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Title

‘Foreclosed future’ in between continuity and innovation in youth’ futures research

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Abstract

This contribution discusses how the metaphor of youth futures as ‘foreclosed futures’ suggested by Santiago del Rìo et al is both rooted in existing literature on youth’s experiences of temporal suspension and at the same time extends that literature by addressing the shifting structural conditions youth people face today. This commentary therefore highlights how the intensifying climate of hardship further reinforces and strengthens the central argument of the article ‘Austere life-course and forecloses futures’ which is developed through the proposal of the metaphor ‘foreclosed futures’, to understand the particular view of the future amongst young people in austerity regimes.

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I am pleased to have been invited to comment on the article ‘Austere life-course and forecloses futures’, authored by Santiago del Rìo, Sarah M. Hall, Elisabeth Ackerley and Laura Fenton, assuming that as a sociologist – more precisely, as a youth sociologist- I would enjoy reading any proposal of conceptual advancement on the topic of austerity and youth’s futures, specifically from a geography angle. What I read is, indeed, a mixture of elements in continuity with core ideas of transitions in youth research and studies of youth temporalities on one hand, and on the other, some innovative features that will make the contribution valuable beyond geography - and sociology- itself.

In what follows, I present my reading of this, showing how the article is entrenched in both previous contributions and how it also pushes these ideas forward in light of how structural conditions for youth have changed, and the resultingly exacerbated climate of hardship that may well sustain the central argument of the original contribution of this paper.

The authors of the article develop two main ideas: the first revolves around the metaphor of ‘foreclose futures’; the second is a reinterpretation of the life course under a framework of ‘re-institutionalisation’, or ‘familialisation of the life course’. This second point will come as no surprise for those familiar with Mediterranean contexts. Given this, and given the nature of this piece and the limited space available, I will concentrate on the first idea and its relation to existing studies of youth transitions.

By the suggested metaphor of a ‘foreclosed future’, the authors mean ‘how austerity has sized control over young people’s future while imposing constraints that inhabit their ability to envision and achieve stable and secure futures’ (page 2). Safely backed up by analysis of data collected in several countries, the authors ground their arguments in ‘geographically varied forms’. Conceptually speaking, the metaphor conveys the image of something that has been taken from youth, with the literal meanings being ‘to take possession and prevent’. I will first explain how I see this as deeply rooted in several previous interpretations of the hardship faced by young people in contemporary society, which has often viewed as resulting in prolonged youth transitions, a kind of suspension.

In her influential article on Dutch youth, Manuela Du Bois Reymond (1998) had talked about the rejection of assuming an adult role, with young people not wanting ‘to commit *yet*’ (my emphasis). This seminal article conveyed a feeling of unreadiness, a desire to take time in order to make definite choices. This mechanism is confined to a phase, which many scholars have described as a moratorium, whereby youth is precisely defined as a societal ‘license to postpone’ (Côté and Hallahar, 1994). This phase, during which the famous ‘choice biography’ could be identified at its peak, was never meant to last indefinitely, but rather to characterize a passage that could lay the foundation for subsequent orientations and more refined experiences. The ‘voluntary’ deferral of obligation is also found in Arnett’s ‘theory of development’ (2004), where such obligations are seen as ‘closing doors’ for the self at that specific moment in life. In an early article on these themes, the Norwegian scholar Ann Nilsen (1999) described youth as being ‘at a bay’. The model of deferment, which Brannen and Nilsen further characterized later, was only one possible orientation emerging from empirical data, but it was based on the idea of ‘adulthood as a phase reserved for the distant future, a phase which [young people] assume will resemble their parents’ lives’ (Brannen and Nilsen 2002:529). This was seen as a boring routine that they associated with their parents’ lives, in ‘contrast with their own

present lives as young people which they consider ought to be full of possibilities, variety and excitement' (2002:522). Nilsen (1999) and later, Nilsen and Brannen (2002), wrote about a feature that was indeed found in similar terms in other pieces of research around the same time.

What I am suggesting here is that, if not an ideal condition, the suspension from adulthoods' responsibility carries at least some important agentic features for youth, which emerge through different facets. Again, out of a typology which included other orientations, an early influential study in Italy identified youth who, in terms of time, were 'self-structured' (Cavalli 1985), an expression that recalls agency. In a somewhat similar vein, youth have been described as 'cumulating' projections as time passes (Carmo et al. 2014): if not masters of their time, the ability of some young Portuguese workers studied in this piece to elaborate such a strategy can also be seen as agentic, albeit again, situated within a wider typology. In these interpretations we witness a transformation of the very idea of the future. According to the well-established concept of 'extended present' elaborated by Helga Nowotny (1994), the notion of planning for the future may be altered by the experience of the present, in the sense that the future is somehow drawn into the *here* and *now*.

It is interesting to observe how this delay becomes irreconcilable only when the protraction of this suspension becomes systematic – something that Cavalli (1980) interpreted as a shift from 'youth a process' (culminating in adulthood) to 'youth as a condition', where specific lifestyles and even subcultures may emerge from this suspension. Indeed, on the level of public discourses, this allegedly voluntary deferral may well have provided substantial justification for what has often become an accusation against youth for not "rushing" to assume adult roles, feeding into a popular representation of them as nothing but grown-up children (Cuzzocrea et al. 2022), a view that persisted at least until the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Interpretations based on sheer critique of youth share the assumption that this deferral is somehow decided by young people themselves; it is seen as the result of an orientation actively taken. Deferral is their decision, their responsibility, and their fault.

Drawing on my own research (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016, Cuzzocrea 2019, Cuzzocrea 2025), I can identify another layer of interpretation for suspended time in youth's experiences. In my studies of young people in Italy, this idea has sometimes emerged in its pejorative forms, to interpret cases where young people wait until adult roles are not deferrable anymore, and at that point they have to find a way to contribute to society as a worker, as a parent etc. This phenomenon, called 'waithood' is in fact a *forced* suspension based on harsh structural conditions rather than voluntary choice, and it has largely been used to interpret situations of youth hardship in the Global South. Contrary to the 'fast track' transitions which characterize working class kids' transitions, leaving them

little room for choice or exploration, waithood suggests that the Global South entraps youth in its own way, locking them into a marginal space and making them more dependent on families, for instance. In these terms, suspension is no longer a time *for* youth, it is a time that *betrays* youth.

It is important to add that categories based on waiting are still relevant today, as recently summarized by Doumas and Avery (2024), particularly in light of the global COVID 19 pandemic, when waiting took on a different shape for youth (Cuzzocrea 2025, Pitti 2022). If we return to the metaphor of ‘foreclosed future’, the mechanism described above takes a different shape. The meaning evoked by the metaphor of foreclosed future is both more technical and more radical than ‘suspension’ or ‘waithood’, suggesting a nuance of possession that has been taken away but might eventually be returned. One of the strengths of this nuance is how closely it aligns with the claims we have become accustomed to hearing from young people themselves in recent years. Think about for instance the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg addressing environmental issues; very famously, at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in 2019 in New York city, Greta declared:

"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. [...] But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you." (23 September 2019: United Nations Climate Action Summit – "How dare you! ").

While Santiago del Río et al. suggest application of the foreclosed future in the context of austerity and not environmental issues, the parallel is clear. By introducing the metaphor of ‘foreclosed future’, the article advances and repositions a line of interpretation of youth hardship that already has a long history within the relatively young field of youth studies. This metaphor, framing youth responses to austerity regimes as the experience of having a foreclosed future, conveys the idea of something that is rightfully theirs but remains out of their possession—something they must first prove themselves worthy of. Foreclose is both just and unjust: we owe something, but ultimately it is already one’s own. I expect this metaphor to stimulate productive debates, and I am confident that the breath of the article’s main arguments will help it attract readership beyond disciplinary boundaries.

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