**YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK BETWEEN PROJECTS AND INSECURITY … IN THE FAMILY**

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Perhaps one ought to start from a rather bitter, but very realistic quotation.

*“Our society likes youth, but it doesn’t like the young people. In the collective narration being or seeming to be young is becoming a condition required for success, but only for those who are no more young. The genuine young ones are of no importance, they will have their opportunities in their future, a future which incidentally will never arrive, for the youth of those no more young ones aims at prolonging itself more and more, blocking spaces for the others, the genuine young ones. The school losing value, unjust systems of social security, disfigured environment and landscape, all those are symptoms of a society not capable of thinking and projecting its own future, ill because of a “lack of intelligence” both myopic and dangerous.” (V. Pelligra, introduction to the topical assembly nr. 3, “Accompanying young people in the world of work”, 47th Social Week, Torino, Sept. 13th, 2013)*

Let’s examine if the author is right by making a course of analysis of the elements which accompany the complex passage from young people to adults.

**1. “Starting a family” in order to become adults?**

On the way to the project of being a couple and a family today there exists a twofold difficulty, almost a twofold marginalisation which concerns those who are going to pass through it:

**-** the difficulty of becoming adults, of taking on an active, autonomous, responsible role (paradoxically being young today means being marginal)

**-** the parallel difficulty of thinking of one’s own future shared as a couple with another person, so much so that today for a lot of young people getting married is almost a *mission impossible* (founding a household is a matter of times gone by, it’s not *trendy,* it’s not *cool*, one could say it’s for *old-fashioned ones …* in short, for outsiders).

The literature on the “prolonged family of the young adult” is now among consolidated data; it

noticess above all in Italy, but in other developed countries as well, a more and more remarkable

number of young people of over thirty who live with their proper family, with their parents, even

if the conditions for autonomy exist (stable work, for example) which could allow a clearer

emancipation. That social phenomenon can be attributed to:

* exterior socio-cultural factors, such as the difficulty of entering into the world of work, the difficulty of finding a house, the expenses for a new family, generally being out of proportion to the real resources of a young couple (and after the years of crisis we are passing through those empirical data are certainly more negative for the young ones)
* factors of family relationships, such as the resistance against separation from one’s parents (a problem which is one of the parents, too, in any case), the difficulty of creating an autonomous project, the adoption of strategies of “postponing” several important choices (marriage, a first child, a personal project of profession, etc.). In any case it is not only the question of a personal “no choice” for fear or uncertainty *(“And they don’t want to go away …”),* but also of a new “treaty on family relations” *(“And if they then go away ...”),* sealed between parents and adult children in their family of origin.

Even the recent Synod on the family of 2014 has described a family scenario of the families on world level, which turns worse if you put the focus on young families, or on the family project of young people. The challenges are very compulsive and complex. From a socio-economic point of view the most dramatic words resounding in the *Relatio Synodi* are **powerlessness** and **abandonment,** which represent the perception of so many families in front of economy, politics, and actions of governments and public institutions *“There is also* ***a general feeling of powerlessness in the face of socio-cultural realities*** *that oftentimes end in crushing families. Such is the case in increasing instances of poverty and unemployment in the workplace, which at times is a real nightmare or in overwhelming financial difficulties, which discourage the young from marrying.* ***Families often feel abandoned*** *by the disinterest and lack of attention by institutions. (Relatio Synodi, nr.5)*

From a cultural, anthropologic and value-related point of view still more radical challenges to maintaining families, to their very identity, and to their survival appear. *“A vast majority of responses highlight the growing conflict between the values on marriage and the family as proposed by the Church and the globally diversified social and cultural situations. The responses are also in agreement on the underlying reasons for the difficulty in accepting Church teaching, namely,* ***the pervasive and invasive new technologies; the influence of the mass media; the hedonistic culture; relativism; materialism; individualism; the growing secularism; the prevalence of ideas that lead to an excessive, selfish liberalization of morals; the fragility of interpersonal relationships; a culture which rejects making permanent choices, because it is conditioned by uncertainty and transiency,*** *a veritable “liquid society” and one with a “throw away” mentality and one seeking “immediate gratification”; and, finally, values reinforced by the so-called “culture of waste” and a “culture of the moment,” as frequently noted by Pope Francis. (Instrumentum Laboris, n.15).*

And the young generations, those who must “dream” the family, must live the wish for it before the concrete project, cannot take that climate upon themselves.

Of course, new dynamics of relations rule the life of families of young adults which are different from former rules; just one example: Some decades ago having sexual relationships before marriage was strictly forbidden by the family systems (above all for women, to be true). That rule was so strict that one felt in a certain way obliged to move out of one’s home: one had to marry … There was one of the “strong” reasons which pushed one to leave one’s home. On the contrary nowadays sexual practice before marriage, even by a son/daughter living with his/her parents, is perfectly compatible (not for everybody, not always, but to a very significant degree, from a statistical point of view, too); using the holiday home, or even the home of one’s own family, is often considered safer and more recommendable than the old patterns “outdoor”.

Moreover, our society has lost some of the normative factors which, for better or worse, allowed more clarity about the life cycles of a person (and therefore of the family); that is to say, there existed rites of passage, often heightened by religious moments, but sometimes only “social” ones, which marked the leaving of one phase of a life cycle and the entering into another one; military service for men, or the beginning of a workable activity or the end of a formation course between adolescence and adultness, and youth was more of a chronological datum than a genuine social condition such as it is considered nowadays. The question, banal if you think so, but legitimate, is:*“At which moment do you become adult? When you leave your home? When you have some work? When you have a child?”*

The difficulty of answering that question shows how difficult it is to define a real decisive moment and testifies to the existence of a long phase of transition, often ambiguous, when the person is in a debate between autonomy and dependence, between responsibility and tutelage. That often becomes a problem of the person, or it inevitably becomes a problem of the couple who sets off on an autonomous project of life. Moreover, it’s nowadays rather normal to leave your family home when you are “single”, while in former times you only left when marrying.

**2. A project of life with another person?**

It’s at the very moment of construing a shared project that one comes across an ultimate difficulty, which you could sum up as follows: “*I would have to decide now to pass all my future life with somebody else? (And only with him/her?)”* In that case, too, the banality of the formulation of the question hides the fear and the problems which nowadays the young people (but not only they) shoulder and which reveal themselves in the project of being a couple (for it is there that their future is really regulated). In particular, some cultural difficulties of our society are revealed which directly affect the couple:

* **The weakness of the project**: Few people feel at ease with “waging” for their whole lives nowadays. Why commit oneself, why oblige oneself in a relationship, above all when love is in it? In that case, all the ambiguity and all the faultiness of a certain way of proposing emotionality emerge: emotionality is proposed as the sphere of the instinct, of immediate satisfaction of one’s proper feelings, which cannot be restrained by other limits: as long as “I feel that I love” it is okay, but at the moment when “I don’t feel it any more” (What? Romantic music of the voice of one’s beloved?) it is over. That “irrational instinct of feeling” weakens the capacity of projecting with regard to love (on the contrary it judges it in a negative way), by exposing them to an anarchic sentimentalism of disposable relations; moreover it contributes to nourishing the idea of a purely mechanical sexuality, only connected with drives and one’s instinctive needs *(I desire it, we love each other, why not?)* and completely severed from the significance of gestures, form the meaning of relations, from the project.
* **The restriction to the present:** The absence of projects is also produced by a restriction to the present in which our whole society is interested and which sees in the *instant moment* the only (ultimate) horizon of every gesture; thus one loses the sense for one’s history, for one’s destiny, in an anthropologic perspective where the human being only acts in order to answer “immediately” to his/her needs and is determined by that. The liberation of the human being from the project thus turns into a slavery of needs, and that would have to be well thought over in a society like ours, which is capable of producing such a lot of “illusionary” needs. Moreover, it is the question of a manifestation of the utopia of the human being who suffices him/herself, who doesn’t depend on his/her past, who doesn’t need the others in the present (apart from using them), nor in the future, either, if it is not he himself/she herself who controls it.
* **The fear of uncertainty:** Finally the fear of the future which often assumes the language of a certain catastrophic apocalyptic mood, which in everyday life becomes the desire to contain, to a maximum degree, uncertainty, to reduce the risks, to have nothing unforeseen in one’s life (*Because the exterior society is so unstable and uncontrollable …).* Therefore, for a young one choices for his/her future are based on the total control of the factors; only if one has everything under control (house, work, friends …), one will be able to jump forwards. That attitude suggests, of course, a series of postponements,waiting for one’s “definite place”, the “good flat”, the “well-furnished house”, and, for sure, the “right person”.
* **The fear of the other one**: In addition to that this uncertainty also becomes the difficulty of imagining yourself every day together with another person who is certainly not like you and with whom you are going to share, more or less consciously, your daily life. The difficulty arises at that moment of thinking of a kind of sharing which is realized in the fact that you are going to live together with someone who perhaps snores, who puts his/her toothbrush in you glass, or who squeezes the toothpaste tube rather in the middle than at the bottom: things which mark the family life in a not marginal way; the difficulty arises at the moment when the other one quite banally becomes a limit to you freedom, rather than a different “you” to be embraced, respected, loved just because he/she is different.

Those dilemmas do no only touch the life of a couple, but the idea of a person and the idea of society which each one elaborates and realizes in his/her existence: trust, fidelity, respect of contracts, those are elements indicating the quality of the “social capital” of a community as well as the course of individual and family lives. Moreover even the idea that “trying out before” helps to reinforce the stability and the duration of the relationship *(first we live together, then if that works we will marry),* without having to confront those dilemmas, appears more like the illusionary research for a sort of “risk assurance”, or like the research for “techniques to be learnt for the life as a couple” (it is sufficient to find a good handbook and everything will go well). Being a couple is an experience which you cannot pass through “safely prepared”, but only completely involved and directly; you do not live *ad experimentum*, so much so that very often couples who have lived together for long years, as soon as they get married, separate after some months: that appears to be paradoxical, but that indeed supports the hypothesis that it is impossible “to try living”.

Finally even psycho-social research makes evident the limited effectivity of cohabitation on trial for preventing breaking up, suffering, frailties of life as a couple; this is the result of an inquiry realized some years ago in the United States, but still interesting for understanding these dynamics:

*“If you compare the course of couples between those who live together and the married ones, the results of our research confirm former research which finds marriage a relationship distinct in quality from cohabitation, because it is endowed with a higher grade of commitment and stability compared to living together:*

* *Higher grades of commitment and stability were found in every dimension of separation and reconciliation that was considered;*
* *the married ones experiment quite less frequently than those living together with interruptions of their lives with their proper partners, such as separation or living in different houses;*
* *among the couples who separate or live separately the married couples experiment quite more frequently with transitional phases which lead them to living together again after reconciliation, or to starting to live together again after having lived separately.*

*In addition to that our results suggest that marriage stabilises the union of those who live together. Those who lived together and end up in marriage less frequently break up compared with those who live together and do not marry, they have higher rates of reconciliation and renewal of living together.*

*Our analyses on the role of cohabitation before marriage reveal that it is only associated with a higher frequency of separations. We have not found a difference between marriages preceded by cohabitation and the others in what concerns frequency of reconciliation, separate residences and/or renewal of the relationship after an experience of separate residences.*

*The complexity and the paradox of those results indicate the necessity of further analyses in order to examine in which respects the behaviour of married people is different with regard to their commitment in the marriage, to their patterns of relationship, successive separations, reconciliation and new marriages, if cohabitation before the marriage happened or not.” [[1]](#footnote-1)*

## **3. Love and project**

Nowadays in contemporary society it seems impossible to ascribe “reasons” to emotional and sentimental choices. It is as if in our culture construing, living, realizing projects of a relationship with another person, maintaining an emotional and sexual relationship could only be connected with emotions, could only be an instinctive or at best sentimental, affective event. There we pay the consequences of a “romantic” representation of life which favours the truth of feelings in comparison with the truth of relationships, the power of the free and ephemeral sentiment of the moment in comparison with lasting responsibility. The trap may also be found in a reductionist and Enlightened definition of reason, according to which reason is only capable of accepting, of “understanding” what it can successfully explain within its mechanism; but that has also determined a total separation between the profoundest roots of the life of the person and reason itself. That is like an incapacity of passing a cultural judgement on affections and on sentiments; these two spheres do not succeed in getting together in the person, for what you explain reasonably, is rational, while in a final analysis all the rest is instinct, is “affective liberty”. That is to say that you would have to live “in eternal love”, the only condition of the truth of sentiments.

But it is only from the alliance between passion and reason that a real “project of life” can rise. Frailty and wane of reason weaken the project, flatten everything down to the present, for thus what you feel today is the criterion for what you do now, but that cannot be the criterion for planning the tomorrow, because if you don’t feel that sentiment any more tomorrow, the only criterion that you had changes and so you will decide differently. It is as if, relying completely on instinct and emotionality, the person lived in an infinite present, divested of a possible or imaginable future, where each moment defines itself, and that prevents the project.

The project of love is thus inevitably the expression of a will, a reason and not only of an instinct, and therefore it demands reason and passion together as a condition for creating a life together. It’s a weak contract which is established between two persons who tell each other:*“We will stay together as long as we feel good.”* That is a contract one can make, it isn’t impossible or unjust by definition, but that is not a project of a life together. In addition to that it is not what a person really desires when he/she encounters somebody with whom he/she wants to share his/her whole life.

That subtle, but decisive distinction between the fact of falling in love and love itself tries to create a dialogue between passion and reason, words which are often opposed in contemporary culture. And it’s also because of that missing alliance that the projects of being a couple and a family lose their social and public importance by qualifying themselves as a “private act”. On the contrary to what the various media tell us nowadays, love and sexuality live on reason, not only passion. That is what makes it possible to construe a public responsibility of “founding a family”, too.

In a certain sense one could therefore say that love cannot but join passion and reason or, if it were possible to correct proverbs, one would not have to say “*marriage is the grave of love”,* but “*marriage is the grave of falling in love and the cradle of genuine love”.* The fact remains that in any case love cannot be only an instinctive project, a simple sentiment. In its fullness love is a reasonable project which passes through the act of falling in love, but that is only its beginning. However, there remains the question if that statement is understood and shared by contemporary society.

**4. Continuity and discontinuity of generations**

1. “Founding a household” also obliges to define new boundaries to two primary spheres of relations: the systems of the families of origin and the relationships with friends. The new family which is constituted cannot but, more or less consciously, adopt strategies of establishing distance/approach with regard to intimate relationships into which each partner was integrated before; that even constitutes one of the very primary tasks of the development of the family in its initial phase. That operation happens through constant negotiation between opening and closing of family boundaries, in which sometimes the couple can pass through difficulties, lack of understanding, collisions. In any case the degree of opening the family system to the outside will make a significant difference for the functioning of the family, for the quality of life of the couple, as well as for the capacity of the family of adapting/reacting to the challenges of the environment.

As examples, using not a strict, but rather familiar language, we can find patterns of opening relationships with regard to the families of origin or to other networks of relations/friends:

* *I and you all alone:* “due cuori e una capanna”, where the project of being a couple is the only arbitrator, and as soon as the couple enters the house, nobody can enter any more (you risk seclusion, relations potentially suffocated and/or suffocating, in the case of difficulties in the relationship (and if not) few resources from outside) ;
* *I, you and mum*: the couple remains united (or totally caught) with one or two systems of the families of origin (not necessarily that of the woman), thus guaranteeing for it a flow of resources of affection, relationships, help, too, but risking the failure of the aim of emancipation/autonomy as well, which is indispensable for a new family;
* *I and my friends (or you and your friends)*, when one of the members of the couple remains strongly connected to the former life style, relations, groups of friends, and after marriage remains more connected to that system (of spending leisure, and of values and priority, too), thus slowing – or even paralysing – the construction of a new emotional centre of relations and of values;
* *We and our friends (or our friends and we);* in that case it is the couple as a whole who remain in the system of relationships with friends, thus enjoying a large sphere of relations (more exterior resources), but risking the course of defining a new project of an original couple, shared and autonomous.

In these mechanisms of distance from/implication in primary external relationships of the couple it is in any case necessary to examine the dialectics of opening/seclusion, of exterior and interior resources, of continuity and discontinuity, in order to construe courses of the couple and new projects of the family, because that is a new, but not isolated family; for isolation and the incapacity of having relationships with outside (of asking for help …) are the important weakness and frailty of any family.

On the other side **intergenerational continuity** constitutes one of the strongest factors of education to life, by means of transmitting values, life styles, “directions for use” from one generation to the other; nowadays, however, we are confronted with a difficulty of this transmission which weakens the capacity of projecting being couples, and the process of differentiation, too; nowadays we are confronted with a wish to postpone, to live in a closed receptacle, where the new generations don’t seem to expect much from the preceding generations, who, in their turn, have more and more distress in choosing and communicating the values and the contents considered useful for the new families.

Moreover, the connection with history and the origins of the person remain a primary task of the family networks, which no societal subject can substitute; one cannot imagine that the school or the mass media or the culture in a large sense provide all alone the instruments and the contents of the history and the identity of persons: They are not capable of it in a an objective way, and thus the freedom of the persons would be quite more exposed to the influence of those in power, of those who control the social spheres.

That’s a little like it was for Schopenhauer’s porcupines, a metaphor still efficient for describing the inevitable fatigue of the regulation of interpersonal distances. “On a cold winter day porcupines crowded very near to one another in order to protect themselves by the heat of their bodies and not to freeze and die. But immediately each one felt the spines of the others and the pain obliged them to withdraw again. Then they crowded together again because of the cold and again they withdrew because of the spines. That continued in this way until they found the best position which enabled them to warm themselves without being pricked.”

**5. Family and work: allied values**

It’s not my task to deepen the topic of work for the young people, but it seems important to me not to separate those two spheres completely, because both work and projects of the family are parts of the same dream of happiness of every young life which approaches adultness: Moreover, it is by working and founding a family that you build up society, even according to the Constitution of our Republic, which quotes work as an essential element and family as the “basic cell” of society. In addition to that those two fields are united by a horizon of values much more similar than you think: in both cases the freedom of persons if at stake, in both cases responsibility is an indispensable value and the relations are fundamental.

##### These dynamics, this necessary unison between the family and work is well described by the following quotation, a little long perhaps, which comes from the work sessions of the 47th Social Week of Italian Catholics, dedicated to the Family: hope and future for the country, at Torino in September 2013, where the condition of the young people was observed with particular attention.

*“A last note concerns the possibility, even the duty of the family in those times when work is uncertain and precious, changeable and totalising, to help their children to manage the polarity “daimon - anti-narcissism”. By that expression the economist Luigino Bruni (2013) indicates the double tension which animates the young people of nowadays in their choice of a course of preparation for work and then in the choice of work itself. The “daimon” represents the inmost vocation of each one, one’s nature and one’s way of flourishing and realizing oneself. The search for a kind of work which should be and allow an expression of that dimension is a duty to oneself and to the others. At the same time this legitimate aspiration can be paralyzing, not only because that work can take time to arrive, thus pushing the young one to accept “inappropriate kinds of work”, but that kind of work – and that can be the greater problem – might not exist, either. The market, the one of work as well, is a mechanism by means of which the society indicates which forms of work are “useful” rather than “good”. That’s why putting oneself on the market of work means beginning to compare one’s proper aspirations, one’s proper vocation, one’s proper “daimon” with what is useful and appreciated by the others. In that sense the market can favour “anti-narcissism”, that is to say the antidote to narcissism. Moreover, it is also true that the fact of following only the signal of the market is also a distortion which will bring the a priori negation of personal realization and a depreciation of one’s deep proper vocation. Flourishing rises from the balance and the composition of these two important tensions: the “daimon” on one side and social usefulness on the other. The family has the duty to put the young ones in the conditions to learn how to manage this tension in order to be able to present themselves in the world of work as they really are, but in a well civilized attitude of opening up to others.” (V.Pelligra, Introduction to the assembly on topic nr. 3, “Accompanying the young people in the world of work”, 47th Social Week, Torino, September 13th, 2013)*

Sigmund Freud was very right when he was asked what was necessary to be done in one’s life to make that life worth being lived. He answered quite simply: “LIEBEN UND ARBEITEN” (“love and work”).

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1. (*Georgina Binstock, Arland Thornton,* ***Separations, Reconciliations, and Living Apart in Cohabiting and Marital Unions****, Journal of Marriage and the Family, nr.65, May 2003, pp. 432-443). Data of a longitudinal research (from 1962 to 1993), on a sample of 800 young whites, in the urban area of Detroit (323 directly married, 226 living together and married later).* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)