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Squeezing it or blurring it: youth as a resource among early career professionals in Italy and England

Introduction

At the political meeting 'Flexicurity for Young generations' (Rome, 30th October 2006), delegates of both the Italian Ministry of Labour and the British Department for Work and Pensions, discussed the problems that their youth face in the first years of employment. Such a problem was presented as counterintuitive as the qualified youth, with its skills and energy, should sustain economic production and be immune from suffering any issues. However, being young may be a very different resource. In this paper I show how two groups of early career professionals, one based in Italy and one based in England, found making the first steps in professionals' labour market a very different experience. Being *young*, helps professionals based in England, while it is mainly an obstacle for their counterparts based in Italy. A study of careers must consider the specific stage of the life course of the actors (Leicht and Fennel 2001). More specifically, I argue that families, by eliciting different forms of individualism and individualisation, foster different strategies in the two contexts.

My data shows that there is rampant age discrimination in both countries which interestingly goes in opposite directions. In Italy, gerontocracy dominates institutions and organisations, creating embarrassing situations for the youth, while this does not seem to be the case in the UK (Hammer 2003, ILO 2006). In England, while media and analysts express concern for those qualified youth who do not access the labour market at the level they are supposed to enter, in the main a liberal system affects mostly the unskilled and the elderly. Despite low employment protection, interviewees are over confident. In this paper I clarify the tensions caught in these mechanisms and warn that distortions may arise from trapping young professionals in an 'inadequate' stage of life.

Negotiating strategies and resources: theoretical aspects

The leading question is thus how the two groups of professionals negotiate the opportunities and constraints related to the specific position they occupy in the life cycle, and use them as resources to build a career. A strategy of action, according to Swidler (1986), 'involves characteristic way of solving problems and a characteristic set of problems to be solved. Such strategies depend on skills, styles, habits, and capacities for organising self and action that are learned through culture' (2001: 86). Activating cultural repertoires allow people to move among situations, finding terms in which to orient action within each situation (Swidler 1986). This highlights how 'culture actually influences people, shaping their social relations and their thoughts, feelings and actions' (2001: 79). To what extent is a young professional willing to diversify from given working paths?

Another important point that Swidler produces is the distinction between the settled and unsettled situation. In the first, 'people are operating within established strategies of action; people can live with a loose fit between culture and experience' (2001: 89). People sustain multiple capacities for action (Swidler 2001), but may be reluctant to abandon established strategies of action. Normally, 'people do not readily take advantage of new structural opportunities that would require them to abandon established ways of life (Swidler 2001: 105). Yet, in unsettled situations 'new strategies of action are being developed and tried out' (Swidler 2001: 89). In my work, this distinction concerns a different institutionalization of flexibility, a 'settled' phenomenon only for the groups of professionals based in England. This suggests that different reactions are involved.

Also Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) suggest to focus on the justifications provided by the people for their own actions as well as their repertoires of evaluation for the actions of others. Lamont and Thévenot extend the analysis across space. Namely, if we can speak of 'American thinking' (Wagner 1999), then it is also plausible to think of an 'English thinking' and an 'Italian thinking' in matters of work, employment and careers. Following these authors, investigations could therefore be done in terms of 'orders of worth'.

Boltanski and Thévenot show that actors can switch between different frameworks and principles of justification within the very same social settings depending upon how a given situation is defined. Thus, the contexts in which individuals draw boundaries become culturally understood (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). For Lamont, there are relatively stable schemas of evaluation that are used in different proportions across national contexts. In this view, members of different national communities are not equally likely to draw on the same cultural tools to construct and assess the world around them (2000: 9). One should investigate 'the practical reasoning and reflective 'accounts' that people use on a daily basis and that make social life an ongoing, practical accomplishment' (Silber 2003: 429), the range of arguments and principles of evaluation which

individuals deploy in the process of trying to define what may be the most proper or legitimate action.

Squeezing it or blurring it: ways of conceiving youth

In this section I discuss how the two groups of early career professionals interviewed employ different cultural repertoires with reference to their specific position in the life course. Professionals based in England demonstrate a very aggressive attitude towards the world of employment. Their self-assertiveness and self-confidence, consistently shown throughout interview encounters, is well combined with the pretence of being immune to negative sides of the flexible labour market. The eagerness to participate fully in the world of adults, and the impression that they are able to make a difference in it transpires in all moments of many accounts. This is certainly so in Martin's case, whose interview takes a peculiar self-congratulatory direction, to the point that he even asks me whether he sounds arrogant. He is clearly satisfied with the position obtained, and with the fact that by wearing a suit every day he stands out from all the anonymous guys on his office street (he still believes this is true despite his recognition that everyone in central London looks the same as him). The tone of his account is similar to that of a job interview (where the employer would be the interviewer). Plans of changing jobs, or even career, are often considered at some point in the interview. The tone in which such wishes are pronounced suggests that they are not simple evasion dreams but something that is considered to be a real, possible alternative. That the world of work is connoted aggressively in England is also shown by Bill, a young accountant working for a small accountancy practise in Essex, who describes it as an arena where everything starts and finishes very quickly:

'I think the business mentality in the U.K. at the moment is very short-term. Get rich quick. [...]Which is why no one stays in a firm for longer than two or three years. They stay two or three years, then they don't get enough so they go and join another firm that will pay them what they want.' (Bill, accountant, England)

The workplace described by Bill is definitely one for young, energetic and enthusiastic people. In its intensity, Bill's account contains at least a few elements that show the relevance of the position in a given stage of the life course. Firstly, it suggests that workers may be treated differently depending on whether at that point in their life and career they can give their most or not. Bill mentions that if it is not the case, they are disposed of. Secondly, the importance of conventional success is confirmed. Typical of the youth is naivety and inability to grasp the consequences that such a way of working is

likely to produce in the medium/long term. With reference to the railway industry work culture, Strangleman points out that ‘while there may be a rhetorical claim that younger workers are more dynamic and entrepreneurial, it seems that what is really valued amongst this group is docility or passivity in the face of management demands and dictates’ (2004: 137). They perceive their current situation as exciting and this convinces them to emphasise what they are in that specific moment, defining clearly the boundaries with ‘younger youth’ on the one hand, and ‘more mature adults’ on the other.

Such emphasis on a supposedly all-winning generation is completely lacking in the accounts given by the professionals based in Italy who were interviewed. There is no such a thing as a ‘short term mentality’, to use Bill’s words, as there is no possibility to program. Instead, it is much more a matter of swimming in the flexible labour market for some years, trying not to sink, and hoping to land one day or another on the island of secure employment, where real life really begins. This is partially related to the educational and vocational system, which, very strongly for professional pathways, stands on a long apprenticeship. The young professionals interviewed in Italy describe, again and again, aspects of work that function as delayers of their proper adult entry into the labour markets. The account given by Carlo, a young accountant working in Naples who collaborates with an established practice and at the same time tries to create his own, is exemplary in this respect. His career trajectory is a natural one, since his father runs a shopping mall and Carlo himself has grown up learning how to manage a business. He sets up a distinction in the accountancy career stages, emphasising the role played by his family:

‘I graduated from school at eighteen, nineteen, one year military service, nineteen, five years of university and I am twenty four, three years of apprenticeship and I am Mr Nobody. I have the qualification, pay attention, but the practice needs to be opened, set up, done. And I am twenty-seven, and the practise needs to be opened, to be oriented and to me this means to get clients, and I am Mr Nobody, really Mr Nobody. Then considering that if you are learning either you are not paid or you get 310 euros per month, for me the family...at the end....it is a consequence, I have no intention at all to have a family [...]. The fact that the family allows you not to pay rent, it’s an important thing for this path, I’ve said, five years plus three years, then acquisitions of clients.[...] Today, I have my own practise, I am economically independent, in the sense that if I earn 10, I spend 9.50 for the practice [...]. I could do this and not encounter any problems because I have a healthy family, no problems at all, my father used to say: ‘do not worry, study, and for the rest, I will support you [...], as long as you do it, as long as you don’t make a fool of me’’. (Carlo, accountant, Italy)

This account shows some difficulties in attempting to get established under a gerontocratic regime and starts suggesting how the youth phase can be either squeezed to make the most out of it or diluted to minimise the discomfort.

The family role in supporting individualism and individualisation

I suggest here that the influence of the family of origin is pivotal in the launch of early career professionals in the adult community since it has an active role in shaping specific orders of worth. In particular, negotiations inside family boundaries influence the development of individualism and individualisation. I suggest these as useful categories through which to interpret the different strategies of young professionals based in Italy and England.

Some aspects of the structural context in which Italians are embedded force them to find ad hoc, personal solutions to solve their problems. On the contrary, the emphasis on individualism for early career professionals based in England, and the smoother system in which they act, suggest them to activate already existing routes, on which they can jump on and jump off at their convenience, reducing in this way the need for individualised strategies. I argue that the structure of the Italian family is such that their youth is discouraged to develop their individualist side, while it is quite the opposite for the phase of socialization taking place in English families.

In Italy, the role of the family is very strong in all the first stages of the construction of the career, as an all-solving institution in which the young are supported. First of all, it covers a pivotal economic role. In showing his passion for wearing cashmere sweaters and taking expensive holidays, Carlo raises the issue of valuable consumption that many professionals are not willing to give up. This resembles to some extent an immature 'spirit of capitalism', to borrow a phrase from Weber, at least if compared to interviewees who have already bought and sold their first house, and now invest their money in a second, bigger one, whose mortgage is being paid off with through the rent of a few house mates.

In a social and economic context in which family is the only source of funds to study at university, and in which a high percentage of people do not 'leave' home to go university, but rather continue living at their parents, families do have a say in the decisional process¹. Even once married (marriage remains the most popular reason to leave the parental home, Mazzucco et al. 2006), Italians tend to reside very close to their parents. This constitutes an important resource because due to the low percentage of working women from the previous generation, a cheap and trustworthy source of childcare is made available.

¹ ISTAT Multiscopo survey reveals that 61% of Italians in the 25-29 age group live with the family, as well as 29,5% of those in 30-34 age group, as reported in Mazzucco et al. (2006)

On the other hand, the family provides a sort of economical support which is not temporally bounded, and starts before children are born and, if there are not specific problems, proceed after they are grown up. Families do support each other with small products and services. Congi (2001) lists all these sources of material support ending up justifying why 'they don't emigrate'. While in previous Italian generations the youth were the supporters, now they have become those for which support is morally justified. There is also evidence that even in families where the last generation has moved away (often to northern Italy), the flux of economic support from the family of origin is still in existence. Also, the state bases its policies on a model of the traditional family in which youth are only a part of the whole and, as such, denied agency. The traditional emphasis of the Italian government on the institution of the family, realised by delegating to it many services that a health welfare system should provide for, is a contradiction whose negative effects appears now to be on young people shoulders.

A precarious equilibrium is made possible by a system of mutual protection allowing young adults to consume and live on little earnings because they can count on domestic production and eventually on retirement/disability pensions of their elders. Individuals are never alone. There is a terrific exchange of material and immaterial resources, but family also plays a pivotal emotional role. Franco has built a disappointing career in engineering but he compensates with satisfaction from family life. Now that his one-year old daughter recognises the ring tone of his mobile when he calls his wife on the way home, 'everything is fine'. Pietro, an HR professional, seemed to have sacrificed many ambitions just for the sake of seeing his family living happily in one of the islands in the Naples gulf. This implies many difficulties for his career but he has tried already to move to Milan, where his expertise could find many rewards in terms of salary levels and career progression. He maintains that 'when you are facing a move alone there is no problem, but when your family has to get involved as well, obviously it is more difficult, harder'. Pietro claims that his decision is aimed at ensuring a better life-style for his family. Yet, he has to travel very extensively every day for work reasons, and this seems to be affecting the quality of his own life. Thus, if we look at the family as a resource that early career professionals may activate, some resemblance of the sadly well known amoral familism may help explaining the readiness of families in supporting their grown up children.

In contrast, the family is not so significant in this respect for professionals based in England. It is mentioned from time to time, but first of all its members look disembodied by their gender connotations. For instance, Anne-Marie contemplates the possibility that her fiancée 'maybe will want to stay at home' when they decide to have children. In such a way, he concisely subverts the traditional gender organisation of the family. And in fact, other male interviewees have done what

Anne-Marie is contemplating: for instance, John has succeeded in leaving behind his working class background by first raising his daughter in his early twenties when his wife took the role of the breadwinner and going to university later.

Secondly, the various members of the family are more powerful agents. In other words, strategies based on the individual are stronger than compared to strategies intended to defend family needs. This is valid for both those who are married or in stable partnerships and for those who are single. In fact, only one out of the group of thirty, Amanda, has decided to continue living with her parents, unexpectedly finding this solution both convenient and pleasurable. Côté (2002) argues that when the cost of education is sustained by students (and not by parents), they are more likely to become independent soon afterwards and integrate more promptly in an adult settings.

The independence of professionals based in England is also due to easy access to forms of credits for various needs, including financing higher education and buying properties. Instead, Italian counterparts are excluded from forms of credits if their job is not considered stable by banks, that often ask for the parents' signature as guarantee. Andrea, an engineer from Cagliari, has bought a small flat in the hinterland of Cagliari, and likes underlining that he is paying the mortgage by himself, contrary to many of his friends 'who have it paid by their parents'.

This situation is made clearer if further specifications are made regarding the gender structure of the family. Throughout the Thirty Glorious years (1945-1975), female labour demand was discouraged unless the support of the mother and/or mother-in-law intervene (Mingione and Andreotti 2005: 103). The economic crisis of the seventies, nonetheless, forced women to question themselves about their role in the world of paid employment. This inheritance is difficult to extirpate: the process of defamiliarisation, i.e. the tendency to provide by themselves or by the market the various family needs, has never completely taken place in Italy (Esping-Andersen 1999). This, Mingione and Andreotti warn, has happened fully only in Northern European countries, while in Italy 'the transformation of the social regulation of female work is internal to the role of the professionalised housewife, who is wife and mother of workers' (2005: 103).

The responses of Great Britain and Italy on female participation in the labour market are quite different. Great Britain has experienced higher levels of female participation, with high participation until the early twenties, significant rates of drop out for childcare reasons and then high participation once again when their children enter school. This movement has been dubbed the 'M curve' reflecting its high-low-high pattern. These aspects are worth keeping in mind as different female participation in the labour market entails different amounts of informal work that women can devote to the family and particularly to accommodate 'grown up' children. To come back to the analysis of my data, young professionals interviewed in Italy are likely to have

housewife mothers or mothers who have played very little parts in employment, probably maintaining as predominant roles that of wives and mothers. These mothers are unlikely to push their sons and daughters to build an independent life early, firstly because they can still materially work for them, and secondly because ‘loosing’ their dependents would involve a redefinition of their primary identity. Families of origin are the prime site for obstacles to the growth of sons and daughters and they prolong their moratoria. These aspects are simply lacking in the cultural contexts in which professionals based in England are embedded.

In sum, I argue that the family plays a pivotal role in eliciting individualistic attitudes in their youth. Few words are worth spending on this concept: individualism is mostly associated with the US - and by extension one can also talk about an Anglo-American reality². The individualistic self ‘searches for increasing autonomy and self realisation’ and this has been seen as an expression of egoistic competition and marketization (Paci 2005: 12). It has to be distinguished from individualisation, although the two are often confused. The latter refers to the growth of freedom and awareness of the self, and is also associated with Western modernisation. However, it is a much more clearly defined phenomenon. Beck (1992) suggests that so far individualisation has been understood as personal emancipation and uniqueness, while less has been said on the subjective side of such facts, relating more to how individuals cope with their consciousness in such situations. For him, ‘individualisation means that each person’s biography is removed from given determinants and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent upon decision’ (1992: 15).

Under individualised regimes, the individual must find his/her sense of continuity (Sennett 1998). Life is increasingly lived as an individual project, is a life ‘of one’s own’ (*Eigenes Leben*). ‘Individualised individuals’ live for the moment, having to find ‘biographic solutions to systemic contradictions’ (Beck 1992: 137). Bauman (2001) notes that the ‘non-linear individual’ has to develop the skill to put together networks, construct alliances, makes deals. Since ‘failure becomes personal failure’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 24), individuals are ‘forced to think, act and live’ (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2002: 27). Self-actualization and the expression of one’s personality becomes a requirement (Giddens 1991, Elliott and Lemert 2006). What is increasingly significant is ‘how individuals create identities, the cultural forms through which people symbolise individual expression and desire, and perhaps, above all, the speed with which identities can be invented and instantly transformed’ (Elliott and Lemert 2006: 53).

In discussing some family and gender issues, a constitutive element of the life cycle emerges, namely, the fact that different orders of worth prompt graduates based in England to concentrate

² Individualism does not necessarily have a clear beginning in history, and it can simply be defined as ‘human orientation *ab origine*’, an ‘archetypal and inter-temporal phenomenon, which is present *in nuce* since the dawn of civilisation’ (Paci 2005: 58).

solely on their career from the end of university until some sort of establishment in a given professional path is achieved. In this period of time, they tend to think solely of themselves, and tend to do so in individualistic terms; they are the direct responders of scholarships, student debts, rent to pay (mostly in cohabitation) and so on. They are already independent of the family of origin, and even those who have already constituted a family themselves, tend to think of themselves as individuals. Indeed, a number of the interviewees stated that they could still choose because they 'did not have a family', meaning by this not that they weren't married or in partnership, but that they did not have the responsibilities that come with children. They reaffirm that they are alone in constructing their path, i.e. free to choose and maybe to go in the wrong direction, even suggesting that they are in a phase of their life in which they are entitled to think of themselves and their career without restriction nor special 'personalised' support.

Early career professionals based in Italy who were interviewed simply seem to lack this phase of life: they tend to construct their careers along with their families. This can be understood in two senses; they either tend to live in the parental house for very long, most of the time well after the completion of university studies and vocational apprenticeship, in which case it is easy to see how the family can influence choices and directions to be taken (even for those who clearly state that 'they are free to do what they want') or the other likely case is in which they have already started their own family, and even in this case it is easy to grasp how this can intervene in one's choice of career. For professionals based in Italy, that phase in early adulthood in which one concentrates solely on one's career as an independent individual is blurred.

Conclusions

In planning their own career paths, early career professionals must come to terms with structural aspects entailed in the position they occupy in the life cycle. In looking at this as a resource for constructing a career, the comparison among professionals based in Italy and England suggests that their different orders of worth imply activating different resources, and that even when the same resource is activated, it is always configured as multifaceted and complex. For instance, family is in Italy a multi-solving institution, yet at the same time Italian youth struggle to leave it behind and act autonomously. Strategies implemented are by their own nature short term and not organic -thus very much individualised. In turn, this force them to enact and develop side abilities.

On the other hand, these are not issues for professionals based in England, who can claim in a more legitimate way to follow the route they prefer as capable, reflexive individuals. Young professionals based in England are 'more' individual than those based in Italy: in their orders of justification, decisions are taken on the sole basis of individual needs and wills. However, one

must not overlook the fact that in claiming such a freedom, they mostly end up paradoxically following very conventional routes: paths are already forged and young professionals just simply jump on them with their own capacities, not really in need to enact individualised routes.

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