



Introduction

For a long time the question of the definition of youth and of the age groups to which youth belonged was settled by the routine use of established statistical categories: the 15–24-years-old age group was held to be the least imperfect possible grouping of the nebulous population we call “youth”. Yet, at the time this use first became well-established, the homogeneity of the group of young people defined in this way was far from proven. If we go back to 1982, for example, while 95% of French 15-year-olds lived with their parents, this was true for only 26% of 24-year-olds; heterogeneity was just as obvious when it came to economic activity with 99% of 15-year-olds in full-time education versus barely 8% of those aged 24. At the very least, we could agree that above the upper limit of this age group, the vast majority of the population had reached the status of adulthood.

The evolution of lifestyles and activities that has followed has destroyed the last justification for using this statistical category to define “youth”. We know, and the chapters that follow will show, that attainment of the status of adulthood has been pushed still later—and this, of course, is true not just in France. In certain domains, half the young population had reached the age of 24 without acquiring the characteristics that define adulthood (this is true for the number of males living in a couple and for both sexes for the birth of their first child). To include such individuals, who are no longer members of the prime age group for youth, although they still share many of that

group's attributes, the upper age limit for the group has had to be raised to 30.

But the problem with the definition of youth is not limited to the issue of statistical categorisation. The definition should be based on sociological arguments that offer consistency to the classification. The sociology of age usually defines age groups in terms of the succession of "social roles" occupied by people over the course of their lives. In this definition, age has both a status dimension (it corresponds to a collection of statuses: student, working, married, etc., that follow each other in the life course) and a normative dimension (certain behaviours that are expected and prescribed by society are associated with each of these positions). In this conceptual context, "youth" is differentiated from childhood more in terms of degree than nature: the "youth" are children but simply a little less dependent on family and school. In this narrow sense, it corresponds quite well with what we usually think of as "adolescence" and this was implicitly, at heart, the idea that justified the use of the 15–24 age group.

Is the extension of the frontiers of youth equivalent to a prolongation of youth defined in this way, that is to say a sort of post-adolescence? Or is it the sign of a much more profound redefinition of this life-stage? The debate on this point is, of course, far from over, and, moreover, the two hypotheses are not as exclusive as they appear for each may concern different categories of youth. Let us simply pose the terms of the debate, and in the process emphasise their characteristics to illustrate the two opposing interpretations.

The extension of the process of transition to the status of adulthood can be interpreted in two ways:

- 1 either as a process whose causes are, for the most part, external to youth itself (due to the economic and institutional situation, to the politics of company employment practices, etc.) and which lead to a weakening and developing insecurity of this age group as a whole.
- 2 or as a result of a cultural transformation of the entry mechanisms to adult life specific to this age group or life-stage.

A number of factors support the first hypothesis: insecure jobs are primarily the preserve of young people, the length of time young people take to establish themselves in an occupation is increasing, the standard of living of young people has stagnated or even worsened, and

generational inequalities are increasing; individual and collective pathological disorders amongst young people are increasing. At the same time, for this first theory to be firmly based in fact, we also need to verify that these phenomena, whose reality is indisputable, are the product of an identical process for all young people, a process whose intensity is the only thing that varies according to the categories concerned.

Another way to interpret the phenomenon of the prolongation of youth would be to argue that, of all the constraints that impact on the life courses of young people, it is the way they construct a route into adulthood that has been transformed the most. Why has there been such a change? Probably because the construction of the status of adulthood and the identity that corresponds to it is a more complex process than ever before, and because a common model of adulthood is less immediately transmittable or commonly transmitted from one generation to another, from parents to their children. In this hypothesis, youth, while being clearly distinguished from adulthood, would not be comparable to a prolonged adolescence, or what certain writers have called "post-adolescence", giving it either the characteristic of social regression (prolongation of enforced dependence) or of psychological regression (maintenance of a status of irresponsibility). Youth would instead be a new life-stage of making life choices, of forming aspirations, of a gradual definition of adult identity. If this idea is taken to its limits, we are led to believe that this process is functional and has nothing to do with any modern pathology.

This idea might seem surprising and appear to contradict some of the evidence referred to above. Other factors, however, support this second interpretation, or at least suggest the first is inadequate. For example, for all categories of young people today, family roles are acquired much later than occupational ones (and even after a stable career has been established). Put differently, the logic of economic constraints is insufficient to explain postponements in the domain of the family. In other words, there is little evidence to support the idea that young people revel in the status of "adolescent", of familial dependence. The evidence shows in fact that those who continue to live with their parents beyond their school education do so most often because they have no other choice. Others choose instead to live at a distance from their families while profiting occasionally, and sometimes regularly, from their parents' support.

In reality, the contrast between the two interpretations of the prolongation of youth as presented above is largely artificial if we

consider that they coexist in French society and that they simply concern different categories of youth. The two forms of the prolongation of youth illustrate, to a greater extent, the increasingly marked divergences in the destinies of youth that depend on whether or not they achieve a minimum standard of education. All that is necessary to be convinced of this is to examine the youth unemployment rate in the last 20 years as a function of educational level. Other indicators probably show equally well the process of social polarisation of youth.

The definition of youth is, therefore, becoming blurred, as a result of two factors: firstly because achieving adult status has become an increasingly individualised and in consequence more differentiated process ; and secondly because the internal unity of the group we term “youth” is under threat from diverging social prospects that are a function of educational achievement.

At the beginning of this study, the question, therefore, needs to be asked: has the redefinition of the boundaries of youth removed all validity from the concept itself and, therefore, any point to the book? Obviously, youth—the age of transition—only has a meaning if, beyond the variations of its length, it retains the characteristic of being a preparation for adulthood. This prerequisite itself implies a second: that adulthood retains sufficiently stable characteristics to be the outcome of the age that precedes it. Some sociological studies (Castel, 1995), by advancing the idea that a steady erosion of the “*condition salariale*” [“secure employment”] based on stable full-time employment is taking place at the heart of society, have raised doubts about this proposition. If adulthood itself is no longer based on those criteria of status, especially related to employment, by which it has been defined up until the present, “youth” as it has been categorised since the nineteenth century obviously no longer has any meaning. All the same, such a conclusion seems premature. Until recently, job insecurity was essentially concentrated in the younger cohorts of the population (Behaghel, 2003), a fact that clearly puts strains on this age group, but at the same time constituted a reassurance, even if temporary, that these stresses were transitory ones. Longitudinal studies have clearly demonstrated the increasing time it is taking for people to move into stable long-term employment, but equally they show that three-quarters of young people succeed in finding stable employment before they reach the age of 30. In addition, to challenge an argument that is sometimes advanced, it is clear that when discussing their

future, the traditional aspects of adulthood founded on work and raising a family continue to play a central role for young people.

There are, therefore, good reasons for retaining a definition of youth as an age of preparation for adult life. This preparation is taking longer, it lasts beyond school education and family upbringing, but this function is not challenged in any fundamental way. However, the validity of this definition is only true for the majority of youth who attain a minimum of school examination passes or vocational training. The destiny of the others is much more uncertain and a growing divide is appearing between them and the rest of the juvenile population. The real sociological question, like the real social question, therefore concerns the analysis of the division of the young population into two groups.

This book presents a synthesis of studies, mainly carried out in France, showing the growing complexity of the transition to adulthood that is changing at present into a continuous and progressive transition between life stages in place of a series of discontinuous, sudden and irreversible transitions that previously separated these life stages. Before presenting some data and analyses that illustrate these changes, it will be helpful for me firstly to discuss the terms of the debate in French sociology that have driven me to revise the approach to the concept of youth and then to construct analytical tools to read these changes with a sociological eye. In Chapters 3 and 4 I go on to present two studies that exemplify the empirical treatment of the question of youth.

