

Book review

Understanding Youth in the Global Economic Crisis

Alan France
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The global economic crisis which began in 2008 led to the deepest recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s, with consequences felt everywhere. Increasing levels of unemployment were perhaps the most visible outcome of the crisis, with young people seemingly most adversely affected. *Understanding Youth in the Global Economic Crisis* was published in the aftermath of what the author refers to as 'the great recession' and aims to assess what impact the crisis had on what it means to be young today. Alan France's timely book identifies four key social changes which he argues have been accelerated by the global economic crisis and the subsequent austerity measures employed by nation states. These changes have particularly affected young people, and are: the growth and expansion of education and training; unemployment and underemployment; the growth of non-standard and precarious work; and the complexity of young peoples' lives (including fragmented transitions, 'yo-yo' lifestyles and increased mobility).

A core tenet running through the book is that the changes discussed have been accelerated by the crisis and the subsequent political response, rather than caused by them. The need to take a historical perspective is emphasised, with the growing influence of neoliberalism over the past thirty years highlighted as a critical driver behind the changes explored. In the first chapter the author sets out his theoretical framework for the rest of the book. Pointing to the limitations of dichotomies in youth sociology such as 'transitions versus culture' and 'structure versus agency', he calls for a more holistic understanding of youth via a 'political ecological approach'. At the centre of this approach lies the relationship between the economic and the political and the structuring processes of institutions, with an emphasis on the role of youth policy and the influence this has on young people's lives. Indeed, the detail into which the book goes on youth policy across a number of contexts is impressive, demonstrating clear links between policy and the nature of the contemporary social landscape in which young people develop. A range of primary and secondary data sources is drawn upon throughout the book, including statistics and reports from bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and national statistical services in the case study countries. Quantitative data reported by other authors are also utilised, along with policy documents and statements from institutions developing and implementing policy and the wider academic literature.

The chapters examining this empirical evidence revolve around eight case study countries: Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Poland and the UK. The reasoning behind this selection, laid out in the introduction to the book, is to facilitate a 'compare and contrast' approach. Thus, four of the countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK) have followed a broadly similar path in terms of overall ideology and associated policy responses, whilst the other four (Japan, Norway, Spain and Poland) were chosen to illustrate divergence from an overwhelmingly austerity-based approach. While these reasons seem sensible, it is interesting that the United States was not included. As the author describes in the second chapter, the 'spark' for the crisis was the collapse of the subprime mortgage market in the US following decades of neoliberalism driven policy, and with the US arguably the country in the world most entrenched in neoliberalism it might have been beneficial to include it in the book. Nevertheless, the book does not seem to suffer for this omission. The UK and New Zealand, for example, provide strong case studies of where neoliberalism has been heavily embraced.

The second chapter examines the global economic crisis itself and the political response which followed. The analysis focuses on the impact of the crisis and the use of austerity as a policy response in the first four case study countries mentioned above. The growing influence of neoliberalism and how these nations have embraced the embedding of markets and the financialisation of their economies is explored. Although there is some divergence between them, the general influence of neoliberalism is seen as ongoing in all four countries, and even accelerating via continuing austerity measures which place market principles at the core of economic recovery. This chapter also highlights the strong moralising component associated with the 'neoliberal turn', and the implications this has on the form of citizenship available for young people. They are now urged to take personal responsibility for their own lives with the 'entrepreneurial self' emphasised rather than support from the state.

The next four chapters focus in turn on the changes affecting young people, again concentrating on the initial four case study countries. Importantly these chapters explore not only the varying experiences of young people *between* the four countries but also *within* them, with the role played by gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic group examined and the consistency of forms of inequality over time highlighted. Chapter three looks at the expansion of education and training over the past thirty years and the breaking of the promise of a 'good life' for those who gain the right skills and qualifications, along with the growing problem of underemployment and the implications for social mobility. Chapter four highlights the increasing commodification of post-16 education and training, and the growth of the 'user pays' ideology emphasising how certain groups of young people have been more adversely affected than others. Chapter five then concentrates on young people's changing relationship with paid work. The continuing problem of youth unemployment is underscored, and new and deeper problems around underemployment and the precarious nature of some forms of paid work are examined. Chapter six looks at concerns about the moral problem of 'NEETs' (those not in employment, education or training) and the accompanying increase in the use of active labour market policies which seek to regulate young people's behaviour.

In these middle chapters the author skilfully demonstrates the interaction between youth policy and young people's lives in a way which is accessible and interesting to academic and non-academic audiences alike. This continues in the following two chapters which switch focus to the four other case study countries of Norway, Japan, Poland and Spain., I personally found these chapters the most compelling, being less familiar with events in these states. Norway is shown to provide the greatest counterpoint, with its social democratic state affording a resistance to neoliberalist

ideas and principles. However, even here there has been an increase in privatisation, notably in the delivery of training to jobseekers and the running of active labour market policy programmes. Similarly, while Japan has resisted neoliberalism as a form of Western Imperialism, there has also been a move to incorporate neoliberalist philosophy, in particular as a response to the effects of stagflation on people's economic prospects. Of the four countries, Poland is shown to have embraced neoliberalist ideology most fully following their exit from the Soviet bloc, while Spain, particularly after 2007, has also operationalised neoliberalist policy, in part due to the requirements for EU financial support.

The ninth chapter then synthesises the findings from all eight case studies and the impact that changes in these countries have had on young people in terms of moves out of the family home, migration and social mobility. The concluding chapter then brings together the changes discussed throughout the book and attempts to answer the question set out at the start regarding what impact the crisis has had on what it means to be young today. In summary, the author shows that this role is complex and challenging, particularly for some social groups. The direct impact of social policy since the recession, and long before, in fostering this challenging environment is demonstrated, along with its role in perpetuating social inequalities. For me the most striking developments discussed are where policy has shifted responsibility not only on to young people themselves, but also *explicitly* on to their families. In Australia, for example, it is proposed that in the future income support for under-22-year-olds will be paid to the family and not the young person, with availability determined by parental income. What consequence such policies will have for young people and their ability to move successfully into adulthood should be closely followed as they are implemented by governments.

With youth unemployment remaining a stubborn feature of the global economy in the years since the recession and growing problems associated with precarious work and underemployment, this book provides an important contribution at a time when young people face unprecedented challenges in growing up. While the book does not necessarily break new ground in terms of the empirical data reported, the author has managed to skilfully synthesise data and knowledge from a wide range of sources, providing a unique theoretically informed global perspective of what it means to be young today. This perspective is incredibly valuable, demonstrating the importance of place and the connectivity between social policy and young people's lives in a number of differing contexts. This book will be of interest to students and academics alike, and indeed anyone with an interest in the relationship between social policy and the experience of modern day youth.

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