Chapter 2

The youth precariat, "generationism" and the austerity city

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> It seemed to me that what they wanted was to be inside the games, within the notional space of the machine. The real world had disappeared for them – it had completely lost its importance. They were in that notional space, and the machine in front of them was the brave new world.
>
> William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

William Gibson invented an apparently nonsensical word "cyberspace" in his futuristic 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, to describe a hallucinogenic world of computers and a post-punk generation of young people, living in a world of urban decay. His vision was prompted by an experience of watching kids playing video games in Vancouver. The hallucination turned into reality; thirty years later science fiction has been transformed into a mass digital culture, where many young people teeter on the edge of virtual reality. It is psychological escape from the reality of the austerity city, where legions of anonymous young people find themselves consigned to living marginalised lives. They are called the "precariat" (Standing 2011). The word precariat conveys the precarious status of vulnerable young people in the austerity city, as a denizen class with few rights. David Harvey (2013) comments in reference to the austerity city and one of the places to start would be to focus on the rapidly degrading qualities of urban life, through foreclosures, the persistence of predatory practices in urban housing markets, reductions in services, and above all, lack of viable employment.

Young people in the austerity city face profoundly existential challenges that affect their health. At a recent EU/Council of Europe Youth Partnership conference, Beyond Barriers, held in Malta in November 2014, on the role of youth work in supporting young people in vulnerable situations, one youth participant observed that there is "no difference between dying inside and really dying". These anguished words capture the mindset of vulnerable young people in the postmodern world. Many of these young people arguably face similar challenges to displaced young people after the Second World War (Lowe 2012). While the European urban landscape has been transformed from cities reduced to rubble into prosperous centres of culture and relaxation, the psychogeography of the austerity city presents vulnerable young people with a profound sense of displacement and social exclusion.

One of the most defining features of this denizen youth class in the austerity city is their use of cyberspace to convey their anger to the world. The troll has emerged in this cultural landscape as the modern trickster, playing pranks on the adult world. Some of these trolling activities have attracted public condemnation, such as the alleged misogyny of "Gamergate" (trolls are predominantly male) (Gleick 2014). Trolls simply say "I do it for the lulz", broadly meaning "I do it for the laughs". Derived from the Internet acronym LOL (laugh out loud), it expresses the mocking humour of the precariat on the margins of urban civilisation (Gleick 2014). In this article we explore: (i) the position of youth in postmodern society in terms of lifestyle change and transition; (ii) the emergence of the youth precariat and "generationism" as a new force in politics and society; and (iii) the implications for youth policy and youth work. We adopt the concept of the austerity city as a metaphor for the growing social inequality young people are experiencing.

YOUTH IN POSTMODERNITY: A HEALTHY OR UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLE?

There are deep questions that inform and shape the definition and foundational meaning of youth, youth policy and childhood in a postmodern world where society is fragmenting and identities are destabilised. Philippe Aries (1962) advanced his thesis of the discovery of childhood as the product of modernity. Norbert Elias (1994) viewed the emergence of childhood as part of a civilisation process, which he called "civility". Talcot Parsons (1963) conceptualised youth as a product of capitalism that had created a rupture in society, resulting in an extended transition to adulthood. In modern society, a cultural space was created outside the traditional family that aimed at the socialisation of youth for more complex occupational roles and social responsibilities. Formal education became the chief mechanism by which, increasingly, the socialising functions of the family were displaced on to the state in urban industrial society. Youth work found a space in this new order to offer informal education and personal development through recreational and leisure pursuits in the community. This modernist process led to the deconstruction of pre-modern youth, as an invisible organic part of traditional extended family life within a rural agriculturally-based economy without age stages, into the structured urban industrial world of education and employment.

Postmodernity has thrown up new socio-historical cultural configurations of fragmentation, individualisation and consumerism in the risk society (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). This is the social and cultural space that youth in Europe finds itself in as a social group, adrift in a world without clear co-ordinates or an easily identifiable purpose (Crook et al. 1992; Putnam 2000). A shrinking state and weakening civil society are being challenged to address this social vacuum in the lives of postmodern youth (Powell et al. 2012). Whither youth in postmodern society?

The Irish *National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007* (NYWDP) addresses the impact of postmodern change on youth in terms of a series of socio-cultural factors: demography; diversity; blurring of boundaries; complex transitions; choices and pressures; individualism and consumerism (Department of Education and Science

2003: 2-4). In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, unemployment and poverty need to be added to this list. The NYWDP notes that young people are declining as a proportion of the population but "the make-up of the youth population is much more culturally diverse than heretofore, increasing the need for intercultural/multicultural aptitudes and awareness among young people and those who work with them" (Department of Education and Science 2003: 2-3). It convincingly seeks to grapple with the foundational meaning of youth in the postmodern world, arguing that the boundaries between childhood and adulthood have become more fluid, leading to a blurring of previous distinctions. This has impacted on the transition from childhood to adulthood: "The transition that has for so long been associated with youth is being significantly extended. In addition, the transition – in fact the transitions – are becoming more complex" (Department of Education and Science 2003: 3). The NYWDP discusses the critical issues of consumerism and individualism in terms of the lifestyle choices and pressures that drive young people earlier in their lives to embrace sexuality and relationships in a world where the solidity of the traditional family and community is under strain (Department of Education and Science 2003: 3-4). The tension between group consciousness and atomistic individualism, and the interweaving of ethics and aesthetics define modern youth culture (Gilroy 2010).

Are these profound changes in postmodern society undermining the foundations of youth as a social and cultural construct? Is there a loss of meaning in a decentred world? Can we any longer address "youth" as a coherent whole? Does this present youth policy with a crisis of obsolescence? Or does it present us with an opportunity to reimagine its mission? The NYWDP (Department of Education and Science 2003: 4) concludes that young people are more alienated, sceptical and questioning of established meanings contained in traditional religious verities and the authenticity of social institutions. This might be interpreted as a Baudrillardian version of postmodernity in which youth culture can simply be dismissed as stylised and ritualised forms of activity in a world that has become lost in a black hole of meaninglessness (Barker 2008: 428). The NYWDP (2003: 4) rejects this "death of meaning" thesis, optimistically concluding that "there is nothing to suggest that young people are any less interested than before in the spiritual dimension of their lives, in developing a belief system which makes sense of their experience and informs their relationships with others and with society". But it issues a warning that youth policy must adapt to "the changing nature of youth" and see it as an "opportunity" and a "challenge" (Department of Education and Science 2003: 11-12).

YOUTH AND THE AUSTERITY CITY: THE MAKING OF "THE PRECARIAT"

In the postmodern world, young people are experiencing a serious crisis epitomised by life in the austerity city. In his influential book, *The Precariat*, Standing (2011) made four key observations on youth in the austerity city.

► The city is the object of utopian desire (e.g. Paris, Berlin, London, Amsterdam and Shanghai) – a shifting spatio-temporal order that is associated with both the realisation of dreams and the act of rebellion.

- ▶ The reality is that the austerity city of the 21st Century has produced a new class, called "the precariat", which are denizens (especially young migrants) rather than citizens – a dangerous cultural contradiction in the age of globalisation.

- ▶ Citizenship for the precariat is truncated by "the precariousness of residency, of labour and work and of social protection" (Standing 2011: 5).

- ▶ For the precariat, labour is instrumental (for living), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure) (Standing 2011: 22-23).

David Harvey (2013: xi), in his study *Rebel cities*, observes that alienated urban youth are being transformed into "idle youth lost in the sheer boredom of increasing unemployment and neglect in the soulless suburbs that eventually become sites of boiling unrest". The youth riots in both the French banlieues in 2005 and the English cities during 2011 arguably represent the negative and destructive consequences of austerity policies. These riots need to be set within the wider context of youth protest, including the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, Los Indignados and Pussy Riot (Powell 2013).

Unsurprisingly, anti-politics is part of young people's world view. This has led to a radicalisation of discourse about which Howard Williamson (2013: 1) has advanced "a scenario in which historically socially disadvantaged youth may connect with newly intellectually disaffected young people to produce either more toxic or more creative alliances amongst the young". Adults frequently dismiss the radicalism of youth as simply the product of adolescent idealism. But is it?

Historian Roy Foster (2014) has recently taken up the issue of youth revolt in his book *Vivid faces*, which studies the Irish revolutionary generation of the early 20th century. Foster (2014: 6) asserts "the concept of *generation* is both fertile and troublesome, especially when linked to a change in political consciousness". He further observes "we may now be coming to see the notion of *generationism* challenging or even replacing class as an organising principle of analysis: conceiving of age groups as carriers of intellectual and organisational alternatives to the status quo, acting under the constellation of factors prevalent at the time of their birth" (our italics). In Europe we talk of the "generation of 1914", the "post-war generation", "the 1960s generation", etc., suggesting particular characteristics are associated with particular historic generations. However, Foster (2014: 7) warns that "the danger of generalisation across a generation must be guarded against; even a self-conceived generation can contain within it so-called generation units which are in apparent disagreement in some ways but linked by affinities of response to their historical and social circumstances". This comment reminds us that the recognition of generations in the social memory largely happens in retrospect. As Foster (2014: 7) puts it: "a generation is made not only of conscious processes of identification and rejection in the lives of the protagonists, but also retrospectively, in their memories, and in their control of the larger territory of official and social memory". He concludes that "the changes that convulse society do not appear from nowhere; they happen first in people's minds and through the construction of a shared culture, which can be a culture of a minority, rather than a majority" (Foster 2014: 8).

Matthew Collin (2007), in his book *The time of the rebels*, examined the role of 21st century "generationism". Youth resistance movements in former communist states

(such as Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine) played a key role in the delivery of democratic change. Collin identifies the power of popular culture (the voice of youth) as a catalytic force in bringing about change. Popular cultures create shared dialogue between young people that enables them to form bonds and become agents of social and political change. Often the impact of this change is on imaginative politics (dreaming of a better future) rather than on the world of practical politics.

In the West, the network known as Anonymous is associated with a variety of protest movements, including Occupy Wall Street, Los Indignados and the advent of hacktivism on the Internet. It represents a progression from trolling to political activism (Gleick 2014: 36). Anonymous was created on the Internet forum 4chan in 2003, as an essentially prankish and juvenile activity. The title of Anonymous reflects its organisational character as a leaderless phenomenon that defies categorisation as a movement, organisation, party, etc. It is simply an invitation to participate in protest under the mask of anonymity and reimagine politics through an idealisation of the future. In this way Anonymous rejects, mocks and satirises the world of adult politics. But it also identifies the power of generationism to challenge the existing order in the interests of promoting change. Popular culture is in itself a platform for the youth population to express its view through music, theatre and comedy that focuses on the imaginative politics of social justice and political change.

It is not often clear whether generationism represents the politics of enchantment or disenchantment or the social reality or both. The conventional view of the adult world is that the individual relates to external reality as an engaged citizen. Childhood and youth are represented as a progression to adulthood during which the young person is socially constructed as a "learner". The problem with this picture of youth is that, in an era of extended transitions and blurred boundaries, it becomes highly problematic: when do youth and adulthood begin? In terms of social reality, the world splits youth and adulthood and allows cultural representation to carry out the function of bridging the barriers. The anonymity, embraced by some young people in the Anonymous phenomenon and symbolised by the wearing of masks, suggests that many young people are alienated from the public realm. Furthermore, vulnerability results in socially deprived young people falling through the safety net traditionally provided by the welfare state. That constitutes a serious challenge for youth work and youth policy.

A new youth policy initiative is needed in our view to address the austerity city. Key challenges and issues include the following.

▶ Homelessness and residual marginalisation in the banlieues (suburbs) – what Michel Foucault called the "interior of the exterior" – needs to be addressed by reimagining the city as a common space with common rights of access and easement.

▶ Social housing needs to be provided for young people in city centres at subsidised rents in partnership with civil society/youth organisations.

▶ Public spaces need to be developed, as opposed to privatised, for young people to meet, play sport, make and listen to music, engage in community art and enjoy free Wi-Fi access in the process of becoming – young people – and the narrative of sustainable futures need to be accommodated as a central goal of youth policy.

- Youth policy needs to be designed that puts young people's health and well-being at its centre.

- Youth unemployment (which is estimated to be 50% in some parts of the EU) is destroying the current generation of young people and turning them in a futureless class of denizens.

- There needs to be a European Learning Bank offering every young person three years' free tuition within new experimental universities that are informed by the values of open access, flexible learning and participative curricula and provided in partnership with youth organisations in every part of the austerity city.

- The EU Erasmus programme, which has successfully enabled student exchanges across the European Union, should be opened to all young people, with the explicit purpose of promoting shared European values, culture and citizenship.

- A new youth policy needs to combine the imaginative politics of youth – their passion for social justice – with practical political initiatives that bring about policy change.

WHAT IS YOUTH WORK: EMPOWERMENT OR CONTROL?

The term youth work encompasses a wide range of practices and is provided by a diverse group of organisations, from independent local clubs to large international organisations like the YMCA. New forms have emerged over the last decade, often in response to government policy and priorities, further stretching the boundaries of what can be described as youth work. Moreover youth workers themselves have sometimes found it difficult to articulate what it is that makes their practice distinctive. Commenting on the European context, Coussée (2009: 6) suggests that youth work suffers from "a perpetual identity crisis" in which it seems hard for youth workers "to put their work into words". Kiely (2009) reaches broadly similar conclusions in her analysis of Irish youth work, pointing to a lack of clarity in many of the terms used to communicate the values and objectives of the sector. Members of the public, on the other hand, tend to think of youth work in rather narrow terms as a form of recreation provided in a particular place (a club, "den" or centre), oblivious to the more ambitious goals which the sector sets for itself, including relationship-building, personal development and social education (Devlin and Gunning 2009).

Notwithstanding these difficulties in trying to define youth work, it is possible to extrapolate from academic and policy documents a number of key features. Youth work is generally described in terms of informal education which is based on the voluntary participation of young people. While some "learning situations" are planned (such as discussion groups or structured programmes) the majority arise in the everyday encounters between members, and between members and youth workers (Hurley and Treacy 1993: 1). The educative purpose of youth work is often seen to be personal and social development, as the Irish Youth Work Act (2001) makes clear:

> … "youth work" means a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through

their voluntary participation, and which is (a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and (b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.

A concern with personal development and social education/informal learning is evident in government reports from the 1970s onwards, signalling a move away from the "character-building" philosophy of earlier forms of youth work (Hurley and Treacy 1993; Treacy 2009). Of course, as Kiely (2009) has rightly pointed out, "personal development" and "social education" are open to interpretation.

Voluntary participation is generally agreed to be another defining feature of youth work (Davies 2005). Young people have traditionally been able to freely join youth organisations and leave when they choose. This has important implications for the content of youth work and the interaction between adults and young people. Youth workers must develop programmes and ways of working which are attractive to participants and which they perceive to be of value in the here and now, and not just at some indeterminate date in the future (Davies 2005: 13). The voluntary principle also ensures that young people possess and retain a degree of power which they may not experience in other areas of their lives. Negotiation, "openness to a real give and take" and greater parity of esteem are therefore important elements of the youth worker/young person relationship, as Davies (2005: 13) points out: "any youth worker who patronises, rides roughshod over or simply ignores them is liable to find her or himself without a clientele to work with".

A related point is that membership of a youth club can be an empowering experience, as young people have the opportunity to make decisions, take on new responsibilities and have their views represented, experiences which are often denied them in other areas of their lives, particularly within formal education. Indeed Jeffs and Smith (2008) have argued that most people only encounter "genuine democracy" in autonomous organisations, clubs, and associations, where profit is not the prime objective, strong leadership is mistrusted and dialogue is nurtured. A range of other objectives and ideals of youth work are asserted in literature, including: promoting social inclusion (Devlin and Gunning 2009; Morgan and Kitching 2009); "starting where young people are starting" (Davies 2005: 15); fostering association, relationships and community (Jeffs and Smith 2008); being "friendly, accessible and responsive while acting with integrity" (ibid.: 278); and being available to all young people and not just to those who have been allotted "adult-imposed labels" (Davies 2005: 15).

While there is a certain consistency across the different definitions of youth work there are also, as O'hAodain (2010) points out, a number of contradictions. Youth work can be empowering, but it can also be an instrument of social control, regulation and conformity. Gilchrist et al. (2003) reach similar conclusions with regards to youth and community work, arguing that it is at its best when motivated by ideals of justice, democracy and equality, and at its worst when motivated by "fear and insecurity" to become an "unquestioning servant" of the forces of "repression and control". From the outset, youth and community work have been "constrained to negotiate the tension between domestication and liberation" (ibid.: 7). Tensions within the youth work sector are perhaps most evident in relation to targeted projects, with some commentators arguing that these initiatives undermine the ethos and objectives which the youth work sector has traditionally claimed for itself (Kiely 2009).

In order to meet the challenges of supporting young people in the austerity city youth work needs resources and investment. Youth work values that individualise young people and promote personal development, social education and empowerment should be at the centre of any inclusive youth strategy. Informal learning that empowers (Batsleer 2008) rather than socialisation that problematises young people should be the approach. Youth initiatives that problematise young people are arguably counterproductive because they draw young people into a culture of control that defines them in ways that are disempowering. David Garland (2001), in his important book *The Culture of Control*, argues that the social organisation of the postmodern order has involved a series of political and cultural adaptations that shape how citizens think and act in relation to crime and the threat of crime. These changes have shaped policy and practice in ways that have led to the targeting of socially deprived young people as a potentially criminogenic population. A youth work strategy that emphasises empowerment and inclusivity, while focusing on young people's vulnerability, needs to eschew problematisation. Targeting problematises and is the antithesis of traditional humanistic youth work values (Powell et al. 2012: 150-171); youth work ought to reach out to socially deprived young people in the austerity city by engaging in conscientisation (Friere 1972). This involves major challenges in terms of communication in order to create an informal learning culture. We live in the era of digitisation where communication, (particularly) among young people, has moved to the Internet. Youth work is challenged to shift its methodologies to meet these challenges in postmodern society. But the medium must be more than the message. Young people need to be empowered through a conscientisation that enables them to become aware of economic social and political causes of their vulnerability.

In our view, the role and task of youth work within the austerity city needs to be transformed, if it is to effectively respond to the concerns of an increasingly disaffected youth generation. Key issues and challenges include the following proposals.

- ▶ Youth work needs to embrace the Internet as a new creative space in which new empowering things happen (for example, e-activism) and potentially new possibilities for participation and deliberation exist (such as e-democracy) for young people.

- ▶ The skyscrapers have become the symbolic giants of this urban landscape – dominated by financial centres, hotels and playgrounds for rich adults from which young people are excluded – inclusion is the key to improved health and well-being for vulnerable young people.

- ▶ Youth work is challenged to contribute to the reconstitution of the psychogeography of the austerity city into an inclusive space. That means youth work needs to persuade policy makers and legislators to reconstitute the city as a common space.

- ▶ Young people need to be brought in from the borderlands of inclusion/ exclusion to become real citizens of the postmodern city. Youth work is challenged to be the bridge to inclusion that is real and tangible rather than imagined in media representations of youth.

- ▶ Youth work needs to address transitional stages between youth and adulthood that focus on extending care and support to all young people up to 25 years, so that their health and well-being is assured.

- ► Youth work is challenged to recognise that we are living within new generational territory that is being reinvented as we speak – respect, recognition, citizenship, security and safety are vital to young people's health and well-being and require dynamic engagement that empowers.

- ► Values that reflect the reality of multiculturalism in a global world need to be explicit in the youth work informal education curriculum, if tolerance and social cohesion are to be maintained.

- ► Youth work needs to address philosophical questions exploring with young people the purpose of being in the world and their democratic right to share in its possibilities and rewards as a measure to strengthen self and identity. What are the human rights of young people? How do young people promote their right to have rights?

THE "RIGHT TO HAVE RIGHTS"

Historically, young people have lacked rights and visibility. Hannah Arendt famously called this "the right to have rights". Agency over their lives is denied to young people: they have traditionally been defined as the possessions of their parents and, latterly, through the principle of *parens patriae*, they have become "welfare subjects" (Pinkney 2000) of the state, the ultimate custodian of a young person's right to care and protection. The dependency of children and young people's status on this legal and cultural framework is challenged by child abuse reports, which point to failures of adults to discharge their responsibilities towards children and young people, culturally framed as "innocent and vulnerable" (Powell and Scanlon 2015). Increasingly, questions are being asked about the youth citizen (Keane 2008). Should young people, along with other historically disempowered groups (e.g. women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, etc.) not be empowered? Why do young people lack a public voice? Why can't they vote in elections? Does this denial of a basic human right facilitate child abuse? These are difficult questions that threaten the normativity upon which our cultural world is constructed. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 proclaims that children and young people do have a right to public expression of their views in relation to their welfare – "the child's voice". Its implementation promises to transform children and young people's human rights (Young Bruehl 2012).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) was signed by every member state of the United Nations with the exception of Somalia and the United States. But what does it mean for young people? Article 12 endorses a right to participation but its language is obscure. Does care stop at 18 years? What happens to vulnerable young people between 18 and 25 years, a defining period in an individual's personal development? Is this a social class issue? Does society have responsibilities towards the socially disadvantaged young person during these complex and challenging years of transition? Many will have moved beyond traditional youth work interventions but will still have major care and support needs. These care and support needs pose a major challenge for youth policy. Arguably, transformative change in youth work and social policy is needed to address the evolving needs of youth.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to contextualise the lives of young people within the austerity city. The argument is that young people increasingly constitute a "precariat" of denizens, living on the margins of society. Some revolt, seeking to reimagine politics. This rebellion is often dismissed by adults as adolescent fantasy. In our view "generationism" constitutes a reality check on adult power. It also highlights the limitations of youth policy and youth work and the need for transformative change in society's engagement with youth. There are a number of key issues and challenges that postmodern youth policy needs to address, as the basis of an inclusive society. It concerns the basic needs of young people, which can be defined as follows:

1. citizenship, rights and recognition;

2. empowerment, information and support;

3. dignity, safety and security.

Without these basic needs young people are turned into a precarious class of denizens living on the margins of the austerity city. Youth work has a pivotal role to play in this transformative process. But it is challenged to engage with young people in a dialogue that connects with their social reality.

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