



Moratorium or waithood? Forms of time-taking and the changing shape of youth

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Abstract

Developing Erikson's concept of 'psychological moratorium' (1968), literature on youth transitions has a central focus in the procrastination of adult roles. Forms of time taking may either be erratic, or take more institutionalised and/or middle-class-oriented shapes such as 'gap years,' and they are generally justified by the aim of self-experimentation. However, on a different institutional level, they enter in contrast with the recent imperative of becoming 'fit for work,' which is realised mainly through obtaining an increasing number of qualifications and skills considered essential to meet the challenges of employment, and ultimately embody a model of 'active citizenship.' But how do these two contrasting demands come to terms with each other in the experiences of youth? And how is youth itself re-shaped through this interaction? Contrasting the concept of psychological moratorium (and its developments) with a wider literature on social acceleration, where an emphasis on active citizenship and employability can be framed, this article revisits forms of time taking among youths. It does so by discussing a Sardinian case study, where varieties of time taking also reverse into forms of 'waithood,' and are therefore in contrast with social acceleration. More analytically, I have identified two modalities of moratorium (i.e. classic moratorium and waithood) and two sub-modalities of waithood (justified by either the accomplishment of procedures or by waiting for

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someone else's intervention). These findings are discussed with reference to a broad political framework through which it is possible to revisit the changing shape of youth under the pressures of late modern society.

Keywords

Youth, waitthood, Italy, social acceleration, future, narratives, moratorium, youth identities

Introduction

I had finished the fifth [last] year at school and I, myself, didn't know what my future was, Italy was in full crisis and to find a job many young people were compelled to leave for abroad. I was working as an artisan in my town because it was my passion. I used to earn just enough money to go out on Saturday nights and have fun with friends but I was always thinking that I couldn't keep going on that way. Then my 25th[birthday] arrived and at that point I wanted to take a decision about my future. (NU M 25)

In this excerpt, an 18-year-old Sardinian student who was asked to imagine his future in writing, sets the temporal scene in which his transition is taking place: the crises; the necessity, for those of his generation, to leave Italy for a better future; a temporary niche of salvation (the possibility of devoting himself to a craft); seven years of bearing a situation of economic deprivation while chilling out with friends (but only over the weekend), until he cannot put off making a decision anymore. In a general context of precarisation in the lives of young people, the salience of biographical temporalities, as in this excerpt, has been a point of concern for those studying youth. This is explained by the fact that the more uncertain the current socio-economic conditions are, the more difficult it is for young people to plan a life.

The procrastination of the assumption of an adult role is especially relevant for Southern European youths (Cavalli and Galland, 1996). Regardless of whether this happens by choice or by necessity, the sort of postponement that is mentioned in the excerpt is certainly neither tied to experimentation, nor does it suggest the type of *joyful* exploration that would be expected from a young person. It also prompts us to reflect on how biographical time needs to be considered along the timeline of everyday life and the timescales of generations (Leccardi, 2009; Woodman and Leccardi, 2015): forms of 'time taking' lie at the intersection of these dimensions.

This article focuses on young Italians, an ‘extreme’ case of uncertainty in Europe (Bello and Cuzzocrea, 2018). Yet, in explaining youth transitions, the dimension of time is not exclusively relevant to youth in Italy and has been used extensively in analysing the trajectories of young people around the world. In fact, prolonged transitions are very much a problem of time (Woodman and Leccardi, 2015); the popular metaphor of the ‘yo-yo’ transition (Biggart and Walther, 2005) contains a strong temporal component that emphasises stops and returns. Overall, the temporalities to which youths refer are not homogeneous, and the short-term futures and the long-term perspectives they imagine have been analysed differently and separately (Cook, 2015; Nilsen, 1999). In this article, I investigate how moratorium is shaped against, and in contrast to, a framework of social acceleration (Nowotny, 1994; Rosa, 2003, 2010, 2013), so that we can rethink current notions of youth through comprehending the manner in which they are trapped by temporal discourses.

I explore two contrasting demands faced by contemporary youths. The first pertains to expectations created by social acceleration that often generate a constant sense of busyness and, therefore, become very pressing for young people who need to find a position in the labour market. The second is a permission to decelerate, in the form of moratorium, which is available to young people while they experiment with their sense of purpose and identity. The first develops within the dimension of everyday life, while the second unfolds on a biographical level. The nexus between the two levels has been regarded as problematic (Woodman and Leccardi, 2015) but, largely, not on the basis of empirical investigations (see Longo, 2015 for an exception); the exploration of this nexus forms the core of this article, where I will treat the term moratorium analytically rather than for what it evokes, as in Cristofori (1990), within the intention of reflecting on the nuances of segregation, resistance and inequality implied in forms of time taking.

I start by tracing the original definition of moratorium in order, then, to compare and contrast it with more recent literature, which takes into consideration different forms of time taking among youths. I then contrast moratorium with institutional discourses pressing youth to acquire as many qualifications as possible in the shortest span of time in order to be employable. The article then proceeds to discuss specific forms of time taking found in narratives of the futures presented by young Sardinians. In this case study, alongside ‘classic moratorium,’ forms of ‘waitthood’ are also anticipated, defined as periods during which one just waits for something to happen without filling the time with activities intended to further equip oneself for the future. In the conclusions, I propose a reconsideration

of notions of moratorium, of the dimensions of inequality that are entrenched inside contrasting temporal demands, and of the changing shape of youth itself.

Moratorium: Original definition and developments in literature

According to Erikson, a psychosocial moratorium is a 'niche' in which a young person can find his or her place through self-experimentation (1968: 156). It allows those who are not yet ready to avoid assuming 'an adult role' for some time. Society thus *permits* such postponement and allows young people to indulge in the desires and ambitions, which are believed to be typical of this phase. Moratorium is characterised by a 'selective permissiveness on the part of the society.' It is 'firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made' for young people' (1968: 156). The term implies a 'provoking lightness' (Erikson, 1968: 184–185) and 'playfulness' (1968: 157) in young people, even though these sentiments may end up coinciding with 'apprenticeships and adventures that are in line with society's values' (1968: 157). Similarly, Eisenstadt (1964) uses the term 'transitional moratorium' as a framework to analyse youths' access to the institutions and roles of adult life.¹

In the aftermath of Erikson's work, moratorium has taken on a central role in many conceptualisations of transition in the social sciences, with a wealth of studies assuming this concept more or less explicitly in order to understand changes among youths under the updated socio-economic conditions which young people have come to inhabit. King (2010) has investigated discourses of time allocation between generations with specific regard to late modern acceleration. Writing from a psychological perspective, Arnett (2004) proposes a 'theory of development' where the concept of 'emerging adulthood' is used to indicate the period of life between 18 and 25 years of age, a 'new and historically unprecedented period of the life course' (2004: 4) characterised by the deferral of obligations. Commitments are not completely absent but not felt as urgent either. The motto is 'yes, but *not yet*' (2004: 6). Adult obligations are seen by emerging adults as 'closing doors' and therefore as the end of 'spontaneity' and 'wide-open possibilities' (2004: 6), whereas emerging adulthood is an age of 'identity exploration, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work', of 'possibilities when *hopes flourish*,² when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives' (2004: 8).

From a psychological perspective, Côté and Allahar define an 'identity moratorium' as one that 'can provide young people with opportunities to

experiment with roles, ideas, beliefs, and life-styles and can set them on a life course that is rich and rewarding' (1994: 74), with a tendency to avoid 'any roles that involves responsibility' (1994: 83). However, despite this *license to postpone*, these authors do underline the fact that young people are overall one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society, and call them a 'generation on hold' (1994) to indicate their economic marginality. Du Bois Reymond (1998) makes a similar argument regarding youths in the Netherlands. In a study on Turkish German youth, moratorium is the period of life in which youth activate 'search processes' defined as forms of 'actionism' (Bohnsack and Nohl, 2003: 366). Here, the notion of moratorium engages with milieu and lifestyles, but it is also related to the idea of 'Bildung' (2003: 373), which in turn King, following an approach attentive to the generational divide, has defined as pertaining to 'the regulation of relationships of power over temporalization' (King, 2010: 60).

If studies such as Du Bois Reymond's (1998) bring a wider discourse on so-called 'choice biographies' into this discussion – whilst indicating a specific relationship to structural constraints – others have emphasised more the constraints that are typical during this phase of the life course. For instance, drawing on data from Norway and the UK, Brannen and Nilsen talk about an emphasis on present time devoted to friends, leisure and lifestyle opportunities (2002: 520), but do so in a general context where youth view themselves as occupying a disadvantaged position in the life course: in such a situation, the emphasis on present options is dictated by the competing and challenging demands of the educational and employment systems, and this presentification is itself a measure of structural constraints. A typology featuring self-structured, hetero-structured, self-destructured and hetero-destructured youth (Cavalli, 1985) was the main result of a piece of research on Italian youth that has been influential in Italian scholarship and beyond (see Reiter, 2003).

Transitions are very much culturally embedded (Arnett, 2004). In the Mediterranean region, this signifies a pattern where youths stay with their parents for a long time (see Mauceri and Valentini (2010) on Donati and Scabini's 'long family'). A wealth of literature has investigated the effects of flexibility on the temporal and existential organisation of the self, often in order to explore the timings at which key events occur (Marini, 1984), less often in order to enquire regarding the significance of time taking in the current scenario of destandardisation. This often resolves into processes of 'presentification' (as re-elaborated by Leccardi (2005) for the Italian case). Brannen and Nilsen identify a model of deferment, where those with an 'extended present' orientation tend to postpone responsibilities associated with young adulthood (2002: 517). In a study of young Italians in the UK,

Bagnoli (2012) distinguishes between prospective, retrospective and moratorium stories, differentiating between ‘apparent stability’ and ‘trial and error’ (2012: 81).

Today, moratorium is institutionalised in various forms (e.g. gap years) and has gained enhanced legitimation through these, even if the word is not popular. This is not to say that Erikson’s work was in principle disconnected from the conditions of late industrialisation (Arnett, 2004: 8). However, in general, in an era where ‘*individual* choices and decisions become centre stage’ (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005: 416, original emphasis), it appears that not taking a choice, i.e. waiting, may itself signify the making of a choice. But how does moratorium take shape today? In particular, how has the need for exploration changed, if it still constitutes a central part of youth transition? How ‘youthful’ do explorations continue to be? How do forms of time taking combine with pressures of social acceleration, which have invaded educational and employment discourses?

Moratorium under the pressure of post-modern societies: Discourses of acceleration

Under the pressure of today’s labour markets constrains, criteria for developing aspirations might not be simple to identify (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005), especially in the work domain (Laughland-Booÿ et al., 2014). Orientations may be difficult for ‘contingent identities’ (Pollock, 2002) on a ‘contingent work life course’ (Heinz, 2003), characterised by a ‘new situationalism’ (Rosa, 2003), in which it is difficult to adapt to unforeseeable circumstances, and thus, plan a future.³ On the one hand, there is a proliferation of opportunities; on the other hand, qualified workers are not always absorbed into labour markets, and they need to elaborate additional strategies on top of earning degrees. This rhetoric aims at ‘producing’ readiness to take opportunities immediately when they arise, ‘a commitment that may affect the stability of a person’s work biography’ (Heinz, 2003: 193) as well as a person’s sense of continuity (Sennett, 1998). On a political level, this has transformed the ‘employment’ issue into an ‘employability’ issue (Cuzzocrea 2015a), a logic which disproportionately affects young people. A young job seeker (or someone already in employment) is deemed responsible for making him- or herself desirable in the labor market, *continuously* demonstrating that he/she possesses the most up-to-date competencies. Employers expect a *proactive* attitude to facing the challenging demands of a competitive economy and this inevitably implies a significant personal burden where the acceleration ethos is incorporated. Proactivity is itself a symptom of acceleration demands, and has somehow found application in recent reforms

in the educational domain throughout Europe.⁴ We could say that education impinges on accelerated rhythmicities, reducing space for the emancipatory power it should entail in principle (Alhadef-Jones, 2016).

Drawing, amongst others, on the writings of historian Reinhard Koselleck, Rosa (2003) has described acceleration as a constitutive aspect of modern society, which tends to evolve in waves. In this approach, tackling *temporal* phenomena, along with notions of ‘appropriation’ and ‘activation’ (Rosa et al., 2016) is pivotal in understanding contemporary society (2003:4) and, I would add, in how young people move and operate within it. My point here is that an increased personal responsibility is closely connected to social acceleration, as it becomes necessary to collect qualifications, ‘marketable’ experience, and more generally, titles – what Holdsworth (2015) has called ‘the cult of experience.’ Acceleration has a ‘subjective’ and an ‘objective’ dimension (Rosa, 2003: 9). The ‘subjective’ dimension may, for instance, determine feelings of time being scarce. The ‘objective’ dimension relates to the measurement of unities of action, implying that we do more things in a shorter time frame. It can also refer to efforts to compress actions and experiences (2003: 9). Moreover, given the contraction of the present there is a further acceleration in the ‘pace of life’ (2003: 11). It is fascinating to relate these moments of acceleration to those times in life when experiences are most salient. Yet, in general, ‘accelerated societies necessitate greater capacity for coping with more complex lives’ (King, 2010: 54). This can be considered an additional burden for youths in that ‘the accelerating pace of change creates additional demands: continual social transformations and generational tensions are superimposed with one another - in the wake of new cultural patterns of coping and resistance strategies’ (King, 2010: 61).

Social acceleration might entail ‘dead times’ (Leccardi, 2009: 31), which are normally perceived as pathological or perverse. Among the five forms of deceleration identified by Rosa, ‘oases of deceleration’ (2003: 15), i.e. niches that have not been touched by the dynamics of modernisation and acceleration, are particularly relevant to the present case study. In general, ‘not all social groups accelerate equally: some, like the sick, the unemployed, or, in some respects, the elderly, are forced to ‘decelerate,’ while others, like the Amish, refuse to adopt the temporal structures and horizons of modernity’ (Rosa, 2003: 22). Even if acceleration relates to the speed of technology, it also pertains to the pace of life in general, having effects on relationships (King, 2010: 55). This accelerated pace of life is an attempt ‘to squeeze into a life ever more, ever faster and much at the same time’ (King, 2010: 56). An aspect that may intervene to make this acceleration more difficult to sustain is geographical mobility, a ‘discourse’ strongly supported by European institutions (Cairns et al., 2017).

Research project and methodology

Youths are supposed to engage in exploration in order to understand who and what they want to become. The idea of a moratorium has served to explain the metaphors through which the transitions to adulthood have been conceived of in literature, most notably through trajectories that, once linear, are now said to have become increasingly complex. Goodwin and O'Connor (2005) have contested the issue of complexity and lack of linearity; and likewise, I argue, should we reexamine the meaning of taking time out within that.

Taking a step beyond a mere review of the notion of moratorium, this article reflects on visions of imagined futures that have emerged out of an analysis of essays written by 18-year-old Italian students. The students were asked to imagine themselves at the age of 90 and narrate their future lives as if in the past.⁵ In this extremely in-depth material, temporal narratives assume a key role, as young people discursively position themselves within society *through* imagining their possible futures. Collecting such narratives allows us to investigate how they are able to identify and use resources around them in their search for a place for themselves. Agency and the future are intertwined: agency involves the idea of projection and implies anticipation; 'desired' and 'hoped-for' futures have an impact on the ways in which youth act in the world today. By using these data, I value the imagination of young people's narratives, where even dreaming is not necessarily a form of disengagement from reality (Mandich, forthcoming).

I have elsewhere discussed the meaning of peripherality in a Sardinian context (Cuzzocrea, under review a). Within Italy more generally, the desire to engage in exploration may be considered especially relevant given the scarcity of structural opportunities and general uncertainty (Leccardi, 2005). Here, youth agency is also restrained by a public discourse according to which young people have little willingness to define courses of action. The Sardinian case study has strong cultural connotations (Arlacchi, 2007) that have become an object of a lively debate (Brigaglia, 2017). Here, youth conditions are particularly serious. According to the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2014), the rate of youth unemployment in Sardinia is higher than in the rest of the country (54% vs. 42.4% nationally), as is the percentage of NEETs (28% vs. 23% nationally). After a period between the end of the 1990s and early 2000s, which had been dominated by the hope and promise of a new economy (Ferrucci and Porcheddu, 2004; Mongili, 2015) that was channelled through specific experiences of temporality (Mandich, 2009), the conditions for Sardinian youth have once again become stagnant. Previous research on time issues has emphasised that

the experience of time of Sardinian youth might be in part dissonant from youth's experiences in other parts of the country (Crespi, 2005).

This article uses material collected in the context of the '*ifuture*' research project ('*Giovani, cittadinanza, e capacità di aspirare*'), which aimed to investigate narratives of the future that were produced among young Sardinians. 341 essays were collected in 2013 among 18-year-old students who were attending their penultimate year of school. 253 essays were collected in Cagliari, the main city in Sardinia located on the southern coast. The remaining essays were collected in Nuoro, in the island's interior. The gender ratio is 215 females (ca. 63%) to 125 males (ca. 36%) due to some of the schools being predominantly attended by females. The students were reassured about confidentiality, especially in relation to teachers, and about the fact that the essays were not objects of evaluation. The length of the essays varies considerably. The original Italian texts were translated into English by the author of this article only for the purposes of quotation. This method has been used in other countries too (Elliott, 2010; Heggli et al., 2013; Lyon et al., 2012; Nugin 2014) and presents several strengths but also challenges. In an early phase of analysis, all essays were thematically coded using NVivo 10 in order to organise the rich range of insights using basic coding techniques and to share them with a small research team. Temporal issues were further investigated by the author of the present article following the observation that students reserved differently sized portions of the essays to different phases of life, and that the (imagined) action had an original, unexpected distribution across the imagined life course (see also Cuzzocrea, under review b). Due to space restrictions, I develop methodological discussions concerning the collection and analysis of narratives elsewhere (Cuzzocrea and Isabella, in preparation) and I focus here on forms of time taking as they appear to shed light on current notions of youth.

Varieties of moratorium

I suggest that an unsolved but pivotal question in the current socio-political climate would be to investigate to what extent moratorium maintains an exploratory character, rather than reverting into a form of time-taking and deceleration. Dissonant and at times conflicting demands seem to weigh down the normative expectations of youth. Precisely this contrast undermines the 'permissiveness' and indulgence granted by society, which as we have seen was central in the original formulation of the concept and pertains to how one should become 'fit for work'. But a similar situation pertains for more general expectations on the performance of youth, as Blatterer underlines:

the ideal is to be adult and youthful but not adolescent: to be open to change, but responsibly so; to be willing to live in the present only, but to invest in a secure future; to be mature, but not settled; to improvise, but know what you want – to be adult and eschew settling down. (2010: 69)

While the discourse on acceleration is global, there may be variations that depend on national contexts. For instance, in Italy family cultures (and, to some extent, the social classes they embody) will have an influence on the pace of the transition. In the data collected for the *ifuture* project we see anticipations of forms of moratorium which are not necessarily ‘youthful’ or positive. On the contrary, imagined accounts of the youth phase are imbued with anxieties, resignation, a sentiment of limited control over one’s life and poor experimental effort, as for the students below:

Lost, with no trust and few options for change, I decided, after my [graduate] stage, to move to Rome. My application was accepted and I started in Rome the job I was doing in Perugia. During the ‘stall’, while I was trying to realise what was best for my career, I met the man who would stay next to me for the rest of my life. (CL F 14)

After having worked in the family business and saved money for ten years I got married to the girl I have known since high school. (NU M 06)

The ‘ten years’ imagined saving money in the second excerpt and the ‘stall’ in the first one suggest the refiguration of difficult times, during which they expect themselves to struggle before more prosperous times arrive. While there is little trace of the acceleration discourse here, overall it is possible to envisage two main forms of moratorium: the classic moratorium (5.1); and moratorium in the form of waithood, mostly a ‘waiting for something to happen’ (5.2). In turn, I want to distinguish between two sub-categories in the latter case, namely ‘waiting for some procedures to be followed and completed’ (5.2.1) and ‘waiting for someone’s intervention’ (5.2.2). I will discuss these in the remainder of the section.

5.1. ‘Classic moratorium’ has at its heart explorations of the self. There are elements of struggle but they go along with fulfilment and a sense of achievement:

As a 19-year-old I left, something I had always wished to do, and it was a bit complicated initially. The first step was England, we stopped in London and we accepted all jobs that were proposed to us. Every month we moved to a different place and so our CVs improved and grew full of marvellous

experience and positive notes. Fun was already around, and despite the fact that I missed my parents, I realised I had never felt so good and complete as I had then. (TF F 20)

After spending the summer to get some rest, following a tiring year at school, I decided to leave for Spain with my best friend to get a better knowledge of the language and understand what it means to be independent, responsible and aware of one's own choices. (TF F 25).

In these examples, the focus is very much on the imagination of an immediate future. Other studies have indicated a similar finding. For instance, some young people studied by Brannen and Nilsen:

live very much in the present and orientate themselves to their present status as young people and toward the 'extended present' and the myriad of lifestyle opportunities provided for being young. These young people focus on the 'here and now' of completing their education, enjoying their social lives and so on. [...] They assume that 'some day' they will eventually settle down, but not yet. They manage this by drawing a clear line between being young and being adult. (2005: 417)

There is, nevertheless, a specificity to the Sardinian case study, in comparison to other studies: very often these explorations are imagined as entrenched in narratives of travel, suggesting that they do not expect to discover anything new in Sardinia. In these future narratives, 'other contexts' enable one to flourish; the moment the young people leave suggests a turning point, which might not occur if such opportunities were found in the local context (Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016). So, this is classic moratorium but coupled with mobility: an occasion for attempts during which one feels entitled to experiment:

My great desire for liberty led me to take a sabbatical at the age of 19,⁶ a year totally devoted to fun and myself. It was a year rich in experiences, rich in travels and, most of all, rich in new encounters; when travelling, one always meets interesting people, and it is good to share and be confronted with diverse ideas and viewpoints. For this reason, I can say that I am proud to have travelled a lot and to have seen and lived a lot. (TF F 31)

This imagined experience also refers to the class-biased possibility of taking time out.⁷

5.2 Let us now address other, more ambiguous, forms of time taking, which I refer to as 'waitthood'. This modality, already explored in extra

European contexts (e.g. Batan, 2012; Jeffrey, 2010; Honwana, 2012, 2014), sees youth as waiting to be ready for an occasion that will help them carry out a transition. In the first sub-modality (5.2.1), this means imagining oneself waiting for some procedures to be followed:

After having attended a Degree Course, then fortune knocked at my door offering me the occasion to work in an airport. (CL F 100)

We waited to save quite a lot of money, after that we decided to leave Italy, life was too hard and I hoped for a better future for my children. (NU F 6)

The aspect of money saving is rather unrealistic in a situation where people do not earn anything, and it resembles what their parents may have done in the past. In addition, it is interesting to note that even studying is equated more with a formal procedure, rather than with personal growth: in the quoted excerpt, for instance, the student does not even mention what kind of degree she imagines will allow her to work at an airport. A peculiar meaning is awarded to an entry exam to study medicine. This might be seen more clearly as a 'rite of passage' (Cuzzocrea, 2015b). In the narratives centred on medicine, the day when one gets to know the access results is 'the Big Day', the day of the 'greatest satisfaction' to be 'proud of' (CL F 62). Nonetheless, the strategies prefigured here are very much procedural: students mainly realise that they are missing some pieces of the picture and that without them they cannot proceed any further. In a context where resources are scarce, they feel barely entitled to make a transition at all. A number of studies on Italian youth stress creativity as a way of playing with structural constraints, and ultimately as a way of life (Leccardi, 2005). In the cases analysed here, however, strategies do not interfere with structural contexts, suggesting that youth struggle to develop such a capacity. This interestingly echoes Argentinian youth, who have been described as

'liv[ing] in a dormant time where temporalities are 'suspended' in the present in the sense that they do not know how to navigate or prolong their situation beyond it.' (Longo, 2015:17)

5.2.2. This is further explained in relation to a further subgroup of 'waiters.' In their imagined narratives, hardly anything happens, until someone notices them:

An English director, a modest one, was the greatest gift of my life. He called a famous American director, a friend of his, who chose me for one of the greatest works in movie history, which brought me an Oscar nomination. (TF F 1)

This can be a ‘talent scout’ who breathes new life into a vocation (for instance, acting or singing), but there can also be the sort of intervention that creates new motivation in situations where there is no apparent talent:

I started to send CVs to a list of various shipping companies, that my professor of sailing gave me, to help me in my goals. I waited for a year, before he looked for a company, he made me attend courses and helped me acquire an American visa. Without those I wouldn’t have been able to get on a ship.⁸
(NAV F 12)

But fortune saved me: I managed to enter the practice of a well-known dermatologist, to which many aspired, thanks to my professor who put in a good word for me. From that point onward my days were so full of work, and even though I had to give up to many things, I was happy like that. (TF F 2)

Therefore, English directors (FT F 1), teachers (NAV F 12) or university professors (TF F2) can act, in these youth’s imaginations, as catalysts in the waiting process due to their superior capacities. Most notably, *waithood* is characterised by emptiness rather than accumulation of skills or experience of any kind. In terms of time, the relevant question is thus what to do in the interval before something happens, at a moment in the lifecourse when their European counterparts are acting accordingly to the ‘cult of experience’ (Holdsworth, 2015), i.e. collecting titles and qualifications which are much more specialised than a very vaguely defined ‘Degree Course’ (as in CL F 100).

This raises two issues. The first: if acceleration demands can – and with reason – generate resistance, would it be sensible to interpret these imagined futures as an attempt to counteract these demands? The second: could it also be simply that the pervasiveness of imagined *waithood* suggests a wider structural argument, i.e. forms of time taking could have been socially permitted in contexts when linear transitions were prevalent, but that they lose their original function when uncertainty, fractures and risks prevail? These explanations are mutually exclusive, and I am tempted to choose the second one. This would also explain, for the sample object of investigation here, a level of inequality which tends to go unnoticed. Also, it would identify what the contribution of this discussion could be in terms of a wider theory of time.

There are several examples of extreme youth disengagement in high-income societies such as Japan (Furlong, 2008). Li and Wong (2015) talk about cases of social withdrawal among youths for *Hikikomori*, but also ‘freeter,’ or ‘otaku’; they ‘seclude themselves in their rooms, do not attend

school or work and have minimal social contacts' (2015: 595). Yet, literature also reports compliance with an accelerated ethos among youth. For instance, Raddon (2007) explores the narratives of distance learners and shows that informants 'combat [...] a sense of insecurity by remaining employable' (2007: 62), and that they continuously learn 'throughout life in order to keep up with rapid change and to ensure employability, self-fulfilment, community cohesion and national and international competitiveness' (2007: 77).

The case under investigation is different from both. The data suggests here that moratorium can be joyful and youthful but can also take the shape of an 'apnea' during which one has to resist, and this is even more significant given that the narratives are not about fact but about imagined futures. There is a generic hope that at one point in time things will improve (eventually by moving) but without identifying what can be done to get there. This may be linked to the distinction famously made by Cavalli (1980) between 'youth as a condition' and 'youth a process,' which lies in how clearly a future can be depicted, and, therefore, in the different functioning of deferral of gratification. Along similar lines, Carmo et al. (2014) find that the future is not deemed to be predictable among a group of precarious employees in Portugal 'because the present is constantly changing' (2014: 350).

Conclusions

The terrible and desolate misfortune of living in this island is the long and cold winter, it's dead boring and there is nothing to invent and our towns have a deadness of the soul with no girls to meet and discover and no adventure to engage in, everything *slouches* like a sort of lethargy. (F Soriga, 2008; my emphasis and my translation)

In this article, I have discussed two contrasting temporal expectations: one pertains to social acceleration, often reverting into a constant sense of busyness; global discourses make this very pressing for young people. The second is the permission to decelerate, in the form of moratorium, which is thought to be granted to young people, giving them a permission to experiment with themselves that they do not have afterwards. The first temporal aspect develops within the dimension of the everyday, whilst the second develops on the biographical level.

I have discussed various forms of time taking for young people based on data collected among Sardinian youths. Whilst not referring to factual states of affairs, narratives nevertheless talk about meaningful orientations. Taking time and losing time – or, in the latter case, waiting for something

to happen – have a very similar sound in the Italian language (*prendere tempo* and *perdere tempo*), and in the material collected, they may converge. More analytically, I have identified two modalities of moratoria (i.e. classic moratorium and waithood) and two sub-modalities of waithood (justified by either the accomplishment of procedures or waiting for someone else's intervention). In the original formulation by Erikson, moratorium means waiting to take on adult roles. Certainly, though, the term does not mean waiting 'to live.' However, some of the data collected refer to intermediate passages deprived of their intrinsic exploratory value; real life will only begin after they are concluded. The young people studied imagine their future seeing empty temporal bubbles ahead of them during which they will not be able to act; they will, in fact, wait.

This raises the question of whether it is possible to identify positive aspects and openness to the future in these forms of 'time taking,' or whether such processes of taking time just put these young people in a disadvantaged position if compared to their European counterparts, with whom they may ultimately compete at least in the labour market arena. The category of waithood does exist in literature. Yet, it has only been discussed with reference to the global south (Jeffrey, 2010; Honwana, 2012, 2014), at times in relation to youth cultures (Batan, 2012), and/or conditions of economic marginality related to the Arab Spring (Schwartz, 2017).⁹ If the narratives of some of the youths studied in Sardinia could really be grouped into the category of waithood, could their political and economic situation be equated to that of youths in the global south? It is not clear, in fact, whether young Sardinian people feel a pressure to accelerate that is similar to that experienced by their counterparts in Europe, who resonate promptly with demands such as being 'fit for work' or fit for 'active citizenship' in general. They seem distant from a neoliberal logic based on principles of 'fail first', and this raises the question as to whether the phenomenon of waithood might join together areas which are normally studied separately.

In concluding this article, I wish to return to two aspects of Erikson's definition of moratorium, which I believe have been overlooked in literature. The first is the psychological aspect of 'youthfulness', a state of mind that is not found in several essays that were analysed for this research. The second is the accent placed on society's permissiveness towards forms of time taking among youths. Could we provocatively infer that societal structure plays a central role in making young people wait? In other words, is society pulling young people apart? This is a question of social responsibility that I think should be positioned at the center of efforts to rethink youth as a social category. It also leads us to discuss what forms of resistance are enacted

by youth today and, specifically, whether waithood (i.e. decelerating) can be an act of resistance, or if ‘waiters’ are like ‘dormants,’ who ‘consider themselves incapable of making decisions in a world that is overwhelming and are paralysed by the possibilities and limits beyond their control’ (Longo, 2015: 16). If accelerated paces of life can be considered lifestyles, how do forms of deceleration qualify? The discussion of forms of moratorium in this article leads us to question forms of waithood as deliberate attempts to resist social acceleration. This point could be addressed through follow up interviews, but not with the essay material collected. Yet, taking into account Brannen and Nilsen’s advice (2005) not to over-emphasise choice and autonomy in young people’s accounts, I suspect this would not be the case, and that the contrasting temporal demands discussed here simply represent another layer of disadvantage on the young people studied.

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Notes

1. Bohnsack and Nohl (2003: 382) suggest that one difference between the two is that whereas Erikson implies a ‘free experiment of roles’ useful for the formation of the self, Eisenstadt’s notion of ‘transitional situation’ privileges functions of societal integration.
2. My emphasis.
3. As Lawson notes (2014: 21), the novelty of this concept is in the internal genesis of the mechanism.
4. For instance, everywhere in Europe the underpinnings of the Bologna Process have brought monetary sanctions upon students who delay their completion of exams. In Denmark, a reform in this sense was interestingly called the ‘Speed up law’ (2013), and in the UK there are discussions about shortening BA programmes

- by one year. Also, despite it being politically correct to provide funds for early career workers based on the number of years in between obtaining a degree and applying for funds, in some countries and in some measures the criteria to compete is still the age of the applicant, thus discriminating against those who have taken career breaks. This is also the case of funds for graduates that the Region of Sardinia, where my case study is located, has provided in the last 15 years.
5. Students were asked: 'Imagine you are 90. Looking back at your life until that point, describe what happened to you. There is no need to invent something that is unlikely to happen. Simply tell the story of your life, how according to you it could have unfolded. Clearly, you cannot know what is going to happen to you, but you should try to describe how things could go if things go how you think or wish. Try to tell the whole of your life from the moment in which you finish school. Write as long as you think is needed.'
 6. It is especially interesting that a sabbatical is mentioned because they are not common in Italian work cultures outside of academia, and probably less common in academia too.
 7. That class matters in gap years has been discussed too (e.g. Snee, 2014; Vogt, 2017).
 8. This quote is from a student in the naval school; this school is vocationally oriented and several students aspire to get employed in the naval employment basin. It is attended mostly by socially disadvantaged students and interestingly a focus group, which was conducted with them suggests their scale of preference in terms of employers in the field, with cruise ships companies and the Italian navy at the top and the local company operating in the Mediterranean sea at the bottom.
 9. See also <http://www.meyi.org/> (accessed 13 April 2017).

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