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Delayed and negotiated autonomy: domestic emancipation of young Europeans[1]

René Bendit, Kerstin Hein, Andy Biggart

In der Europäischen Union lebt ein signifikanter Anteil von jungen Menschen im Alter von 15 bis 29 Jahren immer noch zuhause bei ihren Eltern. Dieser Trend, die räumliche Trennung vom Elternhaus aufzuschieben, variiert von Land zu Land sowie zwischen jungen Frauen und jungen Männern. Bislang hat es zu diesem Phänomen relativ wenige Forschungen gegeben; die »verspäteten Nesthocker« haben jedoch zunehmend die Aufmerksamkeit von Fachleuten der Familienpolitik gefunden. Denn diesen wurde bewusst, dass der Aufschub der häuslichen Emanzipation zugleich einen Aufschub der eigenen Familienbildung bedeutet. Der folgende Beitrag handelt folglich von der häuslichen Emanzipation von jungen Menschen in Europa. Er stützt sich auf die Analyse quantitativer Trends und qualitativer Interviews, die im Rahmen des EU-Projekts *Family and Transitions in Europe* (**FATE**) erhoben worden sind (vgl. Bendit/Hein 2004; Biggart et al. 2005).

> *"Don´t you, too, feel that somehow you still are too young to be an adult?"* (NEON 2003)

From a sociological point of view, adulthood can be defined by attaining such markers of transition as having a job, living independently or founding a family. While pre-World War II generations of young Europeans usually followed a normative sequence of transition markers in order to become adults, today, social and economic changes have led to a shift from a standard transition towards a more individualised biography, where individuals have to determine their adult position through a process of negotiation instead of following pre-defined pathways to adulthood. These circumstances are deemed to be responsible for the fact that young people do not achieve all markers of transition at once but experience a period of time in their life courses, in which they have achieved an adult status in some aspects but not in others. In line with these developments, it is reasonable to ask whether the meaning of adulthood has changed.

In fact, according to our analyses, young people no longer identify adulthood as a period with objective markers of transition but as a phase of life determined by subjective conditions. In this sense, adulthood is not longer tied to a specific age or event. One rather becomes adult when one "feels" like an adult (cf. Leccardi et al. 2004). However, markers of transition have not become completely irrelevant. Although young people "feel" they are adults when they are capable of making decisions and having their own opinion, economic and/or domestic dependence remains a significant obstacle to the perception of being "ully" adult. Therefore, many young people feel both adult and young at the same time, i. e. too young for traditional adulthood.

Previous European research has highlighted the increasingly protracted stay of young people in the parental home and the problems related to this situation. This research has shown that a successful transition from education to work but also the *attainment of housing independence* have to be considered as decisive aspects in the transition to adulthood (cf. Bendit et al. 1999; IARD 2001).

In the context of the European study *Families and transitions in Europe* (FATE), we have explored these two dimensions of the transition process to adult life within the framework of a more general question: What is the role of the family in facilitating or constraining young people transition process from education to work and to independent adulthood within the context of different European welfare models? One important aspect was to explore the process of domestic emancipation. Another aim was to show differences with regard to forms of support in the transition process to adulthood in line with the economic, social and cultural conditions prevailing in the respective regions.

For this purpose, the methodological design of the FATE project involved (a) a common conceptual framework (based on secondary analysis of national and European data), (b) an institutional survey with a sample of 1,929 young people, and (c) in-depth interviews with 376 young people and 219 parents and a comparative analysis of these qualitative interviews.[2]

The present article refers to some of the results of the *qualitative* research relating to the domestic transitions to independent living and the forms and extent of parental support. The main questions to be discussed are:

- Can significant differences be observed between the youth of the participating countries with respect to their housing transitions?
- What are the main characteristics of young people´s decision-making process when it comes to the question of staying or leaving the parental home?
- What kind of domestic transition and residence patterns develop before young people become fully independent?
- What does it mean for young adults to live with their parents and how is autonomy negotiated?
- What kind of support do young people receive from their parents in the transition to adulthood?
- What constellations of private and public welfare support are linked to the different residence models of young people?

Housing transitions

We have considered housing independence as a significant marker of transition, which contributes to the definition and perception of adulthood. Nevertheless, in accordance with existing statistical data (INRA 2001; European Commission 2003; Statistisches Bundesamt 2004, pp. 557-558) and also within the FATE institutional survey, around two thirds (62 %) of the interviewed young people were still living within the parental home. This ranged from 98 % in Portugal to 36 % among the Danish sample. Whilst some of our younger respondents were too young to be considered as protracted home stayers, in Denmark, Germany and The Netherlands young people tend to stay with their parents while they complete vocational training. Protracted home stayers were more evident in Southern Europe and Bulgaria, were the young people regard prolonged stays as being "obvious" i. e. having developed into the cultural norm.[3] Elsewhere, such as in the UK, where increasing numbers of young

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2   CF. Research Design in Appendix, p. 18.

3   Southern European parents typically feel that staying at home has become advantageous for their children, as they enjoy freedom, understanding, affection and help without being controlled by their parents; parents also feel that young people should not have to compromise their living standards when they do leave home.

people are remaining with their parents for a longer period of time, this is still not perceived as a natural state of affairs.

Corresponding with the data of the quantitative survey, about 39 % of the young respondents in our (not statistically representative) *qualitative sample* had already left home. The majority of these home leavers were Danish, Dutch and German respondents. About 45 % were living with a partner (married or cohabiting), 25 % were sharing a household with friends or relatives, 25 % were living alone, 4 % were commuting between an independent residence and their parental home, and 2 % were living in a student accommodation. Usually, they had a high level of education or originated from higher social backgrounds. German and Dutch home leavers typically left their parents by the time they began their university studies. Therefore, the initial place of residence of these young people is functional and non-permanent. The majority of the young who had left their parents lived in non-permanent residences. Most of them were also semi-dependent on the economic resources of their parents or respective state institutions. Hence we can conclude that the residential emancipation of young home leavers is rather partial.

The interviews with young Europeans also highlight a common pattern that contradicts the hypotheses that prolonged educational pathways are the main explanation for extended cohabitation with the family and that young women tend to leave the parental home earlier than young men. Regarding the first assumption, we could observe that young people with higher educational levels - who stay longer in educational institutions - were more likely to be living independently. On the whole, the tendency of highly educated young people was to leave their parents when entering university. However, this does not apply to the Mediterranean countries, where young people clearly stay at home longer due to extended education. With respect to gender differences, our qualitative analysis did not confirm the results obtained in the institutional survey, i. e. that young women tend to leave their parents' home earlier than young men. Our analysis has not yielded any plausible explanation for this discrepancy.

Staying or leaving? A complex decision-making process

Staying in the parents' home or wishing to leave corresponds to a complex constellation of factors. When young people take a decision regarding their residential situation, they consider their interests, fears and wishes, resources, social expectations, and structural constraints. In the decision to stay or to leave, young people therefore balance the pros and cons of an independent life. The most decisive factor in the decision of whether or not to move to an independent residence, however, is related to material factors, i. e. structural constraints and uncertain labour-market conditions, which may force the young to stay with their parents. Relevant subjective factors for leaving their home are desires, fears and preferences and individual aspirations for autonomy. Italian research highlighted that the prolonged stay in the parental home can undermine the desire to become independent. A comfortable home may make young people lose interest, while even short spells of independent living may serve to enhance the desire to have a place of their own. Another important subjective dimension is the fear of loneliness or not being able to cope with independent life.

Our qualitative analysis has revealed that some young people choose to stay with their parents in order to maintain their standard of living. Given the option, some young people prefer to secure a certain quality of life and postpone their transition. These respondents have high demands on the stan-

dards of their future residence, which prevent them from accepting simple housing conditions of a lower quality than those of their parental home. Some younger respondents (and their parents) supported the idea that young people should move out and purchase a house or flat by themselves. At a first glance, such expectations can be considered as a stimulus for young people to attain residential emancipation. But in many cases, the situation on the housing and labour markets (especially in Bulgaria and Spain) does not permit them to realise this expectation. It rather turns into an obstacle for young people who pursue residential independence. Hence young people have to find a balance between social expectations, their own aspirations and financial resources.

As mentioned earlier, young Europeans tend to establish intermediate housing arrangements before making a definite transition to an independent household. Fernádez-Esquinas et al. (2003) looked at these partial stages of housing transition by means of three dimensions: (1) economic independence, (2) living with the parents, and (3) having a permanent independent home. Based on these dimensions, the authors constructed a typology of domestic emancipation, which reaches from *complete dependence* (young people living with their parents and depending on parental financial resources) to *complete emancipation* (complete economic and residential autonomy of young people with respect to their parents).

The following situations refer to intermediate housing arrangements:

- *Temporary emancipation*, which concerns young people who are not living with their parents but whose present housing situation is provisional. They do not experience full economic independence as they still receive financial support from their parents or public institutions (e. g. students). Within our research, this was the *most common* intermediate housing arrangement of highly educated young people.

- *Precarious emancipation*, which relates to young people who live independently but still receive money from their parents or public institutions. In contrast to the previous category, they do not live in provisional housing arrangements, but in independent lodgings. Therefore, their situation can be seen as precarious rather than temporary.

- *Economic emancipatio*n, which includes young people who still live with their parents, although they already earn their own money. This situation was found in countries with high proportions of young people with delayed housing emancipation. Still, there were some isolated cases of young people *returning home* after having lived on their own. Among these young people, there was a relatively important group with a high educational level who, for several reasons, returned home after finishing their studies. On the whole, coming back was not seen as a normal event. As experiences of independent living tend to enhance the desire for autonomy, the motivation for returning back home decreases as soon as the young people live outside the parental home.

Living with parents - negotiating autonomy

It is a fact that growing numbers of young Europeans stay with their parents for longer periods but these protracted stays at home are increasingly being considered a problem (cf. Papastefanou 1997). This tendency of prolonged residence in the parental home means that two adult generations live together in the same household and tend to develop a kind of *clustered nest*. Therefore, the family develops norms that establish the rules of intergenerational behaviour on some essential points. These rules are not very strict, but mostly the result of negotiations. As Sgritta (2001) puts it, "Instead of beco-

ming emancipated from the family, young people become emancipated within the family". Therefore, the construction of autonomy within the parental home has become a central issue in the process of housing transition.

A look at the FATE respondents (cf. appendix) shows that living with the parents was the most common housing arrangement (61 %). The shares of home stayers differed from country to country; the highest proportions of young people living at home were found in Italy, Portugal, Bulgaria and Spain, followed by the United Kingdom. This situation mostly applied to respondents with lower and medium education in Denmark, The Netherlands and Germany. They tended to stay with their parents while they completed their vocational training. If they stayed longer than this, they felt they had to justify their situation, as staying at home was not self-evident.

Young people in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria tended to stay with their parents while finishing low-, medium- or high-level educational courses. These respondents could be regarded as protracted home stayers. They mostly did not contribute to the parental income, neither with money nor with other support. Protracted cohabitation had become some sort of *cultural norm*.

Our empirical data show that the construction of autonomy within the boundaries of the family occurs by means of negotiation processes. Intergenerational conflicts become particularly evident as the educational and hierarchic relationship between parents and children has to be transferred into a relationship between members of two adult generations: parents have to concede control, while the young need to increase their power within the family context.

Young people use certain strategies to build up and protect their private space inside their family of origin. In this sense, a significant strategy used by our young FATE respondents concerned the *management of information*. Young people and their parents establish a kind of informal deal according to which the young are expected to give their parents a certain amount of information about themselves. Giving this information to parents can be seen as a "security measure" but also as intergenerational reciprocity. Whichever is the case, gaining information about their grown-up children means that parents retain some control over the situation and gain intimacy. Otherwise, young people are only able to gain privacy and power by holding back information, as in the case of the following Portuguese female:

> *"It´s good and near but of course there are things about my personal life that I don´t tell. I keep for myself. I don´t tell everything, everything to my parents, because they wouldn´t understand, they have a different mentality than mine. Not my future plans, but things that I do with my boyfriend. I don´t tell them everything; I´m talking about my intimate relationship They could even accept, but they wouldn´t understand. And there is no need..."*   (female, 23, university finalist).

Another important strategy to protect privacy is to *reduce the involvement in personal relationships within the family*, and to transfer significant relationships to other areas. Although young people may still be living with their family, they tend to reduce the time spent at home and the communication with their parents and other family members. This often means that family members only get together at common meals. As a result, the significance of the parental home is reduced to a kind of hotel, i. e. a place where young people change clothes, eat or sleep:

> *"I never speak with my parents, I don't know, I never see them. They are always working, and when I come home I go to my room to watch TV or to play with the computer, whatever, maybe we don't see each other in several days"* (male, 25, low education level, Spain).

This autonomy within the boundaries of the family is a kind of *restricted autonomy*, as the young are still bound to parental rules and expectations. Therefore, the degree of independence within the family is likely to be limited. In spite of the fact that most young people and their parents describe their cohabitation as harmonious and based on mutual understanding and trust, they are involved in a situation where both generations try to achieve different goals; while the young look for increasing their level of independence, the parents rather want to stick to their role as parents: *"No, I´m completely free ... but I have to ask before"* (female, 26, first stage of tertiary education, Spain).

Our detailed analysis of the *parental perspective* showed that it were mostly Southern European parents who reflected on this situation. They compared the situation of their children with their own experience and came to the conclusion that housing emancipation patterns have changed tremendously. They considered their own former housing transition as the traditional way of leaving home: mainly for economic reasons and lack of autonomy within the family. Parents said that staying at home had become advantageous for their children as they enjoyed freedom, understanding, affection and help without being controlled by their families. At the same time, they supported the idea that their children should leave home without having to forfeit their living standard.

> *"Perhaps in my time we became adult sooner than they do now, because when getting married we passed to depend on ourselves before than today. Today, young people stay longer at home, in my time we became emancipated much sooner, at my son´s age I was already married, we got married, we left house and we had other kinds of problems, we no longer depended on our parents to solve the things (...)"* (Spanish mother, housewife, high social status).

The latter assumption reveals a highly ambivalent attitude towards the protracted cohabitation with adult children. Parents in other European countries showed less ambivalent opinions regarding the stay of their offspring at home. The majority of parents did not see delayed emancipation as a problem and pointed out the advantages for both generations. Parents tended to understand the needs for mutual adaptation. Autonomy at the parental home is being defined as a limited kind of independence. In this sense, parents need to learn to let their children go. By letting go the control over their adult children, parents make sure that both generations remain attached. However, the process of finding the right balance between control and freedom or between being parent and friend was considered a difficult task (cf. van de Velde 2000).

What kind of support do young Europeans receive in their transitions?

In our institutional survey, we found considerable variation across the national contexts with respect to the material support young people received from their families or the state. There was also a variation in young people sources of incomes depending on their educational level. In the lowest education groups, income tended to be derived from employment and state benefits, in the group with medium-level education from training allowances and employment, whilst higher-educated respondents received most support from their parents, but many also combined this with income from employment and loans or grants.

Five key dimensions of family support were identified on the basis of the *qualitative survey*: material support, network support, emotional support, advice and practical support.

▪ The extent of *material support* to the young showed a wide diversity, ranging from complete to partial and absent. In respect of divergence and convergence across the various contexts, there was a clear dichotomy between regions where state support predominates and others where the family is the main provider. The most abundant levels of state support can be found in Denmark, where the need to support young people´s independence is recognised as an explicit goal of social policy. The Southern European contexts provide a sharp contrast, with only minimal or non-existent state support; young adults´ transitions are often heavily dependent upon family resources. Evidence of the provision of material support by families was most apparent among those who had completed higher education, and young people were acutely aware that higher education is not free and family support is important. Combining their studies with part-time employment was often critical for attaining a viable standard of living.

▪ In most European countries, the family has also traditionally played a role in securing employment for their offspring through the *use of informal network support*. In the modern context, job allocation processes are assumed to have become more closely tied to cultural and educational capital. However, in Northern Europe, there was little evidence of this use of informal networks (it was prominent especially in Bulgaria and Spain).

▪ Young people also place high value on the *emotional support* provided by parents, even more so than material support. Where emotional support is not evident, young adults articulate this loss as a noticeable deficit. This was particularly notable in Denmark, where some young people perceive parental philosophies of letting them find their own ways as a lack of support.

▪ With the ever more uncertain process of transitions and the fact that individuals are increasingly held responsible for their own decisions, access to sound *advice* seems particularly salient. Young people were often critical of the advice provided by "official sources" in the form of guidance and counselling, whilst parents, although eager to support their children in their decisions, often felt unable to guide them in educational or occupational decisions because they were not familiar with modern educational and labour-market contexts.

▪ The *practical support* provided by parents appeared to be given in largely unconditional ways, although a distinction could be drawn between Southern and Northern European countries. In less affluent families in Southern contexts, the provision of material support depended on the family resources. The attitude of less affluent Spanish parents could be summed up as, *"If you don´t study you will need to work"*, while among affluent families, the philosophy was, *"If you don´t study you can´t work"*. Although support was provided in a largely unconditional manner, the deeply enshrined reciprocal expectations embedded within policy and culture among parents and young people alike meant there were expectations of reciprocity. This tended to take the form of demanding intergenerational support and (particularly in the case of young women) expressing expectations of caring for parents in old age. In Northern European countries, reciprocal expectations were more diverse.

Transitions within different models of public welfare

An analysis of the relevance and meaning of different forms of support given to young people in the process of domestic emancipation has to bear in mind that young adults in Europe are embedded in

social and legal relationships, which depend on the respective national and regional contexts. These relationships are relevant for the *transition regimes* that refer to clusters of countries sharing a similar *Gestalt* of socio-economic structures, institutions and cultural patterns. *Such transition* regimes also influence domestic transitions, as young people decide on their housing transitions in accordance with their material means and independence expectations. Using Gallie´s and Paugam´s (2000) adaptation of Esping-Andersen´s (1990) model of comparative welfare regimes as a starting point, we can sketch the following models of housing transitions for the nine European regions covered by our project:

- *Models of advanced residence autonomy*: Young people in Scandinavian countries (e. g. Denmark) growing up in *universalistic transition regimes* (which recognise them as full citizens and where the political concept of youth is focused on the personal development of the individual) are entitled to generous public support provided as educational allowances. Moreover, Scandinavian countries favour an *advanced autonomy* model of residence, which determines the independence expectations of young people and their families. Herein, personal development is regarded as inconceivable without the acquisition of domestic independence. As a consequence, young adults in Scandinavia leave their parents´ home much earlier than in other European countries.

- *Models of relative residence autonomy*: In countries with *employment-centred transition regimes* (e. g. Germany and The Netherlands), social entitlements are linked to the work position and/or to the family status. In this type of transition regimes, where the political concept of youth support is focused on vocational qualification and the allocation of the young into professional and social positions, young adults who are not employed only have indirect access to public support. This makes them economically more dependent on their families than in Scandinavian countries. At the same time, the residence model is based on *relative autonomy*. Thus, young people are expected to move out as soon as possible, despite being economically supported by their parents. However, if leaving the parental home is not possible, it is accepted that they stay at home for a longer period.

- *Models of relative autonomy and/or dependence*: In *liberal transition regimes* (e. g. in the United Kingdom) support focuses on individual or private provisions and responsibility, and on promoting economic independence through employability. Nevertheless, prolonged education has turned the former tradition of advanced autonomy into a situation of *relative autonomy*, or even dependence. Because of prolonged education, young adults increasingly depend on the material support and accommodation provisions of their families. This leads increasing numbers of young adults to delay their departure from home.

- *Models of extended dependence*: Finally, *sub-protective welfare* regimes prevailing in Southern European countries and post-socialist transition regimes are characterised by the absence of public support. In an extremely difficult labour market, young adults thus are highly dependent on their families. Furthermore, the cultural norm supports an *extended dependence* residence model, which means that young people are expected to stay with their parents for longer periods of time.

As our comparative research shows, transition regimes represent different scenarios, which may restrict or enhance the choices and scopes of action for young adults in Europe concerning their decision of staying in or leaving their parental home.

Conclusions

Domestic emancipation is a decisive aspect in the transition to independent adulthood. Housing transitions are part of this process, which involves intermediate semi-dependent arrangements and some returns before the permanent transition to independent housing is made. Young people´s decision to move into an independent lodging is influenced by social expectations, resources, structural constraints, fears and desires. On the whole, housing transitions are embedded in *transition regimes*, which refer to different constellations of socio-economic structures, institutions and cultural patterns.

In the light of the discrepancies between the ageing population and the decreasing fertility rates of Europe, it has become important to investigate and support the domestic emancipation of young Europeans. Our comparative analysis suggests that education and labour-market transitions should be *decoupled* from such other transitions to adulthood, as housing transitions.

One important factor determining the decoupling of transitions into adulthood is related to the economic support of the young. Therefore, it is important to recognise young people as full citizens, who are entitled to individual and direct allowances from the state. In fact, individually allocated economic resources have proven to be much more effective in promoting domestic independence compared to the indirect economic support of the family of origin.

It is also important to support short spells of independent housing - such as student exchanges or voluntary work - as they seem to strengthen the desire for autonomy. Our data suggest that privileging the maintenance of certain living standards may interfere with the process of domestic emancipation. Therefore, it may be useful to motivate and enable young people to live in semi-dependent and intermediate forms of housing arrangements.

Finally, our results seem to be in line with the findings of other studies (cf. Bertram 2005), which point out that delayed processes of leaving the parental home and entering the labour market constrict the available time to achieve other relevant markers of transition. Young adults are expected to achieve a secure job, to establish an independent household and to found a family of their own in a relatively short period of time. Given the uncertainties of the labour market, this puts them under considerable time pressure.

Appendix: Research Design

Institutional survey

The quantitative institutional survey was developed on the basis of a common conceptual framework and questionnaire. It was carried out in the national contexts of the nine participating partners. The respondents were young people (15 to 29 years of age), who were interviewed in their educational institutions.

Sample

1,929 young people were interviewed at the end of their educational courses (984 young women and 945 young men)

Qualitative survey

Some of the young people who had participated in the institutional survey were asked one year later if they wanted to take part in the qualitative research. Their interviews were complemented with parental interviews.

Sample

376 young people (193 young women and 183 young men)

219 parental interviews (47 with couples, 130 with mothers and 42 with fathers)

Respondents´ national and regional origins

United Kingdom: Coleraine District in Northern Ireland (about 80 km from Belfast)

West Germany: Tübingen and Reutlingen in Baden-Württemberg (South-West)

East Germany: Dresden, Meissen, Radebeul, Riesa, Moritzburg and Kreischa (in Saxony)

The Netherlands: Leiden

Denmark: Kalundborg, Holbaek and Copenhagen

Spain: Valencia-Region: Provinces of Valencia, Alicante und Castell

Italy: District of Milan

Portugal: Almada (South of Lisbon)

Bulgaria: Plovdiv and surroundings

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Übergangs in den Arbeitsmarkt (in britischer und in europäischer Perspektive) publiziert. Aktuelle
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