

# **Transitions to Adulthood Through Recession**

Youth and Inequality in a European  
Comparative Perspective

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Understanding youth transitions in difficult times**

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# 1 Understanding youth transitions in difficult times

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## **Introduction**

This book explores continuities and changes in youth and the transition to adulthood in diverse European country contexts. It explores recent developments in light of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent recession, social crises and austerity policies and situates their relevancies with reference to the long-term restructuring of youth and young adulthood. We bring together authors from across various sociological sub-disciplines specialising in youth, family and kinship, class and inequality and life course studies. They analyse developments across six European nations: Norway, the UK, Germany, Portugal, Italy and Greece. Each chapter investigates country-specific institutional, cultural and economic processes reshaping the life course phases of youth and early adulthood and how transitions are experienced, negotiated and authored by young people and their families. In most country case studies we offer new analyses of qualitative data. The contributors explore generational dynamics as an important analytic lens on youth and transitions, interrogating continuities and changes across generations as well as the interdependencies that bind familial generations. Most also focus on social class as a key dimension of their analyses of young people's pathways and transitions. Whilst the analyses derive from distinct projects they are complementary and sit in dialogue with one another. In this introductory chapter, we trace some general developments through the latter part of the twentieth century, identify and explore some recent changes in the framing of young people's pathways and transitions with reference to our country case study contexts, and discuss the conceptual value of the transitions approach and of a contextualist life course approach.

Notions of progress have underlain ideas about historical development in the Western world for hundreds of years (Kumar 1978). These ideas inspired the belief that conditions would improve from one generation to the next. The three decades of economic growth after World War II and the establishment of welfare states and poverty reduction along with expansion in education and employment for all were understood to be the new standard for development that fitted into the notion of progress (Hobsbawm 1994). In

northern and western Europe post-war growth, investment, full employment, welfare state development and growing prosperity (particularly relative to the hardships of previous decades) underlay the long boom described by Hobsbawm. Extremely diverse sets of welfare arrangements and linked rights, responsibilities and gendered divisions of labour were built across these European nations in the post-war decades. Full employment meant that young people's pathways to independent living were strongly underpinned by access to jobs, improving relative earnings and the resources deemed necessary for family formation. This period was also 'the age of the housewife' (Oakley 1974; Wærness 1978) and the male breadwinner model was the standard in most families. The transition to adulthood was strongly gendered and influenced by social class. Young working-class men were expected to get a job and earn a living as soon as compulsory schooling was over. A long period spent in university education was a privilege for the few. The post-war decades of inclusive growth saw increases in absolute if not relative upward social mobility (Breen 2004; Goldthorpe and Mills 2008). Through the post-war era family background remained a strong indicator of young people's life chances in education and future employment. Therefore, although the era is often described as one of inclusive growth it was marked by strongly classed pathways from families of origin to destination. Nevertheless, the institutional structures of welfare, education and labour market regulation, and full (male) employment buttressed relatively standardised transitions across northern Europe.

From 1973 the era of inclusive and seemingly continuous growth faltered and gave way to recessions and rising unemployment across Europe (Hobsbawm 1994; Blanchard 2006). Anticipated by the policies of the Thatcher Conservative government in the UK, the 1980s saw a broader move away from the Keynesian policy strategies of the post-war decades and a new ascendancy of market-oriented policies. This period also saw an intensification of a process of globalisation with its deepening international economic interdependencies. Buchholz and colleagues, for example, identify interrelated social trends which engender greater connectedness across nations, including a growing internationalisation of markets and linked growth in economic competition across countries, a tendency to internal deregulation and reliance on market mechanisms in the provision of goods and services, and a linked increase in interdependence rendering nations more vulnerable to common crises (Buchholz et al 2009). Within nations these developments have heightened risks and precarity for those in vulnerable positions. Indeed, restructuring has itself altered the distribution of vulnerability across and within different population groups and life course stages.

Another important trend across European nations is the marked expansion of education. The number of years in compulsory schooling has increased and whilst in 2016 it was on average nine years (European Commission 2015), there has been growing concern over young people who do not complete 12 years of schooling, the so-called 'drop-outs' (Vogt 2017). Early school leaving is defined by the European Commission as completing school at the point of lower secondary education (typically at 16 years old). From 2002 to 2016

early school leaving rates continued to decline across the EU and fell from 17% to 11% (Eurostat 2017). Across Europe, participation in tertiary education has increased across the same time period from 24% to 39% (Eurostat 2017). This is a remarkable social change across a short historical period, and leads to interesting patterns of contrast in levels of education across population cohorts. For example, Germany manifests extensive similarities across generations in their levels of educational attainment. In stark contrast, Portugal manifests a very large generational gap in levels of formal education due to the low base of secondary education amongst currently retiring cohorts and very significant recent increases in educational participation amongst successor cohorts (Allmendinger and von den Driesch 2014). The marked increase in educational participation across many nations also raises important questions relating to the effectiveness of skills strategies and the fit between labour supply and demand. Some commentators highlight risks of credential inflation, widely seen to engender increased difficulties for more highly educated young people (eg Brown et al 2010). Systemic pressures also mean that those with few educational qualifications are increasingly marginalised and are less likely to overcome a difficult labour market start than in the past (eg George et al 2015).

In seeking to shed light on the macro-level framing of transition and country-specific diversity, many writers define and draw on typologies of regime types relating to welfare, education and labour market arrangements, and school to work transition patterns (eg Esping Andersen 1990; Walther 2006; Buchholz et al 2009; Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Eurofound 2014). Such typologies form useful organisational and framing devices for social analysis. They foreground some of the ways in which contrasting institutional and cultural contexts profoundly shape the experiences and opportunities confronting young people and their lifetime implications. In their analyses of restructuring life course processes and the position of young people, Buchholz and colleagues (2009) very effectively show how diverse country-specific institutional structures mediate wider trends and translate them very differently at national, meso and individual levels. Although national contexts frame life course processes and social inequalities very differently, the authors argue that young adults are 'the losers of the globalization process' (p.67). Recent cohorts of young adults have been disproportionately undermined due to their life course stage and relatively vulnerable position in the labour market in an era of significant economic and social changes; times which differ markedly from those experienced by their parents and grandparents.

In the opening decade of the twenty-first century, all European countries were affected by the global financial crisis in 2008. Whilst public funds in many countries were spent on bailing out the banking sector after the crash, economic recession was used to justify spending cuts and policies of austerity (Stiglitz 2012). This is evident in some countries represented in this book: the UK, Portugal, Italy and Greece. The consequences of these policies have been dire on many fronts in these societies. Where austerity policies have been

vigorously pursued and welfare and public services subject to retrenchment (Stiglitz 2012), intergenerational support for the transition to adulthood from family, friends and the wider community has gained new relevance, including within Mediterranean countries which already had a strong tradition of family support. Countries manifest significant diversity in how they provide support for early labour market transitions (O'Reilly et al 2015) and in the intergenerational inheritances, support and commitment which influence young adults' experience (Allmendinger and von den Driesch 2014). Southern European nations have seen significant outward migration as a response to shrinking labour market opportunities. Throughout this book the diversity and variety of experiences, perceptions and practices are contextualised and demonstrated. Within the chapters our contributors situate recession and related developments alongside analyses of longer-run trends in the shaping of youth and early adulthood as life course stages.

Whilst the era from the 1970s/80s onwards has a longer duration now than the so-called post-war era of inclusive growth (eg Taylor-Gooby 2013) that preceded it, it nevertheless provides a common counterpoint in descriptions of current arrangements. For example, many commentators contrast the experience of youth and young adulthood today with that which was obtained in the post-war decades until the 1970s. They particularly highlight that youth and the transition to adulthood has become less linear, more protracted and more precarious (eg Buchholz et al 2009; Heinz et al 2009; Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Antonucci et al 2014; Raffe 2014). Billari and Liefbroer (2010) describe the emergence of 'a new European pattern of transition to adulthood' (p.73), characterised as late, protracted and complex in contrast to the early, contracted and simple transitions which characterised the post-war period. These new characteristics and how they manifest across country contexts are well illuminated through the chapters. We turn now to illustrating some continuities and changes in youth and early adulthood across our country contexts.

### **Youth transitions in changing social and economic contexts**

In this section we highlight some trends in the youth labour market, familial transitions and relationships across generations and we flag some key themes to be explored through the book. Positioned at the margins of the labour market, young people have been especially vulnerable to unemployment with low recruitment and exposure to last in, first out, policies in economic recession. They have also been undermined by the trend for employers to devolve risks to their employees, particularly through the use of casual and temporary labour (cf Bukodi et al 2008). Across Europe, unemployment rates vary significantly. In 2013 the EU-28 unemployment rate of young people aged 15–24 was 23%, reaching 40% in Italy and 58% in Greece (O'Reilly et al 2015). EU youth unemployment rates have since improved slightly to 2017 and stand at 19% (European Commission 2017). Such rates compare unemployed and employed youth, whilst the unemployment *ratio* measures unemployment as a

proportion of the cohort as a whole. On this measure the 2013 EU average stood at 10%, varying from 4% and 5% in Germany and Norway to 13% in Portugal and 17% in Greece (O'Reilly et al 2015).

The EU employment rate of 15–24 year olds declined from 37% in 2008 to 33% in 2012 (Eurofound 2014), and then manifested a slight rise to 34% in 2016 (European Commission 2017). Employment rates vary significantly across northern and southern European nations. For example, in 2016 employment rates amongst young men aged 25 to 29 remained fairly constant at above 80% in the UK and Germany. In contrast, equivalent employment rates fell from 88% to 73% in Portugal and from 82% to 63% in Greece between 2000 and 2016 (Eurostat, Data Explorer). These are important reasons for the emigration discussed in the Portuguese and Greek chapters in the current volume.

National labour markets vary greatly in the kinds of employment available to young people and the extent to which early jobs comprise 'cul-de-sac' (dead-end) jobs or routes to labour market integration and a decent career (cf Bukodi et al 2008). There is a trend towards a polarisation of jobs with increased relative shares of high and low-skill jobs across many countries and a shrinking of the share of middle-skill jobs over recent decades (OECD 2017). It is widely observed that the youth labour market has become much more precarious than in the past. Across Europe, whilst 10% of the workforce aged 25–64 were on temporary contracts, this was the case for 42% of those aged under 25 (Eurofound 2014). Germany was relatively insulated from the consequences of economic recession (see Burda and Hunt 2011). Indeed, unemployment rates there fell between 2008 and 2011 (OECD 2011). In their study of the life course in Germany, Buchholz and Kolb (2011) highlight the particular vulnerability of young people (and women generally) due to a trend towards flexible employment practices, more widely found since the 1980s. With over 25% of young people under 30 on fixed-term contracts in Germany, this exemplifies the widespread vulnerability of those at the start of their careers (Buchholz and Kolb 2011). Nevertheless, Germany still manages an economy which integrates its young workers relatively successfully through its training and education systems (Eurofound 2014). This stands in contrast to several other country examples explored in this book. Growing labour market difficulties for young adults are widely seen to compromise pathways to autonomy and social independence, and to undermine psychological and subjective wellbeing (Antonucci et al 2014). Our chapters highlight the question of young people's experiences and orientations across diverse national, regional and class-related contexts.

European nations may be experiencing a slow return to economic and employment growth from 2013/14 onwards, yet low and middle earnings remain static, and evidence points to inequalities becoming more marked (OECD 2017). Several researchers suggest that family background has maintained its grip on young people's life chances (Antonucci et al 2014; Biggart et al 2015; O'Reilly et al 2015). Allmendinger and von den Driesch point to a

deepening divide between the haves and have-nots and argue that ‘...through inheritance, the opportunities and risks accumulate dramatically on both sides’ (2014, p.99; see also O’Reilly et al 2015). The prospects of those with low qualifications is a particular concern. Many have very little chance of employment beyond short-term or zero-hour contracts at the low-pay end of the labour market. Across Europe, amongst 25 to 39 year olds with no more than lower secondary education, employment rates remained steady from 2000 to 2008 but then declined markedly, from 66% in 2007 to 56% in 2013 (European Commission 2017, p.72), suggesting particular difficulties for the least qualified. Young people’s early experiences of the labour market are crucial components in their future employment trajectories and wider wellbeing, for example through the scarring effects of early unemployment (O’Reilly et al 2015). Thus, although there may be a slow resumption of economic growth there are extensive concerns that this will be exclusionary and further marginalise disadvantaged youth. Conditions for young people with little or no formal education beyond compulsory schooling are remarkably similar across national contexts, signifying the importance of supranational trends in skills demands related to processes of both globalisation and national policies that we have pointed to and which will be further elaborated in individual chapters

There are gender differences across countries in employment participation, with the highest rates amongst women in the Nordic countries and the lowest in southern Europe (European Commission 2017, p.32). The highest female participation rates are amongst older women, especially those with higher education and seniority in workplaces. The gender employment and pay gap continues and remains an important issue across EU nations although now, notably, women are more highly qualified than men across the EU (European Commission 2017). Despite their higher qualifications on average young women earn less than young men and are more commonly in part-time and temporary jobs (Loi et al 2017).

Uncertainty over the future is a fundamental factor influencing pathways to independent living and to taking on financial commitments of one’s own, particularly through family formation. We next consider patterns of leaving home across Europe and offer some brief observations relating to changing fertility patterns. In northern European countries with strong welfare states, especially in Scandinavia, the family is generally less important as a direct source of support than in southern Europe (Buchholz et al 2009; Nilsen et al 2012). However, as the chapters in this book demonstrate, extended family and intergenerational relations remain very important for young people during the transition to adulthood. Their nature and importance vary by country, by social class and by gender. Across European nations, a comparison of ages at leaving the parental home reveals marked differences relating to welfare arrangements, familial interdependencies and cultural expectations, patterns of support across generations, and the nature and availability of housing. Nordic countries manifest the lowest ages at leaving the parental

home (the early 20s) whilst southern European nations have the highest at around 30 (Eurofound 2014). Ages at leaving the parental home have manifested some considerable constancy over the long term (Billari and Liefbroer 2010; Eurofound 2014). More recently, from 2000 to 2016, across the EU 28, the average age of leaving the parental home remained steady for males at 27.1 and increased amongst females from 24.7 to 25.1. Italy manifests especially late ages at leaving home, in 2016 on average just over 31 years for men and 29 years amongst women (Eurostat, Data Explorer). The headline figures hide great diversity and some complexity. In their study of the UK, Stone et al (2011) show an extensive prolonging of the period of partially dependent co-residence within the parental home, particularly influenced by increased house prices and reduced financial security and especially marked for disadvantaged groups. For example, approximately one-quarter of those without qualifications and aged 30–34 co-reside with their parents (Stone et al 2011). In Italy, acquiring independent housing is often a family project, with complex negotiations which mark young people's pathways and familial exchanges. Linked subjectivities, values and practices amongst working-class young adults in Italy are taken up in Chapter 8 in this volume by Mattioli and de Luigi.

There is a widely articulated concern that the undermining of economic security for young adults additionally leads to delayed family formation, reduced fertility and increased childlessness. Sobotka and colleagues (2011) urge caution in presuming evidence of causation between economic recession and fertility decline. An adequate economic analysis requires in-depth understanding of diverse opportunity costs to childbearing, costs which cannot be straightforwardly read off from recession, and which vary by gender, education and employment status (Sobotka et al 2011; see also Miettinen 2015). Furthermore, any assessment of economic influences on fertility needs to be informed by an understanding of the cultural contexts in which relevant values, judgements and practices take place (cf. Szreter 1996; Bernardi and Keim 2017). Across European nations there had been some upturn in fertility rates from 2000 onwards, explained in part by an end to the trend of relative postponement, as well as by more family-friendly policies in some countries (Goldstein et al 2013). Patterns of fertility decline have re-occurred since the onset of the recession and these authors conclude that extensive unemployment and uncertainty is manifest in new delays in the timing of first births evidenced across many EU countries from 2009 onwards (Goldstein et al 2013; see also Sobotka et al 2011). In Chapter 10 of this volume, Heady explores the cultural embeddedness of economic and other considerations relevant to fertility decision-making and behaviours.

These questions about transition from the parental home to independent housing and from family of origin to family of destination bring into sharp focus some issues which are under-explored within youth research relating to exchange, support and inter-relatedness across generations. These issues are examined in several chapters in this collection. Relationships across generations have distinct, if overlapping, relevancies in shaping youth-to-adulthood



transitions. Firstly, family background and parental socio-economic circumstances are crucial influences on children's life chances. The reproduction of inequalities across generations relates to the economic, social and cultural resources which are passed on within families. This pattern and its manifestation and causality has been the subject of extensive sociological traditions of research and writing since at least the 1960s (eg Bourdieu 1986; Bertaux and Thompson 1997; Bernstein 2000). There is an overlapping question which is sometimes sidelined in empirical research so it is important to identify it separately: specifically, the question of how familial generations share a common social and economic position in respect of labour market and social opportunities (see eg O'Reilly et al 2015). These inequalities – of resource and position – manifest throughout young adults' pathways and transitions in their diverse educational, training and early labour market experiences and in their wider social and cultural participation and agency. These themes are taken up particularly in the chapters by Brannen and colleagues (Chapter 3), Irwin (Chapter 4), MacDonald and Shildrick (Chapter 5), and Jentsch and Reiter (Chapter 6).

The second area in which generational relationships bear on youth as a life course stage and youth transitions is through the familial relations of care and commitment, which lie at the heart of how generational interdependencies are experienced. These interdependencies connecting children and their parents (and grandparents) are shaped through historical, cultural and institutional arrangements. Indeed, the prolonged partial dependence of youth is partly contingent on its accommodation through familial support and parental obligations to support young adult children (cf Irwin 1995). There are interesting and important questions relating to the articulation of subjective orientations and social structural arrangements, and some argue that there has been a long-run shift to a more normative, 'obvious' expectation of parental support in enabling young people towards social independence (eg Brannen 2004). New norms, however, can exclude those whose circumstances do not fit (for example, those who are estranged from their parents or need to support them). Furthermore, everyday practices do not simply follow 'norms' but are contextually embedded and often subject to negotiation. The analysis of pathways to independent housing in Italy by Mattioli and de Luigi in Chapter 8 of this volume neatly exemplifies some of the linked challenges.

Youth transitions have been a recurring theme in the social sciences, studied from a number of perspectives. Theoretical designs and approaches that lend themselves to analysing and examining such questions where the *temporal dimension* is prominent are described below.

### **Youth studies and a contextualist life course approach across national contexts**

In this section we will give a brief outline of methodological themes that are important across the chapters. We also seek to provide a framework that

invites a cumulative and comparative reading of the country case study chapters. They all relate to the school-to-work transitions of young men and women, and demonstrate the diversity in transitions that are specific to national contexts but also link to wider structural dimensions that cut across national boundaries. The discussion in the chapters emerges from different but related theoretical and methodological approaches. In the literature, there is a dividing line between youth studies and life course research. However, these two approaches engage with temporal dimensions and address structural aspects of societies as well as individual agency. They thus demonstrate that taking a view across sub-field divides is helpful for providing a richer insight into processes that involve both 'history and biography' (Mills 1959).

Youth studies pay particular attention to the age groups defined as youth and topics related mainly to that life course phase. MacDonald (2011) discusses two main approaches in youth studies and makes a distinction between a *cultural* approach engaged with local youth cultures and a *transitions* approach, which primarily studies transitions from school to work (MacDonald 2011). He takes a long view, discussing the development of youth research in the UK over a 30-year period and suggesting that in order for youth research to gain more relevance in discussions of important social and political issues such as youth unemployment, it would be helpful to bridge the gap between the two perspectives. Furlong et al (2011) discuss the same divide and suggest a social generation approach in order to bridge the gap. Roberts' chapter in the current volume (Chapter 2) traces the traditions of the transitions perspective, whilst MacDonald and Shildrick (Chapter 5) engage with the transitions perspective with reference to a specific set of empirical cases.

There are many definitions and approaches within life course research. Heinz et al (2009, p.15) define life course research as follows:

As a proper methodological basis for the analysis of social processes, [the life course approach] denotes an interrelationship between individuals and society that evolves as a time-dependent, dynamic linkage between social structure, institutions, and individual action from birth to death.

Elder et al (2006) adopt a term from Merton (1968, cited in Elder et al 2006) and discuss the life course perspective in terms of a *theoretical orientation* and see 'the life course as consisting of age-graded patterns that are embedded in social institutions and history. This view is grounded in a contextualist perspective and emphasises the implications of social pathways in historical time and place for human development and ageing' (p. 4). Elder's definition of the life course is more specifically engaged with the historical context than other definitions, hence a *contextualist* approach.

Historical change happens in a complex process of interactions between social, economic and political factors. It is not the result of inevitable forces of nature. This becomes particularly evident when studying intergenerational processes from a contextualist life course approach. Elder's (1974/1999) study

of two cohorts who were children under the Great Depression in the United States, bears testament to the importance of political intervention for what happened in people's lives after the deprivation brought on by the social and economic situation during the 1930s. The Keynesian economic policies after the war created conditions of affluence in Western countries that contributed to lessen the impact of hardship and unemployment some had known in their childhood years during the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup> Combining cross-national perspectives with comparisons across time gives a broader outlook on conditions in the present. Blossfeld (2009), commenting on the usefulness of a life course approach in cross-national comparisons, states that life course studies 'tend to deepen our understanding of cross-national differences when we give a convincing explanation of the impact of institutional and social-cultural conditions on the life course in various nations' (p. 281). In this book, where the life course phase of youth transitions is centre stage, comparisons across contexts give insight into variations and diversity over historical time and across countries.

Throughout this book, the chapters are organised and written in a way that set them in a comparative 'dialogue'. Thematically their specific focus varies dependent on country-level concerns that come across in the research projects. For the purpose of this book, these differences are important dimensions that we have used to identify them as 'cases' located in specific contexts at a particular moment in their history. Hammersley and Gomm (2000) observed that one of the problems with the term 'case study' is that it is used in many different ways. Ragin (1992) wrote about the process of 'casing' in social research and discussed it in terms of a practical activity that is ongoing in any research project. Putting together chapters for a cross-national book is not a research project, but in the framing of the whole the chapters are 'cased' as instances that can be compared and contrasted in order to give insight beyond the single chapters. When we invite a comparative reading across chapters, we emphasise the usefulness of cross-national comparisons. The chapters are written by authors who have situated their research in 'countries as contexts' (Kohn 1987; Brannen and Nilsen 2011); as 'cases of' youth transitions, generational relationships and class-related inequalities that are temporal and spatially bound.

The chapters may be considered as 'cases' of questions that are specific to particular national contexts within the overarching theme of youth transitions and social inequality. We have arranged them in an order that reflects this dimension. The next chapter in the volume is devoted to an overview of the theoretical approaches in youth studies, by one of the leading names and a pioneer in the field, Ken Roberts. In Chapter 2, *Youth research meets life course terminology: the transitions paradigm revisited*, Roberts explores broad theoretical discussions informing youth research. He outlines the development of 'the transitions paradigm', and its association with sociology's claim to being the lead discipline in the study of youth. Roberts considers the distinctive merits of 'transitions' vis-à-vis other paradigms and the challenges

involved in extending its use beyond education-to-employment transitions. For Roberts, a key research challenge is to generate understanding of how the period of youth is critical for framing life course trajectories and how this varies across historical and social contexts. Roberts advocates 'transitions' as the lead paradigm for advancing knowledge and describes its merits vis-à-vis alternative conceptual framings. The centrality of the history-biography dynamic is thus underlined in Roberts' discussion of the transitions paradigm.

Chapter 3, *Transitions from school to work in Norway and Britain among three family generations of working-class men* (Brannen, Vogt, Nilsen, and Knight), provides a cross-national comparison of the school-to-work transition of working-class men in the two countries. Based on biographical interviews with members of three generations in each family, it discusses working-class men's transitions set in the contexts of historical change and intergenerational relations. Theoretically the chapter relates to a contextualist life course approach. The data shows both differences and similarities between the two countries over time. The overall changes in employment opportunities for working-class men in the youngest generation are similar and reflect the increase in manufacturing jobs being moved to other parts of the world and the processes of globalisation analysed by Buchholz et al (2009). Although public spending on education and welfare is relatively higher in Norway than in Britain, the role of intergenerational support for young men has gained in importance in both contexts.

In Chapter 4, *How parents see their children's future: education, work and social change in England*, Irwin explores the perspectives of parents as their children grow up and approach young adulthood. She considers changing educational arrangements, the restructuring of youth labour market opportunities and rewards, recession and longer-run economic changes. How are young people and their families positioned in these changing contexts and how is change experienced and negotiated across diverse class circumstances? Irwin draws on qualitative longitudinal data generated when the parents' children were approaching young adulthood in the context of recession and austerity. She explores parents' perspectives on their teenage children's educational and labour market prospects and on their wider chances for securing a decent living. In so doing, she illuminates commonalities and class-related differences in the experiences, orientations and practices of parents supporting their children's progression to adulthood.

The focus is still on Britain in Chapter 5, *Biography, history and place: understanding youth transitions in Teesside* (Shildrick and MacDonald), but this time on a very specific place that is emblematic of de-industrialisation, Teesside. The chapter brings together and discusses a series of research projects first begun in the late 1990s – *the Teesside Studies of Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion*. The focus is on the way in which young people make transitions to adulthood in the context of declining opportunities for secure employment, reduced social security for young adults and austerity cuts to

youth services, in a place that has high levels of multiple deprivation. The chapter describes these studies and offers a summary overview of their main thematic insights, then offers analysis of the social, economic, geographic, historical and political contexts shaping the biographies and transitions of economically marginalised youth. The authors explore the processes and decisions that result in the economic marginality of places and populations, and argue for the necessity of a form of sociological analysis capable of making sense of the complexities of individual biographies and addressing the pressing policy problems that relate to 'socially excluded youth'.

In contrast to many of the other countries, Germany saw a more limited impact of the 2008 crisis. Chapter 6, *Social inequality and the transition to education and training: the significance of family background in Germany* (Jentsch and Reiter), explores problems of inequality from a different angle that demonstrates how the tie between family background and educational achievement is strong compared to other European countries, a pattern linked to early tracking in the schooling system. The chapter provides an overview of the highly specialised German education system and highlights the importance of family background at different points of selection throughout young people's education trajectories, and how these processes are important in the reproduction of social inequality. Despite the widely admired and vaunted status which is attached to German vocational training, the least qualified encounter increasing difficulty securing a foothold in vocational education and training (VET) and the labour market.

Chapter 7, *Youth transitions and generations in Portugal: examining change between baby-boomers and millennials* (Alves), explores patterns of change in youth transitions in Portugal against the backdrop of the country's contemporary history which sets it apart from most of its EU partner countries. Portugal had an extremely long period of autocratic rule (1926–1974) during which time it was a colonial power but had a fragile economy and a limited welfare state, especially in public policies and benefits relevant for young people. The specific history that still informs many of its economic and social characteristics has been responsible for the wide gap between rich and poor, and for prolonging already difficult transitions of young people, which were exacerbated by the 2008 crisis. This chapter analyses a set of historical statistics relating to the age group 15–29 in different periods with special reference to education and employment. It also draws on qualitative interviews with this age group in 2012–2013 during the most difficult years of the crisis to give an in-depth understanding of conditions for Portuguese youth. The topic of emigration comes up in the interviews and in the statistical material, demonstrating that Portugal has a long history of people emigrating during difficult times; it is not a phenomenon restricted to the last years of crisis.

Chapter 8, *Young people and housing transitions: the role of intergenerational support in an Italian working-class context* (Mattioli and De Luigi), explores morals and practices relating to extreme shortages of independent housing for young people as well as intergenerational support in working-class families

when young adults seek to leave home. The global financial crisis of 2008, austerity policies and a weakening of welfare provision further increased young people's structural dependency on their families. Based on qualitative interviews with parents and young people, the authors explore the specific contexts where support is provided and negotiated, and examine ideas of independence, moral values and intergenerational relationships in times of increasing inequality. The chapter analyses the subjective experiences of parents who give financial and in-kind support and of adult children who receive it and offers insights into some of the ways in which moral obligations between generations are translated into actions and tensions which can arise.

Chapter 9, *Young people and recession in Greece: searching for a better future* (Sakellariou and Koronaïou), explores young people's perceptions and attitudes towards aspects of the economic crisis in Greece, asking how young people reflect on and respond to the circumstances in the society in which they live. The chapter examines young people's viewpoints, emotions and values during a crucial period of their lives and under the exceptional circumstances of deep crisis – economic, social and political – in Greek society. Based on qualitative research conducted at the peak of the crisis in 2013, the chapter explores how young people were affected by the crisis, how they saw Greek society under crisis and what futures they saw for themselves. Additionally, the authors consider how young people perceived the role of the family and intergenerational relations, and their perspectives on the extensive outward migration pursued by many young adults.

Chapter 10, *Kinship, community and the transition to adulthood – geographical differences and recent changes in European society* (Heady), addresses transitions to adulthood from a social anthropological approach with reference to two aspects: economic and socio-spatial placement. The first part focuses on processes of socio-spatial placement as coherent social sub-systems and as aspects of a wider socio-economic reality. The second part explores how these systems are affected by economic transformation and the resources which they offer for dealing with economic and social stress. A series of comparative statistical studies over the past decades have demonstrated that the timing of the transition to adulthood, and the order in which the different steps take place, vary considerably between different European regions – and that these differences are correlated with aspects of spatial and kinship organisation in the regions concerned, demonstrating the complex and embedded nature of transition processes.

## Note

- 1 Elder's study was groundbreaking at the time since most longitudinal research in psychology aimed to arrive at knowledge that would transcend time and space. Elder's study rather emphasised the importance of the historical context (Nilsen and Brannen 2010). The contextualist approach takes the historical period into the study as an important dimension and thus demonstrates how social processes are embedded in a specific time and place.

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