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The Long Transition

Class, Culture and Youth Training

Robert G. Hollands

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To Helen's past and Joe's future

‘Schools of the vocational type, i.e. those designed to satisfy immediate, practical interests, are beginning to predominate over the formative school, which is not immediately “interested”. The most paradoxical aspect of it all is that this new type of school appears and is advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallise them in Chinese complexities . . . The multiplication of types of vocational school thus tends to perpetuate traditional social differences; but since, within these differences, it tends to encourage internal diversification, it gives the impression of being democratic in tendency. The labourer can become a skilled worker, for instance, the peasant a surveyor or petty agronomist. But democracy, by definition, cannot mean merely that an unskilled worker can become skilled. It must mean that every “citizen” can “govern” and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this.’ – **Antonio Gramsci**, *Prison Notebooks* (1929–35)

‘It is certainly the case that the vocationalist deluge which is now going on, both inside the schools and in the “further education and training” sectors, is designed specifically to freeze the existing social division of labour between the mental and the manual classes – between conception and execution, as Marx put it – and, within that, to make damn sure nothing much moves on the sexual division of labour and the ethnic division of labour either! But all that does is to reaffirm what we already knew: that education is critical for the maintenance or the transformation of the social division of labour. A political force which is determined to do something to begin to break down the expropriation of the people into their separate universes must formulate alternative ways of making the link.’ – **Stuart Hall** (1983)

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Foreword: Transitions in Transition

To many readers the title of this book will inevitably evoke echoes of another work, written in more hopeful times. In *The Long Revolution* Raymond Williams set out to chart the social and cultural transformations set in motion by industrial capitalism as they worked their way through the institutions which shaped ordinary lives. In *The Long Transition* Robert Hollands has set himself a less ambitious, but no less daunting task: to examine the way in which working-class identities are being reshaped in and against the new regimes which have been set in place to produce the kind of youth labour required by post-industrial capitalism. It is, here, through what has been called the 'new vocationalism', that the ideology of the enterprise culture has been institutionalised in particular pedagogic and disciplinary forms, and a new generation of working-class children find themselves being schooled, or trained, for their subordinate roles in the political economy of Thatcherism. How they negotiate that experience, what resistances and accommodations they make to what is demanded of them, is the substance of the story which this book has to tell.

Raymond Williams, himself, in his later work, *Towards 2000*, pointed to what might be released by the kind of 'mobile privatisation' promoted by the Thatcherite dream; yet, ever alive to emergent contradictions, he also argued that this new individualism might also open up spaces in which non-traditional working-class identities could take root and flourish, and eventually produce new forms of struggle. In an address to the Cultural Studies Association in 1984 he even suggested that youth training schemes (YTS) were the most important arena for socialists concerned to renew the project of popular education; here the battle for young hearts and minds might well be won or lost.

Robert Hollands's study, almost uniquely, sets out to take up Williams's challenge; his book is concerned to renew the cultural analysis of class, to map out some of its more intricate and intimate positionings as they articulate the shifting boundaries of gender, generation and ethnicity. In particular he succeeds in showing how different types of training regime open up or close off specific identities for young people. The monolithic image of 'Thatcherite YTS' crushing the aspirations of 'young workers' crumbles before a more sophisticated and nuanced account, albeit one which is even more damning in its conclusions.

If the book avoids simplistic polemics, it is not, however, by retreating into a purely academic exercise of 'theorisation'. His method involves an ethnography which is both critical and compassionate; he neither patronises nor sentimentalises the young people he listens to; rather, he makes their voices heard within an interpretative framework which accords full weight to the wider resonances and hidden complexities of what they have to say. But the book does not stop there; it draws out the implications of this research for the development of new and more responsive youth policies within the labour movement; as such it makes a welcome and timely contribution to current debates around the Labour Party's policy review.

The book, however, offers cold comfort to those who think that school-leavers and youth trainees will make easy recruits for any political ideology, Right or Left. Instead what it points to is the real gulf which separates these young people's felt needs from their expression in any form of organised politics. These are transitional identities which lack any stable anchorage in our political culture, even though they may initiate a fragmentary cultural politics of their own. This is something of an old-fashioned story, but one whose narrative ingredients are in the process of being refashioned. For at a time when the consuming passions – and privileged autonomies – of youth culture are being stretched to embrace much of childhood as well as a good deal of early adulthood, the State is enforcing a new and enlarged condition of dependency, removing the right to benefits, and making most young people even more powerless than before.

Nowhere is this dependency – and the forms of resistance it engenders – more clearly illustrated than on youth training schemes. One of the salutary messages which this book conveys is

just how difficult it is proving for labour organisations to move beyond the patriarchal assumptions which have dominated so much youth policy and research in the past.

Although Robert Hollands's research was originally undertaken at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, it represents in many ways as big a break from earlier CCCS work in this field as it does from the mainstream tradition of empirical youth studies. To begin with, the great divide between school-to-work-transition studies and youth cultural analysis focusing on, lifestyle is here definitively overcome. Family, schooling, leisure, are not treated as separate, functionally interdependent sites of 'social reproduction', but as integral elements in cultural biography, continually being negotiated through the construction of identities in and across the full range of structural constraints. Along with the abandonment of 'functionalism' goes a rejection of the narrow positivistic concerns which have once more come to dominate youth sociology. To those who have returned to the 'numbers game', who argue that with declining numbers of school-leavers coming on to the labour market, youth (un)employment is no longer the burning issue it was, there is a simple enough reply, which Robert Hollands here spells out with great cogency. The training of youth labour has never been simply about matching supply and demand, skills and jobs. That is the vocationalist fallacy *par excellence*. It has always involved a much wider and deeper process of cultural apprenticeship, and one to which government policies have given an ever sharper ideological point. From this perspective the probable absorption of YTS into the Employment Training programme does not signify that the youth training problem has been finally solved, only that the state apparatus for remaking the working class has become more fully rationalised.

The numbers game is part of a biopolitical strategy traditionally devoted to the surveillance and control of youthful populations; it is one with which a certain kind of sociology has actively collaborated, most recently under the aegis of the ESRC. According to this paradigm young people become a problem only when there are too many of them, never when there are too few! Against this it is necessary to demonstrate that the importance of the youth question has nothing to do with demography or deviancy. It is a site of discourses and institutions which play a key role in shaping

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the society we all live in – condensing certain strategic contradictions which are otherwise hidden or displaced. And yet, paradoxically, these same ‘youth’ contradictions ensure that ‘young people’ never constitute a unitary social category. Robert Hollands does not shrink from exploring the theoretical and political difficulties posed by this fact. Indeed it is because he risks his neck, and refuses to retreat into pontifications or become side-tracked into trivial issues, that his book is such a welcome change from so much recent writing on the youth question.

This is not yet another local study of YTS; it is not a *vox pop* survey of life and love on the dole. It provides us with an original look ‘from below’ at some of the deep-rooted changes which are working their way through young lives to map out the essential contours of British society in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. As such it makes an important contribution to the debates which this series is concerned to pursue.

PHILIP COHEN
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June 1989

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ROBERT G. HOLLANDS

Key to ethnographic quotations

- Pause in the conversation
- . . . Material edited out
- [] Explanatory information or actions inserted
- X Young person purposefully not identified
- BH Bob Hollands

List of Trainees Interviewed or Referred to in the Book

Young women

Alice (white, clerical, PTA)*
Ann (white, distribution, PTA)
Andrea (white, retail, college-based)
Cheryl (white, distribution, PTA)
Daljit (Asian, clerical, community-based)
George (white, manufacturing, college-based)
Jackie (white, childcare, college-based)
Jan (white, clothing manufacture, PTA)
Jennifer (Afro-Caribbean, clothing, PTA)
Jill (white, childcare, college-based)
Julie (white, retail, PTA)
Kamni (Asian, clerical, community-based)
Kathy (white, public utilities, employer-led)
Kelly (Afro-Caribbean, clothing, PTA)
Liz (white, retail, PTA)
Lorraine (white, clothing, PTA)
Mandy (Afro-Caribbean, clerical, community-based)
Margaret (Afro-Caribbean, childcare, college-based)
Michelle (white, distribution, PTA)
Shanaz (Asian, clerical, community-based)
Tracy (white, caring, PTA)

Young men

Andy (white, manual labour,** community-based)
Angus (white, retail, PTA)
Art (white, manual labour, college-based)
Baz (white, maintenance, community-based)

Ben (white, horticulture, community-based)
Billy (white, mechanics, community-based)
Calvin (Afro-Caribbean, manual labour, community-based)
Chris (white, manual labour, community-based)
Craig (white, metalwork, community-based)
Dan (white, maintenance and repairs, PTA)
Finchy (white, signwriting, PTA)
Frank (white, manual labour, community-based)
Garnie (Afro-Caribbean, woodwork, community-based)
Inderjit (Asian, clerical, community-based)
John (white, retail, PTA)
Leonard (Afro-Caribbean, woodwork, community-based)
Mark (white, manual labour, community-based)
Mick (white, maintenance, community-based)
Nigel (Afro-Caribbean, clerical, community-based)
Otis (Afro-Caribbean, construction, college-based)
Paul (white, engineering, employer-led)
Peter (white, horticulture, college-based)
Robert (white, maintenance, community-based)
Shabaz (Asian, metalwork, community-based)
Will (white, maintenance, college-based)

* PTA Private Training Agency

** Manual labour refers to a broad range of training and work experience in numerous manual trades (i.e. painting and decorating, bricklaying, construction, etc.)