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Youth  
and generations  
in times of crisis:  
Portugal in the  
global situation

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## INTRODUCTION

The discourse on generations is, presently, prolific and widespread in the public and political spheres. There is a sequence of letters to identify age cohorts born in distinct decades (generation “x”, “y” or “z”), as well as multiple categories to describe today’s young people as a generation distinct from the previous ones. The label *Millennials* – a chronological qualification initiated by Howe and Strauss (2000) to name the young people born after 1980 – became the most popular generational category in the media, underlining supposed specificities of the age cohorts that live the transition to adulthood in the turn of the millennium or later.

Beyond the *Millennials* label, other generational categories were later used to distinguish the current young people, mainly based on their practices and experiences in the spheres of work, mobility, and digital life: “geração mileurista” (Freire 2006; Gentile 2014),<sup>1</sup> “precarious generation” (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2017), or “lost generation” (Allen and Ainley 2010; Pritchard and Whiting 2014); “global generation” (Edmunds and Turner 2005; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009), “Europe generation” (Lopes 2014) or “Erasmus generation” (Wilson 2011; Ieracitano 2014); “digital generation” (Feixa 2014; Ponte 2011), “net generation” or “digital natives” (Tapscott 1998; Hargittai 2010; Jones and Shao 2011). Among many others, these are some of the labels recurrently assigned to contemporary youth in the sense of emphasizing differences, conflicts, or flows between their ways of life and their parents’ and grandparents’ – who also received their own generational epithets: “baby boomer generation” (Roberts 2012) or “Great War generation” (Pais 1998a).

The proliferation of generational categories has not been followed, however, by empirical research wide enough and with a deep analytical engagement in the social sciences scope. The claims concerning the existence of generations and generational changes are surrounded by too much speculation, are too simplistic, and have a universalistic exaggeration, sometimes even contradiction. These generalizations are usually based on market studies promoted by large companies guided toward *marketing* and to *business*

1 The reference for this designation is the imagined average wage for the contemporary youth. In Portugal, it has acquired equivalent discursive formulations that, however, disclose the presumption of lower wages in relation to other European countries, around 500-600 euros.

(Williams and Page 2011; Parment 2014), with more market-centred than scientific interests in their analyses and conclusions.

In general, these studies intend to evaluate the overall economic capacity and the symbolic availability of specific youth segments for the acquisition of certain consumer goods (objects, experiences, services, etc.), assigning to them preferences, pointing out social practices, and defining life styles that are made available in the market, later generating pop labels for specific consumption profiles. These are studies that tend to homogenize the youth condition and the respective behaviours, blurring unequal social and cultural conditions in light of western youth experiences, located in Anglo-Saxon countries, among the white, urban, and more educated middle classes (Little and Winch 2017). Furthermore, those studies take for granted that distinct demographic cohorts – that is, young people born between date  $x$  and date  $y$  – have a generational correspondence. However, there are no definitions consensually accepted concerning the content of all generational labels created, nor their age cohorts.

In this perspective, I start this essay by introducing the current sociological approaches to the concept of generation. Considering the global context of systemic crisis and establishment of austerity policies in several countries of the world since 2008, from the USA to Europe and Brazil, I will discuss the hypothesis that this moment is, indeed, a *generational marker*: for young people who are making their transition to adulthood, austerity measures identify a turning point that creates distinctive structural conditions to their life courses, so that they are experienced, viewed, and planned in structurally diverse and unequal forms of life when compared to their parents' lives. This happens, to a large extent, because of several reorganizations established by austerity policies that have extended beyond the crisis environment, jeopardizing social citizenship rights that are critical in the organization of present and future life courses of young people.

The flexibility established in the labour conditions and its potential extension throughout the life course put the focus of the *inequalities* in the discussion on generations, freeing it from the mere cultural values and ethics of life *differences*. In this sequence, I introduce the hypothesis that “precariousness”, although experienced in very distinct ways due to the unequal social supports of young people, can be part of the core of a new generational conscience as a structural condition considered throughout life, with deep and extended effects that go beyond the sphere of the labour life, reifying a context that is favourable to the ontological insecurity of the younger citizens.

Concerning to a great extent the case of Portugal, one of the countries most affected by the crisis and the austerity policies within the Euro zone, this discussion will be developed with recourse to several sources and studies.

## GENERATIONS AND GENERATIONALISM

Despite the empirical approach to the concept of “generation” being often made through age groups, the fact is that, sociologically, generations do not emerge “naturally” from the secular cadence established by the biological or demographic rhythms translated in the ages of the individuals. Assuming a *generational approach* implies going beyond the analysis of the age effects indicated by the chronological structure of successive age cohorts. It demands a reading that is centred on the longterm of social structures, and not only on the variations that the attitudes and behaviours have throughout the “ages” or “cycles” of the life course. As pointed out by Mannheim – one of the predecessors of the generational approach in the beginning of the 20th century with the publication, in 1928, of *The Problem of Generations* (1990) – the age groups correspond to “potential generations” that, only when touched by a picture of deep social destabilization, with sufficient disruptive and transforming power to make emerging attitude and behavioural standards that are distinct from those shared in the past, will be able to configure “effective generations”.

The *generational perspective* inaugurated by Mannheim and sustained in sociology with differentiated inputs<sup>2</sup>, shares two central attributes to identify and understand a generation in its unity and specificity as *social reality*: on one hand, the existence of a picture of events that are quite wide and intense to separate the historical continuity of the collective life, events that in the present can correspond to “slow and non-catastrophic processes with economic, political and cultural nature” (Feixa and Leccardi 2010, 191). On the other hand, this exact same picture of historical discontinuities must be experienced in a comprehensive way by the members of a social formation in an early phase of their socialization, so that the new structural conditions produce long-term effects in their lives and subjective relations with the world.

2 See, for instance, Eisenstadt (2009 [1956]), Attias-Donfutt (1988), and Eyerman and Turner (1998).

Therefore, the generational perspective is going to locate the individuals within specific structural configurations of economic, social, cultural, and/or political nature. It considers the change processes that allow the induction of socialization conditions that are sufficiently wide and distinct from the past to provide new experiences and to shape new subjectivities between the younger layers of the population. In this sense, my hypothesis is that new emerging priorities and subjectivities in the context of new material conditions of existence of young people do not assume a mere “transitional” reality (that is, the result of an effect of their youth condition), but have the ability of being transported throughout life, resulting in a generational condition.

Do the labels already mentioned concerning the contemporary youth really translate the emergence of new social generations? Will these labels correspond to actual and objective social realities? Are contemporary young people forging new forms of transition to adulthood? Even though we live in times of acceleration of the historical temporality, it is certainly impossible to think about changes that are so fast that they justify such a quick succession of generations as the recent profusion of vague and hasty qualifiers and categories of generational identification. More than showing the actual existence of generations, the frantic creation of generational categories witnesses the recent trend for *generationalism* (White 2013), that is, the systematic invocation of the concept of generation as a principle of categorization, division, and explanation of the world, aiming to locate, narrate, and understand in time the global changes that happen in the social, economic, and political level and that – supposedly – reach the younger with higher intensity and continuity.

In the *generationalist approach*, the concept of generation is assumed not as an objective social reality, but as a *discursive reality* (Scherger 2012; Aboim and Vasconcelos 2013; Pritchard and Whiting 2014; Timonen and Conlon 2015). The generational labels are discursive realities in the sense that they are symbolic constructions underpinned by cultural narratives that integrate codes and terminologies that intend to express differences of preferences, values, representations, and ethics of life based on age principles. In this perspective, the generations are taken as *symbolic categories* used in the public space and in the social interaction, in diverse configurations and with differentiated contents and social interests. The individuals can mobilize those generational categories in their daily discursive practices as principles of organization and interpretation of the world and social change, in their processes of social identification and categorization.

Thus, the *generationalist approach* moves away from the *generational approach* in the sense that, in the former the discursive realities do not need to have any objective correspondence with generations as social realities anchored to events endowed with potential of historical change. This does not hinder, as claimed by White (2013), the emergence of generationalist expressions with the emergence of the social formations that consider identifying and describing, not only forewarning them, but also contributing to their social production.

### GENERATIONS AND INEQUALITIES

The generationalist discourses and labels allude, to a great extent, to transformations concerning the distinct practices and experiences of current youth in different spheres of their daily life, in relation to their preceding generations. And they do it not only in a perspective of identifying *intergenerational differences*, in a horizontal plan of cultural differences, but also, and increasingly, in the perspective of making known *intergenerational inequalities*, in a vertical plan of asymmetries and power relations involved in a moral language that often tries to identify economic, social, and political injustices and inequalities within the relations between generations (Pereira da Silva and Ribeiro 2017). This happens to the extent that, as Roberts argues (2012), in many European countries, following the Second World War, the *baby boomer* generation was the one, after many, that lived better than its predecessors and that knows that it was living better in terms of income, consumption levels, and social rights.

Although with quite distinct rhythms, intensities, and configurations, this context has been under a wide reconfiguration on a global scale, with a mass of more educated and more “globalized” youth – that is, more connected among themselves and with the world – experiencing not only new forms of transition to adulthood, but also facing a deep transition in the adult condition itself – marked by added difficulties, even blockage, in terms of capacity of social automation and economic emancipation. To a large extent this is due to the structural transformations that happened in the labour sphere under the aegis of a “new form of capitalism” (Sennett 1998; Boltanski and Chiapello 1999), marked by the implementation of a set of measures guided to the “flexibilization” of labour conditions, with deep implications in the youth capacities of planning and decision-making in several spheres of their lives.

The labour blockages that they experience end up transforming into transitional blockages, underpinned by postponements in their aspirations and projects due to the lack of means of achievement. The youth condition has been extended in such a way throughout the life course of the citizens born after the 1980s that there is a risk that youth studies are no longer analysing the conditions of postponement of the traditional markers of entrance to adulthood (Ferreira and Nunes 2014). Instead, they are analysing the conditions that restructure the adult condition itself in this generation, as well as its future condition as elderly. In fact, we are facing a revolution in the very standards of life courses, currently less organized according to pre-set and linear “cycles” and more organized in contingent “spirals”, increasingly vertiginous and risky, with consequences in the intergenerational commitments established until now, recently questioned and frequently attacked. It is in this context that the term “generation”, especially after the crisis, is emphatically adopted as part of the language of the youth collectivism, and it is frequently operated as a political category mobilizing collective actions in face of the inequalities that are assigned to it. Just as the social class was, too, in the past.

This does not mean, in any way, that the inequalities based on social classes have disappeared in the 21st century, but that *age* – along with other variables like gender, sexual orientation, or ethnical-racial belonging – became a relevant criterion in the access to and the struggles for resources, wages, and social rights. The concept of “precariat”, this new, wide, and heterogeneous social category characterized by the social vulnerability resulting from structurally precarious jobs, and by the chronic uncertainty and insecurity in terms of income in the future (Standing 2014), either from the point of view of the wage or the retirement, allows handling this new reality of class in articulation with the age/generation.

It is a social category that is no longer only associated with a set of concretely and symbolically less qualified professions, but that is increasingly extended, among the newcomers to highly qualified and symbolically valued professions and activities, to whom nowadays much more flexible, unsafe, and disadvantageous contract and salary conditions are offered, contrasting with the past.<sup>3</sup> Concerning this, Côté (2014) emphasizes the need to resume the topic of the *youth-as-class*, evidencing the systemic proletarianization of the young population in many countries, in which young people are left –

3 See, for the Portuguese case, Matos, Domingos, and Kumar (2010), and Matos and Domingos (2012).

namely by the State – at the mercy of neoliberal economic interests and their mechanisms of exploitation.

It is in this setting that the generationalist discourses often express social struggles concerning policies of power and income redistribution, as well as of recognition of certain social citizenship rights that begin to be questioned, naming by those who are susceptible to having some commonality in these types of experiences.<sup>4</sup> There is, in fact, an unequal distribution of the power positions in generational terms, in which the “generational authority” is the target of disputes and rankings. The large socioeconomic changes presently occurring are not being promoted, to a great extent, by the younger generations, but by the financial elites who benefit in detriment of those. Beyond that, the demographic advantage that older age cohorts have in the face of the younger in the traditional electoral and public consultation process has favoured, in several places of the world, the ascent to power of politicians with more conservative positions.

It is in this perspective that the term “generation” was a discursive practice that was challenged, for instance, during the referendum associated with Brexit, when it was argued in the streets and the media that the voters who voted *yes* in the referendum for the exit of Great Britain from the European Union, would have been, over all, the older voters, thus defining a future that they would not live themselves, and that was not the future mostly intended by the younger generation, perceived as more educated and cosmopolitan than its predecessor.<sup>5</sup>

The generation is also a category currently mobilized discursively in relation to problems pertaining to the fair redistribution of wealth and rights between older and newer generations, namely concerning the labour world, where the intergenerational conflicts are being potentialized. The inequality that can be felt between different generations in the labour field are generating unease regarding relative injustice, when often in one same organization or company, presently, the younger workers take over the same tasks or even more important and demanding tasks (quite often related with new competences, digital and

4 See, for instance, Gouglas (2013); Williamson (2014); Milkman (2017); Bessant, Farthing, and Watts (2017).

5 It suffices searching, in any search engine, for the terms “Brexit and generation” to find thousands of news and articles published in the media such as BBC, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, etc., that between 2016 and 2017 tried to show and interpret the Generation Gap present in the Brexit.

others) than the older workers, but with much more unfavourable remuneration, contractual forms, and social protection. In a society where fertility has decreased, and the average life span has increased, the generational inequalities become evident in terms of the distribution of increasingly scarcer public resources, considering that “the new [generations] will see the older generations to take possession of the realized productivity gains, being increasingly harder to justify ethically the transferences between them” (Mendes 2005, 250).

In this context, I claim the possibility of the current generationalist discourses being analysed to be a *symptom* of a generational change underway and, to this extent, a *vestige* of a generation as social reality in construction. And it is not only forewarning it, but also contributing to its social and symbolic production. In fact, as Roberts claims (2012, 479), the conditions that made possible the reproduction of the experiences and the standards of living of the baby boomer generation have disappeared, foretelling the likely emergence, although still undefined, of what will form a new generation among young people born after the 1980s, who know and live in a world that is distinct from the one of the past and projected for the future. It is a hypothesis with a global nature to be seen and followed in a contextualized and intersected way, considering the variety (in space) and variability (in time) of national public policies, as well as variables of schooling, class and family social capital and social background, gender, ethnic-racial and citizenship stature, among other variables.

## CRISIS AS GENERATIONAL MARKER

As some academic studies already show, in several countries<sup>6</sup> the generation born after 1980 faces lower wage standards when compared to the preceding generations, and with precarious labour conditions that go beyond the moment of entrance in the labour market, increasingly marking the active life course of this generation. In Portugal, these conditions were particularly intensified when, in the aftermath of the subprime crisis in 2008, announced worldwide, Portugal asked for an international bailout in 2011 to face its public debt and, as a consequence, a set of political austerity measures were imposed by the so-called

6 See Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2017) for the cases of the USA, England, Australia, France, and Spain. See Côté (2014) for the Canadian case, and other examples. For the case of Portugal, see Ferreira et al. (2017), Bago d’Uva and Fernandes (2017).

*Troika*, formed by three international institutions: the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

The period between 2011 and 2015 forms an historical backdrop that had specific effects on the life of Portuguese young people (and those less young, as well). Even though recently there are signs of economic improvement in Portugal, the systemic reconfigurations added by the austerity measures were so intense and deep that their effects can hardly be circumscribed to the period when they happened, and were later reverted in short or middle term. They were, indeed, effects that ended up going well beyond the economic sphere, opening the possibility of having established for a long-term “a social regimen of precarious existence”, with “deep and hardly reversible consequences, at least in middle term, in the economy, in the labor world, but also in the social and class structures” (Carmo and Barata 2017, 322-323). This social regimen, in the long term, can be translated in a diversity of precarious ways of life among young people that vary depending on the conditions of social inequality that are inherent to the plurality of youth conditions.

Considering the changes produced in the social and economic structure of the Portuguese society (and other societies of southern Europe, like Greece, Spain, Italy, and Malta), I leave open the hypothesis that the austerity measures implemented during this period work as a *generational marker*: not in the sense of forming an event accountable for abrupt ruptures, but for establishing a turning point marked by the intensification and acceleration of economic and social processes that were already happening and that are generator of a context structurally differentiated from the past. That is, effects that do not correspond to historical discontinuities directly induced by the economic recession, but that result from trends that were already signaling and forecasting the frailty of the hope for the *April Generation* – the generation that, in Portugal, corresponds to a pale and late reflex of the aspirations of the *baby boom* generation in Europe<sup>7</sup> – in consolidating a strong Social State, with social justice and economic growth.

7 As Bauman proposes (2007), the borders that separate the generations are ambiguous and indefinite depending on their localization in time and space (territorial, social, and cultural). In this sense, in Portugal, we did not have a *baby boom* generation properly as it is described in the literature, much less in the historical time when it emerged in the Anglo-Saxon context. Portugal lived under a dictatorship during World War II and lived like this for another 30 years thereafter. It also dealt, during this time, with its own wars, in the sense of trying to keep the occupied territories in Africa. They were difficult conditions that are not consistent with the ideals of prosperity and well-being of the Anglo-Saxon *baby boomer* generation.

In fact, the set of conditions inaugurated on April 25, 1974 – the day that symbolically marks the fall of the dictatorship in Portugal and the establishment of a democratic system – encouraged the belief in the possibilities of actual security, peace, and upward social mobility among those who, since an early age, were brought up in this setting. The installation of the democratic system in the 1970s and the end of the war for the defence of the occupied territories in Africa by the Portuguese, was followed throughout the 1980s by the stabilization of a model of constitutional State and welfare State, a union of economic growth and progressive outsourcing of the economy, the adhesion of Portugal to the European Economic Community (in 1986), the expansion and democratization of the social media, the substantial increase of the schooling rates, especially in higher education, and the decrease of the unemployment rates (Figueiredo, Lorga da Silva and Ferreira 1999).

A feeling of hope in the future was nurtured among young people socialized under this set of structural conditions, those who shaped the April Generation, born in the 1960s and 1970s. It was not, however, a sufficiently solid and durable framework to guarantee the continuity of this feeling of hope for the coming age cohorts. From the 1990s, the levels of (youth) unemployment climbed again (Ferreira 2006), becoming a phenomenon that Natália Alves came to identify as “uncontrollable, massive and selective. Uncontrollable, because it did not stop increasing in the last the 20 years, except for the second half of the 1980s. Massive because it reached a high number of employees. Selective because it is not uniformly distributed through all the categories of workers, affecting mainly the more vulnerable social groups (youth, women and, in some countries, emigrants) or specific sectors of activity” (Alves 1993, 651). As explanatory factors for the difficulties added to young people in their transition to the labour market in the 1990s, there already were “the reduction of the volume of employment, particularly in sectors of activities traditionally responsive to the young labor force, and the precariousness of the wage relation” (Alves 1998, 110).

When contrasting some common indicators in the National Youth Surveys conducted in 1997 and 1987, it is observed that young people in the 1990s expressed higher aspirations related to the academic qualifications they wanted to achieve, when contrasted to the youth in the 1980s (Pais 1998b, 189). Therefore, the expansion of the school aspirations among young people and their investment in the prolongation of their school trajectories was still felt, believing in the value of the diploma as an antidote against the difficulties of

labour market insertion and in its virtuous power of joining the type and the level of instruction, the profession, the remuneration, and the social status (Alves 1998, 89). On the other hand, in the 1990s young people were already disclosing a greater conscience of the difficulties of the labour market and the threats of unemployment.

Socialized in conditions shaped by the expansion of education since the mandatory schooling until higher education, many more young people than in the past had possibilities of nurturing throughout their school years high aspirations and expectations concerning the *value of employability* of the diplomas they were earning – that is, the value assigned to diplomas in the access to a work position equivalent to the qualifications certified by it, the steadiest forms of employment and, ultimately, even in the access to work position *tout court*.

But the remarkable schooling progression of Portuguese young people in those years, and the resulting expansion of the aspirations and expectations among them for a better quality of life in the future, in terms of labour stability and security, was being followed by added difficulties in finding jobs, namely in positions corresponding to the qualification obtained in terms of remuneration, status, and social protection (Figueiredo, Lorga da Silva and Ferreira 1999; Ferreira 2006). In the face of this situation José Machado Pais had already posed the following question at the end of the 1990s: “is the education system instilling among young people excessive, or at least disproportional, expectations related to the prosaic reality of the labor world? And when these expectations are betrayed in young people with strong expectations of social mobility, won’t it be created conditions for the emergence, in the future, of specific forms of *social disenchantment*?” (Pais 1998b, 190).

About 20 years later the hypothesis put forward by José Machado Pais was confirmed. The social reactions triggered by the austerity measures imposed by the *Troika* in 2011 – evident in social movements that, organized in a global, rhizomatic, and virtual way, acquired expression in Portugal during the years of the crisis (Pais 2014), as the *Movimento 12 de março* [12 of March Movement],<sup>8</sup> the *Precários Inflexíveis* [Inflexible Precarious], the *Indignados* [Appaled], or other equivalents<sup>9</sup> – handle this feeling of disenchantment

8 Resulting from the organization of the demonstration that happened on this date in 2011.

9 These movements, among others, indicate new ways of looking at and making politics among the youth of our days, as expressions of resistance to the new structural conditions that they experience, ►

and social dissatisfaction. Although generalized, it is a feeling shared, to a great extent, by young people and adults raised in a horizon of expectations marked by the growth of the Social State and by the belief in the value of employability of the school diplomas, but that is confronted with a picture of difficulties added in the access to the labour market and that, not being totally new, has intensified greatly throughout the deep economic crisis in Europe after 2008.

The higher education diploma no longer guarantees access to and progression in a certain career, not even a job corresponding to the qualification achieved (Cardoso et al., 2014). A disenchanted reality of which, in turn, young people and their families are increasingly more aware, as is shown in the chronicle by Andreia Fonseca, a young holder of a Masters in Psychology, published in the *Público* newspaper in June 2015:<sup>10</sup>

I'm part of a curious generation. At 25 years of age, I grew up with the nonsense that a degree was a guarantee of success. But this generation was deceived. The sheepskin is not a guarantee of anything. At the most, it is a long-term investment that, perhaps, one day will generate profit. Deluded, this generation went to the university at 18 with all their luggage, in a heroic search for a promising future. But, in my case and in so many others (I dare to say thousands of people), it backfired.

The course was finished with effort, investment (at every level) and an average of 18 *valores* – with the right to tears of pride in the presentation of the master's thesis. And after the happiness peak, the reality came... Back home, with the same luggage, loaded with heroic dreams when one left, but that came back with fear, doubts and anticipated difficulties.

The luggage was right! Days passed by, cvs were printed, delivered and, with much certainty, ignored at a vertiginous speed. "Change the cv", "hide your master's", "you have to accept that this is difficult and will have to accept anything", said the wise voices around me, and that at each word "burnt" my dreams, transforming them into mere ashes.

(...)

» as well as trying to configure alternatives to the social system that is drawn (Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011; Williamson 2014; Milkman 2017). They are highlighted, over all, for being movements of collective action to the global scale, formed in globalized conditions of connection, provided either by the integration of new technologies of information and communication in daily life, or by the relative widening of the opportunities of geographic international mobility.

10 Andreia Fonseca, "Sou desta geração que nem se permite sonhar" [I am from this generation that doesn't even allow itself to dream], Crónica P3, *Público*, June 12, 2015. See <http://p3.publico.pt/actualidade/sociedade/17113/sou-desta-geracao-que-nem-se-permite-sonhar>.

All this frenzy, that is my life of an unemployed graduate, ends at the dinner table. That moment when I sit, I see the air of fatigue in my parents' faces (that air of those who need to count cents to survive) and I feel that I still depend on them to eat a mere loaf of bread.

And in the unfolding of this "simple" thought, I feel that I do not even dare to think about having my own house, my own car (or another vehicle with wheels) or buying my own food. And it is this generation, that now is also nicknamed "young adults", that one day will be the core of our active population. A generation that does not allow itself to dream, because dreams cost a lot... They cost the price of the disillusionment, ours and of those who love us. And since the "dream commands the life", I do not even dare to say that I live: I survive, to the cost of my parents' sacrifices, those that some time ago cried out of pride when I acquired the damn sheepskin!

These are strong words from somebody who, just like other young people in Portugal, as in other countries of southern Europe, lives in a setting where the conditions that would favour the optimistic search of formal education and the itineraries that this offers saw themselves quite fragile. The reduction of the volume of employment and the consequent compression of the labour market resulted in very high indices of unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, namely in segments until then less exposed to these conditions there, like the young graduates (Cardoso et al. 2014). The rate of youth unemployment reached peaks never seen in the past (around 40% in 2013). The most structural unemployment configurations were also intensified, in the form of long-term unemployment, strongly accentuating the probability of *transitory forms of unemployment as a temporary situation* to become, with time, *circulating forms of unemployment as intermittent condition*, with the risk of precariousness becoming rooted in their course and to structure their ways of life due to the regularity and temporality that it acquires when adults (Ferreira et al. 2017).

And it should be noted that the official unemployment numbers exclude several of these young people who would prefer to be working, but are counted as non-active population, sheltered in an educational system through which they hang on as students, or under the stigmatic condition of "unoccupied" young people – more known as NEET (not in education, employment, or training), a designation that to a great extent, reupdates the traditional image of youth as "allergic" to work (Rowland et al. 2014; Ferreira, Pappámikail and Vieira 2017).

On the other hand, the forms of underemployment also increased, present in the resurgence of atypical forms of employment, of gig economies, and of informal economies (Ferreira et al. 2017). A certain instability has always been part of the youth processes of transition to adulthood. The notion of “experience” itself, namely of professional experience, is always part of the youth transitions to the labour market. The beginning of the active life always tended to be marked by short bonds, high turnover of occupations, with professional identities still little defined and consolidated. However, in certain structural conditions like those that have recently characterized the economy, the enterprises arrangement, and the legal framework of labour relations in the Portuguese society (OECD 2017), the increasing risk is that more unstable, temporary, and flexible forms of youth transition are extended along the life course and become a social condition in the adult life. In other words, that situations of intermittent work, oscillating between situations of legal or informal independent work, internships, scholarships, accumulation of partial and opportunistic jobs, and the whole plethora of forms of employment once called “atypical” are institutionalized as typical, shaping labour trajectories and life courses with very diffuse possibilities of projecting a future beyond the constraint and randomness of the present. And this is well beyond life’s professional dimension.

#### PRECARIOUSNESS AS CORE OF GENERATIONAL CONSCIENCE

The situation of extreme labour precariousness can be the structuring core of a *generational conscience* (Mannheim 1990; Feixa and Leccardi 2010), a reflexive focus around which the unit of subjective experiences among young people born after the 1980s is set, as well as the recognition of its particularity when compared with previous generations; a conscience that, additionally, finds conditions to be extended. In a context of systemic crisis that includes many countries of the world, with quite different intensities and configurations, the experiences and meanings of young people concerning precariousness, traditionally rooted and understood in a national order, find conditions to be fast and efficiently shared on a transnational scale, potentializing the creation of a global generational conscience (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009; Edmunds and Turner 2005).

In Portugal the intergenerational recognition regarding the current youth unemployment as a structural problem is remarkable. That is, youth

unemployment is understood as a consequence of the recent compression of labour market, in contrast to the social perceptions and moral judgements traditionally shared concerning youth unemployment. From the point of view of common sense, the situation of youth unemployment was traditionally perceived as a result of the voluntary refusal of young people to work, ensuing in moralizing judgement based on a work ethics as a duty. More recently, the moral judgment tends to be directed to the school and the vocational training system: based on a purely instrumental view of knowledge, it is argued that the institutional systems of knowledge transmission, supposedly, do not promote, before and after their action, the articulation between competences, qualifications, and places in the labour market (Alves 2007; Cardoso et al. 2014). Consequently, youth unemployment results from these institutions not guaranteeing the supposed “youth employability” – their capacity of becoming “employable” – pretending that young people would not be prepared for the work places supposedly available.

However, far from common sense arguments that reasoned for “allergy to work” on the part of the youth, or far from the theses constructed around the fallacy of the “employability” and the supposed lack of preparation by the school, there is a wide intergenerational consensus in the Portuguese society regarding the perception of youth unemployment as having a structural nature, caused overall by the reduction of the volume of jobs and the consequent compression of the work market. In a survey from 2015 (Ferreira et al. 2017) more than 60% of the Portuguese people recognized that the causes of the youth unemployment are linked to the fact of having “increasingly fewer jobs for those who are entering in the labor market”, reflecting the chronic lack of capacity of the Portuguese productive system to generate sufficient work positions, widely expanded during the economic and monetary crisis.

To a great extent, the structural subsistence of this feature in the Portuguese society happens because the regulation made by the State has kept its role as coach, keeping its traditional recommendations in terms of youth employment public policies: (a) on the one hand, policies of employment activation, underpinned in short-term measures based on ephemeral forms of training, internships, or insertion contracts, to guarantee the “employability” of the young – a watchword understood as the capacity of the worker in adapting to the demands of the work world; (b) on the other hand, policies of promotion of self-employment and creation of enterprises, known under the name of “entrepreneurship promotion policies”, under-financed and with a residual

adhesion among the unemployed young population, with little capacity for its later sustainability. The figure of the “young entrepreneur” and the image of the “employability”, nurtured on a large scale by the most recent public policies to tackle the youth unemployment, are typical figures of the economic neoliberalism, that places on the individual the burden of the responsibility (and the culpability) for the condition of unemployment and for his exit from this condition, disregarding the structural factors that are the basis of the addition of young people in this situation.

Finally, the most recent policies have been in the direction of the liberalization of the labour market (labour flexibilization, professional mobility, collaboration in projects, etc.), which have not had the support of any “invisible hand” in the Portuguese economy in the sense of rendering the expected outcomes (increasing employment), resulting in mobility “from precariousness to precariousness” (Matos 2014), passing through periods of increasingly longer unemployment. In fact, for those young people who have been employed, the austerity policies established by the *Troika* were followed by requirements in the sense of volatilization of steady employment, consolidation of a more flexible, contingent, precarious, and individualized labour relation, wage reduction in comparison with previous generations in equivalent positions and occupations, resulting in the questioning of many public social protection guarantees.

In this context, in which the precariousness of labour relations is installed with intensity and throughout the life course, the Portuguese young people share with others from southern Europe a paradoxical social condition: there has never existed in Portugal such a condition of qualified youth, while, simultaneously being so frustrated in the aspirations and labour expectations socially nourished by the school and the family, as well as under such a great difficulty of transition to the labour market, in trajectories increasingly more discontinuous and in which the labyrinth tends to almost always lead to the same goal: precariousness. It is a generation in “*dysrhythmia* between the idealized and the accomplished”, “when the imagined futures are denied by the reality” (Pais 2012, 267). A reality of labour difficulties that are propagated to several dimensions and phases of life, surpassing the labour dimension and resulting in wider problems of social inclusion.

## FROM LABOUR PRECARIOUSNESS TO ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

The effect of the austerity measures have intense and lacerating effects far beyond the economic sphere, as the conditions of youth precariousness are not felt only in their transition to the labour market, but reach a much wider dimension in the transitions to adulthood, affecting other dimensions of youths' lives in terms of social (un)protection and (in)dependence and, ultimately, of ontological (in)security. The ontological security, according to Giddens (1995, 75-82), refers to a feeling of continuity in the personal identity of the subject, of stability and order in the events and experiences passed through, and of steadiness of the social and material environments involving her/him. The precariousness felt in youth transitions to labour tends to be a consistent threat to this sense of existential and personal security, contaminating and narrowing future horizons.

There are several recent studies that have pointed out the remarkable impacts of the difficulties felt in terms of labour insertion in the management of the daily life of young people, as well as in the delineation and realization of future projects that go far beyond the professional life, but that depend on this to a great extent. I am referring to transition markers to adulthood that cross other spheres of youths' lives, like leaving parents' home and life autonomy, conjugality, and parenthood (Pais 2012; Alves et al. 2011).

In fact, the decision-making of today's young adults in relation to projects like leaving parents' home, buying a house, or forming a family is much more difficult and risky. Not by chance, these are projects that are postponed and whose accomplishment will happen according to the extent of the material conditions of each youth segment, always with the spectre of being reversed at any time. This is also a mark of the current generation, an indicator of its existential precariousness: the *reversibility* to which the social statutes that they take over in life are subjected. They leave their parents' home running the risk of coming back, relationships are tried, and conjugality is experienced; they are not students anymore, being aware of the need to go back to school later; they are workers and in the following day they are unemployed; internships, training and similar events accumulate in a life course increasingly more labyrinthine, without guiding landmarks.

On the other hand, facing the "lack of future" of their life, the youth condition of this generation ends up being more "presentist" than young people of previous generations. That is, they end up appreciating much more

the experiences that are provided to them in the present and the respective gratification than valuing future projects, much more difficult to delineate and to materialize and with uncertain gratification. Facing a reality in which stability is quite difficult to guarantee, and the future is made of open scenes and short terms, the important thing is to live the present moment, day-by-day, and to enjoy it not only in hedonist terms, but also with personal and identitarian accomplishment – despite being, from now on, in a provisional and recyclable, flexible and adaptive way. The notion of “experience” becomes a discursive value in the most diverse spheres of life, whose practical concretion is certainly quite dependent on the respective objective conditions.

At the same time, even by means of the massive presence of new technologies of information and communication among the youngest generation, but also the relative democratization of the access to “traveling” (low cost flights, different forms of lodging at low cost, student exchange programmes, etc.), it is a globally connected generation that tends to have “more world” in their horizons, and to have access to more and diversified experiences, much more segmented, unstandardized, and unritualized than it was in the past. The accelerated flexibilization of the labour market, in terms of contract, secular, and even geographic bonds, the ubiquitous digitalization of life worlds, and the lack of conditions to design projects of (and with) the future ultimately makes the life course of today’s young people a sequence of voluntary or conditioned experiences.

At a time when the notion of “professional insertion” cannot be conceptualized anymore as a specific moment in life (denoted with ideas of “entrance in the active life” or “transition from school to work”), converting into an increasingly zigzagging, indeterminate, and inexact process (Alves 2008; Pais 2001), the articulations of this process with traditional markers of passage are creating transition forms to adulthood made of complex, uncertain, and insecure settings and itineraries (Vieira, Ferreira and Rowland 2015). It is in this context, when the structures of opportunity to the access to employment are increasingly blocked, ultimately hindering more and more youths’ access to the realization of other projects of life, that the idea of professional insertion increasingly converges with the idea of social inclusion, and the attainment of jobs is intrinsically associated with mechanisms of protection from social exclusion (Alves 2008, 76).

However, for those who live their youth condition in a crisis and post-crisis context, this will happen not necessarily already under the aegis of a feeling of

victimization and frustration in front of projected futures and identities, like the April Generation. Socialized in conditions of labour scarcity, the hypothesis of the precariousness not being discussed as such is visible, and the new rules of capitalist and neoliberal games tend to be lived along with a functional feeling of acceptance and naturalization. Those who have backing to explore in an adventurous and creative way the limbos of uncertainty and insecurity might even appreciate the practices and experiences that such rules might provide. Even though the objective conditions stimulate efforts that quite often are inglorious, the psychological adjustments compel the incorporation and reproduction of neoliberal beliefs: one needs to be optimistic and restart, always with energy and hard work (Franceschelli and Keating 2018), looking for escaping, managing, always moving, without complaints or fatalism, even when this movement is made in circles that unfailingly return to the home left (often the parents' home).

## CONCLUSION

Will these impasses leave a generational mark on the professional life of young people? Will they be, along with other life dimensions, identifiers of a structural change of such an order in the experience of the youth throughout their life course that may signal the emergence of a new generation? Will the austerity years and the changes that happened (or were intensified) during them be a turning point and generational rupture?

It is still early to evaluate with rigour the impacts of the changes that have happened in terms of their longevity in the life course of the age cohorts born after the 1980s, but it would be sociological naivety to think that the trends identified in the crisis years in Portugal, but not only there, will be circumscribed to transient circumstances. For the time being, there are certainly temporary effects that are transversally shared with a long youth condition and that are prolonged in the life course, that is, they are increasingly further from being conceptualized as mere effects of “age” or “life cycle”. Given their intensity and structural rooting, the detected effects will have, certainly, conditions to disseminate beyond temporary crisis, legitimizing the hypothesis of crystallizing in time and becoming generational effects, in the sense of extending in the biographical time of life course and in the historical time of future age cohorts.

This means that they are effects that question the symbolic borders not only of the “youth” condition, but also, including, the “adult” condition itself. Not embarking on controversies marked for mutually exclusive positions – as do those who present the generational paradigm as a substitute of the transitions paradigm or point to the generational paradigm as a “new emergent orthodoxy in the studies of youth”.<sup>11</sup> It is worth considering that a new generational framework will have among its major effects the reconfiguration of forms of existence of the condition as “adult” and of life course themselves just as they have been lived and projected until then. The fact is that we have been witnessing structural changes that have significantly modified the experience of the traditional markers of entrance to adulthood in Europe, with specific effects among young people born after the 1980s, allowing them to know and live in a world that is distinct from the one in the past and projected for the future.

Facing the global change in the structural conditions following the 1980s, in terms of conditions of autonomy in personal life and communication in daily life, the Millennials, whether in the discursive formulations that fall on them, or in the objective conditions that involve their experiences and world experiences, could be the basis of the configuration of a new generation, still under construction, marked by structural changes that the economic-financial crisis accelerated and consolidated. It is not yet an effective generation, in the sociological sense of the term, but the expression of a process of generational transition lived globally, in which those born after the 1980s were the first ones dealing directly with the reality of the neoliberal capitalism, adjusting many of the expectations and aspirations of which they still assign to the hard structure of constraints and opportunities made available to them, intrinsically marked by the precariousness of their existences.

This does not mean that such changes will be experienced by youth in an equal way. The generational paradigm is often criticized for supposedly homogenizing the subjects born in certain space-time contexts, crystallizing and standardizing differences from senses of rupture, and to level diversities and inequalities existing at this moment. However, there is no guarantee that this will happen. The fact that the new generation is unequally exposed to the restructuration underway, which is strongly asymmetrical from the social and spatial point of view, makes it fallacious to think that this transformation

11 Criticisms pointed out to Wyn and Woodman (2006, 2007), Wyn (2012); by Roberts (2007, 2012) and France and Roberts (2015).

inevitably creates a totalizing intragenerational unit of symbolic constellations. The youth asymmetries persist and acquire new contours. For such, the impact of “time marks” among the youth and along the life course will always be filtered by their objective conditions of existence, namely in terms of their background concerning social class, schooling or social-professional situation, gender or sexual orientation, ethnicity or stature of citizenship, for instance.

Mannheim already confronted this problem, advancing the concept of “generational units”, that is, groups that although sharing a “generational awareness” marked by the proximity in the face of a new structural context (and by the distance in relation to the previous one), reflect and react in a distinct way regarding the same, considering the social status that they assume in it. Although immersed in a relatively particular structural context, marked by structural processes in common (as the expanded schooling, the difficulties and restrictions in the insertion in the work market, the access to new technologies, among others), the youth trajectories are crossed by different socializing experiences, supports, and social conditions that have distinct and unequal effects in the difficulties faced and the strategies used to deal with them.

In this sense, the intensities with which the ontological insecurity is felt and the ways that precariousness is experienced and managed along the life course are socially diversified and unequal, as their effects on the trajectories depend, to a great extent, on regimes of transition to adulthood underlying the national political contexts, as well as the social backgrounds and the capitals that the subjects, young or adult, have accumulated in their respective course. Certainly the public, family, and school backing of some young people when compared to others will make it possible for them to better resist the processes of professional disqualification that are not in consonance with their aspirations and/or qualifications. Others, however, in positions of greater risk of social exclusion, will experience the precariousness of their labour trajectory in conditions of stronger objective and subjective suffering.

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