Boomerang Kids & Global Youth Unemployment

The Accordion Family: Boomerang Kids, Anxious Parents, and the Private Toll of Global Competition
by Katherine S. Newman (Beacon Press, 2012)

Reviewed by Zachary Prout

In an radio interview about her new book, Katherine Newman told NPR than an accordion family is best defined as "a multigenerational household in which you have adult children over the age of 21 living with their parents". In her exploration of the growing frequency of such households here and abroad, she tries to identify the relationship between why adult children in their twenties and thirties return to (if they ever leave) their parents' home and the increased economic globalization of recent years. The author searches across varied political and cultural spectrums in order to better note the unique results that different societies have yielded.

Newman, a professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University and author of ten books on economic instability and urban poverty, has no shortage of experience studying the social repercussions of recent economic trends, and *The Accordion Family* does not disappoint. Intended for the parents of boomerang children as well as policy makers, the book moves from intensive interviews of multigenerational households of different nationalities and income levels to evaluation of wider survey data to assessments of the national consequences of delayed aging and even intergenerational downward mobility.

Newman begins by asking a sample of different individuals in different countries how they see "adulthood" and the cultural conventions that go with it. It appears that the definition varies around the globe. Alanzo, from the Italian city of Legnaro, claims, "You are [an] adult when you think you have something to do for your family, when you take your responsibilities and when you understand you are mature" (32). However, Robert, from Denmark decides that, "At some point you start feeling that everything should make sense. A sort of unity. Then I think you get to the point [where you are an adult], when you start to get the meaning of things" (75) . Are the days gone of adulthood only being identified as station in which an individual is married, becomes a parent, and has a real job? Newman believes so. In the globalized world we live in today, she contends that the real definition evolves with time. A challenging job market and volatile housing market has torn into the finances of young adults. Most do not claim it is so far the norm for the baby boom generation to have young adults back in the house, but they recognize that current conditions have left young people with limited options:

> "Adults who came of age in an earlier era are not likely to think this [feeling of adulthood] is an adequate substitute for the real thing. But they too are co-conspirators in the effort to develop this psychological side. All too aware of how much harder it is to afford education and residential autonomy than it was back in the day, American parents join their Spanish counterparts in recognizing that life is simply more costly today, the job market is problematic, and all that combines to limit the capacity of their kids to do what they did in the distant past." (98).

The parents of the boomerang kids show much empathy for their children. While some admit that they wish for a "launch" of their offspring, many know that the barriers to entry are high and cumbersome. There is no doubt that children become adults, but if the traditional, more static definition is becoming quickly unattainable until later in life, then there is no choice but to accept a modern classification focused more on a psychological state. And if a postponed move out of Mom and Dad's house is one of the results of scarce jobs, stagnant wages and unaffordable housing, a shift to a more multigenerational model may benefit the entire household if adult children's income can help keep the family afloat. Newman additionally cites the demand for a certain level of comfort, "Young people seem to have concluded that it is better to stay at home than experience a loss of creature comforts. The Eurobarometer asks respondents about the role of 'home comforts with the responsibilities' as a factor in delayed departure and more than 30 percent of all respondents (over 40 percent in Greece and Italy) agreed that this was one reason to 'stick around" (115). Young adults want to be home because it is much more comfortable than striking out in the wild on their own and having to furnish their own homes, which are most likely not as nice as what they are used to. And parents are happy to both be able to see their children grow and also possibly use them as another source of income (although small) if necessary. Could it be a win-win situation for all, or are there other problems that are going unseen?

Newman goes further and begins to acknowledge the increased cost of higher education in the United States, and how it has exceeded average rates of inflation. With students and parents looking to minimize costs of expanding knowledge, more American youth turn to living at home rather than going away to college. Even in Europe, where the public has been able to pride itself on low tuition costs, recent austerity measures may dictate jumps in tuition costs. Newman notes: "Faced with shutting down entirely or raising tuition, those universities that believe they can exact fees similar to American private universities are rapidly moving in that direction. Those that cannot command tuition at that level are unlikely to survive" (132). It is not as if these colleges and universities are simply looking to nickel and dime their students, but instead it is a survival tactic so the professors and school employees do not lose their jobs as well. These several catalysts, mixed with weak welfare states, will yield a boom in accordion families, says Newman. A shorter list of options with exponentially growing global competition will continue to undermine the ability for young adults to move out on their own.

But what happens if these boomerang children never leave, and are forever living on their parents' tab? Who will take care of the adults if their children never gain financial independence? Newman considers the implications:

> "As age thirty approaches, nervous parents begin to wonder whether in-house adulthood has an expiration date. The more they reckon with the limitations of their budgets and the looming costs of retirement, the less sanguine they can afford to be about the persistent financial dependence of the millennial generation, now many years past what boomer parents have regarded as the normative age of autonomous adulthood". (166)

In fact, in Japan, low youth employment has started to weigh on the pension benefits of elders. If the younger generation is not working much, who will feed the social programs that society needs to sponsor individuals in need? Newman is frightened for the developments of Japan, with a rapidly aging population and less and less people willing to support it. In the United States, she thinks we have mostly fared better. Our immigration-fueled population growth, safety net programs and public housing subsidies still offer more opportunities for jobs and independent living than in the weaker welfare states. However, Newman worries that American youth face an uncertain future as conservatives' attacks on many government programs have intensified: "We are a long, long way from the Nordic model, and hence the economic insecurity that afflicts our twenty- and thirtysomethings contributes to the growth of the accordion family. Higher education is increasingly expensive, and government, particularly at the state level, has been withdrawing steadily from its financial support" (199).

Katherine Newman does an excellent job of mostly relaying the information and personal testimonies she uncovered in a widely accessible manner while keeping her personal judgments separate. However, in each chapter's conclusion and at the book's end, she allows the reader a glimpse of her own perspective and of the policy changes she favors. I really enjoyed this style of presentation. It allows the reader to interpret the research in their own way, but then also examine the thoughts of the investigator. It is clear, though, that Newman has her own strong, relatively left-wing beliefs about the current state of the global economy:"

> "As labor markets become more strained, wages fall, and higher education and job training become less accessible, the pathways to adulthood become that much harder to pilot. Where are today's twenty- and thirty-somethings going to take refuge? In the weak welfare states of countries like Spain, Italy, and Japan, it is a safe bet that they will continue to live with their parents. The trend has been growing in the United States as well, and we can expect it to continue as long as the underlying economic conditions contributing to it gather force. Our young people will have few other options." (196)

To Newman, the boomerang children trend is a problem reflecting declining upward mobility, weak economic growth, and a general undermining of shared social progress. From her look at Spain, Italy, and Japan, she seems to conclude that these conditions are unlikely to be solved by the free market economy alone. Newman calls on U.S. policymakers to act before we start to follow the unenviable path of the "weak welfare states". In the Nordic countries, she observes: "We see no signs of the accordion family in the Nordic nations because there is no need for the family to act as a private safety net. A very effective public safety net is there to cushion the blows of globalization" (198). That is, a publicly subsidized safety net for millennials and young professionals seeking to set out on their own is Newman's solution. She feels that with increased government spending on struggling youth, real change that is tangible and measurable will come about. The free market will simply not right itself in this case.

If society is truly tired of millennials moving back in with their parents for years, then what should or can be done?. A challenging economic climate has left many young adults with limited options and footing the bill will continue to fall on the shoulders of Mom and Dad. The U.S. may have recovered job losses from the Great Recession faster than most European nations, but with more extreme inequality and many obstacles to youth job prospects. Perhaps this explains why Newman seems to struggle to really conclude the book,

> "The messy politics of the accordion family remain unresolved, both here and abroad. They are enmeshed in the same

inequalities that beset the advanced economics of the Western world. Those at the top of the economic heap can afford to purchase a high-quality education for their children, support them as they experiment with internships and international travel, connect them to occupational opportunities, and shelter them from the storm of globalization". (202)

This leaves much of the population out of the picture. And for millennials, Newman says: "the jury is out". She sees the U.S. in a unique position. On one side are the weak welfare states burdened by large economic liabilities and offering little opportunity for the jobless left to fend for themselves. The other way, we see the much stronger welfare states of Northern Europe, where heavy subsidies for youth schooling and job placement have so far seemed to work. But is the cost of these programs worth it in the long run? Allowing millennials years of cheap free schooling creates delayed employment, and that is the exact problem being faced at home. Does "adulthood" need to be redefined? The only conclusion readers are left with about accordion families is that their continued growth may have unforeseen economic consequences, but the range of public support they can count on may not be sustainable for long.

Zachary Prout is a senior finance major at the Zarb School of Business, Hofstra University.

REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 17, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2015).
© 2015 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University

Labor-Lines

A Radio Program About Working Men & Women and the Organizations That Represent Them

Hosted by Attorney Vic Fusco

Labor-Lines can be heard in New York City on **WNYM 960 AM** Saturdays at 1 pm.

Labor-Lines Long Island is on: **WGBB 1240AM** on Saturdays at 7:30pm; on **WJVC 96.1FM** on Saturdays at 7:00 am; and on **LINewsTalkRadio** Saturdays at 8:00 am.

Labor Studies at Hofstra University

Earn a Hofstra University Certificate in Labor Studies

The world of work is rapidly changing, as are modern relationships among workers, between workers and labor unions, and between labor and management. Labor Studies is an interdisciplinary program designed to offer students up-to-date understanding of today's workplace in an international context. The valuable skills acquired will prove useful in careers in labor unions, government, labor law, education, and human resource management.

The new Hofstra Certificate in Labor Studies is a special, affordable offering designed for adults who are not presently enrolled as full-time degree-seeking Hofstra undergraduates, but who instead wish only to take 1 or 2 courses per semester in a focused program of study on labor-management relations, union organization and operations, and related legal and socioeconomic issues. The Certificate is granted after successful completion of 5 required courses (Introduction to Labor Studies; Introduction to Management; Labor and Employment Law; Collective Bargaining; and Labor Economics) and 1 elective.

Advantages:

- Outstanding courses taught by a distinguished full-time faculty
- Regularly scheduled late afternoon and evening undergraduate courses.
- Undergraduate B.A. degree credit option available for the normal tuition.
- Highly regarded specific training of value in many careers.

HOW to REGISTER

REGISTRATION IS EASY:

By telephone: if you wish, you may register using a major credit card by calling: 516-463-5993;
By Internet: download a reg. form from the web site: **www.hofstra.edu/ucce**. **Mail or fax it to**: 516-463-4833.
Cost: Only for this special non-credit certificate, course tuition is just $450.
Courses may be taken for credit at the standard rate. For information on the certificate program.

For more information on the program, email **laborstudies@hofstra.edu**, or visit our website:
www.hofstra.edu/laborstudies