



Routledge Advances in Sociology

YOUTH AND THE POLITICS OF THE PRESENT

COPING WITH COMPLEXITY AND AMBIVALENCE

Edited by
Enzo Colombo and Paola Rebughini



Youth and the Politics of the Present

Youth and the Politics of the Present presents a range of topical sociological investigations into various aspects of the everyday practices of young adults in different European contexts. Indeed, this volume provides an original and provocative investigation of various current central issues surrounding the effects of globalization and the directions in which Western societies are steering their future.

Containing a wide range of empirical and comparative examples from across Europe, this title highlights how young adults are trying to implement new forms of understanding, interpretation and action to cope with unprecedented situations; developing new forms of relationships, identifications and belonging while they experience new and unprecedented forms of inclusion and exclusion. Grounding this exploration is the suggestion that careful observations of the everyday practices of young adults can be an excellent vantage point to grasp how and in what direction the future of contemporary Western societies is heading.

Offering an original and provocative investigation, *Youth and the Politics of the Present* will appeal to students and researchers interested in fields such as Youth Studies, Globalization Studies, Migration Studies, Gender Studies and Social Policy.

Enzo Colombo is a Professor of Sociology and Culture at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Italy.

Paola Rebughini is Professor of Sociology of Culture at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, Italy.

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Precarious and creative

Youth facing uncertainty in the labour market

Sonia Bertolini, Valentina Moiso and Marge Unt

Introduction and theoretical background

Today, young people grow up in a context of extensive transformations in work opportunities, which encourages innovative practices in the way they organise their everyday lives. Most of these innovative practices are still individual efforts, attempts to manage ambivalence and uncertainty. Nevertheless, they may anticipate the capacity to act and to speak in a pioneering way, to set up an original and exemplary action that could become a model for the action of a wider part of the population. In particular, those among them with high social and cultural capital, more in tune with practices of mobility and interconnectivity, recognise it and put it into viable schemes for interpretation and evaluation. The chance to take disparate elements from these current models in order to put together one's life in a specific way depends on their economic and technological opportunities, on their network of accessible relationships and on the individual's own personal abilities to choose. It requires the development of specific skills based mainly on access to and management of the symbolic codes used and valued in various contexts, and on the capacity to move from one context to another (Rebughini et al., 2017).

Difficulties in entering the labour market complicate the situation of young people, who are already being sorely tested from the point of view of the transition into adult life. Literature (Blossfeld et al., 2005) stressed that job uncertainty is not the same for everyone and in every context, because it is filtered by the institutions (employment system, educational system, welfare state system and family system). On the side of the employment system, the spread of flexibility could take place without a substantial reform of the welfare state system and without the implementation of adequate active employment policies, as in Italy, increasing the perception that if you lose your job, you are exposed to high income uncertainty and a low probability of re-employment. Therefore, in changing jobs, a risk arises not only for those going from atypical work to typical jobs, but also from the atypical towards situations of unemployment or even inactivity, because in the absence of a contract renewal, in times of economic crisis, many people stop looking for work. The guidance provided by the educational system and proposals for vocational training, with rare exceptions, does not yet seem able to help young

people overcome work uncertainty by defining career paths that are consistent with their skills.

The presence of policies inspired by the logic of de-commodification and de-familisation is another relevant point in structuring the context of opportunities for young people. At the meso level, the economic capital of the family of origin, which protects them in the periods when they await work, as well as the cultural capital that provides metacognitive resources (Berloff, Modena and Villa, 2015) and social capital, affect the ways and the times when one finds work and the transition to a stable, good-quality job.

Therefore, the institutional, social and cultural contexts radically change the perspective within which individuals make decisions and help reconcile the different transitions (Mayer, 1997; Heinz, 2001). Starting at this point, this chapter focuses on the decisional mechanism and strategies at the individual level. The focus is on investigating the link between uncertainty in the labour market and autonomy, that is, leaving the parental home and being able to financially provide for their own needs, highlighting the coping strategies youth put in place in different institutional contexts.

The results come from a comparative qualitative analysis lasting three years in the frame of the EXCEPT project – Horizon 2020 programme: 386 interviews with young people aged 18–30 in nine European countries (Bertolini et al., 2018). Evidence from recent research has shown that job insecurity leads to putting off decisions regarding the transition to adult life (Blossfeld et al., 2005; Nazio, 2008; Barbieri and Scherer, 2009; Bertolini, 2011; Jansen, 2011; Reyneri, 2011; Blossfeld et al., 2012; Bertolini, Hofacker and Torrioni, 2014; Rebughini et al., 2017). The problem is that long-term planning for your career, and consequently private life, becomes difficult, if not impossible, when working with short-term contracts. However, having to halt planning because you do not know what will happen next, once your contract has ended, may induce an attitude – that is, *playing for time* – which then spreads to other dimensions of life.

Research design: highlighting creativity facing precariousness

To take into account the context in analysing individual decisional mechanisms means to take into account the influence the social fabric that surrounds them has on the actor, without losing the reference to action with its own sense of a Weberian paradigm. Deviations from standard rationality thus are not immediately defined as irrational behaviours but are traced back to the good reasons that guide actions or to the practical sense that guides individuals.

We are referring to a model of rationality that is more complex than the standard one, so in our perspective, some distorting elements of the latter are no more than alternative kinds of rationality. Individuals, first of all, encounter limitations in resorting to explicit knowledge, i.e. when they implement ‘rational’ processes of research, hypothesis verification and learning, thus arriving at simplified

representations of the situation. Therefore, we have sought traces of the intentional meaning of their action, which does not coincide with the instrumental rationality of the neoclassical economic paradigm. Such a level of analysis, however, also highlights the use by individuals of tacit or paradigmatic knowledge that is part of their experience and emotional baggage. The actors have a particular *practical sense*, which they activate when encoding information and making decisions. The baggage that allows individual action to be practiced (agency) is also composed of a series of cognitive maps of reality definition, cognitive schemes to understand and interpret the real, which constitute the link between the ways of doing and those of feeling proper to the emotional sphere (De Leonardis, 2001).

In order to trace these cognitive patterns in our particular research object, a good way may be to enter into the concept of *heuristics* developed in cognitive psychology (compare Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999; Goldstein and Gigerenzer, 2002; Monti et al., 2009), that is to say, those simple rules systems that people follow to face problems and make decisions in the face of complex systems and incomplete information. Giving attention to the practical sense of individual actors, and to the simple rules that inform their actions, allows us to discover many mechanisms that would not have emerged otherwise. In particular, we are referring to creative solutions that youth put in place in order to face uncertainty in the labour market.

Literature has highlighted the role of creativity for the young generation, given the changes in institutional setting – labour market and welfare state, but also the production system (Armano and Murgia, 2012; Morgan, Wood and Nelligan, 2013; Rebughini et al., 2017). Particularly in more recent years, the literature about creativity has moved ever closer to the studies on social innovation, which is to search innovative solutions to social problems that affect contemporary society, such as youth unemployment in Europe.

In this frame, the institutional actor – the state and therefore social policies – becomes increasingly absent in providing opportunities for young people, who are alone in facing the risk of uncertainty (Beck, 1986; Sennett, 1998). In particular, we look at decision mechanisms and strategies of young people facing the transition of leaving the parental home and then looking for housing and economic autonomy in an uncertain labour market.

The framework of the chapter is based on the following links (Figure 5.1). The focus on *subjectivity* is important in order to allow the *simple rules* and the *practical sense* to emerge: in this way, it is possible to complete the information on the impact of job insecurity on youth life that emerged from previous quantitative studies. Job insecurity is accompanied by postponement of transitions to adult life, non-default transitions order and reversible transitions (Rindfuss et al., 1988; Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011). The first consequence of job insecurity, which is having an inadequate income, goes hand in hand with loss of sustainability of household expenses, non-payment of fines and other expenses and over-indebtedness (Fourcade and Healy, 2013; Perrin-Heredia, 2013). In the literature, there is a lack of studies moving from qualitative approaches that at the same time take into account the reconstruction of institutional contexts (see Moiso, 2018).



Figure 5.1 Conceptual map

Institutional context

In Italy, youth employment status shows a high level of unemployment compared to the EU average: 35% in the 15–24 age group and 16% in the 25–34 age group (Reyneri, 2011; Eurostat, 2017; see Bertolini, 2018). In the frame of flexibility, several labour market reforms have introduced temporary contracts in the last years, but adequate forms of social protection are not yet available (Bertolini, 2011). The risk of being trapped in a secondary and sub-protected labour market is higher for young people with respect to older workers (Barbieri, 2011). The crisis in 2008 has worsened this situation. The data show an increase in fixed-term and atypical contracts especially for young people. At the same time, a higher number of NEET among youth (Eurostat, 2017) and an increased risk of poverty in comparison with other age groups are due to the uncertainty and the low level of salaries linked to the atypical contracts (Eurostat, 2016). In the absence of a minimum income scheme, in Italy, the family is still the main provider of welfare and the first form of support young people turn to in case of unemployment or low labour market attachment (Saraceno, 2014; Meo and Moiso, 2018).

In Estonia, the status of youth employment shows a lower level of unemployment than the EU average: 12.1% in the 15–24 age group and 5.2% in the 25–49 age group (Eurostat, 2018). However, the youth employment situation has been volatile, as Estonia was severely hit by the last crisis when youth unemployment was skyrocketing. However, Estonia recovered more quickly than many other EU countries from the last recession, and its unemployment rate has been decreasing since 2011. Since the employment protection legislation is relatively low for everyone, the temporary contracts are not widespread. It is also important to mention

the overall level of public funding available for activation and social protection. In Estonia, the public spending on social protection and active labour market measures are well below the EU average. Although investments in active labour market measures have risen since its accession to the European Union in 2004, they are still less than half of the EU average in 2016 (0.18% of GDP in Estonia vs 0.42% in the EU-28) (Unt, 2018). Thus, also in Estonia, the family is still the main safety net in case of unemployment or low labour market attachment.

Data and method

We will compare the youth strategies of young people in Estonia and Italy. The sample is composed of 103 interviews conducted during the period December 2015–November 2016 with young people aged 18–30, temporary workers, unemployed or working ‘under the table’, balanced by gender and educational qualifications.

The Italian sample consisted of 50 young people, balanced for gender and age: there were 25 young men and 25 young women; 25 were aged 18–24, while the other 25 were aged 25–30. Regarding their educational level, 26 out of 50 interviewees had a secondary level of education (ISCED 3, only one ISCED 4), 12 had a low educational level (ISCED 0–2) and 12 had a tertiary education (ISCED 5–6). With respect to the well-known Italian territorial divide, 31 of them were living in the city of Turin (in Piedmont, northern Italy) and 19 in Catania (in Sicily, southern Italy). In terms of involvement in targeted policies, 27 interviewees had been involved in policy measures, but only one with a form of economic support, and 23 participants had not participated in any such measures.

The Estonian sample consisted of 53 young people, balanced for gender and age: there were 25 young men and 28 young women; 24 were aged 18–24, while the other 29 were aged 25–30. Regarding their educational level, 23 out of 50 interviewees had up to a lower secondary level of education (ISCED 0–2), 21 had completed upper secondary education (ISCED 3–4) and 9 had a tertiary education (ISCED 5–6). With respect to the territorial divide, 29 were from the two largest cities in Estonia, Tallinn and Tartu, and 24 were from counties located near the south-eastern border of Estonia and a county at the north-eastern border. In terms of involvement in targeted policies, 29 interviewees had been involved in policy measures, and 24 participants had not participated in any such measures.

The interviews were semi-structured: leaving a free narration, the person interviewed was given the opportunity to indicate the most important aspects for them in relation to the uncertainty. Through the comparison with ‘control’ questions that asked them to explain the moments, the problems and the most important concerns related to this, we wanted to trace the heuristics activated by the actors in the processes of information collection and maturation of choices.

With different variations between countries depending on the institutional structure in Estonia and Italy, we have found creative strategies in the following areas: housing choices, cost containment and savings.

Housing choices

In the frame of autonomy, the first problem for young people working in an uncertain labour market is to face the income discontinuity. Regarding their housing choices, the results showed some creative solutions: sharing a house, returning to the parental house, having autonomy at intermittence or autonomy elsewhere or a partial autonomy.

Sharing a house (for necessity) in both countries

Cohabitation allowed for sharing expenses with other people and lowering their living costs. To share expenses and reduce living costs is widespread in countries where you do not leave your parents' home to live as a couple (Bertolini et al., 2018), such as in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Poland. In Italy, the interviewees living outside the parental house told a different story with respect to the past. In fact, the experience of living in a house shared with flat mates was quite common among them, and this result was something totally new for Italian youth, who in the past were not used to doing so. Even some of those living in the parental house at the moment of interviews had moved out for some periods in the past, mainly to enter University or to pursue other educational/working experiences in a town different from their own. However, the cohabitation seemed to work as a temporary strategy.

In Estonia, cohabitation is considered more normal, especially among young people leaving the parental home while they are studying. Still, seeing as the heating can be very expensive during winter, even cohabitation is not always enough for young people to cover their expenses, and they are forced to move back to their parental homes.

Sharing as a creative solution for young people facing uncertainty in the labour market is a well-known issue in the literature, especially in analysing new solutions to contain the costs of self-employed workers (D'Ovidio, 2016). Sharing practices are presented in the frame of reciprocity, solidarity and the creation of a virtuous circle of exchanges among people. In contrast, exploring motivations and feelings on the basis of this choice in our sample, young people would prefer to live alone and share their homes only for economic reasons.

Returning to parental house (always out of necessity) against living with parents and redefining autonomy

In the event of unemployment, many interviewees who were already living alone decided to return to the parental home. In Estonia, many interviewees had studied elsewhere and then returned to the parental household because they could not afford to live alone anymore. Thus, returning home in this case has been a way to cover the break between the end of an educational path and the start of their

working path. Returning home is also a coping strategy in case of a breakup: when the couple splits, it is much harder to cover the costs of housing alone, or the apartment is left to the other partner.

Indeed, perhaps in connection with ever-decreasing job opportunities due to the economic crisis, it appears that job insecurity in Italy prompts youth to consider either the most immediate present or the foreseeable future. In this view, you have to focus entirely on the present; consequently, autonomy is limited both in time and space. That is exactly what prevents young people from deciding to leave their family of origin. For our sample, being autonomous mostly meant managing daily or short-term economic problems and decisions and paying for leisure-time expenses and little more.

Autonomy intermittence, autonomy elsewhere and partial autonomy

Asking for help from parents is the most common strategy, but with differences between countries. In Italy, parents are a normal source of support for young people before going to live alone.

I mean, I don't know, to me it seems quite normal that a family, if they can, would support their child during University. . . . I realize that to stay here in Turin, outside from my parents' house . . . I need the economic support of my parents, in this very moment, I mean, partially at least, not totally, but yes, partially. So . . . I mean I don't, I don't feel totally independent, that's for sure. . . . Now that I've worked a little bit . . . I still have some money left (from my last job), so a little bit, I can make do by myself, but before (during University) it was totally on them

(Veronica, F, 26, U, IT)

In Estonia, young people stay at the parental home for financial reasons, being unable to rent their own flat. In order to leave the parental home, they often need parental backup and support, because costs of renting, especially in big cities, are perceived as very high. All the young people who had purchased their own home had received strong support from their parents or other close relatives. One way to reach housing autonomy is via inheritance. For instance, Mai lives in a one-room apartment without a kitchen with her two children. She owns the apartment, which was bought for her with her grandmother's inheritance when she was 16. She understands that at the moment she wouldn't manage financially if she didn't own her apartment, so this is a very important protective factor.

I would rather live in a 16 square-meter place, which is mine, than in a rented apartment . . . it is small, but it's mine.

(Mai, F, 28, U, EE)

In Estonia, home ownership is considered desirable among vulnerable youth even if they realise that without a stable job, it is not feasible to have a mortgage. Therefore, only those whose parents are able to guarantee the mortgage and support the payments can opt for the strategy of buying a place to live in. Therefore, young people dream about home ownership, but no one has managed to take concrete steps towards it without strong parental involvement. For instance, Kaidi (F, 22, U) and her partner had saved enough money for the down payment of a flat in Tallinn, but they were unable to get a loan from a bank because only one of them is working. Kaidi's partner's mother was ready to take out the loan in her name for them. They will be paying the loan payments themselves.

Cost containment and savings

Regarding the cost containment and savings area, results shows these strategies: saving, containing, accounting and programming.

Neither cicadas nor ants

The youth interviewees were well aware of the inadequacy of their income and were really active in money management strategies. In particular, saving is represented as a necessity for young people. Saving is often related to the lack of income support to help atypical workers in facing periods of unemployment.

Saving was a common strategy across the two national samples. Youth interviewees appeared to be able to adapt their material living conditions to their context and its socio-economic features. However, their ability was strongly limited and conditioned by their job insecurity or low salary level. Despite these difficulties, there were differences among countries given the institutional contexts. In Italy, saving could be a strategy to cope with job insecurity only if losing housing autonomy:

the simple fact of being able to save something, to know that someone pays you to do something . . . this is something that makes you more responsible. . . . Seeing as I live with my parents, my housing expenses are almost non-existent.

(Dario, M, 28, permanent employed, IT)

To sum up, for the young interviewees, saving is a short-term strategy to face uncertainty and income discontinuity, without establishing the conditions for a future stability. Therefore, this strategy is necessarily short-term, to buffer uncertainty and discontinuity of income. In other words, it can be seen as a strategy of 'maximization of minimum', according to which, individuals prepare for the worst situation and choose the best option among the worst. The advantage that it offers is that it is not necessary to evaluate all the possible alternatives, but only the worst and the usefulness associated with it.

Containment (if you are alone)

In money management, the role of opportunities and constraints given the context in which the individual acts is particularly relevant. In our two samples, institutional differences matter in the following terms: first, income support levels, which are particularly low in Italy, and the legitimisation of family support, higher in Italy. Where income support is limited, the strategy is to consume without spending too much. Many strategies did not include accounting and were limited only to shopping: in these cases, interviewees bought goods only at a sale or else cheap items, avoided expensive shops and looked for free recreational activities. It is a sort of ‘readjustment of preferences toward the down period’ (Elster, 1999) and/or they construct a new rhetoric to justify their situation, as in the case of Andrea:

I act . . . like this week, I’m not going out . . . or if I go out . . . I meet my friend, sometimes he comes to get me, sometimes I go to get him . . . we don’t go very far . . . maybe to the nearby park . . . if the park, we take the Frisbee or football . . . or we go to the centre, we walk around . . . without spending money, without spending anything . . . we get around by our own means so we spend even less, in hindsight . . . we spend ONLY on Saturday evening
(Andrea, M, 19, temporary job, IT)

Accounting and programming

Using cash money, writing expenses and using technology are common strategies among the young people interviewed. Indeed, budget constraint emerged as the most widespread strategy and was enforced in its most literal and direct meaning: some young people used cash only and spread their salary across the entire month by limiting its availability in the house. Therefore, strategies based on accounting were an optimal solution for some young people in order to keep both expenditure and its planning in check:

I support myself financially . . . I created a file, in Excel (laughing), I put in income and expenditure, so that I can make a forecast.
(Emma, F, 20, temporary employed, IT)

Some interviewees described how they divided their income into days or weeks in order to manage until the end of the month, so they knew exactly how much they could spend:

It is like, normal . . . for me that . . . I don’t have an income all the time. . . . Well and, as I have like, in the previous years, been to America (several times) [to sell books] then it was also like that that I earned most of my income during the summer. . . . And during the rest of the year I didn’t have

much income . . . so then you have to know how to distribute your finances for the whole year.

(Sergei, M, 26, permanently employed, EE)

Reframing autonomy

As for the mechanisms which link a weak attachment in the job market to postponing an exit from the parental home, the interviews showed that attitudes have changed compared to those highlighted in previous research. Indeed, job insecurity is likely to make it impossible for young people to make optimal decisions concerning their lives: halting decision-making appears to be the mechanism young people use to manage high insecurity and uncertainty. Moreover, it's not just that juveniles postpone decision-making about the transition into adulthood (because it requires time and money), since their decisions are also, and most importantly, affected by a range change: decision-making becomes short-term, and self-binding decisions become problematic.

It is possible to say that, rather than making their decisions under risk conditions (i.e. in situations where they can take into account and estimate the probability of each possible result), young people make their decisions under insecure conditions (i.e. some probabilities are unknown). Simply, the institutional context they are embedded in doesn't allow them to understand why and how to get a steady job and a secure income, which they nonetheless deem essential for even planning on leaving their family of origin, let alone starting their own.

Searching for a link among the previous strategies, it is possible to find a common thread among the interviewees from the two countries. Young Italians are in some sense *forced* to share housing with other people, and they prefer to return to the parental house. This preference is linked to a widespread and important strategy for the Italian interviewees: saving. For Italian young people, staying at home is a waiting strategy that can be analytically seen as a norm of sustainability. This situation leads to a redefinition of the concept of autonomy and one's own level of autonomy. For the Italian interviewees, 'Autonomy' is not living alone. The re-composition of resources requires the support of one's peers:

A person can be autonomous, not necessarily because they live on their own, in a small flat or house, but also continuing to live with others.

(Edoardo, M, 31, temporary job, IT)

Moreover, 'Autonomy' is not only supporting oneself, because wages are so low that to be economically autonomous, one would have to give up living.

For Estonians, autonomy is highly valued, seeing as it has been a general norm to move out of the parental home rather early. However, it is very challenging to obtain housing without a stable and sufficient income, and therefore, living with

one's parents for longer is perceived as a new normality, especially by males, the unemployed and those living outside of the biggest towns.

It's just different nowadays. Before you left home, left school, got married and a job, got an apartment, stuff. Well, um things are different now. People just continue living at their parents' home, their parents work and they then live off their parents' income.

(Erki, 24, M, unemployed, EE)

To sum up, this implies important consequences in terms of representation of autonomy among young people with lower social and cultural capital.

Comparing states in which the value of the norm is very different – in Estonia it is very important, in Italy less so – has shown that at the moment young people in Europe are facing similar problems. In both countries young people's creativity has a function of resilience in dealing with the economic consequences of job insecurity: creativity lies in actively re-composing available resources. On the other hand, our analysis has shown the character of short-term strategies of these behaviours. In both countries, there is the lack of specific policies dedicated to young people both in terms of labour, housing, access to credit to sustain their transition to adult life and their short-term strategies for creating conditions for youth to plan their future.

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