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Book Review: *Youth, Work and the Post-Fordist Self* by David Farrugia

Journal Item

How to cite:

Taylor, Stephanie (2022). Book Review: Youth, Work and the Post-Fordist Self by David Farrugia. *Work and Occupations* (Early access).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1177/07308884221103462>

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Review by Stephanie Taylor of David Farrugia, *or of David Farrugia, Youth, Work and the Post-Fordist Self*, published by Bristol University Press, 2021.

David Farrugia's new book, *Youth, Work and the Post-Fordist Self*, presents an ambitious and tightly theorised study of how contemporary young people become part of the labour force. Farrugia suggests that previous theories of youth and work have fitted into two frameworks. Either young people have been seen to transition into work by bringing skills to the labour market that can be exchanged for wages or, alternatively, they have been presented as a separate group or class who become available to be exploited by 'adult capitalists'. The first framework rests on what Lisa Adkins calls 'the social contract' view of work and attributes problems like youth unemployment to distortions of the labour market exchange, whether as a result of structural inequalities or the deficiencies (for example, educational) of individuals. The second framework assumes that young people accept exploitative employment situations because they are 'duped' by contemporary cultural forces, for instance, by being persuaded to accept internships and lower wages.

Farrugia challenges both frameworks. He proposes, following Kathi Weeks, that contemporary young people are governed by a 'post-Fordist work ethic' through which 'subjectivity itself is made contingent on the realisation of the value of the self at work, and is therefore aligned with the value of the self to the labour force' (p.12). Work has become fundamental to the formation of young people so that they now aspire to self-realization through work and employment, understanding themselves through the lens of their (potential) value as workers.

Many academics will note the parallels here with long-standing claims about workers in the global cultural and creative sector. Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt (2008), Angela McRobbie (2016) and Christina Scharff (2016), among others, have argued that the promise of self-realisation through creative work ('self-actualization' in Abraham Maslow's 1962 account of creativity) has persuaded young people, in particular, not only to accept exploitative employment but also to discipline and shape themselves to become the tireless, responsible, uncomplaining, individualised subjects who are the ideal workers of neoliberalism. Farrugia's arguments can be seen as an extension of these claims (he cites McRobbie 2016), albeit mainly framed within a somewhat different tradition of theorising. His additional concern is with how the post-Fordist work ethic produces classed subjectivities, and his arguments around this rest on his empirical work, an interview study with 74 young people from two Australian cities.

Farrugia proposes, based on his analysis of his interview data, that the post-Fordist work ethic functions to perpetuate class inequalities. He identifies three different subjectivities in his participant sample. The first is a middle-class subject of passion for whom there is no separation between the working self and the self outside work. For this subject, value as a worker derives from their authenticity and the human capacities that theorists have linked to immaterial labour ('relationality, empathy, embodiment and performativity', p.28). Second, among young people of working class backgrounds, Farrugia identifies an achieving subject whose more conventional aspiration and effort is directed to acquiring the work value attached to qualifications and experience. The third kind of subject is exemplified by unemployed young people. Giving up the aspiration to self-realization, they instead aspire to some imitation of a good worker. They lack the experience of authenticity available to the

subjects of passion or the experience of achievement available to the second group, even though they may seek qualifications. For this third group, the failure to achieve value as a worker is also a failure of the self.

My account is necessarily simplified. Farrugia's arguments are complex and closely theorised and, in addition to the key sources of Adkins and Weeks, he variously draws on Beck, Bourdieu, Skeggs, Foucault, Hardt and Negri, and McRobbie, among many others. Most readers will probably find the discussions of the research study more accessible. The methodological approach utilises Weber's concept of an 'ideal type' and, as my previous paragraph indicates, it is not always clear how and why the three types are distinct. In addition, qualitative researchers may have some concerns about over-generalisation and also circularity. Farrugia apparently bases his initial categorisations of middle class and working class on the two cities in which the participants were recruited, as if each site provided an entirely discrete and distinctively classed sample, whereas the third group, inconsistently, are defined by the experience of unemployment or bad employment rather than class. Workers in a discursive tradition, like myself, would expect and look for a less tidy correlation of category and ethic. However, a methodological appendix shows, more plausibly, how an interview with one participant exhibits some movement between the ethics of the passionate and achieving subject so the 'types' are not entirely separate after all, although this is not always clear in the discussion.

Youth, Work and the Post-Fordist Self will be of interest to academics with a range of interests. An important part of Farrugia's project is to build on the work of Adkins and also Weeks. Weeks has written about the different work ethics operating in specific sociohistoric contexts. Farrugia's particular contribution, in my view, is to draw attention to the perspectives of young workers themselves. Despite his initial dismissal of the two earlier frameworks, he can be seen to take forward their respective foci on the experience of young people as workers, and how they are impacted by complex contemporary cultures and discourses around work.

References

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