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Abstract

In archaic societies, most transitions indicating the social maturation of an individual were through distinct stages accompanied by endorsed rites of passage. In contemporary societies, however, the transitions are distinguished more and more by the fact that they are individual, negotiable, poorly ritualistic, with wide margins of choice and relatively undefined, both in the modalities and in the timing. This essay will analyze what are reputed to be the main indicators of adulthood in a postmodern context, a context that seems to increasingly question their value: the completion of education, living independently, work, marriage, parenthood, political participation, religiousness and spirituality, the abandonment of deviant behaviors.

Keywords:

Adulthood, indicators, transition, adult, youthful, immaturity, postmodern, postmodernity.

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Introduction

In archaic societies, most transitions indicating the social maturation of an individual were through distinct stages accompanied by endorsed rites of passage. In contemporary societies, however, the transitions are distinguished more and more by the fact that they are individual, negotiable, poorly ritualistic, with wide margins of choice and relatively undefined, both in the modalities and in the timing (Cristofori, 2005; Scabini, Marta and Lanz, 2006; Bernardini, 2012). There are, however, some transitional elements that various scholars agree are indicators of individual and social adulthood. Cavalli (2001), for example, stated that an individual becomes adult only after crossing a series of thresholds: concluding the most significant part of the training process, occupying a relatively stable position in the social division of labor, leaving the parental home, getting married and becoming a parent. Similarly Neugarten and Datan (1973) had identified a set of social age norms, Maggs (1997) the key markers of transition, and Arnett (1994; 1997; 1998) the independence, interdependence and role criterion of transition. Tacit rules or social criteria relate to the many indicators of transition, from economic independence to emotional stability.

Guided partially by these theories, This essay will analyze what are reputed to be the main indicators of adulthood in a postmodern context which is increasingly characterized by several social macro-phenomena: individualization, presentism, labor flexibility and reversibility of roles and statuses.

By taking into account the value of such phenomena in the delineation of the postmodern scenario, eight indicators have been considered the most significant in determining the transition to contemporary adult status.: the completion of education, living independently, work, marriage, parenthood, political participation, religiousness, and the abandonment of deviant behaviors.

The completion of education

Completion of formal schooling is, on average, the first stage of social adulthood that an individual reaches. This is a crucial indicator for at least two reasons. It is a necessary condition to ensure a series of other characteristics of social recognition of maturity: for example stable employment and housing, and financial independence. Secondly, because it involves the detachment from what has been widely recognized as the

ideal-typical environment for adolescence and young adulthood, that is school, which is an environment that allows the youth strong identification with peers and an unrelatedness in respect of the adult world that can be translated into antagonism or apathy. Since the fifties, the end of formal education is a condition that has found a systematic postponement in western societies. Gradually, the age of compulsory school attendance was raised, the number of young people who leave school to enter the working world decreased, and the rate of enrollment in degree and postgraduate courses increased. The reasons for these trends are the generalized increase in living standards and in the increase in demand of specialized skills, as well as in the unexpected boom of births registered after the Second World War. As suggested by Waring (1975), in fact, when an ample cohort follows a smaller, a people jam can occur, which is an imbalance between the age roles available and the number of people who are ready to engage them. According to the scholar, in the face of a surplus of young people who could not be inserted in the working market, the solution implemented by the various governments would have been to expand the scholastic-formative system.

Though these events can lead to the thesis that the social indicator of the end of schooling has been progressively postponed, we cannot yet say that this indicator has lost significance in the construction of a paradigm of adulthood. However, analyzing the studies of Knowles (1996), Jarvis (1998; 2001), Bruner (1996) and Schon (1993), we could, at least, assume that the individual training has taken an original role in the postmodern context. Knowles, founder of andragogy, not only showed that today the formation in adulthood is a diffused, possible and necessary reality. He also proved that the persistence of formation during adulthood is a necessary condition to individual maturation. “A mature person,” says the scholar (1996, p. 222), “is not someone who has reached a certain level of achievement and then stopped there.” He is, rather, a person in maturation, someone whose ties with life are constantly getting stronger and richer because his attitudes encourage their growth. A mature person is not one who has learned a large number of facts. He is, rather, someone whose mental habits are such as to make him grow in knowledge and in its wise use. Similarly, Jarvis (1998; 2001) has suggested that, today, the end of schooling is neither

the undisputed end of the training period, nor the achievement of an individual maturation. The realities of increasingly specialized employment require continuous training updates; and the psychology of adults requires learning for individual development and mediation, with social needs as the context of reference. Bruner (1996), instead, has developed the autobiographical theory of adult learning. According to the scholar, learning consists of a creative action, which is as crucial during adolescence and youth as in adult age: what are produced are not a specific competence, but new styles and modes of thought. This process of self-formation remains active throughout the course of life and has as its aim the development of increasingly more complex procedures of thought, which must be capable of giving autonomous answers to practical problems. Taking note of these theories, we can say that the end of formal schooling, in a postmodern paradigm of adulthood, continues to be the necessary prerequisite for the acquisition of adult statuses that are linked to work and family, although in a fairly delayed manner with respect to the timing of the standard model of adulthood. Some elements, however, are invalidated: the character of irreversibility, as well as the concept that the end of schooling coincides with the abandonment of an individual inclination to learning and self-formation.

Living independently

Leaving the parental home is seen, by many, as an essential step in the transition to adulthood since it fosters the sense of individual independence and is the necessary condition so that the social indicators inherent to the construction of a family unit can be achieved. It is a transitional action that involves a process of separation (Mitchell, 2006). In recent decades, however, this process has systematically lost the characters of stubbornness and immediacy. Young adults may be physically separated from the home of their parents while continuing to depend on them at a financial or socio-psychological level. Many live with others but continue to receive daily emotional support, money or food from one or both parents, and use services located in the house of origin, for example, the laundry or the family car. Then there are the so-called semi-autonomous living accommodations (Goldscheider and Da Vanzo, 1985; Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999), for example military dorms or the university campus: provisional solutions that rarely

involve a real psychological separation. With respect to the latter, therefore, autonomous living and separation have acquired multidimensional features as some variables related to the family context have acquired greater strength (Mitchell, Wister and Gee, 2004; Beaupré, Turcotte and Milan, 2006). Living within a reconstructed family, for example, has been shown to lead to premature departure (Mitchell et al., 2004) and a greater degree of psychological separation. Strong intergenerational bonds, on the contrary, will result in delayed departure from the family background and a problematic separation process.

Living autonomously, therefore, is a social indicator of adulthood that, in the course of time, has experienced substantial changes. On the one hand, like any other indicator, it has undergone a gradual postponement in the time horizon of the individual. On the other hand it has lost the separative strength that used to characterize it as well as the quality of irreversibility itself. The recent phenomenon of the reversibility of the canonical indicators, which is linked to the boomerang age (Okimoto and Stegall, 1987; Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999; Mitchell, 2006), is concerned with independent housing. With increasing frequency, the postmodern context is characterized by the so-called leaving and returning home phenomenon (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999): returning to the parental home after a temporary autonomous experience, mostly for economic and emotional reasons. This phenomenon has systematically grown in the last few decades and jeopardizes the stability of the independence resulting from autonomous residential accommodations.

Work

In all societies, work is an important component of individual life and social structure. Everyone is, in fact, asked to contribute in some form of work that is considered useful for his society. The occupation of a person strongly influences the choices inherent in many other spheres of life; it is also one of the primary factors that determine income, prestige and place in society. Unlike the other social indicators, the employment component necessarily intervenes during the life of an individual: everyone will choose and contrive some sort of occupation; everyone will make changes, more or less relevant, inside such occupation.

Fulfilling a professional role is a symptom of stability and responsibility, it allows cultivating social relationships with peers – as did the school during adolescence – and builds an adult conscience, both collective and individual. In scientific research, therefore, work is almost always recognized as the greater indicator of the adulthood of an individual. For some scholars (Hogan and Astone, 1986; Laslett, 1989), work represents the social realization of the individual; others (Mortimer 1996; Gore, Aseltine, Colten and Lin, 1997) think that adulthood itself coincides entirely with the working age. According to Neugarten and Moore (1965), psychological maturity is closely connected to economic maturity; financial dependency will then be a symptom of the immaturity of the individual.

In the postmodern context, however, employment trends are more related to the phenomena of reversibility and postponing. On the one hand, the gradual extension of the training process and the increasing specialization of numerous areas of business have resulted in a general delay in the entrance to the working world. On the other hand, employment policies increasingly linked to precariousness and flexibility, and the business hiring strategies increasingly based on apprenticeship and indeterminacy, not only have encouraged this delay but, also, questioned the character of occupational irreversibility in adulthood.

Marriage

In Western society, marriage is the bond required to assume certain responsibilities within a family system. Marriage and the formation of a traditional family unit create a new basis for the individual, upon which he will establish his place in the community and a new system of relations with friends, parents, and institutions. In fact, the construction of a family unit, along with job stability, remains one of the main characters through which the social recognition of the adulthood occurs. This recognition, however, seems by now to take place not on a real empirical basis, but on an ideal linked to the classical family of the past (Ellen, Gee and Gutman, 2000). An ideal tied to stability, standardization and harmony, which does not take account of the postmodern complexity resulting from socio-demographic, cultural and economic changes. In the postmodern context, in fact, the centrality of marriage and the traditional family unit is widely questioned. The irreversibility of the marital status has been weakened by not only the

systematic increase in the number of divorces and separations, but also the gradual emergence of non-traditional forms of family – common law couples, first and foremost, but also reassembled families, those living apart together, astronaut families, single-parent families and the condition of being single itself – has, on the one hand, significantly postponed the age at which an individual gets married, and on the other hand is marking the marriage as an individual option rather than as a practical social obligation.

Nontraditional families are subject to reversibility in a greater measure, on average, than those in a traditional marriage. Their recent spread has been often interpreted as a generalized sign of social immaturity (Oppenheimer, 2003) or as a result of the affirmation of some post-modern peculiarities, for example matrimonial instability, the social acceptance of extramarital affairs, the psychological rejection of parenthood, the growth of the female workforce, widespread perception of fear and uncertainty, multiculturalism, secularization and individualism.

Parenthood

Becoming a parent is an important stage in the transition to adulthood as well as a significant indicator of individual and collective maturity. As stated by Cavalli (2001), fatherhood - or motherhood - is a threshold of great importance as it allows the undertaking of full responsibility for a later generation. Parenthood, in fact, is closely related to the role of educator and, therefore, to the processes of promotion and support of physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of the child, in addition to the transmission of one's personal baggage of values. Parenthood turns out to be less and less dependent, however, on the matrimonial function: it should be remembered that in the United States, the rate of births outside marriage corresponds roughly to 30% of all births and in Europe to about 26% (Kutsar, 2005), percentages that have almost quadrupled over the last forty years.

In women, parenthood seems to have a greater value, both on an individual level, for what concerns personal development and maturation, and, on a collective level, regarding social recognition of the status of an adult. In men, however, it seems to promote the abandonment of those behaviors that are socially recognized as immature or deviant. As has recently been established by Cross (2008),

there is a correlation between fatherhood and refusal to infantile behavior. The scholar has compared paternity with two other social indicators of adulthood: financial independence and abandonment of deviant behaviors. In reference to the same age groups, it appears that, on average, an American male who has no children is seven times more likely to go to prison, four times more likely to be a victim of violent crimes, and two times more likely to be involved in an automobile accident. Furthermore, according to the data of the study, it is more likely that a father has a full-time job, and, generally, a higher income.

To interpret the social indicator of parenthood in the postmodern context, two macro-phenomena must be taken into consideration. First, the strong rise in the average age of both parents at the birth of their first child. In fact, if the economic prosperity of the post-war period had resulted in a sudden and significant decrease in the age at the first birth, the increase of schooling, the professional specializations and the value of one's career have systematically postponed the parenting age in the later years. Secondly, the systematic decline in the birth rate recorded in the whole world, and in particular in Western societies, from the baby boom years onwards.

As for the raising of the parental age, even this trend can be traced back to individual, political, economic and sociocultural factors. In addition, there are at least three phenomena that have significantly contributed: the spread of the practice of abortion, contraceptive usage, and the gradual emergence of a real psychological rejection of parenthood (Park, 2005; Foot, 2006).

Political participation

Although it has been shown that political socialization already begins in childhood (Erikson and Tedin, 1995), it is only in late adolescence that the individual develops the ability to understand the difference between the community interest and the personal one; it is in youth that one grows a real sustenance of democratic values (Merelman, 1991), and at an adult age that a rational interest in politics materializes. Therefore, the political involvement of an individual may be considered an indicator of adulthood, although its development and its persistence are strongly influenced by external factors – school, family, one's peer group, and the media – throughout one's lifetime and especially in youth. After all, it is the legislation of every democratic country itself that

anagraphically decree the political maturity or immaturity of an individual. The tendency, furthermore, is to match the right to vote with the age at which people are legally recognized as adults. It is necessary, in fact, to be of age in almost every country of the world to vote; this is a signal of widespread social identification of political participation with individual maturity.

Leaving a legal perspective, it was also often assumed that interest in politics tended to grow as age increased (Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Erikson and Tedin, 1995) and the political values and ideals of an individual strengthen (Alwin, 1991). Those phenomena, however, are difficult to demonstrate empirically, if not through the electoral behavior. In 2002, for example, USA Today magazine, noting that the American presidential elections of 2000 reached the historic negative voting participation record (59% of the electorate), has conducted a survey to determine the social group less likely to participate in politics. This research has not only found an easily predictable fact: young adults are the age group more oriented to abstention; it has also demonstrated that political participation increases gradually with age and decreases only in late old age.

Therefore, political interest may be recognized as an indicator of both social and individual maturity. The hypothesis, however, is that, in recent decades, it also has gradually lost value and must be reconsidered in the development of a new paradigm for adulthood. By observing, for example, the rate of participation in the main European and North American elections, we can note that in the last fifty years, there has been a generalized and gradual decline. From 1960 to 2012, in the United States, it declined by over 5 percentage points, in England by almost 15, in Germany, Norway and Italy by almost 20. Over time, this abstention has lost its physiological or technical-electoral nature and assumed one focused mainly on apathy, mistrust and protest. The decline in interest in politics, moreover, is not limited to the electoral commitment. As demonstrated by the studies of Putnam (2001) and Niemi and Weisberg (2001), numerous other forms of political participation declined in recent decades, for example party membership or the presence in debates and seminars related to the local administration. Not only this, civic participation, in general, has significantly decreased: in attendance at church, in union membership, in confraternities, and in student, youth

and professional associations. On the other hand, other forms of participation more attributable to the anti-politics sentiment have increased: demonstrations, boycotts and alternative forms of protest.

The American and European decline in political participation – expanded in recent times, also in Latin America and Japan – was, in fact, the subject of study and controversy of political scientists in recent decades. The analysis of the original causes of a different degree of political participation must, firstly, distinguish between normal social situations and crisis situations. The crisis worsened the political conflicts, thereby stimulating the participation, which, instead, tends to decrease during periods of prosperity. However, the social situation of the last few decades has been, generally, prosperous, while the rate of voter participation decreased in a strongly gradual manner. If we consider, instead, the theory of Neidhart (2002), there are three main causes of low turnout: the structure of the political system, the degree of development of societies and, above all, the quality and therefore the legitimacy of political institutions and politicians. By examining the Western democratic systems we can assume that the first two factors are, after all, marginal, while in the third can be found not only the primary motivations of the low turnout, but also the ones of the decreasing political interest of the adults and the anti-politics trends of the last few years.

Religiousness and spirituality

Numerous studies (Mattis et al., 2001; Armstrong and Crowther, 2002; Gallup, 2002; Dillon and Wink, 2007) have verified the systematic increase in the importance of religion throughout the course of adult age and late adulthood. The increase relates to both individual interest and the social practices related to it. In a recent survey, Gallup (2002) found that 32% of young Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 claimed to have attended a church or a synagogue in the last seven days. For adults between the ages of 30 and 49, 39 % made the same claim; those between 50 and 64 years, 44%; those between 65 and 74, 50%; and those over 74, 60%. In a correspondent manner, the percentage of respondents who stated to be a member of a church or a synagogue and that acknowledged the strong importance that the religious beliefs entail in their lives grew gradually with age.

Dillon and Wink (2007), instead, have found, through a longitudinal panel conducted between 1958 and 2000, the level of spiritual searching gradually grows in the individual during adulthood. In Italy, a survey conducted by the Iard institute for Passio in 2010, has found that not only the importance attributed individually to religion, but also the level of recognition of its function of psychological, relational and guiding support gradually increases with age.

The abandonment of deviant behaviors

In 1997 Arnett formulates the norm compliance thesis through which he proposes eight deviant behaviors that should be avoided so that the social validation of an adult individual can occur: alcohol abuse, the use of illegal drugs, drunk driving, some minor crimes such as vandalism and shoplifting, sexual promiscuity, non-compliance of the rules of the road and speed limits, the use of vulgar language, and the use of contraceptives as a denial of parenthood. According to this model, the observance of social rules is not only an indicator of a successful psychological maturity, but also of a collectivist behavioral propensity as conduct that could harm others is circumvented. The observance of the penal code itself is a tendency seen more in adults than in young people: in fact, in the United States about 10% of men aged between 18 and 29 are in prison, probation or under house arrest. This very high percentage is not matched in any other age group (Halperin, 2008).

Final considerations

Social sciences likely dwell on the external indicators of transition to adulthood. This essay considers those indicators which have been considered the most influential in endorsing the adult status of an individual, comparing them to typical phenomena of the postmodern context that increasingly risk invalidating their effectiveness.

The first five indicators which have been analyzed – the completion of education, living independently, work, marriage, and parenthood – can be connected to a *classic* and *standard* model of adulthood transition, because their value has been universally recognized by the scientific community. However, as revealed in the course of the essay, their meaning has deeply changed in recent decades: they remain in the collective imagination as ideal stages, which are essential for a proper transition to adulthood. At the same time, however, they seem

increasingly unable to find a correct and linear applicability in an increasingly liquid, individualistic and presentist postmodern scenario. In a society of omniscience and lifelong learning, for instance, it is virtually impossible to complete one's education. Marriage is no longer a well-defined stage, but an individual choice which is reversible, avoidable and replaceable with other forms of non-traditional unions. Job stability clashes with employment trends which have become characterized by precariousness and flexibility.

The other three features - interest in politics, religiousness and the abandonment of deviant behaviors – seem to be not yet recognized as conventional indicators of adulthood and aging, but are considered significant by many scholars (e.g., Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Alwin, 1991; Erikson and Tedin, 1995; Arnett, 1997; 2003; Mattis et al., 2001; Armstrong and Crowther, 2002; Gallup, 2002; Dillon and Wink, 2007; Halperin, 2008), and their analysis throughout this essay has shown their actual value in the contemporary era. These indicators acquire a new strength and a new meaning in the contemporary scenario and should be taken into consideration for a future and imminent redefinition of the adulthood paradigm.

Exclusive reference to a series of *classic* indicators, which do not seem to find common behavioral considerations in postmodernity, risks following a simplistic and limiting practice.

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