Without a Centre that Holds:
Contemporary Adulthood and the Devolving Life Course

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Introduction

My interest in the topic was piqued by newspaper headlines in the Australian press such as these: *'Adults' fail the age test*, *Kids who refuse to grow up* and *Forever young adultescents won't grow up*. This shows that while there is some concern about kids growing up too soon, about the 'end of childhood'[1] – with a perceived early sexualisation of children, their early exposure to violence, the imperative to make career choices at ever younger ages etc. – there coexists the exact opposite assumption, namely that young people either refuse to grow up, or delay that process by a number of years, especially when compared to their parents' generation. So it seems that sometime in the 1980s or early 1990s a generation of teenagers, branded with the label 'Gen Y', suddenly thought to themselves: 'marriage, mortgages, children and fulltime work ain't for me; not now and not until I'm very old, say about 37.' Not satisfied with an explanation that suggests a massive shift in the mindset of a large collective without consideration of possible alternative explanations, I set about investigation that other, often neglected, aspect of the human experience where individual actions intersect with the economic, political, scientific and cultural exigencies of the times. This paper is an attempt to clarify that alternative view by attending specifically to the notion of a prevalent delayed adulthood among people in their mid-20s to early 30s, and I do so with specific attention to transformations in the life course in affluent societies.

I

For all the work that in recent decades has been done in the social sciences on the changing face of the life course,[2] the image of adulthood as life's centre stage, flanked

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[1] N. Postman 1982, *The Disappearance of Childhood: How TV is Changing Children's Lives*, Comet, London.
[2] Cf. M. Kohli 1986, 'The World we Forgot: A Historical Review of the Life Course', *Later Life: The Social Psychology of Aging*, ed. V.W. Marshall, Sage, Beverley Hills; U. Beck 1992, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage, London.

by dependent childhood and old age, is difficult to dislodge from the social imagination. There are good reasons for this. After all, we experience ageing as a linear process, which allows us to perceive of the lived-through past and of life yet-to-come from the vantage point of the present in an embodied sense. This biological maturation of the human body is culturally framed and socially shored up in institutions which accommodate, reproduce and so help us make further sense of, that linear process of maturation. The standard life course, then – where *dependent* childhood in education is followed by *independent* adulthood in work and a family of one's own and *dependent* old age in retirement – is the social analogue to individual experience.

But that experience cannot be divorced from our culturally specific 'ways of seeing.' The prevailing imagery of childhood, adulthood and old age further crystallizes the taken-for-granted notion of life's orderly unfolding. To name just one, and perhaps the most famous cultural keystone in the formation of the social representation of ageing, at least in Anglophone societies: Shakespeare's famous verse from *As You Like It*, has us 'Mewling and puking in the nurses arms' only to have us leave the stage less than gracefully in 'second childishness and mere oblivion / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.'

Science has done its part in the congealment of the standard life course ideal. From the late 19th century, once developmental psychology had outlined the 'ages and stages' approach to human life maturity[3] became the explicit goal of 'normal' development; it became scientifically ascertainable. And taking its cues from developmental psychology, the law began to establish exact age-thresholds for the coming into effect of legal responsibilities, culminating with the 'age of majority' somewhere between 18 and 21 years of age, depending on country and legislature. But neither psychological theory nor legal practice solves the issue the 'when and how' of adulthood; if anything it makes matters more complicated. For example, those who diagnose a prolongation of youth talk about people who are biologically mature and are legally of age, but do not fulfil the social criteria for maturity which make the achievement of adulthood visible, readable, intelligible and thus *assessable on a societal level*. So these individuals are then adult in some ways and not in others, delay some of the markers of adulthood while reaching others, are then both children and adults at the same time. That, in my version of the story is not good

[3] For a critique see A. Rosenfeld and E. Stark 1987, 'The Prime of Our Lives', *Psychology Today*, vol. 21, pp. 62–72.

enough, because adulthood has something to do with a person's social validation of their full personhood. You can't be half a full person. Adulthood is a social absolute.

For now, let me name the three criteria that for most of the 20th century have been core social markers of adulthood, markers that are likely to garner social validation of individuals' adult status: a family of one's own, permanent living arrangements and fulltime work for the (usually male) breadwinner. I call these the 'classic markers of adulthood'[4], all of which presuppose a good measure of financial independence, of course. What is decisive here is not only the achievement of these markers, but the timing of those achievements. Because, after all, the issue for some commentators today is not that young people don't achieve any of these things, but that they do so later, and by implication, too late. Timing is everything. Research in the U.S. has shown people strongly believe that adult achievements – from financial independence, to stable relationships, fulfilling careers and family relationships – ought to be finalized by the time we reach 26.[5]

II

Where does this figure come from? By definition, if a generation of young people can be judged as achieving adult status too late, then there must be a generation of young people who did so right on time and whose collective experiences and values provide the benchmark for present-day evaluations. In fact, the historically unprecedented economic, marriage and baby boom of the postwar era – Hobsbawm's 'Golden Age'[6] – provides that benchmark. Without going into too many details here, the baby boomers' coming of age was marked by early marriage and family formation; by the 1960s family roles and adult responsibilities were nearly synonymous; most women married before they were 21.[7] There was also a strong policy orientation in all western countries up to the rise of neo-conservative politics in the 1980s, toward fulltime employment, and often there were Government schemes that enabled homeownership, subsidized higher education and guaranteed retirement on secure pension plans. In other words, the social values of the time which stressed the early uptake of adult responsibilities were underpinned by economic and political arrangements that stressed stability and the long term.[8] (It is

[4] H. Blatterer 2007, *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*, Berghahn Books, New York & Oxford.
[5] Smith, T. W. 2003, 'Coming of Age in 21st Century America: Public Attitudes Towards the Importance and Timing of Transitions to Adulthood', NORC, Chicago.
[6] E. Hobsbawm 1995, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Abacus, London.
[7] F.F. Furstenberg 2004, 'Growing Up is Harder to Do,' *Contexts*, vol. 3, no. 3: 33–41.
[8] N. Lee 2001, *Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty*, Open University Press, Buckingham; for social conditions of postwar era see, E. Hobsbawm 1995, *The Age of Extremes*.

likely that still vivid memories, on the part of decision makers and ordinary people alike, of two World Wars and the Great Depression made stability in all areas of life a highly valued good.)

All this had a tremendous impact on the solidification of the standard, tripartite life course, because the structural possibilities of entry into adulthood according with prevailing social values were indeed given for a sufficient number of people for experience and ideal to congeal into a coherent reality. The fulfilment of the classic markers of adulthood – family, stable relationships, work and independent living – brought in its wake the social recognition, or validation, necessary for adult status to become a meaningful achievement for baby boomers in their early to mid twenties. And it was 'meaningful' because being an adult can't simply be decided by the lone individual, but is reliant – as a 'status' – upon a degree of conferral by the social institutions and persons that guide and accompany us in everyday life, as elderly people or marginalized individuals who are subject to infantilising practices know all too well.[9] Of course, when I speak about 'the baby boomer experience', I do not mean to infer that everyone shared the same experiences. What I want to get across is that 'stability' was the guiding motto for adult life; that there was an orientation toward a particular enactment of adulthood, for which the tripartite life course is an apposite schema.

III

As one writer puts, it since the 1970s once 'highly standardized life trajectories have been "shattered" by structural and cultural developments in all major social institutions.'[10] To provide some concrete examples: in the area of intimacy, stability has given way to a kind of 'until-further-noticeness', which – to counter conservative critiques of the contemporary family – has also meant greater freedoms of sexual expression, has provided women with greater say over their reproductive futures, as well as opening legal doors for them to exit unsatisfactory marriages.[11] The demise of the manufacturing sector across the industrialised world and the concomitant rise of so-called 'knowledge societies' has meant a prolongation of young people's education, and late entry into the fulltime labour market. The rise of part-time and

[9] Hockey, J. & James, A. 1993, Growing Up And Growing Old: Ageing And Dependency In The Life Course, Sage, London.
[10] M. Buchmann 1989, *The Script of Life in Modern Society: Entry into Adulthood in a Changing World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 186.
[11] A. Giddens 1992, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford; U. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Polity, Cambridge; Z. Bauman 2003, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*,, Polity, Cambridge.

temporary work has precipitated unprecedented labour market participation by women, which for all its benefits has also resulted in a generational de-synchronisation of biological and social clocks. As a consequence of these labour market changes, school and university students are no longer strangers to work; they no longer have to wait to enter 'the real world' after their stint in the education system, but increasingly have to juggle both. Furthermore, education is today more and more a life-longer endeavour, both because technological innovation calls for a constant updating of skills, but also because it is today possible for older people to undertake university study.

All this signals a transformation of the temporal unfolding of the life course with the implication that, while institutional arrangements persist (e.g. education, work, retirement), the life course is today better conceptualized as a series of single or parallel trajectories which may encounter stops and starts, one-way streets, reversals as well as u-turns. By extension, there is a greater potential for social asynchronicity as individuals are 'less likely to experience and/or recognize their own trajectory as part of the 'collective destiny'' of their friendship networks and families.[12] Under these conditions, then, the simultaneity of plural, asynchronous and fragmented biographies becomes a normalized part of the 'continuum' of life.

In my mind the single most important change here is the curtailment of the long-term future, and thus a new impossibility to project one's life beyond the here-and-now and the immediate future as far as social achievements are concerned. 'Settling down', which has for some time was a key phrase connoting adulthood, makes little sense today. As others have pointed out, the fact that the 'new economy' favours those who are flexible, mobile and willing to change, and thus by proxy discriminates against those who want stability and linear, predictable work careers, that is, the crux of postwar work arrangements, is a cardinal factor in these changes.[13] And so today, flexibility has superseded stability as the marker of a successful adult life. The upshot is not so much that young people delay their adulthood, but that they grow up differently, that is, in accordance with the economic, political and social exigencies of their times. In so doing, they are also changing the meaning of adulthood.

[12] M. Buchmann 1989, *The Script of Life*, p. 86

[13] U. Beck 2000, *The Brave New World of Work*, Polity, Cambridge; R. Sennett 2006, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London; R. Sennett 1998, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, W.W. Norton, New York & London.

IV

My study of contemporary modalities of adulthood – a qualitative theory building exercise – attempted to (1) reply to the age-old hand-wringing over the next generation's inadequacies in a theoretically informed manner, and (2) in so doing attempted to find out how people in their mid-twenties to early thirties make sense of their adulthood as part of a highly contingent life course without recourse to adequate blueprints handed down from previous generations.

I want to now very briefly comment on one specific aspect of what came through in the interviews, and that is young people's relative optimism about the road ahead, an optimism that has been commented upon by others in the field of youth research. One important factor in this optimism is the perception of proliferating options in all spheres of life. This is also the aspect of their lives that is often stressed in the media, and some writers have found cause in this to speak of 'the options generation'.[14] What is often forgotten in this story is that these are also people who *have* to choose; and that choosing among a number of possibilities can be very stressful indeed; that there is a feeling that if you put a foot wrong, you've made a mess of your life. But on the other hand the respondents' positive outlook prevailed; none had any doubts that they'll do fine, even if rarely anything concrete was said about future plans, and here their positions in education and the labour market doesn't seem to matter as other research too has found.[15]

I suggest that this optimism is underpinned by the belief in the necessity to be open to change, to flexibly adapt to the unpredictability of social relations, and so to the unpredictability of their adult lives; that flexibility is seen as a kind of virtue. Growing up therefore also is a process of internalization of the uncertainty into which they were born. And being adult, finally, means to have successfully reconciled the uncertainty of the world they face with an advantageous stance toward it. To internalize flexibility as a way of life is to shun (or be at least suspicious of) the securing ties of long-term commitments even if they were available. These attitudes are symptomatic of a kind of self-centring. In the process of becoming adults, these individuals gradually come to realize that the only center that promises stability lies within. This is the latent rationale that often lies behind remarks such as '[growing up means] taking responsibility for yourself . . . first and

[14] H. Mackay 1997, *Generations: Baby Boomers, Their Parents and Their Children*, Macmillan, Sydney.
[15] See also, J. Wyn and R. White 2000, 'Negotiating Social Change: The Paradox of Youth', *Youth and Society*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 165-83.

foremost' (Isabelle); or, 'If something upsets you then change it. Make it better for you. You gotta look after number one and that's yourself' (Anthony).

So, if being grown up today means to have acquired the confidence and skill to adapt to uncertainty, then this also means that they have acquired the confidence and skill to mould and shape the one aspect of their world that is still predictable for all its plasticity, and over which they perceive having ultimate control: themselves. These young adults posit themselves as malleable, flexible, and open to new experiences.

Indeed, the social category 'adulthood' is heavily invested with a psychological vocabulary. It appears that the respondents compensate for the increasingly abstract nature of standard adulthood by recourse to a language that signifies things that are no less intangible and yet have become part of everyday discourse: personal development and growth, 'realizing your potential,' 'being true to yourself,' 'putting number one first,' 'accepting me,' and so on. Pop psychology furnishes a set of readily available ideas that people draw upon to think about themselves. Hence, adulthood too is most easily described in these terms. Now I could go on to argue that these 'new adults' constitute the perfect subjects of the 'new economy', and of a politics that from the 1980s onwards sought to devolve government responsibilities as far as possible on to private individuals. But I'd like to end on a more salutary note, thought I will leave this up to someone else, namely the American cultural anthropologist Ann Swidler:

> In some ways the reaction to [rapid social change] seems to be a culture of narcissism, in which the self and its perpetuation become all, in which the trick is to remain alive and whole without risking attachment or making binding choices. But the other side of these cultural explorations is a search for models of self . . . that are compatible with continuing growth and change, that permeate with moral significance the ups and downs of daily life, the struggle to live well, rather than giving moral meaning only to the dramatic moment of the shift from youth to adulthood.[16]

[16] A. Swidler 1980, 'Love and Adulthood in American Culture', *Themes of Work and Love in Adulthood*, eds N. Smelser & E.H. Erikson, Harvard University Press, Boston, p. 114.