Mirosław Kowalski, Łukasz Albański
Poland

The New Educational Review

Borders, Inequalities and Global Generations: A Preliminary Study on the use of Ulrich Beck's Concepts in the Polish Context

Abstract

The article outlines Beck's major concepts in order to show some theoretical frameworks for the study on migration, young people and possible conflict-laden interactions between them. The example of Poland seems to be particularly relevant to the discussion about the validity of Beck's contribution to the understanding of divisions, contradictions, and desires of the global generation. Although Poland is not perceived as a country of immigration, many young people declare their greater orientation to migration. However, many young people also appear very reluctant to accept immigration to Poland. The article attempts to consider some explanations for this reluctance. The study is descriptive and designed to explore new perspectives. The main goal of the article is to start discussion about generational interconnectedness in times of rapid migration and set up a research agenda for work on Polish young people in a described framework.

Keywords: *young people, intra-generational conflicts, higher education, migration, U. Beck*

Introduction

Research on migration, borders and a growing ethnic diversity has been primarily developed with reference to Western and Northern Europe. Central and Eastern European countries have been chiefly defined as migrant senders or as

transit countries, hence they have up to now remained on the fringe of mainstream discussions about the immigration policy in Europe and only recently began receiving noticeable immigration. Located on the periphery of the European Union, they were all sources of emigration, but immigrants remained a small proportion of their overall population. Thus, discourses about immigrant integration have been less developed compared with those concerning the issue of emigration.

Identified as an ethnically homogenous country, Poland has been widely recognized in the European Union as a sending country. Even if there are more and more young Poles for whom migration is part of their family and personal history, Poland itself is not perceived as a country of immigration. The idea of belonging is entertained in an asymmetrical manner. Crossing borders offers opportunities to live and work abroad, yet binding identity and borders together is the preferred means of national identification. Such a way of identification creates the affective and moral meaning of us, but it also maintains the stigmatized qualities of outsiders (Mucha, 2016). In Poland, external migration in the context of current European situation has been exposed in the media as hazardous to the nation and the nation-building project (Mach, Styczyńska, 2016). This belief is maintained by the majority of social survey respondents. The youngest participants (between 18 and 24) constitute the largest age group of opponents of external migration (over 80%) (CBOS, 2017: 3). On the other hand, however, for an increasing number of young people, migration is seen as an option. In some way, migration can be even perceived as a source of oppositional youth culture in Poland.

The combined problem of youth, migration and identity seems to be caught in a concept of methodological nationalism. Beck (2016: 36) defined methodological nationalism as a cognitive bias based on an equation of society and the nation state, and therefore states and their governments are treated as the cornerstones of social sciences analysis, while it misses a broader picture of global processes beyond nation-state boundaries. He claimed that social scientists needed a cosmopolitan outlook to understand the generational dynamics that exacerbates inter-generational tensions within nations and intra-generational affinities and conflicts between nations (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2009). One of his diagnoses of methodological nationalism showed the omnipotence of state in higher education, and in the humanities and social sciences in particular (Beck, 2012). According to him, under the impression of the national unity of state and education, many basic terms in the social sciences such as society, identity, inequality, or justice were vividly described as national (Beck, 2012: 55). As a result, both knowledge and education were limited to the framework conditions under which the nation state was still prevalent, but at a time when boundaries were muddled in a globalized world.

Although Beck's concept of methodological nationalism has its certain limitations to the explanation of the significance of social memory and the preservation of cultural heritage as the crucial realms of social reproduction (Chernillo, 2006), it offers an important forum for discussion about the modes of interethnic and intergenerational conflicts between young people in Europe. Especially in times of rapid migration movements, when European societies face different scenarios of situations in which there are opposing ideas about national sovereignty and common future of the European Union, an understanding of the general dynamics of interethnic tensions within different units of global generation(s) seems to be particularly relevant to social sciences.

Research Problem

At the age of migration and global risks, methodological nationalism can be particularly costly due to its limitation to public imagination and broad discussion. It defines most basic categories of thought and knowledge in the way that young people conceive of reality. As a result, it can provide inadequate justifications for global events as well as conserve false paths of education in the globalized world. The multitude of interconnections cannot be fitted together into making a unified picture of a nationally bound generation of young people.

Research Focus

Applying Beck's concepts, the study provides some background for a preliminary discussion about the situations and positions of young people in the contemporary world. Drawing on the Polish example, it shows the contexts of tensions and contradictions between expectations of migration dreams of a better life, youth insecurity and education.

Research Methodology

Because it is a preliminary study on the use of Ulrich Beck's concepts in the Polish context, this article is necessarily descriptive and based on critical analyses of the reference literature. It aims to provoke a discussion and set up a research

agenda for work on Polish young people in the context of experienced borders, perceived inequalities and education.

General Background of Research

Traditionally, the term of generation has been used in the sociological literature as a territorially bound entity. Moreover, generations have been usually conceptualized as age-cohorts. These have limited the use of generation concepts to monolith-like categories with constant and passive identities. Recently, however, sociologists have tried to introduce a new concept of generation. The return to generation as an interesting sociological category is related to the efforts made by sociologists to grasp the idea of social change in the twenty-first century from a global perspective. To prove this point, Edmunds and Turner (2005: 566) have claimed that the global experiences of cultural traumas facilitated by the developments in new electronic communications have the potential for creating global generational consciousness. The emergence of global generations is connected with the growth of communication across national boundaries and substantial increase in global interactivity.

Although the experience of generations might be increasingly globalized by media, the inequality of global situations produced sharp dividing lines and conflicts across ethnic divisions. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2009: 33) noticed: "while in the First World, and especially for younger people there, the risks and insecurities of life are growing, the countries that constitute it remain the dream destination for many of the young in the poor regions of the globe. Consequently, the existential fears of the former are going to encounter the hopes for the future of the latter. On the one side, a generation less, measured by proceeding decades, has to accept material losses, on the other, a generation more, motivated by images of an affluent First World, wants to share in that wealth." The phenomenon of global migration shows well the conflict dynamic of the contemporary world.

Many critical studies claim that the combination of experiencing persistent insecurity and regarding one's situation as a result of individual intervention could be considered representative of the neoliberal subject (Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1999). The illusion of choice created by neoliberal self-conceptions masks the continued entrenchment of different forms of inequality in the world. Combining the experience of precariousness among the younger generations with the forces of migration can deepen the division between various generational fractions of young Europeans and non-Europeans.

The expansion of the European Union and the commitment to internal mobility has created a new diversification of migration. As a result, the simplistic definition of the other has become fairly complicated. New migrants from Central and Eastern Europe perceived themselves as hard-working, wealth producing and filling a labor gap. It was migrants outside Europe who have been increasingly divided into the dichotomy of Islam and the West. In fact, many Western and Northern Europeans could tolerate outsiders from both outside Europe and its peripheries, but merely as guests. As Jeffrey C. Alexander (2013: 531–532) notes, "in neither social system could groups from the periphery enter into the center. Deference and sometimes even reciprocity were possible; genuine inclusion was not (…) Core groups have been willing to entertain the idea of incorporation only in an asymmetrical manner. It means that persons can be incorporated, but not their qualities." In this climate, internal mobility and external migration affect national boundaries and jumble together the native and the foreign, but debates over multiculturalism and nationality have taken on a new urgency. From this sense of endangerment, contemporary social and political measures in Europe have followed. The rise to popularity of populist political parties has meant the struggle with every foreigner and other under threat of national extinction.

The Polish Background of Research

Profound social and economic changes have been taking place in the Polish youth lives for over 25 years. Significant transformations after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, re-shaped with European and global trends towards the dominance of free market combined with reduced welfare support, have left little choice, but to embrace neoliberal ideology and try the capitalist way in Poland. This change has had far-reaching effects on the structure of Polish society and the well-being of young people in particular. The background to this lies in, on the one hand, an increased focus on the differences in social development and social achievements between Poland and the countries of Western/Northern Europe, and, on the other, patterns of social and labor exclusion of young people, precarious employment has become a typical part of labor market transitions for all young people, including university graduates (Cybal-Michalska, 2014). This leads to the emergence of a culture of migration, in which spending a period of time working abroad becomes a normal rite of passage for young people. In some way, migration can be seen as a symbolic voice of opposition against the hegemony of previous generations and carries a simple message "I am leaving." Especially, when the broken promises of a

better life have brought increasing alienation from official adult standards which promote both education and work (Albański, 2016).

The interpretation of migration which enjoy the greatest legitimacy among young Poles is that of migrant individual agency and responsibility, although the relative weight placed on individual action and obstacles in explaining outcomes may differ according to the expected desirability of that outcome (Grabowska-Lusińska, 2014). This discourse fits within a broader ideological framework of an individualized society, centered on an exaggeration of the role of individual action and responsibility. It problematizes what is seen as a paternalistic approach, which makes young people passive and dependent. As a result, young people may downplay the existence of external obstacles as a factor, and make a more general argument that individual effort is all that is required for success (Cybal-Michalska, 2012). It rests on particular assumptions about themselves, i.e., having choice and agency.

From such a perspective, the popular conception of migration overemphasizes what individuals can do, and the extent to which what they do is individually chosen rather than structurally determined. Moreover, the idea of an individual that has the power to influence their life comes to determine a common understanding of selves, others and social relations. It seems that the casualization of labor force, combined with greater insecurity for young people, who are positioned as in charge of personal achievement or failure, and with migration seen as a safety valve implies a tendency to define one's life situation in terms of individual responsibility and accountability (whilst dismissing certain social obstacles), on the one hand. On the other, both vulnerability and lack of control lead to a heightened sense of insecurity (Albański, 2016).

At the time of writing, news screens are dominated by images of migrants attempting to reach Europe and its promise of a safer and better life. On its better days, Europe opened its door for migrants, imaging itself as a haven in troubling times; on worse days, the ethnic and religious qualities of the new wave of migrant outsiders challenged the collective identities of Europeans in increasingly distressing ways. More and more all the time, however, international headlines present Europe's vulnerability to migration as casting a grim shadow across its future. In Poland, a discourse of an encroaching disaster has monopolized online comments in the way in which migration is presented as a calamity (Mach, Styczyńska, 2016).

Young people's devotion to life on a digital landscape can challenge them as citizens in a particular way. Although the web is usually described in terms of tremendous opportunities for information, social mobilization and action, some studies also show that when people are faced with a social problem, they are likely

to search only for the others with whom they agree. For instance, in her new book, Sherry Turkle (2015) demonstrates how the use of digital technology trespasses on a time of discussion. In her view, getting online immunes young people from the real conflicts and solutions of the public square. Online, they can choose to see those who share their opinions and offer the ideas they think their followers want to be attached to. Therefore, she warns that a growing tendency among young people for the participation in close-knit online communities will carry high social costs such as a loss of empathy for other people's situations and a growth of narrow-mindedness (Turkle, 2015: 41).

The digital availability of learning other voices does not enable people to see the world through the lenses of diversity. The diversity and inequality of life chances become all visible thanks to global media, but that is exactly what produces particular tensions and potential conflicts. The affective meaning of us is a fundamentally structuring social force, while the opposite side of otherness is powerful to see a sharp distinction: who are they, and why are they here?

Discussion

In his essay *The return of social Darwinism or: Which university do we want?* (2012a), Beck addresses a pertinent question: what role should the university play in the changed world? He claims that the national model of the university is under siege for its deep roots in methodological nationalism. As he explains, it means that the university inculcates the national outlook in societies, whereas global problems create transnational interdependence (Beck, 2012: 59). Perhaps, nothing exhibits this as clearly as European reality, in which migration under the condition of a globalized world, global insecurities and inequalities links different units of global generations.

Higher education plays conflicting roles in dealing with the inherent uncertainty in social forecasts. The weakening of the traditional bonds of community, together with individualization of experiences, personal risk and global insecurity can also be seen as leading to a weakening of traditional social institutions and affiliations. Conditions of doubt penetrate all aspect of social life, and education is no exception. On the contrary, in the unacceptable face of uncertainty, many people demand more education as a perceived remedy for the complexity of today's globalized world. However, the question is what education they want. The promised edge of social sciences has been seriously broken by its processing marketization. In many ways, the nightmare of Weber's iron cage of rationalization has put its

stamp on the condition of higher education. The belief that higher education can set people free from the confines of ignorance, has been changed into the faith in the vocational policy premised on the human capital dictate (Albański, 2016).

The mission of the university to provide a liberal education that contributes to the production of a citizenry that is capable of being engaged in value-based discussions has been negated in favor of the vocational function of the university. Those who define education primarily as serving the needs of economy can play the card of youth unemployment to promote corporate universities and vocational training over social responsibility and intellectual engagement. However, the links between education and work seem to have become less obvious and powerful as young people come into adulthood, which involves a wide variety of routes, many of which appear to have uncertain outcomes (Melosik, 2013). The gap between opportunity structures and self-reliance is a constant source of frustration and stress for today's youth.

According to Beck (2012: 56–57), the combination of experiencing insecurity and regarding one's situation through the lens of a free choice to shape individual achievement or failure is a part of the dominant discourse on youth, education and unemployment, which positions young people in charge of their personal situation. However, those who define education primarily as serving the needs of economy can play the card of youth unemployment to promote selfishness and individuality over social responsibility and intellectual engagement. The neoliberal agenda on universities and youth unemployment, linked with the pressure of globalization and selfish individuality will help the return of social Darwinism. As a result, the ideas of survival of the fittest will prevail over intellectual and social virtues.

As a remedy, Beck (2012: 56) recommends the university of world citizenship, which will broaden the general outlook on globality and (human) social life on planet Earth. He believes that the social lexicon could be rewritten accordingly to grasp global variability and global interconnectedness. In his view, the purpose of the university is to sharpen one's own ideas through the confrontation with the world of global threats such as economic and migration crises, poverty, terrorism, and inequality. Moreover, it means that university graduates will get a better understanding of possible tensions within global generations and it can counteract the dichotomous cleavage between different conflict-laden units of young people.

Conclusion

Criticizing bound thinking and conceptualizations of society and young people centered on nation states, Beck wanted to show global variability and interconnectedness between different units of young people within the framework of global generations. He believed that his contributions to youth studies would shed light on divisions, contradictions, and desires of the global generations. He predicted that the conflict-laden interactions would emerge as a result of intra-generational affinities and tensions. Especially in times of massive migration movements and a feeling of increasing insecurity among young people, expectations of life chances have far-reaching consequences. Hopes and dreams of migration are confronted with the fears of well-being and chronic youth unemployment.

Beck tried to warn his readers that the belief in closed national borders not only gives the overt justification to indifference towards global inequalities and human misfortunes, but also severely limits the capacity for understanding how people conceive of reality. According to him, the struggle over the dignity of the excluded other requires much attention because it seems to be an alternative, available and radical enough, for the construction of a better future, in response to the Hobbesian world of growing insecurity and violence.

The case of Polish young people seems to be a very interesting example for the discussion about cross-border relations within the frameworks of global generations. On the one hand, the migration of young Poles is often associated with both individual aspirations and structural constrains, on the other, Poland used to be a source of emigration and only recently has begun to be considered as a receiving country. An abrupt increase in immigration may be perceived as conspicuous by the majority of young Poles, who declare that they do not want to open their country for migrants. These perceptions may be reinforced by economic insecurity as well. Such observations are only a preliminary step toward a detailed discussion about young Poles in the context of the generational dynamics that exacerbates intra-generational tensions across national borders. Beck's thoughts will offer another look at the situation of young Poles and their declarations.

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