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Work, employment and the material conditions of young people in developed economies: a Marxist political economy of youth perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a Marxist political economy (MPE) of youth to explain the material conditions of young people in developed economies. Central concepts of capitalist accumulation, labour-power and value are utilised to historicise and situate young people in relation to wage labour under capitalism. The article conceptualises how contradictory processes of capitalist accumulation impact young people through an analysis of the actions of private capital, labour and the state. The theoretical approach is supported with UK data which illustrates how young people have experienced challenges in education, labour market transitions, and work and employment conditions. The article reveals how a combination of structural economic change, state regulation and low-road employer business strategies which generate poor quality work have all contributed to the decline in the value of youth labour-power in the UK. The article also provides methodological insights for using the MPE approach in future youth studies research.

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Introduction

This article theorises and advances a Marxist political economy (MPE) of youth approach to explain the material circumstances of young people (defined as aged 18–25[1]) in developed economies. Theorising an MPE of youth is achieved by utilising key concepts from the political economy – chiefly labour-power, value and the contradictions of capitalist accumulation – to historicise and understand young people as in relation to wage labour within capitalism. The MPE approach develops recent 'political economy of youth' research in the *Journal of Youth Studies* (Côté 2014a, 2016; France and Threadgold 2016; Bessant, Farthing, and Watts 2017; Kelly 2018) by offering a systematic theorisation of how capitalism operates in a manner which structurally disadvantages young people. The paper is guided by the research question: how can the material conditions of young people be understood and explained through developing an MPE of youth?

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An MPE of youth is required as the existing political economy of youth approaches have not systematically theorised how capitalist accumulation operates and how this impacts young people. The centrality of the wage labour relation and the compulsion to sell one's labour under capitalism is not fully theorised in relation to youth, neither is the way changes in capitalist accumulation have impacted on young people's material circumstances in recent decades. An MPE approach is necessary as ongoing changes in capitalist accumulation such as shifts in the sectoral composition of advanced economies, prevailing business strategies and government regulation of work and employment have detrimentally impacted labour market opportunities and job quality for young people, resulting in worsening material conditions. This article asserts work and employment conditions for young people have worsened since the 1980s (Côté and Allahar 1996) and have become particularly acute since the 2007 Financial Crisis and the subsequent decade of austerity policies. Youth unemployment was higher than all-age unemployment following the Financial Crisis (Eurostat 2017), and young people experienced labour market scarring as a result (Simms 2011). The subsequent decade of austerity policies imposed across the developed world resulted in stagnant or falling real wages for young workers in the UK (TUC 2019), as well as increases in insecure and precarious work (Gallie et al. 2017) and worsening labour market polarisation (Furlong et al. 2017). COVID19 compounded these problems as the youth stratum of the labour market was disproportionately affected by unemployment (Resolution Foundation 2020).

An MPE of youth approach foregrounds young people's relationship to wage labour within capitalism as this is the primary relationship that determines material outcomes for young people. All young people – unless they can live exclusively from the profits of invested capital – must sell their labour-power to survive (Marx, [1867] 1990). Young people prepare for work while in education, and once in work issues of wages, skills and training provision, opportunities for career progression, worker representation and workplace dignity all become key factors shaping young people's material circumstances and quality of life. Wage labour is vital for consumption necessary for social reproduction, and even unemployed youth exist in relation to the wage labour relation as they are obligated to seek employment by welfare states which have increased welfare conditionality in recent decades (Jessop 2018). All these processes occur in and through a totalising capitalist system whose underlying dynamics must therefore be understood to understand their impact on young people.

Theorising young people in relation to wage labour does not downplay other youth experiences. An MPE of youth does not subsume or obliterate the analytical category of 'youth' within the category of 'worker' or the wage-relation. Rather, the MPE approach illuminates the specific and unique ways in which young people are shaped by their contradictory relationship to capitalist accumulation. Analytical prioritisation of the wage labour relationship does not refute or downplay the importance of other 'objects of youth study' (Threadgold 2020); rather, it facilitates a more systematic analysis of them which can advance understandings of all aspects of youth by grounding them in relation to prevailing processes of capitalism.

The MPE of youth approach challenges explanations of youth that identify age-specific biological characteristics or perceptions (Arnett 2014), or generational differences in attitudes or accumulated wealth (Wynn and Woodman 2006) as the main factor shaping young people's material conditions. The article instead identifies shifts in global processes of capitalist accumulation and their mediation by states and institutions as being central

to understanding changes to young people's material circumstances. These processes are characterised by fundamental contradictions, and it attempts by private capital and states to overcome these contradictions which have been detrimental to young people (Peck and Theodore 2012). These processes manifest not only in worsened conditions in the sphere of wage labour, but also in education, housing and labour market opportunities.

The article makes several new contributions. First, it develops a systematic MPE of youth approach and grounds this abstract theorisation in the concrete analysis of young people in the UK. Second, it presents a new methodological approach for studying young people in relation to the capitalist compulsion to engage in wage labour and illustrates how education, labour markets and employment conditions are all shaped by contradictory processes of capitalist accumulation. Finally, it draws together and advances existing debates in youth studies in a manner that progressively contributes to improving the material circumstances of young people. It is also important to note that while conceptualising young people as workers is not new (Tannock 2001), explaining their material conditions in relation to wage labour using contemporary Marxist theory is a new contribution.

The remainder of the article has the following structure. Section 1 situates the MPE of youth approach in relation to contemporary research through a review of existing literature. Section 2 theorises the MPE of youth approach, explaining how key concepts of value, labour-power and the contradictions of capitalism impact youth. Section 3 applies the MPE of youth approach to explain the material conditions of young workers in the UK and offers a conclusion that draws key arguments together and illustrates how the MPE approach can be used in future youth studies research.

Section 1 – existing accounts of young people's material conditions

This section reviews existing literature on young people's material conditions by identifying four main analytical approaches: first, research that focuses on the age-specific biological characteristics or perceptions of young people to explain their material conditions; second, research that focuses on intergenerational differences; third, youth transitions literature; and fourthly, political economy accounts of youth.

Individualised and generational accounts

Individualised accounts of youth foreground the personal choices and actions of young people. These approaches can be informative although they tend to explain behaviour of young people as being the result of young people's 'essential youthfulness' (Yates 2017), meaning their material conditions are explained as being caused by the very fact of being young, rather than because of factors such as class or socio-economic circumstance. The notion of 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett 2014) is an example of this approach and has been criticised for being methodologically unclear, silent on issues of class and for being presented as both a description of an age period and an explanation of why an age period has the characteristics that it does (Côté 2014b). Criticism of individualistic accounts of youth is not a criticism of research that explores the subjective accounts of individual young people, it is rather a criticism of research that blames young people for their own poor material conditions, thereby obfuscating the role played by structural and institutional power relations.

Generational accounts identify generational differences and intergenerational conflict as the main factors shaping young people's conditions (Woodman and Wyn 2015). Generation in this context does not refer solely to age but to the shared 'collective identities' and experiences of cohorts (France and Roberts 2015, 217). While examination of generational differences can provide valuable insights into material conditions, such accounts do not generally foreground how underlying structural forces shape these generational differences. Specific generations such as Baby Boomers may have been more likely to benefit from historically specific phenomena such as cheap housing, policies promoting full employment, or final salary pensions (Machin 2011), although this does not mean all members of a generation benefitted equally, or that all members of subsequent generations are worse off because of these historical trends being curtailed. Generational analysis can also downplay gendered and racialised inequalities, as well as downplaying the importance of social class; inequality within generations, for example, remains more pronounced than across generations (Reinecke and Grimshaw 2015).

Youth transitions and political economies of youth

Youth transitions research examines how young people move from education into various forms of work, unemployment or economic inactivity. Early transitions research examined issues of structure, agency and the impact of broader economic conditions on young workers (Ashton, Malcolm, and Spilsbury 1990). More recent research has illustrated how – as economic conditions have changed – transitions into employment for young people have become extended and characterised by intermittent unemployment and uncertainty (MacDonald et al. 2005). The notion of a 'golden age' of youth transitions ever existing has, however, been challenged (Goodwin and O'Connor 2005), and France and Roberts (2015) argue youth transitions are viewed as problematic now only because middle-class young people are increasingly affected (2015, 226). This argument supports MacDonald's (2009) claim that the prevalence of low-quality work for young people is due to the subsumption of the youth labour market into a secondary labour market that impacts workers of all ages and is therefore more of an issue of social class (2009, 171). The inability of transitions research to explain the underlying causes of these shifts has been noted by Keep (2012), who critiques transitions literature as being methodologically nationalistic, small-scale and quantitative in nature, resulting in an inability to explain why the economic conditions which shape transitions have changed (2012, 5-6).

The limited explanatory capacity of transitions and other accounts of youth has led to calls for a 'political economy of youth' to be developed (Côté 2014a; 2016; Sukarieh and Tannock 2014; 2016; France and Threadgold 2016; Bessant, Farthing, and Watts 2017; Kelly 2018). Although the term was first used as early as the 1960s (Rowntree and Rowntree 1968), it is the more recent work of Côté (2014a), who – drawing on their own earlier research (Côté and Allahar 1996) – develop the concept by arguing for a 'youth-as-class' approach which emphasises the relationship between youth and adults with socio-economic power. This approach explains worsening youth conditions due to processes of 'proletarianisation' and the development of education policies which 'park' young people until their cheap labour is needed, leading to young workers developing a 'false consciousness' wherein they internalise feelings of low self-worth and do think they

deserve high-quality jobs (2014a, 530–538). This approach draws upon Marcuse's (1972) identification of the unique revolutionary capacity of young people stemming from their alienated position in society (1972, 48). Sukarieh and Tannock (2014) similarly call for attention to be given to how structural unemployment impacts youth and is used by elites as justification for economic restructuring which is detrimental to all-age cohorts (2014, 59), while France and Threadgold (2016) apply a Bourdieusian analysis to interrogate how social and cultural factors influence young people. More recently, Bessant (2018) has advocated the development of historical sociology to locate young people within processes of capitalism, a call echoed by Irwin (2020) who advocates a renewed focus on the 'missing middle' of young workers.

Debates on the political economy of youth differ, but share a key commonality; all start their analysis with young people and then seek to insert or utilise ideas from the political economy to explain their conditions. This methodology intuitively makes sense as the aim of the research is to understand young people. This post-hoc deployment of theories of political economy is, however, analytically limited as it leads to conceptual problems, the main one being young people are not the foundation of capitalism as their labour-power is not central to capitalist accumulation. Young people are a marginalised group in labour markets, and while this does generate a strong moral and normative argument for focusing on young people, it does not logically follow that beginning analysis by foregrounding young people will generate revealing findings. Instead, it is more illuminating, to begin with an analysis of how capitalism operates and then situate young people within capitalism. The remainder of the article develops this alternative approach, building on existing research to develop an MPE of youth that is robust enough to theorise young people within capitalism to explain their material conditions.

Section 2 – A Marxist political economy of youth

This section advances an MPE that situates young people in relation to capitalist wage labour to explain their material conditions.

The modern discipline of political economy has its origins in the work of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political economists, in particular, Smith ([1776] 2007), Malthus ([1820], 2013), and Ricardo ([2017] 2017), whose work foregrounded analysis of land, rent, capital and labour for understanding the economic development of states. One limitation of classical political economy was the incomplete theorisation of the role of labour-power in capitalism, and the assumption that capitalist markets could govern themselves, epitomised in Smith's 'invisible hand' concept (Smith [1776] 2007, 349). Marx ([1867] 1990, [1885] 1992, [1894] 1993) advanced classical political economy through sustained critique in which he developed a new approach to understand capitalism by giving analytical priority to labour due to its unique role as the bearer of labour-power, the source of value – and therefore profit – in capitalist production.

The buying and selling of labour-power – wherein capital purchases labour-power to engage in production with the aim of profitable accumulation – is central to capitalism. Labour-power is borne by individual workers, although as all workers are bearers of labour-power they form a collective social category which is class-based under capitalism (Elson 1979, 138). Capital, similarly, is an abstraction that is concretely borne by individuals and institutions. An individual can therefore simultaneously be a bearer of

both labour-power (through engaging in wage labour) and capital (through possession of assets such as property or investments) (Fine 2001). The relation between capital and labour – expressed concretely in the form of the relationship between employers and workers – is inherently antagonistic because of its fundamentally unequal nature. Labour is compelled to engage in wage labour because its historic dispossession from the means of production means it can only survive by selling its own capacity to work (Harvey 2003). This compulsion is set against capital's constant attempts to devalue labour-power to generate more surplus value, expressed concretely as monetary profit (Marx [1867] 1990, 38). The inequality, unfreedom and exploitation of workers in the sphere of production contrasts with the apparent 'freedom' of the labour market, wherein employers and workers temporarily interact as equals in the buying and selling of labour-power (Marx [1867] 1990, 119).

Young people can therefore only be fully understood when they are conceptualised in relation to wage labour in a class-based society wherein they are compelled to engage in wage labour but are not fully compensated for their work. Understanding how the occurs requires deploying the concept of the value of labour-power (VLP) to understand the relationship between capitalist process and the material circumstances of young workers. The VLP is an abstract concept that can only be indirectly empirically evidenced and while it is not possibly to directly measure the VLP it is possible to assess changes in factors that affect the VLP to observe whether it generally rising or falling (Fine and Saad-Filho 2010). One concrete manifestation of the VLP is wages, although these do not fully capture the VLP as wages are merely an expression of the VLP in the sphere of capitalist realisation (Fine 2013) – wages could rise but if they are outstripped by inflation then the VLP would fall. Understanding the VLP, therefore, requires consideration of factors including but not limited to the price of wage-bundle commodities (e.g. housing, education, transport and food), the specific capabilities and capacities of workers, how labour-power is deployed in the labour process and accompanying business strategies to increase productivity rates which coalesce to influence the VLP, thereby shaping material conditions for young workers. The value of young worker's labour-power could increase – for example – if wages remained constant, but the cost of wage-bundle commodities reduced. Young workers' VLP could also decrease if wages remained constant but strategies to increase worker productivity in the labour process were introduced (Lloyd and Payne 2002). The concept of the VLP is a useful concept as it provides a robust theoretical tool for conceptualising how capitalism shapes material outcomes for young people in a holistic and totalising manner. It reveals how gains in one area – for example, wages – can be cancelled out by rising prices or by changes in employer strategy which leads to work intensification.

The analytical primacy of young people as workers does not mean other social categories such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality and disability are unimportant. These categories can all lead to social disadvantage and discrimination for young people and therefore must be considered when analysing material conditions; specifically, the way they intersect with age and the wage labour relation within capitalism. These social categories can impact labour market opportunities and outcomes for young workers due to historical factors leading to structurally differentiated labour markets existing in which minority groups experience poorer quality working conditions (Dale et al. 2002; O'Higgins 2012). The existence of these barriers for young

workers highlights how trans-historical social categories take on particular forms within capitalism and are manipulated by private capital to segment and undermine collective solidarities among young workers (Grimshaw 2017). An important methodological point to note is that *all* analysis of capitalism is to some extent partial, as no analysis can explore every facet of materiality simultaneously. All Marxist research is a process of 'cutting up the continuum' of capitalist reality in this regard (Gough 2013), wherein capitalism is analysed from multiple angles to develop a more holistic understanding of it as a global, totalising system.

Contradictions and countervailing forces affecting work and employment

Capitalist accumulation is underpinned by contradictory tendencies which manifest in work and employment and have implications for the material conditions of young people (Harvey 2003; 2014). A contradiction can be understood as the tension between two (or more) features of capitalism that cannot be fully reconciled, leading to detrimental outcomes for young people if they are not countervailed by other social forces. Capitalist contradictions are evident in the actions of employers, workers and the state.

A key contradiction for employers is the tension between developing or degrading young workers via adopting high-road or low-road or business strategies (Appelbaum and Schmitt 2009). High-road strategies increase productivity through combining labour-power with technological innovation and industrial processes, thereby increasing surplus value in relative terms. This type of high-road strategy requires workers who have the skills and capacities to engage in complex forms of production and therefore requires highly educated and trained workers. There is generally less labour market supply for this type of worker and so firms must provide their own in-house skills and training provision, as well as offering competitive rates of remuneration. The complex nature of this work inhibits pervasive workplace monitoring and work intensification. Low-road strategies, by contrast, increase worker productivity by lengthening or intensifying the working day to increase surplus value in absolute terms. This is achieved through operating a fragmented and deskilled labour process wherein it is easy for managers to engage in processes of monitoring and surveillance to quicken the pace of work. Low-road strategies generally lead to degraded working conditions as there is little need to invest in the workforce through skills provision or provide opportunities for career progression.

Workers can organise collectively to respond to managerial strategies although contradictory tensions exist between organised labour acting on behalf of workers for progressive change versus it becoming too involved in the maintenance of industrial relations, resulting in organised labour upholding the status quo and perpetuating structural problems within capitalism. Organised labour can be effective in pressuring for employer productivity increases to be translated into wage increases via collective bargaining agreements although these have declined across most industrial sectors in recent decades as union membership has fallen (Brown, Bryson, and Whitfield 2009). In the UK, there has been marked shifts in the position of organised labour. The post-war period was characterised by voluntarism in industrial relations wherein employers and unions negotiated with little direct intervention by the state and conflict was minimised. The state limited its role to setting the 'rules of the game' and maintaining Keynesian policies of demand management and full (male) employment, trade unions limiting industrial militancy in

exchange for regular pay rises in line with inflation, and employers engaged with unions in collective bargaining in exchange for workplace stability and steadily rising profits (Gamble 1988). The economic crises of the 1970s led to this system of embedded liberalism breaking down and being replaced by neoliberal which policies sought to restore profitability by weakening organised labour's ability to strike and by re-regulating work and employment relations to favour capital (Harvey 2007). Industrial sectors that were sites of high-road business strategies such as advanced manufacturing declined, while the growth of finance and business services was promoted (Gamble 1988). The outcome of these policies in the UK has been the development of a growth model predicated on extractive, financialised forms of accumulation centred on the City of London accompanied by low-road, sweated forms of accumulation in sectors such as retail and hospitality, business services and logistics (Lloyd and Payne 2002; 2016).

Shifts in UK state policy from Keynesian to neoliberal illustrates how capitalist states can be conceptualised as the 'crystallisation of class conflict' at a particular moment in time (Clarke 1991). The extent to which state institutions, laws and actions advance or hinder the interests of capital or labour is the outcome of ongoing conflict expressed in the political and economic spheres and explains the often-contradictory way state institutions operate in ways that both benefit and harm young people. Comprehensive welfare states have been maintained by governments from across the political spectrum in part because they act as a bulwark against the excessive toll capitalist accumulation takes on workers while at the same time ensuring there is a suitably healthy, skilled and disciplined workforce for continuing accumulation (Offe 1984; Jessop 2018). These welfare states can, however, become partially or totally privatised, generating new sites of profitable accumulation for capital (Gamble 2016).

Other contradictions exist which shape material conditions for young people under capitalism. Capital's search for profitable accumulation can lead to existing sites of production being abandoned and the fixed capital and labour which was formerly deployed being devalued. This process manifested in the UK as deindustrialisation in the 1980s with detrimental social consequences for young workers as structural unemployment rose and opportunities for career progression disappeared (Ashton, Malcolm, and Spilsbury 1990). A related contradiction is how capitalist firms are compelled to engage in competitive accumulation indefinitely or they will be subsumed by competitors, leading to overproduction, commodity gluts and resultant devaluations and destruction of capital. This competitive tendency is at the heart of the business cycle and a major contributing factor to recurrent economic crises (Harvey 2014) which have immense real-world implications for young people, most recently in the Great Financial Crisis and subsequent period of austerity (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014) wherein young people where 'hit hardest [and] scarred longest' (Simms 2011).

Section 2 has detailed the emergence and key elements of the MPE. It has illustrated the centrality of labour-power in capitalism as the source of all value, and how the notion of the VLP can be used to theorise the changing material conditions of young people. The compulsion of individuals to sell their labour-power and the antagonistic class-based relations were also discussed, and how capitalist contradictions manifest in the actions of employers, organised labour and the state. Section 3 examines the impact of capitalist accumulation and its contradictory features on young workers will now be illustrated in more detail by applying an MPE perspective to young workers in the UK.

Section 3 - understanding young people using Marxist political economy

Material conditions for young people are shaped by their relation to wage labour in capitalism and their position as workers or potential workers. In order to understand how contradictory processes of capitalist accumulation affect young workers, it is therefore necessary to engage in the empirical analysis of labour markets, and work and employment conditions. There have been major changes in these areas in the UK in the last four decades; the sectoral and occupational composition of the economy has altered, changes to the composition of the labour force have occurred, as have changes to the way in which work is performed, regulated and remunerated (Brown, Bryson, and Whitfield 2009). The way in which contradictory processes of capitalist accumulation impact young workers can be illustrated by looking at evidence from two areas: education and transitions, and job quality (Adamson and Roper 2019).

In the UK, education for ages 4–18 remains free although provision has been semi-privatised by academisation and the Free Schools system, both examples of how new markets in education have been developed by the state and both have resulted in fraud and cronyism scandals (HM Government 2014). Higher Education has undergone similar pressures of marketisation; UK universities have intensified recruitment of fee-paying students in response to a decline in direct government funding as part of attempts to introduce market efficiencies into the sector. The outcome, conversely, has been increased bureaucratisation which has detrimentally impacted the workforce and young people studying at university (Kuznetsova and Kuznetsov 2020). The cost of attending university has been individualised, resulting in domestic UK students generally borrowing over £40,000 (Bolton 2020) to attend university, resulting in increased indebtedness among young people ahead of labour market entry, which acts as a form of disciplinary pressure on young people when in work (Gill 1995). A further consequence has been increased numbers of graduates entering labour markets each year, an outcome which has not been met by increased demand for graduate skills or creation of graduate jobs (Rafferty 2019). This imbalance of supply and demand increases; credentialism (UKCES 2012), competitive 'entry tournaments' among young people (Marsden 2011) and skills-based under-employment. All these factors can act as downward pressures on wages which increases the relative power of employers. Young people, moreover, are increasingly taught to internalise the narrative that labour market failure is an individual rather than a collective issue, the result of a failure to develop sufficient human capital or employability skills (Crisp and Powell 2017). This narrative illustrates the power of ideology within capitalism (Zizek 2012), wherein class conflict manifests in the realm of ideas, leading to the emergence of ideas and narratives which deflect attention away from structural problems and systemic contradictions of capitalism. Increased access to Higher Education for all who wish to attend is laudable; however, evidence suggests the opportunities it purportedly offers do not match the realities experienced by young people (Moore 2010). This issue is compounded by recent graduates having to seek employment at a time of sustained economic crisis and stagnation resulting from the Financial Crisis and COVID19, which both increased youth unemployment.

Labour market transitions for young people have also worsened in recent decades (Keep 2012; Furlong et al. 2017). An MPE of youth approach locates the source of problematic transitions as stemming from multiple interlinked factors: changes to education,

changes to the sectorial and occupation composition of the UK economy, and changes to the nature and form of state intervention. The issue of sectoral and occupational change is an important and under-theorised change. The deindustrialisation and mass unemployment of the 1980s resulting from the end of Keynesianism and emergence of neoliberal policies were accompanied by state attempts to foster the growth of the service sector, which gradually began to hire more young people. Employment in this sector was often qualitatively worse, being lower paid, lower-skilled and offering fewer promotion opportunities. The UK state in the 1980s and early 1990s actively promoted the UK's competitive advantage as being a low-paid, low-skilled economy (Rubery 1994) based on devalued labour-power stemming from the weakening of the trade union movement in the 1980s. The state promoted private sector-led regeneration strategies which fostered low-quality employment in the service sector through Urban Development Corporations and Training and Enterprise Councils (Peck 1998). The state did not develop an industrial strategy to replace lost high value-added jobs, instead of supporting the growth of the financial sector as a vehicle for lost tax receipts. The opening up of the former Soviet Union and China to capitalist imperatives in earnest in the 1990s led to a growth of the available global labour force, meaning the UK's comparative advantage began to shift to competition based on a highly skilled workforce, hence policy shifts in the late 1990s setting a target of 50% of young people attending university (Nunn 2012). This supply-side policy shift was not matched by the development of a sustained industrial strategy which generated demand for highly skilled workers, meaning UK labour markets have experienced a decline in what were once middle-class jobs, in particular skilled technical jobs in manufacturing. Good jobs in other sectors and occupations also shrunk as firms sought to streamline their operations to remain profitable against new competitors from the Global South and because of financialised pressures including private equity takeovers of firms (Clark 2013). The result of these processes has been the creation of a polarised, hour-glassed labour market in the UK comprising 'lovely and lousy' jobs (Goos and Manning 2007) in which young people are increasingly at the bottom, as they are less able to compete with more experienced older workers for the smaller number of remaining good jobs which are available.

Once employed young people face multiple challenges in contemporary workplaces which detrimentally impact their job quality, including low and stagnant real wages, work intensification, limited vocational education, training and skills development (VETS) provision and career progression opportunities, and curtailed worker voice and collective representation. Real wage growth has been stagnant since the Great Financial Crisis, and prior to this wage growth was low (TUC 2019) and was not keeping pace with house prices, leading to worsening intergenerational inequality as older workers who own their homes have become more affluent than younger workers who often must rent (Evemy, Yates, and Eggleston 2021). The main legislative change impacting wage rates for young people in the UK in recent decades has been the introduction National Minimum Wage (NMW) in 1999. The NMW was introduced to provide a floor to prevent wage exploitation, although its aged-stratified nature allows lawful pay discrimination as 18-year-olds can be paid less than 23-year-olds for doing the same job. The NMW has not had the effect policymakers desired of acting as a springboard from which wages could be boosted; it has become the socially accepted wage many young (and all-age) workers are paid. Recent research has found that age-stratified NMW rates

can lead to employers replacing older workers with young workers, compounding the problem of younger workers being concentrated in low-paying sectors such as retail and hospitality (Adăscăliței et al. 2020).

Work intensification is the process by which workers are made to work harder, or for longer hours in their jobs, and has been increasing in recent decades in the UK in a manner that detrimentally affects young workers (Felstead and Green 2017). Work intensification is more likely to impact younger workers as it is more common in sectors where low-road productivity strategies prevail, such as retail, hospitality and business services, and it is in these sectors where young people are disproportionately employed (Yates 2017). The growth in jobs at the bottom-end of UK labour markets has been particularly acute in non-routine manual occupations which cannot be easily automated such as care work, retail and hospitality, and delivery work (Machin 2011), and in many of these jobs, work intensity is maintained by pervasive technological monitoring processes, further reducing worker discretion and undermining job satisfaction and quality. These conditions have been allowed to prevail because of limited government intervention to progressively regulate work and employment and because of limited successes of trade unions in responding collectively to these changes, with some exceptions (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2019).

The decline in VETS is especially detrimental to young workers as it is through training and skills development that youth can progress from the edges of labour markets into better quality work. The decline in VETS provision is a consequence of sectoral change; a highly skilled workforce is critical for commodity production in high-road, high value-added sectors such as advanced manufacturing, but is less necessary in low-road business models. The need to ensure a continued supply of skilled labour means many manufacturing firms provided – and continue to provide – in-house training programmes which can lead to young workers entering firms with few to no qualifications and progressing through to postgraduate level in some instances (Yates 2022). VETS provision is less prominent in sectors of the economy such as retail and hospitality and certain business services, wherein the production and accompanying labour process has been fragmented to facilitate speed-up. In these firms, the workforce becomes a cost to be minimised, rather than an asset to be invested in. An outcome of reduced VETS provision is reduced opportunities for career progression either through a firm's internal labour market or through occupational labour markets (McGovern, Hill, and White 2007). Reduction in VETS provision also stems from the compulsion for capitalist firms to reduce costs to maximise profitability, especially if the firm is experiencing additional outside pressures from shareholders or other investors.

Interlinked issues of low stagnant real wages, work intensification and declining VETS provision are compounded by the limited capacity of trade unions to represent young people, both in terms of total members who are young and because of legislative changes which means trade unions most do more with less and work harder to organise to advance the material interests of their members. The weakening of trade unions has been due to multiple factors and trade unions themselves are not without blame (Connolly 2020), although a major cause of union decline has been the deliberate weakening of sectors where unions were strong – such as in manufacturing and the public sector – and legislative changes increasing barriers to organising (Simms, Holgate, and Heery 2012). These changes are problematic for young workers as empirical evidence conclusively demonstrates that unions – despite their flaws – are beneficial for increasing real

wages, improving job quality, decreasing economic inequality and acting in the long-term interests of society by ensuring jobs are secure and communities can remain cohered rather than be destroyed by unemployment (Piketty 2015).

Section 3 has illustrated how changes in educational provision, labour market transitions, low wages, work intensification, limited VETS provision and weakened trade unions combine to worsen material conditions for young people, driving down the value of their labour-power. These conditions are not the result of individual failure or due to essential features of youth that fade with age. Rather, they are the demonstrable outcome of contradictory capitalist processes which have increased in severity over recent decades due to heightened class conflict wherein the power of private capital has increased relative to labour. The driver of these changes is traceable to the need for capital to engage in continuous competitive accumulation, which manifests in different aspects of social life and requires theorisation through the application of concepts from MPE that allow capitalists to be understood on a systemic level.

Conclusion

This article proposed an MPE of youth to theorise and explain the material conditions of young people. In doing so, it advanced existing 'political economy of youth' debates in the *Journal of Youth Studies*. This article was guided by the research question: how can the material conditions of young people be understood and explained through the development of an MPE of youth? The article answered this question by reviewing existing literature and then developing a detailed theorisation of an MPE of youth which used concepts including capitalist accumulation, the VLP and the contradictory nature of capitalism to explain the material conditions of young people in advanced economies, drawing on empirical data from the UK as evidence to substantiate key arguments. The paper found declining material conditions for young people have been caused by long-term changes in structural processes of capitalism, specifically shifts in the sectoral composition of the economy leading to the growth of low-road employment in the service sector. This shift has been facilitated by a re-regulation of work and employment by the state to favour private capital, evident in the degradation of educational opportunities and labour market transitions for young people, low real wages, work intensification, limited vocational education, training and skills provision, and a weakening of trade unions' ability to countervail these changes. The outcome of these changes has been a decline in the value of youth labour-power, which at a structural level is beneficial to private capital as it can result in more profitable accumulation.

The article reveals the benefits of an MPE of youth to understand these material conditions. The MPE approach allows abstract theoretical categories such as capital, labour and class conflict to be grounded in concrete empirical analysis in a manner that overcomes deterministic accounts of youth within capitalism that have previously prevailed in the literature. It achieves this by providing a basis for the understanding of how global, macro-level processes shape local immediate outcomes; the MPE approach grounds the global in the local through critical interrogation of the material experiences of young people. Young people are not merely passive victims of capitalism, nor are they devoid of agency – their position is more complex and needs to be understood via detailed study which locates them in relation to prevailing processes of accumulation and explores how youth are both shaped by and re-shape capitalism.

The MPE approach also provides a methodological framework to interrogate how and why young people experience the material conditions they do today by foregrounding the importance of capitalism and capitalist processes. Existing PE youth accounts – in seeking to understand youth – focus their analysis on the effects of capitalism on youth. This leads to a partial analysis where only the effects are studied, and the underlying causes are not examined. This methodology cannot lead to a complete understanding of young people; the inter-linked factors must be explored, namely capitalism itself. This is one of the great strengths of MPE, the process by which it can 'cut up the continuum' (Gough 2013) of capitalism to analyse one specific facet – in this case youth – and then contextualise it in relation to other facets of capitalism. This approach is the dialectic method, and it is one of the unique strengths of Marxist analysis; it provides the analytical capacity ability to simultaneously examine causation and effect. Finally, the MPE approach contributes new empirical insights as it facilitates the generation of rich new empirical data and allows for existing secondary data to be redeployed and retheorised in a more compelling and holistic manner. The MPE approach can tie together disparate case studies and detached statistical research to better explain the conditions of young people.

The provision of a detailed plan for remedying the multiple problems young people face is beyond the scope of this article, although the MPE approach does reveal how any policies which seek to improve the material conditions of youth must be wary of the challenges of working within a fundamentally contradictory capitalist system, wherein ostensibly benevolent and progressive attempts at reform can have unintended negative consequences. Attempts to improve individual workplaces, for example, can lead to the workplace becoming unprofitable and closing, generating unemployment. Similarly, improving trade union representation can be challenging due to the threat of ageism within unions as they seek to protect core workers, in doing so marginalising young workers. Also, more generally, unions can be seen as having an institutional role in maintaining capitalism by preventing the worst excesses of worker exploitation, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of capitalism as a system. These points illustrate the difficulties of improving a complex system in a way that helps young people, but it should not be a reason for continued research. A good theory should both explain reality and be able to predict future events, and it is therefore important we continue to refine and develop new theories and engage in practical policy generation. Doing these things will contribute to our understanding of the material conditions of young people and act as a basis for progressively and sustainably improving them.

Note

1. Young is defined as aged 18–25 in this article. This definition is selected as it is in line with the UK's Office for National Statistics definition of youth and because UK labour market and employment data are used in the article.

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