

Cécile Van de Velde, Conference Professor of the University of Lille³
 Membre of GRACC (Université de Lille³),
 Member of the Laboratory for Quantitative Sociology (CREST-INSEE),
 Associated Investigator to the Maurice Halbwachs Centre (ENS/EHESS), Paris.

Entering adult life. A European comparison

The aim of this article is to show the existence of different social models between the youth in the contemporary Europe. It is based on a comparative analysis of the familiar and the professional development of young adults in Denmark, United Kingdom, France and Spain. It shows that the definition of «young adult» varies very much from one society to another one and that belongs to a social and cultural concept which refers to settled social agreements. The analysis is based on the complement of statistic and qualitative information obtained in two different ways. On one hand, from the use of the six longitudinal groups of The European Community Household Panel (1994-1999) and, on the other hand, from more than hundred interviews made to young individuals between 18 and 30 years old in the mentioned four countries.

The limits between infancy, youth and the adult age vary greatly from one society to another one. They show the cultural and political images of the attributes related to the different phases of life. This article tries to analyse some of the youth's social conceptions in the bosom of our contemporary societies inside a European frame. It's based on the comparative analysis of the autonomy processes carried out by Danish, British, French and Spanish young men/women: more than 135 thorough interviews have been made between 18 - 30 year old young people in these countries ⁽¹⁾ and they have been completed with six groups of the European Community Household Panel (1994-1999), a study made "without frontiers" and coordinated by Eurostat in the occidental European societies.

We have designed a map that shows the steps to adulthood, each one being related to defined social elements. More than sex and social life, is the social dimension what is shown as the most structured element during this period of life development. If we analyse it from a comparative point of view, "the prolongation of the youth" is far away from combining, in a transverse way, the same features from one society to another one. This article follows this structure, it develops successively four social models that define the youth and adulthood phases, but also the path that joins them.

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 Study carried out in Madrid, Pamplona, Paris, Valenciennes, London, Brighton, Copenhagen, Alborg, between individual sampled in function of gender, category and social means. The guide, the interviews, same to all of them, talked about the family relations, the relations with the studies and about the associated definitions to adulthood.

I - «*To find oneself*» or the logic of the personal development

To begin, a first way of experiencing youth appears in a logic of personal development and takes the shape of a long time exploration that leads to a continuous independence from parents. This means «finding oneself» before having adult responsibilities. This designates youth developments that start

with a forward independence and remain, during a long time of alternation, between different groups, such as residential, familiar and professional groups. These comings and goings give them the possibility of experiencing and forming their identity. Youth is considered then, as a long exploration path and finishes quite late, when they are around 30 years old, usually due to the birth of the first child. This is considered as the step from the own responsibility to the responsibility for others.

This logic of the personal development belongs especially to a generation tendency: nowadays young European people are registered in the life cycle, above all, with the reference of “being oneself”. Most of the interviewed young adults, especially the ones who belong to well-off families, show some confusing elements about this experience, especially a great ambition for “finding themselves” and finding the image of an adult, which is more related to identification elements than to legal ones.

However, beyond this relative generational transversality, young Danish people are, more than British, French or Spanish ones, the ones who incline more to formalize, in a definitive way, this aspiration to the “searching of myself”; but they also begin long developments towards independence and experimentation that come from this searching and are relatively homogeneous depending on the gender and social sources.

1 - Experimentation developments

More often than in the other three countries, the youth phase in Denmark takes the shape of a long path, usually not straight, with trips, jobs and studies financed by the State. This phase is registered inside the continuity of an adolescence autonomy, which is in the bosom of the family. It seems that Danish young people experience an exit that is not only faster, but also easier and more natural, comparing to the cases of the other national or social groups included in this study. It's considered that only the confrontation to a familiar socialization is able to favour the individual identity: staying at parents' house is considered a “lost of time”, a very bad “isolation”, even something “dangerous” that stops “becoming an adult” and breaks the creation of an “own life”.

After the exit comes a long period of experimentation, which can last until 30 years old more or less. Here they assert a wish to face a lot of experiences, having the aim of “fulfilling oneself” or “being ready” to take professional or familiar responsibilities: they have to “do the ego-trip” before having a family and joining the adult life. This way, there is a relation with the time marked by the no urgency and the experimentation. The rhetoric of the urgency appears in the Danish young people's speeches and they object to, for example, the “distress of the delay”, which is more related to the French young people who have similar conditions and age. These last ones show a relative absence of pressure in the moment of the affective incorporation to the active life. The horizon looks far away and the periods quite long. Many people say they don't have any hurry to finish their studies because they prefer exploiting this shared and legitimate time, as shows a 24 year old

young, talking about her friends' development. She thinks she will have to wait "a long time" to start working. Another young says she is "quite worried" about finishing her studies at the age of "only" 25 years old.

This logic of flexible time finds its purpose in the discontinuous developments they alternate such as trips, studies, stops in the studies, jobs, beginning of the studies. The Danish young people have then, in a privileged way, experimentation developments which are presented by comings and goings between a lonely life and a free union, and also by comings and goings between students and wage-earning workers before they finish studying, usually quite late. As a phase of legal and salary inversion, this period of "young adult" is considered above all, as a legitimate and personally institutionalised time. To start late with some complete studies, even after having finished some other studies and having started an active life, is a behaviour that shows this experimentation logic. One of the examples is the development of a boatswain's son who gets a familiar help. After one year in England, he continued his nursery studies. He lived with five or six more students in the same house. Nowadays he's a qualified nursery, he lives alone and has worked for two years in a day nursery. However, he doesn't like taking care of ill people any more and he wants to change his life. Being 27 years old he's going to start studying musical sciences while he keeps working.

More than any other beginning – such as the exit from home, the job or the end of the studies – the arrival of a child is what is considered to be the relative term of this period of legitimate "direction taking". However, the arrival of the first child doesn't break the process of the identity formation: in essence, this requirement of self-realization induces a certain length and doesn't accept the closing. Adulthood, usually associated to the maturity, is a subjective horizon line, an age where people are introduced "furtively". This confirms, always in a context, the development of tendencies that proposes Jean-Pierre Boutinet about the image of an adult as a process and as a "perspective". (2)

2 – A democratic achievement

This logic means more a "democratic achievement", in a certain way, than a simple answer to a certain economical security. The effects of the Welfare State say that the cycle of life is essential in this case, since the financial policy for young students or unemployed people institutionalises the existence of a long and exploratory-character youth: a direct and universal assignation guarantees the economical survival of the young adult with independence from the family resources: their temporary flexibility allows the material prolongation or even the late incorporation to the studies. This policy takes place in the bosom of a society which is structured by a great middle class that separates the election of the studies and the inversions from a simple aim of professional or economical profitability. However, it doesn't obstruct at all the quick and massive incorporation of the students and the young adults to the labour market.

(2)
Jean-Pierre Boutinet (1998),
L'immatrité de la vie adulte,
Paris, PUF, p.27.

Thus, if this is possible due to an unfamiliar state policy, the existence of this kind of youth responds, finally, to stronger cultural roots. These itineraries find their bases on a quick socialization of the autonomy in the bosom of the family, where independence and equality seem to be quite strong pedagogical values. The same state policy has started to counter the paid-job of the students, and thus, the independent behaviours of the young adults that existed before. Thus, it's in this confusion of cultural values that shows up the individual autonomy and political and economical conditions which make them possible, where we can explain the existence of the Danish young people's developments ruled by a logic of personal development.

This social configuration is not usual in Denmark, but it's more underlined in the other Scandinavian countries. So, we can make the hypothesis that says that this kind of societies are more appropriate for the existence of developments with longer and exploratory character, before they start taking responsibilities as adults.

II - «*To assume oneself*» or the logic of individual emancipation

A second way of experiencing youth is framed in a logic of individual emancipation and has a strong meaning of "assuming oneself". This is characterized by a generalized precocity of the professional and familiar transitions and it adopts the figure of a young adult moved by the wish of breaking every dependence relation that joins him/her to the others: to his/her parents or to the State. It's considered that this break can be used as a base by an adult. Youth is seen as a short period of time which takes young people into the financial independence, as a reference point towards an early adulthood, and it has positive connotations. This logic of "self-constitution of the emancipation" is related to short developments where studies form a totalised experience, finished by a rapid entrance to work, which is the base of the financial independence.

Now, the qualitative analysis and the statistics relate more this logic to the British young people than to any other social group, especially the British people who belong to well-off families: their developments – short, directed to the quick access to the marital situation and with a salary – seem to be more inclined to showing a logic of emancipation, even if we can't enclose them in it.

1 – The precocity of a situation

Exactly, in the United Kingdom, the residence independence is also very premature, but differing from the Danish case, this is not guaranteed by an unfamiliarised State and depends on the individual responsibility. Even if it's not the end of the parents' financial help, the exit from home means a real symbolic break in the intergenerational paths and relations. The social rule invites the individual to become an adult; this means, a responsible human being who provides his/her own necessities. The parents' home is associated

to the infancy; so, the exit from this one, which is especially symbolic, becomes a founder act of the adult. During the studies, they prefer indebtedness and professional activity to parents' solidarity: the financial dependency, still partial, restrains the sensation of being an adult. Due to this they have short term studies and they rapidly come into the labour market. The access to parent category and marriage are also premature.

Now, British young people are especially inclined to define themselves as "adults" – related to the residential and professional category – and, in the same way, they are distinguished by the positive image they said they had of this phase of life when relating it to the "reference point" of increasing development. Far away from the "no urgency" that distinguished the experiences as young people from many Danish people, the English young people's testimonies show, on the contrary, a way of precipitation to the access of the adult category and to the professional and familiar responsibilities that come with them. Many of them say they are "wishing", "impatient" and "curious" for going into this adult life which is similar to a "real life" and is also similar to the real reference point of a path that they wish it will be really individual. The Danish ones showed a clear tendency of defining themselves as "young adults" until they become 30 years old, but the British ones usually define themselves as "adults" after the 20 or 22 years old, the age that responds, more or less, to the end of the studies and to the definitive professional entrance. This is more related to the beginning of the independence more than to a long and undefined process of maturing: the adult identity is considered to come directly from a social and familiar category. This way, adulthood seems to be very related to the notion of individual independence and in fact, depending on their residential and financial situation, the interviewed British young people consider themselves to be "adults" in the bosom of their life cycle or not.

2 - The liberal requirement

The analysis of the British young people's development showed that this kind of youth was strongly related to the conjunction of a liberal society and familiar model with individualistic tendencies.

The individualism in the United Kingdom is distinguished by its hierarchic composition where the strong sense of the autonomy developments is the emancipation. Adulthood is a positive perspective, even an ideal. The young adult is invited to make his/her path in an individual way in the bosom of a society that values the professional success as a merit. The youth developments are framed in a cultural context that devalues parents' financial dependence after the exit from adolescence, and gives importance to the search of a paid job more than the familiar help, even while studying. The most important individualism, between the analysed British families, differs from the democratic tendency shown in the interviewed Danish families: the equality in the bosom of the family is not obtained, it's deserved, especially by showing the individual capacities of independence.

The State intervention, of liberal inspiration, confirms the principle of

individual responsibility. When there are no direct subsidies, a loan policy incites to the self-financing. In spite of that, the high prices of studies make necessary, in most of the cases, the family help, and this limits the entrance to university for middle-class and well-off families. The actual evolution is a rise in the educational expenses. Following some long studies means making a decision between facing the expenses during one more year and the profitability it has in the labour market in the frame of a low unemployment rate. Thus, more than being a normative invitation to “being adult”, the liberal requirement conditions, in the same way, the precocity of the British developments.

3 - «To place oneself» or the logic of social integration

A third way of experiencing youth is framed in a logic of social integration and means “placing oneself”. It’s characterized by a massive dedication to the studies justified by the wish of having a definitive job. The phase of the youth, associated to studies, is thought as an inversion in the family that determines, almost definitively, the future social level of the individual, and then, legitimises the acceptation of a transitory familiar dependence. Youth is characterized by quite short studying itineraries, although lineal, and after this ones there is a necessity, sometimes not achieved, for a quick marriage and professional installation. The relation with the time is framed in a logic of urgency where options seem to be definitive and irreversible and where it seems to be that future, fixed in the professional way, has already begun. The access to the professional establishment is the main symbolic entrance into the adult life.

Young French people seem to be the closest ones to this logic, but in a relatively ambiguous way, divided between an aspiration to a personal development and the limitations of a social structure that conditions strongly the possible job in the initial formation.

1 - The age of the “definitive”

In France the most important thing is the semi-dependency. There are many intermediate situations characterized by the ambiguity between a relatively premature exit and a later effective professional establishment: cohabitation without the parents’ approval, student accommodation paid by parents, effective official and financial autonomy... the progressive developments associate familiar solidarity practises to an ethic of the autonomy. An effective family solidarity, in spite of having a meaning of a premature independence, responds to the social election of this period considered a life inversion. In this society, characterized by the importance of belonging to a professional group in the social and individual definition and characterized by the connection between this category and the title got at the end of the studies, the youth phase is considered to be the phase where “life is constructed” and it’s dominated by the pressure of “integrating” socially, “entering a cycle”, where you need to reach a position in the bosom of an already established hierarchy. The problem of a “social definition”

conditioned by the level and the area of the studies forms, in a effective way, a key for the basic understanding of the development into the incorporation to the active life. This makes more important the question of “orientation” for the development and takes to a relation with the time marked by the pressure for going ahead and for making no mistake that can be perceived. The urgency of the integration and the absence of profitability associated to studies contribute to continuous and prematurely begun academic developments. There is a marked division between the studying period and the incorporation to work.

Adulthood is represented as the age of the definitive stability with a first negative connotation; however people looks for it as the age pressure rises. French young people’s adulthood images reflect the relative ambiguity they show to position themselves in the bosom of the placing developments. In fact, they juxtapose two opposite definitions that make able to see a potential tension between the individual aspirations and the importance of a premature determination. Beyond a generalized image in terms of identity and personal development - “to be mature”, “to be responsible”, “to feel autonomous” - , the negative connotation that some young people have associated to adulthood, comparing it to the “routine”, to “fixed”, to a “sad a straight line” or to a “completely designed path” hasn’t find a real equivalent in the rest of the European young people. Adulthood appears, then, codified, like the age of something definitive and imposed. These images reflect the existence of a give and take between a limitation to the premature social determination and an aspiration for a personal development they refer to.

2 - The corporative pressure

As reflect of French young people’s experience, this kind of youth has been associated, in a privileged way, to a corporate kind of social structure.

This youth experience is framed in a social model which makes the belonging to a professional group one of the principal definitive criterions of the individual, but in the same way, it limits the access to it through the certificate. Here we find one of the components of a corporativism that invades the French society, which is strongly structured around a hierarchy of divided socio-professional categories. The concession of the social rights seems to be properly divided and related to profession. In France this approximates to a “corporativist” Welfare State, as Gosta Esping-Andersen (3) defined. The educational system and the labour market remark this division with a pronounced split of the different studying and working sectors, and also with an extreme valuation of the initial title during life.

Besides, the state intervention in front of the “dependent” young adults confirms the principle that parents take care about the studying phase and the professional integration. However, this is combined with some unfamiliar features that legitimate, for instance, a partial right of the residential independence for students and unemployed young people by means of a housing help policy. This shows a quite strong division in the bosom of the

(3)
Gosta Esping-Andersen (1999),
Les tríos mondes de l’Etat-providence. Essai sur le capitalisme moderne, Paris, PUF.

French youth between an aspiration to the independence and the adaptation to a parents' provisional maintenance, at least economical. Despite they belong to a catholic society, French young people usually adopt independence behaviours and family values which are closer to the ones we find in the protestant countries.

In the way that the corporativism is especially structured, even if it comes together with a rigid formation-job link and an elitist educational system, we can suppose that the French society is the one which offers the most susceptible frame in order to create this kind of experiences, even if it's possible to happen, in a more partial way, in other corporativist societies.

IV - «To install oneself» or the logic of familiar belonging

Finally, the fourth kind of youth is framed in a logic of familiar belonging and adopts the development of home permanency while they don't have the conditions for establishing as adults. The strong signification associated to this development could be resumed by the expression "to install oneself". The youth phase is considered to be a waiting phase and a phase when they have to prepare the economical and familiar conditions for a future installation. The exit from the parents' house means a symbolic break of great importance in the young adult's development, because this finishes a autonomization period in the bosom of the family and bases the entrance in life as an adult. Leaving parents' house is the last phase of a process which has three acts: having a stable job, getting married and buying a house. It's considered that the familiar cohabitation keeps on while these three conditions don't happen. Leaving parents' house outside this frame seems to be a way of "affective treason". The integration by means of financial and residential interdependence makes possible the integration in the bosom of the group and the home exit breaks its balance, although this extends thanks to a continuous renovation of the familiar belonging.

In a certain way, in this fourth logic we can add the speeches of the Spanish young people, interviewed in this study. The reasons they give to justify the long time they stay at their parents' home has the mark of a belonging logic and shows the existence of images related to a federator home. However, these rules seem to be claimed - even imposed - by the parents' generation and their maintenance at home comes also from a certain economical pragmatism.

1 - An overdue installation

The exit from the parents' house in Spain is later indeed, and finishes the youth developments taken place in the parents' house; it's based in a legitimacy of a permanence in the familiar home while they don't have the financial conditions for an installation as adults and while the couple's links are not so strong to create a new home. The cohabitation of the young adults and the parents is sometimes called "Luxury hotel" by young men. Helping the family financially is more usual in families with less resources,

while in other situations, parents tell children to start saving money for their future installation. This relative absence of the economical participation usually doesn't make young people feel bad, because it's inside a logic of insure and long term reciprocity: it's considered that, later on, the sense of intergenerational solidarity turns around completely. This is why cohabitation is considered to be a way of collective inversion for the "child's" installation, because this way, he/she can save money for a future housing inversion. The price of this "hotel" seems to be somewhere else, especially in the respect to the family values that guide the cohabitation.

As the culminating moment of a guided youth itinerary, guided by the familiar home, the exit seems to be, thus, a "great step" to the adult life. Usually associated to the economical stability and the familiar responsibilities, the images young Spanish people develop in adulthood are dominated by the logic of installation. Certainly, as happens with all the other interviewed Europeans, the evocation of an identifying process has dominated greatly the expressed definitions of what "becoming an adult" is. However, we have to underline that few Spanish young people choose this identity formation to install themselves in the life cycle: they define themselves as "no adults" due to the lack of achievement of an economical and familiar stability, which is supposed to be what defines the definitive entrance to this age". Youth is usually seen as a long phase of preparation and a wait of an establishment as an adult.

2 - A familiar rule

The analysis of the Spanish youth experience shows that this kind of development takes directly to a conjunction of a familiar rule and a high unemployment rate.

This kind of experience is framed in a society that doesn't offer a social paper to young people before having a relative high age and keeps people in a waiting situation for a long time. Apart from being a simple answer to a rule of installation, the permanency development at parents' house is also strongly conditioned by the economical limitations and by the material impossibility of being able to "offer themselves" an exit once they are installed. Taking into account a quite high unemployment rate between young people and a saturated renting market, orientated to the buying of a house more than to renting, the absence of public helps to be able to get an independence, make people extend their youth phase while they don't have the conditions for having a stability as adults.

However, it's the basic place the "belonging" to a familiar group has, what makes possible understand the belonging development in the parents' house by young adults. More than by his/her independence, the individual defines himself/herself by his/her situation in the material and affective interdependence that renews once and again. Home is the privileged space to create this interdependence and leaving it without having a new one is seen as an affective "treason". In this sense, young adults' autonomy developments consist, above all, on forming their individuality in the bosom

of this familiar belonging through the introduction of a reciprocity with the parents and the preparation of their own installation. Accordingly, in similar ages and social categories, Spanish people usually extend the familiar cohabitation comparing to the other studied countries.

Once we have seen the familiar and social indicators, Spain belongs to the greatest group that consists on the Mediterranean countries, having Italy as the extremity. Thus, we can suppose that the south European countries, which have similar socio-economical conditions – family kind Welfare States and adversely structured labour markets – guide themselves to this kind of experiencing youth.

Conclusion

In view of all this about a society, when can we say somebody is an adult? Where is the legitimate limit between the child and the parents, between the independent individual and the integrated citizen? This article has shown that age keeps forming a political and social idea and that there is still a strong sign of the societies in this phase of life. Depending on the state intervention, the established educational systems and the labour markets, each society tends to institutionalise different ways of going into adulthood and also tends to create specific experiences and images of this vital development. However, the comparison invites not to forget the role of the cultural values and the religious legacy in the differences between the European young people. The different young developments can't be considered as a simple consequence of the institutional characteristics of the educational system, the labour market and the Welfare State. Young people's developments and images respond, in a same way, to stronger cultural and religious roots, and not only to economical features. In this point, the Europe's map is startling: the precocity of the exit and the couple union, pit totally the protestant countries against the catholic ones, including Ireland. (4) The protestant and catholic inherencies mark, in a same way, the behaviours, especially of young people's families. Thus, when internationalising the educational systems and the labour markets, when we pose the question of the potential convergence on the steps to adulthood in Europe, this comparison invites to think that the destiny's multiplicity in this "European generation" would resist – at least partially – to the harmonization of the educational policies and the economical globalisation.

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Cécile Van de velde (2004),
*Devenir adulte. Sociologie
comparée de la jeunesse en
Europe*, Thèse de Doctorat,
Institut d'Etudes Politiques in
Paris.

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