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Youth Policies in Europe: logics and actors in the field

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Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to capture the logic and mechanisms underlying youth policies across Europe. I take a broad sociological approach, seeking to highlight the main focuses in the functioning of these policies. In fact, while the implementation of youth polices across European countries is deeply influenced by contextual factors, including national political climates, some overarching issues of wider interest emerge, and these are relevant to processes of youth transitions. Whether youth policies are more appropriate and effective than policies in other areas is also a subject of youth studies debates. However, the conceptual framework that justifies attention to youth citizenship and youth participation is established, and foregrounds youth policies. After illustrating this mechanism, the chapter gives an overview of the institutions more directly involved in ensuring a focus on youth policies and suggests how they are linked to the theoretical framework of transitions to adulthood.

Keywords: youth policy, transitions, EU-related institutions, autonomy, vulnerability, social cohesion, participation, citizenship.

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Introduction

For anyone wishing to comprehend the impact that youth policies have in the lives of young people, there are few reading materials that would be more imaginative and evocative than the paper by the youth scholar, youth worker and youth advocate, Howard Williamson, entitled 'From Tommy Butler to Tony Blair' (2001). The paper suggests how the impact of youth policies extends in various directions. Williamson establishes this through the account of a hypothetical young person on the practical underpinnings entailed in specific governmentality of youth. By concentrating on a UK context, the paper also demonstrates the influence of specific political climates and contextual circumstances.

Despite such contributions, some are critical of whether current policies have a sufficiently recent focus so as to *substantially* equip young people in their transitions to adulthood (White & Wyn 2008, p. 117). For instance, words such as 'participation' and 'citizenship' have been labelled buzzwords (Kovacheva 1999), referring to a general need to actively create spaces for young people's agency, whilst meaning little more. Amidst this debate, this chapter aims to briefly introduce the topic of youth policy in a European context and put forward its relevance in relation to processes leading to transitions into adulthood. I begin by presenting the key issues in defining youth policy**.** Then, I discuss the general requisites for youth policy, including why such policies are necessary and the guiding principles that underly them. I then proceed by illustrating the main actors who have shaped the field of youth policy in Europe over the last 20 years and to this day. Given the importance of contextual aspects, I conclude by making reference to country-specific regimes of transition and suggest possibilities for a post-pandemic future for youth policies.

Defining youth policy

It is not easy to find a homogeneous view of youth policy in Europe (Denstad 2009). Youth policy has had its struggles in being recognised as a field of social policy, as Wallace and Kovacheva (1998) warned, often suffering from an incoherent agenda and/or increasing complexity (Williamson 2007,

2008), overlooking the conditions of destandardization in which young people live (Walther 2006) and at times limiting itself to the issues faced by young people as workers (i.e., only looking at their conditions in relation to employment) rather than the variety of dimensions that may be relevant (such as, education and leisure). The problem of disentangling issues pertaining to different areas is a substantial one when talking about youth policies. Clarity regarding an overarching framework is essential to the implementation of youth policies (Siurala 2006), affecting efficiency in the mechanism of agenda setting, which then impacts priorities.

Recently, efforts have been made in this direction. Though neither homogeneous nor coherent, the youth policy field is definitely becoming a lively area of discussion in Europe. I will start therefore by quoting the definition of youth policy given by the Council of Europe:

> *a strategy implemented by public authorities with a view to providing young people with opportunities and experiences that support their successful integration into society and enable them to be active and responsible members of their societies,* as well as agents of change. (Council of Europe CM/Rec (2015), my emphasis).

Taking inspiration from the work of Lasse Siurala (2006), the 'Glossary of youth' provides a definition which stresses the *purpose* of youth policy:

> *The purpose of youth policy is to create conditions for learning, opportunity and experience, which ensure and enable young people to develop the knowledge, skills and competences. This is in order to allow young people to be* actors of democracy*; integrate into society; and, in particular,* enable them to play an active role *in both civil society and the labour market. The key measures of youth policies are to promote citizenship learning and the integrated policy approach*. (Siurala 2006, my emphasis*).*

Indeed, the pervasive approach to youth policy often underlines a direction that should be taken, emphasising the 'ought to' or value aspect of actions to be taken by young people – the reinforcement of social cohesion being one of the most popular (Cuzzocrea 2021).

Another important feature of youth policy is that it needs to find its space in between more established policy areas (such as employment or education). In fact, for some commentators, youth policies are more appropriate and effective than those in other areas which also have a direct impact on young people, as would be the case in an employment manoeuvre. It is a characteristic of youth

policy that of being intersectional. For others, however, it should be rather the opposite, meaning that youth should be a primary focus whatever the field of application (Denstad 2009).

In value terms, youth policy *should be based* on 'an opportunity-focused rather than a problem-oriented approach'; 'involve young people both in the strategic formulation of youth policies and in eliciting their views about the operational effectiveness of policy implementation'; and 'create the conditions for learning', so that 'young people […] develop the knowledge, skills and competencies to play a full part both in the labour market and in civil society' (Denstad 2009, p. 124-125). I will explore this 'ought to' dimension a little more in this paper. This is sociologically really interesting, given that it corresponds to a logic by which social problems are 'products of a process of collective definition' (Tsaliki & Chronaki 2020, p. 7). Along this vein, we can argue that the concept of 'youth' is itself socially constructed, as widely recognised in youth studies.

A need to establish systems for robust data collection has also been put forward. This aspect in particular has been used to justify the involvement of many scholars from different subdisciplines to shorten the distance between policy domains and research. In such youth related data collection, the object of observation may also vary, encompassing 'social progress, solidarity, social justice, active citizenship, social and economic integration', as is the specific angle or approach taken: 'from regulation to emancipation, from prevention to intervention, from proactive to reactive, from problem oriented to opportunity focused, from paternalistic to open' (Lavchyan & Williamson 2019, p.8).

This list puts the emphasis on a dichotomous construction between positive and negative aspects referred to young people. According to the Council of Europe, a youth policy *should have* the following common objectives:

> **…**to invest purposefully in young people in a coherent and mutually reinforcing way, wherever possible, through an opportunity-focused rather than a problem oriented approach; to involve young people both in the strategic formulation of youth policies and in eliciting their views about the operational effectiveness of policy implementation; to create the conditions for learning, opportunity and experience which ensure and enable young people to develop the knowledge, skills and competencies to play a full part both in the labour market and in civil society; to establish systems for robust data collections, both to demonstrate the effectiveness of youth policies and to reveal the extent to which "policy gaps" exist in relation to effective service delivery to young people from certain social

groups, in certain areas or in certain conditions; to display a commitment to reducing such policy gaps where they demonstrably exist. (Council of Europe, 2021a).

In European youth policies, the centrality of reciprocity and collaboration amongst different stakeholders concerned with young people's lives is known as 'the magic triangle' approach (Chisholm 2006). This term emphasises the aspiration for a balanced input (and a resultant effective and robust policy) from those who write youth policies (i.e., policy makers), those who study youth (youth researchers), and practitioners who are in contact with youth (such as youth workers). Most importantly, young people themselves are placed at the centre of the triangle. The magic triangle also exists in a pejorative version, known as the 'Bermuda Triangle' (Planas-Lladó et al. 2014), which stresses that attempts at collaboration might be weak and unsuccessful; and an ameliorative version, put forward by those who see the potential of *really* positioning youth within the communities in which they feel embedded at the heart of research, policy, and engagement (Zentner 2016). A range of techniques facilitates this process of collaboration, including 'structured dialogue', whereby youth are invited to literally sit at the same table with the other actors (policy makers, researchers, and youth workers) engaged in consultation regarding in policies that concern them, and express their views about their needs and priorities. Such a mechanism may involve a shared agenda and a principle of subsidiarity, meaning that the member states may not implement any particular measure outside areas of so-called 'exclusive competence' (Williamson 2002). In the next section, I will illustrate few transversal aspects that justify the conceptual basis of youth policies

Conceptual foundations for youth policy

Some critics have argued that young people are often seen as adults 'in the making', the assumption being that young people (and children) are nothing but incomplete adult citizens. This bias generates a hierarchical notion of citizenship, with some citizens viewed as being more fully developed then others. According to this young people are due to 'climb the ladder' of citizenship as time goes by, namely as they become adult (Smith 2015). This is a vision that was first challenged in the United Nation Convention on the rights of the Child in 1989 (UNCCR 1989). Discourses and theories of citizenship are discussed in relation to discourses of 'rights, competence, agency, autonomy, independence and participation'. It is fair to acknowledge that a complex picture is recognised to foreground such notion and, therefore, a multiplicity of possible youth participation has been formed. For example, according to Williamson (2005 p. 14) specific initiatives for socially excluded young people 'dovetail with wider measures concerned with the promotion of active citizenship,

lifelong learning and community safety. To separate one from the other would produce a false picture'.

However, the primary goal tends to be the sustainment of forms of social cohesion (Smith 2015, p. 357-358) and how this takes shape in specific programmes (see Cuzzocrea 2021). This is justified in reference to the fact that young people are seen as 'apprentice citizens' (White & Wyn 2008, p.108), corresponding to that which in social policy has been considered a 'position of historic powerlessness' (Davies 2019, p. 6). Monica Barry (2005, p. 109) notes this in fact that:

> the essentialist nature of the term "young" emphasises young people's "otherness". The concept of "youth" segregates and problematises young people to the exclusion of the wider social and political environment of which they are a part.

In youth studies, Evans (1995, quoted in White & Wyn 2008, p. 108) distinguishes between a 'minimal' and 'maximal' citizenship. Minimal citizenship is reached when civic and legal status are granted. Maximal citizenship emphasises a participatory approach to political involvement. It considers ways of overcoming the social disadvantages that undermine citizenship by denying (young) people full participation in society. It is therefore based upon a consciousness of oneself as a member of a shared democratic culture. The relevance of the distinction between maximal and minimal citizenship in the study of youth is illustrated by White and Wyn when they say that 'maximal citizenship is also integrative— it provides a mechanism for *building connections* between young people and communities' (White & Wyn 2008, p. 110, my emphasis). Many other examples can be highlighted from policies based on the perceived need to 'engage the disengaged' (Williamson 2005); in particular, those related to the NEETs (not in employment, education, or training), regarding which a lot of attention has recently been paid. In this case, getting a job is 'a way of avoiding exclusion' (France 2007, p. 64), and facing the so called 'blame culture' (France 2007, p. 65) levelled against some social strata of youth. A blame culture, in fact, entails 'encouraging the poor and excluded to take their "place" within the lower end of the labour market' (France 2007, p. 64).

In any case, participation is a medium through which full engagement can be accomplished. Engaging young people is not considered an easy feat, and it is well beyond the scope of this chapter to exhaustively illustrate the role of embeddedness and participation in the transitions to adulthood, with a recent emphasis on belongings (Harris et al. 2021). Youth participation extends to various forms, from traditional forms (such as voting), to the most current (such as digital

participation). Young people are said to possess different 'participatory capital' (Wood 2015). Forms of participation are varied, but can also occur at many geographical levels, starting from connections within the municipalities in which they live, to the regional, national and supranational levels (see for instance Cuzzocrea 2019). However, some institutions, such as municipalities, are blamed for their reluctance to use social media as a form of communication, an aspect which widens the gap between youth and the wider population (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres 2015, p. 398). At the other end of the spectrum, discourses on the importance of youth participation have penetrated the highest levels of policy making, albeit largely in non-traditional areas of action (for example, in those inspired by the perceived need to align with self-entrepreneurship) and through non-traditional methods.

Despite the extensive attention that has been devoted to the failure of young people in fulfilling expectations of their role in the labour market and/or education/training, the traditional dichotomy between the super-engaged and super-disconnected young people is possibly destined to collapse. In particular, the possibility of engaging online is, at least in theory, a strong medium through which this dichotomy could fade away, given the relative democratic vein of online tools. Recently, much attention has, understandably, been devoted to the use of digital tools (Șerban et al. 2020). In such a situation, youth policies could be characterised according to a broad spectrum of tools, ideally with a broader reach, and ultimately reduce the inequalities in the participatory capital that I mentioned above.

Correspondingly, in terms of research, newly emerging techniques have been explored with a view to overcoming (what some perceive as) deficiencies in youth participation and engagement. For instance, participatory videos (Allan 2012; Milne et al. 2012), which are in fact called 'youth-centred tools' (Mitchell & McGill 2015), or art-based techniques (Larson & Walker 2006), are believed to be relevant and of interest to young people. These methods, and the creative strand in which they are situated (Hall & Holmes 2020), assume that visual elements are able to enhance the possibility of engagement – a goal which, in itself must be viewed critically, especially in conjunction with empowerment (see Lyon & Carabelli 2016). The correspondence is here that both engagement and empowerment are key elements in youth policy.

On the other hand, a significant gap that is yet to be filled relates to all those domains of youth policy that do not sufficiently acknowledge the possibility for youth to contribute to society. To use White and Wyn's (2008, p.110) words:

> One of the ironies of youth participation is that when young people do mobilise politically, they are seldom taken seriously as participants or as democratic citizens because of the paradox associated with young people's engagement in political activity.

Although there are exceptions (see, for instance, the platform 'Edgeryders', as analysed in Cuzzocrea and Collins (2020[1]) or maybe even youth protests), a major change in outlook is needed to fully recognise the potentialities of young people, especially when acting together in forms of aggregation that do not necessarily assume the 'traditional' form of social movement (Cuzzocrea et al. 2021).

The lack of recognition of the potential of young people does not stand alone in the studies of youth broadly intended; several scholars looking at youth transitions (for instance Bynner et al. 2003; Jones 2002; Roberts 2011) have critically discussed the polarisation that exists between the so-called 'choice biographies' (which have taken the form of slow transitions, based on long periods in education), and 'fast track transitions' (i.e. the transitions of those who look for early entrance on the labour market). The underlying criticism is that too little attention has been paid to youth who do not identify in either of these extreme positions, with the conclusion that more research should be done on 'ordinary' youth (Roberts 2011; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006). In other words, 'a missing middle' has been created in the sociological conceptualisation of youth transitions (Roberts 2011; for a focus on Southern countries, Cairns et al. 2014; Mandich 2018). Such 'ordinary youth' may also well be the target of many youth policy programmes. Yet, policies could have a broader destination group. Williamson (2002), for instance, distinguishes between those young people who, in respect to youth policies, are 'socially excluded' and those who are 'essentially confused', 'temporarily side tracked', and/ or 'deeply alienated'.

Based on a rejection of the idea that youth are merely passive recipients of policy measures, EU related institutions have made efforts to elaborate policy research methods to further include youth. One of these is certainly youth work, a hybrid form of activation which assumes several

[1] Convened by the Council of Europe and co-funded with the European Commission, Edgeryders' aim was to explore those areas of interest in young people's lives where existing youth policies were failing to provide adequate support for a transition towards independent adulthood. It was conceived to elicit spontaneous, bottom-up contributions from participants, so that they could offer mutual support in their attempts to construct meaningful transitions. Edgeryders took place through an online platform.

forms, variously referred to as: social education, informal education, positive youth development, personal and social development, non-formal education, and so on (Williamson 2017). These measures tend to be based on non-formal learning and voluntary participation. That youth work is interestingly related to youth transitions theory is indicated by its definition as a 'transit lounge to adulthood' (Verschelden et al. 2009, quoted in Williamson 2017, p. 173).

Youth can be regarded as both a sociological object and an object of political administrative intervention (Cicchelli 2012). In the discussion that follows, I will sketch some ambiguities implied in this distinction. A certain cultural construction of youth is based on a discourse of anxiety, and this has had broad consequences in shaping public policy (Tsaliki & Chronaki 2020). In response to the emphasis on needing to control youth and following the definition of the 'Glossary of a European framework for youth policy' (2006), it is possible to find a constant reference to *autonomy* as 'a possibility for [the] independent life of young people' in many policy documents. For instance, this is the case in the European Commission 'White Paper's New Impetus for European Youth (2001, and then 2002, 2003, 2004); the European Youth Pact (2005) -Communication of the Revised Lisbon Strategy; and the Renewed Social Agenda (2008). Even before the 2000s, it is present in the 'Youth for Europe Programme' (1989).

However, there is a background of ambiguity in the social construction of youth where autonomy is quoted in these EU policy documents (see 'Youth Sector Strategy' 2030). On the one hand, there is a recognition that youth today face conditions of particular vulnerability, given to highly uncertain times (Leccardi 2005). Policy documents clearly recognise that transitions now take longer, and are more complex and risky:

> Difficulties in education, employment, inclusion and health, further combined to problems in finance, housing or transport, make it difficult for young people to achieve autonomy, a situation where they have the resources and opportunities to manage their own lives, fully participate in society and decide independently (European Union 2009, p. 3).

In these documents, however, youth are also recognised as a key resource in society. The underlying discourse is that it is necessary for young people to achieve autonomy in order to 'make use of this resource'. Hence, autonomy is the medium through which to meet wider 'social goals': 'Young people are not a burdensome responsibility but a critical resource to a society which can be mobilised to achieve higher social goals' (European Union 2009, p. 2); 'young people are essential

to achieve this' (European Commission 2010, p. 2) [i.e. smart, inclusive, sustainable growth, Europe 2020 Strategy]. According to European policies, youth should be creative, have an enterprising spirit, be mobile (see, in particular, the document just mentioned known as 'Youth on the Move', which was in turn an important part of the 2020 Youth Strategy), become employable (if not employed; desire to fully participate; to be positive towards intergenerational solidarity; to be 'empowered'). In the next section, I will introduce the main institutional agents of youth policy.

Agents of youth policy

The fact that youth policies are deeply imbued with values such as solidarity and social cohesion (Lavchyan & Williamson 2019, p. 4) seems to be a product of the involvement of institutions such as the Council of Europe, whose primary area of work is the development of democratic societies. It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the influence of the Council of Europe and other main actors, which I will do, albeit briefly, in this section of the chapter. This will also include an overview of the instruments they use.

The Council of Europe (hereafter CoE*)* was one of the first international institutions to develop an agenda that was sensitive to young people. By organising the first international expert review of national youth policy in Finland in 1997, it established a mechanism for assessing national youth policy in Europe (Denstad 2009). Thereafter, other initiatives proliferated, at that time in relation to certain geographical European areas, such as the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (1999). The long-term strategy of the CoE in promoting youth policy in Europe was already apparent in the 2008 paper, *The future of the Council of Europe youth policy: Agenda 2020,* which had a focus on human rights and democracy, living together in diverse societies, and the social inclusion of young people. Also noteworthy is the fact that the CoE is structured to work on a 'co- management' basis. This involves a dialogue between the European Steering Committee for Youth (CDEJ), made up of representatives of the 49 member states that belong to the CoE, and an Advisory Council on Youth, made up of representatives from non-governmental youth organisations in Europe.

Since the 2000s, efforts to find common ground in youth policies at the European level have become visible, with the involvement, inter alia, of the *United Nations*, and the organisation of the first Conference of Ministers for Youth, which took place in Lisbon in 1998, and increasing reference to the conditions of youth in various documents. A landmark in the development of youth policies

in Europe is considered to be the 'White Paper on Youth' (European Commission 2001), given that it:

> …brought the issue of youth policy to centre stage of the European Union at a time when 10 candidate countries were very receptive to guidance and direction from the European Commission and eager to develop their policies in line with EU policy (Denstad, 2009:9).

However, as far back as 1972, we saw the establishment of the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg (a second followed in Budapest in 1995) and the European Youth Foundation.

The Council of Europe and the European Union, both strong advocates for the development of national youth policies, currently pursue different mechanisms for encouraging cross-sectoral holistic policies (Denstad 2009). For the *European Commission*, there have been different components to this involvement:

> Promoting young people's citizenship and active participation in all areas of society (through the policy priorities of the Commission, the Youth in Action Programme and the European Youth Portal);
>
> Promoting education, youth employment and social inclusion, in particular stressing the transition phase from education to employment which is often precarious for young people (through the implementation of the European Youth Pact);

Advocating for the inclusion of a youth dimension in other sectoral policies (Denstad, 2009)

Since it produced the 'White Paper' in 2001, the European Commission has promoted the elaboration of evidence-based youth policies in the member states and is committed to planning its policies through a consultative process involving evaluation methods. Up until that point, the involvement of the European Union in youth policy had been primarily limited to the administration of the European Commission's youth mobility programmes, the first of which was established in 1988.

As an instrument in line with the interpretation of youth policy as being characterised by 'a magic triangle' mechanism (Chisholm 2006), the so-called *Open Method of Coordination* (OMC) 'aims to strike a balance between European integration and national diversity by encouraging convergence of objectives, performance and broad policy approaches, but not of specific programmes' (Keune 2008, p. 51). Supported by the White Paper on Youth, this method has as its

aim to encourage and support the development of common objectives in terms of 'benchmarks' and 'indicators', and the dissemination of best practices. The Renewed Framework, which followed the White Paper, has proposed an even greater emphasis on knowledge-building, evidence-based youth policy, and mutual learning (as noted by Devlin 2010). These mechanisms permit the European Commission and the Council of Youth Ministers to be dominant players in conjunction with EU member states.

In the last decade, a number of youth-focused networks supported by institutions, have emerged, which strive to foster opportunities for young Europeans seeking pathways to independent adulthood (Petkovic & Cuzzocrea 2014). The *Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe,* founded in 2002, builds on this reality. It has developed a virtual Internet-based *European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy* (called EKCYP), which brings together the policy positions of the European institutions in various areas[2]. A variety of other networks operate primarily online[3].

From the supranational to the national level

I have so far discussed the supranational level of youth policies in Europe. But what form do youth policies take at the national level? This section seeks to address this central issue. A national youth policy is a government's commitment and practice towards ensuring good living conditions and opportunities for the young population of a country (Denstad 2009, p.11). The involvement of central national government can vary significantly, as recognised also by the Youth Sector Strategy 2030. For instance, Italy does not have a national youth law (as for art.31 of the Italian Constitution). However, the 'Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza' (PNRR), namely the plan to tackle the post-pandemic which is part of the wider 'Next Generation EU', definitely shows a more direct interest on the role of young people as agents of change.

If the *concept* of a national youth policy is now well established (Denstad, 2009), it is uncontested that when youth policies' principles leave the supranational level, they are implemented to different extents and according to different modalities (Chevalier & Loncle, 2021).

[2] The database annotates information and examples of best practice, and includes a database of experts known as the *Pool of European Youth Researchers* (known as PEYR). See https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/council-of-europe-youth-policy, accessed on 04 01 2021.

[3] See for example the EACEA (Education, Culture and Audiovisual Executive Agency of the European Union) Youth Wiki, launched in 2018, which describes itself as "Europe's online encyclopaedia" for national youth policies.

This is due not only to national characteristics but, even more broadly, the different welfare regimes to which countries refer. These are characteristics of the different countries that constitute the EU, depending on the role of the market, the family and the state, as well as their interconnections. They define, in Esping Andersen's (1990) famous typology, three aspects that are key in the transition to adulthood: demercification (namely, the possibility of having an acceptable quality of life regardless of one's participation in the labour market), destratification (which defines the position regarding the distribution of social privileges) and defamilisation (namely, independence from the family which allows individuals to acquire resources and opportunities).

In light of these necessary acknowledgements, I am proceeding towards a conclusion to this discussion with a quick exploration into existing conceptualisations of welfare mechanisms that may illustrate how youth policies operate in different areas of Europe. The concept of youth transition regimes (Walther 2006) is particularly helpful in importing the characteristics of welfare regimes (as famously identified by Esping Andersen 1990) into the analysis of youth transitions. Walther elaborates on regime types: the universalistic regime of the Nordic countries (characterised by extended welfare provision combined with an inclusive schooling system); the liberal regime of Anglo-Saxon countries, characterised by an adaptive and versatile education and training system, combined with open, easy access to employment. At the same time, employment is poorly protected and access to welfare is not universal. Then there is the employment-centred regime of the continental countries, which has educational and training frameworks that are more selective and standardised. The fourth system is typical of Italy, Spain and Portugal and is called sub-protective. It is centred on a non-selective educational system and is combined with low-standard training schemes. Access to the labour market is difficult, and high rates of informal and precarious jobs remain. This typology may also be identified as familistic given the prominence of the family on which young people are highly dependent. Each of these transition regimes, here described in their structural terms, is accompanied by specific concepts of youth, of youth unemployment and of disadvantage. For instance, the universalistic regimes see personal development and citizenship as core for the construction of youth; the liberal regime instead values early economic independence. Lastly, there will be a specific focus on certain policies as opposed to others in each of these regimes. (Walther 2006, pp. 125-129).

The reason it is worth devoting a few words to these specifications is that social researchers reflecting on youth policies need to carefully consider the link between youth transitions and welfare regimes (Kiilakoski 2019) as well as the citizenship forms that it takes (Woodman & Wyn

2015). The conceptualisation offered by above mentioned German scholar Andreas Walther, is the result of reflections emerging from three large research projects that took place across several European countries between 1998 and 2004. Inspired by the broad empirical material, Walther was able to highlight the dynamics of biographical construction by young people, looking at it in conjunction with the economic, institutional, and cultural aspects within the specific contexts in which they were based. In doing so, an ambitious middle range conceptualisation emerged, which is highly relevant to understanding the features that a youth policy requires if it is to have a significant impact on young people's lives in the real conditions that they inhabit.

Other authors have engaged in similarly broad attempts and, like Walther, their work can be considered the conceptual starting point for understanding why youth policies have such different effects. It also helps to establish why youth researchers who operate in this arena need to sustain a dialogue with other parties involved. First, Walther draws not only from Esping Andersen but also from du Bois Reynold and Stauber (2015, cited in Harris et al. 2021, p. 120), whose work is more centred on youth biographies. Another key contribution is the work of David Raffe (2003) who, reflecting on the use of the metaphor of a 'pathway' (often used but also very much criticised in youth studies), discusses specific configurations in the nexus between education and work, the classical heart of youth policy preoccupations. At the core of his analysis lies the fact that, on the one hand, academic drift may be irreversible and that, on the other, vocational pathways may become trapped in a vicious circle of low status and low expectations, thereby *de facto* inducing young people from the working classes to specific destinies.

A central feature of such studies is to investigate the freedom 'left' to young people to determine their career trajectories once the key decisions in education have already been made. This obviously intertwines with broad cultural aspirations and a feeling of 'fitting in' rather than exploring– and/or at times suffering– a social and cultural milieu where one may never feel that they belong, as noted in the classic text *Learning to Labour* (Willis 1977). The work by Raffe (2008) was then expanded into a conceptualisation named 'transition systems'; this has had an important influence through its capacity to describe the features of a country's institutional arrangements which, in turn, shape young people's education–work transitions. These are said to explain the persistence of national variations in transition processes and outcomes.

Such approaches are echoed in the even broader outlook offered by the British Sociologist Ken Roberts' conceptualisation. Roberts (2009) talks about 'opportunity structure' as an adequate term to reflect on the possibilities for young people to make a more or less successful transition

throughout generations. This author is convinced that scholars' reflections should depart from employers' recruitment behaviour and preferences, and only from there, look at how young people find their way through the system based on labour market structures (Roberts, 2018). This way, policy-wise it makes sense to think about entry into the labour market first. Given that Raffe's work reflections are based on the specific educational path that one embarks upon, the discussion inevitably overlaps with the more specific analysis of educational systems, as much as this can be said for Walther's work. Despite these differences, the end point is that such conceptualisations are able to characterise systems in a country-based way, dividing them into what Roberts (2018) defines as 'recognisable types'. Not only country specific examinations, but also more comparative work (see for instance, Chauvel & Schröder 2014; Van de Velde 2008), is needed for these tools to be further advanced.

Last developments and conclusions

The above discussion has illustrated the mechanisms and the policy actors who have been protagonists of youth policy in Europe in the last 20 years or so across Europe. Most studies of youth transitions in Europe take these sorts of characteristics into account and it is therefore essential that youth policy bears them in mind too, so as for them to be successfully implemented. Should we turn from the last 20 years or so to the most current situation, it would be difficult to identify completely different mechanisms, and completely different actors. Possibly, we can state that the field has become increasingly populated, with a growing number of NGOs (referring both to self-governed youth organisations and NGOs working with young people) operating in the field:

> There is now a burgeoning private sector in the youth field, providing consultancy, training, research, and practice, producing both more competition and more collaboration. There are, as a result, what might be called "permeable boundaries" where different institutions and organisations seek both to define and defend their unique character and contribution (their "distinction") and yet simultaneously share with and adopt practice from the work of others (CoE 2020b, p. 4).

For instance, the apparatus for training practitioners in the youth sector is becoming more articulated than ever. Indeed, the basis of the three European youth work conventions was to find homogeneous grounds for those in the field[4].

Policy documents upon which the current youth policy in Europe is implemented include: the 'Youth Sector Strategy 2030', which refers to the *modus operandi* of the Council of Europe in the youth field; the 'European Union youth strategy 2019-2027'; the 'United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'; the 'United Nations youth strategy'. This latter document contains five strategic priorities in the areas of youth voice and participation, education and health, and economic empowerment. The current EU Youth Strategy is based on eleven goals: Connecting EU with Youth; Equality of All Genders; Inclusive Societies; Information & Constructive Dialogue; Mental Health & Wellbeing; Moving Rural Youth Forward; Quality Employment for All; Quality Learning; Space and Participation for All; Sustainable Green Europe; Youth Organisations & European Programmes.[5] In the limited space of this chapter, I can only recommend a close reading of these policy documents, for the complexity of principles contained within. A further issue to be considered is that of evaluation, obviously a central aspect for those primarily interested in the study of transitions (see, for instance, Lonean 2020).

Current and future policies must surely consider the additional vulnerabilities that the COVID 19 pandemic is creating for young people, alongside the already existing ones. The limited jobs available, social distancing and online learning have exposed young people to a degree that policy makers must take into consideration. There are also the consequences for the mental health that these risks will have for many young people. These consequences will be heightened in some sectors rather others, for instance with those engaged in mobility abroad -a florid area of youth policy- which is obviously very much affected at the time of writing (see for instance Krzaklewska & Şenyuva, 2020). According to some, the COVID 19 crises has seen solidarity among countries and stakeholders in the field of youth policies. Institutions such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe, UNESCO and many other international organisations have shared resources and opened access to platforms, for instance by creating dedicated webpages and aggregating the available

[4] See final declaration of the third European Youth Work convention here: https://www.eywc2020.eu/downloads/doctrine/WebforumVeranstaltungenWebsiteBundle:Media-file-54/3rdEYWC_finalDeclaration.pdf, accessed 03 02 2021.

[5] See the dedicated website to the Youth Goals, https://youthforeurope.eu/european-youth-goals-2019-2027/, accessed 03 02 2021.

resources for young people, educators, and parents. (Stefan & Șerban 2020). Shortly, those involved in the monitoring and studies of youth, such as those looking at the construction and implementation of youth policy, will have to report on the depth of these interventions.

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