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Projecting the category of NEET into the future

→ 1. Introduction

The concept of NEET, indicating those youth “not in employment, education or training” has been a popular reference in the media. NEETs “lack skills needed for first jobs”, said BBC News on 23 May 2012; “record number of young people not in education, work or training”, claimed the education correspondent for the Guardian on 24 February 2011; “NEETs: the forgotten underclass”, wrote the Telegraph on 15 November 2012, adding, “the future looks bleak for today’s young people not in education, employment or training”. The website reporting data gathered by the Bank of Italy reported that in 2010, Italy had 2.2 million NEETs, that is, 23.4% of the population aged between 15 and 29, and therefore they ought to be called the “NEET generation”. News about the rising numbers of NEETs across Europe, the conditions they face and their unpredictable future, is being used to illustrate the seriousness of the situation of youth across the EU. In this sense, one could say that the focus on NEETs aligns the recent global recession with the worsening of conditions for youth.

Clearly, this demonstrates the pervasive use of the term at the international level, with many international organisations

and NGOs taking it a key indicator. Among others, the European Commission, through the Europe 2020 initiative Youth on the Move, has recently invited EU countries to develop the concept further (European Commission 2010). The truth is that “the cost of the NEETs is about €100 billion each year and represented, in 2010, nearly 13% of the young generation (aged 15 to 24 years) – or 7.5 million young people – in the European Union (Eurofound 2011: 9). As the Eurofound report notes: “NEET has been introduced as a key statistical indicator for youth unemployment and social situation of young people in the framework of the Europe 2020 growth strategy, alongside the youth unemployment rate and the unemployment ratio” (2012: 21).

Signs of the category’s dominance are apparent in youth research too. Scholars such as Jones (2002) and Roberts (2010) have talked about a polarisation between the so-called “choice biographies” (slow transitions characterised by long periods spent in education), and NEETs’ transitions (fast-track transitions), claiming that little attention has been paid to those young people who do not identify themselves in either of these extreme positions, and therefore urging for more research to be done among “ordinary” youth (Shildrick and MacDonald 2006; Roberts 2010). This argument has fuelled a vigorous debate in youth studies, one which has touched upon the theoretical foundations of what it means for today’s youth to lack linear transitions, as well as Ulrich Beck’s seminal work *Risk Society* (1992, ed. or 1986), in which he first inspired new interpretations of destandardised biographies (Woodman 2009; Roberts 2011, 2012).

However, only partial contributions have so far been made in terms of discussing conceptual problems and inconsistencies arising from the use of the term NEET, with some exceptions in the case of the UK (notably Furlong 2006, 2007; MacDonald 2011; Yates and Payne 2006) that I will use as a starting point in this paper. Entrenched as it is in the so-called “triangle” between policy, research and practice, we can expect that the category will continue to fuel the debate in the years to come. In considering such current diffusion and projection into the future, the variety of its possible uses and meanings, and the possibility that the concept is refined, this paper is firstly intended to review the category of the NEET, to trace its origins and assess it as an instrument for future analyses of transitions and full inclusion of youth in society. My arguments will be then developed by noting the importance of the characteristics of the welfare regimes in which the young people live, in particular with reference to Italy, to illustrate the heterogeneity underlying the concept that has to be addressed. I will finally consider the weaknesses of the category that must be tackled should the concept continue to be used in the European debate.

→ 2. Defining NEETs

In the last few decades, we have become accustomed to a situation where it is not only difficult to enter the labour market for the first time, but it is also usual to experience discontinuous employment for some years after this first entrance, and this has been exacerbated by the recent economic crisis. In this scenario, the importance of enhancing one’s employability is high. However, the term NEET has only existed since 1996. Previously, issues related to youth exclusion and vulnerability were conceived of and measured by the concept of youth unemployment. It was a “simple dichotomy” between employment and unemployment, with no grey area in between (Furlong 2007: 101). In relation to unemployment, Furlong – who speaks of the concept of NEET as “having now replaced that of

youth unemployment” (2006: 553) – advocates not dismissing its use: “we can speak authoritatively about aspects of its prevalence, causes and consequences and about ways of reducing its incidence. It is important not to abandon this substantial knowledge base or to lose sight of the ways in which youth unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, can lead to marginalization or exclusion” (2006: 555). Given this view, why has the NEET become such a powerful indicator? What additional explanatory power does it have that previous categories do not have? Was it even conceived of with this intention? What context has allowed it to flourish? Will any future changing scenario support its existence? These are some of the questions I will try to answer in this paper, beginning with a definition of the term.

The term NEET is used to refer to those who are “neither in employment nor in any education nor training”. A report from Eurofound (2012), which looks at the characteristics, costs and policy responses across Europe of this NEET group, states that this definition “is in principle straightforward”. However, different definitions are used in different countries and different international organisations have, as result, set their own definitions or subgroups to encompass this variety.

The first difference is related to age: most European countries today refer to youths as between 15 and 24 years old, and as a result are able to use national data from the Labour Force Survey. This is the version used by the European Commission in 2011, by the International Labour Organization (ILO), and has been implemented by Eurostat; and in fact the indicator is used as a reference in the Europe 2020 strategy (as noted by Eurofound 2012: 21-22). In other cases, the limit is lower (for instance, in Scotland, the range 16 to 19 years has been indicated, Scottish Executive 2005). In some other cases it is higher: up to 34 years, as in Korea and Japan. Intuitively, such an international disagreement makes comparisons difficult. Clearly, the NEET population is a very heterogeneous one:

Following the ILO definition, the unemployment rate is a measure of those who are out of work, but have looked for work in the past month and are able to start in the next two weeks. It records the share of the economically active population who are not able to find a job. ... In contrast, the definition of NEET ... records the share of the population of *all* young people currently disengaged from the labour market and education (Eurofound 2012: 22, emphasis added).

The Eurofound report identifies five main subgroups: the conventionally unemployed; the unavailable (that is, young carers, the sick and disabled); the disengaged (including discouraged workers as well as other young people who are pursuing dangerous or asocial lifestyles); the opportunity-seekers; and the voluntary NEETs: “those young people who are travelling and those constructively engaged in other activities such as art, music and self-directed learning” (Eurofound 2012: 24). The Scottish Executive adds those with limiting long-term illness (LLTI), family disadvantage and poverty, substance abuse, young offenders, those with additional support needs and educational disaffection (2005: 1). Also, there are those in voluntary work or working part time.

However, there is another, more substantial level which complicates these ambiguities. In fact, the definition may be intended to capture different aspects of the same social phenomenon. Notably, in some countries the number of NEETs becomes “a measure of disengagement from the labour market and perhaps from society in general” (Eurofound 2012: 1), a threat to integration, a “risk”.

More precisely, being a NEET is primarily associated with such conditions as “deprivation; financial exclusion; low attainment; weak family and other support networks (such as peers); stigma and attitudes of others and debt-aversity” (Scottish Executive 2005: 1); or being in a general condition of vulnerability with low human capital (with likely effects on employment outcomes and earnings), low educational attainment and poor family background (Furlong 2006), being unemployed regularly or having a poor level of participation in the labour market (Furlong 2007), and showing scarce engagement in politics (Volontè 2012: 11). Such factors will have negative effects on future employment outcomes and earnings as well as on physical and mental health (difficult relationships, drug and substance abuse, involvement in criminal activities). The dominant interpretation is that these conditions define a scenario of social exclusion (Eurofound 2012: 25), disadvantage and disaffection, putting NEETs at the margin of society and not just in need of financial support. Although some have defined this interpretation as distorted (Yates and Payne 2006), it is apparent that the category is an important one not only to assess youth without employment, but also to capture what the stigma around being perceived as a NEET is, current attitudes towards this social group, and the willingness to limit the rise of potential problems.

According to MacDonald, while there is little doubt that “young people who are NEET can face a range of disadvantages”, it is also true that the category may include “emerging adults” (in the sense that Arnett (2000) gives to this group), who are simply better off and “experimenting with life-style choices, postponing firm occupational commitments, perhaps enjoying gap years”; and the fact that they are counted as NEET is a distortion. It should be much clearer that “different resources and opportunities are available for different groups” (MacDonald 2011: 431). In summary, the problem of the heterogeneity of the group means that the category is a “flawed concept”, merging some “extremely disadvantaged” with others who are in fact “able to exercise choices” (Furlong 2006: 553) and ultimately, such a heterogeneity is overlooked (again, Furlong 2006). MacDonald concludes that the usefulness of the NEET category is therefore “compromised” and may fail to identify those who are genuinely “particularly vulnerable to marginalization or exclusion”. We’ll come back to the policy implications of these later on. To properly understand the category, I now turn back to its origins.

→ 3. Where does the concept of NEETs come from?

As Furlong reports (2007), the concept of NEET first came about in the UK as a response to a specific political climate and a change in the benefit regimes for youth. The term was first used in place of “Status Zer0”, which indicated the lack of any status whatsoever. Status Zer0 was used to refer to 16-and 17-year olds who were ineligible for unemployment benefits because they were underage, but who had remained cut off from youth training programmes. This term, used by Istance et al. in a study published in 1994 for the first time, was then changed to Status A, but remained a technical term related to careers services records. Some of the tensions and policy issues were identified early on (Williamson 1997).

Furlong (2007) argues that early definitions held a negative connotation and suggested the construction of a discourse of vulnerability in the UK among young people who were not engaged in “positive” activities. For Williamson (2005: 13), the label became “a crude proxy by which wider forms of ‘social exclusion’ may be defined”.

With the publication of the UK Government's *Bridging the Gap* report in 1999 (Social Exclusion Unit 1999), researchers started to use the term NEET, a term which "clarify[ed] the concept by drawing immediate attention to the heterogeneous nature of the category, and ... avoid[ed] the negative connotations of lacking status" (Eurofound 2012: 19-20). The origin of the term explains why most studies to date have been conducted in the UK (Eurofound 2012: 53), and indeed this continues to be an important policy area in this country (MacDonald 2011), even though, as we have seen, the concept is now very common internationally. However, it is important to reflect on the early development of the concept especially because with the term Status Zero, concern for those who seemed to "count for nothing and were going nowhere" had been well expressed (Williamson 1997, quoted in Eurofound 2012: 20).

It is regarding this aspect that I want to make some reflections. This last sentence is in fact very important as it suggests an overlooked component of the NEET logic: that of putting young people into boxes. As noted in the Eurofound report, in the case of New Labour, whose emergence dominated the changing political scenario, the priority was to show a strong commitment, when they took power in 1997, to improving employability in the context of the Welfare to Work scheme. This included the 16-18 age group, who were at that time seen as being in danger of social exclusion. Approximately 9% of this group, the report continues, were considered NEET and consequently encouraged to be pro-active, and to take responsibility for leaving this undesirable situation behind. Unless they located themselves in one of the boxes (employment, education, training) they were considered to be responsible for some sort of "deviance" and subject to sanctions according to the New Deal rules (Eurofound 2012). The priority was "to engage the disengaged", and "getting a job was seen as a way of avoiding exclusion" (France 2007: 64), and all this was seen in the context of a "blame culture" (France 2007: 65). The aim was to achieve this "by creat[ing] a new workforce with the vocational skills and abilities to manage social changes" – so far so good – yet it was also through "encouraging the poor and excluded to take their 'place' within the lower end of the labour market" (France 2007: 64) that this outcome was intended to be achieved. Not only was this a very specific, socially, economically and historically bounded process that has to be framed in a specific political scenario: it also underpinned a specific ideology, one where everyone has his/her own place and ought to be located accordingly.

→ 4. Weaknesses and ambivalences

In this section I will examine some of the criticisms that have been made of the NEET category and how these lead to the specific discussion I want to add to this debate.

A reminder of the history of the concept, where it originated and in response to what climate, has been included to suggest that the current use of the term is much wider than initial intentions. Overall, "the original UK concept of NEET was never intended to be applied to those aged 18-24 years and especially not to those aged 25-29 years. Neither was NEET ever seen as having potential for internationally comparative work" (Eurofound 2012: 26). In imagining a potential further diffusion of the term, this first level of criticism should be taken into consideration.

On a second level, it has to be recognised that the lack of an agreed definition makes comparative research complicated. Furlong says: "the replacement of

unemployment with NEET ... as a focus of policy has resulted in a situation where aggregation of discrete categories of experience (unemployment, caring, travelling, sick, resting, learning) into one all-embracing category (NEET) has led to a situation where we have to *disaggregate* to understand or to effectively target policies" (Furlong 2006: 554). However, despite its heterogeneity, NEET can actually be seen as a very narrow concept as well, in the sense that given the increasing prevalence of insecure work, those who work under such conditions are not necessarily being "recognized as vulnerable" (Furlong 2006: 566). In other words, "a broadly focused set of policies would encompass all of those in precarious positions or lacking advanced skills, irrespective of whether they were currently NEET or in employment or training" (p. 567). Therefore, it is envisaged that further explorations of the discourse of vulnerability can be made, if NEETs are to be taken as a measure of vulnerability.

Together with the necessity to redefine what kind of vulnerable young people NEETs are, the category of NEET also poses the *vexata quaestio* of how much responsibility lies with young people. Perhaps as a result of the ideological climate in which the term was created, NEET "is an ill considered concept that places an undue and often misleading emphasis on voluntarism" (Furlong 2006: 553), because "youth policy tends to construe being NEET as a problem *with* young people" (my emphasis) (MacDonald 2011: 431). They could point to structural problems in the labour market and aim to reduce them, rather than the number of NEETs (as in most cases, such as Chen 2011, Mascherini et al. 2010).

This represents a significant impasse, that is, that conceptually the use of the category reinforces some misunderstanding in the reading and interpretation of youth transitions today. There is not enough space here to reconstruct the debate on increasing insecurity and fragmentation of career paths of young people across Western countries today. However, even a minimal reference to this body of literature, which focuses on the lack of linearity, will make clear that young people often transit from one job to another, from education to work, from work to education again, and will then pause and come back to acquire new training in a dynamic way, whereas "NEET" is a "static policy category", as MacDonald has argued (2011: 431-432). Isn't there, then, at the heart of such an approach, a superficial reading of this increasing complexity? And isn't there a misconception that those who experience slow-track transition are unproblematic (because they remain in education for a long time and then immediately afterwards find employment), as already put forward by MacDonald (2011), possibly in contrast with initial intentions? Are we not just witnessing an attempt to put people in boxes without really interrogating what those boxes contain and why one would ever want to occupy one? The remainder of this paper will therefore be devoted to broadening this discussion in time and space: specifically, I will move from a UK-based debate to another context, that of a country characterised by a welfare system which makes the category irrelevant (albeit still used). I will then offer some general thoughts about how the mechanism can work further in the years to come.

→ 5. Changing context: the case of the NEETs in Italy

The remainder of this paper acknowledges and builds on the criticism in the previous section, and adds a further important dimension. I maintain that the usefulness of the category of NEET is linked to certain welfare characteristics of the country the youth live in. Generally speaking, the conditions of youth are very different when comparing youth living in countries where citizens are entitled to state support

regardless of their employment status v. countries where this status is irrelevant; countries where the training system ensures a smooth transition into employment v. countries where this is inefficient; or countries where markers to adulthood have very different cultural meanings. Disregarding such differences, and taking the notion of NEET too literally, might result in a rushed operation of “putting people in boxes” which risks drawing comparative pictures not representative of the real needs of youth, and consequently leading to the design of inefficient measures.

To illustrate this discussion, I will now discuss the category of NEET in relation to Italy. Italy is here taken as an example within the EU and not as an exception. In fact, the context in which the focus on the NEET has flourished in Italy is the same context that supported a “flexicurity” agenda across Europe.¹⁷ This was launched by the EU and was thought to enable full employment. The so-called OMC (open method of co-ordination) “aims to strike a balance between European integration and national diversity by encouraging convergence of objectives, performance and broad policy approaches, but not of specific programmes” (Keune 2008: 51). Along these lines, it would be unfair to state that there have not been efforts to tackle youth problems in Italy; in fact, a number of measures have been taken: amongst others, *Diritto al futuro* (Right to the future, November 2011), a package of measures adopted to counteract youth’s precarious conditions; Italy 2020, an action plan for youth employability through learning and employment integration; *Salva Italia* (Save Italy), *Cresci Italia* (Grow up Italy), *Semplifica Italia* (Simplify Italy), and *Partecipiamo!* (Let’s participate!), all measures to encourage the participation of children and adolescents. In general, a cross-sectoral approach has been taken.

Even though youth is recognised as a group that deserves protection, their problems are approached in a fragmented way. The following is an excerpt from the most recent National Report to the European Commission, which sets the basis of this fragmentation:

Italy doesn’t have a national youth law, but youth is constitutionally protected (Art. 31 of the Italian constitution) and according to that, over the years, a commitment of the State to safeguard young people has constantly characterized the political and legislative choices that accompanied interventions by the administration in office at the time The first initiatives implemented on behalf of younger generations were developed at local, municipal and regional levels, and began at the end of the 1970s, becoming in the years increasingly well constructed and multi-thematic so much that they adopted a transversal approach to tackle the problems and needs of the younger generations. Since the Constitutional Law n. 3/2001. Regions had got legislative and executive powers in all subject matters that are not expressly covered by State legislation, such as youth policies. For this reason there are many regional laws regarding youth topics and many agreements between the Government and the local authorities (Regions, Provinces and Municipalities) for the interventions to be carried out on the territory (National Report, Italy 2012: 1).

In line with this, several regions have actually pursued their own youth policies, often in ways that are incompatible with each other. Some of these regions, like Lombardia, have permanent working groups,¹⁸ and others, such as the Region of Puglia with

17. This is intended to be an attempt to conciliate flexibility and security in the labour market.

18. See http://www.politichegiovani.regione.lombardia.it/cs/Satellite?Page&childpagename=DG_Giovanini%2FMILayout&cid=1213462586442&p=1213462586442&pagename=DG_GSTSWrapper, accessed 13 February 2013, in Italian.

its programme *Bollenti Spiriti*,¹⁹ have ongoing innovative and imaginative projects. Elsewhere, programmes with innovative potential, despite generosity in allocating funds, actually hide internal fractures and inconsistencies, showing a poor understanding of the real issues youth have to deal with, as in the Region of Sardinia's Master and Back and Giovani Ricercatori programmes.²⁰ The resulting scenario is one in which youth initiatives, in general, might differ significantly from each other, the most innovative being very likely promoted by highly motivated officials (and therefore individuals) rather than the result of institutions' efforts and co-ordination. Moreover, they all happen next to more traditional measures aimed at increasing the employment rate amongst young people, through helping create some space in the labour market for them, or helping them to find an existent place, so to speak, as in the case of the GRAL project (where this stands for *Gruppi di Ricerca Attiva di Lavoro*), spread out across several regions. So in a way we can say that most of these programmes use the logic of putting people into boxes and to confirm this, I quote the highly controversial recommendation that the Minister of Labour under Monti's "technical government", Elsa Fornero, gave to Italian youth on 23rd October 2012, when she declared in a public speech that they "should not be choosy" when first entering the labour market.

I will now discuss why I think that the category of NEET is not adequate to paint a picture of Italy's youth, by proposing a few issues which we should question, providing a sketch of how they are expressed in the case of Italy and by briefly commenting on possible scenarios in 2020.

Entitlement to social rights

Italy follows the southern European welfare system model, a development of the work of Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999), where it is characterised by a low level of welfare provision and a strong emphasis on the family (not the individual) as a recipient of benefits (Ferrera 1996). More precisely, Italy is characterised by a welfare system relying on opposing principles: a corporatist principle concerning retirement and unemployment based on belonging to professional categories; and universalistic criteria concerning the educational and health systems, based on citizenship rights (Colombo and Regini 2009). Therefore, young people do not expect to be "included in the game", nor to have responsibility for locating themselves in a certain position until they have taken a certain professional direction, especially if they engage in higher education.

Projection into 2020: clearly, such an unbalanced welfare system has a disorienting and inegalitarian effect. Hopefully by 2020, social rights will be extended in all EU countries.

Homogeneity/heterogeneity within the labour market

In Italy there is a strong divide in the labour market between those who are in typical employment, and those who have atypical employment arrangements, which defines a complex situation (Borghini 2000; Paci 2005). Moreover, the Italian system attaches benefits such as maternity leave to employment status, therefore only those with typical jobs are entitled to full rights, such as unemployment benefits, with the result of exacerbating social conflict. This means that having a temporary job is an excluding condition on many levels.

19. Available at <http://bollentispiriti.regione.puglia.it>, accessed 13 February 2013, in Italian.

20. For a comment, see Cuzzocrea and Tavani (under review).

Projection into 2020: the NEET approach does not consider fully, although it somehow departs from, the reality that employment is itself eroding in quality, especially for newcomers, and as such it risks eroding one's dignity. Looking at the scenario in 2020 requires us to pay attention to what kind of work opportunities institutions and government are creating for young people.

Transitions regime

Italy is characterised by a particularly delayed transition to adulthood, even within the established model of southern European countries (for an overview on the approach, see Walther 2006). Young adults are torn between a willingness to take their place in the public sphere, and awareness of not being able to meet society's demands (Donati and Scabini 1988; Diamanti 1999).

Projection into 2020: in Italy, common parlance easily attaches the word "youth" to adults in their late thirties or early forties. Demographers expect Italy to be a very old country in the years to come, as a cumulative result of the increase in life expectancy and a low rate of fertility. Statistical categories should agree on a concept of youth coherent with national patterns rather than simply raising the age range.

Structure of career paths

Italy lacks structured career paths, and suffers from a general weakness of institutions, such as professional bodies, in providing guidance for, and foreseeable development in, one's career (Cuzzocrea 2011). There is a general understanding that advancements in one's career are achieved through length of experience, rather than by meeting goals.

Projection into 2020: in countries like Italy, public services should be reinforced to support young people's job searches as well as orientation in one field or another. In the same vein, companies should be encouraged to offer good quality induction to newcomers and better structured guidance in the first years of a career to inform career passages and, more generally, career decisions.

Educational systems

In Italy, being a university student is a condition with very loose deadlines. A length of time to pass exams is suggested and encouraged (increasingly so), but not compulsory to a large extent. This makes it possible for a high percentage of university students to be enrolled at university for a very long time, even up to a decade. Intuitively, while a 21-year-old who studies at university is not a problem, a 28-year old who has been at university for ten years and has not graduated yet might well be a problem, but in the NEET terminology he/she will not be counted as such: as long as you are a student, you are not a problem.

Projection into 2020: while the pressure of the Bologna Process will possibly reduce the age gap of fresh graduates across the EU, this actual distortion does not allow us to size the problem of the NEETs in Italy, where the phenomenon of the *fuori corso* (university students taking several additional years to complete their degrees and entering the labour market at an older age than their European counterparts) has an impact. The German and Austrian university systems might also be subject to a similar issue. In 2020, either this group will be reduced or underestimated numbers and figures are likely to be released for this country.

Intergenerational relations

In Italy the family is “used” as a substitute for the state in providing support for economically unstable youth. Unemployment benefits are only granted to those who have been in employment for a certain length of time. Therefore it is impossible to support young school leavers. Culturally, the family takes the burden. According to Da Roit and Sabatinelli (2005), the familistic model in Italy can be described simply as a limited offer of public service, accompanied by the attribution of responsibility to the family. It could be argued that the state bases its policies on a model of the traditional family in which youth are only a part of the whole. In fact, they receive very little specific attention, at least until they form a nuclear family of their own. A precarious equilibrium is made possible by a system of mutual protection allowing young adults to live on their low earnings because they can count on domestic support and eventually on the retirement/disability pensions of their elders (Congi 2001).

Projection into 2020: a truly holistic approach today needs to put emphasis on the possibility that one is able to be fully independent in 2020. Although informal networks (such as family) will always have importance in some contexts, policies should put individuals in such situations that they can count on themselves in order to meet acceptable standards of living.

Respective status of education, employment and training

Employment, education and training have different social statuses, and in Italy in particular training attracts a very low social esteem. The vocational system is poorly institutionalised and mainly embraced by those who have failed another route. The Italian popular version of the acronym NEET often forgets the last letter: it is often heard that NEETs are “those not in employment or education”. This also happens in Spain, where the term *ni-ni* is used (meaning, again, not in employment or education).

Projection into 2020: while vocational training is well organised and respected in countries such as Germany, education, employment and training are three different activities, and have different outputs in the medium and long term. Considering them as if they were the same, and put on the same level in all countries, maybe gives an idea of how many people are “outside of the boxes” today, but does not say much about how many of them have started on a career path that is going to be fulfilling and rewarding, and will keep them “out of risk” in 2020, or conversely, how many just take the first low-skilled job available to meet incumbent ends but will be deeply dissatisfied with it. According to the rhetoric of the NEETs approach, no attention is given to how good and appropriate to one’s aspirations and inclinations is either employment, education or training, and therefore how successful they are as stepping stones in one’s career.

New frontiers of employment and work

Like other European countries, Italy does not grant recognition to a vast amount of work that young people are doing in forms not associated with employment itself – I mean by this work which is not commissioned, nor paid for, but promises to give access to jobs which would not otherwise be granted. These efforts, which we can call side-employment activities, currently hold high transformative potential and are very important not only to enable young people a position in the labour market, but also for society in general to ensure itself the highest level of innovation.

Projection into 2020: young people need to attempt their own routes, and to try themselves out where they think they can achieve the best results. On the contrary, currently, “young people are pushed into training and education that they feel they are not ready for; and young people at high risk but who are already in education, employment or training are neglected by the service” (Yates and Payne 2006: 331), whereas part of the Europe 2020 strategy is “to ‘unleash the potential’ of young people through quality education and training, successful labour market integration and increased mobility” (MacDonald 2011: 439). Citizenship support might actually be functional here not to waste young people’s potential and talent. Again, giving this sort of opportunity to young people is not contemplated in the definition of NEETs, unless it takes the shape of formally recognised education or training, which of course is not always the case. Hopefully, by 2020 there will be wider support available to young people’s efforts to realise their own aspirations, either through financial support or otherwise.

→ 6. Conclusions

The concept of NEET was intended to form the basis of a holistic approach to the problems of youth, one that could be broader than employment alone, which at that time dominated the debate on youth. I have, however, reconstructed the reason why this category might be considered too narrow, as well as misleading. Even broader categories have been suggested, such as that of “social generation” (Furlong et al. 2011), in order to investigate “the ways in which the meaning and experience of age is shaped by social conditions” on the basis of a “systematic analysis of the economic, political and social conditions impacting on young people” (p. 361).

Alongside an assessment of the category of the NEET, its uses and history, I have proposed some criticisms and attempted to de-locate it from where and when it was intended to be used to another context, that of contemporary Italy. This operation is neither speculative nor futuristic, as the use of the NEETs category is already extensive in Italy. However it brings with it some speculative factors as it is meant to encourage general reflection on how the category is being used today across Europe, what inconsistencies are being overlooked in this application, and what are the caveats that should be taken into consideration in its possible future use. These limitations are mainly related to diversity in entitlement to citizens’ rights and educational and professional assets, as well as specific balances in intergenerational relations. More importantly, new frontiers are seemingly being opened for youth employment, which will hopefully be more attentive to youth’s aspirations and inclinations, in contrast to the operation of “putting people into boxes”. This process is too abrupt and does not respect the needs of youth, as well as being in contrast with EU recommendations in the field, pushing not only for more jobs, but also for better and more fulfilling ones. In summary, we should acknowledge that the concept of NEET is country-specific, permeated by a certain ideology of little use in comparative research and most significantly (as used in most policy contexts) a static concept, making it scarcely appropriate for supporting young people to find their place in a fast-changing, dynamic labour market and denying them the right to make meaningful choices for themselves. Young people do construct their lives drawing on the institutional resources they see available in their own context of reference, and, as in the invented story of Tommy Butler (Williamson 2001), their entire lives are then intertwined with whatever policy measures policy makers are able to offer to address their needs as full citizens. It is therefore advisable that these measures reflect their very social, economic and historical conditions.

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