Poor Work and Social Exclusion

The global, the local and marginalised youth transitions

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Introduction

This paper is about young people growing up in poor neighbourhoods in North East England and their experiences at the margins of the labour market. Access to decent work is crucial in avoiding poverty and social exclusion and, furthermore, remains fundamental for reasons of social justice (Adams 2005). The growth of the New World Economy throws into sharp perspective key contradictions about access to, and opportunities for, decent rewarding employment. Fundamental changes in the operation of labour markets in the West have increased the need for managerial and highly skilled workers. Policies aimed at securing Britain's future in the fast changing global economy demand increased skills across the workforce and it is widely acknowledged that Britain lags behind our key competitors in this respect. It has been suggested that output in the UK is estimated to be somewhere between 10% and 25% lower than France, Germany and the US (McNally and Telhaj 2007). As Lord Leitch (2006:6) recently suggested in his review of Britain's skills needs for the coming decade:

> In the 19th Century the UK had the natural resources, the labour force and the inspiration to lead the world into the industrial revolution. Today we are witnessing a different type of revolution …In the 21st Century our natural resource is our people – and their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous – higher productivity, the production of wealth and social justice.

What is frequently missing, especially from policy discussions, is that the demand for an increasingly skilled workforce is paralleled by a potentially equally strong demand for 'poor work' (Byrne 2005). Green (2006) refers to the rise of 'servant occupations, there to pack bags, cleans floors and secure property'. The knowledge economy is underpinned by numerous jobs which demand little in the way of skill or advanced training or education. These jobs are poorly paid, often exploitative and demeaning, and rarely offer any formal protection or guarantee. As Toynbee (2003:3) notes, 'what if hard, demanding, important work does not liberate people from poverty at all?' The policy emphasis on skills development and lifelong learning tends to overshadow any meaningful discussion of 'poor work'. It is the ugly sister to the bright belle of the new economy. Thus, who undertakes poor work, why they do it, and the value and significance of such

work for society and for social justice is rarely discussed. Furthermore, those who undertake such work are rendered invisible, all too often assumed to be in their positions only temporarily, or through choice, or through lack of ability, or simply because of a general reluctance to improve their skills and enhance their prospects of decent employment (Cieslik and Simpson 2006).

This paper describes the experiences of young adults whose labour market transitions were primarily concentrated in this sort of poor work. In the research reported here, we followed up a number of young adults we had previously researched to see where their longer-term biographical experiences had taken them. We wanted to know where the widespread economic marginality which characterised their mid to late teens had led them as they progressed through their twenties. For the vast majority economic marginality continued, if anything, more securely cemented into place via multiple and cumulative experiences of disadvantage (of which labour market experience is only one aspect, but we would argue one *fundamental* aspect; see Webster *et al* 2004). In attempting to explain these marginalised school to work transitions we emphasise two key processes. Firstly, the abundance of poor work within a depressed local labour market, which offers up few decent employment opportunities, even for those with better qualifications. Secondly, we stress the significance of a strong and enduring commitment to traditional working class values, particularly in respect of employment. One can only begin to understand the marginalised biographies of these young people by reference to both their class cultural heritage and their geographical positioning. Thus, despite their commitment to 'learning to labour' (Willis 1977) and their conventional aspirations, for our sample, there was little realistic prospect of moving beyond the crucial, but extremely uncomfortable edges of the new world economy.

Globalisation and Inequality: the changing nature of work

The changing nature of work and the economy is now well documented and we refer only briefly to some of the key trends here (see Burchell *et al* 2002; Pettinger *et al* 2005; Vosko 2006). The last quarter of a century has seen the creation of nearly a hundred million jobs in the labour markets of the industrialised world (Green 2006). Key changes are the rise of the service sector, the feminisation of the labour market, increases in employment in the knowledge and technology areas and the rise in self-employment. Parallel decline in the manufacturing industries has radically altered the face of the economic landscape in most industrial nations.

Many have interpreted these changes as positive ones. Managerial and professional jobs are predicted to grow faster than other sectors of the UK economy over the next five years (Labour Market Predictions 2006: 214). The shift towards a knowledge based economy and the accompanying demand for higher skilled workers is often presented as one of the key strengths of the new market economy, producing new opportunities for social mobility and personal economic advancement. At the same time it is important not to forget that this sort of economic development is spatially uneven and with some areas experiencing severe economic decline. The 'Old Industrial Regions' of North

America and Europe face particular problems (Hudson, 1989). As Danson (2005:285) suggests:

> Over the past few decades, major restructuring in many regions dependent on traditional heavy and basic capital goods industries such as coal, steel and shipbuilding has led to massive redundancies and high unemployment for the workers who have lost their jobs from these dominant employers….The jobs created to replace those lost have been focussed on new entrants and women returners to a more flexible labour market, with new employment opportunities, demanding new and different skills from those applied in the former heavy industries. Many have claimed a mismatch between the skills and attributes of the redundant workers and this new economy due to problems with their employability.

The 'skills mis-match thesis' underpins much of the current thinking of UK employment (and social inclusion) policy[1]. Understandably, it is often assumed that younger generations, not yet acculturated into older forms of employment and more amenable to acquiring new skills, are the best placed to capitalise on the opening up of opportunities in the new, global knowledge economy. Yet, the uneven geography of labour demand and labour supply at least confuses this thesis. Britain's concentrations of worklessness are not, in all cases, geographically close to abundant opportunities in the new skills economy, as Adams (2006) describes in respect of North East England.

Youth (Un)employment and the British Policy Context

It is commonly accepted that the effects of globalisation have resulted in young people's post-school transitions becoming more disordered, complex and less predictable. Some argue that consequently transitions have become more individualised (see Walther *et al* 2006; Furlong and Cartmel 2007) and perhaps less closely tied to, or easily predicted by, social structural influences, such as class background. Today, the lack of traditional, relatively secure, manual working class jobs means that the young working class are expected to pursue alternatives to what were once accepted routes into work and employment. For most, this means spending longer periods in post-16 training and/or further education. Taking account of the recommendation of the Leitch Report (2006:9), the Labour government recently pledged that by 2015 *all* young people will remain in full or part-time education or work-based training up to the age of 18. This will effectively remove the option of employment for young people under 18. This is a laudable aim. The numbers of young people in the UK with few or no qualifications compares unfavourably with our European counterparts (McNally and Telhaj 2007). At the same time, such a proposal fails to recognise that those with a tendency to vacate learning at sixteen have already been failed, often badly, by an education system that continues to serve best those in more advantaged social positions (Ball 2003). Such failings are unlikely to be rectified easily by

[1] At a national policy seminar in 2006, one of the research team described, in brief, the forms of social exclusion and economic marginalisation uncovered by our studies. The then newly appointed UK Minister for Social Exclusion, the Right Honourable Hilary Armstrong, responded even more briefly, with three words: 'the skills agenda'.

further prolonging what has become for some young people a disappointing, and even damaging, process (MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Evans 2006). Furthermore, if the British government persists with its plan to criminalise those that don't comply, there is a strong possibility that such a move will do little more than simply add to the burden of cumulative disadvantages that most early school leavers already face. A recent Prince's Trust study noted that:

> Unemployment is at its lowest for a generation; more young people are finishing school and going on to further education; and crime figures have stabilised and in some cases declined. Yet there are a significant number of the population who are excluded from this prosperity – who find themselves on the outside looking in. They are often young and live in deprived communities across the UK (McNally and Telhaj 2007:7).

It is this group of poorly qualified, often multiply disadvantaged, young people who are most likely to fall out of education and training at an early stage. UK policy concerns about young people and social exclusion tends to focus on those defined as NEET, or not in education, training or employment. New Labour's policy agenda prioritises employment as the best answer to poverty and social exclusion. Youth unemployment is a significant problem, but the concern with 'NEETs' produces a static view of the problem. Youth unemployment becomes largely distinct from the connected problem of 'poor work'. Research shows that very few young people are permanently NEET (Furlong and Cartmel 2007) and more often these young people find themselves engaged in a perpetual process of churning through short term, low paid employment, back to unemployment, occasionally punctuated with periods of training or education. Commentators might imagine that younger generations might be better placed (e.g. than older, redundant workers) to make the most of the new economy. As we will see, it was this sort of work that, in fact, *constituted* the labour market for the young adults in our studies.

Teesside and the Teesside Studies

Since the 1990s – with colleagues – we have undertaken extensive research into the life transitions of young adults from some of Britain's poorest neighbourhoods; in Teesside, North East England[2].

This is a conurbation that has undergone dramatic and speedy economic change as the local effects of increased global economic competition ripple through the lived experience of communities and their residents. In the post-war, Fordist period of full-employment (until the early 1970s), Teesside was a working-class place renowned for its industrial prowess in steel, chemicals and heavy engineering. By the late 1980s and 1990s, as the effects of economic restructuring and redundancy played out, it was infamous for its high unemployment and

[2] Paul Mason, Jane Marsh, Donald Simpson, Les Johnston, Mark Simpson, Colin Webster, Andrea Abbas, Mark Cieslik, Louise Ridley and Robert MacDonald also participated, at different points, in this research. Robert MacDonald is thanked in particular for his contribution to this paper. Thanks also to Paul Watt and Ken Roberts for their comments on an earlier draft. I am indebted to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) for their support and to all the participants in their study. All real names of informants and their immediate neighbourhoods have been changed.

associated social problems. Despite some employment recovery in the late 1990s/ 2000s, Teesside can still be described as 'one of the most de-industrialised locales in the UK' (Byrne, 1999: 93).

Our earlier studies - *Snakes and Ladders* (Johnston *et al*, 2000) and *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005) – conducted fieldwork between 1998 and 2001. They shared an interest in how 15 to 25 year olds from the 'Willowdene' and 'East Kelby' neighbourhoods evolved transitions to adulthood in contexts of severe socio-economic deprivation. These wards all featured in the top five per cent most deprived nationally, with some ranked amongst the five most deprived wards (from 8,414) in the country (DETR, 2000). Both studies involved periods of participant observation with young people and interviews with professionals who worked with young people or the problems of poor neighbourhoods (e.g. Youth Workers, Benefits Agency staff). At their core, though, they relied on lengthy, detailed, tape-recorded, qualitative, biographical interviews (Chamberlayne *et al,* 2002) with 186 young people (82 females and 104 males) from the predominantly white, (ex)manual working-class population resident here. In each study, sample recruitment was purposive and theoretically oriented toward capturing as diverse a set of experiences of transition as possible.

Our third project, *Poor Transitions* (Webster et al, 2004), sought to follow the fortunes of a proportion of the earlier sample (34 people from 186, 18 females and 16 males) as they reached their mid-to-late twenties, in 2003. Chiefly, we were interested in where the stuttering, economically marginal, non-progressive transitions described in our earlier studies led people, as they more fully entered adulthood. Particular research questions centred upon the later experiences of *particular* forms of exclusion: one such interest, and most relevant for this paper, was the later transitions of young adults who had displayed strong work commitment but whose 'school to work' careers had been marked by recurrent unemployment and limited labour market progress. In this paper we draw in particular upon the research completed for *Poor Transitions*; research that provides a relatively rare, close-up and longer-term insight into the way that young adults make lives under economic circumstances radically different from those known by their parents and grandparents.

The de-industrialised world of poor work

A key finding of *Poor Transitions* was that economic marginality remained a constant feature of young adults' lives. This was despite the growing variation in other, *objective* circumstances of interviewee's lives (e.g. in respect of whether people were now parents or living away from their own parents) and increasing *subjective* senses of change. Regardless of whether interviewees were now parents or not parents, living with parents or independently, embroiled in serious criminal and drug-using careers or 'on the straight and narrow', they remained poor and at the margins of the local economy. The pattern of 'school-to-work' careers that was common in informants' late teens and early twenties continued into their mid to late twenties. Here we focus in brief on the labour market experiences of three people - Simon, Adam and Elizabeth – in order to give some empirical description of the de-industrialised world of poor work. As authors, it was hard

to know who and what to leave out of this description. Young adults' accounts of poor work were uniform, multiple and – at times – distressing.

Simon, first interviewed when we was 19 for the *Disconnected Youth?* study, was aged 23 at the time of the later fieldwork. He had 'hated' school, regularly truanted in order to escape severe bullying and left school – 'the happiest time of my life' – with poor GCSE grades (GCSEs are the standard, national examinations for 16 year olds in England). His post-school career was typical of many: various low paid, casual, service sector jobs were interspersed with spates of unemployment. Despite his early negative experiences of school, he returned to college part-time to improve his GCSE grades. At 19 he was unemployed for a year and offered a twelve week work placement at the Nissan motor company through the New Deal for Young People programme (NDYP)[3]. Despite his hopes, he was not kept on, but soon found a job as a factory operative with which he was 'quite happy'. He was then sacked, for reasons he considered 'unfair dismissal', was unemployed again and 'absolutely sick of it'. He abandoned a plan hatched with his friend to move to another city (to work in a supermarket job he had seen advertised in his local job centre), because the promised accommodation had fallen through. Following various temporary jobs he got a permanent one, paying £185 per week, at a food-processing factory. He worked there for a year but resigned, saying 'I'd been on permanent nights for a year. I was run down and I was drained out and thought I can't do it anymore. So I put my notice in'. Soon after he started a three month, temporary job on the assembly line of a local electronics company. Again, a short period of unemployment led to his current, full-time job as a factory machine operative (paying £150 per week). His plan, though, was to apply for a bus driver job: '£5.50 per hour is decent money.'[4]

Adam (aged 25) had visited the Careers Service every week between the ages of 16 and 18 to no avail. Unable to find a job, he participated in government sponsored training schemes for school leavers. These were followed only by intermittent employment of low quality. Like others, he was frustrated by the lack of opportunity to prove his worth. Rejection letters cited his youth and lack of work experience: 'it's just what's on that piece of paper [the application form] and they [employers] look at it and they say 'do we want him or don't we want him?' That piece of paper holds me back'. Adam started to feel disillusioned and began to worry that 'there's no decent work out there'. Eventually, at the age of 21, he started a NDYP placement specialising in retail employment, with study for a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) attached. He 'loved' this. Unfortunately shortly afterwards – and later as well – his hopes and plans of remaining in shop work were dashed because of new management and cost-cutting exercises, resulting in further unemployment. In one instance, after taking a permanent job in a high street music store his employment was terminated abruptly: 'I started in

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[3] The New Deal for Young People is a UK government programme designed to move 18 to 25 year olds, who have been claiming unemployment benefits for six months or more, from 'welfare to work' through a mixture of tailored advice, guidance, training and employment experience.

[4] The rates of pay etc quoted in this paper pertain to the late 1990s and early 2000s, some of them prior to the introduction of the National Minimum Wage. Few UK commentators would doubt that the levels quoted are examples of low pay (of very low pay in many cases).

October and they finished me in January', with only a day's notice. 'They just said "look we can't afford to keep you on, you are going to have to leave tomorrow"'. Looking back over his post-school labour market experiences, Adam described a 'cyclical' educational, training and employment career comprising frequent movements between government training programmes, short-term retail jobs and long spells of unemployment, which he 'despised'. At the time of interview, he was once again unemployed but 'desperately' looking for a new job.

Like Simon, Elizabeth had been 19 years old when we first met her and 23 at the time of the *Poor Transitions* study. Her ambition - in the first few years after leaving school – had been to gain a job looking after young children (in a nursery or similar). After failing to locate such a post and following the advice of employment service staff, she broadened her job search to include social care work with elderly people. Elizabeth's experience of her first job led her quickly to abandon this job ambition. Arriving for her first night shift, she found herself – untrained and unsupervised - as the only member of staff present and in charge of the elderly residents. She resigned when the same happened on her second night shift. A subsequent, short period of unemployment was terminated by employment as a machine operative in a knit-wear factory, working nine hour shifts on £3.17 per hour. By the time of her most recent interview she had given up her long-held plan to apply for university-based nurse training because she had become accustomed to the wages factory work brought and enjoyed the company of her work-mates. For her, this employment had become fixed:

> [When] I went to the factory, I thought, 'right, I'm gonna get a job I'm gonna hate'. Like in a factory, I thought I'd hate that and I'm gonna stay there until I start nursing. I thought if I hate the job, I'm gonna wanna leave to do nursing, but I got used to the money and the people and I didn't wanna leave once I was in there. So nursing went down the drain.

Although these three cases do not include *all* features of interviewees' employment experiences that were reported to us (e.g. of industrial injury, of clearly unfair dismissal, of broken promises about pay or training), they do convey the general pattern. Interviewees had left compulsory education poorly qualified and happy to be free of what for most had been negative, disaffecting experiences of school. They embarked on cyclical (Craine, 1997) post-16 labour market transitions that carried little sense of forward motion toward more secure, rewarding employment. Virtually all displayed work histories – into their mid and late twenties – that consisted of various combinations of: often low-quality, government training schemes; usually unfinished and/ or low-level educational courses; recurrent periods of unemployment and low/ no skill, low paid, insecure employment.

Byrne (2005:72) suggests that 'poor work is the big story' in attempting to understand most contemporary forms of social exclusion .The phrase 'poor work' pithily captures the low paid, low or no skill, casualised, routine, low level, insecure, boring, hard, menial and sometimes degrading work our interviewees typically did, when they found employment. What Byrne's theoretical discussion is not able to convey, however, is the *attractive force* of poor work in shaping these forms of marginalised youth transition. Shifting, non-progressive, cyclical post-school careers are, in part, explained by the hyper-conventional commitment to

work we discovered. College courses and government sponsored training schemes were usually regarded as second best to a job *and* perceived (probably correctly, according to our longitudinal evidence) as unlikely to lead to jobs. Abandoning them for jobs made sense to informants and signified the value they placed upon work; even insecure poor work that would often quickly return young adults to worklessness. Murad found this same class-based 'work ethic and enthusiasm for work' amongst excluded groups in continental Europe, describing its 'persistence in current times' as 'remarkable' (2002: 98).

That young adults *continued*, in the long term, to be committed to employment, when the only jobs they ever got came in this form, is certainly remarkable. It is even more remarkable when influential academic and policy depictions of 'socially excluded' young people suggest exactly the opposite, i.e. they posit '*cultures* of worklessness' as significant in explaining economic marginality (e.g. Murray, 1994)[5]. What we *are* most concerned about, in current policy analyses and declarations, is the apparent *inattention* to what we see as the more significant, but politically less visible, problem of disadvantaged (young) people becoming trapped, long-term, in a cycle of low-paid poor work and unemployment. Furlong and Cartmel's study of disadvantaged young men in Scotland tells a story that is almost exactly the same as ours from Teesside. For their respondents, 'the main problem was not finding work, but keeping it' (2004:27).

Conclusions: the importance of class and context in understanding socio-geographic (im)mobility and marginalised transitions

This paper is about the connection between global economic changes and local experiences of work and the labour market. Through close-up, detailed, longitudinal biographical interviews undertaken with young adults from deprived neighbourhoods in North East England, we have been able to shed a little light on the ways in which broader social and economic processes play out through the lives and experiences of young adults. In attempting to understand the enduring commitment to, and experiences of, poor work for our sample, we highlight two key issues. Firstly, we point to the significance of living in a locality served by a failing and weak labour market that offers limited opportunities for gainful employment, even for those with stronger academic qualifications (see MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Secondly, we stress the importance of longstanding and traditional working class ethics and values in a context where working class routes to adulthood have been radically transformed. We discuss these points a little further, here, in conclusion.

We found that low paid, poor work did not, for our informants, provide convenient stepping-stones to something better. Poor work can, we know, provide this function for better placed social groups on different life trajectories. Higher education students often undertake this type of work, 'paying their way' through college. Such work can be convenient and useful, bolstering CVs, funding increasingly expensive higher education and sustaining (for some) varied

[5] Interestingly, recent Social Exclusion Unit analysis (2004) has found that 'cultures of worklessness' are *not* significant in explaining concentrations of worklessness in the UK.

leisure lifestyles (Miles 2000). For our interviewees, these jobs meant something quite different:

> those with poor skills have fewer opportunities and face more constraints in the labour market – both in skills terms and geographically – than their more highly skilled counterparts. The quantity and quality of jobs available locally is of particular importance for these. Geography matters most for those with poor skills' (Green and Owen 2006:9).

Sustained engagement with poor work inevitably contributed to their further social and economic marginalisation. A *lengthening* record of marginal employment and intermittent unemployment is likely to mean an individual becomes even *less* attractive to employers as the years pass (Furlong et al, 2003). Thus, poor work, becomes another crucial mechanism in the reproduction of poverty, social exclusion and class inequality.

The abundance of these forms of work, particularly in some of the least economically buoyant, de-industrialised local labour markets has enormous repercussions for working-class life – and the making of working class lives. There has been very extensive discussion in youth studies about the restructuring of transitions for all young people, irrespective of class. Whilst we would accept that UK transitions are becoming more like those in some other European countries (e.g. in that there is a general extension of the youth phase), we would also point to increasing polarisation *within* this phase in the UK between those who take slower routes to new educational and economic opportunities and those who still move quickly to the labour market (Jones, 2002). We would not wish to over romanticise older working class ways of living. We recognise, however, that when preferences for 'working class ways to be a person' (Evans 2006:11), particularly in respect of employment, collide with the disappearance of decent work for the under-qualified, the result can be widespread experience of downward social mobility.

Henderson *et al* (2007:51) remark that some of their (working class) respondents, 'appeared to inhabit another era when they talked about the continuing allure of having a trade, and the security this could offer you in the labour market over a working lifetime'. Whilst the quantity of older forms of working class employment may have gone into sharp decline, the commitment to them – and the ways of living that they once supported - remained strong amongst our interviewees. It underpinned their enduring commitment to, and tolerance of, what was often exploitative and demeaning employment.

To conclude, Teesside grew up as a place where working class lives were able to flourish on the ready abundance of heavy industry. Hard, demanding and sometimes physically debilitating work in the iron and steel, chemical and ship-building industries provided the basis of working-class life in the town. Today these traditional industries have all but disappeared, and in doing so historically rooted and taken for granted routes to (a decent) working class life have been swiftly swept aside. The young adults in our research clung determinedly to the value of work and the importance of 'learning to labour' (Willis 1977). Unfortunately, they found themselves living in a *time* and a *place,* where such normal and modest aspirations were difficult, and in some cases, impossible to

realise. At best, our samples were destined to circulate in and out of poor work, with little prospect of moving either onwards or upwards.

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