

Preface

Tomaž Deželan 8/10/24
for my preface

When I first went to Slovenia in the late 1990s, for an important conference on youth transitions (*Flying Over, or Falling Through the Cracks?*), I was handed one of the best youth studies books I have ever read (and I have read a lot!). *Youth in Slovenia: new perspectives from the nineties*, by Mirjana Ule and Tanja Renner, two distinguished sociologists from the University of Ljubljana, was a majestic piece of work, illuminating the changes and the challenges experienced by, and facing young people in Slovenia, following the break-up of state socialism and Yugoslavia.

Tomaž Deželan's new publication is a text that, for both intellectual and inspirational reasons, follows in those footsteps. Almost thirty years on, Slovenia has tasted and embraced liberal democracy, become a member of various transnational clubs, including the European Union, and developed a participative and progressive policy framework for its young people. The latter is the essence of this book.

Each chapter considers the main shifts over the past three decades, accounts for evolution and development, and concludes with some level of evaluation of the progress made. More significantly, perhaps, is the fact that those contributing to the monograph are immersed in that history, possessing, as editor Deželan testifies,

an 'accumulated knowledge and experience' that provides an invaluable font of ideas for the future.

As Slovenia emerged from state socialism, with its 'transmission' approaches to youth and youth policy (securing the transmission of established political structures and values), young people embraced issues such as peace, ecology and sexual freedom, mirroring the 'key concerns of progressive youth in other parts of the world'. Those key concerns coalesced into one overarching demand, to be an integral part of the political system not, as a conference elsewhere in 'eastern' Europe has put it in the 1970s, as 'factors', but as a later Council of Europe conference in the 2000s put it, as 'actors' in social change. Yet demographic pressures, amongst others, have consistently denied or diminished the voice of young people in political decision-making, even on matters of direct concern to them – the bedrock of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There is invariably a gap, sometimes gaping, between theories of youth political participation and its practice, between rhetoric and reality. It is not the only gap! The six substantive chapters of this book address both youth policy and the youth sector in Slovenia, its institutional and operational development, and its resource and evidence base. The findings, reflection and implications are, unsurprisingly, revealing. Its intense attention to detail is immensely informative, traversing the always rather uneasy relationships between policy proclamation, anchoring research knowledge and evidence, and practical developments on the ground at local level.

But that is the story everywhere. This story provides us with a wealth of understanding about Slovenia but it also conveys many salutary tales that we would be wise to consider in relation to our own youth policy and youth work histories and circumstances. To learn about Slovenia and to grapple with the tensions within the triangle of youth policy, research and practice is the important contribution this book makes to the youth sector in Europe at a time when there is some risk that rhetorical proclamation from on high is clouding some of the more grounded risks and realities.