

**POLITICAL ECONOMY AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRANSITIONS FROM  
EDUCATION-TO-WORK IN THE UK DURING AND FOLLOWING THE 2020 AND  
2021 LOCKDOWNS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper rejects the cases made in recent volumes of this journal for incorporating political economy into youth studies. A brief review of young people's transitions from education into employment in the UK during and following the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns shows how youth transitions research engages routinely with changes and continuities in politics, state policies, the economy and labour markets. It is argued that the main weaknesses in current transitions research arise from our lack of an up-to-date class scheme within which to locate subjects' childhood origins and adult destinations. However, the paper illustrates how young researchers occupy a privileged position from which to identify emerging, consolidating and declining social classes. The conclusion is that youth studies must necessarily foreground young people, that it must engage with the outcomes of political and economic processes but has no need to 'dig deeper' into political economy for alleged underlying root causes.

**Keywords: class, lockdowns, political economy, youth transitions.**

## INTRODUCTION

This paper has two components. The first reviews what happened to young people's education-to-work transitions during the UK lockdown years of 2020 and 2021, and the labour markets that awaited them. Here the evidence is from routinely collected official education and labour force data, plus independent research reports that were released during 2020-2022. The second component considers proposals to inject a political economy perspective into youth studies which were published between 2014 and 2021 in the *Journal of Youth Studies* (specifically Cote, 2014, 2016; France and Threadgold, 2016; Kelly, 2018; Sukarieh and Tannock 2016; Yates, 2021). These proposers do not speak in complete unison, but they all insist that youth research will discover causal explanations only within the wider political and economic contexts in which young people lead their lives and make their livings. Some, but not all of the proposers also advocate, in the first instance, treating young people as a single group, even as a class in the case of Cote (2014).

Why now? Until 2014 the term political economy rarely featured in youth studies. Then came Cote's 2014 paper. This might have been, but has not been a one-off blip but has led to a stream of interventions, each a mixture of endorsement, additions and tweaks. Clues to the reasons for this mini-eruption may be found in the histories of political economy and sociology. This addition to the political economy series therefore proceeds with abbreviated histories of political economy and relevant parallel developments in sociology. The paper then presents the evidence gathered within a conventional youth transitions framework on the age group's experiences in the UK during and immediately following the lockdown years, the labour markets that they entered and the types of employment obtained by different socio-demographic groups. The paper then revisits political economy and argues that weaknesses within sociology, especially in class analysis, one domain in which sociology can be claim to

be the main proprietor, have created space for the political economy interventions. The paper concludes with a discussion of the merits, limitations and demerits for youth studies of accepting the embrace of the political economy perspectives that have been proposed, and expresses a preference for sociology improving its own class act.

## **POLITICAL ECONOMY AND SOCIOLOGY**

### **Brief histories**

Political economy was the name given in the late-18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to the work of scholars such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus and Karl Marx, thereby distinguishing them from earlier and contemporary moral and political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the English utilitarians. ‘Classical’ political economy crumbled from the 1890s when economics separated as a mathematical social science. This triggered further divisions into the present-day disciplines of politics, sociology, law, geography and history. Max Weber (1864-1920) died before he had to choose a discipline. His initial qualifications were in law, his main academic career job was as an economist, and he was a professor of sociology from 1919-1920. His younger brother, Alfred Weber (1868-1958), had to decide which discipline to opt for. He chose economics and became a renowned economic geographer. Norbert Elias (1897-1990) and his slightly senior mentor Karl Mannheim (1893-1947) opted for sociology which became the sole social science of whole societies. At that time, sociology’s core theories were about evolution, gradually shortened and narrowed to changes in Europe since the end of the Middle Ages. Sociology spread rapidly in universities in France and Germany from the 1890s. In Britain the subject was taught only at the London School of Economics until after the Second World War.

The early history of sociology in North America is entirely different, but there was trans-Atlantic convergence after 1945 with sociologists on both sides concentrating on their own

‘modern’ societies, equipped with new powerful research methods – the representative sample survey and the ethnographic methods pioneered in social/cultural anthropology. Sociology in Britain largely absorbed social administration (a subject now renamed as social policy) which had investigated poverty, housing and other conditions of life among the population’s more deprived groups.

Sociology expanded rapidly in European and American universities from the 1950s. Scholars divided into specialisms which focused on the family, education, work, politics, crime and other topics and groups including youth. For a time sociology’s specialists all retained a synoptic overview of their entire societies. The specialisms were united by a common interest in social class which linked the economy, politics and the social. This applied in the sociology of youth whether researchers addressed youth transitions, usually from education to work (for example Ashton and Field, 1976) or youth cultures where researchers in Britain congregated around Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) (for a classical account of the CCCS position on post-war working class youth cultures see Cohen, 1976).

Subsequently, some of sociology’s specialisms and specialists have migrated into inter- or trans-disciplinary fields of which youth studies is an example. Much research and analysis within these fields may have lost sight of the political and economic contexts. Within youth studies this is most likely in the burgeoning studies of youth cultures within which there is now further specialisation into, for example, research on night clubs and music festivals. Many though not all youth culture researchers treat youth as a ‘state of being’ rather than ‘becoming’ and ‘coming from’ as in the youth transitions approach. However, sociologists are prominent in a new sub-field which seeks to identify generations among post-1960s youth cohorts, and

these sociologists do not lose sight of the changing economic and political contexts (see Woodman, and Wyn, 2015). However, sociology's pre-eminence in youth transitions research is now challenged by economists who replace occupational classes with income as the preferred measure of labour market outcomes (for examples see Belfield et al, 2018; Green and Henseke, 2021), and educational backgrounds are often reduced to linear scales measuring levels of attainment (for example Schoon and Lyons-Amos, 2016), which may be a reasonable approximation to reality in North America but not in Europe where most countries retain different types of secondary schools and tertiary education.

More alarmingly for the entire discipline of sociology, its categorical/relational class schemes are being replaced by linear, gradational scales across all the inter- and trans-disciplinary fields. Unfortunately, the categorical class scheme still most used in the UK and the rest of Europe was constructed in the early-1970s. The scheme is still fit for its original purpose which was to measure trends over time and inter-country differences in inter-generational occupational class mobility (see Goldthorpe et al, 1987). This sociological product has been extraordinarily successful in that amended versions of the Goldthorpe/Nuffield/Oxford scheme have been adopted by the UK and the European Union as official socio-economic classifications of their populations (see Rose and Harrison, 2007). However, the amendments have actually been conceptually violent. The original categorical classes have been forced into linear scales with the bands of occupations said to represent skill levels though skill was not a factor in the original grouping of occupations. They were grouped according to their typical work and market situations. The original categorical classes, still available for use, are a service class of managers and professionals and a working class. Then there are two intermediate classes occupying middling space but overlapping both the service class and the working class. The intermediate classes are other/lower non-manuals and the self-employed. The problem is that

however realistic in the 1970s the scheme looks dated when confronting the present-day workforce (see Roberts, 2020a). The Great British Class Survey (Savage et al, 2013) has identified clusters defined by their economic, social and cultural capitals but is unsuited for wider use, and its claim to be measuring class can be contested.

Hence the space for an intervention from political economy. This subject never became extinct. It was kept alive mainly by economists who were dissatisfied with the removal of economic history from the discipline and by its treatment of ‘free markets’ as a natural order rather than dependent on supportive political and cultural contexts. Currently political economy is enjoying a renaissance as a reaction to neo-liberal politics and economics. As recent contributions in youth studies have made us aware, political economy is gaining even wider attention.

### **The Journal of Youth Studies papers**

The case for injecting a political economy perspective into youth studies was opened by Cote (2014) who claimed to be proposing *the* political economy perspective, which was neo-Marxist. Most data in Cote’s paper is from North America, but he claimed (and this has not subsequently been contested, and will not be contested in what follows) that similar trends have occurred in all modern capitalist countries in the post-1970s neo-liberal era. Cote’s central claim is that the material conditions of youth have been progressively degraded, that youth have been conquered by corporations and compliant governments who have proletarianised almost the entire younger generation, turning them into a servitude class. So why are youth not resisting? Cote claims that they are taught to labour compliantly in education, compelled by material necessity to sell their labour, and duped into false consciousness by capitalist mass media. Cote claims that the income withdrawn from youth has gone mainly to a wealthy top one percent, and that the young people who escape servitude are mainly from affluent families

who achieve postgraduate and professional qualifications. He argues that in North America undergraduate higher education has ceased to act as a social mobility engine. According to Cote, only political economy can delve to the root cause of the degradation of young workers, from where (unspecified) radical emancipatory solutions can be developed. Any youth studies outside the political economy perspective is labelled 'liberal'.

In their reply, despite a pugnacious tone, France and Threadgold (2016) actually endorse the case for political economy, agree that youth labour is being degraded, but insist that there are significant differences among youth outside the highly privileged elite. They also believe that Cote is far too cavalier in attributing youth's failure to resist to false consciousness, and urge incorporating Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *illusio*, social gravity, misrecognition, *doxa* and symbolic violence into a political economy of youth. Cote's rejoinder claims that he has been misrepresented and misunderstood (Cote, 2016), largely due to France and Threadgold's failure to set the 2014 paper within Cote's larger body of work.

Sukarieh and Tannock (2016) endorse the case for youth studies paying more attention to political economy. Their examination of papers published in the *Journal of Youth Studies* between 2011 and 2015 found that only 10 percent dealt with employment and unemployment, while around a third were about peer groups, sub-cultures, consumption and leisure activities. However, they dispute the existence of any single political economy perspective. Their political economy focuses on the totality of relations that constitute political, economic and social life, and echo Cote in urging youth studies to foreground the state and corporate actors who are responsible for the material circumstances of youth and who, indeed, construct youth studies.



Kelly's main contribution to the political economy debate is to endorse Sukarieh and Tannock's case for foregrounding all actors who shape youth, and youth studies also (Kelly, 2018). Kelly's other 'provocations' are to argue that 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism is different from earlier versions, and in youth studies' never ending debates about the roles of structure and agency, Kelly draws attention to the difficulty of recognising true agency in networked, digitalised societies where so much of life at work and beyond is controlled by artificial intelligence's algorithms.

The most recent (to date) contribution to the political economy saga in the *Journal of Youth Studies* is Yates' insistence on a more rigorously Marxist approach using concepts such as capital accumulation, total labour value, and contradictions (Yates, 2021). Yates' data is mainly from the UK but like all other contributors he believes that his arguments apply across all modern capitalist societies. However, Yates recognises that countries adopt different strategies to compete in international markets. The UK has allegedly taken the 'high road' of boosting business sectors that employ high-skilled labour in high paid jobs mainly in financialised forms of capital accumulation, while most youth employment is in 'low road' business sectors such as retail and hospitality where young employees have been experiencing work intensification and downward pressure on real earnings. Yates confirms the widening gap between youth and adult earnings. He agrees with Cote that youth studies needs to begin with how capitalism operates thereby locating the underlying causes of youth's deteriorating labour market conditions, from where the search for radical solutions can begin.

The argument developed below takes issue with all preceding contributions. It uses evidence from UK young people's experiences in education and the labour market during and since the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns to show that youth transitions research necessarily engages with state policies and the economy. Sociology has been and remains the discipline that sets young

people in the context of Sukarieh and Tannock's, and Kelly's totality of social relations. Currently sociology is handicapped by the lack of a usable up-to-date class scheme. Sociology must fix this problem, and youth research can contribute to the fix. This is because a focus on young people's experiences in the labour market is a privileged position from which to identify emerging social classes, those that are consolidating and those that are decomposing. That said, youth studies must not waiver in foregrounding young people. This field deal with outcomes of state policies and economic trends, not the drivers.

### **YOUTH TRANSITIONS IN THE UK DURING AND SINCE THE LOCKDOWNS**

The purpose of this brief account is simply to illustrate how youth transitions research has and continues to engage routinely with the economy, labour markets and government policies.

#### **The lockdown years, 2020 and 2021**

The first national lockdown which began in March 2020 ripped 20 percent from UK GDP. There were forecasts and fears of a massive rise in unemployment, especially among young people as had happened during the recessions of the early-1980s and following the 2008 financial crisis. No end to the pandemic and lockdown was then in sight. There were calls for emergency government measures to rescue otherwise unemployed school and college leavers (Henehan, 2020; Major and Machin, 2020, Trade Union Congress, 2020). The government responded with increased funding for apprenticeships, further education and additional job coaches, plus a *Kick Start* scheme, available to commercial, voluntary and public sector employers where the government paid the minimum wage for up to six months to otherwise unemployed young people (Chancellor of the Exchequer, 2020; Department for Education, 2021a; Sunak, 2020). Only *Kick Start* actually commenced in 2020, and had assisted just over 100,000 young people by the end of that year, not the 250,000 for which government finance was available. During 2021 additional job coaches were appointed in Jobcentres and new youth

employment hubs were created, but the crisis with which they were intended to deal never materialised (Department for Work and Pensions. 2021a, 2021b).

Unemployment did spike in 2020. The overall rate for 16-64 year olds rose from 4.0 percent to 5.3 percent. Among 16-17 year olds it rose from 23.6 to 30.4 percent, and from 10.3 to 14.9 percent among 18-24 year olds (Office for National Statistics, 2021a). However, by late-2020 these rates were falling. Annual GDP was down by just eight percent. The decline in unemployment rates continued in 2021 to 4.1 percent overall in October-December 2021, 19.5 percent among 16 and 17 year olds and 9.8 percent for young people aged 18-24. Furthermore, nearly all the initial rise and subsequent fall in youth unemployment was accounted for by students losing then regaining part-time jobs. Among 18-24 year olds who had left full-time education the employment rate fluctuated trendlessly between 74 percent and 78 percent throughout 2020 and 2021 (for more detailed evidence see Roberts 2021a).

Young people already in employment or seeking jobs gained more assistance from government measures available to, and trends that affected all age groups, than anything specifically targeted towards or affecting the youth age group. First and foremost, the government's furlough scheme which paid 80 percent of normal salaries to employees who were unable to work due to government lockdowns helped to keep over 11 million workers (officially) in employment between March 2020 and September 2021 when the scheme ended. Young people were the age group most at risk of being 'locked out' of their jobs, and therefore were the most likely to benefit from furloughing, on account of their over-representation in locked down business sectors, namely bars, cafes, restaurants and hotels (the hospitality sectors), retail, entertainment and tourism (Brewer and Handscomb 2020; Brewer et al, 2021). Competition for jobs was eased by European workers returning home prior to, when or after the UK exited

the single market at the end of 2020, and by older workers moving from employment into inactivity (retirement) (Brewer et al, 2020; Brewer et al, 2021; Cominetti, 2021).

Labour demand was boosted by the government's need to hire additional staff to cope with Brexit: more staff were required for border control, and by the customs services to process the forms and liabilities that accompanied all imports and exports. Jobs were created in 2020 to supply and distribute personal protective clothing and equipment to health service staff, to manufacture, distribute then administer tests for the coronavirus, then in 2021 to vaccinate the entire adult population, eventually extended downwards to 12 year olds. Despite GDP regaining its pre-pandemic level at the end of 2021, the costs of managing Brexit and the pandemic meant that by 2021 government spending exceeded revenues by 20 percent, and the national debt was roughly equivalent to annual GDP, its highest since the end of the Second World War (Bell et al, 2021; De Lyon and Dhingra, 2021). The youth of the pandemic and lockdown years will spend their adult lives repaying this debt, as did the post-1945 youth cohorts (see Shah et al, 2022).

More government funding may have been made available, but apprentice numbers did not increase in 2020-21 but continued a decline that had begun in 2017 with the introduction of a 0.5 percent training levy on firms with payrolls in excess of £3m and continued through 2020-21. Levies could be recovered by recruiting apprentices, and non-levy paying firms could receive support for apprentice training from the surplus in the funds that were raised. The intention was to increase the quantity and improve the quality of training, but in this respect the levy backfired. Some firms had always kept their recruitment and training outside the government-funded scheme in order to avoid the bureaucracy, which increased with the introduction of the levy in 2017, and/or because they preferred to customise training to their

own skill requirements rather than a government template. Hence the post-2017 fall in apprentice starts. It is noteworthy that the steepest decline was in starts by under-19 year olds, from 89,000 to 65,000. The decline among 19-24 year olds was more modest, from 107,000 to 95,000, and nearly all the decline was in intermediate (really basic) apprenticeships. The numbers starting higher apprenticeships actually rose (Department for Education, 2020a, 2020b, 2021b). During the lockdown years around one-in-six young people entered the labour force via a government supported apprenticeship (see Dickinson and Hogarth, 2021; Roberts, 2021a; The St Martins Group, 2021).

Apprentice numbers declined, but the proportion of 16-24 year olds in full-time education rose during the lockdown years. Schools were subjected to lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. Attendance was intermittent for most pupils from Easter 2020 until Easter 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021b). Schooling went online. The ways in which teachers taught remotely varied from school to school. So did the extent to which pupils engaged in online learning. Here social class was a major filter (Edge Foundation, 2021; Major et al, 2020; Major and Machin, 2020; Villadsen et al, 2020). University teaching went online in Spring 2020, and at some universities stayed mainly online throughout the 2020-21 academic year and into the beginning of 2021-22. There were fears that students sitting crucial examinations at age 16, 18, then in higher education would be disadvantaged vis-à-vis earlier cohorts. Opportunities to obtain work experience and vacation internships disappeared (Mason, 2021). Dangers to young people's transitions were averted by the adoption of 'no detriment' policies in education, meaning that overall grades would not be inferior to those of preceding cohorts. There was actually over-compensation and school and university examination results improved and retained their former credibility when students made their next steps in education or into the labour market. The proportions of 16-17 year olds remaining in full-time education rose from 84 percent to 89 percent between 2019 and 2021. Since 2015 this age group had been legally required to remain

in ‘full-time learning’, but full-time learning had been interpreted liberally and infringements had been overlooked. The proportion of 18-19 year olds starting higher education courses rose from just under to just over 40 percent. Expectations of a prolonged education appeared to have been baked into young people’s minds. In 2021 32 percent of 16-25 year olds expected to complete their education with a Masters degree or higher, whereas just 15.5 percent of 29-31 year olds in 2021 were this well-qualified (Schoon and Henseke, 2021). Recruitment by employers offering ‘top’ graduate jobs declined only slightly (Department for Education, 2021c; High Fliers Research, 2021; Institute of Student Employers, 2021).

Education-to-work transitions proceeded normally in 2020 and 2021, more-or-less as they would have progressed pre-pandemic. There could be trouble ahead. All age groups’ education was interrupted during lockdowns. There was no assurance that they would benefit from ‘no detriment’. Pupils’ mental health deteriorated (Banks and Xu, 2020, Children’s Commissioner, 2021; Mental Health Foundation, 2020; NHS Digital, 2021; Sehmi and Slaughter, 2021). Non-attendance increased whenever pupils returned to schools after lockdowns (Crenna-Jennings et al, 2021; Edge Foundation, 2021; Savage, 2021). There could be long-term scarring. On the other hand, as in 2020 and 2021, the UK’s transition regime (see Roberts, 2020b) could take the strain.

### **Occupational class destinations**

The basic case for class analysis is that occupations are not distributed evenly across uni-, two- or multi-dimensional social space but form clusters, each with a typical position in the regimes of production, distribution and consumption (work and market situations in Goldthorpe’s terminology). Clusters are not necessarily classes, but they are potential emerging, consolidating or declining classes (Roberts, 2011, 2020a). Ideally, the entire class structure

should be scanned since classes are shaped by their relationships with one another. However, for present purposes, illustrative cases will suffice.

Despite an overall improvement in qualifications, the types of employment that young people have entered during and since the 2020 and 2021 lockdowns have been much the same as the jobs that awaited preceding cohorts. These occupations do not form a linear hierarchy of pay, skill, qualifications, or prior years of education and training. There is no objective measure of skill that can be applied in comparing occupations (Attewell, 1990; Clarke and Winch, 2006; Payne, 2000). Yet skill is pivotal in legitimating all the other inequalities. Two of the clusters that young people may enter were topics of public concern prior to the pandemic and are likely to remain so.

One is the lower middle class which is now a common destination for university graduates. This makes the cluster a matter of concern for all the involved parties. The graduates must feel over-qualified since many people of their age doing similar jobs left education when age 18 and sometimes earlier (Department for Education, 2021c). The graduates concern governments because they will be among the third whose projected lifetime earnings make them unlikely to make any repayments on their student fees and maintenance loans (Hillman, 2021). Even so, the graduates experience their debt as a burden (Callender and Gayardon, 2021). Repayments are not triggered until annual earnings reach the median, however long this takes until outstanding debt is written off after 30 years. There have always been university graduates who have sacrificed pay in order to work for charities or in religious or political vocations, but they had the option of 'graduate jobs'. Most lower-middle class jobs are in offices, typically in front of computer screens. The staff process data and some actually liaise with offline suppliers and customers. Even so, their work is monitored digitally and minutely. They are executors of rules

delivered from above, which is one example of how classes are formed through their relationships with one another (see Braverman, 1974). Despite the (lower) *middle* class label, they are the largest of present-day Britain's *working* classes. The lower middle class is tiered. As in the 1970s (see Ashton and field, 1976), individuals can experience short upward careers, but only exceptionally into the upper middle class (see below). University graduates who 'step down' into these jobs are making a step that will typically have career-long implications (see Vobemer and Schuck, 2016).

A second cluster of concern are young people who fail to establish themselves in occupations with sufficient pay and security to sustain an adult life. During the 1990s and 2000s Britain experienced strong growth in various types of precarious employment – low paid, less than full-time hours, sometimes with zero-hours contracts, self-employed cleaners, gardeners and deliverers of goods on foot, by bicycle or motorised transport (Goos and Mannung, 2007). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century young people typically started working life in probationary posts, as trainees or apprentices in occupations for which the employers might decide that they were unsuited or the young employees might decide that the occupations did not suit them and switch to something different. Students are usually satisfied with precarious part-time jobs. A 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon is that increasing numbers of young people become adults – they have left the parental home and become parents themselves - while still in precarious employment situations, Standing labelled them a precariat class (Standing, 2011). We must always hesitate before applying labels such as precariat or lumpen proletariat which the groups would not apply to themselves. However, since the 1980s a wedge has deepened between the working classes above, and the 'precariat'



The formation of this cluster has been facilitated in Britain by the government's resurrection of 'the Speenhamland system', pioneered by 18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> century local authorities in Berkshire who decided the top-up agricultural workers' wages in order to prevent them being cast out of work and needing full support from local public funds. During the late-20<sup>th</sup> century the practice was resurrected as Working Tax Credits, now assimilated into Universal Credit, which enables employers to recruit to low paid jobs in which employees' pay will be boosted from the social security budget. In 1999 statutory minimum pay was introduced at 50 percent of median earnings. By 2020 the 'living wage' for claimants aged 25 (soon to become age 23) and over had risen to 59 percent of median earnings (Office for National Statistics, 2021c). This has created a large bulge in income distribution beneath the median in which young people are at risk of entrapment in jobs that can be performed with minimal training. Those trapped are not confined to young people with the lowest achievements in education. Mean starting pay for higher education graduates in 2020 was approximately £20K (Department for Education, 2021c). Annualised minimum pay for an adult was £19K and median pay was approximately £26K (Office for National Statistic, 2021c). Governments are concerned about the cost of wage top-ups alongside the escalating amount of student debt (Department for Education, 2021c; Office for Students, 2021).

There are additional clusters of occupations that young people can enter. One is a skilled working class. The claim to 'skill' is made and generally accepted on the basis of the length of in-firm training needed to acquire the full skill-set. The occupations are in aerospace, motor vehicle assembly and component manufacture, construction, energy supply and distribution, tele-communications and others. This class is much smaller than before the UK economy deindustrialised, but it still offers jobs with pay around or above average (not median) earnings (Office for National Statistics, 2021e). Only the upper tiers of the lower middle class can match

these rewards. Entry is rarely via higher education. It is normally through in-firm training begun at age 18/19, nowadays within or outside a government supported apprenticeship. Employers complain regularly of skill shortages, but the only solution (which they practise) is for them to do more training, but here they are competing for the same recruits as universities towards which their university educated teachers are most likely to guide well-qualified young people. Along with the lower middle class, the skilled working class is part of a still 'missing middle' in youth studies (Irwin, 2021; Roberts, 2011).

Finally there is an upper middle class, almost always entered through higher education, where there are careers leading to the elites of corporate management and the professions. In 1977 median earnings were just below, and average earnings were just above £15K. By 2005-06 the figures were approximately £25K and £35K and this gap has persisted since then (Office for National Statistics, 2021e). The upper middle class has been the beneficiary. Those who reach career pinnacles can accumulate serious wealth. Which graduates gain access to these careers has attracted the same level of attention among sociologists (for example, Friedman and Laurison, 2019) as used to be associated solely with the unemployed and NEETs,

It is necessary to scan the entire class structure since classes are formed through their relationships with one another. The upper middle class is exceptionally rewarded only in comparison with the classes immediately beneath. Soaring upper middle class salaries have demoted lesser professions such as school-teaching and social work into upper tiers within the lower middle class who, along with the upper working class, are set apart from the precariat by the former paying the taxes that fund the latter's means-tested benefits. This division has deepened over time as the proportion of welfare spending that is a universal entitlement or contributions-related has declined, and Britain has moved towards an American-type means-

tested welfare state (see Brewer et al, 2022; Gustafason et al, 2021) in which a political consensus has been formed on targeting assistance towards 'those who need it most'.

This brief overview of the UK class structure in the 2020s has been neither precise nor exhaustive. There are additional possible clusters such as the self-employed with the alternative of placing them in the classes where their occupation is normally employed. There are marginal cases in all clusters such as less than fully-skilled employees in high productivity, high-paid offshore energy. However, the overview has been sufficient to demonstrate clustering rather linearity in the positioning of the workforce, and that examining young people's education-to-work transitions necessarily engages with outcomes of political processes, the economy and labour markets. The main, indispensable but contestable case for a political economy intervention is its insistence that youth studies must search beyond outcomes for root causes.

### **POLITICAL ECONOMY REVISITED**

Some subsidiary suggestions in the Journal of Youth Studies papers can be rejected before engaging with the principal issue. First, young people cannot be a class. Nor can any other age group. A feature of the classes in all sociological theories, schemes and scales is that lifetime membership is possible. All class schemes and scales seek to identify groups of occupations in which people spend all, or the greater part of their working lives. They should also be more likely to have family origins in the same class than individuals starting their lives in other classes becoming mobile and arriving at this class destination. Children born into a class should also be more likely to remain than those from other classes arriving in the given class. To the extent that these conditions are fulfilled we can say that a class has achieved demographic coherence which will maximise the likelihood of an occupational aggregate developing distinctive social and cultural characteristics including political proclivities. Demographic coherence is essential for a Bourdieusian habitus to contain the collective memory of a class

(Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Currently in Britain demographic coherence is stronger at the top, within the upper middle class, than lower down the class structure whereas in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the working class was the most coherent.

As the upper middle class expanded throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became increasingly self-recruiting. Since the early-2000s most new entrants to UK universities have had one or two graduate parents (Roberts, 2010). Higher education today is less often an engine of upward social mobility than class reproduction, and in some cases it acts as a downwardly moving escalator. Wealth has grown more rapidly than incomes since the 1970s, and those who were richest to begin with have been the main beneficiaries. Along with other ‘assets’, house prices have risen faster than incomes, especially earned incomes, Housing is the most widely held form of wealth, and young people’s chances of becoming home owners have depended more-and-more on significant transfers of wealth down the generations (Leslie and Shah, 2022). At the other end of the class structure, the precariat has been increasingly congregated in the cheapest, least attractive publicly owned, socially managed and privately rented housing (Lupton et al, 2009). Around 30 percent of young people join the lowest rungs of upper middle class careers, but there are many more for whom it is their class of aspiration. The top one percent are elites in corporate management and professions, the level where wealth and political power are drawn together by social and cultural bonds.

Another misinterpretation by the advocates of political economy applies to the (correct) observation that the difference between youth and adult earnings has widened over time. If, as they grew older, today’s youth could expect to become beneficiaries of this trend, current youth cohorts would not be more disadvantaged than their predecessors. In fact the widening gap in the UK indicates a progressive inter-cohort deterioration in life chances which began at the

bottom of the class structure in the 1980s and has gradually spread upwards. The reasons include slower growth in GDP than during the previous 30 years, and a smaller slice of GDP being distributed as wages and salaries (see Roberts, 2012). Today’s 16-24 year olds earn less than their parents earned when the latter were in this age band, and on present trends this will continue as current cohorts grow into their 30s, 40s and beyond, and retire on less generous pensions. Inter-cohort decline is also evident in the shrinking proportions who own the dwellings which they occupy at all ages up to 40 (Corlett and Odamitten, 2021). This inter-cohort decline in life chances is evidence that needs to be taken into account in grouping post-1945 youth cohorts into generations.

Another point of detail, common to Cote’s, France and Threadgold’s and Yates’ political economics is their misleading treatment of youth as singular group except for a minority who are a privileged elite. Young people are paid less than adult workers on average, but there are pay inequalities within all age bands. The dates and age bands in Table I are not perfectly matched, but they show differences between the legal minimum and median hourly rates of pay in all age bands, with the difference widening with advancing age.

**Table I**

**Age and minimum and median pay per hour**

<b>National minimum and living wage 2021</b>	<b>£</b>	<b>Median pay 2020 Full-time employees</b>	<b>£</b>
<b>Apprentices and trainees</b>	4.30		
<b>16-17</b>	4.62	16-17	5.12
<b>18-20</b>	6.56	18-21	9.10
<b>21-22</b>	8.36	22-29	12.86
<b>23 and over, living wage</b>	8.91	30-39	16.16

Individuals who are relatively well-paid vis-à-vis other 16-17 year olds, then at age 18-20/21, advance further ahead as they move into adulthood. This demonstrates the biographical

importance of the types of employment that young people enter early in their working lives. During the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> centuries in Britain it became increasingly important to make a good start to working life as average pay rose from year-to-year more steeply than median earnings. This was due to higher earners achieving larger annual rises in their pay than the lower paid (Office for National Statistics, 2021d). Thus achievements in education and early employment have become more deeply divisive than before. So ‘yes’, youth studies must engage with political economy, but do all youth researchers need to become political economists? This would develop the sociology of youth into a sociology of (nearly) everything.

### **CONCLUSION**

The account of how young people in the UK fared during and following the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 has illustrated how youth transitions research necessarily engages with the outcomes for young people of government policies alongside changes and continuities in the economy and labour market conditions. Sukarieh and Tannock (2016) note that recent volumes of the *Journal of Youth Studies* have contained far fewer papers on employment and unemployment than on youth as a state of being. This may be celebrated or deplored, but it is irrelevant to the case for political economy, whose essential argument, and criticism of the entire youth studies field, is that it is failing but needs to dig deeper for ‘root causes’.

The contrary position, adopted here, is that digging deeper is not within the remit of youth studies. Rather, it is the job of economists and political scientists to take account of the evidence from youth research. Postulating any ‘root causes’ seems ill-conceived. Economic and political actions must have causes. Weaknesses in youth transition’s engagements with origins and destinations are due primarily to the absence of up-to-date maps of youth’s childhood backgrounds and the adult lives into which they embark. This weakness has arisen within sociology and sociology must fix it. Youth studies can justify its existence only by persistently

foregrounding young people. Its researchers have no need to become 21<sup>st</sup> century polymaths. We necessarily work within a division of labour within the modern social sciences which began before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continues in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

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