

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

**Masaryk University**

**Faculty**

**Procedure field**

**Applicant**

**Applicant's home unit,  
institution**

**Habilitation thesis**

**Reviewer**

**Reviewer's home unit,  
institution**

Faculty of Social Studies  
Social Policy and Social Work  
Mgr. Ondřej Hora, Ph.D.  
Faculty of Social Studies

„Youth, labour market insecurity and institutions“  
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Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Bulgarian  
Academy of Sciences

### 1. General description of the contents and structure

The habilitation thesis under review consists of an abstract, introduction, 6 chapters, conclusion, bibliography (consisting of over 170 titles) and an annex. The total volume of the book is 345 pages, of which the text is 315 pages (excluding the title page, abstract and table of contents).

**The abstract and the introduction** set forth the main components of the author's approach. Focusing on the position of young people during their transition from school to work, Ondřej Hora aims to elucidate the processes that take place during this very important period in the life, using their own life stories as “windows” through which we can observe how young people themselves perceive the transition. The main argument of the book is that the situation of young people is dependent on their initial position and economic situation during their ‘great transition’ from school to work, with part of young people unable to tackle the process and finding themselves in an insecure position. The stated goal of the study is to provide insight into “the critical moments and places in the life stories of young people by both following their stories and understanding how their behaviour in interactions with structural conditions allowed them to live a preferred kind of life”.

Apart from outlining the main research questions and the structure of the book, the introduction also presents the conceptual framework of the study, which is based on two main strands of literature: on macro-level theories, trajectories, and institutional determinants, and literature on the individual agency of young people who are either unemployed or in an insecure position on the labour market. The methodology applied is qualitative empirical

study carried out in the Czech Republic based on the life stories of more than 70 young people. Here should be mentioned that the theory is presented as close to the data as possible while the author's interpretations are partially separated from the theory and life stories of the respondents. Ondřej Hora's observation could be shared that this is an unusual method of presentation of the empirical material, but one that definitely contributes to the overall quality and originality of his work, as well as to the argumentation of the stated research goal.

**Chapter 1** lays out the methodological framework of the research. It provides arguments in favor of the relevance of cultural studies' theoretical and methodological apparatus for the study of the research topic that the monograph is dedicated to. The author employs a combination of approaches combining analyses of the contextual, dialogical and self-reflexive dimensions, along with the narrative approach to interviews analysis, that prove to be reliable means of accomplishing the research tasks he has set for himself. The chapter provides relevant information on the respondents who took part in the two international projects – CITISPYCE and NEGOTIATE—that the book is based on.

It also contains a useful table listing the more general key categories and the concrete topic categories on which the analysis is based, with the former mainly derived from the methodological chapter, and the latter – from previous research. The organisation of the empirical data according to corresponding or conflicting information on patterns of similar or different life stories, situations, and opinions, as well as by the employment of a combination of both 'wide' and 'across' approaches to data analysis creates very positive impression when reading the text. The competent use of such approaches demonstrates the author's abilities to work with empirical data, as well as his analytical skills.

**Chapter 2** focuses on the transitions and the position of young people in the labour market. The author has built a robust theoretical framework for the study of transitions emphasizing their normative perception as well as some of their important characteristics like complexity/fragmentation, reversibility, blurred character and hybridization, the changing character and incidence of the states, and the changing of transition from normal to uncertain. Ondřej Hora introduces and guides the reader through the various important aspects of young people's situation on the labour market – the difficulties in finding work, employability, aspects of marginalisation and precarity, scarring effect. The chapter introduces the central concept of the book – that of job insecurity, and discusses its different types providing solid arguments for the legitimacy of the book's focus on insecurity as both a subjective perception of young people, and an objective situation that has a deep and lasting impact on young

people's lives. The relevant life stories of respondents placed next to the theory provide support to the conceptual framework outlined in the chapter.

**Chapter 3** provides a thorough account of the diverse strategies used by young people to deal with insecurity from both a theoretical and empirical point of view. Looking at insecurity through the theoretical lenses of social structure, culture, agency theory, capability perspective, and applying theory for the interpretation of relevant quotations from the interviews, Ondřej Hora presents his arguments and draws his conclusions in a convincing way. An important conclusion is that individual agency and individual decisions significantly influence the future of young people, with decision-making being rather problematic in the context of insecurity and marginalisation. The author makes a strong case for society paying much more attention to the prevention of insecure positions, and for increased guidance and individual support for young people both during their time at school, and during their critical transition to the labour market.

**Chapter 4** lists and discusses at length the multiple factors of insecure position. These include the locality in which people live, the labour market situation, individual competencies and personal factors, family situation, the role of employers. The above-mentioned factors are generalized groups consisting of a number of sub-factors that may impact negatively a young person's chances in the labour market. An important point is made about such circumstances acting as conversion factors as well. Citing Böhler et al. (2019), conversion factors can be divided into groups as follows: (1) institutional, (2) social, (3) familial, (4) economic, (5) cultural, (6) political and (7) personal, with such factors being able to influence young people both positively and negatively. As the empirical data show many of the respondents, especially those of minority origin, live under the threat of multiple disadvantages. Such people have very low chances for standard employment, and often one of their disadvantages directly or indirectly contributes to the emergence of another, thus creating a vicious circle, one that is extremely difficult to get out of. In this aspect the implementation of an intersectional approach, explicated as complexity (McCall, 2005) or as interference between inequalities (Verloo, 2013), could be recommended for the future research efforts of investigating insecurity in life course perspective.

**Chapter 5** provides a large volume of empirical data on the far-reaching personal consequences of the four main types of insecurity (job insecurity, employment insecurity, income insecurity, and combination insecurity). Those consequences range from changed life attitudes, work attitudes, and work behavior, lower and missing future social protection, going

into debts and family destabilization to psychological problems like low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority and depression. Both short-term and long-term consequences of insecurity are analysed, as well as the diverse ways in which insecurity influences individual and family life, and how it relates to respondents' future. At the same time difficult life situations are sometimes mitigated by factors like the help of family and friends, and the mechanism of "building" – a situation when young people accumulate additional knowledge and qualifications helping them to improve their labour market position. The author makes an important point regarding the lack of institutional support that in some cases contributes to the worsening of young people's situation. This topic is developed in detail in the last chapter, dedicated to the institutional determinants of early job insecurity.

In **Chapter 6** the role of institutions in early job insecurity is highlighted and researched in detail. Institutions such as the education system, social protection, and active labour market programmes shape new opportunities for young people. Dr.Hora investigates their ambivalent role as supporting structures, bridges, and mediators on one hand, and as barriers, obstacles, and mediocre pathways leading to dead ends, on the other. The author concludes the chapter and the book with a list of the social policy implications of his research. Based on his one experience of the work with marginalized young people in insecure positions on the labour market, and stepping on the basis of well selected theoretical concepts Dr. Hora provides a number of timely and adequate recommendations for social policy institutions,that his research clearly shows, are in debt to such vulnerable members of society. Those recommendations include developing outreach policies for direct addressing of dropouts and helping them return to education; developing a link between active labour market policy and education to allow young people to get a qualification which is needed in the labour market; increasing unemployment protection of young people; developing policies for suppression of the drug market in deprived communities; developing cooperation among key subjects on the labour market.

## **2. Assessment of the scientific contribution to the field**

The book "**Youth, labour market insecurity and institutions**" is an original project of the author in which he expresses his authentic scientific position and opinion. It presents a significant contribution to the fields of both social policy and the study of young people's integration in the labour market. Ondřej Hora's original approach combining cultural studies methods with the study of the interactions between young people and social policy institutions in a 'from below' perspective, is an important contribution to the applied social science. The

book also reflects the author's sincere commitment to making his contribution to vulnerable young people by providing institutions with all the empirical data, analyses and policy recommendations needed to more effectively support school-leavers in their "great transition".

### **3. Qualification of the author**

I have personal impressions of Ondřej Hora, from our collaboration at NEGOTIATE project. I can state with certainty that he has significant expertise in the field he has dedicated his research efforts to. Dr. Hora has well developed abilities for intercultural communication; he is good partner in the team work and meets the high standards of the interdisciplinary research projects. In his book "**Youth, labour market insecurity and institutions**" he cites 11 of his publications dedicated to the topic. Coupled with his field experience participating in two international projects, they provide for a biography, which is of mature scientists.

### **4. Main strengths of the book**

Ondřej Hora deserves praise for his thoroughly researched and well-organised work that represents a significant contribution in the field of social policy in general and youth transitions to the labour markets in particular. Apart from the strengths I already mentioned, I will dwell upon only a few of the book's many merits. The first one concerns the organisation of the book. Here I give full credit to the author's assertion that in bringing theory closer to the data he has succeeded in: i) allowing the reader to have all the relevant information on one topic – both theoretical and empirical – in one place without the need for constantly flipping through the book from the first to the second half, and ii) facilitating the comparisons and reflection on the relations between various dimensions of the cultural approach.

Second, the wide range of sociological (theoretical and empirical) research and publications that the author uses is highly commendable. These sources are skillfully harnessed to achieve his research goals, and that is in itself an indisputable testament to his research potential. The analysis of the sources and the empirical data shows conscientiousness in defending the pre-formulated hypotheses, and accuracy in presenting the results of his empirical research.

And last, but not least, I would like to commend Ondřej Hora for making his opinion heard throughout the book by offering his own analyses and thoughts on all of the many topics discussed under the heading "My reflection on...". Making his own voice stand out in this way is a clear sign of the author's expertise and authority on the subject.

### **5. Critical remarks and recommendations**

Naturally, as with any intellectual product, a number of recommendations and critical remarks can be addressed to Ondřej Hora's work, without belittling its merits:

- I would recommend the author to pay more attention to wording and syntax, and to proofread thoroughly the whole text to avoid occasional spelling, grammar and syntax errors and incoherent phrases. This is even more valid for respondents' stories that were translated from the Czech language;
- The book would benefit from the addition of more visual materials – tables, figures and illustrations – where applicable, and from including the few present tables in the table of contents.

**Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** (number of questions up to the reviewer)

1. Which categories of interfering inequalities, beside minority origin, are leading to multiple disadvantages in the school to work transition in the Czech Republic?
2. Which policy recommendations could be seen as specific to the Czech national context compared to other Central and Eastern European countries?

### **Conclusion**

The habilitation thesis entitled “**Youth, labour market insecurity and institutions**” by Dr. Ondřej Hora **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field “Social policy and social work”.

Date: September, 9, 2021

Signature: Prof. Rumiana Stoilova