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Title: Book review: Student Lives in Crisis : Deepening Inequality in the Times of Austerity

Year: 2018

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Wilska, T.-A. (2018). Book review: Student Lives in Crisis : Deepening Inequality in the Times of Austerity. Teachers College Record, 25.1.2018, Article 22252.

<https://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=22252>

Lorenza Antonucci:

Student lives in Crisis

Deepening inequality in the times of austerity

The book “Student lives in Crisis”, by Lorenza Antonucci, takes a critical overview on the development of higher education in Europe after the financial crisis that started in 2008. Antonucci challenges the long-term policy mantra of the European Union on the equalizing power of the wide participation in higher education, which is visible in the EU2020 strategy to have at least 40% of young adults completed tertiary-level education. The author argues - rather daringly- that the incentives for a wide participation in higher education may actually have increased rather than decreased existing social inequalities.

Antonucci’s argument is based on the diminishing state support to students in higher education, as the universities have simultaneously increased tuition fees and reduced state support in most European countries. This process started with a progressive shift towards individualized policies during the 1990s, and has accelerated during the economic crisis. The shift towards a privatization of social risks clashes with the reality of a declining availability of family support and also the declining capacity of labour market sources to sustain young people’s transition to social and economic independence. Therefore the students are forced to take high study loans, to work in precarious jobs while studying, to suffer from bad housing conditions, and to remain dependent on their families.

Even after graduation, European young adults experience record high figures of graduate unemployment and underemployment. As a result, for an individual, higher education is not necessarily a good investment, and the promise of higher education is broken. Antonucci states thus rightly that the much discussed European youth unemployment crisis is only one part of a broader social and economic crises faced by today’s young people’s generation in Europe.

There is a lot of research of higher education that focuses on access, policies, and destinations in Europe. However, less is written about the students’ own experiences of university life. This book analyses the implications of higher education policies in the context of the welfare provision and structures, but the main emphasis is put on the students’ experiences of university life in three different European welfare states: England, Italy and Sweden. The book divides into three parts, the first one describing how changes in social policy and student support have affected students’ lives in Europe, specifically in the countries under examination. The role of the expansion of higher education is also contemplated. The second part of the book sheds light into the personal experiences of the students’ university lives in the three countries, presenting results of a survey and in-depth interviews. The third part brings the themes together and analyses the experiences of the students in the context of the ‘welfare mixes’: the welfare provision of each country complemented with the parental support and participation in the labour market.

The empirical research consists of the policy analysis, survey and interviews. First, 84 Q-methodology surveys were carried out in six cities across the three countries under examination. The surveys were followed by 33 in-depth interviews. The results revealed five profiles of the university experiences ranging from “struggling and hopeless” to “having a great time”. The experiences were analyzed in the contexts of the students’ socio-economic backgrounds and the private and public welfare provision. In the policy analysis, the welfare mixes of England, Italy and Sweden were compared. The countries in the study were selected on the basis of the differences between countries in terms of the sources and generosity of the provision of student support. Italy serves as an example of a country with a high role of family sources and low state support, but also low level of individual contribution (tuition fees). Sweden is presented as the opposite with a generous support by the state, high labour market participation, but non-existent individual contribution. England is in the middle with high role of both private and public sources of welfare, developed student support system, but also a high individual contribution.

The main findings reveal that for a good experience of university life, either generous state support or sufficient sources provided by the family were necessary. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds were thus much more likely to suffer from hopelessness and financial deprivation. Hopelessness was also a typical result of an insufficient state support, particularly in Italy. The role of the labour market for economic subsistence was typically complementary, if the state support was sufficient. Participation in the labour market was necessary, if the state and family support were absent or insufficient. Thereby, student lives appeared to be the most equal in Sweden, where the state support is universal and generous, but cuts in study benefits have increased the inequality among students even there.

The results of the study reflect the overall trend young people are confronted by, which is making their transitions to economic independence similar across most European countries: the privatization of social risks. This means the gradual shift from using public sources to sustain their semi-dependency to using private sources. The main argument of the book is that the university experience is likely to exacerbate rather than decrease inequalities among students by encouraging the reliance on family sources. The current student cohorts are required to find resources to pay for higher education costs and also fund for the living costs of their university experience. This is not possible for those students who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and thus the social inequalities are reproduced in higher education. However, Antonucci does not argue that due to the failure in public support, the higher education should be reserved for the higher socio-economic groups, as was the case before, but she urges for the need for reviewing existing welfare policies.

Antonucci’s book is a deep and insightful analysis of the social and economic position of today’s university students in Europe. It offers a lively picture of student life by shedding light to the students’ own experiences. However, larger data with more systematic sampling would have provided stronger grounds for the arguments presented in the book. Also brief overviews on the history of higher education and student support in each country under examination would have given broader perspectives to the analyses. However, despite these shortcomings, the study is comprehensive and addresses important issues and raises further

questions. Questions that arise include, for instance: Will there be enough space for all highly educated young people in the European labour market? Will feelings economic deprivation and hopelessness cause long-term effects on today's students' adult lives? Will today's student generation indeed face 'eternal semi-dependency' as the author ponders?

Antonucci's book is well written and structured and enjoyable to read. The book serves as a very good basis to the future research and discussion on higher education, young people and measures to tackle new forms of inequality. The book also provides concrete recommendations to policy-makers for student welfare, housing and labour market policy. European young people's social and economic well-being will undoubtedly become an increasingly severe issue in the future. Moreover, the welfare systems in European countries will face pressures by migration, unemployment and political instability, for instance. Therefore there will be a constant need for comparative research on the lived experiences of young people.

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