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**Juggling School, Work, and Family:
The Transition to Adulthood in Italy, Sweden,
Germany, and the United States**

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes the findings from 12 papers that were commissioned for a conference on the transition to adulthood in four countries: Italy, Germany, Sweden and the USA. For each country, scholarly papers were written by a social historian, a developmentalist from psychology or sociology and a scholar of public policy. Each paper used comparative data to summarize how the transition to adulthood was unique in their country and then to explain why this pattern of uniqueness occurred. The present paper synthesizes these three papers on each country. It emphasizes the role the nuclear family plays in Italy in facilitating the very late household independence of young Italian adults, a role that is slowly transforming traditional parent-child relations. It also emphasizes the role the Swedish state plays in facilitating a brief period of experimentation before it promotes young people settling into higher education, relatively stable work, and cohabitation or marriage. The paper also emphasizes changes that are occurring in the German higher education and apprenticeship systems, especially the latter in terms of pressures from the changing nature of work and jobs and the desire of businesses for flexibility in hiring, training and firing. And finally, the paper emphasizes how variable the transition to adulthood is in the USA, being especially problematic for those who do not go into higher education or have strong family links into the labor market. Prison, early childbirth and job churning are more characteristic of the USA than elsewhere in the industrialized world, in part due to racial beliefs and habits, to adherence to a market ideology, and to a high school system that does not function well where there are many poor minorities, especially African-Americans.

Introduction

This is a first draft of a chapter to appear in a book that will describe how the transition to adulthood takes place in the most highly economically developed countries. This particular chapter is one of two that seeks to explain the pattern of descriptive findings that emerged across four countries: Italy, Sweden, Germany, and the United States. In particular, it seeks to explain the important constellation of descriptive relationships which show that, almost universally, young people under 16 live in their family of origin, attend school full-time, are not employed even part-time, are unmarried, and are childless. National variation after about age 35 is also minimal. In their mature years, few adults are in school or live in their family of origin. Instead, they work full time, have their own household, are married, and have at least one child. The situation is quite different between ages 16 and 35. Then, nations differ in how and when transitions occur in the school, family, and work domains. They also differ in how individuals juggle realities within and between these domains as they try to attain full adult status. This chapter describes and explains national differences in the pathways taken to attain such status.

Italy, Sweden, Germany, and the United States were chosen because they are all highly developed economically and because they also differ markedly in how school, work, and family factors are normatively structured and individually negotiated. They also represent the major welfare state types most often discussed by macro-level theorists (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1990). The second explanatory chapter—the one that follows—explicitly uses macro-level theory to understand national differences in the transition to adulthood. The present chapter is more modest. It seeks only to provide a data-informed understanding of how the various transitions take place and are interrelated in each country, and how they relate to cultural realities within each nation.

The national differences we discuss are taking place against a backdrop of generally similar historical changes in Western Europe and North America. One of these changes is the expansion of secondary and higher education. Young people are staying in education for longer, prompted by changes in school-leaving laws, expanding opportunities in higher education, increasing equality for women, and higher unemployment rates for youths than adults. Full time jobs for young people are also on the decline, particularly in domestic service, agriculture, and manufacturing. In every country, young people now enter the labor force later, they work more often at temporary or part-time jobs, and they increasingly work and go to school at the same time. Also noteworthy are changes in household arrangements. Cohabitation is on the increase, marriages are occurring later, children are born later, and the birth rate is lower. As common as these changes are across the nations we consider, they occur at different rates, from different levels, with different timing, and with different co-dependency patterns. These differences are our focus.

Our account of the transition to adulthood comes primarily from papers prepared for a conference held in Marbach Castle, Germany, and funded by the Johann Jacob Foundation. The conference required experts on each of our four nations to read early drafts of this book's descriptive chapters and then to decide in which ways the transition to adulthood is unique in their nation. Then they wrote an essay explaining why the transition is distinctive in the ways noted. Most essay writers focused on the interface between school, work, and family, and we will do the same. Three essays were written for each country—one by a social historian, another by a student of social policy, and the third by a professor of developmental science. These disciplines were chosen because each deals with youth and early adulthood. And taken together, they illuminate the tricky concept of "explanation" better than any single disciplinary perspective could. In the country-specific accounts that follow, we interweave the three Marbach explanations for each country in order to avoid redundancy. But readers should note that the accounts we present are based on a multi-disciplinary synthesis.

Several disclaimers are needed before proceeding with these syntheses. For the years between 16 and 35, pathways to adulthood vary within nations as well as between them. Indeed, each nation we discuss pursues some social policies designed to help certain sub-populations more than others under the assumption that their transition to autonomous adulthood is more likely to be compromised. Such policies emphasize race, class, or regional differences within a country, or else immigrant, employment, or health status. However, this chapter only deals with within-country variation if neglect of such variation would otherwise distort the account in some major way.

Although we use terms like path or pathway, they should not be understood as paths on a nation's cultural road map of the passage from birth to successful adulthood. There are no maps clearly detailing what is required to reach the interim destinations of successful infancy, successful early childhood, and so on. While such maps could be constructed for each nation, many details on them would not be clear and, anyway, would change over time. Moreover, credibility would require a very complex map with many paths that are circuitous rather than direct and that fit the experiences of some population groups better than others. To avoid premature specificity, we use the pathway notion, not literally, but as a loose metaphor.

To understand national variation in work, school, and family interfaces, structural concepts are necessary but not sufficient. As the four national examples will soon make clear, cultural factors are also at play. This is not the place to explicate "culture." Suffice it to say that we understand it in the weak sense of explanatory factors that are not structural or demographic. Thus, it is a residual category that includes behavioral norms and ways of thinking and feeling. It avoids the need for a strong definition that invokes theory-derived, construct-specific content that has been explicitly and empirically demarcated from the content of cognate constructs. Strong definitions with these

characteristics are superior in every science because they are more theoretical and ostensive. However, since social scientists currently disagree about what a positive definition of culture should include, we prefer to use it as a hodge-podge composite of entities like norms, beliefs, meanings, and feelings. Disclaimers made, we now turn to the exposition of each nation.

Italy: New Roles for the Strained but Resilient Family

Egle Becchi, Alessandro Cavalli and Giovanni Sgritta wrote the conference reports on work, family and school in Italy. We rely on them for the basic facts and some interpretation. The facts are these. Between the ages of 18 and 30, Italians have recently been going into higher education at a more rapid rate than in other countries, albeit from a lower baseline. On the average, undergraduate training lasts longer than in most other countries—seven years—and university students are particularly likely to live at home and study locally as opposed to studying in another region and living in lodgings. Non-students are mostly employed. But their unemployment rate is still among the highest in Europe. In 1999, the official OECD rate was 32% for all non-students between 20 and 34. Whether employed or not, young adults in Italy live with their parents for longer than in other nations. Veneto has the lowest unemployment in Italy, but even so more than 60% of the employed 25- to 35- year-olds living there in 1999 were residing with their parents. The rate is even higher among the unemployed whose parents often continue to provide food and lodging. Italians leave their family of origin and start their own households later than elsewhere. But when they leave, it is much more often for marriage than to live alone or cohabit. This means that Italy has one of the lowest rates of out-of-wedlock birth. But marriage occurs at a later age than elsewhere, and these older young adults have fewer children than in any other country we examine.

Italy is not the only nation with this pattern of protracted reliance on the family of origin, the long-term postponement of personal independence, the relative avoidance of cohabitation, and the small size of the independent family eventually achieved. Data in this book and elsewhere reveal the same pattern in Greece and Spain. It is thus a Mediterranean phenomenon. However, it also occurs in attenuated form in Ireland, implying a possible Catholic influence. Yet church attendance in Italy and Spain is strikingly low, and Greeks are not even nominal Roman Catholics. So, if church influences operate, they probably do so indirectly through a cultural heritage mechanism rather than directly through current religious beliefs and practices.

The Italian transition to adulthood is related to several unique structural elements in that nation. The diffusion of mass university education took place later there than elsewhere—in the late 70s and 80s. The university system is centralized, and the rapid expansion required system-wide reforms that unfortunately did not take place. In frustration, existing faculty raised their

requirements and curricular standards, leading to a longer period of study and more dropouts. Although many new universities were started in all regions, “*numerus clausus*” restrictions were instituted in very few fields. Thus, there were few incentives for students to travel to another region to study in the field of their choice. Outside of the rural south, nearly all students can live at home, commute to a nearby university, and still study what they want. In some ways, this is a boon, given the paucity of university scholarships. It is also a boon, though, in that it preserves familial and regional ties, increases university attendance, holds down annual costs per family, underwrites the long undergraduate study period, and keeps young Italians off a labor market that cannot readily absorb them because of higher unemployment rates than elsewhere. The downside, of course, is that Italian universities tend to be undercapitalized, overcrowded, and poorly administered, with too many long-term students who would rather be working.

The vicissitudes of the labor market for young Italian adults are clear. As Cavalli notes, “In Italy, ...more than half of all unemployed are young people, aged 14 to 24, in search of their first job and more than 70% of all unemployed are aged below 29.” Unemployment is much lower in mature adult groups, and this is no accident. In Italy, employment and retirement policies favor household heads who currently work in the legitimate labor market or who used to. In Italy, there is rhetoric about youth unemployment. But analysis of central government expenditures indicates that an atypically high priority is given to protecting high-paying jobs and to ensuring comfortable pensions from an unusually early retirement age. While strong unions and electoral politics are behind this cozy relationship, it also reflects the cultural expectation that Italian fathers should be household authority figures. But whatever the origins, the reality for young Italians is that they are left to pick up seasonal or part-time jobs that do not constitute a vocational training and are disproportionately in the large Italian informal economy. Individuals in their teens and twenties find it very difficult to earn a family wage or even to gain the experience needed to enter the competition for such “good” jobs.

Young Italians are all the more disadvantaged because vocational training is more limited there than elsewhere. Vocational secondary schools exist, as do some work-study arrangements with larger firms. But the Italian political system does not spend heavily on job training and retraining, and the economy has many small firms that are not easily organized to provide formal training of high quality. These difficulties are not restricted to the lower end of the job market. One of the reasons undergraduate study takes longer in Italy is that young people see fewer prospects of a good job if they graduate on time. Incentives for on-time graduation are few.

The situation of women has changed in Italy and other parts of South Europe, possibly more rapidly than elsewhere. Gender-linked primary and secondary education that served to channel women’s expectations into marriage

and motherhood is now less prevalent. Rates of university study are comparable to those of males. In 1974 and 1978 respectively, laws were passed allowing divorce and abortion, each symbolizing greater independence for Italian women in a nation where traditional Catholic conceptions of gender and birth control had been dominant. These changes may be responsible for Italian women delaying marriage and childbirth more than in other nations and also for reducing the number of children they eventually have. The delays are not associated with lesser sexual activity, though. The cultural link between marriage and first intercourse ended with the demise of Fascism, and the link between intercourse and childbirth ended with acceptance of contraception and abortion. However, delaying marriage means that young Italian women now have time to fill between ending school and getting married. This time is filled with paid work if it is available or with more study. More than in other countries, Italian women stop work when they get married or have a child, each of which comes later than elsewhere. Young Italian women have much more discretion over their lives than their mothers did at a comparable age, but the female role is probably still more fluid in Italy today than in any of the other countries we consider.

Thanks to mass media, international travel, and the European Union, all Italy is now in the European cultural mainstream. It is difficult to believe that young Italians expect to consume at different levels from their cohorts in Northern Europe. Yet individual wages are still somewhat lower in Italy than elsewhere, possibly even after cost of living differences are factored in. Thus, to enjoy even a modest lifestyle requires young adults to cut back on something. One way to avoid “unnecessary” expenditures is by continuing to live at home without contributing very much to room and board. The loss here is in personal autonomy, for the young adult does not attain one of the most important symbols of adulthood, having one’s own household.

Both the consumption and autonomy ends could be reached by cohabiting with a lover, thus sharing expenses and pooling wages. But in Italy, cohabitation is still rare outside of large cities. Another option is to have a non-familial, non-amorous roommate with whom to share living expenses. But this too is rare. If unmarried Italians have to live outside of the home, it is usually with an extended family member or a mature adult co-chosen with parents. In a cultural context like this, independence from the parental home usually entails marriage. But more so than elsewhere, marriage in Italy entails women leaving paid work and having a baby, both factors that prejudice personal consumption in a nation where neither the state nor businesses provide quality day care or generous child allowances. So, to enjoy a lifestyle with consumption levels equal to North and West European models entails living at home with one’s parents. Cultural factors make this more attractive in Italy than elsewhere, but cultural factors also close off the cohabitation and roommate options that other countries use. Families are expected to cope in Italy; and they do by supporting their adult children at home for longer than is customary elsewhere.

The prolonged presence of adult children has led to adjustments within the Italian family. Historically, Italians have lived in large nuclear families that were patriarchal in some clearly demarcated domains and matriarchal in others. Children living at home, whether adult or not, were subject to this gender- and generation-based family stratification system. But it seems to be breaking down. More and more adult children live at home, and they are generally more educated than their parents. This gives them a special form of capital that parents generally respect. It allows them not just to express what they need and want but also to negotiate for these things in direct and indirect ways. Adult parents and adult children living together report to interviewers that they eventually reach a more egalitarian *modus vivendi*. This is characterized by mutual affective dependency, each generation having its own space, each getting to use the communal family space when circumstances suggest its use, each agreeing to tolerate the other generation's unique cultural productions, and the mature adult generation swallowing large doses of "don't ask, don't tell." As a result, the younger generation is to a considerable degree socially and personally independent. Younger adults often have a room of their own, can invite in friends of both sexes, listen to music and TV as they want, and even use the family car until they get one of their own. This is, of course, a more middle-class and hence also regional picture in Italy; and it is less relevant when a family has many children and few financial resources. However, if middle-class families are carriers of the dominant national family model in Italy, then we now have a younger generation that has modeled for others a delay in the independence symbolized by economic self-sufficiency and having one's own household. But this same generation has also negotiated to attain considerable social and personal independence without endangering the material life style it is willing to settle for.

Other structural changes occurring in Italian society facilitate this culturally negotiated increase in equality between generations. For instance, the low national birth rates and the high levels of rural migration mean that more Italian families can afford a home in the country. When adult children have newer relationships that are romantically expressed in ways that might offend or discomfort their parents, where better to go than to the family country place? Young adults in Italy are as sexually active as elsewhere, and this would not be possible unless there was some complicity between the generations. Since traditional parental dominance will not work well with adult children, this raises the possibility that future changes will take place in Italian family relationships. In particular, when people now in their early 30s have begun their own families, will they want to maintain the hierarchical relationships that characterized how they related to their parents as children or the more egalitarian relationships that characterize how they related to them as adults? And since their birthrate is likely to be very low, will they act in a more hierarchical or egalitarian way towards their one, probably adored, child? The reality of two non-elderly adult generations living in the same household for longer periods has already led to

intergenerational accommodations. In their turn, these could lead to nuclear families in the future being more egalitarian in structure and style.

Italian tradition associates independence with three m's that should be achieved in the late teens or early twenties: *mestiere*, *matrimonio* e *macchina* (a steady job, marriage, and a car). The employment situation in Italy now makes it difficult to attain a good job by the early 20s. And early matrimony prevents buying a car because a baby is likely to arrive and relatively few wives work. The old cultural model cannot work within the age span specified. The three m's still count in Italy, but they are now linked to marriage from the late 20s to the mid-30s. Only by delaying marriage can most individuals cobble together the material resources required to attain nationally (and increasingly, internationally) validated consumption levels and whatever social identities go with these consumption patterns. In a society where roommates and cohabitation are rare, few legitimate paths to independence exist other than through marriage, and marriage itself depends on parents subsidizing their adult children at home during the pre-marriage years. According to surveys, young people who live at home do not give their parents much, and most of their income goes to personal consumption rather than savings. So, we might assume that Italians can eventually afford to marry primarily because of the higher wages that age brings and only secondarily because of the modest accumulation of capital in the form of a car or small savings account.

In Italy, young people and their parents are trapped. But the young people are trapped in a partly gilded cage that they have themselves co-designed in such a way that it hardly infringes on their personal life and continues the economic subsidy they have always had—room, board, and sometimes even pocket money. Their parents are also trapped, but not totally unhappily so. They see their children regularly and have first-hand knowledge of what their children are doing. Moreover, the prolonged stay may mean that the children's obligations to their parents are now even deeper. These obligations are particularly important in families where the parents have had less sustained contact with the legitimate workforce and so receive meager pension benefits. The stronger the bonds of obligation, the more elderly parents might expect their children to contribute in their underfinanced retirement years. The new family system implies mutual gains, and not just one generation being a parasite on the other. This is not to deny the moments of great tension that surely arise when two non-elderly generations live together for longer. But in Italian families, mutual affective regard may mute these tensions when compared to countries with less familistic traditions.

Historically, Italian families had to be so strong because government did so little for them. Once young adults have finished their formal education, this is still true relative to other European nations. There is relatively little job-training, few income supports for the young unemployed, and little support for young children. Families are expected to be the first line of support for individuals in

need, and non-governmental welfare agencies (often associated with the Catholic Church) come second. City, regional, and national governments come last. Tax collection is also less developed in Italy than elsewhere, adding to the low level of expectation about what the state can provide other than to those family heads who worked in the legitimate labor market and have become unemployed or are already retired. In a nation organized along these lines, little remains in government budgets for young families. So, for the support they need, they have to turn to family or the informal economy. Even so, the state indirectly supports certain young adults. In Italy, the parent generation transfers resources to children for longer than elsewhere, and older parents with a history of legitimate work enjoy a disproportionate claim on state tax resources. As a result, some of the benefits they receive trickle down to their adult children living at home. It is impossible to know how much this transfer involves, and it is almost certainly less well targeted than policies aimed exclusively at young adults would achieve. But nonetheless, some transfer from the state to adult children living at home does occur.

The Italian story is about international structural changes that are influencing the nation, but not all of them in the same way as in other nations. In general, the changes have come more recently to Italy and have bit more deeply, especially as concerns the longer undergraduate study period, how much longer young adults live at home, the later age at which marriage occurs, and the small number of children. But Italian culture affects how these structural changes are experienced and buffers their impacts. Thus, it cuts off cohabitation and living with stranger roommates as ways to leave the family home. More so than in other nations, it links marriage to childbirth and female withdrawal from the labor market, thus delaying marriage for those not willing to see their standard of living compromised. And it builds on the already strong affective ties that characterize Italian family life, in some ways renewing them by making them more egalitarian and by ensuring that the younger generation's economic dependence does not diminish its personal or social independence. The family has become less unequal in its internal power relations. Young women have gained dramatically more control over their lives. And young men and women have learned that their parents are willing to be complicit in their children's sexual and cultural lives even when they do not agree with the choices being made. Structural changes are modifying cultural forms, and cultural traditions modify the influences of structure. Intimately connected, these two explanatory forces mirror the dance that takes place between two mutually accommodating non-elderly adult generations that co-exist in the same home and create a new equality without diminishing traditional affective ties. All very Italian; and the adult children get to stay home longer to enjoy Mother's cooking.

Sweden: Sponsored Experimentation for Early Self-Reliance

Sweden is the country least like Italy in the transition to adulthood, though it shares the same generic goals—getting a good job, enjoying material satisfaction, and creating a stable home in which to raise children. Moreover, both countries are exposed to many of the same international structural changes. For instance, despite a recent upturn, it is increasingly more difficult for Swedes under 25 to obtain steady and career-building work. Marriage is being ever more delayed. University enrollments are increasing, but many attend university only because they cannot find jobs they consider suitable. However, these international changes have come about less abruptly in Sweden and may not be as large as in Italy. Also, national differences are evident in how the school, work, family transitions are compressed in Sweden as compared to Italy, resulting in full autonomy earlier in the former. Differences also exist in the value accorded to marriage, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock births, with Sweden being more prone to dissociate marriage from both childbirth and forming new households. In each nation, the family and state play different roles. In Sweden, the state (and corporations) actively support the transition to adulthood. They do this both to develop a productive and financially self-reliant citizenry and also to increase the odds that young people will voluntarily carry out the obligations of citizenship.

If personal autonomy is central to adulthood, then most Swedes are “adult” by about age 25. They have moved out of the parental home and have started their own home. Indeed, most Swedes leave home soon after high school, mostly in order to live alone or to cohabit, often alternating between these two states and only returning to their parents’ home for brief interludes. Also, by age 25, most Swedes have been in stable cohabiting relationships that are in some respects like experiments in marriage, though marriage itself occurs on average at age 30 for women and 32 for men. However, marriage is not considered necessary for parenthood in Sweden, and more than half of all births are to unmarried women, with the first birth occurring at age 28.5. By age 25, most Swedes who have not attended a university have settled into a steady job in the legitimate labor market despite some earlier “job churning” that labor economists view as experiments in identifying personally suitable long-term employment. Swedish unemployment rates for young people are consistently lower than in the other countries we explore. Entering university students tend to be older in Sweden because many young people take several years off after high school in order to travel or be employed. As a result, only about half of the university students have graduated by age 25. But the age of university admission is now going down and the age of graduation may sink also. Most Swedish students are confident that, upon graduation, they will get a job with responsibility and financial potential, and so they do not feel the same crisis that many Italian and French students do. By age 25, the vast majority of native Swedes have left their parents’ home; they are or have been in stable cohabiting relationships; and they are well established in the labor market or are completing their university studies and face good job prospects. There are some exceptions

to this general pattern, especially among Sweden's non-Scandinavian immigrants. Yet the picture is generally accurate. By age 25 most young Swedes can see they are already largely autonomous, though children and marriage do not come for five more years.

We need to explore the system that produces these results, to examine how it works and what pressures it currently faces. Staffan Eklund, Ann-Sofie Ohlander, and Margaret Weir and Hakan Stattin wrote the Marbach conference reports we used for understanding the Swedish story. It is not exclusive to Sweden, though. It more or less applies to each of the other Nordic countries. Thus, the Italy/Sweden contrast is also a Mediterranean/Nordic contrast.

In 1991 Sweden reformed its three-year high schools that are attended by 97% of those who complete their compulsory earlier education. The new high schools aim to provide a broad basic education and to prepare individuals for further education, mostly in national study programs. These same dual goals hold even for students in the high school vocational training program, though they are less likely to go on to higher education and instead go to paid work. Firms throughout Sweden are encouraged to participate in work-study programs, this being promoted as an informal duty of firms and as a chance for young people to be noticed by possible future employers. Across all forms of high school, only 10% of young people drop out—a very high completion rate. Even so, Swedish high schools do not accomplish all the state expects of them. The standards enunciated for them place a high value on inculcating independent problem-solving and responsible citizenship within a framework of participatory democracy. But teachers find it difficult to incorporate these values into all their relationships with students. Their teaching styles still tend to be autocratic and give students little voice. Still, it is interesting to note how clear and broad is the state's interest in high schools. It wants them not only to prepare for work or university study but also to foster individuals who value self-reliance, who recognize their obligations to fellow citizens, and who participate in local decision-making and agenda-setting activities.

Of Swedes aged 19-22, just over 40% are in full-time higher education. Study grants and loans are available to everyone, with loans comprising about 72% of the total. Over the years, these loans can entail significant personal debt, particularly since the stipend levels are set assuming summer work. Moreover, until a revival in the late 1990's, the labor market had not been what it formerly was for students seeking to reduce their debt by combining study and work, whether in summer or during the academic year. The system for funding higher education favors young people from more affluent families because they need fewer loans. Even so, university study is possible for every high school graduate willing to take on loans and summer work. Progress through university is better regulated in Sweden than in Italy, and so graduation takes less time. Although graduates tend to be younger in Sweden, this is by less than would be expected, given that Swedes graduate from high school one year younger than Italians.

This is because many Swedes wait some years before attending university. However, delayed entry has recently become less prevalent and the university graduation age is actually falling. Possibly related to the more regulated course of study in Sweden is that there are fewer long-term, semi-professional students than in Italy or France. These are often students who are so critical of “bourgeois” society that they cannot or will not fully join it as adults. They need to find a long-term shelter against their impending “bourgeois” fate, and university life offers one such shelter.

The vast majority of Swedish students live in dormitories or lodgings, reflecting the high national value placed on being independent and leaving home. This early exit from home is made possible by housing policies dating back to the 1930s that sought to increase the then-low Swedish birthrates by subsidizing the amount of housing available and even the space per house. As a result, housing is more available than in Italy and at prices that are more affordable locally. There is cheap housing available in Italy, but in the country and not in the cities where more and more people live. Moreover, Swedes do not have the same marked preference for local universities that one finds in Italy. Swedes are socialized to be proud of their own locality, but they are also socialized to be nationally and internationally cosmopolitan. So, studying away from home is like an adventure, whereas for regionally chauvinistic Italians it is more like a burden. And since the “numerus clausus” system is widespread, any Swedish student wanting to get a degree in a particular field has to be prepared to go wherever a suitable place is available. Whether planned or not, the Swedish university system promotes personal autonomy in young people, while also providing a relatively clear and generally dependable path to quality employment in the near future. Italy is not like this, given its less structured university system, its tighter housing, its regionalism, and its weaker job market for young adults, whether university graduates or not.

Almost 60% of Swedes do not go to university, preferring to work instead. Historically, the work situation for young Swedes (aged 16-24) has been much better than elsewhere. In the recession of the early '90s, their unemployment rose to 19%, a level that was seen as a crisis in Sweden but would have been labeled as a policy victory in Italy. (However, Sweden's “off the books” economy is much smaller than Italy's). By 1999, the recession had ended and the youth unemployment rate fell to 8%, a figure most countries would envy. There is no separate labor market for young adults in the sense that they are grossly over-represented in some sectors. But what is striking about their employment is the high fraction now in temporary or part-time employment. In 1987, 71% of the 20-24 group had a job classified as steady; in 1998 when the recession was over by several years, it had dropped to 54% and the disposable income available to young people was lower by about 25%. Things are getting worse on the Swedish youth labor market, even if they are better than elsewhere.

In Sweden, both the state and corporations acknowledge responsibility for training young people so as to invest in both their productivity and independence. Individually and collectively, the state and industry fund many training schemes and, in the recession of the early '90s, the state mounted even more of them. Important in this connection is the success of Swedish business in exporting high value-added goods, making salient the need for quality workers and thus for investment in their training. Moreover, the ownership of business is more concentrated in Sweden than in Italy, making it easier for the state and business to collaborate. And finally, it is more broadly acknowledged in Sweden that the state has a responsibility to help people of all ages maximize their personal independence. So, state support for job training reflects deep cultural and economic values in Sweden. However, much training involves partnerships with business, and so market realities are heeded. The state only trains for jobs employers feel they need.

The state provides benefits to young persons who are unemployed. There is general unemployment insurance (Akassan) for everyone with even a modest history in the labor market. This pays up to 80% of the salary earned immediately before becoming unemployed. Young people are eligible for it. There is also a basic unemployment benefit for those with little employment history. This has been reduced several times during the 1990s and now pays about \$3,500 per year. This is not enough to live on, and by reducing the benefit level the state is reinforcing the message that work will pay and that non-work will not. Unfortunately, the fraction of young people receiving basic rather than general unemployment insurance rose strongly during the '90s. For those who cannot live off basic insurance and cannot get help from parents, the state pays a supplementary benefit designed to meet basic living standards for an individual. Among persons aged 20-24, the take up rate for supplementary benefits doubled from 10% to almost 20% during the 1990s, while it hardly changed for other age groups. Thus, the youth labor market for those who do not go to university is getting more difficult.

The Swedish state is an active player in promoting the autonomy of its young citizens. It values the life-long self-reliance and civic engagement that are thought to follow from individuals making a positive entry into early adulthood. However, its attempts to help position youth for the labor market through education, training, partnerships with industry, and subsidies to industry are running into problems. In economic hard times, young workers are the first to be fired since they are not as immediately productive as experienced workers. International competition is probably forcing businesses be leaner, requiring investments in the next generation to be justified economically and not as contributions to the state and its citizenry. Jobs do not last a lifetime anymore, and to be apprenticed in one trade is no guarantee that the same trade will exist when one is 55. The central dilemma of the Swedish system is retaining and developing quality jobs with good prospects for those who do not go to university. As temporary and part-time jobs proliferate, things are getting worse, especially

for immigrants from outside of Scandinavia. Even so, the state of affairs is better than elsewhere. Most 20-24 year old Swedish non-students are in steady jobs, and to judge by the 8% unemployment rate, nearly all the remainder have access to temporary and part-time work that allows them to experiment with what they would like to do on a more permanent basis. Still, it may not be much of a consolation to know that youth employment is better in Sweden than almost anywhere else.

Swedes place a very high value on personal autonomy and self-reliance. By age 20, most Swedes are out of the family home for all or most of the year, whether they study at a university or not. However, the rate of those remaining home in their early 20s is increasing, albeit from a low base rate. When young Swedes first leave home, 70% of those aged between 16 and 24 go to live alone in a small rented apartment. Most of the others are in cohabiting relationships with a lover, a state that is more prevalent in the 20s than the late teens. Moving back with parents occurs infrequently, mostly when times get especially hard. The expectation and reality is that most individuals will live independently and will responsibly experiment with new partners until they eventually settle down and marry one of them. Sweden does not encourage early marriage as much as it encourages marriages where each partner knows the other's strengths and idiosyncracies.

Despite the prevalence of cohabitation, marriages still tend to take place slightly sooner in Sweden than in Italy, being 32 for men and 30 for women. However, marriage is much less strongly associated with childbirth in Sweden, which has one of the highest rates of out-of-wedlock births in Western Europe, though the father and mother often marry later. However, the average age of women when their first child is born (28.5) is lower than the average age at which they marry (30). Out of wedlock births still carry stigma in Italy, but rarely in Sweden. Moreover, Swedish women tend to have among the largest families in Europe—2.1 children compared to Italy's 1.3—and the state is quite active in supporting families and especially children. While the hope is that each individual would be able to earn enough to support a family, the modern reality is that a comfortable lifestyle in Sweden requires two incomes. So, in addition to the university scholarships, job training and unemployment provisions already mentioned, the state and business have developed systems for maternity (and paternity) leave, child allowances, and day care.

The Swedish story is one of individuals being supported after high school to study at a university or to learn to work, with the clear expectation that this support should be used to become a self-reliant individual and an active citizen. As they grow older, young persons are expected to help themselves more and more; and reliance on parents is minimal when compared to Italy. Frank recognition is made that young people in their late teens and early 20s do not always know what they want. They might want to see the world, to experiment with whether to go to university, to experiment with different kinds of jobs, to

experiment with living alone or with another person, and even to experiment with several partners in order to learn mutual intimacy and responsibility. The state actively sponsors such experimentation and also acts to support rather than undermine individual initiative. So, study grants are provided, but a loan or parental help is also needed, as is some paid work. When unemployment occurs, past work will be rewarded but prolonged inactivity will not, though enough is provided to keep life and limb together. When children are born, couples are not left alone to struggle. Child supports are in place that allow each partner to stay in the workforce and so contribute to family and personal independence.

But the system is threatened, particularly as concerns stable work for those who do not attend university. International competition and the growth of non-Swedish multinational corporations mean that market principles are gaining ground. These are associated with lower levels of collaboration between businesses and the state and perhaps with lower total tax revenues, each of which could hurt young workers and young parents more than others. Moreover, the changing structure of work means that individuals can no longer be trained for a specific job in the expectation they will hold it for their entire working life, or even half of it. And finally, new immigrant groups constitute the hardest hit segment in Swedish society. Over the long term, and in economic recessions, public opinion might turn against them and the support system that helps them. Even so, Sweden is unique among the nations we consider in encouraging early adult experimentation in many areas of personal life and in fostering a relatively orderly transition to adulthood. By age 25, most Swedes live as autonomous individuals in their own household supported by steady work or scholarships and loans. They have future prospects and a developed sense of social citizenship, though they are not yet parents or married.

Germany: The Crown Jewel in Peril

Rainer Silbereisen and Walter Heinz wrote the conference papers on the transition to adulthood in Germany, and Karl-Ulrich Mayer provided some commentary on their accounts. Most aspects of the transition are not distinctive for Germany, whether we refer to high school graduation rates, the average age of leaving home, age of marriage, marriage rates, the incidence of cohabitation, the number of births, mother's age at first birth, or youth unemployment. Three differences do stand out, though. One concerns the early age at which schooling decisions are made that may well determine individual life chances. Another concerns changes that are occurring in the higher education system in order to deal with greater numbers, to reduce the graduation time, to absorb East German institutions, and to clarify the respective roles of research centers, universities, and polytechnics. The third source of uniqueness concerns those who do not go on to higher education but instead seek an apprenticeship. The German apprenticeship system is internationally renowned, but is currently experiencing considerable shocks from which it might not recover in anything

close to its current form. This implies more problems than heretofore in how German non-graduates make the transition to adulthood. The transition they experience has a lot in common with what happens in Austria and Switzerland, and so much of our discussion applies to German-speaking countries in general (with apologies to West Switzerland, Ticino, and the Engadine valley).

In Germany, the transition to adulthood partly depends on the secondary school one attends. Usually after 4th grade (but sometimes after 6th), young people enter a Hauptschule, Realschule, or Gymnasium. If on track, they leave them after a total of 9, 10, or 13 years of schooling respectively. These three types constitute the stratified system of high schools that channel young people either into vocational preparation and then work (the first two) or into a course of study designed to prepare them for post-secondary education in a polytechnic or university (the last). So, at a very early age important life decisions are made in Germany based on parent requests, fallible tests, and testimonials. And these school decisions have occupational consequences. For instance, in the late 1990s, one-third of all apprenticeships went to students from Hauptschulen, and these students mainly entered craft and blue collar occupations. Two-fifths went to students from Realschulen, and most of them were trained for occupations in commerce, and technology. Only one-fifth went to Gymnasium graduates, and they entered careers in business, commerce and public service. It is difficult to believe that this correspondence between a school's prestige and the occupational stratification of its graduates is entirely due to true merit differences at 4th grade, and that no causal role should be ascribed to the social expectation differences built into these different curriculum tracks.

In this connection, the contrast with other countries is striking. In Sweden, everyone attends the same kind of school until the last three years when vocational and university track choices are made. The same is basically true in Italy. And in American public high schools, tracking occurs within-schools rather than between them. One implication of such early school tracking is that the German educational system may ignore many students whose cognitive interests and gifts emerge after 6th grade. Another is that the school system is likely to reproduce existing class differences in the next generation. But if it does, the influence probably varies by Federal state. In Hamburg, a state with a long egalitarian history, 34% of students enter the Gymnasium and so have a chance to go to university. In Bavaria only 19% do. While these percentages say nothing about the social class of those actually entering, the potential for true merit selection is probably higher in Hamburg than Bavaria.

In Germany, universities are organized by states, and students clearly prefer to study close to home. But the preference is noticeably weaker than in Italy. Moreover, many fields of study are governed by numerus clausus restrictions, and these encourage migration to another part of the country. So does the old tradition of attending several different universities in order to complete one's higher education. German undergraduate study has traditionally

not been highly structured, and individual variation in the number of years it takes to graduate is considerable. Some students spend longer because they want to explore life options in academics and elsewhere. Others see continuous study as a means to avoid becoming bourgeois, albeit fewer than in France or Italy. Some students fall through the administrative cracks because it is widely assumed that those with enough ability to get into a university are able to manage their own course progression there. And some students take longer because they are apprehensive whether the kinds of jobs that university graduates traditionally fill will be available to them, given Germany's changing job structure and the increased competition from other students in the expanding university and polytechnic system.

However, serious attempts have recently been made to get students to graduate within five years, even if this means more graduates finishing up with jobs inferior to what they expect. There is little reason to suspect that university graduates will lose their competitive edge over non-graduates just because the study period is shortened. Things could also get worse for them if student numbers continue to increase without more financial support from the German states, as has been happening for the last decade. Faculty generally resent being required to teach more, and this could lead to watering down the curriculum or even tightening it so that only the better candidates complete their studies. More teaching also entails less time for faculty research in a national setting where research is increasingly conducted by national and international centers rather than by universities that, in Germany, do not have graduate schools attached. But however much university and polytechnic students might be hurt by shorter graduation periods and faculty role changes, they still symbolize superiority in the skill mix thought to be required for executive and professional jobs. Whatever the actual skill levels of future German graduates, their comparative advantage within their own nation is quite clear.

For those who do not attend university, the centerpiece of the German transition to adulthood is the apprenticeship system, also found in Austria and Switzerland. This system is designed to provide for the large group of young people who, in every country, want to go straight from high school to paid work. The apprenticeship consists partly of on-the-job training and partly of school-based vocational instruction, and so is called the Dual System. The apprenticeship lasts for at least three years so that certificates are usually gained at age 18, though that is creeping up also. The Dual System is buttressed by agreements between government, unions, and employers and incorporated into a Vocational Training Act (Berufsbildungsgesetz) and a Federal agency that develops, reforms, and evaluates training ordinances for 360 occupations in the craft, technical, commercial, and service areas. The hope of all young Germans, and the expectation of most, is that they will be offered a job in the business where they did their training or at least in a firm doing similar kinds of work. Additional training is often asked for, and it can be provided either on-the-job or in a special technical school or, more likely, in some combination of both. Thus,

the apprenticeship system is for a minimum of three years. In practice it can last longer, depending on the complexity of the skills involved. That this Dual System is widespread can be seen in the statistic that almost 80% of recent German school leavers obtain either an occupational certificate or an undergraduate degree, whereas just over 50% of all Americans reach these same standards.

In light of the numbers and the institutional commitment of multiple parties, it is not surprising that the German apprenticeship system is often held to be the most successful of all the school-to-work models. For those teens who find traditional school work punitive, it provides an alternative that links school and work in practical ways. It also furnishes young people with a clear path to a secure economic and social future, thus avoiding the uncertainties plaguing many Italians and Americans who have no interest in higher education. It may also reduce the juvenile behavior problems that get many young people off track, and in many cases it sows the seeds for a later family life based on just one wage, thus avoiding some of the child care complications that arise when both parents work. It also sows the seeds for occupational advancement. Anyone who already has a certificate can work in his or her occupation for five years and then, over the next three years and with a government subsidy, can learn how to become a self-employed master whose own business can then train the next generation of apprentices.

The apprenticeship system helps the nation at large, not just the apprentices and their employers. It produces a large group of young Germans in 360 different occupations who have a certified level of performance in clearly specified occupation-specific tasks. This has helped create a work force that produces export-worthy goods with a high value-added component. The slogan—*deutsche Wertarbeit* (quality German production)—is validated because of master craftsmen who are encouraged to pass on their concern for excellence and the specific skills they command to the next generation and who are widely respected in society for doing just this. The apprenticeship system also provides another symbol about cooperative relationships between government, unions, and business, entities that seem less antagonistic to each other in Germany than in, say, France, Italy, or the USA. Historically, the apprenticeship system has symbolized a cooperative industrial policy. It has provided a pathway through high school for those who dislike formal class work. It has provided hope about secure jobs in early adulthood and predictability about one's future life course. And it has played an indirect role in making it possible to afford earlier marriage and child bearing than in Italy.

However, the apprenticeship system is under considerable strain right now and probably cannot survive in its current form. The strains are many. While each might be surmountable individually—though some more readily than others—the cumulative weight of so many sources of weakness is striking. Some former problems have now largely been dealt with, most notably the system's initial bias towards jobs traditionally filled by males. Apprenticeships are now more equal by

gender, though young women tend to be steered towards traditionally female roles and their training pay in these occupations is lower than that of males. The ethnic/religious bias against offering apprenticeships to non-Germans is still striking, however. It affects not just new immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, but even young Turks who are third generation in Germany. Indeed, only 37% of all eligible Turks make it into the Dual System, and those who do so are trained for more menial positions than the office and technical jobs that disproportionately go to Germans.

It is serious that the percentage of persons offering to train apprentices is going down relative to the demand for such roles. It is increasingly common to see official signs imploring local small business owners or independent craftsmen to take on apprentices. Business cycles exacerbate the demand for apprentices, as does the faster growth of small firms relative to large ones. Smaller firms are not thought to be as well organized to recruit, train, and perhaps even subsequently employ, apprentices. Some are more interested in subsidized labor right now than in training the next generation by rotating young people through various tasks and training them on all of them. This speaks to the problem of outmoded trainers everywhere, but especially in East Germany where so many of the masters cannot perform at the standards nationally required. Inspectors are supposed to detect inadequate training. But the bureaucracy is keen to keep the numbers of apprenticeships up and, anyway, it is often slow to identify lax firms. It is also slow in updating job descriptions so that they can reflect the changing market for labor. It is not a surprise, therefore, that 20% of those who begin an apprenticeship leave it within the first year either because they do not like the job or work site or because they want to go into other work or back to school. Of those who complete their apprenticeship, 40% cannot subsequently find a job in the occupation in which they were trained and, in some years, fewer than 45% of those who do manage to get a job do so in the firm where they trained. It is understandable that some young people lose interest in their occupation; some train with masters who are not very accomplished; and some are trained for skills needed in the old and not the current or emergent labor market.

Nonetheless, there is a growing skill mismatch of systemic proportions, as evidenced by the current paucity of workers in information technologies and business administration at intermediate levels. Indeed, Germany has been deliberately recruiting workers in information technology from India, creating special immigration statuses for them. Obviously, those running the apprenticeship system were not able either to foresee this need or to do anything about it, given the shortage of persons capable of training apprentices in these newer occupations. The greatest threats to the apprenticeship system come from structural changes in the labor market in general and in the youth labor market in particular. In an economy that is increasingly more global and service-oriented, more of the jobs for young people are part-time or temporary. Yet a flourishing apprenticeship system needs stability. It also requires good prediction of the

number and kinds of jobs that will be needed 20 or even 10 years from now. But that prediction is not what it was. Some occupations are becoming obsolete or almost so; others have radically changed their content; and new occupations are continually emerging. It is not easy for an organization based on complex government, business and union interdependencies to adjust to fast change, but this is what the apprenticeship system has to do.

What are the new employment realities? While soft skills were never neglected in the apprenticeship system, they may now be even more important than job-specific skills. How one learns has become as important as what one knows, and this ability is seen to be an attribute of general education rather than specific job training. Temporary employment agencies flourish all over Germany as employers seek greater freedom from regulation of all kinds and especially greater freedom to hire, train, and fire. Businesses also increasingly value last-minute assembly processes that use internationally generated components instead of relying on labor-intensive one-site local production. It is difficult to manage a large apprenticeship system that will meet the needs of business in the new occupational world of speedy obsolescence and unpredictable creation. Adding to the difficulty is that more of the businesses operating in Germany are foreign-owned or co-owned, and that native German businesses are experiencing stiffer international competition. Have these reduced business commitment to the German apprenticeship system? Will recruitment be based even more on temporary staff so as to weather market fluctuations and employ the skill mixes needed only when they are needed? Will training become oriented more to learning one or two production-specific tasks for the short term as opposed to learning an often-complex set of tasks presumed to be relevant for a lifetime? Will the German labor market for young people move towards the more market-oriented Anglo-American model where occupation and occupational pride are less relevant than flexible hiring and firing and on-site training in highly specific tasks? Will future demand be more for people who are educated rather than trained? For those who attend a Haupt- or Realschule, the German "educational" system is about training. It prioritizes on education only for the increasing number of those who attend a Gymnasium.

The transition to adulthood in Germany is not very special when viewed from the perspective of the age of leaving home, getting married, and having children, or the numbers attending higher education, or the time such higher education takes. It is most special in the early and clear pathways either to job training or university education, and in the apprenticeship training system that is the crown jewel facilitating this unique interface between schooling and work. Even so, Germany may have the greatest emergent problems. Its universities are experiencing considerable pressure and some role confusion, given the increase in student numbers without a corresponding rise in expenditures per university, given the competition from Fachhochschulen, and given emergent political interest in universities more as sites for teaching than for research. More importantly, the apprenticeship system may have been a better solution for

realities in the former world of work than it is for realities in the current and emerging worlds of work. Nowadays, there is less need for the set of skills associated with a given occupation. And the need has increased for specific skills that can be taught on site for jobs that are held for shorter periods—certainly much, much less than a lifetime.

Discomforting for Germans is that no obviously effective solutions are under discussion for either problem, and businesses increasingly favor flexibility and decision independence rather than involvement in complex training relationships that also include government and unions. Of course, the one problem may provide a partial solution to the other. Thus, if greater numbers are trained in higher education, this may provide the better educated (rather than better trained) work force that is supposed to know how to think and thus solve for themselves a wider range of work-based problems. And this outcome would occur even if the average quality of graduates from institutions of higher education were lower than in the past when German universities were under less pressure. But there is an irony here, for as more and more young Germans want (and need) more education beyond their apprentice certificate, the German higher education system will have to expand and diversify even more. The result will probably be even more pressure on traditional universities. In Germany, and to a lesser degree in Sweden, the need is to create viable new transitions to work, especially for those not attending college. But how can such persons cobble together a stable work history that involves multiple firms and changing skill mixes if the apprenticeship system trains them for occupations that assume greater stability than the dynamic way in which labor markets are currently evolving?

USA: The “Sink or Swim” Transition

The Marbach papers on the USA were written by Jacque Eccles, David Ellwood, and Jonathon Modell, and commentary on them was provided by Christopher Jencks. We depend on them for many of the facts and interpretations presented here. However, since we are scholars of the transition to adulthood in the USA, we use more of our own knowledge in this section than for the three countries described earlier. In most respects, the transition to adulthood is similar in America to Canada and the United Kingdom, and it is probably warranted to talk of an Anglo-American model of the tradition to adulthood to complement the Mediterranean, Nordic, and German-speaking models considered earlier.

The USA is distinct in several ways. Its secondary school system has more private schools than elsewhere, the majority Catholic. Its public schools are not stratified by presumed ability like in Italy, Sweden, or Germany. Instead, tracking takes place within these all-purpose high schools. The percentage of 18-year-olds still in high school is lowest in the USA, reflecting a higher dropout rate.

The higher education system is three-tiered instead of two, consisting of two-year junior colleges that have both educational and vocational missions, undergraduate institutions with mostly educational missions, and graduate schools with both educational and professional training missions. The American university system is hierarchically ordered, resulting in the opposite stratification system to the German one where secondary schools are stratified but universities are not. Americans delay institutional stratification more than elsewhere, and they seek to provide individuals with second and third chances should their motivation to get ahead come later than is customary.

When they leave home, young Americans are the most likely to have roommates of the same sex, whether they attend university or work full time. They are also more likely to be incarcerated or otherwise involved with the legal system. Although there is nothing exceptional about American rates and ages of cohabitation and marriage, the average childbearing pattern is more like Sweden's than Italy's—about 2.1 children per woman, with births beginning in the late 20s on the average. However, there is considerable dispersion by age, and births to American women under 20 are much more prevalent, though still a small fraction of all births in a given recent cohort. Young Americans are not as knowledgeable or as sophisticated about birth control when compared to other nations.

In the USA, there is extensive part-time and temporary employment after age 16 and more mixing of school and work than is found elsewhere. Full merit scholarships to attend a university are rare, except in non-professional graduate fields. As a result, most students without affluent parents need work or loans or some combination of the two. For those who do not attend university, the USA reveals the most periods of unemployment under 25 and the highest levels of “churning” around different jobs. Most businesses are reluctant to collaborate with unions and government, and so vocational training is not well established. Firms prefer to do their own training and want maximal flexibility in hiring, training, and firing. So, finding jobs is more a matter of individual initiative and social networks than of third party placement. Indeed, agencies counseling to the youthful unemployed teach them how to search for jobs and provide incentives to do so, but do not go out of their way to locate jobs or to teach task-specific skills.

In every country we have considered, some groups make an effortless transition to successful adulthood while others do not. One recipe for success is clear everywhere—work hard in secondary school, graduate from university, do not get involved with the law, do not have children before the late 20s, and marry or cohabit with someone at least as well educated as yourself. For those who do not go to college, the recipe is somewhat different. It stresses graduating from high school, getting a job with prospects, acquiring both soft and hard job skills, developing a broad network of job contacts, avoiding repeated contact with the law, marrying a partner in the mid-20s with a good job, and avoiding children before the same age period. Each nation also has groups that make poorer

transitions to adulthood. Physical and mental health can play a role here. So can race and ethnicity, particularly at their intersection with class (and sometimes immigrant status). Although people of color in every nation are over-represented among those experiencing a difficult transition, our impression is that the situation is most acute in the USA. Striking is the high percentage of less-educated African-Americans and Puerto Ricans who experience unemployment, incarceration, homelessness, poverty, child bearing before 20, and single parenthood. While very few of them experience all or most of these complications, many experience several of them. The United States may therefore be characterized by more variation than elsewhere in the quality of the transition its citizens make. And this occurs in a society that apotheosizes self-help, has weaker family ties than Italy, and that provides able-bodied adults with less government support than in Sweden or Germany.

Normatively, the United States offers second and third chances to young people, especially in education. Those who have not done well in high school, or who dropped out, can nonetheless attend a two-year college and make up the shortfall. If they meet the necessary standards, they can then transfer to a university; and if they do well there they can even attend graduate school. If they go to a lesser-known university, perhaps because their high school grades were weak, they can still go on to a quality graduate school if their undergraduate work is strong. Second chances are also evident in the employment domain. Prospective employers do not seem reluctant to hire young people with a poor work history, provided it occurred before their mid-twenties and was not attributable to incarceration. Some employers encourage their young workers to attend evening classes, and some employees do this even without encouragement. Individuals who have had disorderly lives in their teens and early 20s and do not want further education can sometimes get into the military and thus generate a special credential that many employers value. Alternatively, they can take whatever jobs there are in order to demonstrate their personal value through their reliability, motivation on the job, and work performance. Second chances in the personal domain are also stressed. Stigma about cohabitation and divorce in the early 20s are on the wane, and remarriage is common. Very young women who have had a child usually get formal and informal support not to have another, and very few mothers who have a child before they are 18 have another before they are 20. Birth control may still lag behind the European nations in the 20s, but if so it is not by much.

Other nations promote catching up by those who are temporarily off track as well as self-improvement by those who discover they originally aimed too low. Thus, a German can use an apprenticeship as a stepping stone to further education in a polytechnic or evening school. But no national system is as fluid as the American with respect to the number of opportunities that individuals have to get back on track. And no nation leaves so late the fundamental choices that have to be made about the quality of educational institution to attend. The American system seeks to provide individuals with opportunities they can utilize

when their abilities, interests, and needs have crystallized. This is less the case in Germany where the secondary school transition has such life-long consequences and occurs almost 10 years before the corresponding college choice in America. But in the American system, individuals have to want these opportunities, and it is tougher to take advantage of them the older one is and the more one has already slipped behind. To have a system of second chances does not mean that those who most need such chances know of them and have the freedom to avail themselves of them without considerable moral effort and personal sacrifice. For instance, the military is an important institution for self-renewal and access to a good job after a period shielded from many street dangers. But it is well nigh impossible to be accepted into the military without high school graduation, and recruiters do not appreciate involvement with the criminal justice system other than for minor adolescent infringements that are fairly common. Thus, the military is a second chance option, but it is not open to all and most in the military resent it being seen as a second chance option or even a form of social welfare strategy.

America does not afford the same cultural sponsorship of youthful experimentation that one finds in Sweden. Cohabitation is not normatively encouraged, though it is increasingly tolerated in larger cities. Single mothers in America do not get child support services that are as generous or as free of stigma as in Sweden. Young Americans who break the law find themselves much more often in jail or prison. As to state and business support, this is not as generous in the USA as in Sweden or Germany. For instance, maternity and paternity leaves are not as widespread in the USA or as generous in duration, and business obligations to hire the young are not as deeply entrenched in the USA. In Sweden, the aim is to support individuals without undermining their individual initiative. It is assumed that many young people are not sure what they want to do and that, in experimenting with their private and work lives, they will inevitably make some mistakes that are non-trivial in their consequences. In the USA, the main assumption is different. It is that individuals can do it by themselves at an early age by virtue of their own will and initiative, provided only that those institutions (primarily educational) are in place from which they can benefit. It is up to each young person to take advantage of these opportunities by utilizing either his or her own general cultural knowledge or by being embedded in a network of supportive others who know of the opportunities and dangers. Since such knowledge and networks are unequally distributed in the USA, it is not clear that second chance opportunities are as available or as practically accessible as we would like to think.

In the USA, practical family support for the transition to adulthood is not as widely available as in Italy. Self-reliance being the national goal that it is, relatively few young American adults live primarily with their parents. Indeed, a relatively high percentage of people lives with roommates in order to be independent and yet share housing expenses. A relatively high percentage of young unmarried mothers also lives alone, in part to take advantage of welfare

laws. In practice, these last households often contain family members either in a “doubling-up” arrangement or as neighbors who live close by and visit frequently. Other family members (biological or fictive) are needed in these households because marriageable men are rare (due to their work and crime histories), because welfare support levels are so low, and because recent legal changes require work to be substituted for welfare. But affordable child care is not always provided. Much of the family help comes from females. Absent fathers usually do provide some forms of help, though often minor. The total level of family support does not match Italy’s, though it can be considerable in the case of middle class Americans who have temporarily returned to their parents’ home after a divorce or lost job. But lower class families in the USA are rarely in a strong position to help with shelter, food and money, especially since it is more likely than in Italy that a small child will be involved. Two generations living together without a small child imposes many fewer burdens and sources of tension than when a child is present. As a result, it is probably materially and socially easier for Italian families to provide the kinds of informal support to the younger adult generation that young adult Americans also need. Extensive child care is needed if young women are to work, and generating this within the household or extended family complicates intergenerational relations. More specifically, it burdens the older generation or siblings who provide the care, and it adds to the uncertainties and anxieties of working women with a child but without a long-term partner.

Until very recently, wages for poorly educated young men and women have been declining in real money terms. The federal government has tried to counter this in an attempt, like the Swedes, to make work pay. Thus, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) now supplements wages (but not unemployment), and it has become so institutionalized that an industry now caters to poorer workers by helping them pick up their credit—for a fee, of course. Also, the minimum wage has been regularly raised during the boom times of the last decade. And day care provisions are improving for three- and four-year-olds with less affluent mothers, largely because Head Start has been expanding through both Republican and Democratic administrations. Businesses want female workers to feel comfortable about their child care arrangements but do not want to pay for them directly, while liberals see quality day care as a chance for small children from straightened circumstances to learn middle-class relationship skills and to prepare cognitively for school. By now, just over 50% of the families eligible for Head Start are in the program, and many of the remainder take part in other state or local subsidized day care programs that vary considerably in structure and quality. Implicit in EITC, minimum wage increases, and Head Start is both the philosophy that work should be supported and the reality that government has to do something about the stagnant wages paid to less educated workers in the current labor market. Indeed, the gap separating the top part of the income distribution from the bottom part is growing faster in the USA than in other countries, especially when the top and bottom deciles are contrasted. For those young Americans not in higher education, work is essential, in part because it is so closely linked to EITC.

Yet in the age groups of interest, official unemployment is higher in the USA than in Sweden, though lower than in Italy, and unemployed persons are not eligible for EITC. Even more striking about the youth labor market is the American pattern of more periods of unemployment, more jobs held, and declining wages in real money terms. Job churning is obvious. Yet young Americans are expected to be heavy consumers and are targeted as such by advertisers. So, if they are to live a lifestyle they find acceptable (if not desirable), their expenditure “needs” can be considerable. Where can this money come from if families or steady work cannot provide it?

Part of the answer is “hustling” in some form or another. The American underground economy is most prevalent among those who cannot or will not get attached to a legitimate labor market that fails to provide them with a living wage until their late 20s. The result is crime in particular. Given recent changes in sentencing practices, such crime entails higher incarceration rates for both young males and young females, though the level is ten times higher for the men. Most Americans seem to be willing to accept these rapidly increasing incarceration rates. It means less crime on the streets, and the extra taxes it costs seem to be minor in comparison. However, costs are also borne by the families of those incarcerated who now lack a partner, a parent, a source of income. They are also borne by the poorer communities from which the prisoners come that are now even more poor and devoid of adult males in their 20s and 30s. And, obviously, the criminals themselves bear a tremendous cost. They are taken out of circulation at an age when they would otherwise be accumulating important sources of social and cultural capital that will stand them in good stead the rest of their life. Instead, they are generating non-work histories that will make many potential employers suspicious of them on their release from the penal institution. No nation is as draconian as the USA in this regard. Although young people are rarely incarcerated for a first offense, given the national philosophy of second chances, by the third offense they are in deep trouble. It is as though they have been defined by then as having failed a test of character, as having refused to take advantage of the institutional first and second opportunities offered them, and as having willfully rejected the self-willed self-improvement philosophy of the USA.

This may or may not be true. But notice the informal and formal context in which their poor transition to adulthood takes place. Informal support is supposed to come primarily from families, and in all social classes in all countries nearly all families provide some support. However, the level is lower in the USA than in Italy, the other country where weak formal supports from schools, government and business force greater dependence on the family. Formal support is less good in the USA than in Sweden or Germany. The USA has some of the poorest schools, and their links to quality jobs are much more tenuous than in Germany. Moreover, American business has no taste for training young workers through partnerships with unions and government. Nor is there a normative structure in

the USA like in Sweden that sees experimentation as an inevitable part of human development between ages 16 and 25. Most Americans do make a successful transition, some through the conventional route via higher education, others through the conventional route of early stable employment thanks to network and union connections, or to luck and character. And some make it by utilizing second chances after having earlier gotten off track. But the wastage seems greater in the USA than elsewhere, given the poorer family and institutional supports.

The USA is the most individualistic laissez-faire nation we consider, the most market-dominated even at these young adult ages. Most individuals swim in the tides created, thanks to careful parenting in general and to a willingness to co-invest in higher education in particular. But a greater fraction than elsewhere seems to sink, especially among those who are poorer and racial minorities. The prevailing ethos is one of individuals who have to negotiate markets for education, jobs, and life partners, and in these markets they are free both to make whatever decisions they want and to live with their consequences, though some second chances are possible. Young people in America are expected to make the transition using cultural knowledge they have picked up in their family and school. The adequacy and relevance of this knowledge leaves a lot to be desired. The school of hard knocks awaits all those who deviate from any one of the safe paths to successful adulthood.

Conclusions

This chapter has been about differences between four nations. But the similarities are striking also. They include the expansion of higher education; the growing difficulties in the youth labor market; and increases in cohabitation, later marriage, and fewer children. We should not forget the increasing percentages of those who simultaneously study and work, or the variation within each nation. In every country, many young people make it through the conventional pathways of attending a university or getting a good job early. But there are always those who flounder significantly, these being disproportionately poorer people whose race, ethnicity, or religion differs from what prevails. The mostly international factors creating such communalities need to be investigated, and our guess is that the role of international economic changes fueled by the needs of multinational companies will play a large role in the story. But that is not the story told here.

Our story was about national differences. Italy, a country with a weaker state and smaller businesses than the other countries, finds itself forced to rely on its family heritage in order to cushion young people against the international changes taking place. And in so doing, family relationships become more egalitarian as the better educated younger generation negotiates with its parent generation to retain social and personal independence while surrendering some economic independence, but not that associated with how its income is spent.

Sweden is a country that promotes individual self-reliance, but does so through a tolerance of early experimentation and support from state, industry, and union sources that effectively sponsor young people. Thus, by age 25 most Swedes have made a successful transition. Though marriage and children are still to come, most Swedes have by then been in cohabiting relationships. The main problem here is that businesses want more control over hiring, firing, and training in order to accommodate to international competition, thus threatening the national partnership model. This same model is under even more concentrated attack in Germany, the nation that forces the earliest occupation-relevant decisions from its child citizens and then seeks to give them hope and direction by training them in one of 360 occupations suiting a wide range of talents. But this famed apprenticeship system cannot continue to exist in its current form. The current world of work increasingly values firms making their own decisions about hiring and training, and in a way that reflects more flexibility than is entailed by a structure based on fixed occupations. And if an education model were to replace the current training model for those Germans who are not university-bound, that will only exacerbate the problems German universities already face. The USA is the most individualistic of the nations we consider, though it prides itself on giving all individuals a second and sometimes third chance. Family support is generally lower than in Italy and government and business support less than in Germany or Sweden. So, young people who do not go to university flounder more than elsewhere and there are more of these flounders, especially among those who are poorer and of color. They have significant problems with schooling, living arrangements, incarceration, early child-bearing, overstressed families, and a labor market where until very recently their real wages were declining.

What does all this matter, though, if Americans, Swedes, Germans, and Italians all look demographically similar by about age 35? However different the pathways to adulthood and however different the locus and level of supports, the end result is still the same. From age 16 to 35 is almost 20 years, about a quarter of a lifetime. How these years are spent is therefore very important in its own right. As Rabbi Hillel is reported to have said: All the rest is commentary. But to provide some of that commentary, it is not at all clear that marriage means the same thing in all these nations, or that commitments to work are the same, or that commitments to children are, or that trust in institutions is. In this regard, it is very difficult to tell the chicken from the egg—do national differences in the transition to adulthood lead to these differences in mature life, or do forces responsible for the differences also shape the transition? Nonetheless, it is possible that how the transition to adulthood takes place might affect important outcomes like those above. Whether it does or not is empirically unclear at this time. Less unclear, though, is a future research need: To examine what individual and institutional consequences follow from national differences in how the transition to adulthood takes place.

Reference

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