



## **Generational changes, gaps and conflicts: a view from the South**

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### **→ Young people and collective economic hardship**

Earlier longitudinal and well-known studies on the long-term effects of experiencing economic deprivation during childhood – such as those caused by the Great Depression of 1929 – have shown that feelings of insecurity, fear of unemployment and hunger, and an overall sense of powerlessness towards a collective and individual future prevail for many years after the actual economic historical episode, if not the rest of the lives of the individuals (Elder 1974; ILO 2012) and their descendants. These consequences are manifested not only as concrete negative effects produced in the access to the structure of opportunities in life available, but also as life styles, educational strategies, parental approaches, and overall social values and identities of whole generational units. This longitudinal and timely approach might help us to reflect on the current situation of young people and young adults, always bearing in mind its eventual future consequences – namely in the European countries experiencing the hardest economic scenarios.

The collective hopelessness that is being experienced nowadays in countries most affected by what is coming to

be known as the Global or the Great Recession could, moreover, be considered a cancer in the achievement of the EU and member states' goals of becoming a "smart, sustainable and inclusive economy", accomplishing "high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion" (Europe 2020 – Europe's Growth Strategy), for which youth involvement and active contribution is absolutely fundamental. European strategies being applied and expected in these countries are potentially paradoxical. It also has obvious negative effects in the attainment of well-being of hundreds of thousands of young people and their families, evidently and particularly affected by these economic difficulties and circumstances. Young people are a part of a "domestic equation", and the fact that they constitute one of the social layers that is most affected by this economic and social circumstance actually is a "family affair" (Derosas 2004), where all lives are linked and "each generation is bound to fateful decisions and events in the other's life course" (Elder 1994: 6). This household context also has to be taken into account. Young people thus suffer direct and indirect effects of the new forms, more invisible but more holistic, of social inequality, of social reproduction and mechanisms of perpetuation of poverty – consequences of interrupted trajectories of social mobility and of the decrease in the quality of social conditions of existence. Thus, their future might be jeopardised in numerous and complex sorts of ways, yet to be identified in this ongoing process.

Experiences of transversal and historical episodes of economic and social (and perhaps generational) crisis are capable of shaping and re-directing the life courses of entire generations. This framework may help us to reflect on the future of the young and young adult generations in countries most affected by the European economic crisis – Portugal, Spain, Greece and Ireland. It may not prevent us from having serious concerns and a pessimistic outlook on this future, keeping in mind current unemployment rates, emigration flows (out of Portugal, for instance), increasing social inequality, cuts in education and science and in overall social rights (that some might fallaciously call "benefits"), decrease in fertility rates, increased danger of unsustainability of the social security system, and so on.

### → Sociology of youth, social change and the Portuguese case



Figure 1: 12 March 2012 demonstration propaganda

Sociology of youth in particular and youth studies in general have always struggled to reconcile the classist and generational approaches in the analysis of young adults' trajectories, living conditions and social background, and have sometimes discarded one or the other for the sake of certain scientific, argumentative or statistical purposes, or due to national specificities or youth itself. For the classist approaches, generational differences are less important in comparison with the more relevant and politically important differences between social classes and positions, even within the same cohort or generational unit. For the generational approaches, social heterogeneity within the same cohort or generational unit, when considered, must not be detached from generational comparisons as proxy of a time metric capable of grasping social change.

But if, on the one hand, it seems rather unscientific to aggregate highly distinctive individuals – either socially, ideologically and professionally – solely on the basis of the homogeneity of birth cohort (Nunes, 1998), thus undermining issues of social inequality and heterogeneity within these very cohorts; it may also seem imprudent to circumscribe the analysis of youth to here-and-now interpretations of data, with no time-relativism and no real intentions of grasping social change through the concrete measurement of the fluctuations, variations and evolution across time of key indicators of the “demographically dense” period transition to adulthood (Rindfuss 1991). Generations, in a wider sense perhaps, should be used as a time metric unit. Its conceptual and theoretical complexity (Mannheim 1952) must not prevent us, youth researchers, from using it in analysing social change, especially in times like these, where the past can teach us about the future consequences of a specific economic and political scenario.

Moreover, the current economic moment that Portugal, among other countries, is experiencing may be “interpreted within the framework of a national crisis, an emergency of such proportion that it threatens the common way of life” and revitalises the collective experience itself (Elder 1974), making analytical dismissals of the classist or the generational approach counter-productive. Let us take as examples the two most important demonstrations in Portugal, organised by the people, and not linked to political parties or to unions, held as consequences both of the economic crisis and of the political response to it (one in 2011 and the other in 2012).

The term *geração à rasca* (generation in distress) emerged as a political response to the term *geração rasca* which, although similar in words, is very different in content. *Geração rasca* means paltry, vulgar, coarse or gross generation. In 1994 a politician and journalist nicknamed this generation with the term *geração à rasca*, in response to some polemic events of a students’ demonstration (on reforms in the education system responded to). This was rapidly s with the term “*geração à rasca*” by a politician from the other political spectrum. This label was constituted, on the contrary, with the idea of a generation where opportunities for social mobility based on a more meritocratic and egalitarian system were being threatened. The resemblance with the social circumstances of the young adult generation in 2011 is, indeed, remarkable (Figure 1).

So on 12 March 2011 – a time by which the previously mentioned cohort would be roughly 20 or early 30 years old – one of the most important and biggest of the recent demonstrations in Portugal was held under a generational call. This was done before the Portuguese rescue package of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Troika was implemented, through Facebook and other social networks, and finally through traditional media itself. Rallying under the term “*geração à rasca*” (generation in distress), the demonstration was held in Lisbon and Oporto, and gathered more than 200 000 individuals from all cohorts: the elderly, adults, young people and children. Although originally meant to relate to a specific cohort and generation in Portugal (*geração à rasca*), this demonstration revealed how in fact lives are linked, and how intergenerational differences are set aside when it comes to defending the survival and future of the youngest generations. This was a pacific, spontaneous, popular and mass example of generational solidarity that justifies its relevance in the recent history of Portugal in its own right.

The second example of a popular, mass and recent demonstration in Portugal, which was held in 33 of its cities (as well as in other countries across Europe), constitutes another example of how the collective experience of a period of economic



**Figure 2: 12 September 2013 demonstration propaganda**

hardship forces us to include social categories that, in more predictable times, we may disregard for scientific or argumentative purposes (Figure 2). This demonstration underlined the importance of the classist approach to the study of youth and social change. Attended by more than 500 000 individuals (which represents roughly 5% of the whole population of Portugal, including children and minors), this demonstration was diverse both socially, as well as generationally. Different social stratum attended and, again, different generations, outraged with the recent policies forged by the government to allegedly respond to the Troika and IMF's targets and demands, were present to speak not only on their behalf but also, maybe especially, on behalf of each other. Individuals from all parties, from left to right, are in agreement as to the structural social changes being forced on Portugal. A conscious increase of social inequalities, both by the impoverishment of the population as a whole and by a lack of concern on protecting the groups of the population less immune to social exclusion – including youth – is consensually a motive for contestation. This is true partly because it affects generations differently and, by consequence, affects almost every single family for one reason (generation) or the other – the youngest, the less qualified, the poorest, the elderly, the most socially excluded or vulnerable in a more general manner. Both generational and classist views are necessary to understand the current and future state of youth affairs in cases that, like Portugal, are putting the permanence of the youngest generations in the country at risk.

### → From generational gap to generational conflict or generational discontinuity?

The use of the concept “generation” might not always be used correctly, for it may entail many different things. The term “generation gap” was very popular in the 1960s up until the 1980s. It encapsulated the idea that due to extremely rapid social change, parents’ values and attitudes were far from their children’s. This would usually contribute to the misunderstanding of some youth cultures and subcultures, music, social values, aesthetics and daily attitudes. The term has decreased in popularity, as has the gap itself. When it comes to social values, the most problematic gap in terms of mutual intergenerational understanding, those of today’s young people are not as distinctive as in the past (Smith 2005). Nonetheless, this gap seems to be greater in countries where these processes of social change were more profound and rapid, such as in Portugal (Torres and Lapa 2010). But even in these circumstances, a “popular term today, “generational conflict”, is used improperly, as the demonstration of 12 March 2011 and the discourses collected at the occasion illustrate. A generational conflict would mean that instead of a gap – which leads to misunderstanding which in its turn may or may not lead to generational conflict – the values of young generations and of their parents would not be defined merely by being non-coincident, but by being in confrontation or in disagreement. Even in countries such as Portugal, and despite the fact that the term is regularly used both explicitly by academia and implicitly in political discourses and commentaries by high positions in the government, this does not seem to be the case.

There is a conflict for survival of the different social trajectories and mobility paradigms experienced by both generations or, put in a different way, a struggle to maintain the previous type of transition to adulthood, occurring in a scenario of economic growth, where the mechanisms of social mobility may not have been accessible to all, but were clear (when it comes to the transitions to adulthood that occurred after the revolution that ended the dictatorship). So both parents and their children were convinced, and engaged, in a meritocratic society based on work ethic and hard work applied directly in the labour market or, for those who had that chance, firstly in a long investment in a trajectory of attaining education, training and qualifications, where social inequalities although impossible to eliminate were seen as possible to overcome. In spite of these rapid changes, generations are not in conflict, but their path towards a more meritocratic society is threatened.

This sense of a discontinued path towards a meritocratic society is in part due to the fact that social changes in Portugal in the last five or six decades have been massive. In 1960, almost 40% of the Portuguese population was illiterate, while in 2010, according to data from the Survey on Employment (National Statistics, Portugal), the percentage of individuals with a higher education degree was already higher than the percentage of individuals with no degree (11.8% and 10.3%). For the 1931-1950 cohorts, the level of religiousness is 6.5; while for the 1971-1992 cohort the level is 5 (on a scale of 1 to 10, according to data from the European Social Survey 2006). Laws legalising abortion and gay marriage were also approved in the past decade, which reveals, together with other indicators, how the social and cultural development of the countries has been less influenced by the Catholic Church. Between 1981 and 2011, the share of apartments for rent – more adequate for less formal conjugal situations and for the geographical mobility typical of the period of the transition to adulthood – decreased by more than half (from 44% to 20%) (National Statistics, Portugal). The democratic and demographic transitions, as well as the “educational revolution”, a massive democratisation of higher education, globalisation and the growth of the services sector, have all contributed to making the current generation of young people and young adults the most qualified in the history of the country.

In this context, how can this country make the best of the most qualified generation it helped, together with the emotional and financial investment of entire families, to create? Recent policies and tendencies seem to indicate that this potential is not going to be tapped on behalf of the country itself. Among these are the typical and now extraordinary disadvantages of young people in the labour market (which include the less protective regime of youth in southern European countries), and the politics of youth and its relation to the unemployment rate and to emigration flows (developed in the next section of this article). Young people are, thus, specifically and increasingly vulnerable to precarious labour, unemployment and unprotected parallel economy activities, according to the Labour Force Survey, among other sources of data (International Labour Organization, 2012). From the individual time point of view it is easily understood that the starting point in one’s career, that is, the moment (or moments) of entry into the labour market, tends to be one of the most difficult in one’s career. For that reason, young people are at one of the most difficult points in their professional lives. Thus, from the individual time point of view, young people are more exposed to precarious labour. From another point of view, when we consider historical time and the beginning of the recession, some birth cohorts combine the disadvantage, if one may say so, of their being new to the labour market, with this historical moment

of the economic recession. Moreover, not only are the structural conditions for young people across Europe not the same as other age groups (and never were), but the economic recession does not affect all countries equally. In the case of southern European countries, they combine long-term disadvantages regarding social protection for people in transition to adulthood with a historical event like the recession.

When it comes to transition regimes in Europe, Portugal and others were already considered as the most disadvantaged cluster, so-called “sub-protective” (Walther 2006). Italy, Spain and Portugal are clustered in a sub-protective regime<sup>4</sup> with non-selective schools, training characterised by low standards and coverage, social security mainly based on the family, and a closed and informal employment regime, as opposed to Denmark and Sweden (with a universalistic transition regime),<sup>5</sup> Germany, France and the Netherlands (with an employment-centred transition regime),<sup>6</sup> or the United Kingdom and Ireland (with a liberal transition regime).<sup>7</sup> This was true even before the crisis which, in its turn, has not changed the scenario completely, only worsened it.

Young people from these countries are therefore combining historical disadvantages of time and place, and for that reason deserve much more attention in the political, national or European-wide arena.

### → The politics of youth

Political views and actions directed at youth issues reflect and intensify, in some cases, the disregard for these generational dynamics and historical contexts. In 2012, for instance, the Portuguese Secretary for Youth and Sports argued that emigration was a promising solution for the increasing youth unemployment in the country. He based this remark on his own preconceptions on Portuguese youth, further stating that young people need to leave their “comfort zones” (their parent’s home) and relocate to where jobs might be available. Unemployment as a personal experience was, in his opinion, caused by youth apathy, and could be effortlessly solved through individual agency. Many other statements on the part of politicians in high positions in the government have also corroborated this idea, encouraging young people to abandon their plans of staying in their country and to emigrate to other countries where jobs might be less scarce. This, together with the current scenario in this country, will have, according to specialists, tremendous consequences in the distant future as well as enormous differences to previous emigration flows (namely the one that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s).

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4. Characterised by non-selective school systems, low training standards and coverage, social security based on the family, closed employment regime with high risks and informal work (Walther 2006: 126).
  5. Characterised by non-selective school systems, training with flexible standards, social security based on the state, open employment regime with low risks, and a concept of youth based on personal development and citizenship (Walther 2006: 126).
  6. Characterised by selective school systems, a standardised training system, social security based on the state and family, closed employment regime with risks for the population at the margins, and a concept of youth based on the idea of adaptation to social positions (Walther 2006: 126).
  7. Characterised by non-selective school systems, training with flexible and low standards, social security based on the state and family, open employment regime with high risks, and a concept of youth based on early economic independence (Walther 2006: 126).



This simplistic assumption about the relationship between youth and unemployment made by some Portuguese politicians is not only a bold statement (and fallacy) about the relation between structure and agency, but also a stereotyped understanding of the (cultural) context of southern European countries. Portuguese youth is, like others, an “easy target” for these misguided generational and national comparisons, many times provided by academia itself. Incorporated politically, the justifications for the timings, “delays” or synchronisations of transitions to adulthood are frequently based on a supposed “generational personality”. These are serious obstacles to youth policies, and to mere recognition of their important role.

These obstacles are visible, for example, in the latest International Labour Organization report from 2012. While many of the European and South American countries responded to the high unemployment rates with policies to combat the obstacles to economic growth, or directed at the occupational dissonance between supply and demand in the labour market, or by expanding social protection, Portugal tended to limit its actions to some support to “young entrepreneurs” (ILO 2012). Obviously, these measures are not equally accessible to the different stratum of the young population, nor is the labour market, especially in these times, capable or prepared to embrace new businesses on such a scale – since 50 new insolvencies are registered daily in Portugal (in October 2012).

There is a complete void of policies to take full advantage of the indisputable potential of the younger and highly qualified generations in Portugal, young people who could, in their turn, help the country overcome the difficult situation it is experiencing, for instance by: using their skills acquired through school and education; increasing the fertility rate ensuring the future sustainability of the social security system; and by being more productive in the labour market, not from fear of being fired but based on the conviction that this is individually and collectively positive. Instead, emigration is one of the phenomena that characterises 2012 and beyond. The most qualified generation in the history of Portugal is contributing, and everything leads us to believe it will continue to contribute, to other countries’ developments. Different from the emigration flows of the 1960s, this emigration flow is much more qualified and does not imply as many transfers to the country of origin. The great majority are 25 to 34 years old. In 2012, 65 000 young individuals left the country. The loss of these qualified young people is even concerning the International Monetary Fund, which has declared that it is important for the Portuguese Government to consider the irreversible and negative effects of these migration flows for the recovery of the country, that is, of this “generational discontinuity”. While current Portuguese young people seem to be destined to be citizens of the world, Portugal, if the government continues to ignore this problem, might be destined to see their young people, young parents and their children, the most qualified and, paradoxically, entrepreneurial individuals, leave with no date to return. The beginning of the 21st century in Portugal, and countries alike in what concerns the economic context, may be characterised by a certain degree of generational discontinuity and enforced diaspora trajectories.

### → Final remarks

An approach beyond the here and now to the understanding of young people’s conditions of existence, inspired by the concepts and methods of generational analysis, may bring to light the urgent need to promote long-term youth policies and structural, coherent and integrated European approaches. For one, it may remind us that the achievement of the Europe 2020 Growth Strategy will hardly

be accomplished without the participation of young people, more specifically the goals of “high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion” that it includes. Secondly, the increased and inter-related geographic mobility and unemployment of young people, especially in countries experiencing the economic crisis in a harsher manner, must receive concrete and urgent attention in European policies concerning mobility, migration and demographic trends of young people. And thirdly, research on the processes of social change set in motion by these new patterns of mobility and generational discontinuity must be promoted and funded. Young people are protagonists of social change, and their trajectories and subjective accounts are important both to understand and to foresee current societies and to produce the scientific evidence fundamental for policy-making designs and decisions.

The importance of the study of social change can be oriented towards the study of young people and towards the design and promotion of long-term and integrated youth policy, firstly, through the promotion of youth research, preferably characterised by longitudinal designs. Evidence-based youth policy is, ultimately, dependent on the collection, aggregation and eventually interpretation of data (be it qualitative or quantitative) on the social conditions of existence and trajectories of youth, and the measurement of the impact of important economic events such as the one Europe is experiencing necessarily has to deal with this sort of data. Secondly, it must recognise new patterns of mobility and migration among young people and promote programmes and policies that prevent these new patterns from becoming new forms of social exclusion and social inequality. Across Europe the mobility-friendly mechanisms should be enhanced and the positive aspects of participation of young people in the labour market should be made clear both for receiving and for sending countries. Thirdly, national policy reviews, and the subsequent evaluation of policies, should also take into account the politics of youth and the informal messages about young people and their participation both in civil society and the labour market, passed on both by government individuals and by the media more generally.

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