1 *The risk society*

Images of a classless society, a common way of speaking, dressing, and seeing, can also serve to hide more profound differences; there is a surface on which everyone appears on an equal plane, but breaking the surface may require a code people lack.

(Sennett 1998: 75)

**Introduction**

The life experiences of young people in modern societies have changed quite significantly. These changes affect relationships with family and friends, experiences in education and the labour market, leisure and lifestyles and the ability to become established as independent young adults. Many of these changes are a direct result of the re-structuring of labour markets, of an increased demand for educated workers, of flexible employment practices and of social policies which have extended the period in which young people remain dependent on their families. As a consequence of these changes, young people today have to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents: this is true irrespective of social background or gender. Moreover, as many of these changes have come about within a relatively short period of time, points of reference which, by serving as clear route maps previously helped smooth processes of social reproduction, have become obscure. In turn, increased uncertainty can be seen as a source of stress and vulnerability.

On a theoretical level, these changes have been expressed in a number of ways, with sociologists holding different opinions about whether they signify the beginning of a new era, just as significant as the transition from medieval to modern society, or whether they represent developments within modernity. At one end of the spectrum, post-modernists such as Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1988) argue that we have entered a new, post-modern, epoch in which structural analysis has lost its validity. In post-modern societies it is no longer seen as appropriate to apply grand theories to the study of social life. Patterns of behaviour and individual life chances have lost their predictability and post-modernism involves a new and much more diverse set of lifestyles. The validity of a science of the social is rejected, along with the usefulness of
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key explanatory variables such as class and gender. As Lash and Urry suggest, for post-modernists, ‘all that is solid about organised capitalism, class, industry, cities, collectivity, nation-states, even the world, melts into air’ (1987: 313). Other theorists have been more cautious in their interpretation of the changes and have used terms like ‘high modernity’, ‘late modernity’ (Giddens 1990, 1991) or ‘reflexive modernisation’ (Lash 1992) to draw attention to the far-reaching implications of recent socio-economic change, at the same time as expressing the view that, as yet, these changes do not represent an epochal shift.1 This is a view with which we concur.

There is little doubt in our minds that radical social changes have occurred, yet we are extremely sceptical of the validity of post-modernist theories and suspicious of a tendency among fellow social scientists to exaggerate change. Modernity has always involved differentiation, a plurality of life-worlds (Berger et al. 1974), a weakening of communal regulation (Elias 1978) and a sense of uncertainty (Durkheim 1947): indeed, the weakening of traditional ties, the depersonalization of relations and the growing obscurity of factors which structure patterns of exploitation in advanced capitalism were identified by the founding fathers of sociology. While structures appear to have fragmented, changed their form and become increasingly obscure, we suggest that life chances and experiences can still largely be predicted using knowledge of individuals’ locations within social structures: despite arguments to the contrary, class and gender divisions remain central to an understanding of life experiences.

At the same time, we recognize that traditional ways of conceptualizing class are not well suited to the analysis and understanding of the distribution of life chances in late modernity. Employment relationships, which serve as a cornerstone for conventional class analysis, and the occupations that serve as proxies for class, have changed significantly. There is evidence that, for many, employment relationships have become more precarious and that individuals’ skill in managing risk should be regarded as a significant resource. In the flexible workplace, having the resources to manage risk (and here we refer not just to financial resources but to capital in a broad social sense) underpins labour market security and the reproduction of advantage. Increasingly models of class must take account of agency.

Despite these reservations, in this book we provide empirical evidence to support the argument that concepts (such as social class) which have long been central to sociological analysis still provide a foundation on which we can develop an understanding of processes of social reproduction in the modern world. Nevertheless, we argue that some of these concepts need to be respecified in ways suited to modern conditions. In this context, we suggest that writers such as Beck (1992, 2000), Giddens (1991), Sennett (1998) and Bauman (2001) have been successful in identifying processes of individualization and risk which characterize late modernity and which have implications for lived experiences and for the ways in which we represent social divisions. While we accept the main thrust of their arguments about individualization, we suggest that life in late modernity revolves around an epistemological fallacy: although social structures, such as class, continue to shape life chances, these structures tend to become increasingly obscure as collectivist traditions
weaken and individualist values intensify. As a consequence of these changes, people come to regard the social world as unpredictable and filled with risks which can only be negotiated on an individual level, even though chains of human interdependence (Elias 1978, 1982) remain intact.

In many respects, the study of young people’s lives provides an ideal opportunity to examine the relevance of new social theories: if the social order has changed and if social structures have weakened, we would expect to find evidence of these changes among young people who are at the crossroads of the process of social reproduction. One of the key aims of this book is to uncover evidence of the changing impact of social structures through the study of youth and young adults in modern societies. The central questions we seek to answer relate first to whether the traditional parameters which were previously understood as structuring the life chances and experiences of young people are still relevant. Second, we will examine the extent to which the terms ‘individualization’ and ‘risk’ convey an accurate picture of the changing life contexts of the young.

We accept that the experiences of young people have changed quite radically over the last three decades, yet suggest that in the age of ‘high modernity’ life chances and processes of social reproduction remain highly structured. We also agree that there has been a breakdown in ‘ontological security’ (Giddens 1991) which validates the claim that modernity, as traditionally understood, is changing. It is possible to draw on a number of theorists within the ‘late modernist’ tradition to understand these changes (such as Sennett 1998 and Bauman 2001), but in our opinion, the ideas of Ulrich Beck put forward in his book *Risk Society* (1992) (and elaborated in *The Brave New World of Work*, 2000) and those of Anthony Giddens in *Modernity and Self Identity* (1991) provide clear statements about the nature of these changes and therefore a good base for the study of young people in the late modern age. We begin this chapter with a summary of the relevant ideas of Beck and Giddens and then start to identify some of the ways in which they can be applied to an understanding of young people in modern societies.

‘Risikogesellschaft’

In *Risk Society* (*Risikogesellschaft*) Beck (1992) argues that the western world is witnessing an historical transformation. Industrial society is being replaced by a new modernity in which the old, ‘scientific’, world view is being challenged; predictabilities and certainties characteristic of the industrial era are threatened and a new set of risks and opportunities are brought into existence. Whereas modernity involved rationality and the belief in the potential offered by harnessing scientific knowledge, in late modernity the world is perceived as a dangerous place in which we are constantly confronted with risk. These risks include those stemming from the threat of nuclear war or environmental disasters, as well as other risks which have to be negotiated in day-to-day life. Indeed, according to Beck, people are progressively freed from the social networks and constraints of the old order and forced to negotiate a new set of hazards which impinge on all aspects of their day-to-day lives. Previous securities are broken and people’s concerns start to centre upon the prevention or
elimination of the risks which are systematically produced as part of modernization.

This is not to suggest that we have moved into a new era of classlessness or that people’s structural locations have a limited effect on their life chances. Beck acknowledges that risks are unequally distributed within society and may be arranged in a manner which follows the inequalities characteristic of class society:

Like wealth, risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom. To that extent, risks seem to strengthen, not abolish, the class society. Poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk.

(Beck 1992: 35, original emphasis).

Despite an unequal vulnerability to risk, Beck does suggest that class ties have weakened (at least in a subjective sense) and that in late modernity it is not always possible to predict lifestyles, political beliefs and opinions using information about occupations or family backgrounds. Indeed, Beck argues that ‘people with the same income level, or to put it in the old-fashioned way, within the same “class”, can or even must choose between different life styles, subcultures, social ties and identities’ (1992: 131). These doubts about the validity of class and about the relevance of social structures that are elaborated somewhat cautiously in Risk Society are expressed more boldly in Beck’s later work. In The Brave New World of Work, for example, he talks about a ‘political economy of ambivalence’ in which ‘top and bottom are no longer clearly defined poles, but overlap and fuse in new ways’, and where ‘insecurity prevails at nearly all positions within society’ (Beck 2000: 3–4).

Because individual behaviour and lifestyles can no longer be predicted using concepts like social class, Beck describes the new epoch as ‘capitalism without classes’ (1992: 88). Individualized lifestyles come into being in which people are forced to put themselves at the centre of their plans and reflexively construct their social biographies. Collectivities fragment as ‘individuals are encouraged to perform as a “Me & Co.”, selling themselves on the marketplace’ (2000: 3). The workplace becomes less of an arena for conflicts, and ascribed social differences such as gender and racial inequalities come to assume a greater significance. In all aspects of their lives, people have to choose between different options, including the social groups with which they wish to be identified, and temporary allegiances are formed in respect to particular issues. People may join a number of social and political groups whose aims appear to clash – they may join a trade union, for example, and vote for right wing political parties – yet Beck regards these various allegiances as representing pragmatic responses by individuals in the struggle for survival in the risk society.

While we agree with Beck that subjective dimensions of class have weakened and that lifestyles and experiences in education and the labour market have become increasingly individualized, it is important to stress that we are not arguing that class has weakened as a predictor of individual life chances. It is also important to be clear about Beck’s view of the ongoing nature of social change.
divisions which continue to shape life chances: he is not suggesting that social inequalities disappear or weaken within the new modernity. Social inequality continues to exert a powerful hold over people’s lives, but increasingly does so at the level of the individual rather than the group or class. Beck admits that within western societies social inequalities display ‘an amazing stability’ (1992: 91) and that empirical research is unlikely to uncover significant changes. ‘Income inequalities, the structure of the division of labour, and the basic determinants of wage labour have, after all, remained relatively unchanged’ (1992: 92), although there has been a weakening of class identities and the individualization of lifestyles.

The social processes identified by Beck have received broad support in the work of Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991), although there are significant differences which we highlight in the concluding chapter. Giddens argues that the age of ‘high modernity’ is characterized by a risk culture insofar as people today are subject to uncertainties which were not part of day-to-day life for previous generations. Within this risk culture, the self is reflexively created as people are forced to interpret a diversity of experiences in a way which helps them establish a coherent biography. Thus Giddens argues that people have to accept the central part played by risk in their lives which involves acknowledging ‘that no aspects of our activities follow a pre-ordained course, and all are open to contingent happenings’ (1991: 28). Furthermore, ‘living in the “risk society” means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence’ (1991: 28).

Unlike post-modern perspectives, the interpretation of high modernity presented by Beck and Giddens and their view of changes in the balance of the relationship between individual and society does not mean that people are free to re-create the world in increasingly diverse forms. For Giddens, modernity ‘produces difference, exclusion and marginalization’ (1991: 6). Diversification involves the emergence of new experiences and trajectories, but does not involve a process of equalization nor does it dilute the nature of class-based inequalities on an objective level. In this context we will argue that processes of diversification may obscure underlying class relationships and may provide the impression of greater equality without actually providing anything of substance: a process which we refer to as the epistemological fallacy of late modernity.

Thus while structures of inequality remain deeply entrenched, in our view one of the most significant features of late modernity is the epistemological fallacy: the growing disjuncture between objective and subjective dimensions of life. People’s life chances remain highly structured at the same time as they increasingly seek solutions on an individual, rather than a collective basis. Beck argues that in late modernity, risks have become ‘individualized’ and people increasingly regard setbacks and crises as individual shortcomings, rather than as outcomes of processes which are beyond their personal control. Unemployment, for example, may be seen as a consequence of a lack of skills on the part of the individual, rather than as the result of a general decline in demand for labour. Similarly, problems faced by
school-leavers in less advantaged areas may be seen as a reflection of their poor record of academic performance rather than as a consequence of material circumstances and the lack of compensatory mechanisms within the school. The individualization of risk may mean that situations which would once have led to a call for political action are now interpreted as something which can only be solved on an individual level through personal action. The search for solutions to entrenched inequalities tends to become focused on individual ‘deficiencies’ rather than social and economic structures. As a consequence of these changes, Beck argues that an increase in social inequality may be associated with an intensification of individualization as more people are placed in unpleasant situations which they interpret as being due, in part, to their own failures. In the risk society, individual subjectivity becomes an important force.

Social class and biography

The challenge to the validity of traditional ways of thinking about social class and the relevance of class for understanding the distribution of life chances in modern societies has engaged the imagination of a wide range of sociologists (e.g. Pahl 1989; Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992; Pahl 1993; Saunders 1995; Pakulski and Waters 1996; Sennett 1998; Savage 2000; Bauman 2001). Pahl has even gone as far as to suggest that class is ‘ceasing to do any useful work for sociology’ (1989: 710). Indirectly, social scientists studying youth have made significant contributions to this debate by looking at the new ways in which the lived experiences of young people are affected by class and by observing the ways in which processes of social reproduction unfold at this key stage in the lifecycle. A crucial issue here relates to the ways socio-economic divisions are re-created through the individualized experiences of young social actors and the processes whereby reflexivity is located in class relations. Reflexivity does not challenge the validity of class but is a central component of the dynamics of class. As Savage suggests,

Reflexive modernization does not create the ‘free’ individual. Rather, it creates individuals who live out, biographically, the complexity and diversity of the social relations which surround them.

(2000:104)

To understand the ways in which reflexivity contributes to social dynamics it is necessary to move beyond descriptions of biographies so as to understand the ways in which outcomes that individuals may attribute to personal agency or regard as deficiencies of skill or motivation are largely shaped by forces that can lay beyond the full comprehension of individuals.

Reflecting on the linkages between structure and agency in the context of youth transitions, Furlong and colleagues (2003) suggested that to secure any outcome, such as gaining an educational qualification or securing a particular job, an individual must mobilize structural resources (such as economic, social and cultural capital) as well as capacities usually regarded as indicative of agency (such as motivation and effort).

For Furlong and colleagues, the mobilization of resources can be either
conscious or unconscious, although no individual is ever fully aware of the conditions under which they act, the resources they are utilizing and the constraints on their actions. However, individuals usually have at least a partial awareness of the resources available to them and of obstacles that they may encounter. Inevitably rationalization will involve some distortion as individuals seek to reconstruct events and biographies in ways which give their lives an overall meaning and consistency (Heinz 1991). In an individualized society, people may not be as aware of the existence of constraints as they are of their attempts at personal intervention, and therefore a process of rationalization may lead to an exaggeration of the role of individual action. It can also be argued that the relative weight placed on external constraints or personal action in explaining outcomes will vary according to the perceived desirability of that outcome. For example, individuals may be more likely to blame negative outcomes on external forces or conditions while giving themselves credit for achieving more favourable outcomes.

The issue of biography has occupied an important place in youth studies, especially among those researchers whose work is mainly focused on cultural dimensions of experience. Essentially biographical approaches have been used as a way of understanding how individuals make sense of their lives within the dynamic processes of transition and change. Biography, which can be seen as another way of talking about rationality or, more accurately, rationalization, helps us to understand agency and the ways in which individuals negotiate uncertainty and attempt to manage their lives. Used extensively in the German literature, a distinction is frequently made between the ‘normal’ biographies that are regarded as characteristic of the Fordist era and the (poorly named) ‘choice biographies’ that are seen as describing the experiences of significant numbers of ‘trendsetters’ (du Bois Reymond 1998a) in late modernity.

Methodologically biographical approaches are an effective way of learning about young people’s interpretations of their experiences and of discovering the ways in which they attempt to plan their futures and put together the pieces of life’s jigsaw. Theoretically, biographical interpretations may run the risk of underplaying the significance of structure and of taking young people’s interpretations at face value. Du Bois Reymond (1998a), though, uses the concept as a way of highlighting tensions between the choices that stem from an increase in options and the need to adapt to circumstances over which individuals have little control.

Adolescents and young adults develop life concepts and attempt to direct the content and complexity of their lives: at the same time, they are forced to adapt to the constantly changing demands of their environment (especially the labour market).

(Du Bois Reymond 1998a: 63)

Du Bois Reymond is also very clear about the extent to which these biographical ‘trendsetters’ are concentrated in the more advantaged social classes, representing what Lash and Urry refer to as ‘reflexive winners’ (1994: 143).

The use of biographical approaches within a framework that not only remains firmly in touch with the pervasiveness of structural constraints, but
which analyses the ways in which structures are recreated through the interpretations of social actors can be particularly illuminating. In the context of young people, such an approach was pioneered by Paul Willis (1977) and comes across particularly effectively in the recent work of Stephen Ball and colleagues. Like du Bois Reymond, Ball and colleagues (2000) recognize the advantages derived by those who are able to act as ‘biographical engineers’ but also appreciate that some have limited ‘coping resources’.

In a sense, part of the biographical project of youth relates to the construction of a sense of selfhood in which there is a reasonable degree of congruence between objective and subjective experiences. While this reconciliation has always involved some tensions, in Fordist societies young people were, to an extent, able to use the experiences of significant others (especially family members or peers from the same class positions or with similar educational attainments) to help them construct road maps. In late modernity it is argued that rapid processes of social change and the fragmentation of experiences make it extremely difficult to plan for the future or manage lives (subjectively or objectively) in a meaningful sense. As Sennett puts it ‘How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?’ (1998: 26). These processes of flexibility or fragmentation effectively bring us to a situation where ‘no one can say what you must learn in order to be needed in the future’ (Beck 2000: 3).

**Growing up in the risk society**

In this book we describe some of the ways in which social changes occurring over the last three decades or so have led to a heightened sense of risk and a greater individualization of experiences among young people. Indeed, since the first edition of this book was published in 1997, there is evidence that the labour market has become increasingly casualized and precarious (Rifkin 1996; Gorz 1999; Watson *et al.* 2003; Furlong and Kelly 2005). Under conditions where work experiences are fragmented, it is often difficult to identify an end point to ‘transitions’ (Dwyer and Wyn 2001). Despite the far-reaching and ongoing implications of social change, we still hold to the view that there are powerful sources of continuity: young people’s experiences continue to be shaped by class and gender. We also highlight the maintenance of inequalities associated with ‘race’, while recognizing that experiences of different ethnic groups can be quite distinct. In our view, ‘race’ is a socially constructed category but one which is central to the understanding of structured inequalities within advanced capitalist societies. The analysis of the impact of ‘race’ on the life experiences of young people is complex because many of the disadvantages faced by members of ethnic minorities are a consequence of their position within the class structure, rather than being a feature of racial exclusion. In this respect, we agree with Miles that ‘racism and exclusionary practices is [sic] always part of a wider structure of class disadvantage and exclusion’ (1989: 10).

Young people today are growing up in different circumstances to those experienced by previous generations; changes which are significant enough
to merit a reconceptualization of youth transitions and processes of social reproduction. In other words, in the modern world young people face new risks and opportunities. The traditional links between the family, school and work seem to have weakened as young people embark on journeys into adulthood which involve a wide variety of routes, many of which appear to have uncertain outcomes. But the greater range of opportunities available helps to obscure the extent to which existing patterns of inequality are simply being reproduced in different ways. Moreover, because there is a much greater range of pathways to choose from, young people may develop the impression that their own route is unique and that the risks they face are to be overcome as individuals rather than as members of a collectivity.

In our view then, the risk society is not a classless society, but a society in which the old social cleavages associated with class and gender remain intact: on an objective level, changes in the distribution of risk have been minimal although they can be more difficult to identify as the social exclusivity of pathways begins to disintegrate. Subjective feelings of risk have also become a much more significant feature of young people’s lives and this has implications for their experiences and lifestyles. With traditional social divisions having become obscure, subjective risks stem from the perceived lack of collective tradition and security. Whereas subjective understandings of the social world were once shaped by class, gender and neighbourhood relations, today everything is presented as a possibility. The maintenance of traditional opportunity structures combined with subjective ‘disembedding’ (Giddens 1991) is a constant source of frustration and stress for today’s youth.

The idea that perceptions of risk are culturally constructed and that there is an inevitable mismatch between objective risks and subjective perceptions of risk is controversial and it is necessary to develop scientific methods which bridge the gap between objective and perceived risk. In this context Adams (1995) suggests that people’s perceptions of the risks involved in different types of behaviour are socially constructed and affected by experiences and norms associated with their social groups. Applying for a place at university, for example, may be perceived as risky by a young person from a lower working class family, whereas a young person with similar qualifications from an advantaged family may take their acceptance for granted. Similarly, this mismatch between subjective and objective dimensions of risk is reflected in reactions to the use of illegal drugs by young people: socially accepted drugs like alcohol and tobacco pose far greater health risks.

Change in the economic order, the dismantling of Fordist social structures, the extension of education and the associated demand for credentials mean that in late modernity individuals are increasingly held accountable for their own fates. Individual accountability and achievement are values which are constantly reinforced by the school and the media, yet in reality individuals often remain powerless. The combined forces of individual responsibility and accountability, on the one hand, and vulnerability and lack of control on the other, lead to a heightened sense of risk and insecurity. Conditions of doubt penetrate all aspects of social life and self identity becomes fragile and subject to constant reinterpretation (Giddens 1991). For Beck and Giddens, this constant reinterpretation of identity signifies that life has become a
‘reflexive project’: individuals are constantly forced to reconstruct their biographies in the light of changing experiences.

In the space of one generation there have been some radical changes to the typical experiences of young people: patterns of schooling today are very different to those of the 1980s and the youth (and indeed, the adult) labour market has changed in such a way that it would be almost unrecognizable to members of previous generations. Young people from all social classes tend to remain in full-time education until a later age and higher education is becoming a mass experience rather than the preserve of a small elite. Education is increasingly packaged as a consumer product with costs to be borne by individual beneficiaries and people are encouraged to treat services as products. In Chapter 2 we provide an overview of changing educational experiences and argue that despite some convergence in experiences, many forms of differentiation still exist. Although we identify some sources of individualization which have an impact on young people’s experiences, we argue that the traditional determinants of educational ‘success’ still have a powerful effect on educational pathways and outcomes.

Since the early 1980s labour market entry has become more casualized and precarious employment has become a typical part of labour market transitions for all young people, including university graduates. In Chapter 3 we describe the main changes in the youth labour market and highlight changes in the school to work transition. We suggest that collectivized transitions characteristic of a Fordist society have become much rarer as young people move into a highly differentiated market for skills and casual services. While school to work transitions have become more protracted, we argue that the essential predictability of transitions has been maintained. However, as a result of the diversity of routes, young people are faced with an increasing range of options which force them to engage with the likely consequences of their actions on a subjective level. While class and gender can still be considered as prime determinants of labour market experiences, there is evidence that less advantaged young people are becoming trapped in an enlarged and unstable labour market periphery while young people from all social classes, lacking fixed points of reference, experience a growing sense of unease and insecurity.

Along with the protraction of the school to work transition, there has been an extension to the period in which young people remain in a state of semi-dependency leading to calls to recognize a new phase in the lifecycle called ‘young adulthood’ (EGRIS 2001) or ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett 2004). Young people are remaining dependent on their families for longer periods of time and it has become more difficult for them to make successful domestic and housing transitions (Coles 1995; Jones 1995; Holdsworth 2000; Iacovou 2001; Heath and Cleaver 2003). While we argue that domestic and housing transitions are still strongly affected by class and gender (Chapter 4), it is suggested that changes in the sequencing of the three transitions (school to work transitions, domestic transitions and housing transitions) have led to changing family dynamics. For some, this new space is characterized by a freedom that is unencumbered by the responsibilities of adulthood while for others it is best seen as a frustrating limbo characterized by powerlessness and a lack of
resources. These changes have implications for behaviour and experiences in other dimensions of life.

In the age of high modernity, as subjective class affiliations, family ties and ‘traditional’ expectations weaken, consumption and lifestyles have become central to the process of identity construction. Changing lifestyles and leisure experiences are discussed in Chapter 5. In this context we note that some commentators have argued that style and consumption have become more important than class in the shaping of young people’s lives (Featherstone 1991; Abma 1992; Bennett 1999). We disagree with this position. Although the linkages between leisure lifestyles, youth cultures and social class may have weakened, consumption, which is central to the lived experience of young people, is not unrelated to class. Indeed, with leisure having become increasingly commercialized, some young people clearly lack the resources to participate regularly in a broad range of activities or to socialize with people from other class positions. Moreover, as Phoenix and Tizard (1996) have noted, patterns of consumption, fashion and lifestyles are symbolic of class position, with young people being adept at reading subtle indicators of class.

The increasing stresses and strains of modern life and their impact on young people’s health are examined in Chapter 6. We suggest that as individuals are made to feel more responsible for life events, uncertainty and risk have taken their toll on young people’s mental health. The incidence of mental illness, eating disorders, suicide and attempted suicide have increased as young people develop a sense of having ‘no future’ (West and Sweeting 1996). These trends are also affected by an increasing isolation from adult worlds. While risk taking has always been a feature of young lives, longer transitions have led to a greater vulnerability to risk, including those risks which stem from involvement in or vulnerability to criminal activities (Chapter 7). Domestic and work commitments have long been associated with a reduction in risk-taking activities and there is evidence that protracted transitions mean young people remain vulnerable for longer periods. Here young people are being denied the chance to become ‘stake holders’ in their society and in turn they may look for alternative sources of satisfaction, some of which carry health risks or make them more vulnerable to police surveillance and arrest.

The weakening of the traditional bonds of family and class, together with an individualization of experiences, personal risk and global insecurity can also be seen as leading to a weakening of traditional political affiliations (Chapter 8). In particular, changes in the subjective understanding of class have implications for young people’s participation in the political process. The majority of young people feel that party politics have little relevance to their lives, yet at the same time they are politically active in a broader sense. Many of the issues young people regard as important cross the traditional lines of party politics and reflect concerns about global insecurity, injustice and environmental damage. Young people’s engagement with politics can also be interpreted as reflecting a disintegration of older forms of collective identity as well as a scepticism about the extent to which meaningful processes of change are likely to emerge from within the traditional machinery of state.
Conclusion

In sum, this book aims to provide an assessment of conceptualizations of the new modernity through an empirical analysis of the social condition of contemporary youth. In doing so, a number of issues are raised which have important implications for sociological theory. Our central thesis is that while traditional sources of inequality continue to ensure the reproduction of advantage and disadvantage among the younger generation, various social changes have meant that these social cleavages have become obscure. Moreover, young people increasingly perceive themselves as living in a society characterized by risk and insecurity which they expect to have to negotiate on an individual level. While writers in the ‘late-modernist’ tradition – such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990, 1991) – are able to illuminate some of these processes, we suggest that there has been a tendency to exaggerate changes and to understate many significant sources of continuity. In particular, it is argued that social class and gender remain central to an understanding of the lives of young people in the age of high modernity.