
Betraying a Generation

Robin Simmons reviews *Patrick Ainley's latest book*

Patrick Ainley, *Betraying a Generation: how education is failing young people*, Bristol: Policy Press. 2016 142 pp. £9.99 (pbk)

Betraying a Generation is published by Policy Press as part of its 'Shorts' series, texts of between 20,000 and 50,000 words, which aim to critically review topical issues in a concise and accessible fashion – and this book certainly does that. As readers of *PSE* will know, Patrick Ainley always writes in an incisive and engaging fashion but *Betraying a Generation* provides a particularly lucid and authoritative critique of contemporary trends in education and society more broadly – and the far-reaching consequences of such changes for young people in particular. It is aimed at a range of audiences but will be particularly useful for teachers and academics working with students across the social sciences and humanities. The book also offers a welcome antidote to the now notoriously narrow, instrumental nature of teacher education, youth work and other forms of vocational training aimed at those preparing to work with children and young people. In fact, it should be essential reading for those involved with such programmes.

Betraying a Generation allows its readers to engage with a number of critical debates about important challenges, dilemmas and conundrums facing young people today – and its structure, content and style will enable them to join the debate quickly and authoritatively. Whilst its coverage is wide-ranging, two related themes run throughout the book: the restructuring of the UK economy and its effects upon education and employment, especially for young people, and the various ways in which the education system (if indeed system is the right term) is involved in reinforcing and exacerbating

inequality and disadvantage, especially amongst large sections of the young.

Whilst education has always been a source of social control as much as emancipation (Lawton, 1975), it is, as Patrick argues, now shamelessly oversold as the solution to a wide range of social and economic questions over which it has limited and arguably diminishing influence – whether this is delivering economic growth, driving (upward) social mobility, or the multitude of other tasks with which it is now charged. This, as he explains, goes some way towards explaining the growing stress and anxiety we now see amongst student, teachers and parents as young people are left studying longer and harder, and paying more and more for an education which often fails to deliver either the quality or security of employment they have been led to expect.

Betraying a Generation contains a short introduction and five substantive chapters. The first of these provides the historical context for the book and explains the consequences, especially for young people, of de-industrialisation and the far-reaching restructuring of the economy which has taken place since the end of the 1970s. This and the unravelling of many of the social institutions which characterised the social democratic settlement of the mid 20th century has, it is argued, created a vacuum which education is now (quite unrealistically) expected to fill. Chapter 2, 'New times', debunks various notions about the UK's rise as a so-called knowledge economy and exposes some of the harsh realities of working life in contemporary Britain – where low skill, poor pay and insecurity is now the norm for so many. It also deals with the ways in which education is implicated in all this: in sifting and sorting young people; through

preparing many of them for a future of increasing uncertainty; and, in some cases, effectively acting as a substitute for waged labour.

It is, however, important not to view the past through rose-tinted glasses, and undoubtedly working life was also frequently dull and alienating in post-war Britain (Beynon, 1973). But, for a growing number of people today, especially those employed in the call centres, shops and offices that dominate 21st century labour markets, employment is every bit as grim – though now also stripped of the various forms of solidarity and security that characterised the ‘Fordist’ era of production. The implications of all this, as Patrick argues, are profound – not only for young people, who have become increasingly fungible, despite being more extensively schooled and highly qualified than ever, but potentially also for the legitimacy of the education system itself.

Chapter 3 argues that the limited upward social mobility which took place in Britain for several decades after the end of World War Two has now given way to a general downward mobility. This, it is maintained, is linked to extensive labour market restructuring associated not only with the rise of new technology and the long-term decline of traditional forms of manual labour, but also with the ‘hollowing out’ and ongoing proletarianisation of much intermediate, technical or white-collar work. The chapter goes on to discuss the changing ‘shape’ of social class – from the traditional post-war pyramid, to the proposed diamond shape once

promoted by New Labour, and the hour-glass model of social class associated with the polarisation of the labour market and the so-called pinched middle. But Patrick presents particularly convincing arguments to support his own ‘pear-shape’ (or even ‘teardrop’) model of society where the majority are ‘forced down’ rather than ‘pulled up’ the occupational structure, effectively creating a new middle-working/working-middle class. Beneath them a substantial section of the former manual working class has been relegated into an economic underclass trapped almost indefinitely in precarious and insecure circumstances. Consequently, it is argued that, for the first time in living memory, many young people are likely to do less well than their parents – despite generally being more extensively schooled and far more qualified.

The title of Chapter 4, ‘Running up a down-escalator’, provides a vivid image of a system where students are required to work longer, harder and more and more intensively, often with little return in terms of material reward. Here Patrick also draws on his work with Martin Allen on apprenticeships (see, for example, Allen and Ainley 2014), both to critique current government policy and to compare and contrast English vocational training with other more coherent and robust systems, perhaps most notably Germany. Indeed current policy discourse – which, it is argued, effectively amounts to ‘apprenticeships without jobs’ – can, in many ways, be seen as a cruel deception. Whilst apprenticeships are popular

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with many young people as well as parents attracted by images of craft and security traditionally associated with such forms of training, high-quality provision is in short supply, particularly in occupations where demand is strongest.

Despite being relatively brief *Betraying a Generation* is a comprehensive and wide-ranging book and contains a surprising level of detail – not only in relation to the ideas it contains and the arguments it makes, but also in terms of the data provided about education, the labour market, and social change more broadly. It is therefore a resource which will help readers to understand key debates about the changing nature of education and work, as well as associated questions about social class, inequality and the economy. The book builds upon, expands and updates arguments Patrick has made with his long-term collaborator, Martin Allen – see, for example, *Lost Generation?* (Ainley and Allen 2010) and *The Great Reversal* (Allen and Ainley 2013) – but it also provides a range of new insights, and the final chapter, ‘A new politics of education’, is particularly strong in this respect. Here we move beyond a critique of existing relations to engage with a programme for the future. This, it is maintained, needs to go much further than curriculum reform, fighting spending cuts or ‘reclaiming’ teacher professionalism. Although it is recognised that such matters are not unimportant, it is argued that educational change needs to be part of a much more far-reaching programme of social and political reform and Chapter 5 lays out a comprehensive, progressive agenda for the future. This, it is explained, needs to include not only a concerted programme of job creation, increased labour market regulation, and a coherent industrial strategy but also a much broader re-evaluation of the way society is organised, not only in terms of education and employment, but also in relation to housing, the environment and the economy more widely. Without such a programme of radical reform the prospects for many young people will, as *Betraying a Generation* argues, remain decidedly bleak.

References

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