

How to put an end or not to youth

It seems worth to analyse the reasons why the branch of sociology dedicated to youth pays attention to its “end” rather than other factors. What are the reasons for this close-to-obsessive interest in knowing what limits the end of youth? Maybe it is just because the entrance into adulthood has become a problem provided that, as opposed to what happens in “globalist” societies, there are no obvious rituals or indicators to mark the transitions into adulthood? For instance, marriage is still significant from an individualistic point of view – both men and women can get married however they like throughout their lives – without necessarily marking the entrance into married life and without experiencing it as one of the ways to leave youth. Nobody in France believes that two people who live together but are not married are less mature than two married people. This confusing of the frontiers between ages, even the notion of age, determines to a great extent the fact that youth sociology has focused on the “end”, refreshing certain questions made by individuals and groups, and echoes their inquiries and concerns. The thesis for this article to show the difficulties involved in the end of youth is based on the theory of individualism and individualisation of modern advanced societies (Giddens, 1991) (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) (Singly, 2005). In our case, in the framework of a second modernity – a period that, since the 60s, breaks with most of the hindrances that existed during the period of the first modernity, especially to control the expression of individualism (Wagner, 1996; Beck, 2001) – all individuals must be “individualised”, which means that they have to show certain “personal” competences. Three are the most relevant ones: firstly, a certain disconnection from the parents, secondly, a certain coherence between the two dimensions of the process of individualisation, independence and autonomy, and thirdly, a permanent formation of the self, an opposed imperative to the classical connection of adulthood. The effect of the combination of these three demands is to lead each one to end youth partially, even once adulthood has been reached.

1. Ending childhood and youth by keeping a distance with the parent-children link

The process of individualisation is necessarily based on a certain “dissafiliation”, a distance between the definition of the self as a “son” or daughter” and the right to take part in inheritance and transitions (Singly de, 2000b). This separation is visible with the evidence for the vast majority of inhabitants in the western world of the rejection towards “prepared” marriages and even more towards “forced” marriages. Love has progressively imposed its rules on the institution of marriage and has destabilised its almost universal sense; that is to say, the fact that it is a link between two families. Now, the invention of courteous love, the love fantasy – like in

Tristan and Isolde – does not make sense without the formation of a double conception of identity. An individual is always the “son of” or “daughter of”. Without having this dimension structure the child’s entire existence, he/she can choose as a “free” man or woman and not in the name of the family interests. Since the 12th century, love has been born outside marriage because of this peculiarity: a woman can be a “wife” at the same time as a “daughter” and be loved by another man. The paths of love rejected the confusion between the husband and the lover because they considered that both links led to different functions. When love became a part of marriage, the latter joined even more frequently individuals that had not been chosen by others for being the “son of” or “daughter of”. Emotional freedom shows the strength of the ideal of an individual that must disaffiliate through some of his/her actions, but does not stop him/her from being the “son of” or “daughter of” (this is possible if parents accept this division).

This individualisation is not the result of a secret, but rather of a long process that begins in childhood. This is translated into a change of education between the first and second modernities. During the first one (schematically, since the end of the 19th century until the 60s), education was based on obedience and discipline. The course imparted by Émile Durkheim on «morale education» (Durkheim, 1963) is a testimony of this point of view. During the second modernity, the value of autonomy dictated that the child had to evolve on his/her own and to do so must progressively become more distant from the family, particularly from the parents, competing with the value of obedience.

This imperative of the “individualised individual” (Singly de, 2001) shaped new forms of pathology. In those societies where one of the main features is the psychology of existence, one of the sources of individual discomfort could be found in an insufficient level of “dissafiliation” or little separation from the parents. The analysis of case (1) allows us to know one of the modalities in this process of emancipation against the parents. It is the case of a young single woman, aged 23. Her parents belong to the lower class and have managed to take over important positions. After secondary school (end of higher education), Aurora enrolled in university, faculty of arts, and her mother is a professor of classical arts. She sees it as an obligation, she looks like a “good student” and is very afraid: *“I think that for years I have been programmed, I did not think about what I did, so I went to class, did what I had to do, what I thought was normal... I have always acted as automatically I as I have been told to... At the same time, I was deeply unsatisfied with that life but could not manage to find something that... in fact, if I worked like an automat it was to keep my parents happy, as I knew that is what they expected of me”*. Aurora began to have sleeping problems, stopped attending lessons and searched for the shelter of cafés and public transportation: *“I was running away from my life”... Everybody thought I was somewhere but I was really somewhere else. I got up in the morning and became a different person. My life had become that unbearable*. The “normal” sources of separation during adolescence or divergence of identity (that is to say, an identity that moves between the filiation and personal dimensions) happened late in the case of Aurora and this seems to have the effect of making life more difficult, the crisis gets “more painful” with this maladjustment. She turns into “the daughter of”, who knows how to be obedient and content, and another young woman who she would like to turn into but has not found yet. According to the terms used in *Le soi, le couple*

(1)
Collected by Audrey Palma for
the DEA thesis (Palma, 2002).

et la famille (Singly de, 1996), Aurora has not been able to form a personal identity because she is pressed by an overwhelming legal identity (which takes place due to a strong sense of belonging to her parents). Aurora, using one of her expressions, lives in an “*apparent normality*”; the good daughter (of) cannot reach her own depths to discover the myth of contemporary societies, the real me that is resistant to external pressures. She has no friends, the only “close being” next to her is her cat. He can console her but not help her in this process of personal construction. The construction of the “individualised individual” in modern societies does not take place, it is one of the paradoxes of a society that has quickly been called narcissist, without the help from someone close or a professional.

Lost in her “fake self” (2), Aurora thinks she must do something: “*I began to realise that if I wanted to change the way my life was developing, I had to take an initiative to do with me and not with my parent’s support*”. This way, she requested to be hospitalised: “*If I wanted to build my life, have a life, be an individual, that was what I had to do*”. She connected the change of identity with a change of space; she had tried the cafés and public transportation, which are common spaces considered as the opposite to the private space where she is the “daughter of”. This had not been enough so she opted for a solid institutional space. Aurora uses a metaphor for this step: “*it is like being in a race course and suddenly going into the garage. That’s all, I just stopped the stress of going round in laps and just had a general check up*”. Aurora remembered the (vicious) circle of the circuit forgetting to mention the race she is being pressured to take part in by her parents, regarding social promotion. She stops at the bodyshop not to “get fixed” but to leave, and the term “check up” acquires another meaning: the hope for discovery of the meaning of life. She does not want to go round in circles anymore, she wants to make her own route. The idea of an “individualised individual” often drives her in the trip to freedom of composed legal and received identities.

In spite of the social and psychological burden of the garage and the check up, Aurora is happy she changed “engines” and stooped being a race car: “*Finally, I am an individual and not just my parents’ daughter. I am finally a person*”. In another moment of the interview, Aurora went back to this point: “*I have started to be a real individual with a real life [her cat meows], and I have a cat*”. She has rented a flat for herself and has changed her professional orientation: she wants to become a make-up artist and work in theatre, a project her parents find funny and laugh at (out loud?). A make up artist? Aurora is a competent person! She knows that at another level this means “keeping appearances”. Does her real life consist in helping others to keep their appearances? Time will tell. What counts now she has been born again, is the fact that she has broken a defined identity by others and has affirmed a relative autonomy.

Today it is impossible to be oneself in a world designed by others. That is why one has to try to be the author of one’s life in one way or another. In this scope, leaving youth means completing the creation of the self, often thanks to a distance with the identification dimension as a son or daughter, which does not exclude, depending on the spatial or historical context, the defence of one’s roots (Ramos, 2006) and preserving a tight relation with the parents but still be an economically independent adult (Gaviria, 2005).

(2)
A different sense to that established by Donald Winnicott.

The possibility of ending youth accumulating autonomy and independence

The specific education of the second modernity moves between the classical logics of transmission and the logics of revelation itself. According to the former, the child must be taught some discipline, and must learn the rules to live in society and socialise as much as possible. According to the latter, the young person must learn to create a personal world (in the strict sense of “autonomy”) without waiting to reach this socialisation. The function of the second one is self-production, partly controlled by educators and close people (Singly de, 1996).

The adjustment of the tension between both educational logics often produces a divided identity. In some moment of existence, young people are involved in their own world but also in another one imposed by the parents (and teachers). The first dimension falls under their responsibility and concerns everything to do with friends, sex life and leisure, and the second one falls again under young people’s responsibility and also the parents’, and includes all about educational affairs (Dubet, 1991) (Singly de, 1996). Secondary school students will have more of a right to choose their boyfriend or girlfriend than to choose their educational option in college. The frontiers of the personal world are not stable, and young people use “strategies for slow destruction” (Ramos, 2003) to extend their domain, as Frank says: *“My parents do it well because it is not them who give orders or establish limits, but me. It is a real interaction and I try not to surpass the limits so as to avoid problems. They give me freedom and I can even press them sometimes to get a bit more”* (Ramos, 2003).

This separation of identities (3) allows us to define specificity of youth in the second modernity. This interpretation is based in the distinction between two notions of political philosophy, autonomy and independence, which are often confused in both colloquial and educated contexts and used as equivalents (Renaut, 1989), (Renaut, 1995), (Chaland, 2001). Independence is based on the monadologic conception presented by Leibniz: individuals do not have to give explanations to anybody because they have resources that allow them to evolve independently. Defended by Kant, autonomy is the capacity of individuals to award themselves their own law, to form a vision of the world, a “world” in the sense of constructivist sociology. Thanks to this distinction, we have proposed that youth can be defined in the second modernity as the period of life where the two dimensions of individualisation are disconnected (Singly de, 2000a), (Singly de, 2004). The young find themselves in the social and psychological conditions that allow them to have a certain autonomy without having resources, especially economic resources, enough to be independent from their parents. In this area, we can understand - in theory - the financial support provided by the parents as one of the ways to protect the children. Young people can have certain autonomy without being independent.

(3)
The divergence of identity, between the educational capital controlled by parents and the personal life, less controlled by them, is one of the ways where we can find a divergence of identity, the most theoretical one we have between belonging to the family and the expression of the self between legal and personal identity.

From this point of view, we must reconsider the event that the “classical” youth socialisation considers as the entrance into adulthood, as not all of them are equivalent in relation to independence and autonomy. Some allow for certain independence, whereas others sustain autonomy. Thus, for young people getting their driver’s licence is a significant step, as it increases to a certain extent their spatial freedom. Even having a paid job to earn enough

to pay for their own expenses is another decisive criterion for independence. The latter is in theory the most relevant element so as not to depend on anybody. Indeed, while young people are independent, they will have greater difficulty to establish the family inheritance balance because they are still being defined by their filiation link due to this economic dependence. On the other hand, if they have access to personal and stable economic resources, they can practice their right to inventory and transform, for instance, their relations with their parents from a “hereditary” link to a more “elective” one.

Access to an economic independence does therefore not have the same sense as moving house. Leaving the family home (Maunaye, 1997) especially marks the increase of the personal universe. For this reason, some young people leave at their parents’ home a good number of objects so that their new world, their new “home”, will not be full of past memories and they can express more easily their new autonomy. The fact that they are “inheritors” (whether understood as an extension of the self through family goods) emphasises their old dependence links. To accept the symbolic inheritance in society today, it is often necessary to have acquired one’s own independence. On the other hand, inheriting a certain sum of money from grandparents or getting a certain financial aid from the parents is not compatible with the creation of an autonomous universe (Cicchelli, 2001).

Autonomy does not stop us from having a life in common with the parents, a friend in a shared flat, or with the partner, as long as the “companions” let them carry out this task of acquiring rules and principles. However, those people who live on their own (Kaufmann, 1999) are more easily convinced that they are “autonomous” in that the absence of negotiation is experienced as an indicator of self-determination. As they grow up, always under the regime of dependence, young people get their autonomy in two ways, either negotiating the content of common practices with the other people living at home or by creating “their own little world” in their room (Singly de, Ramos, 2000) or outside with friends. Thus, parents accept (the mother, who is often in charge of keeping the house tidy, with greater difficulty) the disorder that marks the separation between two universes: the family with the principles of order and the threatened young person whose principles are not exactly perceptible by others, but is concerned about moving aside and not being confused with the “family”.

The success of the “culture of the young”, especially with the kinds of music, magazines, films, radio stations or TV channels, is explained on the side of perception by the fact that at a certain ages (the limits are blurry) they are authorised to be reaffirmed as such in both the public and private spheres. This culture is one of the pillars proposed for young people to remake their world. There are other resources to build it and this way some students (although still economically dependent from their parents) can go on a school trip to start building their own personal world. This is the case of Julia, who decided to move to London for some time to “take control of her life”. In the past, possibly as a form of resistance from her parents, she tended to ignore her studies and “go with the flow”. This is why she engaged in this project: *“I don’t know, maybe I just needed to find myself, find references in another city that was not imposed and get away from everything. I think I needed a sort of guideline, one that was not imposed, but chosen by me. It is what I have tried to do this year in London”.* (Moisset, 1996).

The origins of dissociation

The dissociation between autonomy and independence is created through a double mechanism: valuation of self expression, expansion, authenticity; in a few words, the individualised individual - more common in the west since the 60s - and the extension of education in the case of young people of all social classes and both genders (Terrail, 1990), (Baudelot, Establet, 1992) constituting the new capital of the family (Singly de, 1992). Schooling has stopped the transition into the labour market (including the paradoxical effect for those who leave early without a qualification as they feel excluded from this market) and, therefore, also stopped the access to economic independence. The latter, which follows the acquisition of educational capital and a stable job, is reached much later than the legal adult age. When looking from a more subjective indicator, the answer to the question “How old were you when you got your first real job?” is also on this limit: “whatever the socio-professional category and the gender, *real* employment is generally obtained before the age of 25” (Rougerie, Courtois, 1997). Young people do not wait until then to lead an autonomous existence.

We cannot deny that dissociation does not represent an ideal. The model of a “complete” individual today is that of a person who can join (relative) independence and autonomy. We can also perceive the undervaluation of the model of the “woman at home” (that dominated during the first modernity), an “adult” woman, dependent and nevertheless temporarily autonomous. We consider that the link of both dimensions authorises the individual to be autonomous because he/she has greater independence and the means to temporarily transform the universe and the surrounding relations.

Postponement of the end of youth perceived as the end of the formation of identity

From the point of view of youth sociology in the second western modernity, it is not about posing the equivalence amongst all ages, about denying the specificity of the young in relation to adults, but it also becomes necessary to break the representation of the sense associated to these age groups. Adulthood is used to become “superior”, which is preferable on the one hand, although some semi-individuals see it as “inferior” on the other. Schematically, the possibility of having one's own resources and not being dependent is regarded as something positive; the devotion to a paid job is a risk of not being able to experiment, to fall into a routine, to fall into self-destruction through an established identity that is not authentic. Adulthood, according to this dimension, is not longer attractive. Some denounce this with the negative term “young-ism” and consider that the young people who have an excessive autonomy “mature” very quickly and even become adults too soon, and those adults who act in the opposite way are trying to be young again when they are too old to do so (Deschavanne, Tavoillot, 2004). (4) Instead of complaining about what seems to be a regression and a threat to good social order - where each one has their own place - we try to understand the reasons why “adults” want to be young again. In order to make intelligible this historical movement from a youth that they all feel sorry to leave, it would be necessary to develop a more complete theory of modernity and the transformations of time and the relation with it.

(4)
«Dans nos sociétés:
l'infantilisme généralisée a
étouffé l'adulte», interview by
P.-H. Tavoillot, *Enjeux*,
December 2005.

We will just point out some comments. Let's begin by reading a section of a Christian weekly journal, *La Vie*, where for three years different people were asked the following questions: "What is being an adult? Are you an adult? Do you think being an adult is important in this society?". The answers show the difficulty found by most of those interviewed when it came to stating clearly that they became adults when they were well in their 30s. The term "adult" is not accepted, as writer Jacqueline Kelen says: "*Being an adult? I prefer the concept of maturity including at least one type of age and expressing the capacity of renewal of the being. There is an expression I like and I hope to experience: "Stay in youth"*". Maybe Jean-François Deniau, member of the French Academy and former minister, gave the most relevant answer of the contemporary relation with adulthood: "*It all depends on the definition given of the word adult. If being an adult means being aware of responsibilities, then I hope I am an adult. If, on the other hand, we accept my definition: "Being a human who has stopped growing up", then I really hope I am not one yet. We must not forget about childhood or declare it finished"*" (5). Even in the last stage of life this man refuses to be an adult because he does not want to leave childhood definitely. Why? Because childhood and youth are perceived as ages for possibilities and, therefore, for hope. Thus, we see adults as beings with no possibilities, who have nothing left to discover in the world or about themselves.

Youth sociology should also bear in mind the social sense awarded to the category that centres its analysis and listens to the warning made by Georges Lapassade who, since 1963, criticised the term adult by insisting on the fact that individuals are incomplete in many ways (Lapassade, 1963). Adult is a word full of different meanings, some positive and some negative. This is what you discover when listening to a young German man: "*The more you work the more conservative you become. That is why I would like to have a job where I feel good and can fulfil my professional needs... because to a certain extent I am afraid of becoming an adult, really becoming an adult. To me this means becoming conservative, and that means being like my parents"*". (Zoll, 1993). In other words, this young man is saying the same as Jean-François Deniau. To him, adults, taking his parents as a reference, are often individuals that are somehow wondering sleepily because of their routines. He does not want to be like them whatsoever, he wants to fulfil his objectives. Sociologists estimate that the imperatives of modernity, especially the ones ordering individuals to be themselves, only exist for these individuals with a better social and cultural preparation, and the statement made by this young man - as well as the results from the study made by Rainer Zoll - in general reveal that there is an interpretation mistake: if the conditions to practice this imperative experience strong variations, and bearing in mind that modern societies are still as unequal as the preceding ones, there can be some common beliefs; an adult age that can be associated to oneself constitutes one of these beliefs with relations to the belief in the "self" that is always partially hidden and is yet to be discovered (Taylor, 1998).

A model based on the transition into adulthood and defined as a primary objective does not correspond to the advanced modern societies that work according to another myth, the one for the search of the self that can lead people to retake studies, leave their partners, spend some time "on their own", start over their life in common, leave their company to start a new activity... Thus, in one of these interviews a thirty-year-old man who had just

(5)
A book has collected some of the sections published (Tuininga, 1996).

got married after the birth of his first child and had just got a stable job as a state worker confessed that he felt unhappy about what he referred to as the “straight line”. He felt that his life had ended, he confessed he dreamt of “zigzagging”. The depression caused by contemporary society does not necessarily appear from the excess of flexibility or an excessively hard competence between individuals in the performance market, but can also result from a dissonance between the desire to have a life full of events and a reality that is too even: the development of a professional and family life.

Individuals - whether “young” or not - can be afraid of being enclosed in a life that does not let them be themselves. It is the story told by Douglas Kennedy in *L'homme qui voulait vivre sa vie* (1998). Ben Bradford was successful in life: he was a thirty-year-old important lawyer, married and with two children. In spite of all that he felt unsatisfied and wanted to make his vocation true: becoming a photographer. He meets a friend on a boat and feels tempted to leave everything behind: «*We keep dreaming about a freer existence but we let ourselves be trapped by obligations and domestic traps. We'd like to leave, travel without luggage but can't help accumulating more weight until we are immobile. It is our fault because beyond the dream of evasion, we never say no; also, there is this irresistible attraction of responsibilities: profession, home, parent scruples, debts...all of this puts our feet on the ground... but even if all the people I know are secretly angry for having landed in a domestic dead-end, we keep going into it and staying there*” (Kennedy, 1998). Ben Bradford decides to leave everything behind. Does he therefore lose his category of an adult and becomes a “post-adolescent?”. This is an absurd conclusion. As opposed to some thesis that say that “the general childhood atmosphere has smothered the adult”, what we have to do is make a new definition of adulthood (why has youth sociology tried to understand the new meaning of youth without questioning the category of an “adult”?). The myth of the individual, the hidden treasure of a personal identity to be permanently constructed, associated to the right to have several lives, leads us to invent an “adult” category that does not exclude certain features of the “youth” category. Michel Blanc has witnessed this when remembering the trajectory of his hero in *Mauvaise passe*: “*He has become a teacher because he has to make a living somehow. At the age of 45 he has a senior teaching post, a wife and a son, but that is not what he wanted when he was young. Suddenly, he realises he is an old man and that if he wants to change his life, it's now or never*”. The producer and the hero are similar because the first one remembers his own life after the success of the film, *Marche à l'ombre*: “*I had the feeling that if I had continued along the same path, my life would have been a lie*”. Or rather: of course, I am who you think I am, I only am the character that I have always been playing” (6).

The definition of a category of an “adult” is the focus of a theoretical and ideological battle between two visions of the world, between two relations in a second modernity. For those in favour of the first one, the “normal” existence should be the succession of institutional stages leading to adulthood, which does not allow us to “behave like children” (Anatrella, 1988). For those defending the second one, the ages must be re-established. Thus, philosopher Yves Michaud requests that the legal adult age be lowered to 12 (7): children should have the right to vote, even if they are not mature enough. It is not necessary “to be the prisoner of the dream of perfect rationality in citizens”. Adults can be manipulated and the elderly are not deprived of the voting right. There is demand from the start: “the civil

(6)
Interviewed by Olivia de Lamberterie and Michel Palmiéri, *Elle*, 15th November 1999.

(7)Y. Michaud, « Pour le droit de vote à 12 ans », *Psychologies*, January 2001.

capacity is variable and the greatness of democracy consists in adapting to it". Children could have the right to vote not for being and "adult" before the time established by law, but because the inequalities of maturity (which must include the loss of this competence) do no longer divide ages. Adulthood is no longer the door towards the world of adults. Young people "have the advance payment of maturity" thanks to their decisions to purchase or the access to sexuality. Adults want to keep their "resources" associated to youth so as not to be enclosed forever in an excessively strict identity. Novelist Christian Bobin defends this position in his books by referring to one of the Gospels: only children will go to Paradise. The rest are too serious to be carried away by the madness of God, of others, of themselves. Adult becomes an equivalent of "serious". Christian Bobin tenderly remembers the sentence stated by his loved one: «*Nobody is exactly where they should be, but this is good because a strict adaptation would be unbearable*» (Bobin, 1999). He denies that each one of us is defined by the place we have; there must be a game (in every possible way) so that nobody stays in the same place, to make life go on: «*Childhood continues for much longer than the established period for it: it is experienced by people in love, writers and acrobats*» (idem). According to this concept, the individual has not been completed - "What do you do in life? Nothing, just learn" - and is being constantly transformed thanks to the look of the loved one, to the work on oneself through writing, by taking risks that allow us to move and not stay stuck in a definition of ourselves, and go up to the heights of the acrobat. From this point of view, which agrees with the demands of the second modernity, adulthood can turn into an unattractive category.

An individual's complexity as one goes into adulthood, this claim for a "part of childhood" do not imply, however, the denial of a process, of a personal development (Singly, 2001a). The self is transformed continuously and without limits. What is demanded is the preservation of childhood not just to have permanent resources to create a world and oneself, but also to be able to have the sense of the unit of the self, made in relation to one's own origins. Individuals do not refuse to grow up but do not want to refuse to what youth means either: their own birth and at the same time the chance to be born. Young people can dream of becoming "adults". Understood in the sense of accessing stable and sufficient economic resources, an adult can dream about being forever "young", understood as the capacity to experiment with the self. In this sense, individuals do not wish to end with youth, but always want to have projects, a future, even if the objective social conditions limit their possibilities.

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