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Youth precarity as the new face of the social question

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Since a couple of years “youth” seems to experience a remarkable career as category of representation/representational category of urgent social problems and of the most burning questions of society. On the one hand this category, appearing natural and thus universal, seems to play increasingly the role of a “passe-partout” (fits always) target of several policies fighting precarity in general and unemployment in particular. It is therefore located in the centre of the very contemporary social question “par excellence”: how to explain the crisis of the “wage earner society” (R. Castel). On the other hand it seems to be a “allround” category particularly flexible and adaptable to every possible collective projection regarding insecurity, need and crisis. (Let’s think for example of the discourse around urban violence, delinquency and drug addiction).

As equally a social problem and problem of society young people form the privileged target of an ambivalent regulatory social policy: social protection for the youth, protection of the social order against young people – support and control as two sides of the same social medal. All of these aspects indicate that the rapid success of this variable category, its respective form depending on the historical context and the socio-economic trend, can to a great extent be explained by this very flexibility of meaning, behind which a number of social relations in the sense of “dominant-dominated”, “established-applicant”, “owner- those longing to own” etc. are hiding, in a transformed and euphemised manner. If people talk about “youth” it is actually being spoken of social reproduction, if youth precarity is treated, the discussion circles in fact around the crisis of a certain mode of social reproduction; if you discuss youth violence, you worry actually about anomic and pathological forms accompanying this crisis and its devastating psychological and social effects.

It is not by coincidence that the problem of youth precarity in its multiple appearances (poverty, unemployment, vulnerability, exclusion etc.) is designated as a key social question at the very moment where a substantial transformation of the modern wage society is taking place. This concept of wage society has its origin in a “Europe des Trentes Glorieuses” and results from a historical compromise. In a so-called “social” or “rhenish” capitalism the status of the wage-earner experiences a kind of continuous institutionalisation of an equally economic, social and political citizenship and a biographical standard model, resulting from state interventions in industrial law and social support. This compromise seems to be seriously put into question.

The emergence of “youth” as a flexible category of representation of contemporary economic and social problems goes along with a collection of discourses, designating those very abilities as the basis of a new conception of human capital, which is generally ascribed to young people. This conception claims to be the answer to the impatient demands of the economic world, being subject to constraints, which result, seemingly irreversible and unchangeable, of new historical dynamic forces of capitalism in its course of globalisation. Flexibility, mobility, perfectionism, meritocracy, plasticity, low prices, the spirit of competition, continuous subjugation to control measures: these are the material and symbolic necessities ascribed to the status of the “youth”, transformed into universal “virtues” of the new type of human capital, which is again and again claimed by the neoliberal discourse. The prospective wage earner is being transformed into an eternal youth, who accepts like destiny the obligation to participate in a persistent yet aimless course. Still this course will never lead to an effectively stable, recognized and secure situation. The new wage earner agrees even more willingly to the idea of life-long learning, as s/he will never actually leave this strange waiting room, where s/he finds himself surrounded by a reserve army of eternally young people, who simply have no legitimate social status. Better than any other concept, the word “employability”, used in all different sauces of the neoliberal discourse and which has been able - thanks to its terrible variability of meaning – to slip into several employment policy programs fighting unemployment, expresses this idea of the flexible, mobile human capital without bonds and without history: forever young.

Everything leads thus to think that “youth” as a privileged category of the contemporary political and economic discourse occupies the role of a laboratory where experiments around a new type of economic habitus take place. This new type is characteristic for what is called in German the “Arbeitskraftunternehmer” – the new businessman of one’s own work force” – the, who has to subjugate his personal value everyday day to the market rules/rules of the market.

