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Young People and the ‘Entrepreneurial Self’

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The notion of ‘choice’ is particularly strong today in public discourse and reflects the increased marketization of our society. As such, young people are expected to have the capacity to be ‘rational planners’ of their future – making short-term decisions based on a long-term goal. Evidence suggests that young people are happy to embrace this challenge, becoming self-managers of an imagined future, accepting the responsibility to create a pathway from youth to adulthood. Of course, in modern society it’s never that simple.

Young people today are growing up in markedly different circumstances to those that previous generations experienced. The changing spheres of education, work, housing and the family mean that today’s young people face increasing uncertainty. In times past, most young people (primarily male, here) faced a recognisable and predictable path to adulthood: ‘preparation for work through education, then remunerated work, a central source of identity and undisputed sign of adulthood; finally, retirement’ (Leccardi, 2008). This ‘standard biography’ has now been replaced by what many theorists call the ‘choice biography’ (Brannen and Nilsen, 2007). With the decline of our traditional institutions (such as organised religion, the family unit, the labour market, the welfare state, family and local community amongst others), young people are said to now be compelled to become captains of their own ship, navigating the choppy waters of modern society, determining their own futures with every step. The spirit of neo-liberalism demands autonomous decision-makers writing their own biographies as their lives become their own projects. Any failure to reach for the stars is on your own shoulders – so let’s do it!

For some, such a state is to be celebrated – whereas in previous generations the period of youth was largely standardised, young people today are said to be more autonomous and have more freedom to pave their own paths. In this time of the cult

of entrepreneurialism young people are required to become ‘portfolio workers’ and ‘employment entrepreneurs’ – and can short circuit management structures to become ‘future leaders’ today (Morgan et al, 2013). Of course, such a vision is not the reality for the overwhelming majority of young people. This is the case for a tiny minority of the most privileged and there is *substantial* evidence that factors such as class, race and gender continue to shape the lives of young people. However, with the focus today on individual agency these factors tend to be conveniently airbrushed out of the picture and the responsibility of these ‘choice biographies’ inevitably weighs on young people themselves – whatever their personal circumstances and whatever resources they have at their disposal. As Wyn and Woodman (2006) note, ‘the inevitable outcome of this approach is one of inequality.’ And failure to be effective self-managers is blamed on the individual. Worse still, research shows that young people adhere to the principles of meritocracy and individualism – and blame themselves for any failures to ‘get on’.

The Neo-liberal Bargain

We should be careful not to ascribe too much fatalism to structural issues, however. Research shows young people display remarkable agency in trying to move on in life (Hoskins, 2017). And evidence suggests young people are embracing this project of the self – seeing adulthood not as a given but as a project – ever to be made anew. But it would be remiss to suggest that all young people face the same issues in doing so and the choices available to different young people are inevitably circumscribed by structural factors. It is these conditions that young people have to negotiate – as Woodman and Wyn (2015) note, ‘...those who are most disadvantaged are positioned to work the hardest to manage the fragmenting, isolating and individualising processes reshaping the lives of young people around the world’ (p90). However, more and more young people are happy to accept the responsibility of self-managing as they embrace the spirit of our age.

Increasingly though, issues of precarity are impinging on the ability of the middle-class to plan long-term. France and Roberts (2015) write that issues of precarity have long dogged working-class young people, but that ‘the current situation represents a

blip in history because precarity is not new, just new to the middle classes' (p226). The primary reason for this is the discontinuity between education and work and the failure of the 'neo-liberal bargain' – that is, study hard, get good qualification, get good job. The promise of investment in education no longer guarantees a permanent, stable and decent salary in the same way it once did. As the global marketplace drives down the global price of labour, how this will play out in the future remains to be seen, but its effects are already being felt – and not just by the working-class.

As such, research increasingly shows that young people are less able (and less willing) to plan too far ahead. It's difficult to do so when the here-and-now is less than stable. Increased uncertainty inhibits life-planning but still young people are asked to be these rational planners of their biographies. The dissonance is evident. This is not to say that young people don't have some imagined future in mind – of course not. But evidence suggests they attempt to shape paths in ways that ensure other options remain open; if they are fortunate enough to have options open to them (Mørch et al, 2018).

Precarious Effects

Precarity breeds uncertainty and uncertainty breeds insecurity. As work loses the central role and secure axis on which to anchor identity, there is growing evidence that this is affecting the mental health and well-being of young people. The pressures of increasing investment in education, the credentialism race, the pressures of managing the self, of managing uncertainty and trying to live a balanced life place growing stress and strain on this generation of young people. It's little surprise that we see growing rates of mental health problems amongst youth. For many this is an acute issue but as Woodman (2011) describes, for most others it's 'a general background anxiety experienced to varying degrees, a feeling of security at risk that is dealt with in different ways and responded to using multiple practical, not necessarily conscious, strategies' (p126). And Bauman (2000: 161) writes:

The phenomenon which all these concepts try to grasp and articulate is the combined experience of insecurity (of position, entitlements and livelihood), of uncertainty (as to their continuation and future stability) and of unsafety (of one's body, one's self

and their extensions: possessions, neighbourhood, community). Precariousness is the mark of the preliminary condition of all the rest: the livelihood, and particularly the most common sort of livelihood, that which is claimed on the ground of work and employment.

For those with more resources, their ability to navigate precarity will be greater than their less well-off contemporaries. And their range and quality of ‘choices’ will be greater. Studies suggest they may still be in precarious work but this tends to be in more standardised hours. Those with less social, cultural and economic capital to draw upon can find themselves surplus to requirement – more likely to be found in part-time, casual, precarious and non-standard jobs and at greater risk of the aforementioned health issues which can also negatively impact study opportunities and relationships.

Conclusion

The spirit of neo-liberalism is the spirit of risk – in a market driven world it’s up to all of us to carve our own paths. To choose and purchase our own individual way forward. As Peter Kelly (2006) writes, ‘for (Neo)Liberalism...‘homo economicus is manipulable man’ (*sic*), a subject who should be forever open to and responsive to signals/from the markets, from risks and dangers, from opportunities’ (p24).

However, in our increasingly precarious times, the ‘choice biography’ becomes the ‘tightrope biography’ and all of us are ever in danger of falling off – a fact made worse by the gradual erosion of our welfare state. The ability to construct an entrepreneurial selfhood is much more difficult for young people growing up in poverty but it is demanded of them regardless in our increasingly individualised world. As Manuela Du Bois-Reymond (2009) suggests, ‘...this is precisely what the new ideology of neo-liberalism proposes; you yourself are the captain on the ship, you have your luck in your own hands, don’t blame your parents, teachers, politicians, do it yourself!’ (p34).

So get to it!

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