

“The ageing of the young”

This article studies the transformation experienced by the young as another stage in their life. It begins by mentioning the issues concerning the individualisation process (Beck) or de-familiarisation (Esping-Andersen) experienced by the new generations belonging to middle urban classes. Then it presents its consequences on the emancipation of the young. Lastly, it addresses the biographical change involved, as youth has lost against adulthood its strategic role as the most important stage of a person's life cycle.

1. De-familiarisation of the urban young

Since market globalization has made post-industrial societies flourish, its consequences have transformed the structure of biographical construction, which is no longer dependant on the family or community network and has now become a new individual or personalised process. Up until 1975 (a date symbolising the fall of Keynes fordism and the subsequent birth of post-industrial globalisation), people became members of society through their families, which assigned them their corresponding acquired status. This was actually possible thanks to their material and symbolic heritage. Their families could successfully achieve their inheritance objectives by deploying a strategy that aimed at *classing* their descendants (1) into social positions at equal or higher levels. By moving the resources provided by their social capital, the parents managed to place their sons and marry their daughters within the same social levels they belonged to. Pierre Bourdieu referred to this phenomenon as a social promotion, reproduction or reconversion strategy, which determined the identity of most people, regardless of their social class. However, even if the sons of the individualist bourgeois members were to emancipate from their families by following their own strategy to achieve promotion through merits at educational, academic and professional levels, their success was - to a great extent - predetermined by the family strategy to finance, guide and support their career towards social promotion.

This was the strategy used until 1975, thanks to Keynes' economic theory of life-long employment that guaranteed a solid and steady occupational structure, so that the *pater familias* (male head of the household) could make sure that their power and influence - reflected in their material and symbolic heritage or their social and economic capital - would remain safe throughout their entire active life and be available to be used efficiently in order to induce and ensure the integration of their successors in the social structure. This allows the children to inherit both the occupational status and the awareness of the class and social relations held by their parents. However, since 1975 post-industrial society broke Keynes' paradigm and the stability of the occupational structure, which was shattered into a mixture of unstable and precarious jobs. It is a tertiary economy of the new financial,

(1) Bourdieu, 1988.

commercial, communication and personal services whose profitability depends on the introduction of new technologies that reduce stable employment and use flexible employment, based on professional precariousness: de-localisation, temporality, subcontracting, dismissals...

In this situation of new urban markets characterised by their fluidity, lack of stability and uncertainty, the occupation of the *patres familias* no longer guarantees a succession strategy, as its material and symbolic heritage loses its value so soon that it quickly becomes obsolete and can no longer ensure social integration for the children. Under these circumstances the parents cannot make a successful use of their succession strategy as they do not have enough resources to place and *class* their children with the same level of influence and stability. This is known as eclipse of the father, (2) which leaves the family institution without inheritors, (3) as the successors have to play their new role as orphans with no material or symbolic heritage to inherit, and are forced to fight for their future using their own resources without any protection from the family. However, two are the negative effects derived from this phenomenon. On one hand, the appearance of new de-structured families (single parents, reconstituted families, cohabitants, etc) whose main feature is the so-called father's absence and apparently lead to academic and professional failure of their children as they have had no guidance from the fatherly authority. (4) On the other hand we have the forced extension of the children's dependence, who must remain for an indefinite period of time under their parents' shelter, given their lack of success in their attempt to achieve personal emancipation, (5) as we will study in the next section.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this de-structuring in succession only affects those professional urban families who depend on the access to qualified jobs to make a living. Regarding those families *below and above* the professional urban markets, they do not seem to be affected by this process in the same way, but rather preserve their family strategies. The families of major owners or businesspeople can use their material or symbolic heritage to escape from occupational de-structuring, preserving their full power and influence to place and *class* their children in privileged positions, regardless of the position they can reach on their own in the professional labour markets. Regarding those families living in worse conditions, they are often excluded from the labour markets, especially those whose children cannot manage to achieve academic success as the lack of post-secondary education (or in some cases expulsion due to academic failure) leads them to the only possibility of delinquency or exploited subcontracting. Therefore, excluded young people also depend on a familiar strategy within their community networks to obtain a job and a partner, as they cannot emancipate independently by their own means.

Therefore, the new youth strategy of orphanage I have been dealing with only affects those urban classes (the former new middle classes) who join the professional labour markets and depend on them to make a living and achieve personal emancipation. Up until 1975, in this class of urban professionals it used to be possible to follow family strategy with a chance to succeed, as the parents could place and *class* their children at equal or even higher levels. But this has changed. Now the parents' position is so unstable that they cannot transmit their successors their status (occupation), their social capital (power and influence) or their symbolic heritage (class

(2)
Flaquer, 1999.

(3)
Théry, 1997.

(4)
Gil Calvo, 1997 and 2003.

(5)
Gil Calvo, 2002.

awareness and family identity), so the children have to learn to build biographies on their own, without the possibility to take over their parents' position or identity.

This process of increasing deprivation of family support is known as *de-familiarisation* (6) or *individualisation*, (7) and it represents the loss of family succession strategies, as families today cannot induce or guide their children's emancipation (post-familiarity), but they rather have to build their own future in a nihilistic atmosphere where their only help is material and nutritional family support.

2: The metamorphosis of the young: calendar, limits and sense.

The increasing de-familiarisation process in young emancipation has determined a similar radical transformation by making a considerable modification of the features that used to define the young. Here we will browse through the major changes of the main features and take a closer look at the endogenous change in the concept of youth (included in the following section), which is regarded as independent from the other stages of life.

2.1: The blockage of the process of emancipation in the young. The main change found in the juvenile period is its duration, which has been increasingly extended, maybe in an irreversible way. This extension does not come as a result of the proportional distribution of the increase in longevity, as it might seem reasonable. The duration of life has been doubled in the west (from 40 to 80) but the youth period has been tripled, as it has gone from lasting five years (from 15 to 20) to fifteen years (15 to 30). There are mainly three causes behind this phenomenon. (8)

Firstly, the technological revolution requires some qualified labour force. It has gone from blue-collar manual work to white collar, pink collar, white coat, etc. technical and professional work. This demands the extension of the period for education and professional training for all segments of the active population, both male and female, thus delaying the beginning of juvenile emancipation.

Secondly, the economic change has also increased the cost of the resources required to have a family, thus postponing the age for emancipation until the capital needed can be obtained. Here we can see several connected factors, three of which are as follows: the loss of financial power achieved through salaries (added to the instability of temporary work, which does not allow the young to engage into the compromise of a long-term mortgage), the increase in the cost of homes (especially in countries such as Spain, where the real estate and property boom is chosen over rental) and the increase in the cost involved in bringing up children (especially when the scarcity of social services such as nurseries does not allow mothers to work outside their homes).

(6)
Esping-Andersen, 2000.

(7)
Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2003.

(8)
Gil Calvo, 2002.

Thirdly, the previously mentioned social change: de-familiarisation does not allow families to support their children to help them emancipate on their own and have their own families. This factor becomes particularly severe in those countries in the Mediterranean area lacking institutions offered by their

State welfare who therefore follow the family traditions, which reinforces the dependence of young people and women on their parents and husbands. (9) When these factors (educational demands, job instability, increasing cost of homes, lack of public services, and dependence on the family) interact they block the emancipation process to an indefinite extent.

All of this has turned youth from being a short period between childhood and adolescence to become a new everlasting period that cannot be exited easily. 50 years ago all young people belonging to the working class married between the ages of 18 and 22, and those members of the middle class did it between the ages of 22 and 26; today neither of them can do it before the age of 30, hindered by the blockage of emancipation that deprives them from their right to have their own family. In order to avoid this obstacle, people form defective or unsuccessful families: this is the case of some unmarried couples who engage in a precarious cohabiting experience and often have to forget about motherhood. (10)

2.2: Dissolution of the limits of youth. Besides extending its duration, the period of youth has also dissolved its limits to the point that we do no longer know where it begins and where it ends. Its beginning seems indefinite now, with some sexual experiences that have been considered premature by some, from the point of view of emotional maturity, and other factors such as professional experience, which seems to have been postponed until much later on. The result is that the border between childhood and youth is no longer clear, as we now have some adolescents who look like adults and other older people who on the other hand behave like immature teenagers.

The explanation lies on the fact that there is a great amount of contradiction. On one hand, the young still depend on their families until quite late in life, which makes them more immature from an objective point of view. On the other hand, given the increasing number of cases of *de-familiarisation*, they are forced to morally break up with their families, which makes them emancipate in symbolic terms, thus losing their family identity prematurely and replacing it for a changing mask of temporary and fake identities. This submerges adolescents into a masquerade of children's games surrounded by a romantic halo of risky adventures and dangers in the form of violence, sex, drugs and rock and roll. (11)

The same phenomenon happens with the end of the period, as the limit is blurred. Only 30 years ago, the border between youth and adulthood seemed to be clear to us, as it was marked by four criteria based on the acquisition of certain great responsibilities that were assumed one after the other: employment, partner, home and family. According to this, anyone who had acquired these four responsibilities could be considered as an adult, whereas those who had not were still regarded as young people. (12) This distinctive feature was reflected in cultural customs, which were opposed between adults who dressed like older people and young people who had not matured yet. However, this limit to the juvenile period has become blurrier and blurrier and people can get together forming couples even if they do not have a job yet. Even if they do have one, this does not guarantee they can buy a house. Therefore, we can no longer establish the distinction between adults and young people as the latter behave like premature adults whereas real adults tend not to behave as such and become young victims of the Peter Pan syndrome.

(9)
Esping-Andersen, 2000.

(10)
Gil Calvo, 2003.

(11)
Gil Calvo, 1996.

(12)
Gil Calvo, 1985.

2.3: *Loss of the sense of youth*. Although it may seem that this juvenile transformation is only formal, its duration has also increased and its limits have disappeared. Nevertheless, this change does not only affect the formal aspects but also the contents, that is to say, the meaning or sense acquired by youth and considered as a single entity. Back when *de-familiarisation* did not exist, youth was considered as a challenging test in life; a test full of repression and sacrifices, a race full of obstacles. If the person was able to beat all these obstacles and reach the end, he/she would get a prize in the manner of legitimate social integration as an adult, mature and responsible person. This is the reason why this test was considered as an epic story: the heroic battle for life throughout all those difficult *Years of learning* (like in the novel entitled as such, the first part of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* that represents the canonical expression of the *bildungsroman* or didactic novel).

Alike any other story, its narrative sense originated from the ending that gave it all its meaning, making all sacrifices to get there worthwhile. The same thing happened when youth ended, when after all that hard fighting, sexual repression and professional effort, the prize of social integration was finally awarded. Like at the end of children's stories, there was a *happy ending*: they got married and lived happily ever after. Love and work, the two pillars of adulthood defined by Weber and Freud, (13) represented the double prize to be attained at the end of youth. This demanded a double-sided condition of narrative likeliness: above all, the prizes offered should be real, like they used to be when jobs lasted for life and marriages were also long-lasting. In addition to this, the efforts required were to be fairly compensated. This was the message or coda grasped from youth and understood as a narrative of personal improvement.

That is why when youth was still under family authority, those responsible for the surveillance of the emancipation process felt they had the power to repress consumption and sexuality in their children to make them fight for their lives and to only let them get the prize once they had become adults. However, this cannot be done this way anymore: these prizes do no longer exist and people do no longer believe in them, because both employment and marriage have become unstable and precarious and efforts do not ensure the prize, as sometimes these awards are randomly distributed regardless of the efforts made. Therefore, now that juvenile emancipation has been blocked and it is permanently being postponed, those responsible family figures cannot hold back the consumption needs and sexuality of their children any longer, who end up obtaining a premature satisfaction that is not connected whatsoever to their merits or efforts.

This is how the contents of youth have changed. It used to be a period of sacrifice and accumulation of merits, whose compensation would only be obtained in adulthood through stable employment and everlasting marriage, but now sexual and material gratification are given prematurely throughout youth, regardless of the merits acquired. This is why the years of learning have lost their sense and have become an absurd children's game, and therefore destroying the happy ending of youth. No matter how hard one fights and works, in the end we may or may not have the prize awaiting us.

When youth was defined as a process of transition towards adult integration, this insertion into maturity also represented its end, thus providing it with a

(13)
Smelser and Erikson, 1982.

sense of unity. Youth acquired its sense because it ended and led to adulthood like chrysalis turn into butterflies. Youth was like an illness, pre-designed to disappear after a crisis, undergoing a metamorphosis like Kafka's, transforming youth into the opposite: adulthood. But now youth has become a neverending metamorphosis: an everlasting transition without an exit, without a direction, a circular path returning to its own beginning.

Youth is no longer the transition to adult stability because this period has also become a precarious and unstable period like youth, thus becoming its extension but not providing a solution for continuity. Employment is now flexible and precarious and technological advances shorten the duration of the training acquired during youth to last only about fifteen years, thus leading to the need for permanent training. Marriage cannot last forever either, so when young people have become adults but have lost their job or their partner, they have to fight again in search for a new life, in an attempt to acquire a new job, partner and renewed training, although always with the underlying factor of uncertainty and instability. This has turned youth into an everlasting period, as when one seems to have completed it, it starts over again, and adults must be prepared to look for a job and a partner again, behaving like young people in search for a job and a partner, while keeping up their chances to obtain either one during this uncertain period of high professional and emotional risk.

This makes youth no longer seem like a linear story in search for a happy ending but rather like a labyrinth with no way out where one has to sail round and round in circles while trying not to drown in the next gale one may encounter. This is why the young find the metaphor of the labyrinth or spider web quite attractive, as their own lives have stopped being a line with an ending and have become a circle where they wonder aimlessly. (14)

3: The geographical change: adult youth and young adulthood.

Up until 1975 (the date symbolising the end of Keynes' stable employment period and the beginning of the neo-liberal globalisation), youth used to be the most defining period in human biography: it was its core, its centre of gravity. This happened because it was during this period when the most strategic and irreversible decisions were made, marking forever the future events to be experienced throughout the rest of one's life. There were three main decisions, which were the origin of all the rest: (15) the triple election in the field of education (profession, studies), employment (work, career) and partner (marriage, family). These three decisions formed a chain, as partnership and employment depended on initial training and education. But the truth is that, once these decisions had been made, they became not only irreversible but they were also decisions for life, as they were to be maintained for the rest of one's life.

Young people back then had no consumption capacity and had to repress their sexuality, while they were also deprived of freedom. They were subjected to the power of the monopolising adults they depended on. Therefore, in the intergenerational conflict there is no doubt that the relation between forces at different ages favoured adults but had a negative effect on the young. They had to make the most difficult decision, which would determine the rest of their lives. It was the time to choose a career, a job and

(14)
Gil Calvo, 1999.

(15)
Gil Calvo, 1985.

a partner, and once these decisions had been made, one had to keep them as an adult no matter what. This explains that fact that, in spite of their apparent irresponsibility, they were going through the most compromising period of them all, as it was then when they had to make the most crucial decisions that would commit them as future adults forever. Youth represented the most difficult crossroads of them all, the one where personality was formed, destiny was built and definite adult identity was acquired.

This explains the fact that literature glorified youth and mentioned the young hero as the protagonist of the novel of his life while building his own future with the agony of his juvenile battle: a useful but self-redeeming passion. And this fact not only appeared in Goethe's *Years of learning* but also in Stendhal's *Red and black*, Flaubert's *Sentimental education* or Maupassant's *Bel-ami*, examples of a man building his own self and obtaining his reward after the glorious or tragic events experienced during his youth. This is why Gyorg Lukács, in his *Theory of a novel*, was able to say that the hero of the bourgeois novel was the literary plot of himself building his own future in search for his own salvation. But the hero's redeeming passion only took place during youth, a crucial period that tested him. Once this period had ended, adulthood was the resulting task that the young man had assumed throughout his youth, and into which he would engage for life.

Nevertheless, things have changed. Now the correlation of forces between adults and young people has been inverted to affect the latter negatively, thus making them lose their decision-making capacity. The truth is that now young people have full consumption capacity and free sexual gratification. On the other hand, the career, job and partner choices made by young people today are not definitive or everlasting whatsoever, as these are precarious, provisional and uncertain decisions, likely to be modified. Nowadays young people know that throughout their life they will have to change jobs, training and partners. Therefore, the decisions made by a young person are no longer crucial but have rather become irrelevant and free, as they can be revised and rectified afterwards throughout adulthood, which has now become much more dramatic and decisive. Indeed, now the heroic period is that of adulthood, as it is here when one must confront the severe problem in changing training, partners, jobs, families and even personal identities, sometimes in several occasions during adulthood, thus entering a process of constant metamorphosis.

This has extended the biographical crossroads that used to be exclusively embedded in youth into adulthood. The unchangeable and crucial triple election is no longer made throughout youth but throughout adulthood, which is now filled with multiple precarious and uncertain decisions to be replaced by other new ones, which at the same time contradict the previous ones, leading to a dramatic process of identity change. This biographical change does not only move the centre of gravity of life onto a later age but it also leads to the explosion of multiple centres of inflection that meet here but are disconnected, and appear one after the other in a discontinuous rosary of variable geometry and an uncertain ending. (16) This is why the old hero of the traditional linear novel has been replaced by Raymond Craver's new *Short Cuts*, a work reflecting post-modernist narrative, the only one that after Joyce's *Ulysses* seems to represent this emerging biographical complexity. (17)

(16)
Gil Calvo, 2001 a.

(17)
Gil Calvo, 2001 b.

To sum up, now one does not decide on one's life in a single bet, but rather confronts the difficulties of adulthood over and over again in a constant series of bets. This is known as "the ageing of youth" (or "young adulthood"), as it means that this heroic battle for life and the decision-making process does not only take place during youth but is rather extended throughout life. This period becomes a continuous rosary of uncertain battles for an uncertain life full of contingencies.

Nevertheless, this new dramatic sense added to adulthood is crossed by multiple breakages and crossroads that force us to reconstruct our personal identity. That is why youth seems to lose its relevance, as it is turned into a children's game lacking all importance. Quoting Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, youth is a story told by an idiot, full of noise and fury, which has lost all its sense because it is unable to predetermine the identity of an adult. It is the noise and the fury represented by the pyres of the cars that burnt in the French autumn of 2005, as an expression of the lack of capacity held by the young, who have been excluded for making a living and who deserve the right for integration into adulthood.

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