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Book review: Betraying a generation: how education is failing young people by Patrick Ainley

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*Betraying a Generation* is published by Policy Press as part of its 'Shorts' series, texts of 20,000–50,000 words, which aim to provide critical insight into topical issues in a concise and accessible fashion – and this book by Patrick Ainley certainly does that. It is lucid and authoritative, and allows readers to engage with key debates about a range of challenges, dilemmas and conundrums facing young people today – in education, the labour market and society more broadly. *Betraying a Generation* is wide-ranging in its contents but two related themes run throughout the book: the restructuring of the UK economy and its effects on education and employment; and the ways in which the education system (if system is the right term) is implicated in both reinforcing and exacerbating inequality, and justifying the increasingly polarised nature of British society.

The book consists of a short introduction and five substantive chapters. Chapter 1 maps the extensive restructuring of the UK economy which has taken place since the end of the 1970s. It explains the consequences of this, especially for young people, and argues that drastically reduced labour market opportunities for the young, together with the unravelling of the social democratic settlement of the mid-twentieth century, has created a void which education is now (quite unrealistically) expected to fill. Chapter 2 challenges various claims about the so-called knowledge economy and focuses on the realities of work in contemporary Britain – where poor quality badly paid and insecure employment is increasingly the norm, even for many of those with high levels of skill and qualifications. The implications of all this, as Ainley argues, are profound – not only for young people, who have become increasingly fungible, despite being more extensively schooled and highly qualified than ever, but also for the legitimacy of the education system itself.

Chapter 3 argues that the limited upward social mobility which took place in Britain for several decades after the end of World War II has now given way to a general downward mobility. It discusses the changing 'shape' of social class and contends that we have now arrived at a juncture where, despite much rhetoric about (upward) social mobility, the majority of young people are actually being 'forced down' the occupational structure, effectively creating a new 'pear-shape' class structure. Whilst many of those employed in what were traditionally white-collar jobs are relegated into a new middle-working/working-middle class, beneath them, much of the manual working class are lowered into almost indefinite precariousness and insecurity. For the first time in living memory, the life chances of many young people are, it is argued, likely to be worse than those of their parents – despite the fact that they are invariably more extensively schooled and better qualified than their predecessors.

Chapter 4 explains how young people are now required to study longer and harder and pay more and more for an education that, for many, provides little in terms of material reward. It describes how the education system is being increasingly fractured, how old forms of inequality are reproduced, and new divisions created. It also provides an insightful discussion on the redrawing of the academic-vocational divide, paying particular attention to apprenticeships. Here, Ainley critiques current government policy and compares and contrasts the English approach with other more coherent and robust systems of apprenticeship, perhaps most notably Germany. Apprenticeships are popular with young people from working-class backgrounds and their parents attracted by notions of craft and security traditionally associated with such programmes but quality is, as Ainley points out, highly variable and provision is, he reminds us, in short supply in occupations where demand is strongest.

Chapter 5 moves beyond a critique of existing relations to engage with a programme for the future. This, Ainley contends, needs to go much further than mere educational reform – although it is recognised that such matters are not important. Rather educational change, it is argued, needs to be part of a much more far-reaching programme of social and political change including not only job creation, a coherent industrial strategy and increased labour market regulation but also a broader re-evaluation of the way society is organised in terms of housing, the environment and way the economy more broadly is run. Without such a programme of radical reform, the prospects for many young people will, as *Betraying a Generation* argues, remain decidedly bleak.

Despite being relatively brief, *Betraying a Generation* is thorough and comprehensive and will help readers understand key debates about the changing nature of education and work, as well as associated questions about social class, inequality and the economy more generally. The book will be a valuable resource for teachers and academics working with students across the social sciences and humanities but it will also offer a welcome antidote to the now notoriously narrow, instrumental nature of teacher education, youth work and other vocational programmes aimed at those training to work with children and young people. Not only will it help readers understand and critique what is going on round them, it will also enable them to argue for more just and meaningful alternatives.