

Book review

CHILDREN OF ROGERNOMICS: A NEOLIBERAL GENERATION LEAVES SCHOOL

Karin Nairne, Jane Higgins and Judith Sligo

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Children of Rogernomics: A neoliberal generation leaves school is a sociological study of 93 New Zealanders aged between 15 to their early 20s during the transition from school to post-school in the mid-2000s. It is a fascinating empirical study, illustrating as it does the constraints and opportunities for young people at a particular historical moment. Karin Nairn, Jane Higgins and Judith Sligo show the complex engagement of the individual with society by focusing on the 'identity work' undertaken by these young people.

The first two chapters provide a straightforward Marxist account of the neoliberal changes to education within the wider context of contemporary globalisation and the knowledge economy discourse of the previous decade. The focus is on how young people do their 'identity work' within the neoliberal context, how they 'make use of the discursive resources of neoliberalism, drawing on these to craft identity and rework the narratives in which they locate themselves' (p. 23). Chapter three, which deals with the methods used in the empirical case studies, is insightful and scholarly. I recommend it for postgraduate research methods courses despite the authors' unnecessary insistence on declaring their own ethnicity in line with standpoint approaches. (For a critique of standpoint or voices discourses see Moore & Muller, 2010). The researchers' honesty about the ethical dilemma raised by the use of peer researchers and portfolios where they acknowledge that 'we had not (as we had intended) rendered ourselves less powerful in the research relationship at all' (p. 35) adds to the depth and often insightful interpretations of the participants' social biographies.

The expansion of education at the tertiary level for young people today, with only 11 of the 93 having no plans for tertiary education, is a major theme in the book. Although the belief in a university qualification as a passport to a job that pays well is understood as a feature of neoliberalism, the desire for a good job and the level of education required for that employment is not uncommon to previous generations. Another phenomenon not pertaining to the neoliberal period alone is the often poignant situation of working-class and minority students who are the family pioneers in pursuing university study. Equally the shared aspirations for happiness, security, meaningfulness, enjoyment are common to generations over time.

A finding that does separate this generation from previous ones is that no gender distinction was found to be obvious with respect to economic independence. I would have liked further discussion about this given that, while the feminist legacy was not always strong in other areas, it certainly seems to have taken hold here. The uneven nature of the feminist legacy was suggested by the expectation of the young women that they would be economically independent

on the one hand and on the other the position taken by one of the participants (Naomi) that a career was secondary to establishing a home and family.

The fascinating account of the aspirations of the three young people discussed in the 'Great Expectations' chapter was marred to some extent by the ethnic essentialism that meant each individual was portrayed in terms of a foundational ethnic identity. Lia, for example, with two generations of university-educated people in her family and an interest in a law degree was very much a middle-class young woman. Where ethnicity did matter was Lia's awareness of her skin colour as an element in her self-recognition but the relationship between this social experience of race and middle-class status was not explored. It would have been interesting to see a distinction drawn between 'race' (visible physical features resulting from a genetic heritage that are given social meaning) and cultural affiliation to provide a more nuanced understanding of the race – culture concepts. Social experiences of race do matter, of course, but less so for those from ethnic groups in the middle-class.

Unfortunately the authors tended to reduce complex social relationships to ethnicised binaries. Although this is a common feature in New Zealand's social sciences it does detract from the many excellent discussions of the materiality of the young peoples' lives. These may or may not have an ethnic dimension. Shaun, for example, with his deep desire for marriage and family, was described in terms of a foundational Maori identity although his life appeared to be shaped more by the resources available to a working-class person and by the strong emotional bonds of his family, than by Maori cultural affiliation.

The researchers' insistence in explaining both Lia and Shaun's choices as challenging discourses of poor achievement and lack of educational and career success amongst Pacific and Maori young people appeared contrived, given that forces other than cultural affiliation were more powerful in their lives. Fortunately the tendency to essentialise ethnicity was less obvious in Chapter 6 with Marama, Raina and Ana's lives characterised as 'rich in the messy realities of class, ethnicity and gender' but with the reality of individuals and families also recognised. This less reductionist interpretation also came through in chapters 7 and 8. The former showed Hine, Nadine, Kylie, Diana, Evan, and Eric negotiating with 'belonging at multiple levels: through culture, church, friends, and peers and more broadly through seeing oneself and one's beliefs reflected in society' (p. 87). The voice of the researchers came through in their comment that Kylie's willingness to be reflective about her views on Christian beliefs 'was a gift to researchers interested in the fluidity of identity over time'. A fellow researcher would share that sentiment.

The case studies of popular culture show the excitement of socialising for young people and the discussion of alcohol consumption and car culture for some participants and alcohol and university culture for others is informative and insightful. The authors note that 'alcohol consumption represented a particularly powerful dynamic when combined with car culture' and even though 'drinking in cars was risky ... it also afforded social opportunities not otherwise available to rural young people'. (p. 104). The significance of cars in rural areas where they define social activities and relationships and where 'popular images of young men as drivers and drinkers still has considerable potency' (p. 107) has a long tradition in New Zealand society and reminders are needed about the intransigence of alcohol in rural areas. This chapter certainly provides that. However, it was not only the rural areas where alcohol plays its role in identity formation; so too are universities places where excessive drinking is a powerful force, something noted several times in the case studies.

Although chapter 9's focus on three young men seeking to find fulfilling work, fun and autonomy was explained as a neoliberal enterprise with discourses of entrepreneurialism and meritocracy important to crafting worker identities, these are discourses that also have a

longer history than neoliberalism. Once again, the neoliberalism framework tends to become a theoretical straightjacket when analysing the case studies.

Chapter 10 discussed the gendered identities of the young people in the context of feminism, the backlash and the ‘what about the boys’ rhetoric. It was interesting to see Abbey and Ranui, the ‘can-do’ girls, who combine success in education with success in nontraditional domains, described as a dual performance with elements of femininity and masculinity. The authors’ finding that young men and women enacted gendered identities which drew on a wide spectrum of discourses suggests that the decades of ‘strong’ feminism in the 60s and 70s laid the foundation for changes that continue to liberate young people from the rigid gendered identities of the past. This sense of control over one’s life through self-directed identity work also came through in the case studies of the four young mothers ‘working to re-author their lives to explicitly contradict standard deficit narratives of teen parenthood’ (p. 157).

Is the book ‘an in-depth and compelling account of the impact of NZ’s neoliberal policies on the generation of young people born in the years immediately following 1984’ as the Foreword claims (p7)? Or is it a wider and more nuanced sociological study of a generation of young people? I think the latter. However, the reductive determinism of the neoliberalism framework did detract from the richness of the narratives about the complex lives of the young people. Although, to be fair to the authors, they did at several points recognise that ‘neoliberalism does not define these young people. It is one lens through which they do their identity work’ (p. 37). Yet, at other times, they were insistent on inserting neoliberal theorising into the analysis, whether or not it fitted.

However, having said this, such reductionism is a theoretical weakness common to advocacy literature in sociology and my criticisms are not intended to detract from the book’s strengths. The empirical research is thorough and the discussion of the methods used in the research is direct and thoughtful, especially the honest appraisal of the limitations of peer researchers and the anti-CV portfolios. The writing is engaging with the direct immediacy of the style pulling the reader in the young peoples’ lives and leaving us wanting to know more. The book does live up to Foreword’s claim of providing social biographies of young New Zealanders ‘that are authentic and hard-hitting’ and is a worthwhile addition to the sociological literature.

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References

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