Risk, Welfare, Education and Youth

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ABSTRACT

This paper the concept of risk as applied to an understanding of the nature and changing relationship between social welfare and youth in the United Kingdom. The paper begins by drawing on the sociological work of Ulrich Beck (1992) in order to examine how changes in modern society have led to what has been coined the 'risk society'. The paper then assumes historical narratives of social welfare which positioned younger individuals in society. The paper moves attention to examining neo-liberalism in contemporary times as a key feature of the 'risk society' and the recasting of the state, welfare agents and younger people. In particular, the paper observes the rise of managerialism and consumer narratives that are central to neo-liberalism and management of social welfare yet are indicative of risk. The paper concludes by arguing for an interface between risk and a critical sociology of youth.

Keywords: Risk; Education; Youth; Theory; Neo-liberalism

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the concept of 'risk', which both as a theoretical tool and dimension of modern society, is slowly being developed within the sociology of education (Powell, 2013). Notwithstanding this, the concept of risk and the meaning and implications associated with it, have not been fully explored in relation to youth despite on or two exceptions (cf. Cartmel and Furlong, 1997). Risk is shrouded in historical and contemporary political debate about which 'role and responsibility' is it for 'youth' in society – does it reside with the state or the individual? Or some combination of the state, the family and the individual young person? The historical responsibility for the protection and security of youth has gradually shifted towards that of the state, famously epitomised in the United Kingdom by William Beveridge's "cradle to the grave" welfare protectionism of younger people (Leonard 1997). In contemporary times, however, this approach has changed with the move from state protectionism to individual responsibility. The shift from protection *of* the individual to self-protection *by* the individual has been claimed to be illustrative of the phenomena of the 'risk society' (Beck 1992). Such a society has been defined in terms of the erosion of traditional values (Giddens 1991) and the desire to allocate accountability and responsibility for personal or social actions (Beck 1992) Ideas associated with the 'risk society' have, it might be argued, become part of the organizing ground of how we define and organise the 'personal' and 'social spaces' in which to be problematized as 'youth problem' (Epstein, 1998). In what

follows the paper explore this idea both for understanding agency in youth, and for further developing the aims and objectives of a critical sociology of youth (Furlong, 1997).

The paper begins by examining some of the arguments put forward by Ulrich Beck (1992) and the relevance of these for understanding how changes in modern society have shaped the welfare identities of younger people. To illustrate this, the paper reviews the historical rise and consolidation of social welfare in the United Kingdom. The paper assesses how risk has impinged on changing forms and modern practices of the 'welfare state'. From this, the paper traces the welfare transformations to what can be defined as the 'risk society' (Beck 1992) and the impact of this on identity in youth formations and key areas such as the relationship of younger people to the state (Cartmel and Furlong, 1997; Epstein, 1998).

The paper then moves to assessing neo-liberalism as a key feature of the 'risk society' and the re-positioning of younger people as 'consumers' and welfare agents as 'managers'. The paper then evaluates the implications of neo-liberal social policy for younger people and professional practices by using the 'risk' framework derived from the work of Ulrich Beck (1992).

2. TRANSFORMING AGE

As a starting point we should note the dramatic change in the institutional structure that has underpinned definitions of age identities. In this context it is important to highlight the way in which ageing identities were transformed in the two decades following the ending of the second world war (Powell 2013). The key developments here concerned the way in which, in advanced capitalist societies, youth was transformed by the social and economic institutions associated with the welfare state, such as education, training and work (Powell 2013). These became crucial in shaping the dominant discourse around which youth was framed, and the identities associated within and across the lifecourse (Epstein, 1998). A supporting theme was the re-ordering of the lifecourse into distinctive stages associated with education, work and retirement, with transition to retirement becoming an important element in the development of a new identity separate from that associated with youth, work and paid employment (Phillipson 1998).

On this last element, the debate in the 1940s and 1950s focused on the need to escape the injustice and deprivation endured in the economic depression of the 1930s (Frith, 1984). Hence, what has been described by one historian of social policy (Rodney Lowe) as the role of the welfare state in moving society to a higher ethical ground. Lowe (1993: 21) suggests in fact that the welfare state was seen as being able to: 'elevate society by institutionalising a deeper sense of community and mutual care'.

Younger people were integral to this theme of a more inclusive society, one seeking to erase the link between youth and images of poverty (Hall et al. 1978). The possibility of transforming age, through more secure provision of education and training, was a significant component of the post-war social contract. Education for younger people was viewed, first, as a fair exchange for work and income. Second, in rhetorical terms, as a measure of the way in which younger people were now protected from the hazards of social inequality. Third, as part of the intergenerational contract and indicative of the close ties maintained between family groups, younger and older (Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000).

If the welfare state created -or set out to create- a new identity for youth, it was the transformation in welfare from the 1980s onwards which posed a new challenge to the status

and identity of younger people. The crisis in youth that took hold from this period reflected, to a significant degree, the loosening of the institutional supports underpinning the life course. Younger people were themselves the creation of modernity, reflecting the achievements of industrialism, improved public education and the growth of social welfare (Powell and Edwards, 2002). The steady growth in the proportion of younger people in the UK population was, up until the beginning of the 1980s, largely contained within the dual institutions of education and work.

These, along with the ties maintained between generations, created a social, economic and moral space within which growing numbers of younger people could be channelled and contained. In this regard, education and work was predominantly a state of affairs for younger people may be seen as accurate in at least two senses: first, in terms of the way that resources were distributed; second, in relation to the identities and forms of surveillance created. For a period of 20 years or more, moving younger people into the zone of work from education, held at bay the underlying issue of securing a place and identity for aging within the framework of an advanced capitalist society. The meaning of youth was temporarily at least, constructed out of a modernist vision where education and work were viewed as "natural" points in the human life cycle.

The unravelling of these arrangements can be traced to at least three types of crisis affecting the management of youth in the last quarter of the twentieth century: economic, social and cultural. The economic dimension has been well-rehearsed, with successive crises from the mid-1970s onwards undermining, first, the goal of full employment (and hence destabilising retirement), and, second, the fiscal base of the welfare state (accelerated with the onset of a privatisation from the 1980s onwards) (Powell and Edwards, 2002).

These aspects led to the development in social sphere of what to paraphrase Carroll Estes *et al* (2001) refers to as the 'crisis construction' and 'crisis management' of youth, with youth now socially constructed as a "problem" for society (Cartmel and Furlong, 1997). At its most extreme, demographic change was itself now viewed as a source of the economic crisis, notably in respect of the apparent imbalance between 'productive' and 'non-productive' sectors in the economy (Longman 1987). Finally, at a cultural level, the modern life course itself came to be viewed as playing a contributory role in the alienation of younger people in western society.

The sense of unease about the nature of demographic change itself chimed in with a wider discourse about wider developments accompanying the transition from a modern to a postmodern world (Conrad 1992). Uncertainties about the benefits of aging are certainly nothing new. Revisionist accounts of the place of younger people in past societies have tended to emphasise the punitive character of economic relief, and the marginalisation of those lacking gainful employment (Hall et al. 1982). Both aspects may be found as significant elements in present day society, for example in the undermining of education and the assault on minimum wage amidst fears of 'too few workers' over an 'excess' of pensioners (Vincent 1999). But these historical continuities are given added emphasis in a postmodern age.

Arguably, younger people have the most to lose given the restructuring of relationships associated with postmodernity. The extension of individualization may, to take one example, be perceived as highly threatening to identity in the beginning phase of the life-course. As Giddens (1991) argues, modern life raises at least two possibilities: the promise of a multiplicity of identities on the one side, and the danger of ontological insecurity on the other. Similarly, Biggs (1993) suggests that in response to these circumstances, individual actors will attempt to find socially constructed spaces that lend some form of predictability to

everyday relationships. Yet in a postmodern world such spaces may be increasingly difficult to locate.

3. FROM WELFARE STATE TO RISK SOCIETY

From the 1980s onwards, the crisis affecting youh illustrated the way that the problem of social marginality among the young had been contained rather than resolved in the post-war period. Moreover, what a postmodern setting did have to offer -namely the ideal of consumption replacing that of production- seemed only to further marginalise groups such as younger people. Bauman, for example, writes of the accelerating emancipation of capital from labour producing a situation where: 'instead of engaging the rest of society in the role of producers, capital tends to engage them in the role of consumers' (Bauman 1992: 111). This transformation in fact reflects a more general shift from the public provision characteristic of what Lash and Urry (1987) refer to as 'organized capitalism', to the more flexible arrangements running though the period of 'disorganised capitalism'.

This development has served to change once again the definition of what it means to be an younger person. In the conditions of advanced modernity, growing up moves from being a collective to an individual experience and responsibility. The notion of aging society (with social obligations) becomes secondary to the emphasis on the way in which families and younger individuals handle the demands associated with population aging.

This new development may be seen as a characteristic of a society where the 'social production of risk' runs alongside that associated with the social production of wealth' (Beck 1992). As already argued, improved life expectancy may itself be viewed as a consequence of the social transformations associated with modernization. Beck (1992: 21) defines the nature of risk as a '*systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself*' (author's emphasis). Of course, younger people have been ever-present in human history. But to paraphrase Beck, in the past these could be seen as personal rather than societal tragedies (or achievements). The impact of younger people was limited both by their lack of demographic presence compared to older people and, crucially, by the relatively superficial nature of the category of 'problem delinquent' or 'anti-social young person' (Jefferson 2000). The changes consequent upon modernisation transformed both these elements with youth becoming a new and socially recognised risk.

But in line with Beck's thesis about the nature of risk society are three main developments running through an understanding of youth. First, the globalisation of youth is increasingly recognised- all societies (poor as well as rich) are undergoing similar population transformations (albeit with notable exceptions such as those in countries devastated by the AIDS virus). Growing up thus becomes simultaneously both a biographical event and one shared with different cultures and societies across the globe.

Secondly, youth experiences are themselves hugely (and increasingly) diverse. Under the guise of the welfare state, growing up was compressed into a fairly limited range of institutions and identities (notably in respect of income and lifestyles). Youth in the post-welfare society, however, has substantially expanded in respect of social opportunities as well as new inequalities and divisions (Cartmel and Furlong, 1997; Vincent 1995).

Third, youth is also being changed by what Beck (1992) describes as the era of reflexive modernization. This may be conceived in terms of how individuals and the lay public exert control and influence on the shape and character of modernity. At its core, Beck's (1992: 10) approach suggests the thesis that:'…the more societies are modernised, the more agents

(subjects) acquire the ability to reflect upon the social conditions of their existence and to change them in that way'. For younger people, this highlights the move from conditions of structured oppression towards the possibility of new, consumer-based lifestyles (Fornas and Bolin, 1995). On the other hand, this almost certainly goes hand-in-hand with the marginalisation of significant groups of younger people, trapped in the contradiction between decreasing personal incomes (incomes and savings) and the steady withdrawal of support from the state for their future pension provision (Powell, 2001).

These developments confirm the seriousness of the challenge facing younger people. In reality in terms of their social position, the young have moved into a new 'zone of indeterminacy' which is marginal to work and welfare (Epstein, 1998). Younger people experience the world truly as though they were riding (as Giddens 1991,28 expresses it in his description of high modernity) a 'juggernaut': '…it is not just that more or less continuous and profound processes of change occur; rather, change does not consistently conform either to human expectation, or to human control'. This may seem a relatively abstract description of the crisis which younger people may experience but it rather accurately conveys the reality of what may happen to younger people in situations of rapid change.

4. RISK, SELF-AUTONOMIZATION AND MANAGING OLD AGE: A POST-WELFARE SOCIETY?

Youth is itself becoming a more social, reflexive and managed process, notably in the relationships between the individual, the state and forms of public as well as private services; this involves the 'political domain' coupled with this, processes and relationships in the management of youth are decided by political authorities (neo-liberalism) that are bound up with ideological and philosophical questions of self-governance and autonomy. Neo-liberalism considers that a welfare society must reflect only the interplay of social and political structures forged out of self-responsibility and consumerism (Leonard 1997; Powell 2001). In recent years, younger people as *autonomous* consumers derive their 'education', individually and collectively, from a range of social policies, institutions and sites, so that the organisation of education involves market forces, schools, state and families.

The neo-liberal dominance in social policy has been successful because it has identified existential concepts such as self-responsibility, self-governance and self-care that are said to facilitate human action (Leonard 1997). The regulation of personal conduct has shifted from being presented as a responsibility of the state to the responsibility of micro-level social actors such as 'professional experts' and 'younger people' as 'consumers' (Epstein, 1998). The implications are profound. As Nikolas Rose (1996: 59-60) has pointed out:

> disadvantaged individual has come to be seen as potentially and ideally an active agent in the fabrication of their own existence. Those 'excluded' from the benefits of a life of choice and self-fulfilment are no longer merely the passive support of a set of social determinations: they are people whose self-responsibility aspirations have been deformed by the dependency culture, whose efforts at self-advancement have been frustrated… they are to be assisted as active citizens [through] programmes of empowerment to enable them to assume their rightful place as the self-actualizing and demanding subjects of an 'advanced' liberal democracy'.

Here neo-liberalism attempts to define the social policy domain to interpret valid human needs. Under neo-liberalism, the state re-invents itself and its welfare subjects based upon

minimal intervention and regulation via a rolling program of privatization, deregulation, and contraction of welfare services (Estes *et al.* 2001).

Within the 'mixed economy of welfare', there has been the social construction of a market- orientated, consumer-based approach to the delivery of education and the role of younger people as consumers. As Powell (2013) claims the neo-liberal state is being reorganized to include retention of a strong centre to formulate policy but the dissemination of responsibility for policy implementation to managerial regimes. As Gordon (1991: 36) points out:

'The fulfilment of the liberal idea … is a recasting of the interface between the ____ and society to one of market order. It becomes the ambition of neo-liberalism to impli___ individuals as players into the market game administered by actors'.

Management as an administrative power (cf. Habermas 1992) has been pr___nted as consolidating neo-liberalism by adding 'choice' and reducing '__sks' __d 'pr__ems' associated with younger people in education system in UK: a mo__ __ from t__ state as education provider for schooling subjects" to a managerial one o__ monit__ing" and "assessment" in neo-liberal market economy (Fornas and Bol__, __95).

The movement away from a traditional local auth__rity __ of implementing state education to an actuarial and privatised role of 'manage____' is a fea___e of the risk society – "teaching professions" have had their knowledge base transform__ from philanthropic 'teacher' to 'manager' of budgets, audits and accou__ting systems ((Fornas and Bolin, 1995). In emergent neo-liberal managerial regimes, judg__ent is i__creasingly bound up with managerial imperatives concerning risk assessment, ____or__e objectives, purchasing and resource control ((Fornas and Bolin, 1995).__ __evolution of managerial responsibilities is intended to empower younger individuals an__ to ____ __h professional autonomy by having such c managers internalize budgetary disci__nes and translate social policy imperatives (Leonard 1997).

These imperatives have __d a m__jor imp__ct upon social policy and youth. Such neo-liberal reforms were about __cas__ __you__g people as consumers in a market place to be managed by managerial __egimes (P____ll 2001; cf. Habermas 1987). Education management as an administrative __ow__ __are also '__sk-assessors' and 'enforcers' of the mixed education economy, a discourse__that l____es younger people who engage in 'education market', on the contradictory a__d "risky" gr__d of being simultaneously 'consumers' and potential 'problems' in__ividua__ (Biggs and Powell 2001; Powell and Biggs 2000).

Furlong __d Cartm__ (1997) argues that neo-liberalism consistently equates self-responsi__lity w__ freed__, with younger people presented as active agents in a consumer mark__t. H____ever, d____ions associated with class, gender and ethnic position may still leave ma__ po____ __oun__er people highly vulnerable - despite the neo-liberal vision of the 'respo____le consumer'. Gendered inequalities may be especially important in this scenario. As Nanc__ __ser suggests:

'Participants in the 'masculine' subsystem are positioned as *right-bearing beneficiaries* and *purchasing consumers of services*. Participants in the 'feminine' subsystem, on the other hand, are positioned as *dependent* clients' (1987: 113).

5. CONCLUSION

By constituting risk as a centrally defining motif of "late modernity" this paper contributes to new perspective for 'critical sociology of youth'. This paper has raised questions about the historical and contemporary understanding of social forces that are an important qualification in understanding the shifting discourses associated with the transformation from the welfare state to the risk society. Younger people it might be argued are affected by two major changes in respect of access to support on the one side, and the construction of identity on the other. On the one side, there is the creation of 'no care' zones where community supports may disintegrate in the face of inadequate services and benefits. On the other side, there may equally be the emergence of 'No Identity Zones', these reflecting the absence of spaces in which to construct a viable identity for younger people (Phillipson and Biggs 1999).

The argument here is that marginality is now being experienced in a new and somewhat distinctive way by younger people. Marginality, for much of the post-war period, could be reclaimed through identities constructed out of an emerging consensus regarding education and social welfare (Fornas and Bolin, 1995). The collapse of this consensus has exposed once again the vulnerable status of younger people. But this vulnerability is not just about the material experience of deprivation, it also reaches into the texture of day-to-day living. For more affluent groups, a temporary solution seems to have been found in the the promotion of new lifestyles. The social and existential vacuum which this suggests reinforces the sense of uncertainty about the identity of younger people (Epstein, 1998). The great advantage of the loosening of 'welfarist' notions of age lies in the *possibility* of an alternative social and political construction of youth beginning to emerge which might move beyond welfare structures based on assumptions of dependency. This new politics would present a challenge to the constraints placed upon lifecourse development for younger people and opportunities for meaningful agency without losing sight of the social threats posed by new forms of risk and insecurity.

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