

Against Disengagement: Non-participation as an Object of Governance

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Abstract

The discourse of disengagement has achieved ascendancy just as young people's employment prospects have declined – in many countries to crisis levels. Conceptualising and interpreting young people's non-participation in dominant modes of education, training and employment has been a preoccupation of academics, policy-makers and journalists. This paper offers a critical analysis of the discourse of disengagement. It queries the primacy of participation as the dominant policy response to mass youth unemployment, identifies some paradoxes of this policy priority, and locates them within a political-economic analysis of youth unemployment. It proposes a view of prevailing policy responses as a mode of governance of problematised populations of young 'non-participants'. By juxtaposing two ostensibly incompatible analytical frameworks, the paper draws attention to some potentially illuminating tensions between materialist and governmentalist analyses of dominant policy responses to 'disengagement', and considers how these might be exploited in researching and re-conceptualising non-participation.

Key words: youth unemployment, disengagement, NEET, non-participation, labour market, governmentality

“Disengagement”

The discourse of disengagement has achieved ascendancy in the UK and more widely just as young people's employment prospects have declined. The current speed of its reach into the narratives of policy and popular journalistic commentary alike can be tracked quite closely to the recent exponential rise in unemployment amongst young people – in many countries to what the International Labour Organisation refers to as crisis levels without modern historical precedent (ILO, 2012, p.33).

A decade ago, the idea of disengagement had not been applied to young people who were ‘not in employment, education and training’ (so-called ‘NEETs’). Its closest counterparts in the literature were Istance et al.’s (1994) concept of ‘Status Zer0’ and MacDonald and Marsh’s (2005) ‘disconnected youth’. The former is a construct of the administrative category ‘non-participant’; the latter derived from underclass theories, referring to ‘a generation disconnected from the moral mainstream’ (p.199). Some recognition of the risks of a ‘lost generation’ on the part of the outgoing Labour administration following the early stages of the 2007 international financial crisis (e.g. Department of Work and Pensions, 2009) have since been superseded by an emergent discourse of disengagement that purports to account for non-participation amongst young people. ‘Lost generations’ disappeared from ministerial and official policy discourse when the UK’s Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took office. The language of disengagement, already in use, became more prominent, as a particular bearer of meanings of the causes of youth unemployment.

The vocabulary of disengagement is now rife in relation to young people, unemployment and non-participation in education and training. There is prolific use in the press and on the internet (over 25,000 hits for ‘disengaged young people’ on Bing). The term is widely used amongst a range of youth organisations, charities and other non-governmental organisations. There is increasing evidence of its formal usage as a category by government departments and agencies (see for example: The Scottish Government, 2005; Peacock, 2011; Mason, 2012) and more widespread usage beyond the UK where English is the language of government.

Two domestic examples stand out. The first is the extensive use of the term in a recent Department for Education report on vocational qualifications, including in its title. The idea

of disengagement is in effect the focus of the report, sufficient to warrant the following definitions:

Definitions of disengagement included in the study comprise underachievement at Key Stage 3, having poor attitudes to school, aspiring to leave education and training at the age of 16, and playing truant. (Department for Education, 2011, p.5)

This is an exceptionally inclusive definition, which may trail the development of a discourse which seeks to account for almost all non-standard careers during and after compulsory schooling.

Also of significance is its inclusion in the official government report prepared by National Centre for Social Research on the August 2011 riots in England, commissioned by the Cabinet Office. The report is peppered with references to high levels of youth unemployment in some of the localities most affected by riots, and one of its findings reads:

There was a sense that too many young people were disengaged – for example, they were not part of their community in any positive way and they were uninterested in, or cynical about mainstream politics. (Morrell et al., 2011, p.46)

The implied connection between unemployment, the discursive use of the term ‘disengagement’ and social unrest arises again in this paper.

The International Crisis of Youth Unemployment

As Figure One shows, the global rate of youth unemployment had been in a steady decline in the early 1990s. Following the beginning of the international financial crisis in 2007, it returned to its previous recent historical highs, and the most recent projections to 2015 show no signs of recovery (ILO, 2012, *passim*).

[Figure One Here]

Even before the current crises, one IGO calculated that ‘Youth make up 25 per cent of the global working-age population but account for 43.7 per cent of the unemployed, which means that almost every other jobless person in the world is between the ages of 15 and 24’ (UNDESA, 2007, p.238). The most recent report from the International Labour Organisation says:

Young people have suffered particularly heavily from the deterioration in labour market conditions. The rate of youth unemployment rose globally from 11.7 per cent in 2007 to 12.7 per cent in 2011, the advanced economies being particularly hard hit, where this rate jumped from 12.5 per cent to 17.9 per cent over this period. In addition to the 74.7 million unemployed youth around the world in 2011 – a growing number of whom are in long-term unemployment – an estimated 6.4 million young people have given up hope of finding a job and have dropped out of the labour market altogether.(ILO, 2012, p.84).

The ILO’s more detailed analysis shows the major impact of the financial crisis on youth unemployment, from 2007 onwards. Most of the difference in the proportion of young people

without work over that period is attributed to the massive increase in youth unemployment across the OECD and EU. In Ireland, Spain and Greece, current rates match the endemic extremes of unemployment that have long characterised North Africa and the Middle East, where every other person aged 16-25 has neither a place in school or college, or in training, nor a job.

In the UK, the earliest effects of the financial crisis were immediately visible in unemployment rates amongst 16-24 year olds, as Figure Two shows. Since then the rate has continued to rise steeply, reaching record proportions, with almost one in four without work and one in five defined as 'NEET'.

[Figure Two here]

Amongst 16-17 year olds the overall unemployment rate (which includes full-time students) reached one in three in 2008 and has continued to rise steadily since then, to 38% (House of Commons Library, 2012).

Most of the discussion that follows is confined to youth unemployment in the UK. But it is in a number of respects important to see the UK position in its international context. Mass endemic youth unemployment is emerging as a characteristic of rich and poor economies alike. It is affected by a number of specifically transnational factors, most notably the new global division of labour and economic migration as well as transnational policies of national debt management, most notably in the European Union. It is also an increasing object of policy interventions by international governmental organisations (IGOs) (see Fergusson and Yeates, forthcoming).

An additional cause of growing transnational interest is that there is strong historical and contemporary international (Jenkins, 1983; Jenkins and Wallace, 1996; International Institute for Labour Studies (IILS), 2011) evidence of an association between unemployment amongst young people and social unrest. The IILS notes that ‘the inability to address the jobs crisis has led to rising social discontent’, and estimates the risk of increased social unrest ‘is especially high in advanced economies, the Middle East and North Africa ...’ (IILS, 2011, p1).

The growth, spread, universality and social implications of mass youth unemployment are crucial contextualising factors for making sense of the concept of disengagement, for questioning current policies for ‘reclaiming the disengaged’, and for subjecting the emergent discourse of disengagement to critical scrutiny. Such policies and discourses need to be understood not only in terms of economic well-being, poverty and young people’s rights to work and to welfare, but in terms of policy responses to a problematised population of young people who tend at such times to be viewed as a prospective threat to social order and therefore, as I will argue, as an object of targeted governance.

The Critique of the Discourses of Non-participation

Describing, labelling and defining young people’s non-participation in dominant modes of education, training and employment, as the precursor to conceptualising and acting on it, has been a preoccupation of academics, policy-makers and journalists since the 1970s. In the UK, less extreme recessions in the 1980s fuelled the development and circulation of underclass theories and their associated discourses that were popularised by politicians of the New Right

and centre left alike. They linked family histories, low educational attainment, poor housing, and unemployment to a range of socially pathologised conducts, including propensity to criminality (e.g. Murray, 1990). During the recessions of the 1990s, the concept of 'social exclusion' entered political and popular discourse and subsequently achieved something approaching orthodoxy as an explanation for the conduct of young people who came to be labelled, counted and responded to as 'NEET'. The youthful underclass of previous recessions was thus discursively reconstructed as 'the socially excluded'. In parallel, a number of different academic and policy discourses were used to capture, conceptualise, explain and address non-participation in employment, education and training. Principal amongst these are the discourses of transitions and social exclusion, though other variants, particularly those of disaffection and marginalisation, have also been influential.

In the transitions discourse, successful careers are seen to be founded in smooth movement from one activity-category (primarily education, training, employment) to another. Such transitions are progressive, objectively linked and subjectively coherent. As a result, in the discourse, failure to progress towards adult social and financial independence is located in the moment of transfer between activity categories. Whether for want of opportunity, poor provision, ill-advised choices, weak motivation, or unrealistic expectations, it is the point of articulation between activity categories that is seen as the critical conjuncture of success or failure. The concept of transition became dominant in the 1980s and 1990s, and its pervasive methods and discursive assumptions dominated the empirical research agenda throughout that period.

In academic analysis, the social exclusion discourse has varying manifestations, from those which regard the excluded as socially and culturally closed off from 'normal' modes of

participation, to those which expressly attribute exclusion to poverty resulting from worklessness or weak benefits entitlement. More commonly, though, this discourse tends to disregard structural poverty and patterned inequality as a key source of exclusion in themselves, and stresses instead its mediation through diverse social and cultural contexts. Thus it is not poverty in itself but how it constrains possibilities that is the key determinant of exclusion. The inequalities of relative poverty do not universally result in social exclusion, on this reading, and case-specific personal and cultural factors are instead used to account for it. Exclusion is therefore remediable without direct recourse to questions of material inequality. Supported appropriately, so the argument goes, it is within the powers of those who experience it to address their own misfortunes.

Both discourses have been subject to significant academic and other criticisms. The transitions discourse began to attract criticism in the late 1990s. Raffe (2003, p. 4) notes three main criticisms of the 'transitions metaphor' from academic commentators: its linearity, its economism; and its individualism. The data sets, the pathway metaphors and the core assumptions of the transitions discourse resulted in a representation of post-16 trajectories that missed the experiences of a substantial problematised section of the population (see Fergusson, 2000; Fergusson, 2004). While the transitions metaphor is still used widely, and much government-funded empirical work continues to focus on conjunctures between activity categories, confidence in its explanatory power and policy has diminished.

The discourse of social exclusion was the object of much criticism at its inception, particularly in the light of its dilution or perversion of its original European philosophical conception (notably Levitas, 1996, 1998; see also Fergusson, 2002 for an overview). It was weakened in usage by its fundamental ambiguities with regard to causation and the asserted

claims about personal responsibility that flowed from them. And in practice its currency diminished to the point of virtual disappearance with the UK's New Labour project that had introduced and redefined it.

Seen in the round, both discourses (and those of disaffection and marginalisation) leave open fundamental questions of causation and responsibility for 'being NEET'. What personal attributes / deficiencies, or what social / economic conditions lead to 'broken transitions', to a state of disaffection/marginalisation or becoming socially excluded remains vigorously contested.

Participation as a Policy Axiom

Discursively, the concepts of transition, social exclusion/inclusion and participation are deeply entangled. Tautologically, non-participation is the critical index of failed transition; failed transitions further reduce subsequent prospects of participation; non-participation and failed transitions are defined in terms of social exclusion. Once participation has been established as the key to social inclusion, then commuted into labour market participation, it becomes the inevitable solution to social exclusion. As Levitas (op.cit.) has so clearly articulated, this approach was epitomised by the centrality of waged labour to New Labour's conceptions of social cohesion and social integration. Participation in a recognised mode of activity became axiomatic, as *the* solution to New Labour's redefined version of social exclusion. As Fairclough (2000) and Byrne (2005) point out, questions of causation and agency are circumnavigated. In turn, 'The Excluded' become portrayed as a category of hapless victims of inexorable meta-forces of deindustrialisation, globalisation and, most recently, of impenetrably complex and contagious transnational financial crises.

In conditions of economic growth that characterised most of New Labour's thirteen years in office, the pursuit of something approaching complete participation was a tenable policy ambition. Now, in the aftermath of the 2007-8 crisis, 'social exclusion' has disappeared from the UK government's policy lexicon. Yet the axiomatic status of participation remains the guiding principle of policy. In present conditions of recurrent recession in the UK and much of the EU, this axiomatic commitment to participation in the face of massive labour market contraction stretches credulity. Cyclical economic crises have long made young people the first victims of recession (see for example Hedges, 1976; Raffe, 1983). That declining demand for young people's labour is now demonstrably global (see UNDESA, 2007, *op. cit.*, and ILO, 2010) indicates a phenomenon so close to being universal as to merit proper exploration as a social issue in its own right.

None of the policies built around the discourses of transitions, social exclusion or participation have manifested any capacity to remediate non-participation when it reaches critical levels. Five years into the financial crisis, the accumulated wisdom of several decades of policy interventions is unable to contain unprecedented levels of youth unemployment. A multiplicity of approaches to conceptualising youth unemployment, explaining it and informing policy have nevertheless allowed some of the world's wealthiest countries (OECD) to experience levels of youth unemployment that exceed those of the poorest (North Africa and Middle East). Some more fundamental and convincing explanations of these extremes, and of the ostensibly futile persistence with pro-participation policies in the face of oversubscribed labour markets and education systems are required.

The View from Labour Market Theory

Classical liberal theory of supply and demand offers two possible explanations of the disequilibrium that results in mass (youth) unemployment. Supply-side analyses see rising unemployment as resulting from mismatches in supply of labour and demand for labour that result from deficiencies in the supply of labour. Typically these relate to inadequate specific or generic skills, or to poor disposition towards work, high personal 'reservation wage' levels, or reluctance to travel / relocate. Demand-side analyses attribute rising unemployment to a decline in the number of jobs available, typically as a result of poor business conditions, resulting in redundancies and deferred recruitment.

In practice labour markets are diverse and varied according to segments, sectors and localities, and both 'models' are in play at the same time, and in the same place. On the supply side, even in deep recessions with collapsing demand, posts remain unfilled by virtue of lack of requisite skills, but on the demand side, even if the skill profile of the unemployed population perfectly mirrored employers' needs, insufficient demand for labour would account for most unemployment. Only in extreme conditions of near-to-full employment would skill shortages be the sole explanation for job vacancies. And only in equally extreme conditions of slump could all unemployment be confidently attributed to an absolute collapse in demand for labour. Between such rare extremes, complex and prolific exceptions to supply-side and demand side explanations for unemployment are to be expected.

Furthermore, labour markets are inherently dynamic. In buoyant conditions, a deteriorating net skills set will, according to the model, eventually result in weakened demand for labour as productive competitiveness falls and workforces with better skills prosper. In conditions of low demand for labour, an improving skill set has the capacity to strengthen economic

performance and stimulate increased demand for labour – especially if skills and productive efficiency are declining amongst competitor firms, localities or countries.

One key factor in these dynamics is therefore the adaptability of the market *and* the labour force. Thus when the demand for young people's labour is high, vacancies are often filled below ideal skill requirements, as young people are tempted towards early labour market entry. Obversely, when demand falls dramatically during recessions, the opportunity to delay labour market entry and enhance skills is advantageous to young people and employers alike. Young people can make themselves more marketable, the skills-base of the labour force is strengthened and better-skilled workers actively stimulate recovery as new firms prosper where others have failed. According to classical theory, so long as markets operate freely, equilibrium will restore itself as employers adjust their skill demands in times of boom and workers adjust their expectations of pay and conditions in times of recession.

In practice, arguments about the relative influence of supply-side and demand-side factors during market disequilibrium are complex and highly contested. They divide economists, policy makers, governments and major international governmental organisations alike. One analysis suggests that a very small number of leading IGOs support the supply-deficiency explanation, a similar number the demand-deficiency explanation, while several strive to blend the two (Fergusson and Yeates, *op. cit.*).

During the strong market conditions of the early-mid 2000s, when unemployment reached unprecedentedly low levels in the UK, arguments about skills deficit holding back economic growth were rarely heard, except in relation to medium term planning for the needs of the high-skill high-competition global economy. Strong demand for young labour *combined with*

increased levels of HE entry at unprecedented levels, and major increases in extended schooling beyond 16 rendered these arguments unnecessary. The overwhelming majority of young people entered the labour market or began courses of study or training of their own volition. Now, during a period of substantially reduced aggregate demand for young labour *combined with* downward pressures on HE numbers and reduced incentives to study beyond aged 16, supply-side arguments about poor skills and the importance of young people's participation in education and training are once again invoked.

Put simply, at least at the level of political and policy discourse, the case for better skills tends to be most actively deployed when it is least relevant, and least actively deployed when a case for better qualified labour is at its most plausible. But this striking apparent paradox *appears* to be contradictory only if the simplified version of market theory is brought to bear. To the question 'why try to force young people into work experience or courses of training when there is an absolute deficit in labour market demand?' comes the response: this is exactly the moment to do so, according to classical theory. When demand for labour is high, skills levels are unimportant only in the short term: a better-skilled workforce elsewhere will eventually challenge the leading competitive position of another national economy. When demand for labour is low, utilising slow labour market take-up of young people is an opportunity to strengthen the net national skill set, and a rational response on the part of a firm or a national economy that can envision challenging competitors who contributed to its own earlier decline.

This would be a convincing retort in an imaginary perfect market in which all firms competed on a level playing field, and finance operated by the same supposed laws of markets. Three

very obvious ‘imperfections’ in market conditions call this ostensibly prudent strategic response into serious question.

Firstly, the model disregards the relationship between wages and employment. As the now-permanent workforce of undocumented migrant workers who labour without social protection for poverty wages in indentured conditions demonstrates, so long as there are no upward pressures on wages, labour markets tend to ‘clear’. Minimum wage controls, and young people’s personal ‘reservation wage rates’ (those thresholds below which they are not willing to work) inhibit employers and applicants reaching agreement to employ / work in tight economic conditions.

Secondly, firms do not compete on a level playing field in an extensively globalised economy. The growth, economic power and competitive challenge of India and China, for example, demonstrates the inhibiting effects of wage controls and inflexibilities. So do the hugely inferior living and welfare conditions of much of their workforces.

Thirdly, firms are now more than ever demonstrably not subject to the same market conditions. Companies that produce high-volume goods and services and employ large numbers fail if they do not reduce costs as sales decline. This inexorable slide towards bankruptcy for failure does not apply to all sectors of the economy. As recent history shows, when financial institutions face failure, governments under-write them.

It is in this context that economists, governments and IGOs contend on the relative influence of supply-side and demand-side factors in precipitating the transnational re-emergence of mass unemployment, and make (or refuse) policies that appear to assume something closer to

perfect market conditions than can be justified. It is also in this context that young people grapple with arguments that better qualifications will help them contribute to economic growth, rather than merely outflank their peers in future queues for vacant jobs. And it is in this context that the discourse of disengagement is gaining currency.

From Responsibilisation to the Individualisation of Failure

Personalisation and Responsibilisation

The discourse of social exclusion reversioned by New Labour was fundamentally enmeshed with the discourse of responsabilisation (Labour Party, 1997). The *quid pro quo* of subsidised or fully funded training, of work placement and of job-seekers allowance was that young people take personal responsibility for their own conduct of and commitment to whatever programme of activity they agreed to accept. The entire panoply of progress monitoring and Personal Advisers that were the hallmark of New Labour's New Deal for Young People (NDYP) was emblematic of personalised intervention and support that was also a system of monitoring and addressing non-participation. Ostensibly benign in its commitment to matching young people's preferences and abilities to suitable slots in work placement and training, the NDYP edifice retained a disciplinary edge when more inductive methods failed.

Thus, from the late 1990s, the policies for achieving participation and for ensuring that opportunities for participation were actually secured began to change significantly. Rights of citizenship in the form of entitlement to welfare came to depend on 'responsible' conduct, in the form of accepting offered places in education, training or labour markets. New modes of securing participation were developed by means of combining ostensibly more client-oriented policies, newly empowered and better-connected local agencies, and shifts in the exercise of

power between agents and their clients. One manifestation of this effect is admirably captured in Thompson's (2011a) application of Bourdieu's theories to young people, as exemplifying the ways in which education is central to social reproductions of inequality; and in his (2011b) analysis of the effects of individualisation of social risk amongst young non-participants.

The recent ascendancy of the discourse of disengagement and the effective abandonment of the discourse of social exclusion marks a critically important shift in the ways in which non-participation is being addressed. It presages a significantly altered approach. The conceptualisation of non-participation as disengagement anticipates a positively radical move away from locating it in exclusionary failures of provision, and towards implied self-exclusionary failures of individual performance. The outgoing conceptualisation foregrounds young people as products of social and economic environments that governments have the power to improve; the incoming conceptualisation constructs them as individualised authors of their own (mis)fortunes in given environments which will improve only at the initiative of their inhabitants.

The Discursive Provenance of Disengagement

The shift implied in this re-conceptualisation is clearly reflected in the academic provenance of 'disengagement'. The concept has a long and illuminating academic history. Its original use indicating diminishing social connectedness (institutional, structural, interpersonal, normative etc.) derives from theories of aging (Cumming and Henry, 1961) and has principally been developed within academic social psychology. The concept is also associated with social psychological theories of moral disengagement, originating in Bandura's social cognitive theories (1989, 1990), where it has connections to notions of

deviancy and delinquency; to juvenile offending (see Watt et al, 2004); to violence, particularly amongst adolescents (e.g. Hymel et al, 2005); and with terror (e.g. Bandura, 2004). Some authors assert direct connections between disengagement and offending (Stephenson, 2007). Of late, the concept has been uprooted from its psychological context and applied very widely by a number of authors in relation to young people's unemployment and NEET status (Sheehy et al 2009, DeLuca et al, 2010, Upton, 2011). Much of this usage is unreflective and uncritical of this unexplained application of the concept – with the exception of a few notable interventions that have problematised it (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Thompson, *op.cit*).

The concept of disengagement has also been applied uncritically in relation to young people's perceived non-participation in democratic political processes (Spiker et al, 2005; Henn et al., 2007; Manning, 2010). Again, a few challenge this approach. Bhavnani emphasises young people's cynicism, rather than their apathy, noting that it is premised on sceptical engagement with debate, which 'may even act as an *impetus* for political activity.' (Bhavnani, 1991, p.13, emphasis in original). Similarly, Coleman's (2007) Chapter on "How democracies have disengaged from young people" disrupts the negative associations by inverting the locus of responsibility which is always implicit in the vocabulary of disengagement.

Disengagement is then a concept directly derived from the paradigms and precepts of psychology. It locates the act of disengagement in the behaviours and cognitions of the actor. In effect, it is the actor who disengages from a given social world. Changes in the social context which might prompt disengagement are seen as secondary. The act of withdrawal is conceptualised antithetically. That is, it signifies an absence – of engagement. Disengagement is thereby conceptualised as a fundamentally negative process. It is by implication a failure to

act, an absence of exercise of will, or at extremes a default condition of passivity or indolence in which personal responsibility is abrogated.

Governing Non-participation

The net effect of the discursive application of a transmuted and bowdlerised concept of disengagement to young people identified as non-participants is, at minimum, to individualise and pathologise the condition of non-participation . It is, in this discourse, young people themselves who disengage (rather than being excluded) of their own free will. Each act of disengagement harms the actor and her social milieu, insofar as it renders her non-productive, dependent on others for basic maintenance, and without commitment to preparing herself for her own future as a financially and socially independent adult. In these senses, disengagement is self-inflicted and ‘anti-social’. It is a wilful act of self-imposed dependency that damages the core qualities of interdependency whereby social and community cohesion are normally secured.

The reformulation of non-participation as disengagement marks a potentially highly significant departure from all those formulations that explicitly or implicitly recognise that it is at least in part the product of wider social factors and conditions that are external to non-participants, and beyond their control. Preceding discourses in varying degrees all accept that non-participants are at least in part victims of external circumstances. The discourse of transitions attributes non-participation to weak provision for articulating education, training and employment as distinctive activity contexts. The discourse of marginalisation attributes it to inequalities in the availability of opportunities that are typically spatially, racially or otherwise patterned. The discourse of disaffection refers it to the availability of opportunities in any activity mode that are accessible and meaningful to non-participants. The discourse of

exclusion similarly attributes it to limited or unequal opportunities, while nevertheless placing the responsibility for participation on individual actors as well as providers. At root, all these discourses acknowledge or assert the importance of *exogenous* factors in the production of non-participation. The discourse of disengagement constitutes a major turn in emphasising *endogenous* factors, to the partial or total exclusion of exogenous factors. And in so doing it reinterprets a struggling population as a failing population, which is consequently reconstituted as a problematised population.

The problem of non-participation is thereby reworked. It ceases to be primarily a set of conditions which governments must address through policy interventions that extend and improve job opportunities and education and training places. The problem becomes instead the population itself. Non-participation thus ceases to be the *subject of government*, and becomes instead an *object of governance* – where governance refers to the infinitely more complex and multifarious interventions and actions that are not necessarily ordered by governments, but which may be initiated by a wide variety of official and lay agents, outside government as well as within it, who sustain the interface between state and population ‘at street level’.

The idea that populations might be governed through the structures and processes of programmes for ‘the unemployed’ is not new. William Walters’ (2000) analysis of New Labour’s New Deal identifies ‘the proliferation of countless individualised micro-managements [wherein] the personal strategy has become an instrument of government’ (p.139). He traces this historically to the monthly visits by the unemployment assistance officers of the 1930s to some million UK households. Walters describes this as a ‘good instance of the way in which governmental technologies are sometimes redeployed, their purposes re-imagined as they become harnessed to new political objectives and changing

conceptions of the role of the state and its relation to the citizen' (2000, pp. 96-7; see also Henman, 2006). On this analysis, the emergent discourse of disengagement may be a similar contemporary 're-imagining'.

In a similar vein, McDonald and Marston (2005) identify case-managers as exemplifying the governance of unemployed subjects. Rose views them as 'tutors in the arts of self-management' (Rose, 1996: 14) whose clients need to be remoralised and their conduct of themselves remade (Rose, 2000). The discourse of disengagement, especially moral disengagement, is fundamentally concerned with the (mis)conduct of populations whose understandings of the social world are presented as deficient, or whose conduct is deemed to need adjustment or correction. In the context of non-participation, the object of intervention is not principally to make good the absence of suitable jobs or courses; it is to begin these corrective remoralisation processes whereby reconstructed citizens take seriously their responsibilities to support themselves under whatever conditions prevail.

The analyses of Rose, Walters and MacDonald and Marston radically reinterpret the nature of non-participation and the significance and strategies of recent and present policies to address it. Non-participants are a more-or-less wilfully problematic population. Mass unemployment is in part a function of their individual tactics and conducts. The purpose of interventions is not primarily to reskill them, or even to occupy them or make them 'work' for such welfare benefits as they receive. It is in effect to re-engineer their attitudes, beliefs and understandings: to remake them as responsible, self-sufficient citizens and employees who regard it as their personal objective to support themselves financially and otherwise in almost all conditions.

Governance and the Discourse of Disengagement

There is a striking measure of congruence between the precepts of these theorisations and the precepts of the disengagement discourse. Both are focused on endogenous factors as causes of non-participation. Both are powerfully focussed on the individual, and his or her cognitions and exercises of free will. Both emphasise the importance of personalised interventions and the remediation of conduct.

The analyses of Rose et al. are grounded in theories of governmentality, themselves heavily elaborated from Foucault's (1978) brief commentaries on the governance of individual conducts. Foucault's theory demotes the projected power of *governments* which seek to manage and direct the actions of huge populations from a central hub of control which reaches out to the furthest corners of territory. Instead it prefers the concept of *governance*, whereby the processes of exerting power over diffuse, diverse and highly dispersed populations are themselves seen as diffuse, localised, and highly discretionary, but also able to reach deep into the lives and conducts of identified categories of problematised populations.

It is a widely held criticism of this relatively recent analytical approach and framework that its theoretical projections and hypothetical examinations of how power is exercised over troublesome populations lack an empirical base. They place heavy emphasis on the power of discourse in governing populations, as did Foucault. But their capacities to trace the sources and authorisations of discourses – like those of disengagement – and to assess their influence in the thinking and actions of those who are contracted to 'govern populations' at street level are limited indeed.

It is nonetheless important to observe that governmentality theory has achieved considerable purchase on some analysts' interpretations of how particular populations are governed. The limited capacity of other theories of government, grounded in delineated and codified powers of agencies of state and government, to explain the multiple millions of daily small acts of 'shaping other lives' has seriously impeded social science understandings of the tangible manifestations of the governance of any identified population. Governmentality theories offer plausible (and to some analysts seductive) explanations of tangible, observable daily acts of governing – albeit with very limited actual observation to support them, to date.

Researching Disengagement

In this closing section I suggest that the foregoing critique of disengagement points to some considerably more relevant, better founded and prospectively more informative trajectories for future research. To date, the overwhelming majority of research into non-participation can be broadly classified as materialist in approach. Much of it focuses on the experiences of young people and the structures, policies, regulations and institutional arrangements that bear upon them. Alongside this stands a celebrated lineage that reads non-participation as a product of cultures that shape and condition young people's world-views, tolerances and reactions. For the former, material conditions are often directly derived from economic and labour market conditions; for the latter, material (especially economic) aspects of culture are usually less prominent, and in some cases implicit or absent. Only recently has empirical research which is founded in these theories of governmentality become available (e.g. Marston and MacDonald, *op. cit*; Henman, *op. cit*), but the material (particularly economic) contexts within which such forms of governance occur are receive little attention in them.

This separation between materialist and governmentalist approaches is unremarkable and paradigmatic. The meta-theoretical bases of the two approaches are disparate and widely regarded as mutually incompatible if not hostile, principally but by no means only because of their epistemological and methodological disjunctures. In what follows, I suggest that the tensions between them are potentially illuminating.

As we have seen, taken separately, each paradigm has major limitations in its capacity to secure explanations of the causes of non-participation. The political economy of youth labour markets is beset by contested claims about the explanatory power of supply-side and demand-side factors in shaping the contours of accessibility and closure of specific labour markets. The political-economic framework has strong tendencies to take into account only features which can be modelled within a broadly economic world view. As a result, cross-cutting themes concerning the ways in which young people experience relative freedom to participate or refuse participation are usually missing. Conversely, governmentalist analyses are highly developed in their projections of the ways in which such relative freedom may be allowed and constrained, but they lack tangible evidence, and have no clear framework within which to take account of the irreducible structures and conditions of oversubscribed labour markets.

One informative way of conceptualising the costs to research of this paradigmatic separation is to consider the critical dynamic between *determining factors* and *contingent factors* in the analysis of policy prescriptions and effects. Materialist approaches founded in highly empiricist and quantitative methodologies are inherently biased towards the identification, delineation and analysis of tangible factors that have a demonstrably *determining* effect on individual behaviours. They typically draw on codifiable information based on well-bounded factors, and minimise the role of interpretation in the collection and analysis of data. In

contrast, analyses that focus on meaning, interaction, small-scale negotiations of power, and the application of discretionary delegated powers (all characteristics of governmentalist analyses) are inherently biased towards *contingent* effects. They typically ask how the exertions of the will of one party over another play out in different conditions that cannot be codified in any systematic way. Rather they depend on context-specific interpretations which recur only rarely, but take account of a much wider range of factors.

Young non-participants do not, of course, experience non-participation as separate forces of determining labour market effects, and contingent pressures to negotiate those conditions in variable context-specific ways. Young people function in messy worlds defined by the ostensibly seamless fusion of such conditions. They may live in a buoyant local labour market in which the processes of governance are weakly applied by virtue of underdeveloped structures and facilitative rather than coercive agents; or in a depressed labour market where anxieties about unoccupied 'feral' youth run high, and the full governmentalist rigours of zealous intervention operate. In such ideal-typical environments, some predictable outcomes of successful / failed interventions, respectively, may *or may not* prevail. Observing how determining local labour market conditions combine with the contingent conditions of young people's individual circumstances and the priorities of local agencies of governance offers potentially unique insights. Sensitive research that is equally alert to hard-edged material (and cultural) conditions and to the nuanced application of local discretion are, in principle, capable of demonstrating which elements of the admixture of determining and contingent factors trigger or inhibit non-participation.

Of even greater prospective value is to examine the middle ground between ideal types. Obviously enough, where labour market conditions are limiting rather than closed, the

influence of contingency is necessarily prospectively greater, as personal advisers exploit available latitude, and vice versa. But what is currently obscure to research is *the way in which* labour market conditions are understood by such agents of the governance of non-participants, and to what effect. Still more obscure is whether governmentalised interventions ever materially alter labour market conditions. So one approach to research would be to focus deliberately and explicitly on the interaction between the two sets of conditions. In what ways do complex labour market conditions shape governmentalised interventions? Can the bureaucracy of work placements release previously unavailable possibilities in restricted labour markets? And what is the interactive dynamic between the two spheres? Are their supposed respective powers of determination and contingent action mutually compromising?

Of course, the disparate methodologies and epistemologies of the two paradigms need to infuse the analytic frame in equal measure if this approach is to be possible. The reading of the influence of contingent conditions must take due account of the complexity of labour market conditions; the reading of determining conditions must have due regard to the subtleties of the devices of governance for steering outcomes.

This approach has a promising capacity to breathe new air into the important but gridlocked contestation between political-economic analyses for understanding mass youth unemployment. As we saw, away from the rarest of extremes, deficiencies in the supply of labour and limited demand for labour coexist in all labour markets. Policy prescriptions premised on supply-side explanations to the exclusion of demand-side explanations culpably ignore recurrent and enduring transnational slumps in the demand for young labour. But analyses that attribute all youth unemployment to demand failure overlook the attractions to employers of keen, energetic and malleable young workers who will work for wages that are

inadequate to sustain independent living. The dynamics between these tendencies require better analyses than are available. Without them, assertions that unemployment amongst young people is a product of poor skills combined with unrealistic wage expectations cannot be challenged effectively. Equally, assertions that ‘there are no jobs’ will continue to ring hollow in localities where economic inward migration underpins a large informal economy, unless these dynamics are better explained.

On the other axis of this dynamic relation, arrangements for governing non-participation impinge on supply-demand dynamics. The regulatory complexion of the mode of governance bears crucially on what jobs are available and under what conditions. Young people’s reservation wage levels are (irrespective of regulatory minima) a significant supply-side determinant of demand for labour. At an extreme, a coercive-governmental mode is likely to have the effect of filling all vacancies and bottoming-out pay rates. A more negotiative approach will leave sufficient latitude to allow the irreducible demand for labour to inflect wage rates upwards. This relation too needs attention

Approached in this way, atrophied theoretical contestation between supply-oriented and demand-oriented explanations for mass youth unemployment can be reworked in a framework that does not treat labour markets as hermetically insulated systems, but as partly the products of contingent forces, as well as of the forces that condition the environment which constrains contingency. Reciprocally, the un-evidenced claims of governmentality theories regarding the placement of young people become exposed to assessments that recognise that acts of governance outside formal statutory frames are situated in powerful political-economic contexts. Political-economic and materialist interpretations of non-participation are then exposed to full recognition of the governance of problematised

populations that cross-cut the socio-economic processes of placing people in jobs. And reciprocally, governmentalist projections of the manner in which those populations are governed are constrained by recognition of the powers of supply and demand and their underlying drivers: cost efficiency and profit maximisation.

Developing each approach into a workable, practicable research framework capable of unpacking non-participation holds out a valuable prospect, by widening the horizons of two parallel universes for the analysis of the same pressing problem. Alternatives are scarce in this crucial field of research, challenged as it is to its limits at a time of unprecedented risk to social cohesion across the boundaries of nation-states. If such an approach also serves to discredit the spurious discourse of disengagement, it will have been doubly valuable. The difficult research demands of such a dual-paradigm project surely merit debate – and would surely require collective endeavour to be realised.

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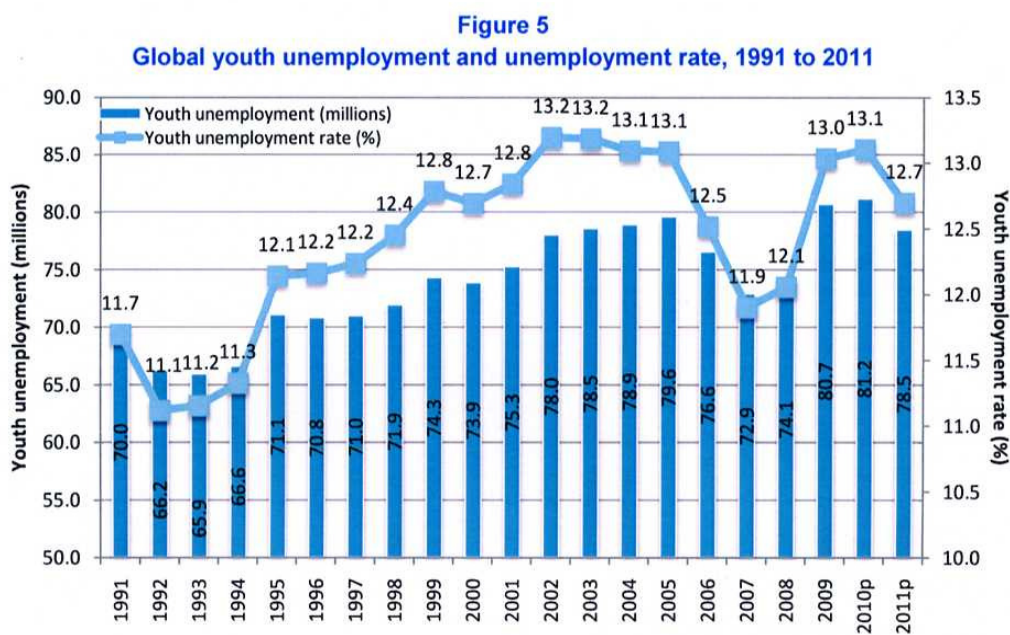
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Figure One

18 Global Employment Trends for Youth, August 2010

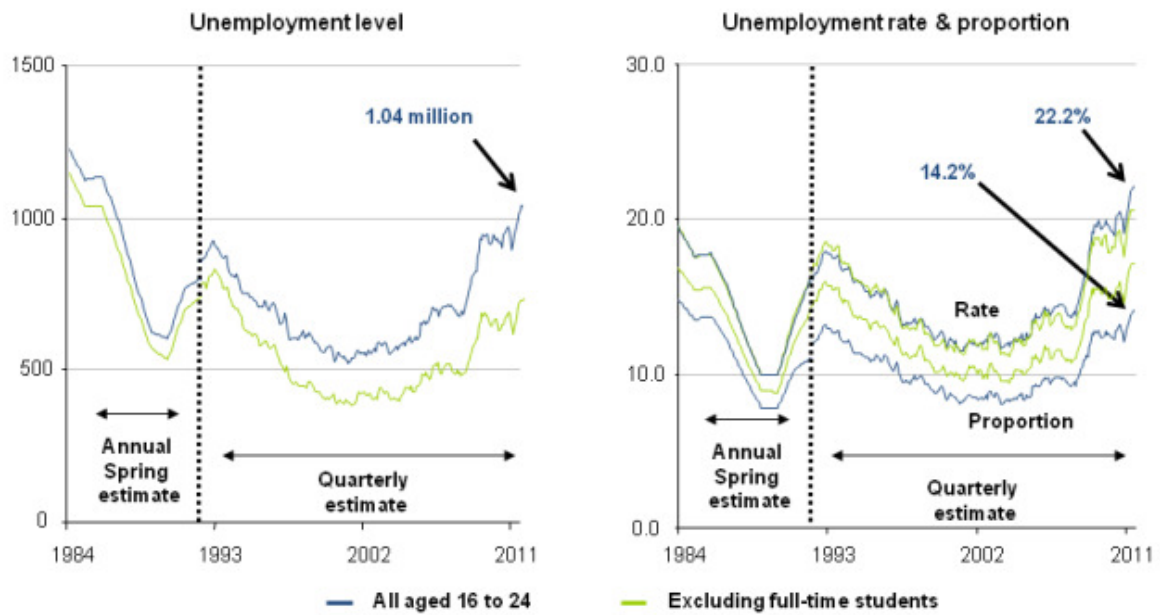


p = projection
Source: ILO, Trends Econometric Models, April 2010 (see boxes 4 and 8 for more information).

Source: International Labour Organisation (2010), p. 18

Figure Two

Unemployment levels, rates and proportions of people aged 16 to 24, 1984 to 2011, UK



Source: Office for National Statistics (2012)p. 2