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Young people, welfare and crime: Governing non-participation

Ross Fergusson

Chapter abstracts

Chapter One

Crises of non-participation

Chapter One highlights the wide-ranging evidence of a crisis of unemployment and more general non-participation among young people in the UK and internationally, and identifies a parallel crisis in academic analyses of non-participation and its relationship to crime. In particular it argues that the academic study of young people has contributed relatively little to a convincing account of how and why mass unemployment and non-participation have become associated with crime. Disciplinary separations and divisions between analytical approaches are proposed as contributory factors, and the chapter queries claims of a rapprochement between divided traditions of youth studies. Insights into the relationship between non-participation and crime that take full account of the effects of changing education and welfare policies and labour market circumstances have been scarce, especially regarding the transformative impacts of the Global Financial Crisis on young people's options and their prospects for financial and social independence. The chapter provides a brief overview of seven key texts spanning two decades that have been exceptions, making important contributions to understanding young people's non-participation in these broader contexts, by crossing disciplinary boundaries and providing critical theoretical analyses. It concludes by setting out the detailed aims, structure and coverage of the book.

Chapter Two

Young people and non-participation: discourses, histories, literatures

Chapter Two maps the historical tensions between fluctuating demand for young people's labour and the legal requirement that they participate in education. It critically reviews three overlapping discourses and literatures that have dominated accounts of the relationship between employment, education and non-participation, tracing a defining shift from three post-war decades of relatively reliable transitions from school to work, to unprecedented levels of youth unemployment since the 1980s. The youth transitions discourse focusses on young people's options for smooth passage from education to employment, and remediable obstacles to it. In response to mass 'failed transitions', the social exclusion discourse of the New Labour era marks a major shift to emphasising the responsabilisation of young people, and the conditionalisation of welfare entitlement. The disengagement discourse came to prominence during the Global Financial Crisis and moves interpretations of non-participation towards poor personal choices and shortcomings focussed on individual factors of analysis.

Chapter Three

Non-participation, wages and welfare

Chapter Three considers the claim that mass non-participation among young people is becoming an endemic, transnational and ubiquitous phenomenon. It traces the profile of contemporary youth unemployment, the deepening divergence between rates of youth and adult unemployment, and some global trends which contextualise the exceptional levels of youth unemployment and non-participation in the UK. It develops a critique of the claims that high levels of unemployment and nonparticipation can be attributed to poor skills and qualifications, focusing instead on the chronically low mean wage rates of young people since the Global Financial Crisis, and providing an analysis of the incremental withdrawal of sustainable state welfare for young people without employment, courses or training places that began in the 1980s. Finally, it identifies a wage rate suppression dynamic, and examines its consequences, arguing that many young people make rational choices to refuse labour market participation under prevailing conditions.

Chapter Four

Non-participation and crime: constructing connections

Chapter Four considers the extent and nature of the mooted relationship between 'being NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and crime among young people, as reflected in the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm and its significant influence on policy discourse. The chapter argues that an exclusively empirical approach to understanding the relationship is unsustainable, and advocates an explicit theorisation of claims of causal connections between non-participation and crime. It reviews the influence of studies based on the economic causes of crime (ECC) thesis on interventionist policies, and develops a critical assessment of several major studies that dispute the tenets of the thesis, partly drawing on the complex distinction between instrumental and expressive crime. Using evidence from these studies Chapter Four emphasises the importance of understanding the unemployment-crime relationship in the context of welfare provision, workfare conditionality and income, and concludes that continuing uncertainties about causality reinforce the need for a major refinement of or retreat from the ECC thesis.

Chapter Five

Unemployment, crime and recession

Chapter Five considers the impact of economic recession on the unemployment-crime relationship. An initial review assesses its historical and recent effects on the incidence of crime and its possible relationship to unemployment. The chapter then puts forward a critical analysis of official data which suggests that, contrary to the economic causes of crime thesis, crime rates among young people in the UK declined during the Global Financial Crisis. This analysis considers changes in policy, practice and recording methods which call these findings into question. In place of inconclusive attempts to interpret the unemployment-crime relationship through changing economic conditions, the chapter shifts focus to international concern about the effects of ubiquitous mass youth non-participation on social cohesion, reviewing evidence of extensive social unrest to argue that understandings of unemployment and crime should take account of expressive and emotional motivations alongside instrumental motivations and the pursuit of rational self-interest on the part of young people.

Interlude

Interpretive Review

This review makes the case for a dedicated theorisation of the relationship between non-participation, welfare and crime that explores interpretations beyond the scope of mainstream empirical research. Its purpose is to divert analysis from a focus on the alleged criminality of non-participant young people, towards an understanding of the causes and consequences of endemic mass non-participation by means of a more broadly based analysis. The review sets out the claim that successive changes in policy-led research have incrementally shifted the burden from exogenous to endogenous factors of analysis of non-participation, and from nomothetic to idiographic levels of its analysis. Policy analysis and response, it is argued, has become less predisposed to acknowledge the role of social and economic circumstances as causes of non-participation, and increasingly inclined towards attributing responsibility to personal factors. In place of this approach, the review advocates dedicated theorisation that contests and disrupts crude distinctions that are embedded in dominant competing accounts of non-participation, in counterposed levels of analysis of its causes, and in diametrically conflicted accounts of crime amongst young non-participants. These criteria determine the choice of two theoretical approaches that are the focus of Chapter Six and that shape the remainder of the text.

Chapter Six

Lines of division, points of entry: two theories

This chapter considers the combined potential of Jürgen Habermas's and Imogen Tyler's work for re-theorising non-participation amongst young people. Habermas' approach works across paradigms by virtue of his attention to the individual, the idiographic and the endogenous, alongside his dominant emphasis on structures, nomothetic levels of analysis and the influence of exogenous factors on human conduct and action. His analyses of the strident imposition of the demands of systems of money and political power on lifeworlds at the critical tipping points between diminishing adolescent dependence and emerging adult independence are shown to offer illuminating alternatives for re-theorising young people's non-participation. Inversely, Tyler's analysis of social abjection and oppression under rising powers of neoliberal governmentalisation is paradigm-traversing by virtue of her overarching emphasis on the personal and psychosocial constituents of both concepts. Her analysis of the ways in which non-participation is represented through policy and practice is shown to demonstrate the capacities of abjection and governmentalisation to reposition victims as authors of their own oppression. The chapter draws out the complementarities of Tyler's and Habermas' work by highlighting the attention they afford to interactions between cognitive, affective, rational and emotional elements of young people's responses to non-participation that have been overlooked.

Chapter Seven

Theorising the non-participation-crime relationship

This chapter extends the exploration of Habermas's and Tyler's theorisations, and those of other theorists, for reinterpreting non-participation and its relationship to crime among young people. It begins by reflecting on how empirical work on the relationship explored in previous chapters has clustered around instrumental and expressive motivations for crime, and considers the additional insights Habermas's and Tyler's analyses bring. Other theorists' work on the ways in which problematised populations can be 'governed through unemployment' then leads to a critical assessment of Habermas's and Tyler's engagement with concept of governance, which highlights problematically weak distinctions between the concepts of governmentalisation and social control. The congruence between Habermas's theories of welfare conditionalisation and juridification, and Jonathan Simon's notions of 'governing through crime' suggest alternative interpretations of the non-participation-crime relationship, whereby states find increasingly sophisticated ways of resolving structural problems by requiring specified forms of participation and by using the powers of civil and criminal law to secure them. The governance of unemployment can then be understood as an active means of governing crime preventatively. But the two also thereby become connected in ways that invoke criminalisation as an important concept for understanding the governance of non-participation.

Chapter Eight

The advance of criminalisation

Chapter Eight applies Habermas's analyses to demonstrate how juridification processes in general serve to ameliorate the deleterious effects of the domination of social priorities by political-economic priorities, to establish appropriate conditions for processes of criminalisation, and to make them available as tools of governance in relation to young people's non-participation. Several distinctive modes of criminalisation are identified, and the ways in which they differentially breach precepts of jurisprudence, subvert rights and impose unjust punishments are considered by reference to critiques of changes in the nature and application of criminal law. A number of conditions conducive to criminalising non-participation are already in place, it is argued, that anticipate more coercive forms of governing non-participation. This view is supported by legal argument that some alleged offences that are targeted and prosecuted are no longer predicated on a wrong or a harm. In turn, this gives rise to the question as to whether the very status of some non-participants constitutes a basis for their prosecution, in particular circumstances. The closing section then considers current and prospective effects of legislative changes to further enforce young people's participation, alongside emerging evidence of its perverse effects, notably in relation to young care-leavers.

Chapter Nine

Review and concluding comments

The final chapter begins by reviewing how the previous chapters have met the aims with which the book began. This takes the form of a synoptic account that connects each chapter. The second part of the chapter offers concluding comments. It argues that the means by which young people can elude unsuitable, exploitative and oppressive forms of enforced participation are being incrementally closed off. The most vulnerable young non-participants are seen to occupy an ambiguous and risky hinterland between self-invisibilisation and self-identification as targets for monitoring and intervention. In particular, those who refuse enforced participation (or refuge from it) are those most likely to become criminalised through civil action, by imputation or by being impelled to secure their own material survival through crime. These conclusions also incorporate a final assessment of the contributions of Tyler's and Habermas' analyses, arguing that their potential for understanding mass non-participation has yet to be fully realised. In particular, their illumination of the advance of criminalisation provides a powerful basis for setting priorities for programmes of research and political action that respond to the vulnerabilities and social injustices that this book has identified. Two closing sections outline what such programmes might usefully attempt.