

***Young people at work in Europe: policy practices to overcome  
the unbalance between generations. A comparative  
perspective.***

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**Summary**

*The working condition of young people across Europe is raising attention but also a few concerns. On the one hand, young people have a different, more “expressive” and more “post-materialistic” approach to work; they expect self-fulfilment from their job although they give great importance to other aspects of their life. On the other hand, in spite of the fact they certainly represent the best qualified generation since history, the newcomers on the labour market are far from enjoying job standards and labour protection similar to the adult and older generations. This phenomenon can be observed all over Europe, although different political and institutional contexts as well as different cultures are relevant in reducing or intensifying the social gap between generations. Evidence from Sprew (“Generational approach to the social patterns of relation to work”) - a project funded under the Sixth framework programme of the European Commission - can be used to discuss these issues and to formulate suggestions for policies. In the first part (par. 1,2) the paper will focus on the “new” work orientation of young European workers and on the relationship between generations (par.3,4). In the second part (par.5,6), the paper shows how the observed differences in labour-market regulation and welfare models, in industrial relations systems and in family cultures (observed through a cross-country comparison) may influence the inequality between generations and it suggests which specific measures can be introduced in order to reduce unbalanced working conditions and increase workers’ solidarity and social cohesion.*

**A few theoretical assumptions**

*Relation to work*

The relation to work (or work-orientation) can be considered through two main perspectives: the relative importance attributed to work compared to other spheres in the existence and the kind of attachment toward different dimensions of work (Meda 2008). From a sociological point of view, the position work occupies in people’s life has been summarized into the opposition between “distance” and “centrality” of work in life experience (Hamel 2003). As for the dimensions of work, from a more

psychological perspective, applying to work the famous Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs – physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and self-actualisation - most authors consider two main areas: the “instrumental” one, which refers to material and safety expectations, such as level of wage and job security, and the “expressive” one, which includes social and symbolic expectations, as good relations and wellbeing at the workplace, autonomy, career success and feeling of social usefulness (Habermas 1980, 1987; Zoll 2001). Close to the notion of expressivity is the notion of “post-materialistic orientation” or the high importance given to goals such as self-expression, self-development or a meaningful life rather than security or order (Inglehart 1977, 1997).

Recent debates on the change in relation to work show opposite points of view: according to some authors, people - especially the younger one - experience an increasing distance from paid work (Coupland 1991, Cannon 1994), due to the weakening of the sense of belonging to a collective (Gorz 1997) and to the growing precariousness which threatens the social integration especially for the weaker groups (Bourdieu 1993; Sennet 1999; Beck 2000; Bauman 2000; Castells 2002) while, according to other authors, work still remains an important value in the construction of social identity (Castel 1995; Hamel 2003, Boudon 2002), although it is becoming less central compared to other value areas, such as personal relationships, leisure, consumption, family. Moreover, and in some way paradoxically, the decrease of the centrality of work is going together with the overall process of individualisation (Habermas 1987; Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Baethge 1994; Paci 2005): by consequence, claims for more freedom, autonomy and self-actualisation are strongly affecting the relation to work (Sen 1994; Inglehart 1997; Beck 2000).

### *Generations*

As for the notion of generation, according to Mannheim, in a strict sense “generation units” are a product of historical events: “individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process” (Mannheim 1970). They take shape in opposition to the previous one, they become social movements and agents of change through a process of political self-consciousness. In this sense not all age groups are generations and not all countries have the same generational boundaries. In a broader sense, almost everybody agree in considering the relevance of institutional factors - like the education system, the family, the labour market regulation, the welfare state model, the type of capitalism - in drawing the boundaries among age-groups or generations.

From this point of view, with some minor diversities in the different countries, we can identify three “generations of workers” being currently at work: 1) people born before the end of the fifties; 2) people who have born between this date and the late seventies; 3) people born from this date on. In the second half of the twentieth century almost everywhere in Europe a strict protection of labour and a wide development of welfare systems created a generation of highly protected, strong and

collectively represented labour force: it is the so-called *Baby-boomers* Generation. Later on, following two world petrol crises, the welfare state financial collapse and the consequent end of Keynesian policies all around Europe, at the beginning of the eighties entered the scene a new, more exposed to unemployment generation of workers: it is the so-called *X Generation* (Coupland 1991; Cannon 1994; Smola, Sutton 2002). In the same period, the hugely increasing participation of women to the labour market was the reason of a sharp generational transition from a “one-career generation” to the “dual-career generation”, with new priorities, aims and needs. More recently, welfare-systems’ orientation to pay retirement provisions to a more and more large population rather than spend money in other social directions, together with the impact of the globalisation on western economies and the increasing preference for flexible labour markets of most governments, are producing a generation of more precarious, less collectively represented, less socially protected workers. They are currently defined as the Generation Y or the *Millennial Generation* (Pirie, Worcester 1998). Despite its being the best qualified generation since history and its enjoying the privilege of being in the right side of the digital divide (which makes it also the “net-generation”), someone call them roundly the “Baby-loser generation” (Keeley 2008) ...

### **How generation matters in the changing relation to work? Do young workers really have different work expectations?**

#### *International surveys*

Insofar, in order to measure the change in work orientation we could refer to a number of international surveys monitoring the change in culture and values over the last twenty years. The most important are: the European Values Surveys (EVS), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and the European Social Survey (ESS). Although they don’t make explicit reference to generations, they are very useful to measure the change over years. Concerning the relation to work and the place of work in life, evidence from these surveys show that:

- with few differences among countries, work still occupies a very important position in the life of people;
- work is still considered a means of earning money but this dimension is becoming less relevant (and it is closely linked to a low level of education);
- there is an increase of post-materialistic expectations from work, such as self-fulfilment and social relations (these dimensions are more frequent in more educated people);
- there is a little predominance in the expressive relation to work among women.

In short, in the post-industrial society work still remains a “very important organiser of identity, time and self-development” (Meda 2008), although individuals’ goals of self-expression and quality of life are getting more important than their preoccupation for

the survival (Inglehart 1997, Meda 2008). Moreover, post-materialistic (expressive) and pragmatic (instrumental) dimensions coexist, so that the individuals' relation to work can be seen as "a struggle to achieve a balance between these two different orientations" (Castro 2008). Whenever a specific reference to younger workers is available, international surveys report a lower perception of work as central dimension in life and a higher importance given to social and symbolic dimensions than the elders: because of their greater involvement in the ongoing process of individualisation, young people show a more intense expectation of self-expression (Inglehart 1977, 1997). Single-country studies on young workers confirm the results of international surveys' periodic monitoring: in France according to Gorz (1997) for young people "to have a personal project is more important than the goals of the organisation in which they are employed"; in Germany, according to Baethge (1994) "the majority of young people want to work in a job where they can improve and develop their qualification (...) where they can bring themselves in as a person, which offers a good communication climate and which challenges their creativity"; in Italy, according to Gosetti (2005) for young people "the idea of a position to hold and where to make roots is faded away, leaving space to the idea of a path".

#### *Sprew Project*

Evidence from Sprew ("Generational approach to the social pattern of relation to work") - a project funded under the Sixth framework programme of the European Commission - allow to better understand to what extent the variable "generation" is relevant for the change in the relation to work. Based on qualitative data (life stories and focus-group of different age workers) in six European countries, the research confirms the above mentioned change, with a more specific focus on different generational orientations and more in-depth considerations around a few topics that are closely linked to change in work, namely the different perception of precariousness and the combined influence of gender, age and education variables.

Looking at new trends in young people's work orientation, it is hard to distinguish the "generation effect" from the "age effect" (for example, we know that, over the years, people change their level of expectations) and also from the effect of two other concomitant variables: "education" (that is supposed to have a major impact in increasing the expressive orientation to work) and "gender" (that has a strong influence in the place that work has in life). Whatever the driver - either the specific culture and attitudes shared by a generation born in wealthy societies, or the feminisation of the labour market, or the sharp rise in the tertiary education over last thirty years - the collected information show that, in our European societies, *work is slowly but relentlessly going to the end of its centrality in people's lives.*

Looking more in-depth at the youngest generation, both male and female workers appear to share a new "*polycentric conception of life*" (Lebano 2008): they result passionate to work and having high expectations from their job - both materialistic and post-materialistic - while at the same time giving great importance to other aspects of life as areas of identity construction. On the one hand, young people more than the

elders value the opportunity to have an interesting job and to be able to learn and develop, they feel disenchanting when their education is undervalued and claim for higher wage and job security as well. On the other hand, young people more than the elders are willing to put limits to the place of work in their life, they expect their work and their personal lives get along well and perceive the importance of technology in enabling them to do this (to work from home, to have flexible hours, to stay in touch with friends and the family from the workplace).

Moreover, interesting signals of the *reduction in the dichotomy between the male and the female patterns of relation to work* are emerging: young women without a child tend to have the same career behaviour as young men; young men are very different from the elderly as for their willingness to share family care responsibilities.

While, unexpectedly, *the perception of job insecurity is higher among adult and elder workers than among young ones*: the former are often very worried about threats of company restructuring and labour market deregulation, while young workers are likely to be more acquainted to job-precariousness that seems to be integrated in their mind as a normal event.

### **Generational differences in the position on the labour market and in the working conditions**

The investigation of the different positions of the three generations at the workplace was one of the most important goals of our research. To this aim, two well-known frameworks should be taken into consideration. The first one refers to the enormous change occurred in company organisation during last twenty years. The second one, to the present situation of labour markets and the role of welfare systems.

The huge transformation of the work organisation going on from the late eighties entails company restructuring, delocalisation and relevant technological change in the manufacturing sector, a remarkable outsourcing of activities in the service sector and, in some countries, also restrictive employment policies in the public administration. As a consequence, we are now facing a dramatic obsolescence of traditional skills especially affecting older workers' employability together with an overall reduction of jobs in traditional sectors. Meanwhile, the increasing fragmentation and tertiarization of economical activities result in a number of new professions but (often) precarious jobs.

Rather than from this change in the market structure and company organisation, young people's disadvantage in terms of job security originates from the widespread de-regulation of labour markets affecting more or less all the European countries during the nineties: despite their higher educational level (particularly the female one) and their brilliant technological (and linguistic) competencies, younger generation almost everywhere in Europe suffer from a prolonged entry route into employment, low-paid and unstable jobs, discontinuous career paths, frequent undervaluation of their qualification level. They have been correctly depicted as a kind of "adjustment

variable” for the today labour market (Vendramin 2008). Moreover, the exhausted welfare-state systems (often more devoted to pay pensions to the old workers than to secure a widespread labour security) find it difficult to counterbalance such a hard situation and to integrate the new groups.

This situation has been confirmed by our investigation. With slight differences among countries, this is the synthesis picture of the position of our three generations on the labour market:

- *Young people (< 30)* are more exposed to precariousness and unemployment but they benefit from a positive educational and digital differential
- *The adult generation (30 to 50)* usually enjoys a stable position on the labour market but it is more exposed to the difficulties related to keeping together career expectations and family care (especially critical is the position of adult women)
- *The elder generation (> 50)* – when still at work – enjoys the best wage and security and the highest representation by trade unions but it is the most exposed in case of company restructuring, due to their deskilling.

Different generations also show different cultures and expectations towards work:

- *Young people (< 30)* ask for more social protection and higher income but also for more freedom and opportunity of self-development
- *The adult generation (30 to 50)* asks for social and company support to better reconcile work and family but also for life-long learning measures in the perspective of becoming “ageing workers”
- *The elder generation (> 50)* asks for recognition of experience but also for the improvement of work environment conditions (workloads, working hours, etc.).

### **Why no clash between generations?**

As a matter of fact, the three generations appear quite different either when considering their “subjective” attitudes and expectations or their “objective” working conditions.

Anyway, regarding the quality of intergenerational relationships, *neither signals of conflict at the workplace* emerged from the investigation, *nor increasing solidarity* (Vendramin 2008). Although the rupture of the traditional knowledge exchange between seniors and junior workers can be considered definitely outmoded together with the social and technical transformation of the Fordist work organisation and the coming of the Ict, no tensions at the workplace have been pointed out. Albeit some scholars theorized “a clash between generation” already a dozen years ago (Chauvel 1998), no young workers’ social rebellion is currently happening.

One of the reasons could be that, at least at present, there is not a definite “winner” or “loser” generation on the labour market: looking at the two extreme groups, in some way the technical obsolescence and the consequent unemployment risk that the

elders experience in their late career might balance the job insecurity and the educational undervaluation that young people meet at the moment of their access into work (Vendramin 2008)<sup>1</sup>. Yet, this hypothesis does not take into account that, within twenty years or more, the today young generation will pay the price of the present unbalanced welfare expenditure. A more convincing explanation of this unexpected phenomenon of the lacking of a conflict, might be the fact that both the younger and the elder generations are collectively represented by the same unions, although young workers tend to join unions almost everywhere much less than the elders: indeed, “in Europe, the decline in membership of people under the age of 25 or 30 is without exception”(Ebbinghaus, Visser 1999, Visser 2006), in part as a consequence of union policies strongly unbalanced towards adult and elder members’ interests. Anyway, from a more general point of view and looking at the society as a whole, we should also consider, as Cavalli (2004) says, the “paradoxical complicity” existing between children and their parents: the former do not protest against the parents’ generation when defending their secure jobs and retirement benefits since they are well conscious that those privileges guarantee them a safety net: the family seems to strengthen its position as social organiser and income redistribution agent.

### **Which factors may advantage or disadvantage the employment and social conditions of young people and the balance between generations?**

Despite no apparent intergenerational conflict exists, the multiplicity of observed disparities among generations asks for social adjustment. Yet, the redefinition of the “contract across generation” is a delicate operation because it is difficult to anticipate which generation will pay the highest price (Chauvel 2007). Anyway, no doubt that governments, companies and other social actors might implement policies suitable to rebalance the uneven situation and restore inter generation solidarity.

Which factors can foster a good balance between generations at work? Cultural and institutional contexts have a relevant impact both on the *social construction of generations* (and their specific features) and on the *relation among generations*, i.e. the balance of power among them, the potential of conflict or of solidarity which they hide. The first aspect considers the relevance of economical, cultural and institutional environment in *drawing the boundaries* among generations. We have already seen (in the first paragraph) what has been the influence of these factors in shaping the main common characters of the three generations currently at work in Europe. The second aspect - the impact that social institutions have specifically on the balance among generations – requires a greater attention: differences more than similarities are useful to gain a better understanding of how diverse orientations in welfare models, in industrial relations systems and labour market regulation, in family cultures may

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<sup>1</sup> Some authors argue that differences “within” the young generation – between the part that will experience an enduring exclusion and the more lucky others – are more worrying than the differences “between” generations (Galland 2005).

increase rather than contain the inequality. For this purpose considering the various countries separately seems to be more appropriate: only from a cross-country comparison we can explore specific cultural and social diversities of each environment and their different impacts on generations as far as working conditions are concerned: access to work, job security, work-life balance, qualification and knowledge transmission, retirement provisions. This evidence will allow us first to highlight on which condition social conflict among generations– or just simple tensions at workplace – might potentially arise and, secondly, to better understand which institutional environment and policies can, on the contrary, foster a greater solidarity and the social cohesion among different age workers.

From this point of view, in each country, policies (and indicators) to be taken into consideration and policies which can help to achieve this aim, are:

- *policies aimed at keeping a balanced birth rate* over time, in order to maintain a right equilibrium between the State expenditure for pensions and the social security contribution coming from employed workers, while actual longer life expectancy and low birth rates are changing the old-age dependency ratio and threatening the generational justice towards younger generation (Hartlapp, Schmid 2008);
- *labour market policies aimed at keeping a stable activity rate among age cohorts*, both through a balanced flexibility in entries and exits (to prevent the dualisation of the labour market into young “outsiders” and old “insiders”) and incentives aimed at hindering the market trend to prefer central-age more productive workers or at confronting company strategies aimed at dismissal of the more expensive older workers;
- *education & training policies* aimed at a better transition from school to the labour market, at updating the skills of older workers, at enhancing the employability of the whole workers: all these factors contribute to an equilibrated composition of skill competencies among workers of different age;
- *welfare policies aimed at a balanced distribution of provisions to different life-cycle needs*: youth unemployment and the transition to work, reconciling work and family commitments, supporting layoffs and reduced income, etc.
- *industrial relations and union policies aimed at balanced representation of interest of young and old workers*: high union membership among old workers is likely to condition union policies and collective bargaining towards the defence of older workers benefits at workplace (secure employment, seniority rules) and the maintaining of generous social protection, especially the share of retirement on the overall welfare expenditure; union involvement in the unemployment allowance administration – as in some European countries - is likely to promote union membership also among young workers.

Yet, also cultural aspects are likely to produce a relevant impact on the relations among generations. What especially matters is the *organisation of the family and its role in the economy*, i.e. households management, cohabitation, caring of family members, distribution of employment opportunities, internal redistribution of income:

- a tradition of centrality of the family in the economy, together with poor welfare provisions to young people, compel the families to prolong cohabitation and financial support to their young members (by consequence, both economic independence of youth and marriage/procreation time are delayed);
- a culture of centrality of the family in the care-giving, together with scarce public services for families, orient elder women workers to renounce to paid work for taking care of their grandchildren and their old parents.

Also the *gender roles* in the family and in the parenthood have important consequences on the balance among generations: the degree of sharing caring responsibility between men and women in the family has an influence on the participation of adult women in the labour market, on the gender and age distribution of part-time jobs and also on the company management of female career paths.

### **Relevance of national institutional contexts in shaping the intergenerational relations**

Given this framework of analysis, we can try to interpret the situation in our countries and also to provide a *measure of the risk* for the social cohesion arising from possible future conflict among generations. The analysis of the different institutional, regulatory and cultural contexts of the six countries involved in the research (Italy, Germany, France, Hungary, Portugal and Belgium) – carried out through national statistical data and empirical evidence resulting from the country case-studies - highlighted possible unbalances of power of the three generations on the labour market.

#### *The younger generation*

Younger workers are likely to be particularly disadvantaged in those countries:

- where the composition of welfare expenditure is particularly favourable to pensions and the unemployment allowance expenditure – which can be considered a proxy of the financial support to younger workers – is particularly low: among our six countries, this is especially the case of Italy and of Portugal;
- where during the nineties a more or less severe deregulation of labour market has been introduced, which had the consequence of the increase of precarious job especially among youth: this is more or less the case of all our countries, except Germany (nevertheless even in Germany young people are more affected by flexibilisation than other generations);

- where union density is particularly low in the younger age cohorts, as in Germany and Italy but not in Belgium (where young people still join unions);<sup>2</sup>.

By contrast, younger workers enjoy more advantages in those countries:

- where the educational and vocational systems – and especially the transition from school to work – are better coordinated: this is the case, first of all of Germany, followed by France and Belgium.
- where youth unemployment allowance is provided: the only country among ours is Belgium, (that looks the most supportive country towards the young generation).
- where, as an extreme solution, families guarantee young people a safety net by means of the substitution of the lacking “external” solidarity among generations with an “internal” one: this is the case of Italy and Portugal. Nevertheless the overall social price of this intervention on younger generation is rather high!

#### *Adult generation*

Adult workers are likely to be particularly advantaged in those countries:

- where a market-oriented political economy is prevailing, since the middle generation (particularly men) – which is the most productive - is going to be the preferred one by employers. Referring to Albert’s analysis of the variety of capitalism (1991), USA and UK – but none of our partners countries – should have the higher probability of this kind of unbalance.

Anyway the relative privilege of this age-group becomes weaker:

- when workers – and particularly women - have family responsibilities, because the harmonisation of work and family life is particularly hard in that period of the life-cycle: the women’s position on the labour market is particularly threatened in those countries where both money transfers and services to families are poor (Italy and Portugal), whereas in other countries, as Germany and to some extent also France, where relevant transfers to families are provided but public childcare is still scarce, 30-50 years-old women are often compelled to part time working;
- in high-tech sectors where the mid generation is beginning to face the increasing competition against more brilliant Itc’s users younger workers;
- when we consider them as “future old workers”: as a matter of fact, in the future the middle generation of nowadays is likely to be more disadvantaged than the present old generation in almost every country, because they will experience the raising of retirement age with its obligations. Anyway, they are expected to be more lucky in countries with a more balanced demographical trend and a higher younger employment.

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<sup>2</sup> The reason is probably that unions in Belgium are involved in the unemployment allowance administration. In France unions are traditionally weaker than elsewhere in Europe in the whole age cohorts (so that they may have less incentives to protect the only group of older workers). No union data available for Portugal and Hungary.

### *Elder generation*

Older workers can be observed by two different point of view:

- as average, at present this generation does not look particularly at risk in our countries, given the persisting early retirement provisions in most of them (Hungary, Germany, Italy, Belgium; whereas Portugal recently entered a new perspective). So far, this policy succeeded in compensating the loss of skill and related productivity of old workers (and in opening more job opportunities for the youth). From now on, the Lisbon employment rate targets and the increasing demand of continuing to work coming from old workers and retired people are going to change the situation.
- from an individual point of view, old workers are more at risk of job losses and income reduction in those countries where the natural erosion of their skills is less balanced by continuing vocational training programmes. Among our partner countries, Italy, Portugal and Hungary show the lowest share of participation of 55-64 years old workers in further education in Europe: around 4% vs. the 43% of Sweden (Eurostat 2006).

### **Concluding remarks**

Young people at work look different from other generations as far as both their “subjective” attitudes and expectations and their “objective” labour-market and social protection conditions are considered. Anyway, neither tensions at the workplace have been pointed out by empirical investigation nor young workers’ social rebellion is currently happening. Some explanations have been drawn, albeit no one entirely convincing, which made it difficult to foresee which generation will be the winner and which one the loser in the long term. Anyway, the cross-country comparison of social and regulatory contexts suggests the possibility of state intervention in several policy areas – demography, education, labour market regulation, welfare expenditure and industrial relations – which might establish a better balance of chance between generations.

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