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This article considers professional youth work in England. It reflects on youth work's persistently anomalous position in the division of labour. Since their achievement of a contested professional status in the 1960s and 1970s, youth workers have pursued an occupational ideology that draws principally on a romantic humanism. Until recently, this provided a relatively stable basis to their practices. Under a dominant contemporary neo-liberalism, influential in different ways across Europe, youth work has been subjected to a range of managerialist practices that have further exposed its ambiguity as a profession. Austerity policy, enacted under the Coalition government, has further weakened professional youth work's position in the welfare division of labour. The article points to resistance to austerity on the part of some youth workers and speculates on the possible future of professional youth work in a policy regime that has little sympathy for the public professions.

Keywords: Youth policy; austerity; youth work; England

Introduction: English youth work

This article reflects on current uncertainties about the position and future of professional youth work in the context of UK austerity policies (House of Commons Education Committee, 2011). Following intense activity in youth services in England (youth work in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is shaped by policy relating specifically to those jurisdictions) under the New Labour government between 1997 and 2010 (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003; Department for Education & Skills, 2002; Department for Children, Schools & Families, 2007), youth work assumed some prominence in the evolving youth support services. By 2008, there were just over 3000 professionally qualified youth workers in Local Authorities in England (CWDC, 2009, p. 47).

The youth work policy trajectory has shifted under the present Coalition. Positive for Youth (PfY) (HM Government, 2011), defined as a '... new approach to cross-governmental policy for young people aged 13–19,' encapsulates the Coalition's youth policy but, whilst promoting a well-known and tenacious English voluntarism, has little to say about *professional* youth work. This work has become increasingly vulnerable for several reasons. First, the Coalition's austerity policies and deficit-reduction strategies have powerfully impacted 'non-statutory' expenditure such as youth services. Second, policy has moved from privileging leisure-based informal education (youth work's traditional focus) to a more formal approach targeting particular groups of young people (those considered *at risk* or *vulnerable* in some way). Third, broader historical trends in the UK, initiated under the Thatcher Government of the 1980s and aimed at mediating the

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power and impact of occupational interest groups through various *de*-regulation and *re*-regulation strategies (Evetts, 2013; Fournier, 1999, p. 299; Johnson, 1993, p. 144), have also had a significant bearing on the autonomy of a range of professionals, including youth workers. Their place in the professional division of labour is now in question.

In this article, we consider the nature of youth work professionalism and the continuities and discontinuities facing youth work during periods of post-war austerity. To set the context, in England and Wales, youth workers range from part-time volunteers to experienced professionals with postgraduate qualifications working for local authorities and charities, churches and other third-sector organisations. In recent iterations, English youth work sits somewhere between schooling and social work as a self-proclaimed specialised, but universally offered, form of education, as noted in the National Youth Agency's definition:

> Youth work helps young people learn about themselves, others and society through activities that combine enjoyment, challenge, learning and achievement. The relationship between youth worker and young person is central to this process. (National Youth Agency, 2013a)

Informal, experiential and participative dimensions have been youth work's defining features since the 1960s (Bradford, 2004). Youth workers attempt to maximise young people's participation in personal relationships, encouraging them to reflect and learn from their experiences of these. In the last decade, youth policy in England has hardened, increasingly focusing on interventions in the lives of young people considered to be vulnerable or at risk in some way (Jeffs & Smith, 2002; Spence, 2004). Thus, youth work has been diverted from its universalistic aims to a targeted and managed focus.

However, and despite this policy hardening, confusion seemingly still rules about the nature and purpose of this imprecise practice. Its very range and diversity of approach (e.g. work in dedicated youth centres, youth clubs based in community centres and church halls, school-based youth wings and 'detached' street-based work), its varied providers (in both state and voluntary sectors) and a client age range that can stretch from 11 to 25 years eschew clear definition. Youth work's liminality and plasticity, whilst being an asset in the past, has apparently weakened its position. As a little known and under-recognised occupation, it has been subject to few research studies, in contrast to social work or teaching, designed to establish effectiveness. The chair of a recently established UK government Select Committee expressed bewilderment that heads of national voluntary and local authority youth services could not explain in clear terms what youth work consisted of and what its aims were (Hillier, 2011; Mahadevan, 2011). The Committee's final report indicated that '. . . we experienced great difficulty in finding objective evidence of the impact of (youth) services' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2011, p. 19), and it called for more robust collection of 'quality' research and shared frameworks to demonstrate practice.

Nevertheless, English youth workers have achieved some professional status. Professionalisation has been contingent on the persuasive nature of an account of moral decline relying either on cultural pessimism *or* on a communitarian explanation in which acquisitive individualism has purportedly eroded social ties and solidarity (Hookway, 2013, p. 841). Collective identification – *community* – is insufficiently strong in the latter account to sustain solidarity and social integration and a '. . . rising sense of entitlement and a growing tendency to shirk social responsibilities' (Etzioni, 1997, p. 65) were the outcome. The instrumental demands of social existence shaped by impersonal and bureaucratic institutions, it was argued, resulted in individual experience becoming increasingly fragmented in a pervasive normlessness shaped by various aspects of social difference

(Jenks, 2005, p. 181; Sennett, 1986, p. 263). The 'trashy daydreams' and 'monstrous nightmares of mechanised humanity' (Halmos, 1978, pp. 21–23) haunting modern lives, underpinned a profound Western pessimism and a conviction that such misery could only be assuaged in the intimacy of the personal domain, including the satisfaction of desire through consumption (Bauman, 2007). The apparent erosion of cultural, social and political affiliations (including religious identifications) signified the absence of any collective means of relieving experiences of an acute *personal* misery generated through the loneliness, anomie and alienation of mass society. Meaning and expressive fulfilment became re-located in *private* and personal domains, above all, in the intensely reflexive personal relationship (Bauman, 2001; Giddens, 1992). It is no coincidence that the principal focus of youth work's intervention has been that personal and intimate relationship, defined as the medium *par excellence*, for achieving individual well-being. Youth workers' dominant professional ideology continues to stress a commitment to a style of work based on the cultivation of close and voluntary personal relationships (Davies, 2005; Merton, 2007; Smith, 1988, 1999/2002). In this, they have presented their work in terms counter to prevailing neo-liberal discourses of youth assumed in current youth policy (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). UK policy discourse has historically defined youth as a largely problematic and challenging social category, and pathological representations of youth have become increasingly prevalent. These, in turn, have shaped territories and modes of practice. In addition to defining youth in much more positive terms, youth workers have been resistant to the managerialist and so-called evidence-based practices of accountability that have increasingly colonised British public services in recent decades (Ranson, 2003; Spence, 2004). Together, these factors have positioned youth work in a difficult and defensive space within the public professional division of labour. Indeed, this has been mirrored by the virtual demise of professional youth work in parts of England and Wales during the period of Coalition government (Davies, 2013).

Following the global financial crisis of 2008, local authority funding in the UK has been slashed. Many voluntary youth organisations received their funding from local authorities. As non-statutory services, youth services, alongside libraries and other leisure facilities, have faced savage cuts where local authority provision in some places was cut completely. Other youth services were 'commissioned out' to be provided by local churches and third-sector organisations, often with a reoriented agenda towards a clearer youth social work remit, or with a clear push to support young people defined as the so-called NEETs (*not in education, employment or training*) into work, thus confirming youth work within the broader context of youth policy aimed at securing youth labour market transitions. The present financial context at a local level for English youth work is bleak. Recent figures from the National Youth Agency (2013b) attest to the broad reduction in the funding of local provision, with planned expenditure reducing by 17.6% from 2011–2012 to 2012–2013. This includes the majority of local authorities in England reporting a reduction in budgets for youth services including teen pregnancy (−21.8%) and substance misuse services for young people (−16.6%), and a re-focusing towards targeted services (+3.2%) away from universal provision. The continuation of cuts to local authority budgets by central government would suggest a persisting trend over coming years. The question is what does this mean for youth work professionalism and professional identity? The reduction in funding for youth work has also translated into slashed training budgets and, at a local level, the diminishing recognition of the former JNC terms and conditions[1] for 'professional' youth work; normally those who had completed a higher education diploma or degree in youth work. The Coalition's PfY makes scant reference to youth

workers as professionals, apparently preferring to celebrate the work of volunteers and voluntary organisations.

In this article, we explore some of the contested positions assumed by PfY and some responses to this. Finally, we speculate on the future of professional youth work in the broad structure of British neo-liberal post-welfarism. We suggest that youth work is already experiencing a realignment in which its organisation and status are shifting from an extant model of professionalism, perhaps reflecting a broader hybridisation of professional forms.

From contested identity to welfare professionalism

Circular 1486, *The Service of Youth*, published in 1939, marked the emergence of the youth service in England and Wales as a formally constituted element of education and welfare provision (Board of Education, 1939). This Circular called for a partnership between voluntary organisations and local authorities at a time of national crisis, formalising the voluntary sector's central position in English social policy (Blackmore, 2005). Then, the state (through the Board of Education) gave qualified support to the idea that youth work could be understood as *professional* work. This was something that a small number of 'career youth leaders' (mainly women) had sought since the 1930s, although there was some uncertainty about whether youth leadership was best located in a social work setting or a broadly educational context. However, the idea of *professional* youth work was repellent to those who saw voluntarism as making a unique (and English) contribution to social order and well-being. Indeed, some in the voluntary youth organisations equated professionalism with 'statism', something especially distasteful to liberal sensibilities (King George's Jubilee Trust, 1951, p. 33). As Morgan suggested, in '... the best ... juvenile organizations there is a quality – a spiritual force some would call it – which will be hard to preserve in a public sector. Therein lies risk of real loss' (1939, p. 412). In the 1940s and 1950s, a doubt was expressed in the Board and Ministry of Education about whether youth work could properly be understood as having a central core of activity necessitating the acquisition of specific and esoteric knowledge and skill, through university-based training. As A.E. Miles Davies, an Assistant Principal in the Board of Education opined that '... the technique of youth leadership, such as it is, is something which should be given in small doses and by stealth as part of a general education' (Youth Service Inspectors Advisory Committee, 1944, p. 4). A year later in 1945, the Ministry of Education's Youth Branch noted, 'We have reached the fundamental conclusion ... that nobody should adopt youth leadership as a career for life' (Ministry of Education, 1945, p. 1).

The Second World War provided the initial rationale for systematic regulation of young people's leisure. Youth workers subsequently became caught in an expanding 'governmentality' (Bradford, 2004; Dean, 2010), in which policies, organisations and agents were co-opted into managing aspects of youth populations. Governmental aspiration relies upon the individual as active citizen, a '... social being whose powers and obligations (are) articulated in the language of social responsibilities and collective solidarities' (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 48). During the war years, various policy claims were made for youth workers' capacity to develop young people's commitment to individual and social citizenship, especially with those young people perceived as being outside the apparently weakening regulative boundaries of domestic, educational and employment spaces. There was a sense then, perhaps as now, that working-class youth transitions should be more carefully ordered especially at a time of national crisis. Youth

work was deployed as a form of wartime population management seeking to integrate young people into socially useful and sanctioned leisure activities and organisations that would contribute to the development of a responsible citizenship. Youth workers achieved some recognition in this work, and a developing professionalism was embodied in the provision of training courses for youth workers at six English and Welsh universities between 1942 and 1947, and supported by the Board of Education. About 300 students passed through these.

The immediate crisis of war provided justification and support for the training of youth workers but the momentum for professional development weakened as post-war austerity (Kynaston, 2007) defined the scale and nature of public service provision. However, continuous underlying doubt was expressed over youth work's professional identity and the necessity for its practitioners to undergo specialist training. The professionalisation of youth work achieved limited subsequent success during the late 1940s and through the 1950s. The politics of the post-war budget, a political commitment to increasing school places and expanding technical education through the early 1950s, the ambiguity of youth work as a distinct occupation and professional career, a reluctance by the state to over-govern in the light of a strong discourse of English voluntarism and conscription's importance as a surrogate youth service constrained youth work's expansion (Bradford, 2007).

This changed during the late 1950s with the emergence of moral panic surrounding emergent mass youth culture in Britain. Government responded by attempting to revitalise the youth service, still lodged in an ambiguous partnership between the state and voluntary organisations. However, considerable capital and revenue funding was injected into youth work from the early 1960s onwards and contributed to the development of a relatively strong professional youth work ideology that was disseminated through an expanding number of training courses located in higher education institutions. Some success was achieved in professionalisation from the early 1960s onwards as the British welfare state developed, shaped by both bureaucracy and professionalism. Bureaucracy sought to secure 'routinised and predictable outputs' (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p. 5), whilst expertise was institutionalised in the form of professionalism and designed to intervene in ever-expanding territories of social and cultural space. Young people's leisure time became one area understood to require the *expert* intervention of youth workers in order to secure their smooth transition to responsible citizenship. In effect, there was an assumption that the careful regulation of young people's leisure time would bolster the work of 'mainstream' education in securing successful transitions. During the period 1960 to the beginning of the 2000s, youth work was sufficiently persuasive to acquire characteristics associated with increased professionalism, sharing this with allied occupational groups. Expansion of training courses in higher education institutions, the emergence of a body of academic youth work literature (based on social science), career development, salary structures and improvements in conditions of service were among these. Such developments were inevitably facilitated by the state, which sought to regulate youth work and youth workers by deploying professionalism as a 'top down' organising principle. This enabled the inscription of professional practice in a 'network of accountability' in which professional objectives and relations with clients are defined by managerial and bureaucratic imperatives rather than by professionals themselves (Fournier, 1999, p. 280). The inherent tension between professional autonomy and bureaucratic organisation has continued, as the influence of the latter as a form of control has become increasingly marked in public service organisations.

Professional youth work's identity until the first decade or so of the twenty-first century can be understood in terms of an influential *expressive* discourse existing in tension with demands (from state bureaucrats) for more *instrumental* practice. This reflected wider developments in British society's particular iteration of capitalist modernity. In a specialised division of labour, personal experience (itself constituted in that division of labour) becomes potentially fragmented, torn between the demands of impersonal institutional structures and the private sphere. However, increasing relative affluence in the post-war period released some (amongst the middle classes at least) from the imperatives of economic survival to discover a range of expressive and emotional 'needs', characteristically fulfilled through the development of the self in the apparently authentic domains of private and personal life which held ' . . . a mirror to the egoistic and anomic normality of modern society' (Martin, 1981, p. 17). New social and cultural spaces were opened up through which flowed a familiar and pervasive romantic individualism asserting the pre-eminence of the self and the importance of individual, especially emotional, experience (Halpin, 2007, p. 18), and was transmitted through universities amongst other cultural institutions. This romantic humanist orientation, celebrating personal growth and emancipation, became incorporated in the ideologies of the so-called 'helping occupations' of the 1960s and 1970s, including youth work.

By the 1990s, however, an aggressive (and implicitly *counter*-romantic) neo-liberalism in the UK signalled a demand for 'value for money' to be achieved through clear practices and relations of managerial accountability. Discord and tension between older, romantic discourse and more recent neo-liberal and managerialist worldviews remain on going and manifested in mounting demands for instrumentalised practices in present-day services. Youth policy, in welfare states of different kinds, is principally concerned to govern youth transitions (Bendit & Hahn-Bleibtreu, 2008). Disrupted youth transitions (into the labour market, for example) renders youth a particularly problematic category, as is the case currently across Europe. As symbolically powerful and dangerous (Douglas, 2002; Turner, 1997), youth's *liminal* status is exacerbated when young people are understood as being outside of the influence of regulating institutions like family, education or the labour market. As elsewhere in Europe, recent English social policy has been formed by the vocabulary (and contested concepts) of social cohesion, community, social inclusion and exclusion. In particular, competing discourses of exclusion have shaped policy agendas in different ways, with special significance for youth. In the UK, a 'social integrationist discourse' (SID) that explained social inclusion in terms of labour market participation dominated under New Labour (Levitas, 2005). SID focused on paid or employed work as the integrating force of modern societies, and it had clear implications for youth policy trajectories. It provided the underlying definition of youth and youth need, and labour market transitions became a principal focus for youth worker interventions under New Labour. To the extent that the Coalition Government is investing heavily in 'workfare', important continuities remain with the New Labour project. However, the Coalition has extended New Labour's SID, celebrating the achievements of 'hard working families' and identifying causal links between individual failure, worklessness and poverty, thus also reinvigorating the spectre of 'underclass' culture (Jensen, 2012, p. 5). Present UK youth policy continues to emphasise encouraging young people to be self and family reliant in managing their transitions into the labour market (Brooks, 2013). At the recent Conservative Party national conference, David Cameron indicated that under a future Conservative government, young people under 25 could lose benefit entitlements if they are not in work, training or education (Grice, 2013). Thus, state support for young people in England is on a diminishing curve, with Coalition policy

emphasising '... individual rights and responsibilities more than collective provisions' (Walther, 2006, p. 127). Professional intervention in young people's lives, such as that of youth workers, has been calculated to stress young people's *individual* responsibility for their position and for negotiating routes to achievement and success, especially in their labour market transitions. The underlying notion of self as potentially active and entrepreneurial is, of course, quite different from the kind of self defined by the romanticism (privileging individuality, spirituality and emotion) that animated much twentieth century youth work.

Changing policy austerities

The present dominant public policy focus in much of Europe is defined primarily through discourses of austerity. Importantly, austerity discourse must be understood in its particular setting and in the context of preceding social policy frameworks and investments. However, austerity has become the organising principle through which English public services have been reconfigured under the Coalition government. Current austerity policy has exacerbated English youth work's vulnerability in the occupational division of labour. Austerity is, of course, no new phenomenon in the UK. However, its meaning and significance are always contingent on the historical circumstance of its use. Austerity works discursively at different times and in different interests. The period of the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the state supported an emergent professional identity for youth work, is typically also described as a time of austerity. As a political strategy, austerity discourse was deployed by Atlee's Labour Government as a means of rendering the subjugation of materialism rational and necessary, especially in the service of restoring national prosperity and well-being (Zweiniger-Bargiolowska, 2002). This was an austerity that required the '... infinite repression of desires' (Kynaston, 2007, p. 58). Austerity discourse now, as then, seeks to mobilise particular anxieties and evoke certain responses from those at whom it is aimed (Bramall, 2012). Its deployment is ideologically important in the attempt to achieve and sustain particular relations of power. Austerity discourse inspires the 'imaginary' to work in particular ways, linking individual, social and cultural realms (Smart, 2007, p. 49). This post-war British austerity discourse was framed by the tropes of stoicism and 'fair shares'. It was geared to the restraint of excessive personal consumption or wastefulness in the achievement of an imagined *social* future organised in terms of the social good. To the extent that collective principles dominated the post-war political and popular agenda austerity, perhaps ironically, underlay the emerging welfare state.

In present times, austerity's work is inscribed on a very different register. It is, however, similarly oriented towards creating representations of extravagance as the 'undesirable other'. Austerity's contemporary 'magnetism' lies in its capacity to invoke particular kinds of national crisis (Jensen, 2012, p. 4) to which austerity itself is construed as a form of resolution. Austerity discourse represents the current *English* crisis as deriving from the economics of profligacy and extravagance, allegedly pursued by the New Labour Government of the first decade of the millennium. It ignores the origins of *global* crisis in the US financial markets that rapidly spread through networked systems. Contemporary austerity thus authorises the rationalisation of expenditure considered to be wasteful. In relation to public or *state* services, the Coalition's discursive use of austerity animates a duality between the 'profligate state' and the thrift and moderation of the voluntary sector and its constituent individual volunteers. At the present time, austerity also encourages the engagement of the 'private sector' in service provision (within the figure of the 'mixed

economy of welfare', for example) and, as PfY shows, celebrates the potential of business to be involved in delivering services to young people (HM Government, 2011, p. 80). Although the Coalition's so-called Big Society[2] theme has, apparently, lost political traction, the appeal to austerity offers new life to the underlying sentiments that animated that political vision. The critique of the profligate state incorporates a long-standing antagonism towards public professionals. In the post-war years, the growth of the public professions in England created some tensions with the voluntarism that shaped philanthropic endeavours such as youth work (Finlayson, 1990, p. 185; Hinton, 1998, p. 275). Currently, public professionals' alleged excessively favourable employment conditions (in the form of salaries, security of tenure and pensions, for example) contrast with what the modern and efficient neo-liberal state is prepared to support (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p. 15; Newman, 2012, p. 90). Importantly, austerity discourse has drawn attention to fundamental weaknesses in the structural position of professional youth work.

Professional youth work and the shifting governance of youth

Although it has become a contested project in neo-liberalism (Ball, 2006, p. 82; Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler, & Westmarland, 2007, p. 51), professionalism remains a significant social form. As a mode of organisation for expertise, it is vital to the exercise of political authority and governance in neo-liberal regimes (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 149). Professionalism has shaped a range of practices, including youth work, designed to accommodate the social and cultural integration of youth and young people. Youth work's current weak position in the political economy of services for young people in England has a significant historical lineage. Its marginal and borderland occupational status has made attempts to achieve and sustain a *professional* identity for youth workers intensely and consistently problematic. As Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Starke, and Warne (2002) have shown, professional identity is formed in the intersection of policy, ideology and practice. Youth work's liminal status in the occupational division of labour is a reflection of its position as neither clearly educational (in any formal sense), nor obviously an element of social work or leisure services. It has long enjoyed a 'betwixt and between' existence (Turner, 2009). This protean state was, historically, an asset, enabling youth workers to transform their practice according to policy or other definitions of youth and youth need. Whilst youth policy was fragmented and multi-dimensional, ambiguity facilitated youth work's development. Such as it is, youth policy has been constituted in an assemblage of reports, parliamentary documents, statements of organisation purpose in addition to diverse cultural understandings of young people and their needs. Youth policy has been encompassed and often obscured by other sectoral policy areas: education, housing or health, for example, within which youth work has had to compete robustly to sustain any distinct identity. To make matters more complex, provision for youth work has, since the establishment of the British post-war welfare state, been the responsibility of a characteristically liberal (and shifting) partnership of local authorities, voluntary sector organisations and, now potentially, elements of private-sector interest. Youth work in England has had no clear statutory basis, and current deficit reduction strategies have led to the contraction of local authority budgets, rendering non-statutory provisions such as youth work especially vulnerable.

In response to policy hardening represented by *PfY*, the purpose of youth work and youth workers has, recently, become increasingly contested in policy and practice debates. The social movement, *In Defence of Youth Work* (IDYW), has widely disseminated its own account of a more 'authentic' youth work, clearly outlined in an open letter circulated

in 2009. That letter marked out what was seen as a virtuous and uncorrupted youth work, characterised by a commitment to '. . . valuing and attending to the here-and-now of young people's experience rather than just focusing on 'transitions' . . . [and to] . . . conversations with young people which start from their concerns and within which both youth worker and young person are educated and out of which opportunities for new learning and experience can be created' (IDYW, 2010). IDYW's significance lies in its attempts to map and sustain a *purer* youth work within the occupational division of labour in the light of policy shifts that seek to locate youth work in a managerialised policy framework. IDYW's endeavours can be understood as responses to a boundary crisis – essentially a kind of moral panic – in which authentic youth work is threatened by pollution and loss.

Diverse stances to the anomaly of youth work can be identified in both New Labour and Coalition policy. PfY is an attempt to consolidate youth policy under the Coalition by adopting a cross-sectoral approach. As a vision for youth policy, PfY retains some continuity with New Labour policy, especially in its reaffirmation of the importance of representing young people as enterprising and independent minded neo-liberal subjects. It also emphasises the significance of education as a route into paid employment. Differences with New Labour policy arise in the methods to support these individual youth transitions. As noted earlier, this has taken the form of rolling back direct state investment in local authority children's and youth services whilst simultaneously encouraging business and the voluntary sector (the faith groups and voluntary youth organisations, for example) to take a major role in providing youth services. Whilst 'the family' loomed large in New Labour policy in the form of the much-lauded Sure Start and Children's Centres and in punitive parenting contracts, under Coalition policy family takes a more traditional nuclear form in assuming its responsibility for its children's economic and moral welfare (Brooks, 2013). Indeed, as we write, the Conservative Party is under fire for promoting a 'fantasy 1950s family' in its aspiration to introduce income tax concessions for married couples (Marriott, 2013).

In PfY, young people are viewed as 'stakeholders' in their individual futures with individual 'rights' being set at the 'heart of youth policy making', yet PfY ignores the structural dimensions of the enduring inequalities faced by many young people. Indeed, it contains little discussion of poverty or disadvantage other than in its ubiquitous allusions to vulnerable or *at risk* youth. The recent review of PfYs progress (HM Government, 2013) makes only passing reference to the swingeing cuts to local youth services and the growing rates of youth unemployment under the Coalition's austerity regime. Rather, it presents a number of exemplars that attempt to provide a clear narrative of progress and success that ignores the demise of many local authority youth services and the challenging labour market situation facing many young people. Davies argues that the reconfigured youth work landscape, shaped by PfY, will only 'hasten the slide from informal education to youth social work' (2011, p. 102).

With such concerns about the obscuring of professional boundaries, September 2013 saw the launch in England of an Institute for Youth Work (IYW). This new 'professional' body aims to provide fresh input into debates about youth work professionalism with an ethical framework, access to training and professional development, and a register of qualified professional, members. However, this initiative is clearly contentious. As noted elsewhere (Davies, 2013), the initial 'top-down' development of IYW was viewed sceptically by some within youth work (Davies, 2013; Wylie, 2012). With little in the way of real power or wider recognition, the IYW has been viewed as too little, too late to serve as an effective lobbying group for an occupation decimated by austerity in public services. Concerns also remain that the working definition and aims of the organisation are too

vague and do little to advocate for a more authentic youth work as proposed by some youth work commentators and practitioners (Taylor, 2013). The constitution of such an Institute at a time of financial and professional uncertainty highlights the status anxiety of youth work as a poorly defined and ambiguous profession. The impact of the Institute is still to be proven, yet this staking out of territory in relation to ethical practice and the training and development of practitioners highlights an apparently enduring need to make claims for some form of authentic practice. Yet, who will be left to join in pledging an allegiance to this loose practice youth work remains to be seen. What appears to be happening as a consequence of the state's *de*-recognition of youth work is that its ideological core (broadly based on a romantic and humanistic perspective) is rapidly unravelling. Those involved in establishing the Institute have recognised that the work's rationale no longer attracts political and popular support. The Institute is, we suspect, a way of sustaining some kind of identity for practice and practitioners. Interestingly, practitioners from volunteers to those with postgraduate qualifications are all eligible for membership. For some, this will represent a *de*-professionalisation of youth work, but for others it may signal an extension of the rather weary notion of empowerment. Membership of the Institute leads to little more than the provision of discussion forums, information on continuing professional development, an ethical code and a *voluntary* register of 'qualified' members. What appears to be forgotten is that professionalism always entails claims to power. Professionalisation, when defined in terms of *autonomy*, signals the success of an occupational group's power practices and its transactions with the state in achieving recognition. No such recognition has been given to youth work, and the Institute can perhaps best be seen as an attempt to appeal to professionalism 'from within' (Evetts, 2011, p. 407). The Institute seems to adhere to a notion of professionalism as *moral position* rather than as a form of social closure within the occupational division of labour.

Reshaping identities in austerity: some conclusions

In this article, we have offered some reflections on developments in contemporary English youth work. In this, we have indicated historical continuities in which discourses of austerity have been central to the argument.

Youth work's historically ambiguous professional identity as a public profession has, we have suggested, become especially vulnerable in present austere times. However, transformations associated with ethical *and* economic neo-liberalism have radically altered the public sector in the last decades. The demands of audit and increasingly invasive modes of accountability have already reshaped social work and teaching. Youth work's romantic sensibility and recent location in multi-professional service architectures (alongside related professionals) have exposed its own vulnerability, drawing attention to an apparently fuzzy rationale within a neoliberal policy framing. Dominant technocratic approaches to accountability greatly increase the capacity for centralisation. Performance and output indicators offer codified specifications that can be used to secure mobile accountabilities through establishing norms and drawing comparisons between services, interventions and practitioners. Such indicators with their universalised criteria eschew the tacit, personal and local knowledges that have, until relatively recently, characterised a humane public professionalism. As a consequence, the personal relationships established between young people and youth workers, as described in the IDYW 'This is Youth Work: Stories from Practice' (2011), have become subject to aggressive calibration and measurement. The personal relationship between youth workers and young people, long the rationale for practitioners, is at risk of being hollowed out by audit practices to become

another 'zombie category' (Beck and Willms, 2004), thus undermining the romantic humanist ethos that has characterised youth work since the 1960s. Instead of offering reflexive account giving as a form of cultural dialogue (Douglas, 2002, p. 226), current audit is often empty of such content and it is hard to see how it will succeed in containing the *authenticity* celebrated by IDYW.

Developments in the public professions under audit regimes have already disrupted existing relations and structures of professional life, effectively re-defining what counts as professional knowledge and professional work (Evetts, 2011). It is clear that youth work in its sometimes-romantic utopian educational form retains hope and optimism for and about young people. Reflecting a historical continuity discussed here, youth work is understood in PfY in terms clearly inconsistent with the IDYW position. Nevertheless, youth work, as suggested elsewhere (Bradford, 2004) has been peerlessly flexible. It has been able to alter its external shape and boundary according to prevailing policy definitions of youth need whilst retaining its expressive core. This was both strength and weakness as youth work was, in effect, held in a perpetual state of ambiguity. However, it is through its 'shape-shifting' capacity that the sometimes-conflicting and anomalous elements discussed may, again, be accommodated. Its precise future form, like that of post-recessionary *Coalition professionalism*, is yet unknown. There are signs that youth work, hitherto understood as professional, is being re-imagined in terms either of a newly valorised voluntarism (an almost sacred category in Coalition politics) or as an entirely different practice: as social work or mentoring, for example. Interesting questions are raised about how (and whether) youth workers will form opportunities for resistance as well as for creating and exploiting the possibilities (?) of porous boundaries, crevices in power relations and hybrid spaces that juxtapose new occupational identities and practices. Youth work, in its romantic form at least, may have to become a significantly more subversive activity if it is to preserve its optimistic educational stance and sustain its modest but important contribution to young people's well-being.

Notes

1. The Joint Negotiating Council for Youth and Community Workers was established in 1961 and sets a national framework for grading posts in youth work.
2. The Big Society was a central tenet of the 2010 Conservative Party election manifesto with an emphasis on volunteering, citizen participation, localism and 'community empowerment'. This initiative faced much criticism for masking substantial cuts to local public services in the wake of privatization and outsourcing of state services to large multinationals, rather than to grassroots community initiatives. Since 2012, there has notably been much less emphasis on the Big Society agenda in Coalition policy.

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