

Current Sociology – review

Young People and Work, edited by Robin Price, Paula McDonald, Janis Bailey and Barbara Pini: Farnham: Ashgate 2011. 291pp. ISBN9781409422365 (hardback); ISBN9781409422372 (e-book)

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Categories: Children and Youth; Organizations, Occupations and Work

As the title suggests, this book explores the work experiences of young people in contemporary developed society, directly confronting the idea that ‘child labour’ is only a problem in less developed nations. Edited by four scholars from Australian universities it contains contributions from 26 authors with backgrounds in Law, Education, Business, Sociology and Economics. The debate around whether participation in work at a young age contributes to future labour market success or whether it is a manifestation of exploitation is foregrounded in the introduction to the book, and addressed directly or implicitly in subsequent chapters. The book has fourteen chapters, organised thematically in three sections: experiences of work (chapters 1-4); intersections between work and education (chapters 5 to 9); and other actors and institutions (chapters 10 to 14), with the majority presenting empirical findings which are drawn from various countries including the Nordics, Australasia, US, Canada and Europe. Four chapters draw on data from Australia/New Zealand and a further three compare these two countries with US/UK, UK and Germany. Empirical evidence uses different methodological perspectives and methods with eight of the chapters providing secondary quantitative analysis. Inevitably in such an ambitious project, the tendency to sacrifice depth in the pursuit of breadth arises, yet in this volume empirical and conceptual variety is a distinct advantage, producing a ‘big picture’ that includes a range of cultural, structural, political, legal and institutional factors pertinent to the subject matter. It is particularly helpful that empirical chapters include a ‘methods’ section, allowing the reader to assess the reach of, and background to, findings and conclusions.

The editors’ introduction sets out the scope of the book, noting definitional problems in categorising young people, and adopting the UN definition of youth as under-24, and children as under-18. Themes address the extent and nature of youth employment, potential conflict between the demands of work and education, and the special characteristics of youth employment which may invoke heightened protection from employers, trade unions and policy makers.

Part one, presenting data of a largely qualitative nature covers types to work, labour market conditions and aspirations, migrant workers and gender(ed) work. Chapter one reflects on the meaning of work for children and the ways in which early experiences of work in and out of the home are socially constructed. Children are reluctant to describe chores at home as work despite being rewarded by money or gifts and more likely to see work as something their parents do. Other chapters broadly outline the prevalence of youth workers in the retail and hospitality sector, noting the potential in a tight labour market for young workers to be exploited and introducing difficulties in balancing the demands of work and education. Chapter three confirms the double-jeopardy experienced by migrant student labour in Australia and New Zealand, exposing government to be complicit in attracting international students to fund higher education, yet noticeably absent when multiple marginalization of these workers in low-paid, unsafe workplaces is apparent. A glimmer of hope, however, surfaces in the chapter on masculine identity in retail work where there is some evidence from the UK to contradict the claim that young working class men simply will not do retail work.

Part Two presents quantitative data charting and exposing vulnerability in youth labour, explicitly evaluating the outcomes of trying to balance the demands of work and education with future labour market opportunities. Chapter Five outlines some serious health and safety issues for young workers, suggesting that instead of being subject to heightened protection, employment in precarious work in dangerous industries such as farming combines with difficulties in tracking health and safety renders youth invisible and ignored by policymakers. The following chapter also highlights difficulties in collecting data on youth labour. While the number of hours worked by young people, and the type of work undertaken clearly matter, student attitudes to work and school also affect ability to balance conflicting demands. Employers are criticised for pressurising youth workers to work more hours than they wish leading to calls for employers and schools to take responsibility for demands placed on workers. Working hours are also the focus of chapter seven, this time in a US college student context in which, unsurprisingly, the cost of higher education is a prime motivator for youth work. There are some positive human capital returns in the form of soft skills acquisition, and minimising graduate debt, yet these are offset by losing out on other leisure time activities and academic achievement. Solutions to this potential problem are unclear with more regulation and enhanced payrates not necessarily seen to produce the desired outcomes. Chapter Nine, which focuses on the EU as an analytical category, notes national differences in employment models and show a marked increase in precarious employment across the EU which

disproportionately affects younger workers, a situation that is likely to worsen in the current economic climate.

Part Three of the book begins by comparing the legal context of rights for young workers in Australia and the UK, specifically highlighting a shift in perspective from a protective to a facilitating role in child labour. This shift, it could be argued, is responsible for the negative consequences outlined in earlier chapters. The role of employers provides a welcome addition to the book, focusing on organisations that are dependent on youth labour. In these circumstances it seems that employers do make attempts to accommodate requests for time off work to study, yet continue to rely on youth labour as cheaper to employ, less aware of employment rights, and more likely to be available to work extra shifts at short notice. The opportunities presented for union renewal are also considered with calls for unions to revisit entrenched stereotypes of disinterested youth and evidence of positive attitudes towards union membership from German and Australian students.

Overall, and despite some evidence of the benefits of working, this reviewer's lasting impression of the book is that the vulnerability of youth in employment is a real, though often ignored, component of contemporary society. While there is some overlap between the sections and the rationale for sub-dividing the book is not particularly clear, it is a useful contribution to scholars of youth, and of work and employment. The particular conditions of youth work where work experience has become a critical component in employability, supported in the education system, results in heightened pressure for young people to take jobs whilst at school and university. In addition the book suggests that youth work is often undertaken out of necessity rather than choice. Employers have been quick to take advantage of this malleable workforce, yet governments, educators, trade unions and society at large are shown to be unwilling to address the possible detriment of this social trend, preferring instead to pretend that child labour is not a problem in the developed world. There is no easy solution to the dilemmas presented in this volume although its publication is a timely reminder to prioritise young people at work in future research, policy and social agendas. Perhaps the next edition will include a chapter on youth 'unemployment'.