

## **Blurred transitions: Revisiting the significance of work and parenthood for young adults in Italy**

By Valentina Cuzzocrea and Sveva Magaraggia

### **1. Introducing transitions and thresholds**

The category of transition to adulthood produces problematic issues. On the one hand, we do not know its borders; that is, when it begins and when it ends. We do not know where to start, because for example, in Finland youth policies include boys and girls up to 12 years of age. In Italy, by contrast, longitudinal youth surveys (IARD to name one) consider the age range of 15 to 34 (in the last 30 years the upper limit has increased from 24 to 34 years). So we can say that, if we take age as a point of reference for the condition referred to as “youth”, its borders are completely fluid.

Corresponding to transformations in modern industrial and post-industrial societies, including the extension of education, the diffusion of birth control devices and the individualisation of social life, the transition from youth to adulthood are being prolonged and de-standardised in European societies (Cavalli & Galland 1996; White & Wyn 2008). Similarly, a common trend can be identified in terms of disinvestment in welfare measures across Europe. This in turn puts pressure on parents and young people, originating specific models of welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). Italy falls within the category of the southern group of welfare states (Ferrera 2006) whose features are low levels of welfare provision and reliance on the family as a form of support.

However, young adults in Italy constitute a case in its own right for a particularly delayed transition to adulthood. Not only scholars (Diamanti 1999) but also national and international press heavily attack them with the accusation that they have lost freshness and agency potential in public life. The question is, then, what conditions would allow a young Italian to consider himself / herself an adult in the current cultural and social-political scenario?

International sociological literature on life course identifies five thresholds which have to be overcome in order to reach adulthood: completion of education, reaching a relatively stable working position, leaving the family of origin, creating one's own partnership and becoming parents. This concept of transition has a strong regulatory framework, in which school and work play a decisive role. Indeed, the ‘critical junctures in the life courses’ (Modell *et al.* 1978:122) that traditionally mark the passage from youth to adulthood involve a transition along two axes: the first refers to the public sphere and separates the period of education from work. The second relates to the private sphere, which separates life in the family of origin from the new one (Buzzi, Cavalli & de Lillo 2002, Cavalli & de Lillo 1993; Galland 1997). The transition from one stage to another would, therefore, imply a definitive abandonment of the first and a complete entry in the second: one leaves education to enter the labour market; similarly, one leaves the family of origin to form one's own family.

This threshold approach does not seem able to grasp the fluidity with which young people in western and industrialized societies are confronted with in this period of life nowadays, in comparison to a few decades ago, where the transition to adulthood no longer seems to be a path characterized by well defined stages. In fact, discussion on the transition to adulthood often tends to assume specific characteristics with respect to past and has not yet been fully investigated (Csikszentmihalyi & Scheneider 2002; Leccardi & Ruspini 2006; du Bois-Reymond *et al.* 2006).

In the literature, several categories have been formulated to analyse young peoples' issues according to the threshold approach. In the late eighties, two Italian sociologists (Donati & Scabini 1988) referred to the ‘young-adult’ as an oxymoron that efficaciously renders the ambivalence of this new ‘in between’ age. The young-adult ideally continues on the path of the ‘early youth’ (Piccone Stella 1993), extending the period between childhood and adulthood, and ending up changing the meaning of adulthood.

Instead of 'young-adults' James Côté uses the term 'psychological adulthood' to refer to the pressure to auto-determination that young people face in the increasingly difficult transition to adulthood (Côté 2000, 29). Côté takes the concept of 'youthhood' (Mørch 1995), reading it as a new phase of life during which, through individual efforts, you can achieve a 'psychological adulthood'. According to this author, the decline of the importance of the traditional markers associated with the transition has helped to bring out an emotional and cognitive 'psychological adulthood'. Jeffrey Arnett (2004; 2006) introduces the concept of 'emerging adulthood' as neither adolescence nor young adulthood. This is theoretically and empirically distinct from both. Marriage and parenthood appear to be the 'real' markers that determine the completion of the transition. In a recent International congress, Carles Feixa spoke about 'Adultescente' (kidult/adultescent), a neologism created by a British company in 1997 in order to define an adult that maintains an adolescent life style.

The Yo-yo approach (Walther *et al.* 2006) shows how the simultaneity of various transitions is becoming more and more of a challenge for young people's agency. It also reflects on the fact that nowadays being adult does not necessarily imply a clear-cut change from the past: you do not stop being something that you were for something else. Rather, being adult implies dealing with highly contradictory demands, and embracing a 'nomadic' status, that is made of 'transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes' (Braidotti 1994: 22).

All these approaches show the necessity to break from the rigid dichotomy of youth / adulthood; what unites these readings of the ages of life is the idea that, given the social and cultural transformations of recent decades, it is no longer enough simply to contrast two rigid stages - youth and adulthood. Rather, we should consider other models that take into account the high porosity of boundaries of the stages of life. Stages of life do not appear as part of a linear path which leads to a complete assumption of adult roles, rather they become periods of experimentation, in which young people are confronted with role models, experiences and different roles and negotiate spaces in the public sphere of this new social horizon.

The fact that the thresholds that traditionally articulate the transition to adulthood have changed their ritual and symbolic value and that, in parallel, the agency on the time of their acquisition increases (together with the uncertainty about their future results) implies also a profound transformation of the condition of arrival into adulthood. It is therefore not enough, in our view, to focus the attention on the changing ways in which structure affects how young people grow up. Rather, it is necessary to discuss how the norms associated with adulthood are changing, how adult men's and women's biographies are changing, without losing the 'right' to be recognised as adult.

## **2. Problematising the threshold approach**

We find that these approaches are somehow conservative in terms of the role played by thresholds (or markers). Anthropological, sociological and psychological literature tend to underline the role of rite of passage, to name one, the consumption of alcohol (Beccaria & Sande 2003), in creating one's own identity. Yet, we all move through the life course, bringing with us something from previous experiences. The concept itself of identity (which derives from Latin "Idem", i.e. the same) is based on the recognition of a twofold nature: one's own identity is peculiar and specific, but also based on a subtle repetition of itself (Sciolla 2007). The threshold approach implies disagreement with these premises, instead recognising a sharp, clear-cut passage from one defined condition to another defined condition.

According to the Oxford dictionary of English, a 'marker' is 'an object used to indicate a position, place or route', a 'distinctive feature or characteristic indicative of a particular quality or condition'. It is used as a 'thing serving as a standard of comparison'. 'Threshold' is accordingly 'a strip of wood or stone forming the bottom of a doorway and crossed in entering a house or room'. Both these meanings underline the definite passage to a subsequent

condition. Therefore the threshold allows a passage from a condition A to a substantially different condition B.

We propose to concentrate on obtaining a stable working position and becoming a parent, which have a strong and complementary significance, covering an important role in literature. Findings from our two respective research projects (Cuzzocrea 2008; Magaraggia 2008) strongly converge in criticizing the necessity, for the young adults interviewed, to refer to such thresholds. These elements make them a suitable lens through which to problematise the threshold approach. In particular, why are the thresholds of parenthood and work important?

**Work:** Given the increasing rate of female participation to the labour market, and the expansion of higher education, work increasingly assumes the characteristics of a universal threshold. As an experience, in fact, it relates to a growing portion of the population. On the other hand, recent transformations in the world of work increasingly threaten the rights associated within a position of employment. Work is less able to provide security and a stable income. Moreover, such a condition seems to be verified across all classes, determining a generalised condition of risk (Beck 1992).

**Parenthood** also seems to be transforming, but in the opposite direction of the employment sphere: four traits in particular seem to be the main indicators of this recent cultural shift. First, the decision to have children is no longer an obvious choice, and is becoming an increasingly rare experience, as the low fertility rate of Italian women shows (1.34 children per woman according to Istat 2007). Secondly, we become parents later in life. A third characteristic of today's transition to parenthood, which is closely linked to the earlier ones and in a sense their synthesis, is its profile of an event that is increasingly chosen and planned. Finally, the last feature that defines the transition to parenthood concerns the changed expectations of the couple about the parental role. Being a parent today is perceived as a reflexive process and requires the acquisition of new set of skills, both psychological and relational (Beck & Beck Gernsheim 1990; Fortunati et al. 2004). We now turn to discuss our empirical findings.

### 3. The work threshold/ work as a marker

The reasons the literature on transitions into adulthood considers obtaining a stable working position as one of the five markers are found in its capacity to guarantee a stable income, and in the potential this has to channel one's identity. There is, therefore, a convergence of two different sorts of elements: one is economic in its nature, and the other is rather more symbolic (work, indeed, is a source of identity). Empirical findings from a previous piece of research (Cuzzocrea 2008), which I am discussing here, have shown that both these elements are to be put into question.

Primarily, we should consider that recent transformations in the labour market have completely transformed the role of work. We have reasons to believe that the situation in Italy is even more dramatic than other European realities, and this causes Italian sociologists of work to say that we have left behind the so-called 'Società del Lavoro' (work-based society, where work is singular and unitary) to embrace the 'Società del Lavori' (jobs-based society, where jobs is plural). This does not mean that there is not work to do, but only that there are fewer jobs associated with the rights typical of the welfare states, if not to contractual rights tout court. We often misconceive work; that is, we say 'work', but we mean 'employment'. This is a very crucial point because the sort of work / employment we mourn is itself confined to a specific historical period, the so-called 'thirty glorious' (1945-1975). Employment is the contractual fact, which guarantees rights and entitles one to have a position in society. Yet, it cannot be said in any sense that before this age people did not work, as in fact work primarily indicates the accomplishment of an activity.

Such an acknowledgement is very relevant because a discussion on transitions to adulthood must consider the progresses that the sociology of work – as well as gender studies, for

instance - have made in recent years to recognise differences in the nature of work at any time, for instance, between paid and unpaid work (Pettinger et al. 2006). Also, there is an international debate on the 'end of work' (Strangleman 2007), which points to the importance of the fact that work has lost the centrality it once had in people's lives. In terms of the working and professional path that one can construct, the emergence of portfolio careers puts into question vertical progressions. Rather, the professional path is becoming more likely to move across different working groups (although, this does not necessarily involve improvements in the salary levels, promotions, higher visibility and responsibilities and so on). Added to this is the increased possibility of occupying periods of unemployment, the 'work' concept is becoming an increasingly unstable indicator. My research on early career professionals reveals that few feel that they require a 'job for life' to go on with a professional life, although this maybe especially true for qualified workers.

Also, we should consider the fact that some jobs might be considered good ones in terms of the contents and satisfaction but are actually not very good in terms of the special protection they offer. More generally, it emerges that it is not easy to distinguish once and for all a good (or stable) job from one that is not so good. What makes a 'good' job is an increasingly a dubious matter. Many empirical pieces of research have shown that the more educated one is, the more likely they are to be oriented towards job satisfaction rather than security. The social status attached to work is not clear. One might be doing an extremely valued activity, but with a very low salary and very precariously. Pushing further in this direction, it is useful to unpack the notion of a 'good job' as well as work. Again, various dimensions emerge clearly from interviewees' responses, and questions, such as, 'What is a good job?' or 'What makes a job good?', gave rise to a variety of interesting responses.

One axis along which an individual's evaluation over a good job can be measured is the personal (and very variable) estimation of one's employability in the labour market. Why is it fruitful to employ the concepts of security in everyday life? The link between employability, security and certainty is defined by the following relations: if I consider myself employable, that is, if I have qualifications and a vocational portfolio which is flexible enough to adapt itself to a variety of available projects, then I will perceive myself as secure. Secure, in other words, in my capacity to occupy a certain position. If having occupied a certain position I feel secure, I will therefore also feel certain in the continuation of my activity and with regard to my total situation with life. If, on the contrary, in a society that is increasingly organised around projects, I feel unable to adapt my knowledge and competences to a variety of work solutions, I will achieve security only in minimum terms. And as a result, I will feel uncomfortable with my surroundings.

The centrality of the perception of employability to one's sense of security holds true whether such a perception is high and positive or the opposite: if it is poor, it is very likely to affect negatively security (and therefore certainty) in all its manifestations. As Giulia, an engineer from Cagliari says: *'the main problem is programmability, the problem is in relation to future possibilities, to be able to have a minimum of certainty for the future, which does not necessarily mean having a salary at the end of the month, but being sure that in the next six months, in the next year, there will be some money which guarantees the payment of rent, eventually of a mortgage'*.

The variety of meanings attached to 'work' and related words are extremely rich and expressive and cannot be reduced to the Fordist dimension. Speculating on the representations of security, Du Gay suggests that: *'the identity of both labour and capital is invariably represented as stable and unchanging, while lived history is reduced to a series of 'empirical variations' on a constant theme. Labour and capital are conceived as having an 'essential', 'real' identity that precedes or evades their dominant discursive articulation in any historical or cultural context'* (Du Gay 1996: 50). Work and its associated concepts emerge with infinite nuances in the interviewees' accounts, in a way that suggests a radical redefinition of the terms

used in everyday language. In these experiences there are inevitably intersections of different nuances of work, which create a rich variety of experiences in which one departs from the perception of employability to attain security and then certainty.

Another aspect deserving some attention is the fact that workplaces are not neutral, rational entities, yet each organization has its own characteristics that affect that grade of control that one is able to develop over his or her own working position. In my interviewees accounts, in many cases the branch specificities and their own specific precariousness seem to absorb most energies of employees, in a way that make organisation's needs take precedence over personal inclinations. Status and position are repeatedly negotiated through every day practices, but in a fairly implicit form, so that it is very difficult to conceptualise one's position, to understand what one can and cannot do, or can and cannot achieve, and in which time-frame. As a young professional in Human Resources states: *'variations [in my career] depend [...] on top management, [...] at times the managing director saw my role in a certain way and therefore I played it in that way. Other times different managing directors asked me for another kind of intervention, and I adopted it. But in the end it depended it [...] on the standpoint of the one who ruled the company'*. This is to say that many companies are very de-structured and it is very difficult to predict how one is going to find his or her own role and positions within it in a few years time.

Another inconsistency with the predominant model of threshold is the fact that certain careers, like for instance positions of self-employment, cannot ever be consider secure, because, in this context, making a career means to get more clients. All these emerging results indicate that there is a strong subjective element to be considered, and this should remind us of what sociologists of the Chicago School first pointed out, that is, a career does not necessarily follow a path of vertical progression within the boundaries of an organization. It could instead be considered in its own right as a much wider phenomenon, and regarded as a term indeed used with a larger meaning. In fact, anyone who works has a career. In concluding these remarks on the role and significance of work in passing through from the youth to the adult phase, it is important to make the point that all these elements suggest to us that the passage from one state to another is not clear cut, not only because of the current economic situation and the low wage of new entrants making early career professionals not entirely economically independent, or economically independent only in certain periods of the year, but also – and perhaps more importantly - because the role and significance of work has changed. What we seek from work has changed, and similarly, what the world of work is able to offer to us has changed too. In particular, it becomes extremely difficult to identify when a job position has the characteristics to guarantee income and define one's working identity. In this sense, entering the world of work does not mean leaving behind the economic insecurity and the search for one's self that is more characteristic of a younger youth.

#### **4. The parenthood's threshold/ parenthood as a marker**

Alongside the transformations in forms of work required by the market, there are changes in patterns of family formation and a reduction in the stability of households, with a consequent decrease in the protective role of the family of procreation (Saraceno & Naldini 2001; Ruspini 2003; Facchini 2005). As highlighted, for instance by Giddens (1999), among all of the changes that are taking place in the world, none is more important than those related to our personal lives: sexuality, relationships, marriage and family. The elements of this ongoing change is the weakening of the model that had previously colonized the collective imaginary and dominated the official statistics: the nuclear family, composed of married couples and children born of their legitimate union (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1990). This weakening has been interpreted as a radical transformation of the family, which has now become a shell institution.

In the middle of the industrial society, for example, a young woman's entrance to adulthood corresponded to the acquisition of the role of wife and mother, and marriage was no doubt a crucial threshold of this transition; nowadays, however, the conjugal union loses this aura of sacredness. Its meaning changes, and as it is no longer the major rite of passage between youth and adulthood it no longer legitimates access to sex and procreation. The model of the family crumbles, and scene on which family and couple relationships are based becomes increasingly differentiated. Becoming and being a parent is in turn affected by these changes.

Such acknowledgements are especially relevant to our discussion, and we have to consider how these transformations address our discussion on the transition to adulthood. So, if we try to understand parenting in the light of the entire life course of the agents, it becomes clear that the experiences of this last step to adulthood are diverse and heterogeneous.

Empirical findings from previous pieces of research, conducted by myself (Magaraggia 2008) as well as others (Du Bois Reymond et al. 2008), show that young men and women perceive the formation of a family as a choice entailing risks that they themselves have to face. Young people's choices and projects are more frequently becoming embedded in informal networks (mainly families and peer groups). Intergenerational relationships, instead of becoming looser, are in fact getting tighter when young people become parents. In countries like Italy, with low levels of welfare provision, the former generation has to supply support to neo parents, both in an economic and relational sense (i.e. help in the caring activities). The expectant / neo parents have to look for this intergenerational solidarity in order to deal with the paradox inherent in making plans and projects nowadays (Leccardi 2009).

As it emerges from my doctoral research, radically different ways of acquiring the role of parent will emerge if we look at parenthood in relation to, on the one hand, the duration of the pathway to adulthood (and thus, albeit indirectly, age) along with, on the other hand, the degree (or lack) of linearity with which the different stages of the transition are achieved (acquisition of the markers). In other words, looking at the transition to parenthood in a temporal perspective allows us to conceive of it not only as the marker that signals the end of youth, but also as a more complex and variegated experience of life, capable of re-signifying the very concept of adulthood. So for example, if we compare early and late parenthood we'll see two different ways of being a parent:

**Early parenthood - fast track parents.** The first type of parents, the ones who experience early parenthood, i.e. those who bring their first child into the world having experienced what literature refers to as a straight and fast transition path (Jones 2002; Bynner et al. 2002), can be called 'fast track', which leads them to be ahead of the average Italian parents. Parents who arrive early at the decision to have a child often do not see this as a socially recognized choice: to become a parent under a certain age tends to be interpreted, in the Italian context, less as a choice than as an unintended occurrence. These young mothers and fathers must face common sense that has changed over time with changing procreative behaviour, which does not deem 'reasonable' a parenting pattern that thirty years ago would not have attracted any kind of astonishment. Many early parents do not use public services for maternity and paternity (such as childbirth classes, counselling, etc.) because they do not feel accepted and understood because of their age. Looking at how they are parents, they seem to be less involved in the process of semi-professionalization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1990; Bois-Reymond 2001).

**Late parenthood – slow track parents.** The second type is that of 'late' mothers and fathers or 'slow trackers' (Jones 2002; Bynner et al. 2002), i.e. those who become parents over the average age, having slowly reached the different stages, of which procreation is the last one. These mothers and fathers can therefore rely on a support network (i.e. family of origin and peer group) that is much more involved than the parents of the first type. From the point of view of the meaning that the men and women of the second type attribute to parenthood, the 'slow trackers' seem to be much more apprehensive towards the children, they adhere strictly

to paediatrician instructions, and seem to surround the long awaited event of the birth of the first child with many precautions and concerns. These are mothers and fathers who live motherhood and fatherhood in a highly 'professional' way, investing a lot on their child. They stress that through the relationship with the new-born, they found a sense of life and a rhythm that had been lost.

If we look at non linear transitions to parenthood, we see even more diverse experiences of becoming and being a parent: the 'yoyo mothers and fathers' and 'young mothers and fathers' may be considered as the real innovative groups of this typology.

Through the materials analysed in my doctoral research, there is a first working definition of these two types, which refer to those who assume the parental role having passed just a few of the canonical pathways to adulthood. In practice, the young men and women of these two types become parents while they are still struggling with the definition of their adult identity. This sudden biographical restructuring regards those who, given their age, had not yet begun to problematise the transition.

These are situations that involve a particularly difficult passage as, in one moment, at least two markers of the transition are completed: the creation of an autonomous nuclear family and procreation, each of which are rich in their own way of difficulties.

For mothers and fathers aged at or above the national average, with a non-linear path behind one, the transition to parenthood involves a biographical reorganization that is relative, although not without obstacles and specific characteristics.

Couples of 'young mothers and young fathers' and 'yoyo mothers and fathers', unlike other parents, not infrequently after the birth of a child reside in the home of the family of origin. The support provided by the family of origin is very consistent also in terms of time. Indeed, these two types of parents are not supported by the peer group (existing ones are mostly still tied to the stage of youth).

In sum, the long wave of changes that are investing life courses also has considerable impact on how they perceive themselves as parents and on how they perform parenthood, and thus become adults. These experiences show that there is not a clear cut definition of traditional youth boundaries. This does not mean, however, that we cannot consider them (full) adults.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

Transitions to adulthood are increasingly slower everywhere in Europe (Cavalli 1997), but especially in Southern European countries. However, Italy is in this scenario a very interesting context to study for its capacity to catalyse the characteristics of the Southern European model. In looking at the transitions of two groups of young adults interviewed for different pieces of research, we cannot ignore the fact that the social context in which they operate show important differences from the one that gave rise to the threshold approach.

The very nature of youth is the legitimate claim for experimentation (Heinz 1993; Crockett & Silbereisen 2000; Scabini *et al.* 2006), which allows us to find out what young people want to become. Such a social suspension, nevertheless, is not done in a social vacuum, and is not passive behaviour tout court. Quite the contrary, it implies the assumption of a considerable amount of individual responsibility and strong activation of one's agency. This is due to the remarkable psychological and social costs involved in making the sort of decisions we have explored in this paper. For example, constructing a certain career path or taking an irreversible decision, such as giving birth to a child, involves such a strong capacity of decision that youth is an increasingly difficult phase of life to be in, at least if compared to few decades ago.

Significantly, in our empirical pieces of research we have found out that there are different ways of becoming parents, as well as different ways of constructing a meaningful graduate career path. All of these, in their increasing complexity, do involve 'adult' responsibilities, as well as active agency, in order to be able to juggle with the difficulties of everyday life. One of

the reasons why this transition has become more blurred is the fact that entering a new phase of the life cycle increasingly involves bringing along some significant remaining parts of the previous phase: one does not cease to be a son / daughter when he / she becomes a parent. Similarly, one does not find once and for all a working identity (or regrettably, full economic independence) when assuming a graduate position in the labour market. Furthermore, it is plausible to think that our comments, referred to the markers we have studied the most, i.e. obtaining a stable working position and parenthood, can be generalised, or at least if seem so if we consider as a third marker the completion of education.

Postponing the transition is tied to the increasing variability of status covered in one's life (Settersten 1997; 2002; Shanahan 2000). The prolongation of times of transitions therefore goes within a con-fusion of the sequences of the *markers* of the transition. However, the different categories coined to elaborate the transitions seem to necessarily refer to the threshold mechanism, even the most innovative such as the concept of yo-yo transitions (Walther *et al.* 2006). We propose to question this supposed inevitability in more depth. Our position, informed on our empirically based research projects, is to be more critical with the inevitability of considering markers of what it is to become a full adult. Ultimately, our interview material suggests to re-conceptualize the intrinsic value of reflexively 'passing' turning points to consider oneself fully adult and to problematise adulthood itself as an unquestionable 'point of arrival' (Kelly 2006).

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