French youth policy in an age of austerity: plus ça change?

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Introduction

When François Hollande became the new president of the French Republic on 6 May 2012, as a moderate socialist, he pledged to make young people his priority and put an end to the neoliberal austerity measures introduced by his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy from the centre-right UMP party. This article explores youth policy in France from 2005 to 2013, in order to ascertain similarities and differences regarding attitudes towards youth and welfare during the two presidencies within an ongoing context of austerity. The article first outlines the background of youth policy in contemporary France. It then examines and compares the major themes and measures in recent youth policy. It concludes that behind the changing political discourse, there is a large degree of continuity in French youth policy due to the sustained focus on youth unemployment in an era of economic difficulties and a corporatist welfare system, which does not provide young people with universal benefits.

Keywords: youth policy; France; unemployment; poverty; welfare state; austerity

Introduction

When François Hollande became the new president of the French Republic on 6 May 2012, he declared in his victory speech that he wanted to be judged on two major commitments: advancement in social justice and progress in the condition of youth.1 He pledged to put an end to the neoliberal austerity measures introduced by the centre-right Nicolas Sarkozy who had come to power in May 2007 on the eve of the financial crisis.2 For François Hollande, a moderate socialist, Nicolas Sarkozy’s radical cuts in public spending and social welfare had worsened the difficulties faced by French young people who had mostly been considered a problem and he had exacerbated socio-economic inequalities (Hollande,2012).

Has French youth policy evolved during the current economic crisis and with the change of presidents in 2012?3 Is youth still considered to be a problem? Has the welfare system been changed to improve social justice? This article explores youth policy in France from 2005 to 2013, in order to ascertain similarities and differences between the two presidencies within a context of austerity. It examines and compares the major themes and developments in recent youth policy during the era of austerity. This is done by examination of political discourse and key policy documents, via reference to Esping-Andersen (1990) and especially the recent sociological analyses of Van de Velde (2008, 2010, 2012) on French youth and the corporatist nature of the French welfare state. The article aims to contribute to the understanding of contemporary French youth policy at a time of political change in the country and increasing youth unemployment within

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Indeed, François Hollande inherited an economy that had been weak for some years, albeit on a lesser scale than certain other European countries like Spain and Greece. At the start of the twenty-first century, France’s unemployment rate began to fall and went below the 10% mark. However, joblessness rose again towards the end of the decade resulting in the 10% threshold being reached in 2009 and again in 2012 (Insee). Furthermore, at the end of 2012, the country recorded its fifth consecutive trimester of zero growth (Insee).

Young people have been especially affected by the current economic downturn (Labadie, 2012b; Lefresne, 2012; OCDE, 2010). At the start of 2012, there were approximately eight million 15–24-year-olds in France, which represented 12.2% of the total population (Table 1). Youth unemployment in France has never fallen below 15% during the past 30 years and it has regularly topped 20% (Aeberhardt, Crusson, & Pommier, 2011). Joblessness rates have been much higher among 15–24-year-olds than for other age groups (Prévost, 2012). At the end of 2012, the youth unemployment rate reached more than 25%, the national average unemployment rate being 10.1% (Table 2). In addition, long-term youth unemployment increased by 5.6 percentage points from 2008 to 2010 (Insee) and at

| Age group (years) | No. of males | No. of females | Total | Proportion of total population (%) |
|------------------|-------------|---------------|-------|-----------------------------------|
| 0–4              | 2,071,787   | 1,982,896     | 4,054,683 | 06.2                              |
| 5–9              | 2,045,399   | 1,954,120     | 3,999,519 | 06.1                              |
| 10–14            | 2,072,507   | 1,971,669     | 4,044,176 | 06.1                              |
| 15–19            | 2,011,249   | 1,925,640     | 3,936,889 | 06.0                              |
| 20–24            | 2,067,870   | 2,023,912     | 4,091,782 | 06.2                              |
| Total (15–24)    | 4,079,119   | 3,949,552     | 8,028,671 | 12.2                              |
| Total (under 25) | 10,268,812  | 9,858,237     | 20,127,049 | 30.8                             |

Note: Estimated total population of metropolitan France on 1 January 2012 = 65.3 million.
Source: Adapted from Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (Insee).

| Year | 15–24 age group (%) | Average all age groups (%) |
|------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| 2000 | 16.3                | 8.5                       |
| 2001 | 16.7                | 8.2                       |
| 2002 | 17.7                | 8.4                       |
| 2003 | 20.4                | 9.2                       |
| 2004 | 20.9                | 9.3                       |
| 2005 | 21.8                | 9.5                       |
| 2006 | 21.9                | 8.8                       |
| 2007 | 19.0                | 7.9                       |
| 2008 | 21.0                | 8.2                       |
| 2009 | 24.4                | 10.0                      |
| 2010 | 22.9                | 9.7                       |
| 2011 | 23.1                | 9.8                       |
| 2012 | 25.7                | 10.1                      |
| 2013 | 24.5                | 10.5*                     |

Note: ILO definition of unemployment rate, fourth quarter (*third quarter).
Source: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (Insee).
the end of 2012, 15% young people were classified as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs) (Insee). Young people have also been particularly affected by neoliberal structural changes in the labour market linked to the recession, i.e. the increase in part-time work, unpaid or poorly paid internships and short-term contracts (Contrat de travail à durée Déterminée – [CDD]), all of which lead to a lack of job security and an unstable work environment (Jugnot, 2012, p. 74). This age group has trouble entering the job market, finding affordable accommodation and accessing affordable health care. Consequently, young people at the beginning of the twenty-first century are the first generation in France since World War Two to be in a worse socio-economic situation than the previous generation at the same age – a phenomenon named in French ‘le déclassement’ (Lefresne, 2007; Maurin, 2009; Peugny, 2009).

Whilst young people have been the age group the most seriously affected by the recession, young people with no qualifications have been hit the hardest (Brinbaum & Guégnard, 2012; Labadie, 2012b). Unemployment rates among school-leavers with no qualifications at all are significantly higher than those who passed the Baccalauréat (the examination taken at around 18 years of age that is a prerequisite to apply to university). In 2011, the unemployment rate for 15–29-year-olds with a higher education qualification was 9%. It stood at 22% for those who had studied until the Baccalauréat, but 46% for those with no qualifications at all, i.e. more than double the rate of those who had passed the Baccalauréat. According to Insee, around 760,000 16–24-year-olds leave the education system each year, of which 120,000 without the Baccalauréat.

A high rate of youth unemployment inevitably has an impact on the resources of young people. Youth poverty has increased since the start of the 2007 recession (Galland, 2012a; Labadie, 2012b): At the end of 2012, the poverty rate among 16–25-year-olds was 22.5%, more than double the rate for over-25-year-olds (and more than five percentage points higher than in 2004) (Insee, 2011). In other words, in the fourth quarter of 2012, more than a million young people were in a very vulnerable situation. Young people with no qualifications were the most affected with a poverty rate at around 30% that was higher than those with only the Baccalauréat and significantly higher than the 10% poverty rate for young people with a university degree.

The vast majority of young people who leave school with no qualifications, those who are NEET and those who live in poverty are from the lower socio-economic groups. They are disproportionately from poorer, disadvantaged neighbourhoods (quartiers défavorisés) and/or from certain minority ethnic backgrounds, especially the Maghreb or sub-Saharan Africa (Brinbaum & Guégnard, 2012; Labadie, 2012b). This means that social inequalities among young people are accentuated depending on their social origins, their area of residence (Dulin, 2012) and their ethnic group.

Sociological approaches to youth have evolved in France and elsewhere in recent decades (Cicchelli & Galland, 2009). Prior to the 1980s, the dominant approach portrayed youth as a homogeneous social group characterised by a particular lifestyle and specific behaviour different to the rest of the population. Later, sociologists tended to depict youth as an almost uniform life stage between childhood and adulthood. The focus resided on the transition between these two stages, via the reaching of certain socio-economic milestones (end of studies, independent accommodation, marriage, parenthood, etc.), culminating in ‘autonomy’, i.e. becoming a socially, economically and, to a lesser extent, politically independent actor, no longer a ward of one’s parents. This approach brought to fore the differences – inequalities – between the socio-economic origins of young people regarding the continuing Bourdieusian themes of cultural capital and social reproduction. However, it should be pointed out that in France there is generally a lack of official data
collection pertaining to race, in accordance with the republican constitution, which does not allow discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin. Subsequently, there was a shift in the sociological approach to young people and the focal point became the lengthening of the period of youth and the delaying of ‘autonomy’, due to the increase in non-linear and complex pathways to adulthood, mainly caused by economic and societal transformations (Moreau, 2012, pp. 82–100).

Cécile Van de Velde, a Belgian sociologist based in France, has recently developed a new sociological approach in her award-winning book, Devenir Adulte: Sociologie Comparée de la Jeunesse en Europe (2008), in which she portrays youth as a state of ‘becoming an adult’. Van de Velde argues that France is characterised by a two-speed meritocratic education system in which the type and level of studies determine permanently one’s career path, social status and personal fulfilment, which reinforces social inequalities and social injustice (see also Cahuc, Carcillo, Galland, & Zimmermann, 2011; Jungnot, 2012; Merle 2012). Consequently, academic choices are generally seen as decisive and irreversible with young people experiencing a lot of pressure to succeed. Van de Velde avows that the urge to ‘place oneself’ in the social hierarchy is due to the rigidity of the French education system and also the French youth policy. She references Gösta Esping-Andersen’s (1990) comparative work on Welfare States, in which he asserts that from the 1950s to the 1990s, the distribution of Welfare State help for young people in France was centred on the family according to a conservative-corporatist, partially decommodified model. Van de Velde demonstrates that this is still largely the case and that the modus operandi of most state benefits remains based on a model of the family helping young people. Thus, young people are obliged to remain in a position of family dependence before becoming financially independent adults. What is more, during a period of austerity and recession, academic success is far more important to find a job than during less difficult economic times, which leads to greater competition at school and even more stress for pupils and students (Van de Velde, 2012, p. 22).

Reflecting the then prevailing sociological approach of the time, in the 1970s, the French government tended to consider youth as a ‘problem’. This was largely due to the worsening economic situation and because the difficulties associated with youth (e.g. high joblessness rates) were interpreted as problems attributable to their life stage, rather than structural problems (Labadie, 2012b). Since then, successive French governments have continued to regard young people as a problem (Charvet, 2001), both in relation to youth unemployment and youth crime.

In youth policy terms, this interpretation led to an accumulation of short-term targeted schemes (that were not universal) aimed at resolving specific issues, resulting in a ‘labyrinth’ of policies (Demuynick, 2009) which were fragmented between different ministries, rather than constituting a joined-up cross departmental youth policy. In the twenty-first century, there has been a marked increase in political interest in youth and youth policy. Youth has featured prominently in numerous political speeches, official reports, political pledges and public policy measures (Becquet, Loncle, & Van de Velde, 2012; Brier, 2010). This proliferation results partially from the especially vulnerable situation many young people are in as a result of the enduring unfavourable economic context in France.

**Sarkozy: zero tolerance and numerous ineffective schemes**

In youth policy terms, Nicolas Sarkozy’s centre-right presidency (2007–2012) was characterised by two main themes: youth justice and youth unemployment. Nicolas
Sarkozy’s relationship with French youth came under the media spotlight before he became president when he was Home Secretary (Ministre de l’Intérieur) from 2005 to 2007. During his very first month in office, whilst visiting the poor northern Parisian suburb city of La Courneuve, on 20 June 2005, he declared that he would get rid of the ‘thugs and hooligans’.\(^5\) A few days later, in the same neighbourhood, he proclaimed that he would clean up the rundown social housing estates with a high-pressure cleaner.\(^6\) Nicolas Sarkozy went on to assert, in September 2005, that in order to protect the safety of French citizens he would come down hard on delinquents, travellers and illegal immigrants.\(^7\) The following month, whilst on a visit to Argenteuil, another poor Parisian suburb, young people hurled stones and abuse at the Home Secretary who was filmed by television cameras avowing that he would ‘get rid of the rabble’.\(^8\) The next day, two teenagers were accidentally killed and another injured on their way back after playing football in the Parisian suburb Clichy-Sous-Bois. Nicolas Sarkozy implied that Zyed Benna, aged 17 years, and Bouna Traoré, aged 15 years, were attempting to steal from a building site and declared that police officers (who had allegedly been chasing them) were thus not responsible for their deaths (by electrocution in an electricity transformer where they hid). Over the next three weeks, there followed extensive urban violence which developed into riots in Parisian and provincial suburbs, with a national state of emergency being declared on 8 November 2005. In terms of public policy responses, Nicolas Sarkozy’s repressive reaction as Home Secretary insisted on introducing ‘zero tolerance’ for the ‘gang leaders’ and ‘drug barons’, combined with a greater presence from riot police.\(^9\) Thus, within the space of five months, Nicolas Sarkozy became associated with hard-line pejorative, rhetoric and repressive youth policy concerning young people whom he often portrayed as dangerous and a threat (Pickard, Nativel, & Portier, 2012). Therefore, regarding youth justice, the image of youth as a problem persisted and the policies became more authoritarian.

Nicolas Sarkozy’s ‘zero tolerance’ youth policy, whilst Home Secretary, was to provide the backdrop to further repressive policies when he became president on 6 May 2007. The country was to witness the hardening and widening of youth justice measures, starting with the introduction of minimum sentences that did not take into account the fact that the accused were minors and an extension of the length of time 16–18-year-olds could be detained in police custody. Two years later, in June 2009, an official ruling dubbed the ‘anti-hoodie decree’ (décret anti-cagoule) was passed against deliberately hiding one’s face during a public demonstration so as not to be identified by public authorities (with a 1500-euro fine) and a ban on being member of a violent gang was introduced.

However, there was a significant shift in focus regarding youth policy in August 2008 with the creation of a new governmental position – a High Commissioner for Youth (Haut-Commissaire à la Jeunesse) – in order ‘to develop a youth policy in favour of young people’. Martin Hirsch took up the non-ministerial position in January 2009; he was already High Commissioner against Poverty and he had previously been director of Emmaüs, a major French charity. As he was not a member of the UMP party and he was popular among the left, his appointment was widely interpreted by practitioners as a political attempt to deal in a more positive and less fragmented way with the ‘youth problem’, especially unemployment among young people, which then stood at 21%. The move was also seen as an attempt by Nicolas Sarkozy to energise the second half of his five-year presidential term of office that was continuing to suffer due to the recession.

Martin Hirsch was involved in the launch of the youth ‘emergency plan’ (plan d’urgence) initiated by Nicolas Sarkozy in April 2009 when youth unemployment topped 24%. The main goal was to get 700,000 young people into training or a job before mid-2010. This was to be
achieved via a series of specific social inclusion and job accompaniment schemes aimed at different sets of young people having difficulty entering the labour market. Companies received financial incentives to take on young people either as trainees or as workers. The plan had a two-pronged approach: first, apprenticeships, with the aim creating 320,000 apprenticeship contracts through tax incentives and financial rewards to companies taking on apprentices; second, ‘assisted contracts’ (Contrats Aidés), called CIVIS (Contrats d’Insertion dans la Vie Sociale), in the public sector and CAE (Contrats d’Accompagnement dans l’Emploi) in the private sector. The government also set the target of 50,000 support contracts (Contrats d’Accompagnement) for unqualified young workers to get them into vocational training and introduced financial incentives for companies to give interns permanent contracts. Furthermore, it set the target of creating 170,000 work contracts (Contrats Pro) via bonuses for businesses, giving a contract to a worker aged under 26. Simultaneously, in April 2009, a new type of unemployment benefit (assurance-chômage) was developed to reduce the length of time (from six to four months) in employment needed to be able to receive State help. Thus, a series of targeted schemes was launched in order to reduce the burgeoning issue of youth unemployment during the economic crisis.

Six months after taking office, Martin Hirsch, the High Commissioner for Youth published the Green Paper on Youth (Livre Vert sur la Jeunesse), on 6 July 2009. The recommendations emphasised the importance of having a new type of coherent, cross-departmental youth policy and that all actors – the State, local authorities, social partners, associations, educational establishments, etc. – needed to be involved, as well as young people themselves. He underlined the urgency of developing such an unprecedented integrated youth policy over the long term, especially due to the economic, social and moral crises (Hirsch, 2009, p. 7). The Green Paper contained 57 youth policy proposals clearly centred on getting young people into jobs.

The Green Paper was the precursor to Martin Hirsch’s ‘Youth Plan’ (Plan Jeunes: Agir pour la Jeunesse) that was focused on detecting young people in difficulty at school and at risk of dropping out, thereby precluding entry into the labour market. The guiding principle behind the project was ‘l’autonomie pour chaque jeune’ (Hirsch, 2009, p. 8), i.e. autonomy for all young people. Here, there was a noticeable shift in discourse regarding the meaning of ‘autonomy’, from it previously implying ‘independence’, to it now suggesting ‘empowerment’; the empowerment of young people to make life choices pertaining to their personal and professional life involving a strengthening of agency. The plan was articulated around four key axes: education and careers advice (orientation), financial independence, entering the labour market (insertion) and civil engagement with an emphasis on targeting dropouts (décrocheurs), i.e. NEETs. In terms of concrete policies, a key policy associated with the Plan Jeune was a very controversial social inclusion income supplement. Martin Hirsch had already introduced, in June 2009, the social welfare supplement – the Revenu de Solidarité Active (RSA) – that had been only for over 25-year-olds. It was extended to under 25-year-olds in September 2010: the RSA jeune. The thinking behind it was to encourage young people to enter the labour market, to accelerate the return to work of unemployed young people and to reduce social exclusion.

Another aspect to youth policy initiated by Martin Hirsch was the voluntary citizenship work scheme (service civique) for 16–25-year-olds that came into being in May 2010. Young people are encouraged to participate for 6 to 12 months in a citizenship project, via associations or local authorities and they received a modest indemnity (it is not a work contract).

In this way, during the first two years of Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency, young people had been first commonly depicted as delinquents and the policy response lay in the criminalisation
of juvenile delinquency. As the economy and the condition of youth worsened, young people increasingly came to be portrayed as a problem regarding joblessness. More and more targeted measures were introduced to encourage the entry of young people into the labour market. Indeed, the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy in terms of youth policy was marked by the proliferation of targeted schemes and measures. The recommendations in the 2009 Green Paper on Youth from Martin Hirsch represented a definite shift away from traditional, fragmented French youth policy. They implied a move away from the convention that State help for children and young people in France be enacted and executed through the family unit (benefits and allowances being paid to the parents, via means-testing of the parental tax returns) – a corporatist welfare model – to a more Northern European social democratic model, where the young person is personally responsible (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Van de Velde, 2008). The young person would thus be enabled to intellectually and financially look after himself/herself, whilst contributing to society: he/she would be ‘autonomous’ (Cicchelli, 2012) and empowered, as underlined in the Youth Green Paper.

However, most of these recommendations would not be enacted. Furthermore, whilst Martin Hirsch had urged that all young people, regardless of their work experience should benefit from the RSA jeune (i.e. it should be universal); only a diluted version was introduced with very strict access criteria, including the requirement to have worked full-time for a total of at least two out of the past three years, or to be a young parent. In terms of reducing social justice and increasing autonomy, this was a real policy weakness since it was not universal and it excluded many vulnerable young people. Furthermore, regarding the new service civique – the young people who participate receive an indemnity below the rate of the minimum wage (Salaire Minimum Interprofessionnel de Croissance – [SMIC]) and the third sector has experienced a cut in public funding as part of austerity measures, which suggests that young people are being used as cheap labour (Cnajep, 2012). Other austerity measures enacted by the Nicolas Sarkozy Government included a reduction in the budgets granted to pre-emptive educative help for young people with learning difficulties and other preventative measures, as well as non-formal education projects for youth. The targeted schemes introduced by Nicolas Sarkozy aimed at enabling young people to get a permanent job contract are also often described as a failure (Perrin, 2011) (with the exception of apprenticeships). On the one hand, by the end of 2010, fewer than 7000 young people had obtained a permanent contract via the schemes, rather than the 50,000 initially forecast by the government. Only 10,000 young people had benefited from the RSA scheme, rather the 160,000-target set by the government (Perrin, 2011) (partially due to the very strict eligibility criteria, thus locking out the neediest young people). On the other hand, youth unemployment continued to rise during Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency (at a greater rate than for the French population as a whole). Furthermore, critics claim that such projects tended to stigmatise the youths involved (Fourneyron, 2012).

By the time the RSA jeune and the Service civique came into effect, Martin Hirsch had already left office after just over a year in the position as High Commissioner for Youth – he had not obtained from the government the 1.6 billion euros he requested to implement his recommendations outlined in the Youth Green Paper. Thus, the notion of having a coherent, comprehensive and positive youth policy including social justice (via the Welfare State) for young people evaporated, whilst youth unemployment and the recession worsened as the 2012 presidential election drew closer.

**Hollande: social justice and cross-departmental youth policy**

On becoming president in May 2012, the Socialist François Hollande placed young people at the very heart of his victory speech and pledged to make them his priority along with
social justice. When entering office, he declared he would transform the image of young people from their being seen as a problem and danger (associated with Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency) to their being seen as the future. In particular, he recognised the seriousness of the economic context for young people. François Hollande immediately appointed Valérie Fourneyron as the Minister for Sport, Youth, Non-Formal Education and Associative Life (Ministre des Sports, de la Jeunesse, de l’Éducation Populaire et de la Vie Associative). She swiftly introduced two schemes centred on reducing youth unemployment and safeguarding career pathways (sécurisation des parcours) that had already been outlined in François Hollande’s 2012 election manifesto.

First, Intergenerational Work Contracts (Contrats de Génération) were launched in September 2012 to facilitate the entry of young people under 30 years into permanent contracts and reduce unemployment among older workers via an agreement with an employer. The young employee is trained with the help of the senior employee and the State subsidises the contract up to 2000 euros a month. The government set a target of establishing 500,000 contracts in five years. Second, the Jobs of the Future (Emplois d’Avenir) scheme was launched in October 2012, with the aim of giving unqualified young people a second chance to be trained and to take up a job. The emphasis is laid on personalised (one-to-one) career advice and guidance, followed by a State-subsidised permanent contract or a three-year contract with local and regional authorities or associations. In his 2012 manifesto, François Hollande pledged to create 150,000 places before 2014 to aid young people get a job, especially in poor neighbourhoods.

After the implementation of these two emergency schemes came the publication, on 4 December 2012, by the National Institute for Youth and Non-Formal Education (Injep) (Labadie, 2012b) of a report titled ‘Inequalities among young people during the economic crisis’ (Inégalités entre Jeunes sur Fond de Crise) indicating the impact of the recession regarding the condition of youth. The authors outline throughout the report how during the recession French the gap between the socio-economic groups has widened, leading to an intra-generational cleavage, which can be crudely summed up as a gap between rich (qualified) and poor (unqualified) young people (Bouzou & Ferry, 2011, p. 57; Labadie, 2012b) that represents a threat for the country’s social cohesion.

During her speech at the launch of the Injep report, Minister for Youth, Valérie Fourneyron declared that her goals mirrored those of François Hollande’s during his victory speech: to make a youth policy for all young people, to reinstate social cohesion and to bring together the country (‘Mon objectif, notre objectif est bien de faire une politique pour toute la jeunesse, de restaurer la cohésion sociale, de réconcilier notre pays’). She affirmed that young people were the Socialist Government’s priority during its five-year term of office (‘La Jeunesse, priorité du quinquennat’). In order to finance these aims, Valérie Fourneyron proclaimed that almost 30% of the State budget in 2013, i.e. 82.5 billion euros, would be devoted to 3–30-year-olds (an enormous age group). According to her, this represents an 8% increase compared to previous years.

Moreover, the minister announced that a defunct Cross-Ministerial Committee for Youth (Comité Interministériel de la Jeunesse [CIJ]) chaired by the prime minister would be reinstated and meet for the first time in early 2013 with the aim of developing an integrated, coherent public youth policy, involving young people themselves ‘to guarantee social cohesion’. She insisted on a point mentioned in the Injep report – the commitment to ‘ensure all young people have access to social protection by putting an end to the accumulation of measures and to adopt an approach of universal benefits and social citizenship’ (‘Assurer la protection sociale des jeunes, en mettant fin à la superposition de dispositifs et adopter enfin une logique de droit commun et de citoyenneté sociale’). She insisted that whilst there are
many different types of young people, she was committed to avoiding the ‘errors of the past’. She did not favour the pigeon holing of French youth into subgroups in order to tailor measures to the needs of a particular set of young people. Such targeted measures, she felt, would be divisive and stigmatising for the young people concerned (Fourneyron, 2012). The Minister of Youth underlined that the increasingly vulnerable position of the younger generation compared to older generations and the inequalities between young people of different socio-economic origins is due to the ‘current economic and social crisis’. This new interpretation places the blame on the global and national economies rather than young people themselves and their life stage. The Injep report echoes this stance (Labadie, 2012b) and gives a considerably more positive image of youth.

The Cross-Ministerial Committee for Youth launched its ‘Priority Youth’ (‘Priorité Jeunesse’) plan in February 2013 with four fundamental priorities: (1) give priority to universal benefits; (2) encourage youth empowerment and autonomy; (3) attack social injustice; and (4) encourage the participation of young people in public affairs, as well as 13 ‘priority objectives’ and 47 ‘concrete measures’.

Two measures have been particularly well received by practitioners and academics: first, the overhaul of the public careers service providing information and counselling; second, the increase in the number of places on the voluntary citizenship work scheme (service civique), taking the number of young people from 20,000 to 30,000 per year. In 2013, its budget was increased by 14.3% to 160 million euros, but the budget for non-formal education was decreased by 5.8% (Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances, 2012) to the disappointment of many organizations working with youth (Cnajep, 2012). Further dissatisfaction arose from the fact that by the end of December 2012, none of the youth employment measures introduced during Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency had been withdrawn or revoked. On the contrary, the two new measures, the Emplois d’Avenir and Contrats de Génération, had been added to the already vast panoply of targeted youth unemployment policies introduced by previous governments, including those launched during Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency (see above). Furthermore, regarding social protection, there has not been a move towards a universal system of allowances – the RSA jeune has not been extended and remains available only to young people over 25 years apart from in some very strict situations. This has been deplored by various institutions including the main student union, the Union Nationale des Étudiants de France (UNEF), and the Conseil d’Analyse Économique (CEA), which claims that universality would help fight poverty, as well as by researchers such as Peugny (2013, p. 29) and Bouzou and Ferry (2011).

Furthermore, the welfare system under François Hollande continues to be corporatist (Esping-Andersen, 1990); it encourages young people to be dependent on their families for support, it does not provide universal benefits for young people and there are numerous different schemes including many targeted ones – the multiplicity of measures has not been simplified; on the contrary, it has been reinforced. This is problematic for several reasons. First, it makes life difficult for youths who have a poor or no relationship with their parents. Second, it lengthens the period of dependency on families (Labadie, 2012a), which has already grown due to the economic crisis. Third, it does not empower young people to obtain social insertion, ‘to place oneself’ and ‘to become adults’ (Van de Velde, 2008). Fourth, it reinforces social inequalities prejudicing young people from lower socio-economic groups and these disparities have been worsening due to the ongoing poor economic context. Fifth, young people who benefit from specific schemes for disadvantaged youths continue to be stigmatised. Sixth, with the focus being on unemployment of specific groups, the youth continues to be perceived as a problem. Moreover, the current system is in contradiction with two of the four stated ‘main concerns’ of the government in the ‘Priority
Youth’ plan of early 2013 regarding autonomy and social justice. Thus, there is a clear discrepancy between, on the one side, concrete policies and, on the other side, political discourse regarding attitudes to young people and youth policy, which seem to pay lip service to practitioners and academics. Thus far, the latter remain, on the whole, rather disappointed regarding youth policy under François Hollande and would like to see a clean break with youth policy under Nicolas Sarkozy.

Conclusions
The presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande have both been characterised by a poor economic climate that has especially affected young people. Both presidencies have been marked by high unemployment rates, with a quarter of young people unemployed by the end of 2012. As a result, the gap between qualified and unqualified French youth has worsened during the recession. On the one hand, young people with no qualifications are increasingly exposed to long-term social exclusion: the ‘scarring effect’. On the other hand, young people with qualifications are experiencing a devaluation of their studies. Both are undergoing a deterioration of their working conditions. Intra-generational inequalities have widened primarily due to the continuing recession, but this contextual factor is worsened by structural factors linked to rigidity and a long-standing resistance to change within the education system (Cahuc, Carcillo, & Zimmermann, 2013; Van Zanten, 2011) and the labour market (Jugnot, 2012). As pointed out by Van de Velde (2008, 2010, 2012), France has a distinctly divisive education system that tends to be centred on acquiring facts and knowledge rather than skills, which discriminates against the unqualified, as does a strong attachment to success on the labour market being linked to success at secondary and higher education. To this can be added a noticeably inflexible work environment that is reluctant to adopt neoliberal flexible working practices, such as on-the-job training, sandwich courses and apprenticeships, which can allow less qualified and unqualified young people to enter the labour market. The increase in temporary contracts, part-time working and ‘survival jobs’ create insecurity and lead to the exploitation of young people (Furlong, 2013, p. 86), as well as the individualisation of pathways (MacDonald, 2009) for these new entrants to the labour market. Due to social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964), unqualified youth suffers the most in this context with young people from poorer neighbourhoods and/or from certain minority ethnic backgrounds, such as the Maghreb or sub-Saharan Africa experiencing the most inequalities and social injustice (Brinbaum & Guégnard, 2012, Van Zanten, 2011). The ambitious partial remedy for continued high levels of youth unemployment, according to Labadie (2012b, pp. 13–53) and Galland (2012b, pp. 33–43), could be found in a coherent youth policy, in a fundamental restructuring of the education system, combined with a reduction in the importance of certificates, diplomas and degrees in professional and social pathways, as well as the prioritizing of the unqualified (Prévost, 2012). This would require an enormous effort over the long term to enact structural changes and entail a considerable amount of discontinuity with the previous youth policy.

Reluctance to change is also noticeable in ongoing resistance of governments to change the way social welfare system operates, i.e. through the family (except for housing benefit), rather than through the individual young person (Chevalier, 2012). This inertia lengthens economic dependency on the family, preventing young people from ‘placing themselves’ within society and obtaining the very autonomy advocated by governments.

However, there has been a clear shift in the portrayal of youth during the two presidencies. Whilst Nicolas Sarkozy tended to render a negative image of youth, who were often embodied as the avatar of social unrest and division, i.e. ‘a problem’, under
François Hollande youth is being portrayed in a much more positive, unifying and hopeful light deliberately marking a clear discontinuity with the past.

Both Martin Hirsch as High Commissioner for Youth, in 2009, and subsequently Valérie Fourneyron as Minister for Youth, in 2012, called for joined up coherent cross-departmental youth policy. However, Martin Hirsch resigned from his post in the Spring of 2010 after just over a year in office and the ambitious goals for youth he laid out in the Youth Green Paper were largely abandoned. The establishment of a post of Minister for Youth occupied by Valérie Fourneyron and her re-establishment of the Inter-ministerial Youth Commission is more likely to be successful at creating a coherent cross-departmental youth policy, as recommended by Martin Hirsch.

In terms of guiding principles and goals in French youth policy, both presidencies seem to be coloured by the same themes. Three have featured very prominently: entry into the labour market \((\text{insertion})\), autonomy \((\text{autonomie})\) and citizenship \((\text{citoyenneté})\). These are by no means new concepts and it is striking how all three have appeared and reappeared on the French youth policy merry-go-round over the past 20 to 30 years (Becquet et al., 2012). The plans announced on 4 December 2012 by the Minister for Youth find clear echoes in the September 2009 plan emanating for the Green Paper on Youth (2009). Thus, there appears to be a clear continuity in the themes and goals of youth policy, principally due to the increasingly high levels of unemployment among young people and structural issues. However, with the arrival of François Hollande there has also been an emphasis on achieving social justice and equality among young people to reduce youth poverty and intra-generational differences, which did not feature in Nicolas Sarkozy’s discourse.

From 2007 to 2012, the country witnessed an accumulation of emergency and stopgap measures to deal with youth unemployment, leading to a confused and confusing landscape in terms of youth policy. This opacity or lack of readability has been widely recognised and criticised (Becquet et al., 2012, p. 9). At the end of Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency in 2012, French youth policy seemed to be in a vicious circle characterised an accumulation of emergency measures attempting to deal with an ever-worsening situation for youth (Becquet et al., 2012, p. 8). Even though the Minister for Youth under François Hollande slated this accumulation of measures during her 4 December 2012 speech, stating that youth policy had become an incomprehensible and inefficient ‘\(\text{millefeuille}\)’ (multi-layered pastry) (Fourneyron, 2012), after a year in office, she had not scrapped any of the previous government’s schemes and had in fact added to them. The themes and the means to deal with youth during the economic downturn seem, thus, to be a continuity of the five previous years. Meanwhile, young people have become even more dependent on their family, which reinforces inequalities and increases individualisation.

Therefore, whilst there is a clear discontinuity in terms of political discourse concerning young people, there remains a large degree of continuity in so far as youth unemployment remains the focal point of youth policy and so youth remains a problem; young people continue to be dependent on their families for the distribution of welfare benefits and the \(\text{RSA}\) allowance has not been extended to under 25-year-olds. It remains difficult for young people to ‘place themselves’ and become empowered and independent (autonomous) in the French society. The striking declaration made by François Hollande during his victory speech in 2012 that he should be judged at the end of his five years in office on an improvement in condition of French youth and social justice was a bold one. His success will depend on three crucial contextual and structural factors. First, the French economy, as well as the world economy, must improve significantly; second, radical changes to the education system and the work environment must be enacted; third, the
welfare regime must be overhauled with the creation of universal benefits attributed directly to young people. Rendezvous in 2017.

Notes
1. François Hollande (6 May 2012). Corrèze: ‘Aujourd’hui même où les Français m’ont investi président de la République, je demande à être jugé sur deux engagements majeurs: la justice et la jeunesse. Chacun de mes choix, chacune de mes décisions se fondera sur ces seuls critères: Est-ce juste? Est-ce vraiment pour la jeunesse? Et quand, au terme de mon mandat, je regarderai à mon tour ce que j’aurai fait pour mon pays, je ne me poserai que ces seules questions: Est-ce que j’ai fait avancer la cause de l’égalité? Est-ce que j’ai permis à la nouvelle génération de prendre toute sa place au sein de la République?’

2. There is a broad spectrum of political parties in France. Whilst the two main parties are the centre-left PS (Parti Socialiste) and the centre-right UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire), the extreme-right wing party FN (Front National) also tends to gain a sizeable proportion of votes in most elections, as do extreme-left parties to a lesser degree. For the French presidential elections of April and May 2012, in the first round of voting, the results were as follows: François Hollande (Parti Socialiste) 28.63%, Nicolas Sarkozy (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) 27.18%, Marine Le Pen (Front National) 17.90%, Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Front de Gauche) 11.10%, François Bayrou (Mouvement Démocrate) 9.13%, others 6.06%. In the second round of voting, François Hollande obtained 51.64% and Nicolas Sarkozy 48.36% of votes, making the former President of the French Republic for the next five years. The Parti Socialiste obtained the majority in the Senate in 2011 and in the National Assembly in June 2012.

3. Prior to the latest recession and up until 2012, France had a president from the centre-right: Jacques Chirac was the president of the French Republic between 1995 and 2007. From 1995 to 2002 there was a centre-right Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) presidency and from 2002 to 2012 a centre-right Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) presidency. Between 1997 and 2002 there was ‘cohabitation’ with a centre-left Socialist government when Lionel Jospin was Prime Minister. After 17 years of conservative presidency, the country elected a moderate left-wing Socialist president: François Hollande.

4. There is no official definition of youth (‘Jeunesse’) in terms of age range in France. The national statistics authority, Insee, tends to use the 15–24 age group for its data, including unemployment statistics (even though school-leaving age is 16 years). However, it utilises under-20 for certain data collection and it has started to use the 18–30 age range in some of its analyses. Other statistical organisations employ different age groups, for example 16–25, 16–29, or even 16–35; so it is often difficult to make national and international comparisons of indicators (Demuynick, 2009, p. 16). It should also be noted that official statistics in France generally do not include the ethnic origin of the population. This is because the census does not contain such information, as it is not allowed in accordance with the French constitution pertaining to discrimination on the grounds of race.

5. Nicolas Sarkozy (June 20 2005). La Courneuve: ‘Les voyous vont disparaıˆtre. Je mettrai les effectifs qu’il faut, mais on nettoiera la Cité des 4000’.

6. Nicolas Sarkozy (29 June 2005). La Courneuve: ‘Le terme “nettoyer au Kärcher” est le terme qui s’impose, parce qu’il faut nettoyer cela’. (France 2 télévision, 2005 June 29).

7. Nicolas Sarkozy (9 September 2005). Speech to police chiefs (préfets).

8. Nicolas Sarkozy (26 October 2005). Argenteuil: ‘Vous en avez assez, hein, vous en avez assez de cette bande de racailles? Eh bien on va vous en débarrasser’ (France 2 télévision, 8 pm news, 26 October 2005).

9. Nicolas Sarkozy (31 October 2005). Seine-Saint-Denis.

10. Injep – Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l’ Éducation Populaire is the publicly funded autonomous institution which is attached to the Ministry for Youth.

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