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Understanding, Problematizing and Rethinking Youth Transitions to Adulthood

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Introduction

Within the individual life course that spans between the birth and the end of life, youth has been traditionally interpreted as a phase of preparation to adulthood, that is as a moment of transition in which individuals are meant to acquire, practice, and master the social capacities that are commonly associated with the adult status: maturity, responsibility, and independence. This conceptualization of youth implies an idea of adulthood as a desirable goal and, as a matter of fact, in most societies around the world becoming adult grants individuals with the rights and the privileges of a full membership. As the passage from youth to adulthood symbolically marks the abandonment of a condition of dependence and the achievement of a condition of independence, achieving an adult status impacts on the possibility to be recognized as mature, autonomous, responsible, and complete subjects by the communities we belong to.

In pre-modern societies marked the passage from youth to adulthood through spectacular and highly symbolic “rites of passage” aimed at proving one’s strength, maturity, responsibility (and virility) and the passage was commonly signaled through permanent corporal modifications such as tattoo and scars (Van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1969). In modern societies five main life events are commonly used to assess the (successful) completion of the transition. The end of studies, the entry into the world of work (with a stable job), the exit from the parental houses, the starting of a new family through marriage or cohabitation, and the birth of the first child represent the thresholds that every young person is expected to trespass to

achieve the status of adult. These events develop along two main axes which refer, respectively, to the *public sphere* - from school to professional career - and to the *private sphere* - from life in the family of origin to independent life in one's own family and, as for the premodern rites of passage, each of them is supposed to permanently mark the abandonment of youth and the entrance in adulthood (Pitti and Tuorto, 2020)

Despite markers of adulthood are common to most societies in the Global North and Global South, the timing of this process is regulated in each society and historical period by specific norms that establish the most appropriate ages for the transition and type of sequence (Elder, 1975). Moreover, several factors can condition single events within the path of transition or the entire path of transition: "micro-social factors" such as individual and family characteristics (e.g., class of belonging, national origin, level of education, etc.), as well as "macro-social factors" like the institutional configurations of the labor market, the welfare state and the family models prevailing at a given socio-historical moment within specific geographical contexts (Coffey & Williamson, 1999; Feixa et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2021). Indeed, youth transitions are profoundly influenced by the socio-historical scenario in which they develop, which constantly redefine the contents and boundaries of youth and adulthood, as well as the very possibility of these life phases' existence.

As both youth and adulthood are social constructs, the understanding of the transition between them always implies to reflect on the processes that, in each society and historical time, define *how* the transition must occur and *when* it can be considered complete, as well as on the different possibilities of achieving a complete adult status granted to different social demographics on the basis, for example, of gender (e.g., for many young women the possibility of being independent are hindered by norms limiting their access to property) or disability (e.g., for many people with disabilities the possibilities of being independent are hindered by the lack of services). In this perspective, exploring transitions to adulthood implies to study the paths through which young people grow up and reach the adult status, analyze these paths' duration and linearity, reflect on the intersectional influences of gender, class, race, and other variables on youth transitions, analyze the events through which each society marks the passage from youth to adulthood, as well as to reflect on these markers' validity (Blatterer, 2010; Pitti, 2017).

Understanding (contemporary changes in) youth transitions to adulthood

For a brief period between the end of Second World War and the late '70s, transitions to adulthood appeared an ordered and institutionally guided path at least for a segment of the youth population in Western societies. Between the '50s and the '70s, most middle-class young men would, in fact, easily, quickly, and orderly achieve the five markers of adulthood thanks to an institutional and cultural systems that strongly encouraged and sustained this process.

After the Second World War, Western economies went through an unprecedented period of growth which was sustained by high levels of social expenditure, the achievement of full employment, and the expansion of welfare state. In this context, the consolidation of a labor market based on long-term contracts and steady hierarchical career progressions allowed workers to be able to count on a widely predictable career path, marked by standardized

intermediate stages and retirement as a certain destination. These social conditions were supported by a system of values (structured around the nuclear family based on marriage) that was scarcely contested at least until the 1960s. While the social context granted most of the youth population with vast opportunities to successfully trespass the thresholds of transition to adult life, the value sphere - also through media - contributed to making these thresholds a widely shared ambition (Côté 2000; Crawford 2007). Between the '50s and the '70s, the classic markers of adulthood were something concretely tangible and reachable for a large part of the (male) population of Western countries and precisely this closeness between ideals and reality has contributed at transforming these thresholds in a standard through which measuring the achievement of adulthood. Drawing on Blatter (2010), it is possible to argue that “when long-term fulltime work was within reach for the majority and early marriage and parenthood so common, the meaning of being ‘grown up’ was perfectly clear, and the attainment of the classic markers brought with them the recognition of adult status”.

However, since the '80s and particularly since the '90s, research has revealed the profound transformations occurred to youth transitions in contemporary society. Indeed, scholars agree that a processes of deinstitutionalization of life courses has introduced several elements of differentiation in youth paths of transitions to adulthood. Compared to their peers of previous decades, who entered the adult world rapidly and following a largely predictable path, contemporary young people would face a more uncertain social context in which transitions become more complex and differentiated while the full achievement of the adult status becomes less certain and less stable.

Nowadays it becomes more likely that the end of studies follows the start of work or life as a couple, that the birth of a child precedes marriage, or that periods of independent living are interrupted by returns to one's family home. Unlike in the past, professional fulfillment no longer necessarily coincides with family fulfillment and the time between the end of studies and the formation of an autonomous family is extended. In this perspective the life moments in which youth can be 'broken down' (i.e., the phases of professional attempts, of friendship and couple sociality and of housing arrangements) are more flexibly combined than in the past (Galland, 2010). Next to these processes of differentiation, structural changes in the labor market (e.g., job flexibility) and welfare systems (e.g., reduction in social expenditures) have made it more difficult for young people to construct a coherent biographical project (Beck, 1986). The lengthening of the cohabitation between parents and children that has been observed across Europe, for example, reflect the protracted condition of economic and professional instability experienced by young generations since the '80s (Unt et al., 2021).

To define the experiences of contemporary young people, Mayer (1994) coined the expression of “postponed generation”. Other authors, emphasizing the alternation of steps forward and backward along the adult path, have spoken of yo-yo transitions (Biggart & Walther, 2005) or used the metaphor of the boomerang (Mitchell, 2006) to indicate the loss of relevance of traditional passing markers and the change in meaning that these markers have assumed among young people. More than a path from a starting point to a safe point of arrival, contemporary youth transitions would be distinguished for their potential “reversibility” (Benasso & Magaraggia, 2019).

It must be noted that the deinstitutionalization of life courses also responds to structural changes as much as to a demand coming from individuals, who attach greater

importance to the possibility of change, of resuming interrupted paths, of starting over both in the work and in the family field. Decisive in determining these new orientations were the changes in individual choices that characterized the “second demographic transition” thanks, above all, to the increased participation of women in the job market, the diffusion of models of family alternative to the marriage, and the decrease in reproduction. As a consequence of the changed scenario, a new course of life has emerged in particular for young women whose lifepaths no longer univocally marked by reproductive tasks and more individualized, also following the increase in the level of education and reduced dependence on the family (Blatterer, 2010).

Problematizing youth transitions and their final goal

In this light, contemporary youth transitions to adulthood would be characterized by more freedom, as well as by more risks and would then combine conditions of dependence proper of the youth condition, with responsibility and capacity/necessity of choice proper of the adult status.

Acknowledging the blurring lines between youth and adulthood, Arnett (2004) talks about contemporary youth as “emerging adulthood” and identifies some features that characterize the individual development process today: the identity exploration that continues even after adolescence, the instability connected to the prolonged search for one’s own place in the world, the focus on the self, on one’s own resources and objectives, the feeling of precariousness, and the phase of possibilities understood as a dynamic period of evaluation of the different opportunities available. Emphasis is given by Arnett to the element of experimentation, of being “in between”: during their youth, contemporary young people would have more opportunities to focus on themselves, engage in training and work opportunities as well as in premarital ties without having to direct their biography towards a definitive status. The postponement of the ages and stages would free them from social constraints and allows them to cultivate individual aspects of their personality. According to this thesis, the expanded construction of a new adulthood affects young people from all Western countries with further convergence processes taking place outside the Western context.

In line with the “emerging adulthood” model, some authors have shed light on the development of a “new adulthood”. According to this perspective, the condition of today’s young people is not so much characterized by the postponement of transitions as by the fact that they find themselves having to manage a strong pressure to anticipate, to quickly take control of their biographies to cope with the uncertainties. In the current historical-social order, therefore, a new way of *being* an adult would emerge. For Wyn and Woodman (2007) typical aspects of the new adulthood are the responsibility, the choice between different options, the balance between spheres of life as a protective mechanism against job instability, the enhancement of extra-family relationships in response to the weakening and thinning of the family units. Within this model, adulthood would lose the character of a stable and definitive condition ending up manifesting itself, on a psychological level, as a subjective maturation

process that occurs in the absence of traditional status markers and essentially starting from a mental condition (Blatterer, 2010).

According to these perspectives, the blurring boundaries between youth and adulthood, the extension of the duration of the youth phase, as well as the tight and narrow spaces of a present marked by economic, political, social, health and environmental crises have increased young people's difficulties in finding and imagining one's own space, both individually and collectively. From being a phase of preparation for adult life youth is today mostly an uncertain condition and enjoys today a less clear status than yesterday. What does it mean to be "young"? What "social functions" does the youth phase play in the individual life path? When does youth begin and when does it end? If in the past the family, the school, the labor market, and the other traditional institutions of modernity have been able to provide socially elaborate answers to these and other questions, today it is more and more young people who must give - autonomously and with resources they have - meaning and value to youth.

However, as traditional paths of transitions to adulthood become less binding than in the past, but also less stable, also the goal of youth transitions – adulthood – become a less defined and more problematic status. When we speak of "adult" are we referring to a married person or can a person living alone be considered adult too? Does one's economic condition or placement in the labor market matter in this definition? Is it enough to refer to psychological maturity or to the age of majority? What impact do regressive events such as job loss, returning home, leaving the life of a couple have on the adult status? What it means to be an adult today and through which changes of status this event can be established is neither clear nor univocally determined.

Conclusions: Rethinking youth transitions

Despite being increasingly problematic and problematized, the classic idea of transitions to adulthood based on the five traditional markers still represents a relevant normative model in contemporary societies. In this perspective, Lee (2001) has suggested that the path of transition to adulthood traced by the five markers constitute a "standard model of adulthood". Indeed, the ordered and clear sequence of events of the transition based on the completion of studies, stable employment, independent living, cohabitation, and parenthood remain the main model against which contemporary young people are expected to navigate their transitions from youth to adulthood. Although consolidated in the short period of time between the '50s and the '70s and despite having become increasingly unachievable in the following decades, the standard model of adulthood has never been really abandoned and adopted by adults and institutions as a measure to assess young people's maturity. Moreover, despite being based on the experience of white middle class young men of the Global North, this standard has become a guiding model for adult maturity whose validity has been generalized to women, minorities, youth belonging to low-income families, and young people in non-industrialized countries.

These processes of institutionalization and generalization of the standard model of adulthood produce a series of consequences for young people as their paths of transitions to adulthood are continuously assessed against the standard. The lack of problematization of the

standard model of adult limit the possibility to recognize young people's difficulties in reaching it, as well as young people's elaboration of new models of adulthood.

On the one, the struggle experienced by young people in achieving the standard model of adult rarely foster a debate on the limits of the model against the changes occurred in the contemporary era (e.g., the dismantling of wage-based labor market, the increased flexibilization) and rarely result in an acknowledgement of the fact that the different life conditions from which different young people start their paths of transition may make the achievement of that standard impossible. Indeed, even when changes in transitions to adulthood are acknowledged, the prevailing readings emphasize the dimension of choice by subjects asked to find their ways amongst an increasingly wide range of possibilities. In reality, many scholars have observed that the deinstitutionalization of career opportunities, the possibility of autonomously constructing one's own biography concerns only a part of the youth world, the one best equipped to face the transformations taking place (Plug & du Bois-Reymond, 2005). Indeed, the possibility to postpone adult responsibilities and the ability to manage risks remain highly dependent on structural, environmental, and cultural influences, as well as on the resources of the system of relationships in which one is embedded (Côté, 2014; Bynner, 2005). In this context, to grasp the complexity of contemporary youth transitions, it is necessary to adopt an intersectional perspective, looking at the different ways in which young people achieve adulthood in relation to gender, educational qualification, condition of origin, ethnicity and other factors.

On the other hand, the assumption of the model of adulthood based on the five markers as the only legitimate model for successful transitions limit adults' and institutions' capacity to recognize and support new configurations of adulthood elaborated by young generations. Indeed, experiencing the discrepancy between what the standard model of adulthood prescribes and what current socio-historical conditions allow, young people elaborate new ways of "feeling" and "being" adults through their everyday practices and in their daily contexts (Burnett, 2010; Pitti, 2017). Experiences of co-housing, emerging models of relationships and non-hierarchical networks of professional collaboration developed by young people while trying to find their place in society entail a (more or less conscious) critique to the standard model of adulthood and its potential oppressive nature for all those who don't want or can't follow its normative ideal (Kelly et al. 2019). While the standard model of adulthood has originated from a societal culture based on competition, unlimited use of resources, and inequalities that privileged certain segments of the (youth) population over others, by changing adulthood, contemporary young generations' alternative configurations of adulthood have the potential to sustain also a fairer and more equal idea of society.

In conclusion, as research suggest that the standard model of adulthood represents an increasing unachievable ideal for many young people around the world, we need to think how this model can be re-elaborated to include young people's different paths, experiences, sensitivities, and idea of future.

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