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## Does a Hidden Padlock Keep the Door of Fertility Shut in the Mediterranean Region?

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### Abstract

Attempts to read demographic dynamics using exclusively the tools of economics are bound to fail. The aim here is to construct an internally coherent theoretical model – not as an alternative but rather to complement the Rational Choice approach – for interpreting changing transitional behaviours. In such cases, people have to make decisions in a state of strong or even total uncertainty. We assume that when such a state of uncertainty is present, making a decision requires a relaxed state of mind, which makes it possible to let oneself go when faced with the incalculable risk of a transitional choice. The sole intention to make a transitional choice does not necessarily lead to it actually being implemented, since an underlying crisis mood can make intentions ineffectual. The onset of a crisis mood, in turn, could depend on a criticality that unbearably persists, transforming a circumstantial sense of inadequacy vis-à-vis a specific occasion into a generalized sense of inadequacy with regard to the whole world. Some implications of the model for social policies are briefly drawn in the conclusion.

### Keywords

Fertility decision-making models, rational choice, crisis moods, generational echoes

[1] THE HERMENEUTIC WEAKNESS OF ECONOMIC EXPLANATIONS OF TRANSITIONAL CHOICES

“Each general society includes many particular societies (.). It is the very fact of living that makes transition necessary.” (Van Gennep, 1981, p.3, our translation). Let us define ‘transitional’ behaviours and choices as particular crucial passages in the course of life, for example leaving home, forming a stable union or having a child, which in the Mediterranean countries have shown a marked trend towards delaying and non-occurrence during the last few decades. Rational Action Theory is at present the widely predominant interpretive approach to these changing processes.

Although many attempt to interpret socio-demographic phenomena like the current low fertility using solely the tools of economic theory have so far been bound to end in failure, Rational Action Theory<sup>1</sup> is maintained in several authoritative OECD reviews of studies assessing the impact of a range of family friendly policies<sup>2</sup> on fertility rates. In her exhaustive report, Joelle Sleebos (2003) admits that these studies report contradictory results, often based not on individual and longitudinal data but on a great profusion of both statistical correlations<sup>3</sup> with a strong ecological fallacy bias and regressions pointing to causal relations without the required statistical significance.<sup>4</sup> When empirical evidence finally comes up with no more than a “weak positive relation” between reproductive behaviours and those policies, should we give more importance to the fact that it is ‘weak’ or that it is ‘positive’?<sup>5</sup> The OECD reports, then, bear out that the alliance between the rational choice and econometric approaches shows serious shortcomings as a “model for generating” demographic behaviours. It is difficult to come up with effective corrective measures for undesirable situations if there is no reliable model with which to interpret them.

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<sup>1</sup> It is not by chance that this approach is also very much consonant with that also currently prevalent “quantitative analysis approach with large-scale data-sets”. Researchers “theoretically focus on the *constraints* of individual actions rather than an individual’s intentions. They are particularly interested in *situations* where the actions of a great number of individuals are *channelled by external constraints, leaving little room for the importance of individual choice*” (Blossfeld, 1996, p. 186, our italics). It is precisely this embedment of action within contextual constraints that makes the rational choice approach fine-tuned for what Abbott (1997) defines as a variable paradigm, and induces Goldthorpe (1996) to advocate an alliance between the two approaches.

<sup>2</sup> Financial incentives such as cash benefits, tax reductions or other subsidies, or benefits in kind such as parental leave or other measures to help parents combine work and family.

<sup>3</sup> For example, total fertility rates vs women’s employment rates.

<sup>4</sup> Another recent OECD *report* (D’Addio, Mira d’Ercole, 2005) confirms this basic assessment, pointing out further technical limitations in this approach.

<sup>5</sup> Joelle Sleebos’s (2003, p. 48) conclusion is that “policy-makers should probably not expect too much from pro-natalist policies; we still do not understand fully why birth rates in OECD countries have declined so precipitously over the past three decades, and knowledge about the effects of policies and their complementarities is still too limited to guide the design of cost-effective interventions.”

This paper takes for granted the empirical evidence of the demographic processes looked at, and aims to construct an internally coherent model for interpreting them. It is not an alternative but rather a complementary model with respect to the Rational Choice approach. Some implications of the model for social policies are briefly drawn in the conclusions.

#### [1.1] TRANSITIONAL BEHAVIOURS ARE NOT REDUCIBLE TO RATIONAL CHOICES

It is the case that, as the norms concerning the transitional choices and dictated by tradition have shrivelled and been swept aside by modernisation, the area of emotionally neutral issues<sup>6</sup> is expanding, and greater importance is increasingly attached to the rational evaluation in making choices. However, there is a major reason for being more wary about relying fully on the theory of rational choice in interpreting demographic choice.

A good starting point for this is Gary Becker. He realized that the standard definition of instrumental rationality was too rigid and that it needed to be made looser so as to broaden the range of human behaviour that could be explored. He stressed that “negatively inclined market demand curves result not so much from rational behaviour per se as from a general principle which includes a wide class of irrational behaviour as well” (Becker, 1962). Here, then, is Becker’s proposal for a simplified, ‘fuzzy’ definition of rationality, also taking the quality of consciousness into account.<sup>7</sup> Only one basic quality of the rational choice approach has never been challenged by Becker (1976, p. 7) himself, as he explicitly says:

“The economic approach does not draw conceptual (differences) between major and minor decisions, such as those involving life and death in contrast to the choice of a brand of coffee; or between decisions said to involve strong emotions and those with little emotional involvement, such as in choosing a mate or the number of children in contrast to buying paint; or between decisions by persons with different incomes, education, or family backgrounds.”

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<sup>6</sup> In a seminal paper, Amitai Etzioni (1986, p. 126) advanced the following thesis: “the majority of choices people make, including economic ones, are completely or largely based on normative/affective considerations not merely with regard to selection of goals but also of means”. The limited zones in which other, logical-empirical considerations are paramount, “are themselves defined by normative/affective factors that legitimate and otherwise motivate such decision making”: Etzioni defines them ‘legitimated indifference zones’, or areas of emotionally neutral issues.

<sup>7</sup> “The economic approach does not assume that decision units are necessarily conscious of their efforts to maximize or can verbalize or otherwise describe in an informative way reasons for the systematic patterns in their behavior. Thus it is consistent with the emphasis on the subconscious in modern psychology and with Merton’s distinction between manifest and latent functions in sociology” (Becker, 1976, p. 7).

Becker fights for a just cause against ad hoc explanations of behaviour<sup>8</sup>. That is why he chooses to advocate a unifying, monolithic approach to the logic of social action. Nevertheless, it is precisely this particular postulate of New Home Economics that we must keep at a distance. Although the logic of rational choice is no doubt fundamental to the process of decision-making, the making of routine choices cannot, in spite of the New Home Economics postulates (Becker, 1976), be compared with what happens in crucial life passages, such as leaving one's family of origin, emigrating, entering into a stable union or having a child. Decisions of this kind are not in fact ordinary choices but, as van Gennep (1981) would have put it, transitional behaviours. Furthermore, choices concerning fundamental transitions require complex painful stages in which the directional axes of our internal gyroscope become disorientated and then re-orientated. Making these kinds of decisions presupposes a willingness to pass through an uncontrolled region, to leap into the unknown.

I assume that in crucial life passages of this kind, some mechanisms tend to impede making a cooperative choice, i.e. a choice contributing to a collective good. Why have a child when that choice implies being less well-off without any compensatory short-term benefit? Collective choices of family formation should not happen or a collective good like a child should not be produced, since it is always convenient (unless the collectivity consists of small groups) for a rational person to free-ride (Leibenstein, 1981). Moreover, unlike in daily life choices, when faced with choices concerning crucial transitions in life an individual is left in a state of strong or even Knightian (i.e. total) uncertainty<sup>9</sup> (Knight, 1921), completely unaware either of the facts to be experienced or of the "model generating" them<sup>10</sup>. For these reasons, economic criteria do not come into play unless there is first an "unshackling".

In a small group, any defection is discouraged when certain types of action both advantageous collectively and disadvantageous to the Ego can be considered rational inasmuch as the Ego identifies self-interest with the interest of the group<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless,

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<sup>8</sup> "There is no apparent embarrassment in arguing, for example, both that the sharp rise in fertility during the late 1940s and early 1950s resulted from a renewed desire for large families, and that the prolonged decline starting just a few years later resulted from a reluctance to be tied down with many children" (Becker, 1976, p. 13).

<sup>9</sup> Unlike risk situations, uncertainty refers to situations where the decision-maker cannot assign mathematical probabilities to the randomness which he is faced with and can only formulate subjective probabilities.

<sup>10</sup> The restraints on choice-making are also stronger in times of wide fissures in a system of values such as the present. As in a context of total uncertainty the system of values would help to make a choice, any fissure in this system can result in immobility.

<sup>11</sup> Hardin (1995) aims to solve the general problem of the production of collective goods (usually named 'collective action paradox') by replacing the Prisoner Dilemma non-cooperative game with 'coordination games' (e.g. Sen's assurance game) that can be performed in a small group. Now, a coordination game implies that the players have common goals, pursuable only if all of them have no alternative but to cooperate, as in the Humean metaphor of the rowers in a boat that have no other goal than to reach the shore

transitional choices cannot be confined within the boundaries of small groups. Just like those who evade taxes or drop litter in the street, young couples hesitating over whether to have a child have the same common interest in the achievement of the goals pursued by collective action (for example, ensuring their community survives and reproduces itself), but differently from the participants in a coordination game, they can achieve that good avoiding to cooperate with the others (Pizzorno, 1995).

So there are collective units which are not formed, or stabilized, by way of coordination games. 'Convention' strategies work inasmuch as a system of norms and of (symmetrically) interweaving groups steers the Ego's choices without allowing too many alternatives. What happens, however, when the monolithic integration of a given normative system breaks up? And what happens when the increasingly difficult economic conditions compel more and more people to free ride?

What we need, if we want to understand transitional behaviours, are more complex interpretational frames than that provided by the New Home Economics. Failing that, the risk is to go off on odd tangents like Jacques Attali,<sup>12</sup> who unable to explain the demographic stagnation in Italy, greatly oversimplifies when he says it is "a country too happy to have children and too happy to welcome in foreigners". Choices that Adam Smith and the Prisoner's Dilemma would classify as perfectly in line with economic rationality are made out to be pure 'irrational' egotism and Italians nothing other than "a well-off people protecting their own happiness".

#### [1.2] THE AMBIVALENCE OF CONCEPTS SUCH AS RATIONAL CHOICE AND RISK PERCEPTION

It is a fact that though hardship, unemployment, costs of housing and lack of childcare services are the pillars supporting every explanation of demographic dynamics based on Rational Action Theory, none of these interpretive models, taken singly, is able to account for this epochal stagnation in the choices of the passage to adulthood.

It is, for example, quite common to put the delay in choosing to enter adult life down to not having a job or, more generally, to the imminent risk of "poverty" faced by young people. Nevertheless, although putting off making choices is more marked in Mediterranean countries, in particular in Italy, examination of European Community Household Panel (ECHP) data shows that in the twelve months after leaving home, young Mediterraneans are much less subject to poverty and housing difficulties than their counterparts in Scandinavia, France and the UK (Micheli, Rosina, 2009). So delay in exiting the

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together. People can restrain their strong inclination to serve their own short-term interests only through the countervailing stabilization of a long-term interest, and that produces a suitable resolution of behavior "which may be properly called convention."

<sup>12</sup> Interview published in the Italian daily newspaper *La Repubblica* (2008).

home may be dictated by (great) caution but not induced by an impending risk of economic hardship<sup>13</sup>.

Moreover, if having a job (even just an unstable employment) is normally an indispensable precondition for setting up one's own home, leaving the family home does not follow on automatically from finding a job. Those out of work do not leave, but those in work do not necessarily leave. In the 1950s too, it was difficult to set up a home of one's own and there was no paternalistic protection of basic statutory employment rights. And yet that period saw the foundations laid for the baby boom. Changes in the labour and housing markets have a very strong effect on demographic dynamics, but do not fully determine its course.

The cost of a child also increases where there is an unequal role division within a couple. Cross-section analyses show that countries where housework rests on the woman's shoulders also have a currently lower TFR. Nevertheless, at the micro-level this relationship may be reversed: "within any one society, on average, individual women who are more highly educated, less religious, more urban or more liberal in their attitudes and values have lower fertility than the less educated, the more religious, the more rural and the more conservative" (McDonald, 2001, p. 9). Once again mere rational choices, based on economic beliefs, are not enough to explain the current changes in behaviour.

The hypothesis we could make is that the decision-making of a 'rational' transitional choice is not triggered by a single economic cause, but rather by the concomitance of a number of causes<sup>14</sup>; however, these interpretive models also conflict with the "weak statistical relations" emerging from the empirical evidence. If a job with poor prospects or the difficulty in finding accommodation or the high cost of living are not enough to prevent leaving the paternal home, nor are they jointly indispensable. If the precarious state of a couple's household budget or the expectation of further expenses or the lack of nursery care are not sufficient to thwart the 'choice' of having a child, nor are they jointly indispensable. Just as tall, dry grass in a field, a burning hot sun and a strong wind won't suffice either – if there is no spark – to start a fire, nor are all three factors together indispensable.

Should we, alternatively, hypothesize that a growing role is played by the risk perception and the collapse of trust in the formation of transitional choices? This may be a good path to follow. However, we cannot ignore the remarkable semantic ambivalence of the term 'risk perception', which can increase when objective uncertainty is mount-

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, Italians leaving home may be less subject to poverty because of a selection mechanism: that is, giving objective difficulties to leave home, those who are leaving are better off.

<sup>14</sup> In order to understand this kind of causality, Wunsch (1988) made use of the category of 'INUS-conditions': "insufficient but necessary part of a condition which is itself unnecessary but sufficient".

ing but also when a state of generalized insecurity, lacking in specific motivation, is becoming more widespread.

The issue of the objective growing uncertainty in a complex society, developed by Beck (1986), Giddens (in Beck *et al.*, 1994) in the 1980s, has been readily assimilated into the decision-making models in order to ameliorate their predictive capacity.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, however, the new decision-making models have not also assimilated the cautiousness shown by Giddens (1990) when he emphasized that the feeling of security is much more an emotional than a cognitive phenomenon. In fact, in the *Theory of Planned Behaviour* (Ajzen, 1988) the degree of perceived behavioural risk does not depend on the degree of internal security/insecurity of an individual (based itself on a previously sedimented frame) but solely and exclusively on the “salient information, or beliefs, relevant to the behaviour”. As well as the previous “*Expectancy per Value*” psycho-social model developed in the 1970s, both Ajzen’s *Planned Behaviour Model* and the *Reasoned Action* model depend entirely on a long chain of external information – a long and deterministic chain of cognitive inputs:

“At the initial level behaviour is assumed to be determined by intention. At the next level these intentions are themselves explained in terms of attitudes toward the behaviour and subjective norms. The third level accounts for attitudes and subjective norms in terms of beliefs about the consequences of performing the behaviour and about the normative expectations of relevant referents. In the final analysis, then, a person’s behaviour is explained by considering her or his beliefs. Since people’s beliefs represent the information (be it correct or incorrect) they have about themselves and about the world around them, *it follows that their behaviour is ultimately determined by this information*” (Ajzen, 1988, p. 126, our italics).

In the recipe for a decision-making process a crucial ingredient is disregarded, that is a dispositional ingredient, connected with that “feeling of security” Giddens labels as a state of mind. Not only the econometric models, however, disregard it. Take Ansley Coale’s (1973) specification of three preconditions for demographic innovation to develop. In his model, any new form of behaviour: a) must yield benefits that outweigh the cost and disadvantages (readiness), b) must be legitimized, that is made culturally/socially acceptable (willingness), and c) there must also be adequate and accessible means to implement it (ability). The three preconditions must be met jointly for the new behavioural form to succeed, in a sort of *bottleneck model* (Lesthaeghe and Vanderhoeft, 1997).<sup>16</sup> Three dimensions (cognitive, normative, instrumental) are therefore involved in Coale’s decision-making model. But all three are nothing other than informa-

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<sup>15</sup> In particular, Ajzen (1988) inserts in the previous *Theory of Reasoned Action* (Ajzen, Fishbein, 1980) a factor of evaluation of the perceived behavioural control. This factor, similar to Bandura’s (1997) *self-efficacy*, “refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour and it is assumed to reflect past experience as well as anticipated impediments and obstacles” (Ajzen, 1988, p. 132).

<sup>16</sup> Note the affinity between the device of a bottleneck model and that of an INUS-condition.

tion entering a rational ‘machine’ that synchronically makes a decision. In a ‘rational’ decision-making process there is no room for a role played by the action of states of mind, which are not reducible to an “emotionally neutral”<sup>17</sup> accounting of merely cognitive input.

### [1.3] THE PARADOX OF UNREDUCED DISSONANCES

A critical point in the rational choice approach is undoubtedly the category of attitude on which it rests. A ‘rational’ choice is traditionally intended as a decision-making device that works roughly as follows: a mixture of social background, socio-cultural climate and a set of individual and collective values influence the individual's attitudes, and these in their turn anticipate the corresponding choices.

Although formally defined in many ways, an attitude is substantially a mere theoretical construct, virtually located “inside” an individual as the counterpart of his behaviour in order to explain it. Attitude is thus a counterfactual category,<sup>18</sup> aimed at accounting for a choice; this is why a non-venial sin of attitude consists simply in its reduced predictive capacity. In the studies based on the “expectancy and value” of a child, the models were shown to have produced “inconsistent and inconclusive results” (Crosbie, 1984, p. 32): attitudes are good predictors of intentions, but not so stable as predictors of actual demographic behaviours. Barber, Axinn and Thornton (2002) show that positive attitudes toward cohabitation, marriage or childbearing, coupled with social pressure or social support, increase the likelihood of cohabiting, marrying or childbearing. On the other hand Liebfoer (1998), on the basis of a panel study on social integration amongst young adults in the Netherlands, stresses that intentions and behaviour show a stronger correspondence only among young adults for whom the family-life event in question is the ‘next in line’. The correspondence is not so strong among young adults who still have to experience a number of other events beforehand.

Predictive capacity apart, there is a more radical criticism to level against the category of attitude; a criticism that overturns the traditional sequence whereby attitude precedes action, both chronologically and genetically. Attitude can, in contrast, be an *ex post facto* processing of actual behaviour (Festinger, 1964). It may have the hidden objective of giving structure and legitimacy to past or current behaviour, not of anticipating future behaviour. The *ex-post* adaptation to a *de facto* practice is not a choice without interior pain. We can call it a coerced choice. As a rhetorical figure, this is an oxymoron; as a psychological mechanism, what we have is a reduction mechanism triggered by the

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<sup>17</sup> See Etzioni (1986) in note 6.

<sup>18</sup> “An attitude is a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution or event (...). The characteristic attribute of attitude is its evaluative nature (...). Like personality trait, attitude is a hypothetical construct that, being inaccessible to direct observations, must be inferred from measurable responses ” (Ajzen, 1988, p. 4).



need to reduce a cognitive dissonance that is the incompatibility between a desire and a norm.

Let us apply the scheme of cognitive dissonance<sup>19</sup> to the clear-cut bifurcation (observed in the Mediterranean countries during the last few decades) between declared expectations, which are socially-normed, of a two-children family, and ‘rational’ demographic choices, limiting fertility within the family. Among the younger Italian cohorts, perception of the costs associated with family formation increases, but this does not affect the perception of their positive value. The painfulness of the dissonance between low fertility and the desire for a larger family should theoretically lead – within a limited time lag – to a decrease in dissonance, either by a modification of behaviour or a change in expectations. In the Mediterranean regions, however, this does not happen. The grapes are definitively not sour, but they are out of reach. The dissonance stays and behaviours are put off. The positive value attached to the institution of family cohabits paradoxically with the drop in fertility and the delay of transitional choices<sup>20</sup>. Changing behaviour, in a word, does not imply a previously changing attitude.

Nonetheless, the Mediterranean paradox of an unreduced dissonance is a valuable clue. It helps us to understand that a changing practice does not necessarily follow a conscious and rational adaptation in attitudes and expectations: in fact, it can also precede them. In that case, we would expect behaviour to find its breeding ground not so much in the cognitive as in the normative-affective sphere. Behind a change in individuals’ rational choices, there should be a shift in the substratum of dispositions that affect them (without actually determining them) and which operate not at the conscious level of beliefs and preferences, but at the more basic one of desires and experiences (Hargreaves Heap, 1992).

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<sup>19</sup> In the theory proposed by Festinger in 1957, two cognitions are dissonant if the opposite of one cognition follows from the other. Because the occurrence of cognitive dissonance is unpleasant, people are motivated to reduce it. Whenever a tension among the elements of a person’s mental set generates psychic discomfort, “something has to give” (Elster, 1983). The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, motivates the person to reduce the dissonance and leads to avoidance of information likely to increase the dissonance. The theory was drawn up in very general, abstract terms: it can be therefore applied to a wide variety of psychological topics involving the interplay of cognition, motivation, and emotion. A person can have cognitions about behaviors, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Cognitions can be about oneself, another person or group, or about things in the environment.

<sup>20</sup> McDonald (2001) stresses the same evidence when he counters to the theory that low fertility has been due to the growth of post-materialist values, by emphasizing the survey evidence from many advanced countries that women in their early twenties express preferences for numbers of children that are, on average, above replacement level. As they age through their twenties, preferences fall but remain well above actual behaviour. This suggests “a willingness and a desire” on the part of women to have more children than they are having.

## [2] THREE HYPOTHESES TO EXPLAIN BETTER THE LOGIC OF TRANSITIONAL CHOICES

In a recent contribution Anne Gauthier, briefly reviewing the fuzzy relation between policies and fertility, wastes no time in reaching the same resigned conclusion as Joelle Sleebos. Gauthier starts off by adopting the interpretive model of the economic theory of fertility as a framework for understanding the effect of policies. But after listing some possible technical reasons for the ambiguity and lack of significance of the results, she suspects that the wide uncertainty regarding the impact of policies on fertility whose target consists of “rational actors” depends upon the weak heuristic power of this theory of action and concludes as follows: “I think that we need to work harder in understanding the actual theoretical mechanisms that lead to fertility decisions...” (Gauthier, 2008, p. 27). Although we have been dissatisfied for some time with the heuristic efficacy of the ‘rational’ man model, we act like the chorus in a famous Verdi opera (*La Forza del Destino*, act II scene IV), where they are urged again and again to leave but no-one moves. Now may be time to make a move by building more apposite models.

Understanding, i.e. building interpretive models, requires a constant dual effort at reconciling the more or less consciously adopted ‘influential metaphysics’ with observation (Delattre, 1981). A constant dual verification of a model’s consistency is needed: on one side consistency with empirical observation – the model’s external rationality – and on the other that between the logical components of the model – its internal rationality. Analysing the internal logical consistency of a model entails breaking down its working hypotheses and cross-fertilizing ideas from several fields of study dealing with the process of formation of an action. This may be less gratifying than examining empirical evidence, but is nonetheless essential. The hermeneutic effectiveness of a model depends as much on its internal as on its external consistency. It may be the case that internal rationality is prior to external rationality.

My aim here is to examine an interpretive model for the process in which procreative choices are made or not made. It can be encapsulated in three hypotheses:

- 1) Transitional behaviour cannot be reduced to a synchronic decision-making process triggered by a strictly ‘rational’ logic: it also depends on states of mind (moods, dispositions) that predispose one to take an action or, conversely, prevent one from doing so (in the latter case we shall call them “crisis” moods or states of mind); a sort of padlock is therefore interposed between intentions and actions, by which they are shackled together or from which they are unshackled.
- 2) Crisis states of mind may in turn be the delayed effect of critical conditions or climates that have crossed the threshold of endurance.

- 3) Crisis states of mind may also be the cumulated effect of a generational shift over the last three decades (the ‘Inglorious Thirty’) marked by a generalized social downdrift.<sup>21</sup>

#### [2.1] CRISIS MOODS MAY INTERPOSE BETWEEN INTENTIONS AND ACTIONS

As with a high-risk investment by a company, a crucial passage towards adult life is a choice whose certain costs outweigh their possible benefits. Making these choices is not justifiable solely in terms of the material quality of the product (e.g., its child-asset); it also requires an added value deriving from the action in itself. Choices made in the dark are choices twice over. Making decisions of such a kind implies that a hidden padlock is opened prior to the well-known ‘rational’ decision-making process. A relaxed state of mind with control over a situation makes it possible to let oneself go when faced with the incalculable risk of a transitional choice. It is a kind of Keynesian animal spirit, a “spontaneous urge to action rather than inaction” even in the face of incalculable risk:

“enterprise only pretends to itself to be mainly actuated by the statements in its own prospectus, however candid and sincere. Only a little more than an expedition to the South Pole, is it based on an exact calculation of benefits to come” (Keynes, 1936, p. 145).

If the human mental function is commonly divided into three basic faculties - cognition (thinking), conation (willing), and affectivity (feelings) - the concept of mood as used in psychology<sup>22</sup> falls mainly within the last of these categories. Moods are “non-intentional mental phenomena” (Frijda, 1993) with four crucial properties: a) they work in a less intense and involving way than emotions; b) they tend to last longer than emotions; c) they are not caused by specific events localized in time; d) they usually signal not states of the environment but that something is going wrong or going well in the current state of the self when coping with the environment itself (Parkinson, Totterdell *et al.*, 1996).

Crisis moods are a particular kind of states of mind. The scientific literature has elaborated lists of affective structures which can influence the non-action of individuals and which, with a connotation of crisis, may be assimilated to the concept of orientation of action introduced by Weber (1913). Their underlying structure can be described in

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<sup>21</sup> Historians call the “Glorious Thirty” the three decades from the end of World War II up to the 1973 oil crisis, characterized by an unprecedented spread of economic wellbeing and by the new role of the media in shaping public opinion and creating new wants.

<sup>22</sup> Apart from the psychological accounts of the dimensional structure of affect pioneered by Wundt (1897) and the psychometric methodology known as the semantic differential by Osgood (1957), the most celebrated mapping of moods in social psychology is provided by Russell and Mehrabian (1977) with their circumplex of affective states: that is a three-dimensional system of coordinates (namely pleasure, arousal, dominance) where moods and emotions working in the consumption behaviour can be mapped.

terms of three features. The first is the loss of the ability to react, the indifference to stimuli as a response to the unbearable nature (in quantity or quality) of the stimuli themselves. The second is the inability to decide on an order of priorities, the by-product of a 'paratactical' organization of the decision-making process in which possible alternatives are placed alongside one another, without any indication of interdependencies and priorities.

The third characteristic of crisis moods – particularly important here - is the loss of the nexus between action and goal. Rational choices are choices which are directly goal-oriented; in contrast, many social or demographic processes diverge from the mechanical intention-action model. Elster (1989) defines as "essentially by-products" the results of processes lacking any direct and conscious link between outcome and intention so that reaching the outcome is possible only by relaxing the control exerted by reason.

Worth, sense, fear, hope, shame, will *-lessness*. A wide range of crisis moods are denoted by words using the same suffix: a state of *-lessness* is, to use a physical comparison, a state of unconscious loss by subjects of their own individual "gyroscope" (Riesman, 1953), whose spinning axes keep their choices on course. It is this loss of an individual's self-determination that intercepts the intention-action chain in the making of rational choices and leads to forms of behaviour described as irrational: from inertia ('sticking to a course'), rigidity, putting off, removal and a moratorium strategy to the most radical avoidance, denial or cut-off strategies (Janis, Mann, 1977).

The idea of irrationality that issues from these behaviours consists in the fact that within them actions and intentions, seemingly part of a unique decisional process, may be uncoupled from one another inasmuch as they are the outcome of different procedures (Simmel, 1984)<sup>23</sup>. Shaped by strictly cognitive and normative internalized constraints, intentions and attitudes may diverge radically from the actions that (apparently) follow from them, since the underlying moods can make intentions ineffectual (figure 1) – like letting go of the clutch makes it impossible for a vehicle to move.

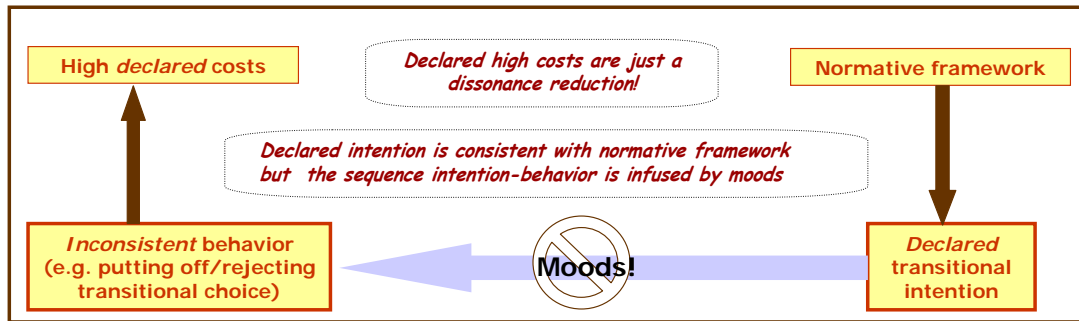
A child that does not want to dive into the water thinks of many reasons not to do so, which are all diversionary tactics, ex post facto rationalisations of a paralysing inability to let oneself go. Let us reflect on the two semantic levels of the verbal expression 'to let oneself go'. While it means "to stop holding back one's feelings, desires, etc" ("come on, enjoy yourself, let yourself go!"), it also signifies "to stop being careful,

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<sup>23</sup> "Of will it has rightly been said that it is blind: it cannot produce any effect if it does not receive some kind of content, which is never included in will itself. Just as will does not - on its own - choose any given content, so it does not derive any purpose from pure knowledge of the contents of the world, i.e. from intellectuality (...). Even if we turn to the concept of calculating the means with total clarity, we remain purely theoretical beings, in no way practical" (Simmel, 1984, p. 608, our translation).

tidy, etc.” (“he has let himself go since he lost his job”)<sup>24</sup>. In the first sense, letting oneself go presupposes a self-confidence and control over one’s own spontaneity that are strong enough to permit one to put oneself on the line. In its second, more negative, meaning, it can refer to a lack of self-confidence that is so pervasive and paralyzing as to make any release of control impossible<sup>25</sup>.

Figure 1. A Mood Interceptor Mechanism: the inconsistency between internalized norms/intentions and consequent behaviours.



## [2.2] CRISIS MOODS MAY BE LAGGED EFFECTS OF PROLONGED INDIVIDUAL CRITICALITIES

States of mind, in particular crisis moods, precede making choices but are not deterministically attributed to individuals as if they were a genetic inheritance. Nor can they be extended to everyone as the effect of a common ‘spirit of the age’. Not all young people in the latest cohorts are indiscriminately marked by ‘sad passions’ as we would be led to think reading Benasayag and Schmit (2003, p. 40, our translation):

“adults today have interiorized the failure of those ideas related to a Messianic vision of the future and share the now dominant contrary view of a highly menacing future.”

There is no doubt that some educators apply this philosophy in everyday life driven by their own fears with respect to the spirit of the age. But how many are they, who are

<sup>24</sup> There is a wonderful use of this semantic ambiguity in a Charles Aznavour song (“*Tu te laisses aller*”, 1966): “I’ve had enough, indeed, of your character. / I’m bushed, indeed, I’d want to choke you. / My God, five years passed, and now / you *let yourself go* more and more (..) / Nonetheless, so little would be enough to start again.. (..) / Try to be, again, that woman I knew, / so many years ago, and I’ll hug you tight, / as well as so many years ago, till you / will *let yourself go* more and more”.

<sup>25</sup> A dual meaning comparable to the opposite fates of the two brothers in their descent into the Maelstrom in a well-known Edgar Allan Poe’s story (1984, p. 447): “I resolved to lash myself securely to the water cask upon which I now held, to cut it loose from the counter, and to throw myself with it into the water. I attracted my brother’s attention by signs, and did everything in my power to make him understand what I was about to do. But he shook his head despairingly, and refused to move from his station by the ring-bolt”.

they, in what contexts, and why do they do so? Applying this logic generally to all educators through the rhetoric of synecdoche is facilitated by the pitfall of the “dominant conviction”, which permeates opinion poll democracy. Hence the continual repetition of apodictic assertions of the kind “...the minds of those who want to help the young are dominated by the idea of a menacing future...”. Once again, how many are they, who, in what contexts and why?

In contrast, states of mind – in particular crisis moods – have origins that can be contextualized and viewed from a historical perspective, are of finite duration and originate and come to an end in precise ways. They are the effect of the contingent frameworks of individual lives, an effect that can unfold along many different lines: as a direct and immediate consequence of those deeply disorientating moments of disruption during one’s lifetime that De Martino (1975) calls “apocalypses”<sup>26</sup>; as something handed down from parents to children through imprinting, a kind of echo from one generation to the next; and lastly as a lagged effect during the course of a life. Let us focus here on the last mode.

The onset of a crisis mood rarely follows a critical situation directly and immediately; it is rather the lagged destructuring effect of an individual criticality that persists unbearably. For example (Heckausen, 1999), a long-term unemployed adult who has applied unsuccessfully for many jobs inevitably becomes discouraged, doubts his own abilities and just goes for any unskilled occupation. But the labour market is not the only sphere in which the lagged formation of crisis moods occurs. They can emerge either in the interweaving between social mobility and public life or among the patterns of daily life and the family-formation system. In all these spheres of social regulation the wearing down of an individual’s resilience and the degeneration of their state of mind into one of crisis is triggered when a circumstantial sense of inadequacy vis-à-vis a specific occasion changes into a generalized sense of inadequacy with regard to the whole world. The destructuring of an intentional state separates it, as it were, from its object:

“The immediate response to loss of an important source of positive value is likely to be a sense of hopelessness, accompanied by a gamut of feelings, ranging from distress, depression and shame to anger. Feelings of hopelessness will not always be restricted to the provoking incident – large or small. It may lead to thoughts about the hopelessness of one’s life in general. It is such a generalization of hopelessness that we believe forms the central core of a depressive disorder” (Brown, Harris, 1978, p. 235).

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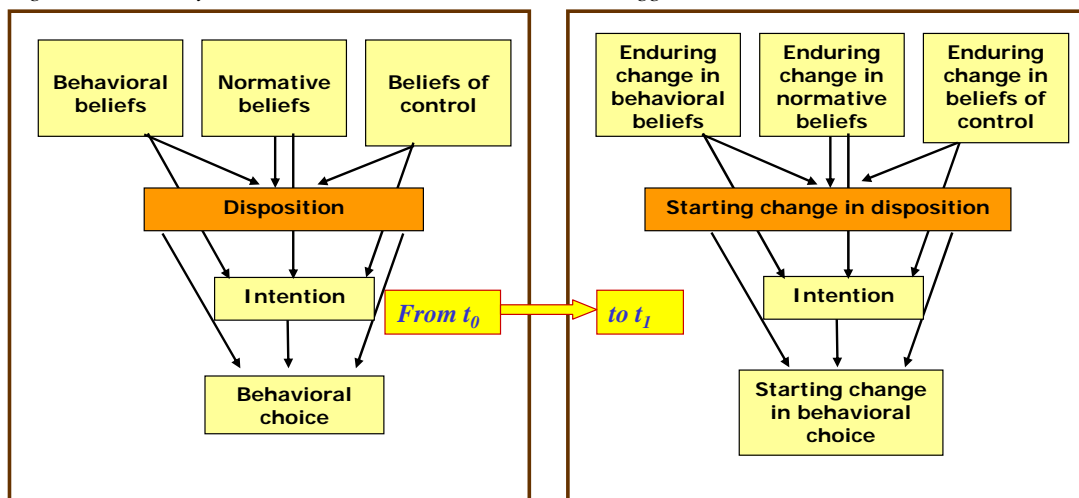
<sup>26</sup> “The inexplicable destructiveness of some forces of nature, the loss of a loved one, a terminal illness, puberty, a famine with no prospect of it ending, [all these situations] embody the immense experience of the conflict between a sudden impulse to do something and the overwhelming doubt that nothing can be done” (De Martino, 1975, p. 23). A thorough exploration of this way in which crisis moods materialize can be found elsewhere (Micheli, 2010).

Let us look at an example, once again located in the sphere of social and economic regulation. During the revolutionary events in East Germany in 1989, more than 300,000 citizens left that country and moved to West Germany. Such a migratory action has a profound impact on personality development, psychosocial functioning, and well-being. Nevertheless, Jerusalem and Mittag (1995) evidence that migrants, despite their young age, had formed a rather stable trait of general self-efficacy that was not much affected by the stress of migration and employment. Neither migration nor the consequent critical situations (financial hardships, disruption of social ties, unemployment) produce a significant stress. However, this apparent stability might change with time; while hardships are perceived as transitory and then not influent on Ego's ability to react, a persisting hardship (e.g., a change from frictional – i.e., sporadic - unemployment to long-term unemployment) can produce a devastating effect:

“Long-term unemployment might weaken generalized self-efficacy beliefs, and weak beliefs might lead to less persistence in job hunting or even resignation and inactivity. *The crucial question could be how long it takes for unemployment and/or living alone to affect self-worth and self-beliefs*” (Jerusalem and Mittag, 1995, p. 195, our italics).

To sum up (figure 2), if a behaviour is usually the synchronic reply to a change in the coordinates of the frame of reference, a changing behaviour can be the result of a changed underlying state of mind, and this can in turn be the outcome of a transformation of the frame coordinates that is started at time (t-1). In such a mechanism Ego can be unaware of this change, and this unawareness justifies the persistence of previous normative expectations and intentions.

Figure 2. From a synchronic 'Planned Behaviour' to a time-lagged 'Mood Focused Behaviour' Model.



The interpretational framework suggests therefore a three-step retrospective explanation for the low propensity to have a child:

- i) The decision not to have a child is frequently a non-decision, as the choice is unshackled from preformed intentions.<sup>27</sup>
- ii) The interception of the usual sequence intentions→actions is caused by the emergence of crisis states of mind.
- iii) The latter, in turn, derive (with a temporal lag) from pre-existing and persisting ‘critical situations’.

### [2.3] CRISIS MOODS MAY ALSO BE A LAGGED EFFECT OF GENERATIONAL ECHOES

This perspective allows us to explain better the delaying behaviour in the transition to adulthood of the Italian cohort born in the mid-1970s and now in their thirties. As a general rule, the bulk of historical events<sup>28</sup> and processes<sup>29</sup> that cohorts experience and cumulate in their own lives condition their life choices and determine – by a mere co-presence in a historical region - their “generational location” (Mannheim, 1952<sup>30</sup>). How can we extrapolate this mechanism and apply it also to the cohort of their younger siblings, born in the early 1990s when the Mediterranean countries were experiencing a macroscopic deregulation in the two main pillars of social reproduction – the labour market and the family-formation system?

In order to do this, we need to keep in mind that two more time coordinates condition the beliefs, moods and practices of a generation. The first is that given by the social practices, beliefs and states of mind that have marked the anthropological generation of the parents of a given cohort, which contribute to determining the practices, beliefs and states of mind of their children.

The other coordinate is constituted by the social practices, beliefs and moods of the immediately preceding and contiguous cohorts: “younger siblings”, as it were, are in fact influenced not only by the generational legacy of their parents but also by the practices and preferences of their “elder siblings”, at least as long as the age difference between

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<sup>27</sup> Incidentally, if a crisis mood leads a person to loose resilience and curl up in a self-protective shell for mere survival, he will inevitably be drawn more into the womb of the family and more unwilling to emancipate themselves from it. Impediment of the urge to choose strengthens the fascination of the Mediterranean strong family. This is a very important covariate, that helps to explain the greater degree of demographic stagnation in the Mediterranean area (Micheli, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Consider, for example, the effects on Europeans’ lives of the 1973 oil crisis, the building in 1961 and demolition in 1989 of the Berlin Wall, and also the 2001 destruction of the World Trade Centre.

<sup>29</sup> With the last decade in mind, think of the effects of the globalization and destabilization of the labour market, or of the deregulation in the rules governing family formation and dissolution.

<sup>30</sup> The force of many of the cited events and processes is such to evoke the Mannheim’s more stringent concept of “generation as an actuality”, that implies “the participation in a common destiny” of its “historical and social unit”: “We shall speak of a generation as an actuality where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic *de-stabilization*” (Mannheim, 1952, p. 303, my italics)



elder and younger cohorts is not so great as to make the former “invisible” to the latter.<sup>31</sup>

Every cohort, it is true, experiences year after year this conditioning so that the generational change flows without interruption. However, some historical turning points such as those mentioned above<sup>32</sup> tend to catalyse this undifferentiated flow, embedding it in clearly identifiable generational waves lasting 27-30 years. This is why we can try to individuate three generational ‘turnings’,<sup>33</sup> with the changing of practices and moods, in recent decades.

[a] Those born around 1974 (the last within the “Glorious Thirty”), young adults in the 1990s, are characterised – as Judt (2010) points out<sup>34</sup> – by a peak in the individualistic rebellion against a model of society based on social equity and the central role of the State; a rebellion leading to rejection of any life choice that is not reversible.

[b] Those born around 1982, teenagers at the end of the 1990s, are the first to experience the epochal change from labour flexibility to precariousness and, more generally, from widespread opportunities for wellbeing to a sharp social polarization;

[c] Those born around 1990, teenagers during the first decade of the new millennium, overwhelmed by a systemic deregulation both of the rules of family reproduction and the labour market, enter into an adulthood deeply marked by what I have called a “–

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<sup>31</sup> In particular, members of an elder cohort cease to be a reference point for a younger one when they cross three crucial thresholds in their life course (puberty, teens, entry in adulthood, roughly every 8-9 years) and themselves experience a thorough redefinition of their parents’ practices, values and moods. This is why the impact of the generational legacy of the parents’ cohort, itself producing an echo every 25-30 years, is further reinterpreted and modified every 8-9 years, whenever a cohort “loses touch” with elder siblings (heirs of a different generational legacy) and consequently changes, at least in part, its own life course.

<sup>32</sup> See notes 28 and 29.

<sup>33</sup> We borrow the term “turning” from Strauss and Howe (1991) who divides modern American history into cycles, each one lasting approximately the length of a long human life (about 80–90 years) and each in turn composed of four different types of “mood eras”, or “turnings”. In a quite similar way, though with much greater authority, Assmann (1997) scans the length of the communicative memory, dividing it into “saecula” and generations.

<sup>34</sup> “The years 1945-1975 were widely acknowledged as something of a miracle, giving birth to the American way of life. Two generations of Americans – the man and women who went through world war II and their children who were to celebrate the ‘60s - experienced job security and upward social mobility on an unprecedented scale” (Judt, 2010, p.51). But “a greatest gulf (separates these two) generations. For anyone born after 1945, the welfare state and its institutions were simply the normal conditions of life, and more than a little dull. The baby boomers, entering university in the mid-‘60s, had only ever known a world of improving life chances, generous medical and educational services, optimistic prospects of upward social mobility and an indefinable but ubiquitous sense of security. The goals of an earlier generation of reformers were no longer of interest to their successors. On the contrary, they were increasingly perceived as restrictions upon the self-expression and freedom of the individual” (*ibidem*, p.84).

lessness syndrome’): an unconscious loss of their own individual gyroscope whose spinning axes keep their choices on course.

Let us pose, then, a quite general question. How do people reorganize their practices, tastes and moods in times of rapidly descending social mobility? This is not a new theoretical issue, of course,<sup>35</sup> but we are no longer used to addressing it. What, in effect, will happen in the intergenerational chain of reciprocities when continuously decreasing childcare and a growing lack of attention by parents (due to the need for dual income in a family) is no longer automatically balanced by the prospect of future improvements in terms of career, life-style and the wellbeing of the children themselves? In particular which practices, expectations and moods mark the millennium generation, located at the core of a ‘perfect storm’, produced by the simultaneous combination of economic recession, cultural deregulation and social polarization?

In spite of its limited statistical representativeness, a recent local exploratory survey<sup>36</sup> confirms, for the new generations, the hypothesis of a decisional process unshackled from intentions. Specifically, three aspects seem to be highlighted.

[a] The increase in Knightian market uncertainty brings about the loss of a clear prospect for the future but does not lead at the same time to the adoption of an ethic of responsibility that should be peculiar to a strategy of flexibility. There is a leap in logic between the cohort born in 1975 and the one born in 1990 that resembles what occurred between the second and third generation in Sennett’s family saga (1998);<sup>37</sup> a leap that consists both in the unshackling of action from its consequences and in a further blurring of the sense of a limit (*shamelessness*);

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<sup>35</sup> Prior to 1734, the date of his death, Richard Cantillon had addressed this theoretical issue in his *Essay on the Nature of Trade in General* (1755).

<sup>36</sup> Carried out in 2006, the survey consisted of 22 in-depth interviews with Italian middle school teachers as privileged witnesses of any differences in the cognitive, emotional and relational resources of the cohorts of fifteen-year-olds in the first half of the 1990s compared to their contemporary counterparts. Those to be interviewed were selected from teachers in technical schools with children from the lower-middle classes, characterised by a more ‘limited’ than ‘elaborate’ language code by a ‘restricted’ language code rather than an ‘elaborated’ one (Bernstein, 1971), consequently with a narrower range of life projects and prospects.

<sup>37</sup> The saga begins with a hardworking Italian emigrant, Enrico, entrapped in the ‘cage’ of bureaucratic capitalist organisation, though he benefits from the linearity and cumulativeness of his life’s career and consequently becomes the “creator of his own life”. His son, Rico, a second-generation citizen rising up the social scale in an age of short-term flexibility embraces the new work ethic wholeheartedly and despises the “time-servers” sheltered in the bureaucratic cage like his father. At the same time, however, he puts at the centre of his ethic the assuming of personal responsibility for what happens even when it’s beyond his control. It is precisely this personal shouldering of responsibility that is lacking in the third generation. For Rico’s children, committing oneself to something is an abstract virtue; they “can’t see it anywhere”.

[b] The faster family deregulation engenders a growing tendency among parents towards what Selvini Palazzoli (1998) calls “mimed care” (working parents overzealously letting children have their way as an affective substitute for being absent). This tendency, in turn, induces in children loss of an affective and decisional barycentre, an accentuated impulse to be elsewhere and constantly delocalise the place where important decisions are made, as in the mannerist syndrome of the student Jurg Zünd in one of the “Three stories of a failed existence” by Ludwig Binswanger (1964).<sup>38</sup>

[c] The accentuated loss of specificity of intentional states once again, as in the 1950s, generates “rebels without a cause” – like the teenagers inspired by Robert M. Lindner’s essay (1944), who were growing up in the anomie of the Great Depression. These “rebels” give vent to their emotions without filtering them through an adequate cognitive pre-elaboration of action (*thoughtlessness*) while at the same time heightening the cognitive objectification of their narrations – a technique identified by Patricia Crittenden (1999), scholar of the John Bowlby school, as a proxy for a state of avoiding insecurity. Also in Judt’s opinion, the mark of the new generations consists in a “*state of – lessness*”:

“For thirty years students have been complaining to me that “it was easy for you”; your generation had ideals and ideas, you believed in something, you were able to change things. “We” (the children of the ‘80s, the ‘90s) have nothing. In many respects my students are right. The last time a cohort of young people expressed comparable frustration at the emptiness of their lives and the dispiriting *purposelessness* of their world was in the 1920s: it is not by chance that historians speak of a ‘lost generation’” (Judt, 2010, p. 3, our italics).

### [3] ECONOMIC POLICIES ARE NOT ENOUGH TO REACTIVATE TRANSITIONAL BEHAVIOURS

How can the flow of transitional choices that is currently stalled be restarted? Without doubt, a moral need for social equity compels us to demand the implementation of some essential policies aimed at making job-seeking or house-hunting easier and at enabling a balance between work and family life to be achieved, which will free young adults from a state of insecurity allowing them to make transitional choices. However, in a scenario of long-term crisis, these policies are clearly necessary but insufficient if unsupported by policies for rebuilding a climate of trust. In the relationship between material conditions and transitional behaviours, the crucial question is that evoked by Jerusalem and Mittag (1995): *how long does it take* for whatever (prolonged) criticality to affect self-esteem and self-belief? Beyond that time threshold, in fact, the restoration of normal (i.e. non critical) material life conditions will no longer be enough to renew, within an

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<sup>38</sup> “Jurg Zünd is lively, sensitive and impulsive as a boy, but soon he moves in three ‘worlds’ which are different or downright contradictory. He fails to put down roots in any of these worlds, given that he constantly sees each of them in the mirror of the other two” (Binswanger, 1964, p. 150, our translation). The existence of Jurg Zünd is thus threatened right from the start by a schism, which enables him to choose his own way of life and compels him to follow those paths shown to him by anyone else.

individual, the previous disposition “to let oneself go”. Beyond such a threshold, either individual or generational criticalities need some further sign of change in order for subjects to consent to make transitional choices again.

The reabsorption of a crisis state of mind is neither automatic nor in sync with the surmounting of critical conditions; it requires more time, as well as the implementation of ad hoc strategies to restore a suitable climate that induces young people to look to the future with self-confidence. An end to critical conditions does not lead *ipso facto* to a renewed inclination to engage in choices marked by Knightian uncertainty.

‘Constructive’ moods may need time to be reconstituted (in spite of the short-term perspective of policies, tied to the time span of a parliament). But this is not all. The recoupling of intentions and actions may not take place if the renewal of material opportunities does not go hand in hand with appropriate signals communicating a change in the ‘surrounding conditions’ within which the opportunities are situated. A change that provides glimpses of a reconciliation of the climate in which the decisional process is constituted. What, then, are these surrounding conditions, these “irenical” – that is pacificatory - scenarios? How can they be created? Let us examine the two questions separately.

### [3.1] IRENICAL SCENARIOS ARE WHAT IS NEEDED TO EXIT CRISIS MOODS

A first possible change in the surrounding conditions regards the gender role set in the organization of housework. The Mediterranean family preserves and crystallises a segregation of roles based on a rigid fencing off of the respective competences and know-how: codes of working and public life in the hands of men, the affective codes in the women’s hands. So the role ascribed to the Mediterranean male breadwinner binds him to the stereotype of the “good provider and firm disciplinarian”, who is empowered to govern his children according to a progressively undermined principle of authority and to engage with them only in the codes of play and cognition. The father is thus the victim of a jammed communicative mechanism, confined solely to the normative and cognitive spheres of life. All that which can help to break out of this asymmetry of roles, particularly marked in the Mediterranean countries - from wage equality and equal employment opportunities to a mandatory shift of parental leave from mothers to fathers - will both lighten the burden of women’s dual role and hand back to men the affective codes, making it easier to opt for a procreational choice.

A second pacificatory scenario is opened up, within the home, by the renewed practice of shared time in childcare (Bryan, Zick, 1996, Bianchi, 2000), which acts as a bridge between the organisation of productive labour and that of care work. All western societies have in common an increase in the time that parents ‘dedicate’ personally, on an individual basis, to their offspring. It only compensates in part for the sharp drop in what Suzanne Bianchi (2000) calls the “time of being there”, when parents are available but

not directly engaged in activities with their children. Our future depends in part on the challenge of renewing the habitual action of care time in which children may remain in contact with their parents as they carry out their tasks either in public work or in home care.

A third irenic scenario (also crucial in Mediterranean countries) consists in a definitive (and inevitable) metabolization (Lamb, 1997) of the passage from a reproductive model based on ‘monotropic’ attachment (where the relationship with the primary caregiver is predominant) to one based on multiple attachment, which takes a long time to reach completion in the Mediterranean cultures. Over a long period, it seemed that the norm in western societies was the existence of a single primary attachment. Research has finally dented the certainty that an infant’s world is ‘naturally’ monotropic<sup>39</sup>. The entry *en masse* of the female population into the labour market has triggered a gradual diminishing of the model of childcare wholly centred on the mother and multiplied *de facto* the figures caring for children and to whom they refer. In Mediterranean countries too, the caring father is starting to appear both in the collective imagination and in the repertory of new urban roles. Once again, the possibility for a man to have access to the richness of care experience cannot but renew the desire to have children.

### [3.2] PROTECTED CORRIDORS ARE REQUIRED TO PRODUCE THE RIGHT IRENICAL CLIMATES

How can we construct these irenic scenarios, that help reduce the fear of running the Knightian risk involved in having a child? Some of the current intervention strategies already go in the right direction, whether they aim to achieve equal treatment or opportunity or to enforce a shifting of parental leave from mothers to fathers. Welfare policies providing resources (cash and material help) to young single adults and couples are undoubtedly a preliminary and undelayable measure in Mediterranean ‘familist’ welfare. Their effectiveness, however, must be measured by their ability to reconstruct the man’s control on the affective codes (Micheli, 2010); and they may be unexpectedly ineffective if not supported by a far-reaching policy to concretely redesign the whole space-time framework of social reproduction and its cruxes.

If the best way to unbridle the desire to have children is to learn to “let oneself go and risk it”, guidelines to help us are few and far between. In flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) the optimal merging of action and awareness is the “essentially by-product” (Elster, 1983) of removing rational control over one’s actions; this removal is permitted

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<sup>39</sup> According to Lamb (1997, p. 119): “Many important questions remain unanswered but at least some issues have been resolved. First, there is substantial evidence that infants form attachments to both mothers and fathers at about the same point during the first year of life. Second, a hierarchy appears to exist among attachment figures such that most infants prefer their mothers over their fathers. These preferences probably develop because the mothers are primary caretakers; they might well disappear or be reversed if fathers were to share caretaking responsibilities or become primary caretakers, which few have done”.

and steered by a higher level of self-control, what Pascal calls *coutume*, habit that sediments day by day<sup>40</sup>. But what are the ‘protected corridors’ that can help to build up this *coutume* and release the iron grip of reason?

Looking at just one controversial question, to give importance once again to shared time means very carefully rethinking the overall organisation of work. Part-time work and tele-work allow the overlap between home and workplace, but in doing so undermine the extraordinary quality of the public workplace in terms of socialising individuals to a common experience and bringing them out of the narrow confines of family life. Bringing work back into the home will thus make sense if it is done in a partial and controlled form, inserted into the framework of flexible work times and places so as to avoid individuals feeling their lives to be confined to the couple or family<sup>41</sup>.

Let us sketch out a second practicable path to irenic scenarios. A final reason that is most often given for putting off having a child is that one does not feel up to it, is not being ‘ready’. When, however, in a group of childless young couples who are friends one of them has a child, what is set off among the others is not only a process of cognitive learning (it can be done and this is the way). Nor is it simply a matter of following a normative dictate. What we have is a kind of sensorial contagion, a spark effect. Seeing a successfully completed transitional choice reduces the anxiety of being inadequate in the undecided, thereby lessening the dissonance between intentions and actions. The fear of being inadequate is overcome by direct physical contact with the outcome of the choice.<sup>42</sup> Only by restoring and reviving ‘contact’ places and institutions, therefore, can we recreate the habit of sharing expressive codes, as in the program of “pedagogy of interdependences” (Guillemard, 1986) drawn up by the Laroque Report in the 1970s or in the ‘contact-hypothesis’ suggested by Allport (1954) to counter xenophobic behaviour towards out-groups<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> A socially built access to the faith - a state that is essentially a by-product, unreachable with an effort of will - is described by Pascal in his Thought 233, by behaving ‘as if’ we already have faith, just as the unreasoned iteration of an habit will produce the expected outcome “by dulling your mind” (Pascal, 1978, p. 577), i.e. relaxing control by dazing your self.

<sup>41</sup> Moreover, a shift of the barycentre towards the private sphere will, in turn, need to be counterbalanced by a remodulation of urban habitats, which would promote both high-density relational networks in neighbourhoods and at the same time connect the centre systematically with the peripheries.

<sup>42</sup> See the narrative of this young Italian woman, reported in Micheli and Bernardi (2003, p. 33): “[...] I waited, but then there was a couple of friends who had [a child] and so the idea came about: when she was 5 months pregnant, you could see the belly, and then we started to daydream about it, and then when she had it, then the baby was there, you could see her, you could see the baby at home, I... the fragrance, you could smell the new-born’s smell. And after all I have always wanted them, so I chose...”.

<sup>43</sup> A good example of ‘contact institution’ would be a universal civic service either to be set up or reintroduced, a ‘tax on time’ for the purpose not of armed defence but of creating “time to care”, similar to that proposed by the Secretariat for Future Studies in Stockholm (1987).

A last caveat, in conclusion. Both strategies for creating protected corridors and those for redesigning the framework of social reproduction cannot achieve their ends within the limited time horizon of a legislative cycle, and this may give rise to insurmountable obstacles to their implementation. But there is no other way. If the choice to set up a family or have a child does not follow automatically from an assessment of costs and benefits, but rather ‘naturally’ as “essentially by-product” of a renewed climate of confidence in highly hazardous future investments, re-establishing social rules to feed such a climate is not an option but an imperative. The gurus of “emotional shopping” know that it is not enough to lower prices to give an incentive to buy and that the readiness to risk has to be cultivated in the virtual investor. That is why they create appropriate sensorial ‘climates’.

Thomas Sydenham, a 17th-century physician and philosopher and author of a celebrated treatise on the “Anatomy of Melancholy”, cured a nobleman of *spleen* through a diversionary therapeutic remedy, despatching him off to a non-existent famous colleague in the Highlands. The expedient worked because the method of cure consisted in undertaking the journey, not being seen by a Scottish luminary (Dörner, 1975). Sydenham’s idea was to get the nobleman to face a situation that involved taking risks, to force him to come to terms with nature *in terra incognita*. A similar by-product – on the propensity of the new generations to run risks and perhaps have a child – can only be reached through the redesigning of far-reaching policies.

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