

### Review: Judit Bessant, Rys Farthing and Rob Watts: *The Precarious Generation: A Political Economy of Young People*

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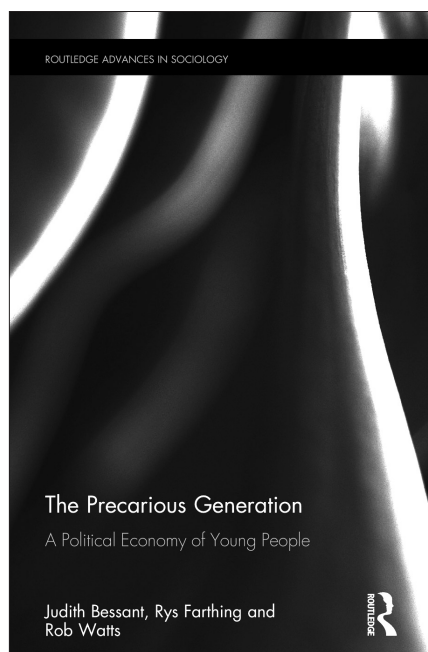
# Judith Bessant, Rys Farthing and Rob Watts: The Precarious Generation: A Political Economy of Young People

Reviewed by Thomas Tozer

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw young people increasingly singled out as a uniquely troubled social category. Nowadays, it is commonplace to talk about how, while the baby boomers recline inside their own homes, enjoying healthy pensions and free bus passes, millennials are finding themselves afflicted by poor job prospects, huge debts and tremendous difficulty in getting onto the housing ladder. Meanwhile, the doctrine of neoliberalism – in essence, the project of scaling back the state and promoting individualism and free-market capitalism – has come to dominate political decision-making.

Is this rise of neoliberalism responsible for young people's political woes? That is the question which *The Precarious Generation: A Political Economy of Young People* seeks to answer. Tracing the effects of neoliberal policy since the 1970s on the US, UK, Australia, France and Spain, among others, the authors argue that neoliberal policy has systematically disadvantaged a generation of young people. Adopting a "political economy of generations"<sup>(4)</sup> approach, they begin, in Chapter 1, by demonstrating the particular struggle of young people today, considering a number of different economic indicators. Their conclusion is that intergenerational inequality is present in all five countries: "young people earn less on average and have higher levels of unemployment"<sup>(32)</sup>. Furthermore, the comparative worsening of their incomes, and the increasing unavailability of affordable housing assets for the young, does not bode well for their future. The chapter also charts the increase of inequality in the above countries over the past few decades, and shows that social expenditure has tended to be lower as a share of GDP in the neoliberal regimes of the UK, US and Australia than in the "conservative corporatist" regimes of France and Spain.

In Chapter 2, the authors critically examine the category of "generation". They begin by critiquing Côté's "substantialist" framing of reality, giving a thorough account of the sociological literature. Côté's framing is criticised for its tendency towards the "structure" vs "agency" debate (are people's actions determined by certain structures, or do people make completely free choices about how to act?). What the authors favour is, rather, a relationist approach, such as that offered by Bourdieu. Such an approach regards the category in question not as "constructed by the researcher", nor as inherently real, but as constituted by relationships: the relations and processes of the category in question. They conclude that, used carefully, the category of a "generation" can be a helpful aid



for making sense of political happenings, particularly the experiences of young people. Young people, they add, are suitable to be considered a generation because the millennials who were born into the "neo-liberal zeitgeist" have been affected by a particular, and unsettling, combination of political events and policies of previous generations. In Chapters 3-6, the authors describe particular ways in which neoliberal policies have impacted negatively on young people. Chapter 3 gives a broad overview of the rise of neoliberal policies in the late 1970s, with specific reference to Australia, the US, Britain and France. The chapter explains the essential features of the Keynesian policy paradigm, with its full employment policies and state spending in order to boost economic growth. The authors then chart the rise of this paradigm, its effects on the above four countries, and the 1970s "crisis

of the Keynesian welfare state"<sup>(61)</sup>. After this crisis, the authors explain, the doctrine of neoliberalism began to take hold. This turned everyone into "market actors"<sup>(62)</sup> and, based on the principles of neoclassical economics, recommended individualistic behaviour and the stripping down of state intervention. The doctrine was not without contradiction, however: the authors point out that at the same time as being antagonistic to government, neoliberalism has relied on government to promote its policies, for example in bailing out the banks and imposing austerity after the 2008 crash. The final part of this chapter describes the impact of neoliberal policies on the four countries' respective welfare states. Chapter 4 then considers recent popular anxiety about "intergenerational justice", and the concern that the baby boomers are living comfortably while bequeathing a huge debt burden, as well as other issues such as environmental problems, to future generations. The extent of the debt burden is calculated using a system called "intergenerational accounting", which gives a precise measure of the debt that will be passed on. The authors object to this system and the recommendations it generates, however. Intergenerational accounting is misleading because it relies on contentious economic predictions, and because in a number of important ways state spending and debt is unlike private spending and debt. Furthermore, the austerity policies being pursued in order to reduce the debt burden of future generations are actively harming younger people: it is contradictory to promote intergenerational injustice today in order to avert intergenerational injustice in the future. The authors then consider the basis of a concern for intergenerational justice, explaining Rawls's approach and rejecting it

in favour of Sen and Nussbaum's account of "justice as freedom", on the grounds that only the latter begins by acknowledging how our lives are marked by various significant differences. Such an acknowledgement, they suggest, is required by any adequate theory of justice. Furthermore, Sen and Nussbaum's account of justice as freedom is "directly relevant to intergenerational justice"(85). A particular example of neoliberal thinking, and the false promises that it offers young people, is its conceptualisation of education as a system for increasing "human capital". This is the topic of Chapter 5. "Human capital theory" saw investing in education as a way to increase an individual's economic value, benefiting both them and society. In the 1980s, neoliberalism carried this theory to prominence; it began to shape government policy, leading to a mass expansion of higher education. Neoliberalism also led to the movement to charge students for their education through student loans. The apparent justification for this, the authors explain, was that the students would enjoy much greater earnings as a result of the education. But it is not at all clear that young people have enjoyed the promised results of their investment. Indeed, youth unemployment is rife; and there are simply not enough "professional" jobs to meet the new demand for them. The authors conclude that the promise inherent in human capital theory – of a fairer, more just society and life-long socio-economic opportunities for the individual, business and society – is now broken.

Next, in Chapter 6, the authors consider the impact of neoliberalism on the justice system. The chapter maps the paradox of a dramatic increase in criminalisation in the US, England and Australia and in the perception of how prevalent crime is, and a consistent decrease in actual crime rates in these countries since the 1980s. There is a particular contradiction between public fear about juvenile crime and a significant body of research showing that young people are, in fact, not particularly tumultuous or criminally inclined. In explaining all this, the authors point to a link between neoliberalism and more punitive legal policies: egoistic individualism, lauded by neoliberalism, is often expressed as not caring for others and being prepared to punish deviants. The authors also note the close association of security with liberty in the liberal tradition of Smith, Bentham and Mill; and they reflect on the contradiction of the neoliberal paradigm, which wants to "shrink the state" but has overseen a large increase of public spending on criminal justice.(122) "Young people", they conclude, "diminished by decades of neoliberal cutbacks, need care and respect – not more punishment."(123).

Chapters 7 and 8 explore how young people interpret their own situation, and argue that a political economy of generations helps us understand this. Chapter 7 gives a number of transcripts of conversations with, or statements by, young people which show that they are quite aware of their situation and the way various hardships that they are experiencing are the result of policies that are benefiting the baby boomers. The older baby boomers, on the other hand, are revealed as often contemptuous and derisive towards the young, acting as though the better conditions they (the boomers) enjoy are entirely the result of their own choices, and blaming the young for the difficulties they are experiencing. The authors draw particular note to the way in which the young naturally and easily use the concept of "generation" to describe the predicaments that they face, and observe that although young people often claim to be uninterested in politics, their social media reading habits suggest otherwise.

Chapter 8 then considers novel ways in which young people are becoming involved with politics, and why such actions can correctly be called "political". Though young people are chastised by some as heralding a "crisis of democracy", particularly on account of their low electoral turnout, others see them as the progenitors of a sophisticated new form of online politics. Yet things are more complex than this binary allows. A political economy of generations, the authors argue, appreciates that young people are largely excluded from the traditional political field because they do not possess the political "capital" (determined by factors such as one's place in the social hierarchy) that makes such access possible. But various more unconventional activities by young people, such as causing the FBI's website to collapse by collectively flooding it with requests at a particular time, can correctly be called political. The authors also examine the English street riots of 2011, a use of satire to mock the Catalan government in 2014, and the rise of the "ultra-right" in Australia. They argue that these are all legitimate examples of young people engaging in political actions. In their final chapter, the authors consider the concept of an intergenerational contract and argue for certain principles that could guide the drawing up of a new such contract. They give two versions of a previous implied generational contract: that each generation will not be worse off than the previous one, and that young people will benefit from spending more time in higher education. Both forms of the contract are broken. A new intergenerational contract must be informed by ideas about justice; it must be ethical (not based on personal preferences); it must give an account of the good life; and it must be the result of a continual deliberative process that engages young people and elders in conversation with one another. Drawing on the capabilities approach of Sen and Nussbaum, the authors argue for a conception of the good life based not on money or utility, but the ability to realise certain substantive goods.(173f) They also argue that such a contract should be developed in a multiplicity of competing publics – including cyber public spheres and informal modes of political expression, which can be added to more traditional deliberative sites. Finally, they propose a "basic income" and the cancelling of student debt as two possible gestures that would go some way toward restoring intergenerational fairness.(182f)

The authors conclude by presenting the current clash between neoliberalism and the rise of new technological possibilities as a political "tipping point". Having arrived at this point we will have to make choices, and one crucial aspect of this process relates to the shape of a new intergenerational contract – hopefully one that will enable "a just society and a good life for all"(189).

The project of the book is laudable and very welcome, and its explication of how neoliberalism has influenced policy since the late 70s, systematically disadvantaging young people in its wake, is rich and illuminating. Furthermore, by relating their research to five different political regimes, with varying respective levels of neoliberal underpinnings, the reader is given a particularly broad understanding of, and nuanced insight into, the influence of neoliberalism over the past four decades. The book is also structured in a way that is easy to follow, with a helpful concluding section at the end of each chapter, and it neatly weaves together academic theory with recent history in a way that enables the reader to appreciate the intellectual drive behind various policy choices at the same time as learning about their effects.

*The Precarious Generation's* broad purview is not without drawbacks, however, with the book often suffering as a result of its tendency to sacrifice depth in favour of breadth. Various important and complex issues, ranging from Keynesian economics to Rawlsian justice, are dealt with in a somewhat cursory manner, occasionally bordering on inaccuracy, with the reader sometimes left feeling more like he or she is reading a literature review than a precise argument or explanation. Furthermore, data are presented in a way that is inconsistent and muddled. The five countries under review are considered in what often seems like arbitrary order, with other countries added and members of the original five marginalised or ignored with little apparent reason; and the graphs, while sometimes clear and helpful, at other times evoke new complications that beg explanation. Moreover, the philosophical rigour with which the authors defend their arguments is often rather lacklustre. A number of critical analytic considerations, such as the fact that young people have had less time to work their way up the job and income ladders and so cannot be expected to match the jobs and incomes of older generations, or the crucial distinc-

tion between young people faring worse than older generations and faring *relatively* worse than previous generations of young people (in comparison to previous older generations), are severely neglected.

In spite of all this, however, *The Precarious Generation's* novel approach and extensive research nonetheless offers a significant and valuable contribution to the field of political economy. It will be read with benefit by anyone interested in the impact of neoliberalism on the past four decades of policy, or in boosting the prospects of the young.

#### Notes

1 Roughly: those born between 1946 and 1964.

2 Roughly: those born between 1980 and 2000.

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