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DOWNWARD MOBILITY IS NOW A REALITY FOR A NEW GENERATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS 1985–2015

Abstract. This article analyses changes occurring in the life courses of young people over the past 30 years, ever since we have been researching the position of young people in Slovenia. The article focuses on the newest generation of youth. Based on Slovenian Public Opinion survey (SJM) data, we have examined their attitude to life and satisfaction with their living circumstances, and placed these data in an international context. Our findings show the high level of satisfaction and optimism of the so-called »millennium generation«. Our data are compared to those collected by German and Canadian researchers who have made similar findings. The growth of optimism and satisfaction with life seems to be a global phenomenon that belongs to the new social and ideological construction of youth in the modern world. However, in this construction of youth attention should be paid to the growing inequalities between young people. The global economic and political crisis is increasing the inequality of opportunities, establishing new, completely excluded groups of young people.

Key words: *life course, transition to adulthood, generation of metamorphosis, inequality*

1295

Introduction

The article analyses changes occurring in the life course of young people over the past 30 years, ever since we have been researching the position of young people in Slovenia. The article focuses on the newest generation of youth, the so-called »millennium generation« born after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Based on data from the Slovenian Public Opinion survey (SJM), we will empirically examine their attitude to life and their satisfaction with their living conditions, and then place these data in an international context. The article highlights the theoretical reflection of young people's position today.

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Youth as a period of transition to adulthood only holds meaning in relation to a specific set of social, political and economic conditions. While science offers theoretical proof of changes in the social order, it has been young people who have provided empirical evidence of these changes in past decades (Ule, 2010). Youth is a socially meaningful and changeable life period which sometimes seems to be disappearing in either »precocious adulthood« or the »prolongation of childhood«. Since youth is a period of transition, it also depends on the status of adulthood. »Yet«, as researchers say, »increasingly, the meaning of adulthood and how it is achieved, marked, acknowledged and maintained is ambiguous. The period of youth is significant because it is the threshold to adulthood, and it is problematic largely because adult status itself is problematic« (Wynn and Whyte, 1997: 9).

Young people are oriented to the future due to their biographic transition as such from childhood to adulthood. They are burdened by the future, making them a sensitive phenomenon in terms of research. By focusing on phenomena and tendencies among the young in the present, researchers may well overlook that which enables young people to transcend the present. For example, in the 1960s researchers looking at youth across the world complained about young people's conformism and apolitical attitude (Tenbruck, 1965; Habermas, 1965; Rosenmayr et al., 1966). As is known, these findings and estimations were later massively denied by students with their articulated protest political movements and their sub- and contra-cultural production.

Due to the demographic changes after the Second World War, the prolongation of education and youth beyond the age of 20, young people became a recognisable and even privileged social group. It was even recognised as developmental potential of society. That is why »to be young«, »to feel young«, »to live as young« became important identity indicators that came to replace others, such as »grow up as soon as possible« etc. These indicators were closely related to all kinds of emancipatory achievements and personal autonomy of young people. At the time, young people were becoming the holders of social movements and initiatives, mainly in the medium of everyday world and new cultural styles and, despite every resistance on the part of the holders of the established culture, these innovations were transferred to all other social strata and generations. This also applied to young people in Slovenia, particularly those living in large urban centres who, at the time, were the main actors of civic and social initiatives and movements (Ule, 1988).

In the 1990s the relationship between youth and society was essentially changed in Slovenia. Young people, once a privileged societal group during the socialist period, became in the 1990s the 'weakest link' of the transition. The new system did not require any particular symbolic representation for

its own legitimacy, nor did it require certain social movements which would represent the political will of the people (Ule, 2012). And, above all, there was no such need requiring these ideologies to express themselves through young people. In fact, the new capitalist system has no symbolic representation because relationships based on capital are presented and imposed as the universal agents that transverse all subjects and all relationships. Without their economic or political representatives, young people had few rights and privileges and, accordingly, a lower social status.

Youth studies in Slovenia from the 1990s onward have shown that the scope and weight of problems young people face are increasing, as are the risks associated with attempts to solve these problems. While young people in the research in 1986 were still exposing problems related to civil rights and liberties, such as “moral crises and lack of ideals”, “insufficient concern by society for youth”, “lack of freedom of speech and thought”, young people in the earliest studies in the 1990s began to mainly expose social and economic problems and fears (Ule and Renner, 1998). Youth studies right across Europe from that time similarly indicated that the structural characteristics of social vulnerability (for example a disadvantaged starting position) as a rule had become intertwined with cultural and interactive aspects (Chisholm et al., 1995; Du Bois-Raymond and Chisholm, 2006). Due to the mostly structural sources of problems and difficulties during their youth, young people often experienced them as an irresolvable vicious circle and sometimes tried to resolve them by means of various unreflective shortcuts (e.g. consumerism, addictions and escapism in pop youth lifestyles).

The autonomy of many young people in Europe and Slovenia since the 1990s has been considerably reduced after the process of contracting the welfare state transferred the majority of costs for the social reproduction of youth from the state back to the family. Young people conceive the social world as unclear and unpredictable. This is the framework in which the social and political reconstruction of youth in Slovenia has been taking place. In spite of the widening of young people’s personal worlds and their (partial) liberation from traditional conservative cultural ties and patterns, their everyday world has been particularising their common problems and has only been offering substitutes and not solutions to real-life dilemmas and problems.

»The Millennium« generation of youth, optimistic and satisfied with life

How does the young generation of the second decade of the 21st century respond to these social circumstances and conditions? As shown by empirical studies in Slovenia and elsewhere in Europe and globally, their response

differs largely from that of previous generations. According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SORS) for 2015, 80% of young people (aged 16–29) were generally satisfied with their lives. This means they estimated their life with scores from 7 to 10 (on a scale 0 – completely dissatisfied – to 10 – very satisfied). Only 5% of youth gave their lives with the lowest scores (from 0 to 4) (SORS, 2016). Young people’s average self-estimation was 7.6. Even more satisfied with their lives were students (8.0) and young people who had completed post-secondary education (7.8). Since this study was conducted in all EU member states, the data are also internationally comparable. On average, youth in Slovenia were more satisfied with their lives (7.8) than the average young person in the EU (7.6). The lowest satisfaction level was expressed by young people in Bulgaria (5.8) and Serbia (6.1), and the highest in Austria (8.4), and in Iceland and Finland (8.2) (European Commission, 2016).

Further, Slovenian Public Opinion surveys from the past few years report about a high level of satisfaction and optimism in young people. These surveys enable a comparison between different age categories. Among all age categories of the population in Slovenia, youth under 30 years are the happiest and most satisfied with their lives (Politbarometer, 2014; Slovenian Public Opinion, 2015; Slovenian Public Opinion, 2016).

Graph 1: THE AVERAGE ESTIMATE OF RESPONSES (1 – LOWEST ESTIMATE, 5 – HIGHEST ESTIMATE) TO QUESTIONS ABOUT HAPPINESS AND SATISFACTION WITH LIFE

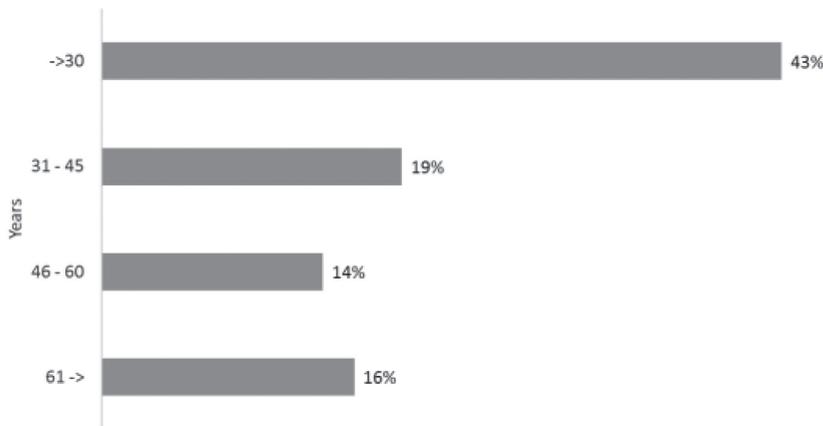


CJM, Politbarometer, 2014.

In the above-mentioned study from 2014 up to 30% of young people under the age of 30 declared themselves very happy. In other age groups, between 10% and 18% are very happy. Similarly, 28% of those in the group

under 30 years of age are very satisfied with their lives, along with between 9% and 18% of those in other age groups. Up to 89% of the former, with between 38% and 50% in other age groups, are also satisfied with their material conditions. Even more amazing are the figures showing that only 2% of respondents in the under-30 age group stated they are not happy at all, and 0% that they are completely dissatisfied with their lives. In other age groups, 5% to 11% stated they are not happy at all, and 6% to 8% that they are not satisfied with their lives. The young are also the most optimistic age group. As many as 43% of them are very optimistic, while among other age groups this share ranges between 14% and 19%.

Graph 2: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO ARE VERY OPTIMISTIC ACCORDING TO AGE GROUPS



CJM, Politbarometer, 2014.

Interestingly, similar results as in the Politbarometer 2014 study were revealed in the 2015 and 2016 Slovenian Public Opinion surveys.

Despite a high unemployment rate and the poor objective opportunities for young people's transition to adulthood, their satisfaction with their own lives in the new millennium has been growing. Such data require a more detailed analysis also because similar tendencies are found by researchers of youth elsewhere around the world. A similar trend is shown, for example, by Canadian surveys of the life orientations of young people from 2014 and 2015 (Simpson, 2015). In these surveys of Canadian youth up to 81% of the young aged between 14 and 25 in 2014, and 80% in 2015 described themselves as optimistic in the question: »Would you describe yourself as a person who is optimistic or pessimistic?«. Eighty-five percent of them are satisfied with their lives. Researchers find that most Canadian youth are happy, excited, optimistic and positive people. In general, they are satisfied and

think they have a good life, say it is easy to have fun, and are most excited for their own personal growth as they age. Drivers of happiness include: being a positive person, expecting to have a good day, the feeling that they have a good life, excitement in the future, and a family that makes them feel good.

Graph 3: OVERALL, HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH YOUR LIFE (AVERAGE VALUE ON A SCALE OF 0 (VERY UNSATISFIED) TO 10 (EXTREMELY SATISFIED))



CJM: Slovenian Public Opinion survey 2015, Slovenian Public Opinion survey 2016.

Similarly, German researchers in the Shell Jugendstudie studies of youth which have been conducted without interruption since the 1960s find that today German youth have never been so optimistic since the Second World War. Thus, as much as 61% of young people are optimistic regarding their personal future (and 52% are optimistic concerning the future of society), and only 3% are pessimists in relation to their personal future (Albert et al., 2016). A comparison between the beginnings of systematic youth research and the present situation shows a completely altered relationship between youth and society. Youth in the 1970s and 1980s were characterised by a kind of pessimistic activism. Particularly educated, urban, socially engaged young people were pessimists regarding their personal and social future.

This was corroborated by our first survey of Slovenian youth included in a study of then Yugoslav youth in the mid-1980s (Ule, 1988) and further supported by studies of German youth (Fischer and Fuchs, 1982). The most pessimistic Yugoslav youth were the young people in Slovenia, although they lived in the most favourable economic, social and political conditions in all of former Yugoslavia. Researchers even spoke about »the crisis paradox«. It seemed as if youth could »afford« to be pessimistic mainly in those places

where critical views and changes in the existing circumstances were more openly allowed. In that period, the youth pessimism, particularly social, was the result of their more critical and more active attitude to everyday life, while optimism was the result of a less critical and more affirmative attitude to what was going on in society. Critical pessimists wished for changes in society and wanted to change society, while optimists were satisfied with the existing conditions (Ule, 1988).

Considering the latest empirical findings, we can conclude that the »millennium« generation of young people seems to have adjusted to the new living conditions in a completely different way than past generations did. This is a generation that reduces and adjusts its wishes to realistic possibilities. According to the results of the above-mentioned studies, their life and value orientations foreground the need for a quality everyday life and good interpersonal relations. They maintain the quality of life by lowering their aspirations and wishes or avoiding problem situations that are difficult to solve or require extreme effort with unclear outcomes: if they cannot achieve self-realisation at work, they redirect their creativity to their spare time; if the harmonisation of career and family is too demanding, they postpone their decision to form a family indefinitely. For example, German studies of youth show a falling share of young people who think that one's own family is needed for happiness in life. Also decreasing is agreement with the view that having children is necessary for happiness in life (Albert et al., 2016). They also adjust work to their everyday life rather than the opposite. The social constituent of work and its usefulness for social development is also considered important.

Downward mobility is now a reality for the new generation

The rise of optimism and satisfaction with life seems to be a global phenomenon that reflects the social and ideological construction of youth in the modern world. And yet - how are we to interpret the data showing a general rise in optimism and satisfaction with the living conditions of youth in Slovenia and globally at a time when the world seems to be increasingly destabilised and unfriendly, particularly towards the young? Is this a response of a protected generation of young people who only take care of their own well-being? Are young people putting off decisions and responsibilities till adulthood, while living a prolonged childhood?

In any case, this no longer is the transitional generation that would have to adjust to new circumstances, but a post-transitional generation that has been socialised in(to) new circumstances. Since young people in modern societies are often the first indicator of deep social change, we can ask whether this change indicates a deeper shift in all of society, such as for

example the transition from traditional to modern societies, or can we only speak about shifts within modern society's existing structures. One possible interpretation is, once again, offered by Ulrich Beck in his new theory of society he presents in his latest book *The Metamorphosis of the World* (Beck, 2016). Beck says that the sociological concept of social change is no longer able to explain today's global phenomena. In his opinion, what we have to do with today is the metamorphosis of the world. Social change refers to permanent transformations in which the basic structures that support them remain constant. Conversely, the metamorphosis of the world destabilises these structures and all fundamental certainties of modern society, shaking the social constants of the existence and understanding of the world as we know them. It opens up a possibility for the oncoming of unexpected events that occur as side effects of the world's political and economic governance (such as waves of refugees and asylum-seekers, terrorist attacks, catastrophic weather changes, the explosion of the reactor in Fukushima, the financial and euro crisis, threats of total digital control).

The metamorphosis of the world also threatens the individualisation of life, about which Beck wrote quite affirmatively in his book on the risk society (Beck, 1986). Beck finds that, while the world is indeed becoming ever more individualised and fragmented, the individual is becoming a fundamental point of reference but, at the same time, the individual no longer matters. According to Beck, the metamorphosis of the world that is taking place tends to abolish the existing primacy of national economies, states and politics in the development of industrial and post-industrial modernisation, and is bringing a new global worldview Beck calls »cosmopolitanism«. He claims that when explaining the modern world we should substitute »methodological nationalism« with »methodological cosmopolitanism«. Beck finds that individualisation and cosmopolitanisation represent opposing moments in modern digital communication because digital communication »forces individuals to rely on themselves, and on the other side, it forces them to use the resources that the cosmopolitan spaces of action hold« (Beck, 2016: 138).

Metamorphosis is neither social change, transformation nor evolution, and it is not crisis. It is a mode of changing the nature of human existence. Metamorphosis in this sense simply means that what was unthinkable yesterday is real and possible today. That is why to those among us who have experience from past worlds this metamorphosis seems shocking. Today's generation of young people has been born into this social metamorphosis and is living it. Since their birth, they have incarnated, appropriated and internalised the key technological and cultural achievements of late modernity, particularly the digital networking of the world. They were already born as 'digital beings'. Modern young people have adopted some

technological and cultural achievements of late modernity as a constituent part of their »second nature«. They have developed a competence to enable them to manage a life between 'here' and 'there', a life full of avoidance and conciliation, and with the ability to deal with contradictions.

The triumph of neoliberalism and the vulgar economist way of thinking was joined by the digital revolution with its enormous potential that can seemingly be attached to anything. The metamorphosis of the world with its technological achievements has become so familiar to the new generation that they enjoy it and build their own life worlds on its basis. What has changed about an entire generation of young people not only includes neoliberal society's disinvestment in youth and the permanent fate of downward mobility, but also the fact that the new generation of young people live in a commercially carpet-bombed and commodified environment that is unlike anything experienced by previous generations (Giroux, 2016).

In these worlds the individual, local and global, private and public are being continuously interconnected. They primarily perceive and understand their private worlds as products of their own ingeniousness, curiosity and their individual and collective experiences. The older generations are falling far behind in this appropriation of the achievements of modernisation. The result of all this is that the different generations live in different worlds and no longer speak the same language. Beck says that we are contemporaries, but older generations do not live in »the same time« as younger generations (Beck, 2016: 192). Beck calls the former the »metamorphosis of generation« and the new generation of the young as the »generation of metamorphosis« (Beck, 2016: 20). He finds this to be 'generations of side effects': »Their existence and action are not grounded in political action or a new world picture but, first and foremost, in their somewhat pre-embryonic digital existence. ... This change of existence is unfolding without revolt or utopia; it is nothing but the side effect of digitalized modernity turned into the social DNA... The common concept of 'socialization' doesn't capture this any more" (Beck, 2016: 188).

These generations, which were born as digital beings (Beck, 2016) are at the same time socialised into fear, the catastrophic and »no alternative« syndrome. No wonder, therefore, that they are optimistic when they are so very ready for catastrophes of all kinds. If they are comparatively well off in their microworlds, fine: but this can only be so in a situation holding no social memory and no humanist heritage/background, that is, in a situation without comparison and without a past, when my present and myself have become the only referential framework. This means they are adapted to the present, but they will not know how, be able or want to change it in the way that their parents and grandparents' generation did.

The crisis has created new Divisions

What is problematic in this story is the growing 'youth divide'. Not all young people are satisfied with their lives. Not all young people have access to the opportunities available to their generation, and obstacles tend to accumulate for those who are disadvantaged. If global digital networking is producing a new form of generational and cultural homogenisation of youth, the diversity and inequality of life situations and chances, which are all too visible, are producing great differences and gaps in the young generation, and that is precisely what is generating particular tensions and explosive forces.

According to the EU Youth Report, approximately 20% of young people in the EU have poor opportunities or lack opportunities for the future. In fact, the EU Youth Report provides evidence that some young people are increasingly excluded from social and civic life (European Commission, 2016). The economic crisis has hit young people particularly hard. It has widened the gap between those with more and those with fewer opportunities. The gap is expanding between young people who study, are confident in finding a job and engage in social, civic and cultural life on one hand, and those with little hope of leading a fulfilling life and who are at risk of exclusion and marginalisation, on the other hand. Poverty rates are higher for young people than for the overall population and involuntary part-time work or protracted temporary positions expose this generation to the risk of long-term poverty.

German researchers of youth find that socially vulnerable and marginalised young people do not express optimism and satisfaction with life (neither in employment nor education or training), but quite a high level of social frustrations, anxiety and anger (Kaplan, 2014). Also according to EU Youth Report the level of optimism is not equal in all EU countries (European Commission, 2016). The highest pessimism is expressed by the young in those European countries burdened by severe economic crisis (such as Greece and Spain). French youth also experience growing pessimism. In 2014, 45% of young people in France stated they believe the future will be worse than was the life of their parents, and 43% think their children will be worse off than they are.

We are facing a gap in material resources, positions and opportunities of access in the young generation of the same nations and globally. Beck thus speaks about »*generational constellations*«, that is about the overlapping and interpenetration of the demographic dimension (age polarisation), material inequalities (education and labour market position), risk positions and ethnic-cultural diversities (Beck, 2016: 194). Every generation has its measure of outcasts. However, it does not often happen that the plight of

being outcast may stretch to embrace a whole generation. Yet this is precisely what may be happening in Europe now. With the prospects of long-term unemployment and long stretches of 'rubbish jobs' well below their skills and expectations, this is the first post-war generation to face the prospect of downward mobility.

Inactivity, poverty and exclusion do not strike evenly. Those starting life with fewer opportunities tend to accumulate disadvantages. Young people on the wrong side of this divide find it difficult to express their political voice. The less educated or less involved they are in social activities, the less they take part in voting, volunteering or cultural activities. Some young people are increasingly excluded from social and civic life. Worse still, some are at risk of disengagement, marginalisation or even violent radicalisation. As Zygmunt Bauman points out, one lesson to be learned from the recent uprising in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, is that a long-suffering group of highly educated but underemployed people can be the catalyst for long overdue societal change (Bauman, 2012). Recent tragic events remind us that exclusion can lead to radicalisation and even violent extremism.

Yet, on the other hand, the demands for global equality are spreading. They are exerting pressure on the existing structures and institutions of global inequality. There are global expectations of equality (Beck, 2012: 194). This spreading of norms and expectations of equality has far-reaching consequences for the younger generations. Different inequalities (between the haves and have nots, between the rich and poor populations of the world) are no longer accepted as fate but called into question, even if primarily questioned by the have nots, the poor, the inhabitants of distant lands and continents, who are beginning to rebel against social inequality (e.g. through their dreams and practices of migration) (Beck, 2016: 195).

Conclusion

We can conclude that pragmatic realism is a characteristic of the new generation of young people in Slovenia and across the world. They are growing up amid the metamorphosis of the world which they have accepted and adopted by lowering their aspirations and wishes to the level of the possible. What is important for them is the quality of everyday life and they have opted for 'either or' tactics: either self-realisation in work or in their spare time, either career or family. They have decided to be satisfied with their lives, optimistic and undemanding. What has changed about this entire generation of young people includes neoliberal society's disinvestment in youth and the permanent fate of downward mobility. Youth no longer maintain the hope of a privileged place that was offered to previous generations.

These new elements stem from the overall tendency to dismantle, deregulate and dissipate the once solid and relatively lasting frames in which the concerns and efforts of most individuals were inscribed (see Živoder, 2016 in this issue). Jobs, once seen as 'for life', are more often than not now temporary and may disappear virtually without notice, together with the factories or offices or bank branches which offered them. In such a world, it is wise and prudent not to make long-term plans or invest in the distant future; not to become tied down too firmly to any particular place, group of people, cause, even an image of oneself; to be guided in today's choices not by the wish to control the future, but by the reluctance to mortgage it. In other words, more often than not 'to be provident' now means to avoid commitment. To be free to move when the opportunity knocks. To be free to leave when it stops knocking. It represents, one may say, a kind of 'rational adaptation' to the new conditions in which life is being lived (Bauman, 2012). Going further, Hurrellman (2015) dubs modern young people mainly pragmatic idealists because they try to change society from below, coming from their microworlds. They have realised that changing the world from the outside only exacerbates the fighting fronts, while changes fail to or only rarely occur.

The basic ways of life are changing very quickly. The grandparents of the modern generation were still committed to the values of hard work, diligence and community values. The modern generation's parents principal life values were education and consumer mentalities. However, in contemporary society, threatened from all sides by precarity and unemployment, neither good education nor hard work are tickets to success. Even the skills once required by jobs are ageing fast, turning overnight from assets into liabilities. Being prudent and provident, thinking of the future, is becoming ever more difficult as there is little sense in accumulating skills for which there may be no demand tomorrow. Young men and women are entering adult life, yet none can tell what the rules of the life will be like in the future. This explains why the message the new generation of young people has received from their parents is that what are most important are personal happiness, the quality of life and satisfaction with life. A privatised existence has its many joys: freedom of choice, the opportunity to try many ways of life, the chance to make oneself according to one's self-image. But it also has its sorrows – loneliness and incurable uncertainty as to the choices made and still to be made being foremost among them.

It is difficult to convince ourselves that new and attractive opportunities for young people will emerge through a period of economic restructuring following recession. The evidence points to a future in which job insecurity becomes a defining feature of the life of young people in the new economy. Youth itself is defined exactly by the ability to rise above the psychological

and physical process of growing up, and in that way is becoming a socially, culturally and politically significant social group. If there is no future for these members of society, or if the paths to those futures are closed and inaccessible, then we can no longer speak about “youth” in the true sense of the word. It is interesting that policymakers are not disturbed by the lack of young people in public life. Moreover, today’s adult society, due to its developmental irresponsibility, is literally and without hesitation parasitising the future of later generations (Ule, 2010). Contemporary society’s irresponsibility for the future goes hand in hand with society’s indifference to young people, and occurs irrespective of the cult of youth that otherwise reigns in contemporary mass culture.

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