THE TOPIC

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Adulthood senses: youth and social changes in Portugal today

The purpose of this article is to study in depth some aspects connected to youth and the juvenile transitions and identities in Portugal based on two levels of analysis. Firstly we have described Portugal today and the important demographical and normative changes it has undergone by making a synthetic presentation of a group of national and international indicators. We have tried to make a special emphasis on the most relevant magnitudes in order to understand the changes and the continuity of subjective juvenile transitions and the factors that help to explain them. Secondly, we have tried to analyse the testimonies of 30 Portuguese young people in the transitions stage (recollection in the context of a European research project – FATE) to certify that they subjectively represent adults, at the same time we state some clues that seem to be relevant in order to categorise identities as established by this group of young people.

Key words: Portugal, social change, youth and adulthood

Introduction

Portuguese society has undergone deep socio-economic changes in the last three decades that have turned around the country from the demographical, cultural and economic point of view. Many of these transformations are common to most European countries, especially in the south of Europe, and tend to be associated with Portugal as they share certain historical and cultural aspects. As a consequence, Portugal today is nothing like it used to be before democratisation, a process that began on April 25th, 1974. Nowadays, for instance, the studies of the Portuguese young people seem to last longer, professional relations have become more flexible and precarious (in spite of the fact that this trend affects all generations), there are higher levels of familiar dependence and the age to get married and have children is being postponed.

However, including Portugal in any kind of typological classification, structuring by geographical, political, economic or cultural proximities can also hide significant differences between these countries, which also award the Portuguese case a certain level of specificity amongst its European peers. This is the framework we will use today to place the trajectories of the Portuguese young people so they can be understood and compared to those shown by their European peers, especially when it comes to trying to understand how they represent adult identity and how they experience the multiple transactions involved. This is therefore the main objective of the present article: a portrait of Portugal today, articulated with a brief analysis of juvenile representation on adult life, made based on 30 in-depth

interviews held with a group of young people undergoing the transition to active life in 2002.

I – Social change and Youth: Portugal today (1)

1. Marriage and fecundity in Portugal: changes and continuity

In reference to the research made based on the population census for 1991 and 2001 (Aboim, 2003), the 90s caused an acceleration in the rhythm of social transformation by nuclearising and individualising familiar and domestic structures. Favouring these trends, several factors appear, such as a better access to housing or a greater informalisation of behaviours in marriage, which is reflected in the increase in the percentage of unmarried couples (which went from 3% in 1991 to 7% in 2001), next to a reduction in the number of marriages (from 7.3 to 5.7) and the increase in the number of divorces and second marriages (1.8 and 11.8 in 2001, respectively).

Also relevant are the changes in the patterns of fecundity and parenthood. There has been an increase in the number of births outside wedlock (from 15.6% in 1991 to 23.8% in 2001), which means, on one hand, that the traditional cohabiting profile and single parenthood model is being preserved, associated to low socio-economic resources, but also to the increase in a cohabiting profile and parenthood that responds to a change in the significant values, which are now less deeply rooted in tradition. According to Ferreira and Aboim the number of children born outside wedlock is greater amongst the lower classes, which apparently prioritise the de-institutionalisation of the links and family transitions, accessing marriage through cohabiting or not having a second marriage (2002). This fact reunited on one hand the increasing importance awarded to experimentation, whose presence is recurrent in the different researches made on the ethics of the life of young people today (Schér, 2000), and, on the other, an objective view of a lower linearity and a greater complexity of life paths (amongst others, Pais, 2001).

However, this trend should not be read as a delay in the importance of formal marriage. In Portugal people get married quite a lot, but later on in life. (2) The average age for the first marriage has gone in men from 26.1 in 1991 to 27.5 in 2001 and for women from 24.1 to 25.3. Both ages came below the EU average for 15 countries, which for 2001 was 29.9 for men and 27.5 for women. These data make us think that people leave home in most cases when they get married, which would also lead us to think in a persistence of the traditional patterns of transition (leave home to get married). However, in this observation we must take into consideration the strength of the economic conditions (low salaries that are not enough for single people to afford to live on their own) and the changes in the values and representations associated to the transitions from one status to the other. Getting married (whether at a civil or religious ceremony) will increasingly become the result of a well-meditated, independent and individual decision, free from family constraints, although backed up by its members. This means

(1)
Except for some already mentioned options, when we refer to strictly national data, the source used is the National Statistics Institute (www.ine.pt), whereas for international comparisons we have used EUROSTAT (http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int).

(2)
Even if the levels of countries like Italy or Spain are not reached, which register closer average ages than the ones for Northern Europe.

that it is a renewed institution, adding a new sense that is different from those subscribed by a large portion of previous generations in their own familiar transitions (Pappámikail, 2004).

Children also appear later on in life, both for men and women. Here the values registered in Portugal are below those registered in the countries in Southern Europe, where the delay becomes more obvious: if in Spain this value surpassed 30 years of age in the year 2000 (30.7), in Portugal the average age for the first child in women was 28.6, a value similar to that registered in Germany (28.7), for instance. We cannot just talk about delay without mentioning the great reduction of the birth rate in southern countries. In Portugal the reduction (reflected through a synthetic index from 1.6 children per woman in 1991 to 1.5 in 2001) has been quite rough and fast (the index was 3.1 children per woman in 1960) as the result of a significant massification of the use of modern birth control methods (that once again refer to a change in values) (Almeida, André and Lalanda, 2003: 405-406).

2. Domestic structures and transition: the place of young people

From the point of view of domestic structures, transformations have also become obvious, thus emphasising the modernisation process: reduction in the domestic attachés (from an average 3.1 people per attaché in 1991 to an average 2.8 in 2001), and the increase in the number of attachés in people who are alone (from 16.6% of the total of attachés in 2001 to 19.5% in 2001). This last indicator is particularly relevant to place the changes in behaviour (and values) in some categories of the young population. The truth is that most people who are alone are basically elderly people (51%), widowers and, in a precarious situation, we have the young people and adults who live alone and are more educated and trained people, especially single, mainly urban and professionally active (Guerreiro, 2003). We are talking about young people who form autonomous residential units without getting married, whether formally or informally, although some may have done it in a certain point of their trajectory.

We are also dealing with a minority of young people, as most of them still live at home until they are almost 30. Back in 1996, when this factor was analysed, (3) the countries in Southern Europe presented values that were clearly above the average of the 15 countries in the EU – 66% in young people aged 20 to 24, and 32% in those aged 25 to 29. However, Portugal had, within this group, the lowest values: 80% of people aged 20 to 24 and 52% of those aged 25 to 29 lived with their parent, whereas in Italy, for the same age ranges, the value was 89% and 59%, respectively. In Spain it was 90% and 62%. This factor is also coherent with the profile of family transitions that we have just described. On the same lines, we know that not only the economic and political factors (such as a weak Social Security system and a labour market that does not help the young) explain this phenomenon, as several researches point at the strength of cultural factors, which put the family as a space for affection, wellbeing and security, and are

(3)
We have no comparative data from EUROSTAT after 1996. However, we could think that in this last decade there has been a decay in the tendency to extend the stay at home with the parents next to an extension of the studies, difficulties in the labour market and cultural factors we have already mentioned.

not necessarily opposed to the claims for autonomy made by the young (amongst others Santoro, 2000; Gaviria, 2002; Pappámikail, 2004).

3. Portugal in Europe: a peculiar proximity

The variation of the demographical markers is justified when we intend to compare the changes and continuities occurred in the life paths of the Portuguese population and the modalities that are traditionally known as the markers to enter "adult life". (4) As we are trying to emphasise, some deep changes have taken place. However, even if the tendency to change acquires the same sense in every European country, the Portuguese modernisation process (not only a demographical one) has been late in every aspect, in relation to its European peers. Thus, if on the one hand, people get married later, on the other we still do it before Spain and Italy. The same applies to parenthood and other indicators.

As we have already said, Portugal has suffered a process of modernisation in a clear and irreversible manner, which, on the other hand, has been extremely asymmetric, both from the regional and social point of view (Costa and Viegas, 1998). We have experienced an intense process where the tertiary sector, the coasts, construction and economic activities have bloomed, leading to a progressive isolation and ageing process in the interior part of the country, for instance. But what other explanations can we give to justify a demographic profile that is, in many aspects, mixed? From our point of view, amongst the different factors that contribute to explaining this profile, there are some that we do not think deserve to be mentioned specially: dynamics of schooling, the labour market for the youngest generations, some magnitudes related to gender profiles and the participation of women in the Labour Market, and the changes regarding regulations, which create contrasts and tensions in many ways. That is to say, factors contributing to cohabiting in the same social time and space, signs of a persistent traditionalism (an employment system based partly on low qualifications or the reproduction of inequalities in terms of schooling, to name a few) and proof of development and individualisation (that is reflected in the diversification of the forms of family organisation, increase of qualifications, adoption of more expressive and hedonist ethics, for instance).

4. School and the labour market: youth, gender and social inequality

The truth is that the education scope in Portugal today can only be understood by considering the starting point, three decades ago: in 1970, 33.6% of the population was uneducated, a considerable proportion only managed to complete primary education (49.6% of people, who could complete the cycle or not) and only 1.5% accessed higher education or even completed it. Since then certain efforts have been made to increase the levels of schooling amongst the Portuguese population, whose compulsory education lasts 9 years. These efforts have only been partly successful.

(4)
At least if we measure in terms of objective family transitions, which is really limited. Section II of this article deals with subjectivities.

Consequently, schooling in the population increased considerably, which meant that the percentage of Portuguese aged 25 to 64 with just 6 years of schooling was reduced from a 77.7% in 1991 to 62.2% in 2001, registering increases in the population that completed basic education (9 years) from 7.4% to 13.4%, from 8.4% to 13% in secondary, and from 6.6% to 11.4% in higher education. The increase is especially obvious in the younger generations (between 25 and 34), whose education was higher than in previous generations: only 43.8% had 6 years of schooling or less, 18.8% of compulsory education, 21.2% of secondary education and 16.1% of higher studies. In fact, we could even say that in Portugal a very significant part of children and adults grow up in homes with very little educational capital but tend to be the most qualified elements of the domestic attachés, which could lead to interesting tensions as we deepen into the dynamics of intergenerational relations (Almeida and André, 2004).

In spite of this, Portugal still has one of the lowest schooling levels in the 15 European Union, added to some high numbers of people leaving school early. Even though schooling in the youngest generations advances considerably in Portugal and in the rest of Southern European countries, Portugal is special because of the negative sign of this group and because of the considerable differences observed. For instance, let's see the schooling of the young population, especially of the percentage of people aged 20 to 24, who have at least completed secondary education (12 years of education). In 2004, Portugal registered a percentage of 49%, whereas Italy had a value of 72.9%, and Spain, 61.8%. After Portugal we only have Malta, which registered a value of 48%.

As we have referred to premature leaving (5) we can see that Portugal registered in 2004 values close to 40% (39.4%), very far from the 15.7% registered in the 25 European countries. Even so, we must note that Italy and Spain (with values of 22.3% and 31.1%, respectively) also show values above the average. This is without a doubt more relevant in the framework of the processes of social reproduction in the field of education, with a decisive impact in the forms of entry into the labour market and also in family transitions. The truth is that someone who leaves school before the age of 18 (as it often happens in Portugal) and begins professional life in the next years ends up experiencing other family transitions, such as marriage or parenthood, which would justify the behaviour of some demographic indicators. That is why schooling dynamics seem crucial to understand some peculiar aspects of the Portuguese case.

The same way we can talk about an important movement regarding democratisation in access to education, we cannot ignore the fact that we are still far from an equivalent democratisation of educational success (Pais and Cabral, 1998: 203). That is to say, not only the educational profiles are low in most of the population, but there are also important reproduction processes of social and economic inequalities concerning schooling. For instance, the increasing diversification of the socio-economic basis for recruitment of students in Higher Education, which makes us think that it plays an important role as a channel of social

(5)
Measured in a population aged 18 to 24, which simultaneously declared not having any qualification past the 9 years of compulsory education, or even less, and not having taken any courses for vocational training in the four weeks before the survey was made (Eurostat).

mobility. It is enough to see the family features of these students to see the strength that their reproduction mechanisms have. In the sample of Portuguese university students subjected to a national scale in 2004, in 36.6% of the cases the fathers were technical professionals, a sector that only includes 14.4% of the population aged 40 to 60. We also have the opposite phenomenon: 19.3% of the students were children of industrial workers, a percentage that in the total population reaches 39.5%. Even more obvious is the analysis of the qualification profiles where at least one of the parents had taken higher education, against a 9.8% of the total population between 40 and 60; in 16.4% of the cases one of the parents has at least a secondary school level, against 8.9% in the same population group; and 13%, 12.9% and 22% of students come from families where one of the parents has 9, 6 and 4 years of education, respectively, against a 10%, 8.8% and 62.5% in relation to the same levels of education in the whole population (Martins, Mauritti and Costa, 2005: 36 to 38).

Inequality and difficulties still exist in the labour market. On one hand, young people are particularly affected by the unemployment rate (15.4% of the population aged at least 25 in 2004), and, on the other, those who are also the least qualified encounter the greatest difficulties to obtain and keep a job (6.4% of unemployment between 25 and 59 with six years of schooling or less, against 4% of the population in the same age group with higher education or more). This without referring to the fact that, in average terms, they are paid less. This statement places many Portuguese with low qualifications with a double disadvantage. If a person with a higher education diploma takes 4 to 5 months to find a stable job (this means that it will last 6 months or more), those who have not completed education will have to wait at least 19 months to get a job (Vieira and Resende, 2003: 83).

The unemployment rate at a certain point can hide different life situations: unemployment in a strict sense is associated to *underemployment* (any job is good as long as one can earn some money) and *rotatory unemployment* (several jobs alternating with period of unemployment). Those more qualified people can have *prospect unemployment* (a family back up that allows the young degree-holders to wait until they find a job that matches their qualifications) (Pais and Cabral, 1998: 210 and 211). Note that the social condition of the young Portuguese constrains their access to vital resources (especially the educational ones) to build their life trajectory. And even without underestimating the individual capacities to build and obtain capital through other means, the family, as one of the main material back ups (possibly the only one) for young people, constitutes an important factor modelling the possibilities young people can choose from.

(6)
It is important to note the fact that this high rate of activity corresponds in most cases to people working full-time, at the same time that, according to EUROSTAT, only 11.2% of the population employed in 2004 had a part-time job.

Another asymmetry persisting in the labour market has to do with gender. Women also are in disadvantage with their male peers. Another Portuguese peculiarity in the European context is the high female activity rate (61.7% in 2004, compared to 45.2% in Italy and 48.3 in Spain) (6) that has certainly contributed to a progressive transformation of the forms of family organisation and subsequent partial reformulation of the roles of gender in

the family. We have recently witnessed the feminisation of education: there are more and more women who successfully reach high levels of qualification. Observing the percentages of school failure (leaving school early), (7) we will see how important the differences are: in 2004 there was 47.9% of failure in boys, which went down to 30.6% in the case of girls. The same thing happens regarding the percentages of schooling in complete secondary education: 58.8% of women between 20 and 24 completed at least that level of education, something that was only achieved by 39.4% of men that age. Apparently, however, this "success" has not been translated yet into "advantages" in the Labour Market.

5. Social change, generations and values in Portugal today

This superficial portrait of Portugal today would not be complete without the due reference to the evolutions that have taken place in the field of regulations, but after many changes in the behaviour of the Portuguese, as we have stated several times, where the youngest generations have played the main role. Consequently, Portugal has been involved in the appearance of a new order of social values centred in the individual (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991, amongst others). Individualisation has been translated into adoption, especially on the part of the youngest generations, ethics of life of a more hedonist style, emphasising the importance of values such as autonomy, fun, experimentation and other values that form this constellation of the senses with effects on social practice and the paths of life (du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Pais, 1998; Singly, 2000).

In Portuguese society the promotion of these values does not only surpass the frontiers of age, but also those of social conditions. To tell the truth, in spite of the fact that the assumption of these values is stronger amongst the young and the most privileged spheres of society, it is still true that the older generations and the least privileged social groups are influenced by them. To a certain extent, this process has ended up by awarding the socialised agents (the young) the role of socialising agents (their parents) (Pais, 1998: 30). Thus, as there is no generational lapse in terms of social values, in an interview about generations it became obvious that the values shared in a general way by all age and social groups, such as individual aims and solidarity, covered transformations and normative orientations and their contents. Regarding the older generations we can say there is a materialistic individualism and amoral solidarity; young people tend to be identified with an individualism based on hedonistic expression and a "sociable" solidarity (Pais, 1998: 30).

However, according to Singly, there are certain limits in society that are centred on the individual: in spite of the fact that promotion of this type of individuality (made of choices, personal realisation, autonomy and authenticity), as we have already said, extends the effective chances of accessing it, these are unequally distributed (2000:18). Here we see the need, as we attempt to show the subjectivities of the Portuguese young regarding adulthood, of placing them in their macro-social, economic and

(7)
Percentage of the population aged 18 to 24, having completed compulsory secondary education, which is not involved in any type of education or training.

cultural contexts that model them. We really understand that the analysis of the juvenile paths have to show the way that the patterns of the life paths, which are rooted in the logics and dynamics of social institutions such as the Educational System, the Labour Market, Justice, etc., are articulated with decision-making - underlying the time and alignment of transition - and with the representations, senses and individual meanings they are associated to. This means it is about revealing the complex interactions between the structural conditioning, regulation and institutional norms, on one hand, and subjectivity and individual decision, on the other (Heinz and Krüger, 2001).

II – Responsibility and autonomy: territories meaning "adulthood" amongst Portuguese young people.

Research tells us that, together with transactions, full of breaks, advances and steps back, young people have posed the existence of multiple senses, both attributed or requested, about what it means to be and adult today (Plug, Zeijl and du Bois-Reymond, 2003). This is also the result of the first analysis of the testimonies collected through a qualitative approximation made in the context of European comparative approximation on 30 Portuguese young people of different age groups (between 16 and 27) and social conditions (from those who left school with less than 6 years of schooling to those who have a higher education diploma). (8) However, in spite of the fact that this group of interviewed is divided to claim for their own adulthood, in most cases they resort to a type of semantic equivalent: being an *adult* to them means being *responsible*. Especially responsible for the consequences of their decisions, which leads to an important dimension of their identity (whether understood as an adult or not): the *autonomy of choices*. Responsibility and autonomy are thus set like central elements of a normative paradigm modelling their own projections, in spite of the situation of total dependence (both residential and financial) or partial dependence (only residential) from the parents.

This almost total unanimity ended up coinciding with what has been stated regarding the general adoption on behalf of young people as an *ethos* based on the principles of expressive individualisation. The testimonies of these young people allow to impose a signification model, where such "*responsibility*" can be divided into three different territories with adult senses. They are clearly hardly ever isolated, but can appear with several configurations and combinations. However, from the typical ideal point of view, we think it is relevant to establish the symbolic differences between the senses awarded by this group of young people to adulthood and the transitions "leading" to it.

These territories correspond in a general way to the three configurations of responsibility defended by Gaudet: responsibility for themselves, responsibility for "others" and responsibility before the institutions (2001: 79).

(8)
The data used in this article are a part of the comparative research project that involved 8 countries – FATE, Families and Transitions in Europe, coordinated in Portugal by Professor Doctor Machado Pais (ICS). The Portuguese sample was selected through a list of contacts obtained by making a survey amongst students in the last years of the educational system in Almada and at different level (compulsory, vocational, professional and university) during the period from April to June 2002. The interviews were made during periods ranging from five months to a year starting from the end of the school year. We must emphasise the fact that we do not intend to make here interpretations that are representative of the Portuguese population, in terms and social conditions of the interviewed, their paths and their future projects.

1. Responsibility for themselves: maturity as the main indicator of adulthood

Most young people we interviewed (around 2/3) connected the adult identity to a subjective perception of themselves and the individual phase of psychosocial development, that is to say, the level of *maturity* shown by each one in their way of directing their life path and the individual assumption of responsibilities regarding the decisions made (and their consequences). Francisco and Marta gave us the following answers to these questions "What does being an adult mean to you? and How would you define yourself?":

"It has to do with responsibility. To me, being an adult does not have to do with age. It is about having awareness of one's actions and assuming their consequences." (Francisco, 27, upper class, higher education not completed, employed).

"Responsibilities above all! It has nothing to do with age, but with responsibility and maturity to make decisions. And when you make the wrong decision, not to blame others, but ourselves. (...) I have been an adult for a long time now." (Marta, 20, lower/middle class, secondary education, employed).

In this type of identification where the individual claims for a certain status (Dubar, 2000) and autonomy is seen as the main feature, adulthood seems not to be connected to age or change of status (such as entering the labour market, creating autonomous residential units...) and depends just on a personal perception of the self. But further on Francisco even ended up saying that "earning my own money has maybe made me less dependent". These testimonies provide content to the macro-social transformation we have been referring to, especially regarding social values and ethics of life. (9)

On the other hand, we could have here a type of *defensive strategy* facing the future, made objective in the projection of identity that would be adopted by the young in situations of uncertainty and unforeseeable structures (Pais, 2003). The young people interviewed offer some blurred images of their future, and turn this way into a different temporary axis: many possibilities and some specific objectives (10) (getting married, having their own home, having children, fulfilling their professional aims, travelling, etc.), although not in a certain chronological order, thus leaving space for possible reformulation as the "day to day" brings unforeseeable events, certain objectives might fail or there is just a change of plans. "Live the present", "I'd rather not think in the long-run" or "I experience one thing at a time" were the most common answers when asked about their future plans, which means that most of these people avoid (at least in their words) acquiring ontological commitments that risk not being fulfilled. This is exactly what Carla says:

"I don't usually plan the future, or at least not much, because when I do things go wrong and the opposite happens." (Carla, 18, middle/lower class,

(9)
We must not forget that we are dealing with young people who live in the outskirts of the urban area of Lisbon, which, in spite of internal asymmetry, is the part of the country whose life patterns, whether normative or material, are the closest ones to the European average rates.

(10)
These objectives are more "unreal" (Pais, 2003), in the sense that they are not articulated with a perception of the available resources, or with a strategy to reach them, and that the worse conditions the young person is living in, the more chances of educational failure there are.

vocational training, unemployed).

Going back to matters of identity, it is true that assuming adulthood depends on a subjective examination, but this does not stop some young people from identifying some moments in their trajectory as particularly relevant for the perception of themselves as adults. They give us several examples of different circumstances or critical moments (Thomson et al, 2002), which have led to a process of consideration of dynamics for identity reformulation. As an example, we have the case of Manuel, 20, not interested in school, but who ended up taking a vocational training course and managed to be top of the class:

"It was more or less around the middle of the year. People realise, right? Maybe I even have a talent for this! After some time (...) a teacher told me he would find me a job... And that was just around mid-year! He called me and told me that. I started thinking... that this was something serious. And I said to myself: this is what I want to do!"

It is interesting to note how, as people stay with their parents for longer, the autonomy of identity can be built/acquired without an independence as such or total emancipation from the "body" they depended on, support or family surveillance, for instance: only an objective analysis of the dissociation between autonomy and independence seems to take place with individualisation (Singly, 2000). Almost all those interviewed said that their parents' back up and presence did not interfere with their educational, professional or personal choices and decisions: (11)

"My parents have always supported me, I had to do what I wanted to do (...) I always made my one decisions. I have always known which was my path" (Isabel, 23, middle class, last year at university)

(11)
This statement was later reaffirmed by some parents, who said that their *lack of interference* in their children's decision was one of the main elements of the strategies/educational practices that were carried out. It is peculiar to note that this strategy is rooted in two different reasons: one of them is normative, and refers to parents who suffered interference from their own parents and have not wanted to "press" their children the same were they were. Another reason is the omission on behalf of parents who, due to their low educational qualifications, avoid giving their opinion or interfering in areas where their children are much more qualified than they are, thus just intervening only regarding behaviour and values (Pappámikail, 2004: 106-108)

"My father and mother have never interfered in my decisions, which I think is wise. When I make a decision they are always there to support me and not criticise me. (...) I listen to their opinion, but I always want to decide for myself. We have to make mistakes and suffer to learn (...). They gave me this freedom so that I can grow up" (Carla, 18, middle/lower class, vocational training, unemployed).

However, it is necessary to understand these statements in a context of identity reaffirmation. On one hand we have the words said by the young project this "rhetoric of autonomy" (Thomson et al, 2002: 351), the cross with meditations about the modalities of interaction and familiar exchange have allowed us to contextualise this rhetoric in the context of a "situated autonomy", subjected to parental guidance, which can be assumed to a greater or lesser extent and with different intensity. Let's talk about an "autonomy situated in a certain regulation system and also in a certain group of socialising practices that contribute to restrict or broaden the field of possibilities that are actually available for the young" (Pappámikail, 2004: 16).

2. Responsibility before the "others" and the institutions: family and work as indicators of adult identity

Some young people (a minority in the sample context) however opted for a reference to the family (and the status of material dependence) to define the adult condition. In their opinion (even if they never question their autonomy in decision-making) only when they are truly "independent", both financially and residentially speaking, they will feel the "right" to claim for their adult status.

"Being an adult... a lot of responsibilities. It is being an independent person!" (Diogo, 20, middle/upper class, vocational training, works and takes higher education at the same time).

"I don't know, but being an adult means you can pay for your own bills (...). I still depend on my parents... and I think that my transition into adulthood will take place when I leave their shelter. And when I have responsibilities!" (Maria, 25, middle/upper class, last year at university).

The others place adulthood in a negative place, regarding the access to the labour market.

"What a pain! Because we have to get up early to go to work according to an awful timetable. I have started to get the feeling that I cannot "skip work" (...) I know that when you start working you cannot help having an adult perspective of life!" (Lourenço, 21, lower class, higher education, employed).

In both cases, otherness (whether in the private or public scope) appears as the external element attributing the status of an adult to certain transitions: in the first case, leaving the parents' home (associated to an independent way of life from the financial point of view), and, in the second place, entering the labour market. For these young people adulthood is an imposed requirement (or is assigned, using Dubar's terminology, (2000)) which does not please some, such as Lourenço. This is due to the fact that this type of projection of themselves shows a clear confrontation between representations with an opposed meaning: a happy youth without commitments and a serious adulthood full of obligations.

Under these representations, which we find in many speeches (regardless of the senses assigned to responsibility), we can see a confrontation of the ethics of life, but that are not translated, as we said in I, into generational breaks. (12) Especially the ethics that many of the young people find in their parents (most of the time less qualified than them, as we have shown) and who assume the paradigm of adulthood. As a consequence, this apparent normative confrontation is less clear in those cases where the young people came from families whose members held higher qualifications.

However - and in general - this "adulthood" opposes a juvenile *ethos* which is supported on individualisation values and is simultaneously a *generational ethos* we want to respect throughout the cycle of life. However, they disapprove of the "weight" of *responsibility* that does not let them do it

(12)
Normative confrontations between parents and children, which are present in several aspects of the children's lives, and which can lead to some minor conflicts, seem to calm down with the affective atmosphere that, according to both sides (parents and children) regulates and intervenes in intergenerational cohabiting.

successfully. As we refer to the ethics of an ant ("a static" and boring adulthood they associate with their parents), but rather go for the ethics of the cicada (hedonist and emphasising mobility and accumulation of different experiences), they disapprove of adulthood and award it a negative sense (Nilsen, 1998:74 and Pais, 1998: 408).

Final comments

As a corollary of this presentation, which has been made necessarily short and in two time periods, one at a macro level, statistically characterising Portugal today and the changes and continuities that have transformed it, and another at a micro level, which has tried to award it an empirical content to this portrait, it is important to make two final comments.

Firstly, the fact that we have observed the existence of some "defensive strategies" in their own projection (as we refer to the validation of adult identity to subjective instances) articulated with a normative paradigm that is clearly rooted in expressive individualisation. These manifestations are presented as associated to a structural context of uncertainty (or at least the belief that there is one). In these cases what seems to be important for the young people interviewed is not being an adult (in a "traditional" sense) but the acknowledgment as a citizen with full rights, in spite of dependence and potential reversibility behind the statutory steps taken. When the young refer to adulthood by stating external elements of specific transitions, which would socially assign them this status, that is to a certain extent undesired, they do not intend to reinforce their dependence or reduce their autonomy, but to reject a normative model of adulthood where they do not see themselves reflected. It is also a semantic opposition: the word "adult" has a symbolic meaning to it that these young people would prefer not to assume. The first ones seem to opt (more or less consciously) for the reformulation of its content, by adapting it to their life circumstances and values.

Secondly, note that, in spite of these undefined and uncertain speeches, as it has been proved by the demographic indicators exposed in section 1, we must not forget that most Portuguese young people end up getting married, having children or building autonomous residential units even before their peers in Southern Europe. So the representations synthetically analysed here contribute only to give texture to the importance of family and professional transitions in their relation with personal identities, with the new sense awarded by the individuals. From the point of view of the social values, the importance awarded to autonomy underlies these important changes, which, in our opinion, have contributed greatly to the transformation of Portuguese society.

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