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Young Adults of the Great Recession
Individual and historical times, present and future biographies

MAGDA NICO

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Av. das Forças Armadas, Edifício ISCTE, 1649-026 LISBOA, PORTUGAL, cies@iscte.pt

Magda Nico has a first degree in sociology and a master's in the sociology of society and the family. At present she is a PhD student in sociology at ISCTE-IUL and a research assistant at CIES-IUL. She has carried out research in the fields of youth, the family and gender. E-mail: magda.nico@iscte.pt

Abstract

Young people are particularly vulnerable to precarious labour. This story has been told by statistical data from the National Statistics Institute and Eurostat and by (official or otherwise) “last in, first out” policies. It happens in a context of increased access to higher education and qualification levels that, together with the changes in the labour market and the effects of the recession, contribute to disappointed expectations of social mobility based on educational attainment. Young people find themselves caught between the goals of survival, work and a career. The new, less visible mass manifestations of “non-extreme” social exclusion delay and seriously constrain the transition to adulthood. This paper provides evidence, based on 52 interviews with young adults and a selection of 3 cases, for the political and statistical invisibility of these new manifestations of precariousness.

Keywords: precariousness, southern Europe, youth

Introduction

Are many young adults in Portugal and other countries in the wrong place at the wrong time? This provocative question, which guides this paper, refers to these times of economic recession in the countries, including Portugal, that are most affected by this historical circumstance, as well as to the newcomers to the labour market – the young adults of these countries who are dealing with the different obstacles to their transition to adulthood, both in the public and private spheres of life. To tackle this question, this paper goes beyond the economic indicators of precariousness and concentrates analytically on the real lives of young people, their complex *curricula vitae*, and their struggles and hidden processes in the transition to adulthood. It will be argued that this strategy is crucial to the creation of more accurate ways (qualitative, even if this may seem a paradox) of analysing social indicators of precarious labour, and also to the acknowledgement of the future implications of these difficult economic and social times.

The paper is organized into four parts. In the first part, the initial question is reformulated in terms of the intersection between historical and individual times, geographical location, and the accumulation of vulnerabilities promoting precariousness. This first part will also include methodological considerations. In the second part of the paper, the transition to adulthood in southern Europe will be briefly contextualized. Cultural continuities, as the most powerful explanation for certain specificities of the transition to adulthood in these countries, will also be put into perspective, with the presentation of alternative predictors. In the third part, three case studies will be presented, with the aim of illustrating the complexity of young people's real lives and struggles, the political and scientific invisibility of this situation, and the many ways in which time and place variables contribute to constrain, postpone and complicate the various transitions to adulthood and the development of the various individual *careers*. The title of this paper, as well as its conclusions, is a direct reference to the well-known "Children of the Great Depression" by Elder (1974). The fourth and last part of the paper develops this reference, concluding with reflections on the need (i) to research the future implications of the historical moment of the economic crisis for the individual's life, well-being and transition to adulthood, (ii) to approach other indicators of precariousness than those provided by statistical or official data and (iii) to look closely at individual lives and structural circumstances in the countries, as important variables explaining different patterns of transition to adulthood in Europe, in order (iv) to avoid comfortable, sometimes

analytically useless and politically dangerous cultural explanations for the different patterns and timings of transition to adulthood across Europe.

Place, time and the research

Young people are specifically and increasingly vulnerable to precarious labour. Among other sources, the Labour Force Survey provides these findings. From the *individual time* (that is, age) point of view it is easily understood that the starting point in one's career, that is, the moment (or moments) of entry in the labour market, tends to be one of the most difficult in that *career*. For that reason, young people are at one of the most difficult points in their professional lives. Thus, from the individual time point of view, the youth are more exposed to precarious labour. From another point of view, when we consider *historical time* and the beginning of the recession (which was more hesitant, or less so, according to the country), some birth cohorts combine the disadvantage, if we may say so, of their being new to the labour market with this historical moment of the economic recession, increased unemployment and precarious labour. Moreover, not only are the structural conditions for young people across Europe not the same as other age groups (and never were), but the economic recession did not affect all countries equally, as is also well known. In the case of southern European countries, they combine long-term disadvantages regarding social protection for people in transition to adulthood with a historical event like the recession. Young people from these countries are therefore combining historical disadvantages of *time* and *place*.

The research carried out (whose results are only partially presented in this paper by means of a selection of three cases) was not initially concerned with the topic of precariousness. But the fieldwork – biographical interviews and life grids – was mainly carried out during 2009. As a consequence, this situation became impossible to ignore, given the structural importance it has for any explanation of the life course in the transition to adulthood, and for the causality of the timing of the transitional events. So, although precarious labour was not the main topic of this research, it was ultimately an important variable for the analysis of the interviews. The research design, along with the introduction of this new dimension in the research (the economic crisis as a serendipity factor) is coherent with the following passage by Thomas and Znaniecki (1984 [1918]). It argues for the need to collect life records on an individual basis but, at the same time, to know the story behind that trajectory.

And the superiority of life records over every other kind of material for the purpose of sociological analysis appears with particular force when we pass from the characterization of single data to the determination of facts for there is no safer and more efficient way of finding, among the innumerable antecedents of a social happening, the real causes of this happening than to analyze the past of the individuals through whose agency this happening occurred.

William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 1984 [1918]: 294-295

The main characteristic of this research design is the dialogue between what some authors (see Wengraf, 2000) call the *life lived*, on one hand, and the *story told*, on the other. Collecting data on the “life lived” means collecting a history of the events, mainly demographic ones. With the life grid as the instrument, the data is collected in time-units combined with the nature of the events, that is, school, work, family, etc. This allows us to trace the trajectory to adulthood. The *story told* is a structured biographical interview where the presence and completion of the life grid during the interview invites the interviewee not only to give temporal order to the events but also, much more interestingly, to establish a causal and emotional link between them. So an analysis of the *history of decisions* allows us to know and interpret the *story* behind the events.

Table 1. The life lived and the story told

| | <i>Life lived</i> (history of events) | <i>Story told</i> (history of decisions) |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Definition | Sequence, duration and timing of the demographic events | Identification of the causal and emotional relationship between events (demographic and others) |
| Method | Life grid, life course record, life calendar | A recorded biographical interview |
| Data | Nature of events combined with timing of events (individual record) | Oral narratives on the life course and transition to adulthood (individual interview) |
| Potential | Analysis of the trajectories: sequence, duration, overlapping, density, reversibility, etc. | Analysis of the stories: analysing the relationship between the trajectories and the agency and (non-demographic) turning points behind them |

This type of interview was an opportunity for the young adults to reflect more on their lives, while giving us the history of the events and their own interpretations on the combination of such experiences. The dialogue between the researcher and the interviewee turned the data collected into a “joint construction”. As Clausen argues, “autobiographical

efforts are likely to require discussion and elaboration. The final product as a narrative statement is then a joint construction” (Clausen, 1998: 197). Non-demographic information was also included in the grid and that was actually very important to our understanding and interpretation of the trajectories, and our ability to make sense of the stories told and the adaptation strategies young people can develop to adjust to unpredictable circumstances. So the same *history of events*, with no biographical narrative attached, could tell many different, even contradictory, stories. Only the biographical narratives can provide information about the direction and intention of the action and give meaning to the trajectory. Though there was no real expectation of reaching a representative sample, 52 histories of events and decisions were collected in this research, which thus satisfied diversity criteria in terms of the residential situation and education. From among these, three cases were selected for presentation.

The ‘big picture’ of transitions to adulthood in Europe

As can be seen in the table provided by Andreas Walther, and in the European and comparative research conducted, countries can be clustered into what are called *transition regimes*, as a result of a combination between the welfare state provisions and the transitions to adulthood in various countries in Europe (2000). Italy, Spain and Portugal are clustered in a sub-protective regime with non-selective schools, training characterized by low standards and coverage, social security mainly based on the family, and a closed and informal employment regime (Walther, 2000). This would be the variable “place”.

Table 2. Transition regimes in Europe

| Regime | Countries | School | Training | Social Security | Employment Regime |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Universalistic | Denmark, Sweden | Non-selective | Flexible standards | State | Open, low-risk |
| Employment-centred | Germany, France, Netherlands | Selective | Standardized | State/Family | Closed, risks at the margins |
| Liberal | UK, Ireland | Non-selective | Flexible, low standards | State/Family | Open, high-risk |
| Sub-protective | Italy, Spain, Portugal | Non-selective | Low standards and coverage | Family | Closed, high-risk, informal work |

Source: Walther, 2006

With regard to the variable “time”, precarious labour has been increasing over the past 20 years. Moreover, in 2005 young people were the most exposed to precarious labour and this was true for all countries (Oliveira and Carvalho, 2010). However, the reasons for the fragile links with the labour market are very different among the countries. Oliveira and Carvalho (2010) state that, according to the data from the *Labour Force Survey*, Portugal and Greece are the countries where the main reason for this high level of precarious labour is the

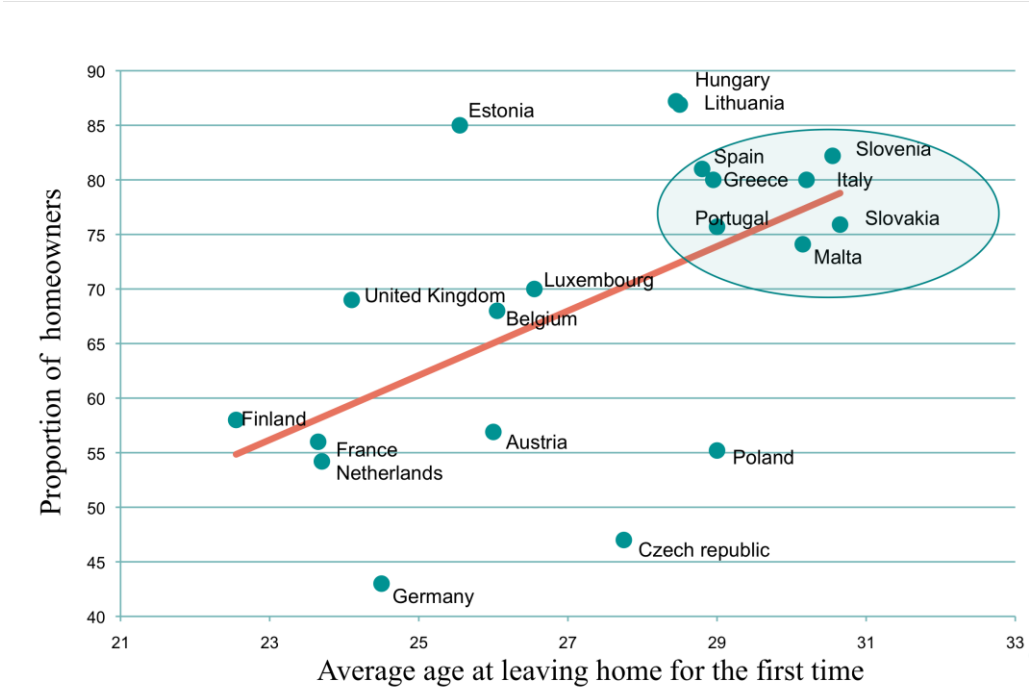
difficulty of getting a permanent job, and not a fragile link with the labour market, as happens in contexts where the conciliation of work and school/higher education is more frequent. In this sense, being young and from southern European countries contributes to the occurrence of precarious labour.

On the basis of statistical data, Oliveira and Carvalho (2010) stated that a precarious labour market affects the whole population, irrespective of educational attainment, though it affects different countries differently. Although it might affect the whole population, precarious labour has different manifestations according to educational attainment, as was shown by the qualitative research carried out. While unemployment, mainly short-term and merely transitional, between one job and another, is much more frequent among those with lower levels of education, young people with higher educational levels tend to experience a different kind of precarious labour, characterized by the difficulty of attaining stable jobs (with temporary or permanent contracts). Hence educational levels have implications for the type of precarious labour experienced. Moreover, young people, especially with a higher education, have a stronger tendency, more skills and more opportunities to reconcile multiple jobs and multiple activities, whether part-time or full-time. And they do so. They do their best with the historical and national labour and housing conditions “presented” to them.

We should, therefore, be very careful when emphasizing cultural continuities as the most powerful explanation for the specificity of the transition to adulthood in southern European countries (Nico, 2010), in particular concerning the (“late”) timing of such transitions. The alleged postponement of leaving home, which is, moreover, so strongly and uncritically associated with southern European countries, might provide a good case to illustrate the argument. The immediate association between southern European countries and the “late” timing of leaving home is generally reinforced by developmental and cultural explanations: the Peter Pan syndrome, the refusal to grow up, the strong dependency on the family of origin, the predominant religion of the country, etc. Figure 1 (below), on the contrary, illustrates quite clearly the strong relationship between a particular structural characteristic of southern European countries – the very low (and historically relatively recent) availability of a rented-housing market (perfect for situations of transitional housing and high mobility) – and the timing of leaving home. As the chart shows, the relationship between these two variables is very strong. It is also a very strong variable in explaining the European diversity in the timing of leaving home. The higher the percentage of home-ownership, the higher the average age of leaving home for the first time. Southern European countries share this structural, much more than cultural, condition that compromises and

constrains this housing transition. Leaving home is more than merely an individual decision based on the interpretation or incorporation of family or familistic values. This data makes that very clear.

Figure 1. Scatter plot of the proportion of home-owners and the average age of leaving home, by country



Sources:

Eurostat News Release (2009) and Norris and Shiels (2007: 68).

Real lives: invisibility and complexity

There is a *mass phenomenon* of precarious labour among the youth. This is not only due to the historical moment we are *all* living in but also new forms of social exclusion, which are non-extreme and less visible. The youth is also becoming an increasingly unpopular social category when it comes to its relationship with the labour market. The fact that qualitative and longitudinal research is not, for the time being, used as much to develop evidence-based policy as the quantitative alternative (McLeod and Thomson, 2009; Thomson, 2009; Henderson *et al.*, 2007) has also contributed to this under-appreciation of these *lives on standby*. The big indicators, mainly on employment or unemployment and occupational status are unable to depict the multidimensional features of young people’s lives. The following three cases reveal some of the crucial factors that are obscured by big statistical indicators and

provide some insight into what Savage called a “picture of kaleidoscopic complexity” (Savage, 1997).

Sara comes from a working class environment and has always been encouraged to help in the family business, gain her independence gradually and adapt to what the labour market has to offer (as a domestic worker, a waitress, etc.). These different involvements with the labour market and with the conquest of financial independence were therefore an intermittent reality in Sara’s life. At the same time she was encouraged by her family to invest in a higher education. So she did. When she finished her degree, and her long-term relationship, she decided it was “time” to leave the parental home, regardless of the stability of her job at the time or the fact it had little to do with her degree course. This decision to leave home has prevented her ever since from being more daring in her professional career, because she just cannot afford to lose her job. She depends solely on her earnings, not because of her family’s unwillingness to help financially, if necessary, but due to the work ethic shared by her whole family – which is at play in the relations between its members. Moreover, because her work in a shoe shop was supposed to be temporary, she has no contract, nor is she registered in the social security system. She has no savings and what she earns does not allow her to put money aside every month. Financially, she lives on the razor’s edge. If anything unexpected, work or health related, happens, she might have to go back to her parents’ home, and this is obviously the best scenario. At the time of her decision to leave home her parents thought she was irresponsible to do so and are currently very disappointed with her professional choices, or lack of them. They think professional choices should have been more important and urgent than the housing question. In brief, she has no social recognition for her financial and housing-related emancipation. She is one of the many invisible stories in the statistics.

Also from a working class background, Ana is suffering from *hyper-reflexivity* regarding her own life and from the incapacity to choose between lose-lose situations. Having lived alone for a few years, though recently joined by her boyfriend, Ana wants to leave her job (in her words, a very stressful one, marked by unpleasant hierarchical relations). Besides this professional goal, she wants to get married and pregnant. Knowing that one decision will exclude the other, she feels incapable of making a choice and is becoming more and more anxious, to the point that the only decision she seems able to make is to return to psychotherapy. A second nervous breakdown, again hidden from her family and friends, is the most predictable situation in the short-term. On the side of her family, from her point of view, there is the pressure to make this “romantic” relationship a success, that is, to marry and have

children. On the side of her partner, there is the pressure not to quit her job until she gets another with the same salary. According to the statistics, she is doing fine: she has a permanent contract.

Luís is the first in his generation (of cousins) who did not go on to higher education and therefore does not have a degree. His choice of a technical course was received with some disappointment by his parents and family. Even greater was the concern at his decision to become a father at 24. As Luís said, “with everything against him” – the very small rented house, the lack of money for day-care etc. – he still wanted to be a father at that point in his life, at that specific time in his transition to adulthood. In order to attain that, he has had to make sacrifices. For the first two years of his daughter’s life, he worked day and night shifts in a part time job, alternating with those of his partner, just to guarantee that one of them was with their child at all times. There was simply no money for private day-care institutions. The media often needs to label generations, and the cohort included in this research has already been called the “neither-nor generation”, that is to say, neither in work nor education. Nonetheless, cases such as Luís’s call attention to a different group of individuals, also invisible but probably quantitatively more significant, who belong to a struggling “*and-and* generation” and try to reconcile important family, school and economic goals in a very short period of their lives. In the statistics, however, Luís is just a part-time worker.

Final notes

As shown above, in this matter different temporalities must be taken into account (Elder, 1994): individual (being a young adult); social (being a young adult in the context of globalisation); and historic (being a young adult in the globalised context and the economic recession). Traditionally there are three different perspectives for the analysis of the transitions to adulthood (Corijn, 2001). One considers the entry into and performance in life’s different ‘careers’ (professional, housing and family), and is often (but not sufficiently) combined with the second one, which emphasizes the structural constraints on the individual’s life course. The third one is more concerned with the psychological development of individuals, measured by indicators such as maturity.

The most popular and immediate analysis produced and embraced by the media (and sometimes academia) consists of the immediate link between individual time and individual choices, ignoring long-term structural constraints or the accumulation of difficulties. If this is

done, transitions to adulthood will continue to be constrained but this will not be accompanied by the social and political recognition of the restrictions beyond individual action, contributing, as Furlong and Cartmel (2007 [1997]) would probably argue, to the “epistemological fallacy of the late modernity”. But because “collective experience is revitalized when problems are interpreted within the framework of a national crisis, an emergency of such proportion that it threatens the common way of life” (Elder, 1974), this historical moment, of the economic crisis, could be the scientific and public opportunity for new interpretations of the transition to adulthood as a much more dependent, constrained and structurally defined process.

Furthermore, this statement would not lose its validity at the time youth ends or on the alleged definitive entry into adulthood. Long-term consequences should be analysed. Elder’s well-known work, “Children of the Great Depression”, did precisely that. It followed a group of children “from their preadolescent years early in the depression to their middle-years, tracing step by step the ways in which deprivation left its mark on relationships and careers, life styles and personalities.” He found, among other things, that the “severe economic hardship led to disabilities (...), to a sense of inferiority, a chronic state of poor health, a deep-seated fear of economic insecurity”. Recently, a report based on a survey conducted in the United Kingdom of young people from 16 to 25 years of age called attention to this idea: precarious labour and unemployment have consequences not only in the present, but also, much more importantly, in the future, especially for individual well-being and quality of life. The report named this generation “the lost generation”. Therefore it is important not only to carry out research on the young adults of the Great Recession but also to develop this interpretative scenario of young adults’ lives, combining the present and future in the same analysis. It would allow us to ascertain whether, among the *Young Adults of the Great Recession* facing different national situations, some generations are, so to speak, “more lost” than others.

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