

on the coexistence of generations at work, focusing on the mutual perceptions of the age groups under study (the under-30s, the 30–49s and the 50-and-overs). The topics relate to awareness of age and the sense of belonging to a distinct group, the individual career trajectory and the tension between experience acquired at work and the formal knowledge instilled by education. Interviewees' testimony also highlights the key role of organisational choices.

More fundamentally, on the basis of employees' views of the relationship between generations at work, this chapter considers the similarities and dissimilarities and the closeness and distance between age groups, and identifies areas of conflict and cooperation. It is clear that other variables equally structure differences among the working population as a whole and within each generation, notably socio-economic category, gender and ethnic origin; these variables are discussed, but not considered in any depth here, as the analysis focuses on age and its ability to give rise to a sense of otherness accompanied by social distance or incomprehension.

6.1 Age: The Great Unsaid

Employees of all ages often see belonging to a specific age group as a predictor of particular attitudes to work and to the formal and informal rules associated with it. However, apart from the attribution of distinctive characteristics to different ages—these days an increasingly hazardous exercise—one notes a fundamental denial of the importance of age in intergenerational relations at work. For the interviewees, it is not the fact of being young and just starting work, or at the “peak” of one's career, or in the last years before retirement, that determines the nature of intergenerational relationships. Furthermore, if stereotypes associated with age certainly exist, they are not particularly strong and have little impact in day-to-day work; they tend rather to be mobilised at moments of tension, when one group feels itself in danger of marginalisation or exclusion on account of age rather than any more objective criterion. Finally, above and beyond social categories such as gender, age or occupation, it is the quality of interpersonal relations that determines the relationships between individual and groups. These points will be developed in what follows.

6.1.1 Perceptions of Attitudes and Behaviours

The first area in which employees display a differentiated perception of generational groups is that of attitudes and behaviours in the workplace. Any distinctive behaviours evoked are generally associated with the younger or older generations, the middle generation being more or less unmentioned in spontaneous discussions of age. Those who have the most to say about the subject are the older generation and their remarks are most often about young people at work. It is in its attitudes and behaviours that the younger generation is seen as distinctive, and motivation is the key word in older employees' discussions of the young. They suspect the young of lacking motivation, initiative and enthusiasm for work, complaining that their attitudes are predominantly instrumental. Reflections on the younger generation's motivations are organised around two axes, the first being the cultural changes associated with the democratisation of teaching, the relative generosity of social provision and changing values. For older workers, life has, to an extent, become too easy for the young, who don't have their parents' motivation, "who don't know why they have to work". "Young people feel more or less protected by the social security system." This was the point of view of a Belgian man in his 50s, a skilled worker:

Life, the system is like that now ... You can tell it's too easy, everything's handed to them on plate ... A young man today, he's not even married and he wants a house; he wants a fitted kitchen, a car. They want everything, just like that. They have a different mind-set, even at work, they have a different mind-set.

In the same vein, one also finds references to changes in values. The younger generation is said to relate differently to leisure, this having an effect on its willingness to work. There are also differences in the relationship to the family. When both members of a couple work, their willingness to work is not the same. Older men were often the main breadwinner; for them it was important to seize on every opportunity to increase the household income, something no longer true of the

young, most of whose partners are working as well. A Belgian joiner put it like this:

The young ones work their eight hours and then they like to go home. They like their friends. They visit their friends. They have a drink with them. Don't ask them to do more. Whereas for me, if there are two doors to be fitted, right, I go and fit the two doors. Then I go and see my friends. Young people aren't like that. That's not the way they live.

The second group of arguments about young people's motivation relates to the psychological contract between the business and its employees. According to older workers, the younger generation are obliged to live in the short term, to adjust to insecurity; it is they that have to make a career for themselves, and as a result they don't have the same loyalty to their employer, which the older workers interpret as a lack of motivation. They do recognise, however, that if younger workers feel less motivated by their work, this is also due to the fact that the firm offers them little in the way of opportunities or prospects. Faced with the permanent threat of unemployment, the young do not get involved in the job in the same way. A male Italian worker in his 50s explains:

They have another mentality, yes, they have another mentality ... They're asked to do another hour of overtime, and they say no. They want to go home. And they're not motivated. I understand that. They wait to be given a long-term contract, they wait and they wait and they don't get it. In the end they lose motivation.

Yet if there is tacit agreement on these points among employees of 50 and over, quite the opposite opinion can be found among the young, although it is less widespread. In this reading, it is the older workers who are said to be more *blasé* than the young, more uninterested in work, less engaged, uninvolved, while the young are said to be innovative and enthusiastic.

Arguments around the theme of motivation are all connected to the central notion of career trajectory. Young workers are different because their career trajectories are different from those of their elders (for this,

see the next section). One might well wonder, however, how new these mirrored discourses actually are. Thirty years earlier, as Nicolas Flamant has emphasised, views were very much the same.⁷ The same kind of commonplaces circulated about young people starting employment, as witnessed, for example, by a study of young people's ideas about work carried out by the Centre d'Études de l'Emploi in 1972.⁸

At a time when some are tempted to explain if not to justify the difficulties the young have in finding employment by their rejection of traditional values, this investigation of young people's notions of success and failure would seem to put a number of received ideas into question ... When most employers known for the employment of young people echo each other in describing the new difficulties they have with them, claiming that they do not show the "enthusiasm for work, the ambition and the seriousness" that supposedly characterized earlier generations, and when they advance such subjective factors to explain their reluctance to continue recruiting them, what exactly is going on?

In the late 2000s, firms rediscovered the younger generation after two decades during which they had either been kept unemployed or served as an undemanding workforce governed by the fear of unemployment. This new generation reflected all the changes that had been happening outside the workplace, in terms of consumption, precarity, technological change and mobility. It now brought all of them into the workplace, with businesses having to face them properly for the first time in the persons of their younger employees. A process of relational learning had thus to be established between these workers and the firms that employed them.

More fundamentally, it is interesting to note that despite these criticisms of young people's lack of motivation to work, the subject of age is not spontaneously evoked in connection with the relationship between

⁷Nicolas Flamant, "Conflit de génération ou conflit d'organisation? Un train peut en cacher un autre...", *Sociologie du travail* 47:2 (2005), pp. 223–244.

⁸Jean Rousselet, Gabrielle Balazs and Catherine Mathey, "Les jeunes et l'emploi. L'idée de travail, de réussite et d'échec chez des jeunes de milieux scolaires et sociaux différents", *Cahiers du Centre d'études de l'emploi* 7 (1975), pp. 11ff.

generations. In none of the six countries investigated did interviewees spontaneously raise the question. There is no implicit or underlying reference to a distinction, polarisation or conflict between age groups. Age is first of all something that is not talked about, it is not a subject of discussion. This absence of any discussion of age, despite the existence of lively and sometimes stigmatising social and political debate about both younger and older generations,⁹ perhaps evidences a kind of workplace taboo on the subject, with people wishing to avoid an eternal debate such as sometimes arises in the case of gender. Yet the subjects that remain unmentioned and undiscussed in a society are often the most crucial. What is more, when directly asked about the importance of age at work, many interviewees stress that people differ in terms of their personal characteristics rather than in terms of age. This type of “internalising” explanation does not promote an awareness of social developments.¹⁰ Social movements generally emerge in response to a perception that the salient features of a group’s shared situation are determined by a set of circumstances outside them,¹¹ and internalising explanations are thus less compatible with a quest for change. The denial of the importance of age thus operates to reinforce the status quo, discouraging the engagement with social conditions that might bring about change. Somewhat paradoxically, despite this generalised denial of the importance of age, each country investigated sees stereotypes and negative characteristics attributed to all age groups. These negative characteristics can be mobilised in periods of conflict, or presented as insignificant in periods of harmony. They nonetheless remain present and available as a “resource” for periods of tension. The features in question display many commonalities from country to country.

⁹ Donatienne Desmette and Mathieu Gaillard, “When a ‘Worker’ Becomes an ‘Older Worker’: The Effects of Age-Related Social Identity on Attitudes Towards Retirement and Work”, *Career Development International* 13:2 (2008), pp. 168–185; Matthieu Gaillard and Donatienne Desmette, “(In)validating Stereotypes About Older Workers Influences Their Intentions to Retire Early and to Learn and Develop”, *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 32 (2010), pp. 86–98.

¹⁰ Henri Tajfel, “Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations”, *Annual Review of Psychology* 33, pp. 1–39.

¹¹ Bernd Simon and Bert Klandermans, “Politicized Collective Identity: A Social Psychological Analysis”, *American Psychologist* 56 (2001), pp. 319–331.

6.1.2 Ambiguous Stereotypes

The negative characteristics and other qualities that older workers attribute to the younger are most often related to the lack of motivation already discussed. In certain cases, as we have seen, older workers explain this as the result of their younger colleagues' precarious status. Lack of initiative and lack of concentration on the job are also complained of, while others speak of the youngsters' competitive spirit. Some older workers go further, saying that the behaviour of the young has deteriorated over the last 20 years: frequent absenteeism, unsatisfactory behaviour, poor standards of work, disengagement, unreliability, impatience. A French sales assistant in his 50s complained: "They want everything now, though they don't know anything and haven't yet shown what they can do." The most common negative stereotypes attached to older workers relate to resistance to change, lack of drive and lack of personal ambition. In a country in transition such as Hungary, where the change in social values has been the most marked, intergenerational conflicts at work are strongly framed by the categories of family conflict. Group discussions conducted by the Hungarian team revealed that "the older generation imposes its ideas about the right way to live on the younger generation".¹² In this country in transition, generational stereotypes in the workplace reflect family stereotypes, and the new, market discourse of the public sphere has not yet penetrated the private realm and put down roots there.

Finally, it is the younger generation that is the object of the most stereotyping by other generations, whether negative or positive, while the middle generation suffers least. In many respects, the latter proves to be the invisible generation. Yet it is this generation that nurtures the most negative stereotypes regarding the young at work. This more critical view of the succeeding generation is nourished by a sense of job insecurity in the face of the rising generation, better qualified on the whole and more prepared to tolerate various kinds of flexibility that are unacceptable to the over-30s. As a result, the young appear as direct competitors to the

¹²Katalin Füleki, Orsolya Polyacskó and Julia Vajda, "Chapter 5: Report from Hungary", in Vendramin, ed., *Changing Social Patterns of Relation to Work*, pp. 197–252.

middle generation, who still have many years of work ahead of them before they retire, and much less of a threat to the older workers.

The results of the 2010 survey of working conditions in Europe¹³ confirm that there is little perception of age discrimination at work, but where it is felt to exist it is directed above all at the under-30s and the 50-and-overs. To the question “Over the past 12 months, have you been subjected at work to ... age discrimination?”, 5 % of European employees under 30 answered “Yes”, while only 2 % of the 30–49-year-olds did the same, and 5 % of the 50-and-overs. The distribution is the same in all six countries investigated, with higher percentages among younger and older workers, though there are differences between countries. Germany had the highest proportion of respondents who said they had experienced age discrimination: 9 % among under-30s, 1 % among the 30–49-year-olds, and 9.5 % among the 50-and-overs. Then come Belgium (7 %, 3 % and 6 % respectively), France (6 %, 2 %, 6 %) and Hungary (4 %, 2.5 %, 5 %), while Italy and Portugal seem the least affected (Italy 3 %, 1 %, 3 %; Portugal, 4 %, 1 %, 2.5 %).

6.1.3 The Overriding Importance of Social Relationships

Finally, the quality of social relationships (the “atmosphere” at work) is a key variable in the relationships between individuals and between groups. A 54-year-old male consultant from Italy says:

Work becomes important, becomes central only if you feel at ease with the people you work with, if you have good relationships.

A 27-year-old female technical employee says the same in her own way:

When the people you work with look at you as if you were a stranger, don't see what you're capable of doing, don't offer to help or ask you to join them for a coffee, it's difficult to think positively and to feel OK.

¹³ Eurofound, EWCS 2010.

The quality of social relationships has little to do with generational identity and age does not seem to be seen as a possible barrier. A mix of generations is generally considered to be a good thing for an organisation, even if age does come up in private discussions. A 27-year-old French woman working as a human resources assistant explains:

Obviously, we don't have the same problems. The older people are close to retirement, and so you often hear them talking among themselves about when they're leaving, about the pension reforms, what they're going to do afterwards. While for me, and for other young people in the same position, we're at a stage in our lives, both personally and professionally, when we're trying to get things together, with all that that involves: how do you get on in the business, what to do about childcare ... , how to have the money to buy a house. All that kind of thing. Well, that can create a bit of a distance between us. We don't have the same problems.

The social relationship can take different forms; in more traditional industries, older workers develop a paternalist attitude towards new arrivals at work. A young Belgian metalworker explains:

I was the youngster, the kid. They were in their late forties, fifties, I was the kid and they were really nice to me. That's why I say I wouldn't like to leave, because I've always been very well treated in the different sections I've been in, because, well, yes, I was 20, I was the kid. It was really nice.

Businesses sometimes make a policy of generational homogeneity and promote the social aspect of this as a form of compensation for insecurity and low pay. A 33-year-old human resources manager at a retail SME in Belgium says that she doesn't recruit employees over 30 as the young staff's commitment to the business was largely due to the atmosphere at work, based on youthfulness and shared interests.¹⁴ And she goes on:

I did an evaluation not long ago, when I asked questions about general matters and all I got out of it was: "We're not well-paid, it's not much of a wage but we're not going to go and look for anything else because it's very

¹⁴ Cultiaux and Vendramin, "Report from Belgium".

nice where we are, because there's a certain freedom, because it's a great team." That's the gist of what everybody was saying.

Talking of social relationships, there is one subject older workers often bring up, the supposed difference between the individualism of the young and the solidarity of the old. They have the impression that the world of work is becoming increasingly individualistic and that solidarity is in decline, for a variety of reasons that have to do with individuals but also with society as a whole. The young are said to be more marked by individualistic values and attitudes. Yet this type of observation remains extremely ambiguous, for while this is what they say, they also tell stories that show that social relationships at work have not weakened. Complaints about the fading of solidarity are often backed up by reference to rates of unionisation,¹⁵ but they seem to be better explained by the contradiction between two different visions and two conflicting experiences of the workplace and the firm. Most older workers have spent their working lives in large firms based on more "collective" values, while younger workers have joined the workforce in organisations inspired by more "liberal" values. Recalling Duferco's purchase of part of bankrupt Belgian steelworks Forges de Clabecq in 1997, a worker in his 40s explains his sense of the awkward encounter of two different visions of work:

We had a certain way of working, before. And then this lot arrived, young, with lots of drive; and they were more skilled. The others, the ones from the old days, they were resting on their laurels ... There was a conflict of generations ... The others, the ones who came after, are more individualist. They don't have the sense of camaraderie that we do. Because there are still a lot of people from the Forges there, and they still don't understand how, after ten years now, how the others don't have that spirit. It doesn't come just like that; if you don't know what it is you don't know how to get it. There are people who understand, even if they haven't been used to it. But there are people who don't understand, so the "others" are bad, even before you get to know them, they're bad, because they don't think like them.

¹⁵ Jelle Visser, "Union Membership Statistics in 24 Countries", *Monthly Labor Review* 129:1 (January 2006); Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, *Trade Unions in Western Europe since 1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

This individualisation is not limited to the workplace but is a tendency of society as a whole. Opinion is however divided: certain authors are pessimistic, seeing in it a breakdown of social ties and a decline of solidarity brought about by new methods of management and evaluation adopted by employers,¹⁶ while others are less so, seeing the prevailing individualisation as representing a change in the nature and form of social ties rather than their destruction.¹⁷

6.2 The Experience of Work and the Individual Trajectory

Generational belonging is inseparable from a specific experience of the labour market. If intergenerational differences can be very marked in terms of educational qualifications or gender, there are also strong differences in career trajectories—the transition from education to employment market, and the career path once in employment.

6.2.1 Differences of Trajectory

The changes in individual trajectories have been substantial, the life course and career path of older workers having been very different from those of young people today. Interviewees—the older ones especially—draw attention to differences at every stage: in the period of education and training, at the moment of entering work, of forming a family, in conditions of work. It is however the older workers who emphasise these differences between age groups. Their observations are ambivalent: on the one hand, young are said to have a more comfortable life, but on the other they see their employment status—rather than the content of work per se—as extremely problematic and unfair compared to how they themselves were treated when they started work more than 30 years earlier.

¹⁶ Danièle Linhart, *Travailler sans les autres* (Paris: Seuil, 2009); Christophe Dejours, *Travail. Usure mentale*, new and expanded edition (Paris: Bayard, 2005).

¹⁷ Patricia Vendramin, *Le Travail au singulier. Le lien social à l'épreuve de l'individualisation*, (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-Bruylant; Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).

Older workers talk of upbringing, of the parents' role as models for their children. Their own parents had suffered poor working conditions. The parents of today's young people had enjoyed easier conditions of work and so it was quite understandable that they had passed on a distinctive way of thinking about work. A Belgian skilled worker in his 50s says:

Our parents, you know, they worked hard, and we learnt from that experience, they passed that experience on. With young people today it's different. Myself, I look at how my father worked, how I work, it's much more laid back today. Much more laid back today, conditions of work have changed. The benefits have changed, there are more than before.

Older workers also point at the fact that young workers have no experience of work as they begin their first employment, having just left education when they are taken on. Furthermore, they have never had great demands made of them at home, where in earlier days they might have gained their first experience of carrying out tasks. Other key changes have been in the time spent at school, and the role of the school in the upbringing of children. Almost 42 % of European workers under 30 left full-time education at the age of 21 or later, while only 25 % of the 50-and-overs did the same.¹⁸ For the EU-15 countries, the difference is even greater, the figures being 52 % of the young and 26 % for the old. The situation is similar in the six countries investigated here, though the differences vary: in Germany, 56 % of the under-30s and 32 % of the 50-and-overs left full-time education at the age of 21 or later, in Belgium 53 % and 40 %, in France 38 % and 22 %, in Hungary 36 % and 15 %, in Italy 38.5 % and 19 % and in Portugal 34 % and 8 %.

On the other hand, these observations need to be tempered by consideration of the increasing prevalence of student employment, which while not yet as common as it is in Québec and the rest of North America is nonetheless a growing reality in Europe. In France, 17 % of the young people who took part in the "Génération 2004" survey had had a regular job while a student, while 70 % had done "holiday jobs or casual work".¹⁹ According to a survey of more than a thousand workers under 30 carried

¹⁸ Eurofound, EWCS 2010.

out in French-speaking Belgium in 2007,²⁰ one respondent in two had worked “regularly” as a student before taking up their present employment, 29 % had done so “sometimes” and 22 % had never had a job while studying. Student employment thus represents a form of occupational socialisation for a good number of young people. More common among young people who undertook lengthy studies, it further exacerbates the difference in skills portfolio between them and those who did not.

6.2.2 The Precarity of Young People’s Employment

A topic frequently raised in discussions of the occupational integration of young people is the precarity of their employment, which older workers did not suffer from, and which they denounce. When they speak of their own integration into work, older workers highlight the fact that it was easy for them to make a career, whatever level of education or training they started with. Today, they note the fall in the value of a degree, the governmental promotion of non-standard employment as a solution to youth unemployment, the flexibilisation of work. They note that entry into work is increasingly individualised and chancy, and that individuals develop a career on their own, spending several years in multiple and sometimes widely varying jobs before finding a stable position.

Older workers maintain, however, that their own conditions of work were more difficult, but this concerns the job itself, not their employment. From this point of view, older workers recognise that “We weren’t like young workers today”, “It’s not nice what young workers have to deal with today”, “Employers are hard on young workers.” A Belgian metal-worker in his 50s says:

Before, companies took the time to train a new arrival, now he has to be up to it after only three days. If he doesn’t have any experience of work, he’s obviously going to lose the job ... I can understand young people going

¹⁹ Eckert, “Les jeunes, les études”, pp. 237–243.

²⁰ Patricia Vendramin, *Les Jeunes, le Travail et l’Emploi. Enquête auprès des salariés de moins de 30 ans en Belgique francophone* (Namur: FTU/Jeunes CSC, 2007)

into new job feeling fearful. They don't know where they're going or how long they're going to be there.

Some older workers therefore think it natural that young workers are less loyal. In the words of a 63-year-old Belgian IT worker:

They can't stick to the old model. Companies and management bear a heavy responsibility; they erect divisions between groups...

Furthermore, human resources management is seen as a vehicle of age stereotypes at work, and policy on secure and insecure employment as a clinical, even cynical tool for testing, sorting, motivating and retaining new arrivals. The same IT specialist sums up as follows:

Now the bosses say: "We want to be able to recruit you and then get rid of you." I think it natural that people should react by saying to their company: "We (the workers) have the right to take you on and get rid of you as well". I think it's entirely natural, quite healthy, even.

Young workers, especially the less skilled, are said to be the chief victims of this situation. Yet while older workers mainly refer to "precarity" when they talk about the situation of the young, the young themselves tend to play it down to a certain degree. They often believe that their attempts at successive jobs are so many trials that legitimate the post they eventually gain, as if they had to undergo a probationary period before being recognised as capable of work. A young Belgian metalworker tells of his own experience:

I had fourteen jobs before this one ... I only ever had short-term contracts. I was young, and it was week here, a week there. It was OK. In fact, I worked a while in all the different sectors ... A job is a job, it's all work experience.

Young people come to a negative view of this transitional period when they fear that they will find themselves stuck in it. For the more highly skilled, it also represents a "battle of the talents".²¹

²¹ Ed Michaels, Helen Handfield-Jones and Beth Axelrod, *The War for Talent* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001).

The survey of young workers in French-speaking Belgium looked at their profile in terms of the number of changes of employment in the course of their careers. It concluded that there was little difference in current status between those who had never changed employment and those who had changed only a few times (once, twice or three times). Up to a certain threshold, changing jobs is part of the normal career path for the young. Two or three changes of employment seem “normal”, with more one tends to see more precarious trajectories and the social reproduction of occupational insecurity. In this survey, the 22 % of young people who changed employment more than three times were also more likely to have had parents who had experienced unemployment. These changes of job were more likely to be involuntary, and the young people with less experience of stability were more likely to have experienced unemployment. Of young people who had changed employment no more than three times, 53 % had experienced unemployment, as compared to 84 % of those who had changed employment more than three times. Beyond a certain threshold, multiple changes of employment in the early years of employment are an indicator of a fragile position on the labour market.

Career trajectories are significant, for several reasons. On the one hand, differences in these arise from a context, and on the other, trajectories are not themselves without effects. If the phase of transition and precarity is prolonged, it becomes difficult—by the age of 30 or even earlier—to achieve a standard career. Louis Chauvel described this situation as hysteresis of transitional socialisation: past history is a determinant of the individual trajectory, earlier experience has an impact on the later career, and the moment of entry onto the jobs market is crucial. According to Chauvel, there too is a process of generational scarring, whereby a generation's past difficulties leave a mark that does not spontaneously disappear.²² In the context of a study of the different generations working on the French railways, Flamant also notes how the trajectories of young workers entering a firm have an impact on their relationship to work and their particular expectations of both business and management.²³ Trajectories differ by age group and also as between individuals

²² Chauvel, “Les nouvelles generations”.

²³ Flamant, “Conflit de génération”.

within them. In his study, Flamant distinguishes three sub-groups among young workers, each sharing a common trajectory: post-school entrants arriving directly from education; ex-apprentices who have completed in-house training; the post-precarious escaping a chaotic trajectory; and those embarking on a second career. Attitudes and expectations regarding work, the business and management are not the same across all four groups of young recruits.

6.3 Tensions Around Experience, Formal Knowledge and Innovation

While actually working, the chief divisions between the generations relate, on the one hand, to the real or supposed differences in aptitude for using ICTs, and on the other to the paradoxical character of experience in relation to formal knowledge on the one hand and the imperative of innovation on the other.

6.3.1 Aptitudes for ICT

In the six countries investigated, the interviewees tend to agree in seeing older workers as having limited skills in the field of ICT. Young workers see themselves as more competent in ICT, and are also so described by older workers, while older workers see themselves as less competent and reluctant to engage with new technologies. A young Belgian manager in his 30s offers his ambivalent view:

I used to work with older people when I started ... real stickers for procedure. What age is it for "older people"? Fifty ... My mother is a teacher. Imagine her office, it's full of papers. I don't have a hundredth of all that, unbelievable, isn't it? Except it's not. These days, there's less paper everywhere, there's no need to make little drawings to understand each other, things like that. On the other hand, the older ones are perhaps better than us at concretising things at meetings. Perhaps because we stay too much behind our computers, we're just fifteen feet apart and we never even say "Hey, what d'you think of this?" Why? Because we don't see each other any

longer. I've noticed, I've got colleagues just opposite me, and it's very rare that we speak to each other. Everyone has an iPod in their ears, and we send each other e-mails. It's sad, it's sad.

The question of ICT is very often brought up by both younger and older workers, very rarely by the middle generation. Nonetheless, numerous national and European surveys have shown that the age-related digital divide largely disappears with time, especially at work.²⁴ The recent EWCS 2010 data show that for the six countries under investigation (except for Portugal), but also for the European workforce as a whole, that there is little difference between the under-30s and the 50-and-overs in the regular use of ICT at work.²⁵ For Europe as a whole, 33.5 % of under-30s are regular users of ICT at work, 38 % of 30–49-year-olds, and 33 % for the 50-and-overs, that is, only 1 percentage point less than the youngest. In France and Belgium, there are even more regular users of ICT among older workers than among the younger. In Germany, Hungary and Italy, young regular users outnumber the old by between 1 and 4 percentage points. Portugal is however distinctive in having more than twice as high a percentage of regular users among the under-30s as among the 50-and-overs (36 % as opposed to 17 %).

The same goes for regular use of the internet and e-mail in the course of work. For Europe as a whole, 24 % of under-30s regularly use the internet at work, 29 % of 30–49s, and 24 % of the 50-and-overs, very nearly the same percentage for younger as for older workers. Portugal again stands out among the six countries studied.

Given the proportions of users of ICTs and the internet in each age group revealed in the results of the EWCS 2010 survey, one may hypothesise that the perception of differences in aptitude rests in part on stereotype or prejudice. This is a matter worth spending a little time over, because the relationship to ICT is seen as a clear distinguishing factor between generations, especially between youngest and oldest. A number of studies have looked at the use of ICT by different groups and at the

²⁴ Eurostat Information Society Database.

²⁵ Eurofound, EWCS 2010.

skills mobilised by users.²⁶ The demarcation between young and old is not as clear as is implied by the stereotypes current in society generally and in the world of work more particularly. A typology proposed by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research in 2001,²⁷ since utilised and elaborated upon by other authors,²⁸ distinguishes three kinds of digital skills: the instrumental skills involved in the operation of hardware and software; the structural or informational skills required to exploit online content (finding, selecting, understanding, evaluating and processing information); and the strategic skills to make active use of the information, judging its significance to one's own situation and using it to inform decision-making at work or in private life. The same authors have shown that if the young do indeed have better instrumental skills, their elders had an even greater advantage over them in strategic skills. Furthermore, the successive surveys conducted by Eurostat show that the key factor in the digital divide today is no longer age but income and level of education.²⁹

Older workers (the 50-and-overs) belong to the last generation to have spent a significant part of its working life without encountering ICT. They were not trained in the use of these technologies when they were young, nor did ICTs have any place in their home life. Their first experience of them then came at a time when interfaces were not very

²⁶ Périne Brotcorne, Lotte Damhuis, Véronique Laurent, Gérard Valenduc and Patricia Vendramin, *Diversité et vulnérabilité dans les usages des TIC. La fracture numérique au second degré* (Gent: Academia Press, 2011); Neil Selwyn, Stephen Gorard and John Furlong, *Adult Learning in the Digital Age: Information, Technologies and the Learning Society* (London: Routledge, 2005); Luc Mertens et al., *Digitaal over de drempel*, e-book (Leuven: Linc, 2007); Neil Selwyn and Keri Facer, *Beyond the Digital Divide: Rethinking Digital Inclusion for the 21st Century*, (London: FutureLab, 2007); Mark Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

²⁷ Jan Steyaert and Jos De Haan, *Geleidelijk digitaal: een nuchtere kijk op de sociale gevolgen van ICT* (The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2001).

²⁸ Patricia Vendramin and Gérard Valenduc, *Internet et inégalités. Une radiographie de la fracture numérique* (Brussels: Labor, 2003), and "Fractures numériques, inégalités sociales et processus d'appropriation des innovations", *Terminal* 95-6 (2006), pp. 137–154; Jan A.G.M. Van Dijk, *The Deepening Divide: Inequality in the Information Society* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

²⁹ Eurostat Information Society Database.

user-friendly and the new technologies were suspected of being responsible for mass redundancies in certain industries or large organisations. They formed part of a context characterised by increased unemployment and lay-offs. For the younger generation, ICTs are an integral part of everyday life. They encounter them first in their leisure-time activities, and the technologies are already familiar tools when they later embark on their working lives. They are expert in the use of many different kinds.

They play video games, visit forums, stay in touch with friends using instant messaging, mobile phones, and web sites such as Facebook; they turn to the internet (rather than the library) for their school work; they watch TV, take photos with digital cameras or mobile phones; they are often users of multiple virtual environments on the web.³⁰

This overgeneralising vision of young people however obscures the significant differences between them in respect of their relationships to ICT and the skills they possess. A Belgian study of young people of 16 to 25 showed that far from being the homogeneous group suggested by talk of digital natives, the young were a highly diverse group and that some among them found themselves in a position of “digital marginalisation”, explained in most cases by family structure, cultural milieu and level or type of education rather than economic circumstances.³¹ This study also shows that there is a mismatch between young people’s actual use of the internet and the expectations of them in terms of the use of ICT at work. In brief, all these studies tend to qualify the somewhat caricatural though widespread understanding of the difference in ICT skills between young and old.

For the over-50s, the ICTs represent one of the great changes to have happened at work over the last 20 years. They arrived alongside changes in modes of corporate organisation, with the emergence of business networks, the expansion of sub-contracting, the growth of services, the

³⁰ Meyers, “Millennial workers”.

³¹ Périne Brotcorne, Luc Mertens and Gérard Valenduc, “Les jeunes offline et la fracture numérique. Les risques d’inégalités dans la génération des ‘natifs numériques’”, report published by the Belgian Federal Ministry for Social Integration, Brussels, October 2009.

automation of informal tasks, the codification of tasks and skills, multi-skilling and flexibility. In this sense, ICTs serve as an emblem for 20 years of transformation, even if their precise role in this remains debatable.³² ICTs at work are the concrete, everyday expression of the shift from the industrial to the information society, from collective to neo-liberal principles of organisation. One corollary of this vision of the distribution of ICT skills is the belief that to be old is to be attached to bygone times, to be reluctant to change. We may hypothesise that differences of skill in the field of ICT reflect the opposition between two ages of capitalism and two historical contexts that differ in many respects.

6.3.2 Methods of Work and Knowledge Transfer

Besides ICT skills, methods of work too may vary between generations. In their everyday work, older workers are described as being more structured, more logical, more organised, more calm, less liable to go over the top. “They bring their good sense to daily work.” All these characteristics are understood as the products of experience. Young workers are described (by young workers too) as being more excitable, impulsive and talkative. A Portuguese woman manager of 38 says:

If I had to change today, I'd be glad if there weren't just the young people so I wouldn't have to be the only “oldie”, but also to have the contact and the discussion, because while you certainly do learn from young people, you have to learn from older people as well.

Yet older workers are not thought of as less efficient: efficiency is associated with time and experience. In the words of one 24-year-old woman, a Belgian logistics assistant:

The inefficiency of older workers is a myth ... Young people are more wound up, they talk a lot, they get over-excited ... but in the end the older ones do as much work ... They may seem like old dinosaurs, they may be a bit slow, but you mustn't forget that they have thirty, even thirty-five

³² Gérard Valenduc, *La Technologie, un jeu de société* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-Bruylant, 2005).

years of experience, and they know the system, they know there's no point getting worked up.

If the problems of knowledge and more especially its transfer are key drivers of age management policy at work, the theme is less central to the way generations speak about each other. Knowledge capital and knowledge transfer are omnipresent themes in interviewees' responses, but they are of secondary importance as compared to such matters as attitudes towards work and social relationships.

A more significant issue in relation to knowledge that emerges in interviews is the question of its recognition. A certain generational tension can arise from the confrontation between the experience that is to some extent acquired with age and the formal knowledge acquired in education, between those who have practical experience and a certain concrete experience in a particular field or in the operations of a particular company, but who lack any certification of their abilities, and those who come into the workplace possessed of formal knowledge and the educational certificates attesting to it. This appears to be an important factor in intergenerational tensions, for those with the experience are often the older workers, while those with the certificates and diplomas are the young.

The issue comes up in all six national studies, the Italian going into particular detail on this point.³³ Older workers have acquired a solid experience but they are now threatened by the young with their degrees, who go straight into management positions. The transfer of knowledge by those who have the experience then becomes a problematic issue, with a breakdown in the hierarchy of skills and knowledge as the young with their formal knowledge come to occupy positions of power. This is particularly noticeable in the service sector, both private and public, where the introduction of new technology has rendered the experience of older workers obsolete, although they still have the safest jobs. This observation is echoed in Germany, where in certain sectors knowledge derived from experience is said to have become less important following its integration

³³ Adele Lebano, Anna M. Ponzellini and Sylvana Greco, "Report from Italy", in Vendramin, ed., *Changing Social Patterns of Relation to Work*, pp. 253–284.

into technical systems. The French contribution is also very clear about the existence of this kind of tension, noting that it is felt more strongly where the arrival of significant numbers of younger workers coincides with the introduction of organisational reforms. In these circumstances, older workers can feel that they have nothing to transmit to their younger successors and may be tempted to hold them responsible for their being sidelined. This very situation is found in Portugal, not only in the banking sector but also in public administration, which has undergone extensive reform. Yet this breakdown in the hierarchy of skills and knowledge—evident in the public sector in particular, but also in very hierarchical private sector organisations such as banks—is ambiguous, for seniority remains a key criterion in determining pay and promotion.

In some cases, less numerous, the young see their ideas and suggestions discredited not on account of any intrinsic weakness but simply because of their own youth. Their age is seen, in this case, as indicating a lack of relevant skills and experience that denies them all credibility. According to EWCS 2010, the ability to apply one's own ideas at work increases with age, with 42 % of Europeans under 30 able to do so, but 52 % of the 30-and-overs. The situation does however vary with country: Belgium, France and Germany exemplify the general pattern, while in Hungary half of all workers are able to apply their own ideas at work, whatever their age, and in Italy and Portugal, it is the middle generation that is most able to do so.³⁴

6.3.3 Innovation versus Experience

Strongly connected with the problems of knowledge just discussed, the polarisation between innovation and experience is another feature very present in discussions of intergenerational relations. It receives considerable attention in all six countries, interviewees agreeing that while older workers have the experience, it is the young who bring innovation and creativity. The problems concern the social value accorded to the two factors. Experience is thought of as both positive and negative, and in

³⁴ Eurofound, EWCS 2010.

Table 6.1 Positive and negative meanings associated with generations by age group

		About Older People	About Younger People
G1 < 30	<i>Positive</i>	Experience 7	Experience 2
	<i>Negative</i>	Technological difficulties 8	Technological difficulties 0
G2 30–50	<i>Positive</i>	Help and experience 24	Energy 11
	<i>Negative</i>	Conformism Technological difficulties 12	No experience Conflicts 16
G3 > 50	<i>Positive</i>	Experience 3	Creativity/Innovation 8
	<i>Negative</i>	Stagnation 3	Creativity/Innovation 2

Source: Passos et al., “Self, Work and Career”³⁶

theory, the same could be true of innovation, but in practice it is rarely seen as other than positive. This is because the values prevailing in the field of work are also the values of the culture in general, and innovation is clearly seen as a positive good in all contexts. A Portuguese woman in her 50s, a white-collar worker, says:

Today people think that it's those who are new who will save the organisation and our society, and really, experience is almost seen as a handicap, as implying rigid methods of work.

This tension is illustrated in Table 6.1, derived from group interviews in Portugal.³⁵ It shows the frequency with which a number of positive or negative characteristics are attributed to older and younger workers, for each of the age groups considered.

Complaints and fears about experience and its devaluation in practice, as opposed to innovation, are found in most of the countries investigated. In Hungary, the researchers noted a decline in the value accorded to experience, though this was not so in all sectors. In Portugal, a number of interviews suggested that when experience is

³⁵ Passos, Castro, Carvalho and Soares, “Self, Work and Career”.

seen as without value or worse, this tends to make the persons concerned more inflexible. In organisations, being older is often seen as an indicator of attachment to past times and resistance to change. In the same way, the Hungarian researchers report that “Older people are blamed for sticking to old routines, and there are very few who argue on the contrary for the importance of their skills and experience.”³⁷ The Belgian authors add that being older is sometimes equated with opposition to innovation, while the French note that for older workers, lack of acknowledgement of the value of experience leads to intergenerational tensions. They go on to say that career management under conditions of (internal) market logic can put younger and more experienced workers in direct competition with each other. The devaluation of the experience of older workers can then, be extension, lead them to adopt hostile attitudes towards young, as a 50-year-old Portuguese man, a transport clerk, explains:

In future, the competition will be with the young, because they will challenge us for positions of power ... and at the same time society is increasingly favouring the young, not experience, but the young who bring innovation.

The ICTs are often associated with this dichotomy between experience and innovation. This association between ICTs and innovation reinforces the polarisation between young and old. In theory, the two poles of innovation and experience are both positive and complementary, and it can easily be shown that both are indispensable at work. However, if one of the terms of the polarity becomes socially overvalued and more desirable than the other, the complementarity is lost sight of and competition takes its place. There is evidence, in most of the countries investigated here, of a fear that in future experience will become increasingly undervalued in relation to innovation, a paradoxical situation in view of all the discussion and effort devoted to the problem of knowledge transfer.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Katalin Füleki, Orsolya Polyácskó and Julia Vajda, “Chapter 5: Report from Hungary”.

6.4 The Role of Organisation

If management studies had focused in the last decade or so on the question of the coexistence of generations at work, it is because it had fairly rapidly become clear that organisational context was in the end the chief determinant of the quality of social relations at work, and thus of the capacity for cooperation and of collective performance. The lessons of empirical studies in the six countries are distilled in the overview by Béatrice Delay and her colleagues.³⁸ These authors highlight three types of configuration that represent the different relational registers that can be mobilised to describe the relationships established between the generations: (1) active cooperation; (2) distance; (3) tension.

6.4.1 The Working Environment Most Favourable to Intergenerational Cooperation

The most frequently encountered configuration is that of cooperative relations between young workers and their more experienced seniors. Such active cooperation is based on the benefits that each individual gains from it, benefits that derive for the most part from the exchange of knowledge, which develops the expertise of the young and affords recognition to their mentors. The occupational expertise of young recruits benefits greatly from their relationships with more experienced seniors, who enable the acquisition of useful knowledge and information that cannot be gained through individual learning or trial and error. The acquisition of new knowledge greatly depends on close socialisation, which takes place in the group through direct contact with more experienced colleagues. As Iasykoff remarks, “The unit to which they are assigned is the most important context of socialisation, where the new arrival assimilates values, usage and norms of behaviour”,³⁹ and older

³⁸ Delay, Méda and Bureau, “How Do Socio-Organisational Systems Support Competition...?”

³⁹ Vladimir Iazykoff, “Jeunes salariés dans les grandes entreprises: trajectoires sociales et représentations du travail”, *Travaux et Recherches de l'Université de Marne la Vallée* 1 (March 2000), p. 5, downloadable at <http://bernard.bianca.pivot.free.fr/Articles/JD/pj00239.pdf>.

colleagues can thus play a major role in developing the professionalism of young recruits. A young Frenchwoman of 27, a research officer in an insurance company, explains:

Me, I want to get on—that's normal—I'm at the start of my career and I don't want to be bored ... That means learning quickly, progressing quickly ... and to do that, there's a lot to be gained from more experienced colleagues, they can save you time ... if you're lucky enough to get support from someone older and take maximum advantage of everything they say, you have a better chance of becoming good at your job, of getting yourself noticed, of rising through the ranks, of moving on.

Finally, many interviewees confirmed that older workers were not reluctant to share their knowledge, most often offering advice spontaneously. However, some new arrivals stated that they had had to prove themselves worthy of their elders' patience and indulgence by first showing a desire to learn, winning their confidence by demonstrating willingness to work and faithfully following instructions. This relationship of dependence on those who show how to do the job helps forge connections and can thereby lead to the possibility of the group's adoption of behaviours at variance with existing norms and working habits without their bearers risking marginalisation.

Training new arrivals is a satisfying task for more experienced workers. The transmission of knowledge gives older workers an opportunity to judge how far they have progressed themselves and to accord value to their own experience in sharing it with others.⁴⁰ It affords a symbolic social recognition that acts as a counterweight to the somewhat negative image of older workers, so long as this transmission is socially valued and not seen as a preliminary to being sidelined or even dismissed. Furthermore, for many older workers, the role gives them an increased sense of their own usefulness. Yet knowledge transmission is not necessarily a one-way process and is often enough an occasion for mutual enrichment. Contact with formal knowledge possessed by the young can lead

⁴⁰Jérôme Gautié and Anne-Marie Guillemard, eds, "Gestion des âges et rapports intergénérationnels dans les grandes entreprises. Études de cas", report on the ACI Travail programme, Ministère de Recherche, Paris, 2004.

some older workers to cast a critical eye over their own practices and look to refresh, if not completely update, their own knowledge. A 49-year-old Frenchman working as a technician says:

It's true too that, because we have to train them, we have to look closely at what we do ourselves, and sometimes to ask ourselves if that is in fact how we ought to be doing it. What's more, you have younger people who have already worked elsewhere, if only on a placement. So they are able to show us methods with which we aren't familiar.

That being said, this “reverse socialisation” isn't always easy, especially in the industrial world with its strongly established guild consciousness, in that it may be seen as challenging the technical authority of the older workers, who derive their social status from it. Such threats to traditional order call for much prudence on the part of human resources when management does not properly play its role. These forms of co-learning based on the complementary nature of different age groups' knowledge and skills seem to be more in evidence in the service sector.⁴¹ So, for example, a young marketing graduate can convey her technical knowledge to her seniors, while they in turn can communicate to her their knowledge of their customers, their habits and what they look for.

Cooperation between age groups is far from being a matter of mechanical organisation, being influenced by the hopes and desires of the parties involved and reliant upon the establishment of interpersonal relationships based on trust, as discussed by Norbert Alter in his *Donner et prendre*.⁴² Given this, the organisational frameworks most encouraging of relations of cooperation are those that recognise the importance of mechanisms of transmission and put in place formal arrangements for the communication of knowledge, such as sponsorship or mentoring. Groups of mixed and balanced composition by age also encourage relations of cooperation, as does group stability.

⁴¹ Béatrice Delay and Guillaume Huyez-Levrat, “Le transfert d'expérience est-il possible dans les rapports intergénérationnels?”, *Sociologies pratiques* 12 (2006), pp. 37–50.

⁴² Norbert Alter, *Donner et prendre. La coopération en entreprise* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).

6.4.2 Intergenerational Distance as Product of the Organisation of Work

The second configuration that emerges from the analysis sees a *distant relationship* established between age groups, exchanges between younger and older being limited in both quantity and quality. There are four main reasons behind the emergence of this type of interaction between generations. The first has to do with what one might call an age effect. Employees' different positions in their personal (and occupational) life cycle are reflected in different interests and preferences, and they tend to have a natural affinity with those who share them. For example, while workers in their 50s tend to discuss retirement, young parents may talk about childcare and about managing the relationship between work and family life more generally. A 26-year-old Belgian computer engineer explains:

With guys my own age, the atmosphere's a little nicer. We have a bit more fun. We're a bit less inhibited, perhaps. If we travel on business, we'll go out more, have drink, a bit of fun. It's a slightly different relationship, it's slightly different.

And an Italian nurse, a young woman of 22, says:

You can absolutely tell the age difference in their discussions. They talk about their problems with teenagers and grown-up children ... well, we're in that age group, and so we feel some interest, but from the other side.

The second explanation has to do with prevailing managerial thinking. Relationships may be distant simply because the different age groups are not physically present in the same locations. Such separation by age can be the result of recruitment policy, the demographic composition of the personnel depending largely on the business's hiring decisions over previous years. Yet the age-uniformity in some workplaces cannot be completely explained as the mechanical result of failures of recruitment. There are organisations that have, and always have had, active recruitment policies, but in which management deliberately supplement their

modernisation policy with a segmented approach to age management, for instance grouping young workers together—on the basis of their supposed capacity for adaptation—in newly developing sectors and leaving the old—on account of their supposed resistance to change—in sectors in relative decline. There are also sometimes attempts to organise job specialisation by age, even if the policy is seldom made explicit, so as to avoid the working methods of older employees contaminating those of the young, who are expected to follow the new methods that management seeks to introduce. This mode of acculturation will however limit the possibility of using new recruits as agents of change.

The third reason for the loss of connection between generations has to do with increasing constraints on production, the intensification of work and just-in-time working. The role of the firm cannot then be limited to the physical organisation of working space, even less to ensuring a suitable mix of ages and seniorities. It must also contribute to the creation of conditions of everyday activity (especially as regards the pressure of time) favourable to the development of a dynamics of cooperation between generations. If proper arrangements are not made, exchange between generations becomes an informal process that does not establish itself automatically. An excessive turnover of staff, whether involuntary or not, also tends to discourage those employees responsible for the transmission of knowledge or the training of newcomers. A director of human resources, a Frenchwoman of 37, reflects on the mood of her colleagues:

We just see young people passing through, and it's a bit demotivating when they only stay six months. Even people with lots of energy, they get tired in the end when the interns change all the time.

In fact, according to the EWCS 2010 survey, 40 % of employees under 30 are on short-term or temporary contracts.

6.4.3 When the Work Environment Promotes Hostility

A third configuration, less common than the two others, involves the *tensions* that can sometimes emerge between generations. Friction can take different forms, such as, for example, younger workers' disdain for

the older, or older workers' hostility towards new arrivals. This can be the case, for example, when experienced workers are reluctant to communicate their experience or acts as agents of socialisation or professionalisation in relation to newcomers. Contrary to any hypothesis of a conflict of values that might be suggested by an essentialist or culturalist understanding of intergenerational relations, these kinds of tensions tend rather to have their origin in problems with the working environment. Hostility may emerge, for example, in people who suffer a partial or total lack of recognition (or fear the loss of recognition in the immediate future). If due recognition is not offered, employees tend to see the other age group as the source of the threat, practitioners of a form of unfair competition against whom it is necessary to take defensive measures (e.g. the reporting of mistakes, the withholding of information, rumour-mongering).

Delay and her colleagues have analysed the causes of the lack of recognition that leads to the emergence of intergenerational tensions, looking at "the social causes responsible for the systematic violation of the conditions of recognition" which leads to the feeling of injustice, of the denial of human dignity and integrity, of what Axel Honneth sums up in the notion of "social disrespect".⁴³ For the young, this sense of disrespect can be provoked by the disappointment of graduate expectations, by broken promises of employment or promotion, or the sense of having been treated unjustly in terms of the efforts made and the symbolic and material rewards actually (or expected to be) received. The experience of the working environment is then dominated by a sense of injustice and unfairness. An Italian woman of 29, an administrator, gives expression to this sense of non-recognition:

I worked for two years under an apprenticeship agreement, and then the company had automatically to put me onto a standard contract, but when I had the new contract to sign, after two years I expected to be offered more money, which they didn't give me. And that really shook me, because I saw it as not giving me any recognition for what I had done in the past, for the

⁴³Delay, Méda and Bureau, "How Do Socio-Organisational Systems Support Competition...?"; Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Legacy of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 63–79.

way I had worked. During those two years I did a lot of things, I learnt a lot, but they didn't acknowledge that.

There may be a sense of lack of recognition when a young employee is treated as no more than an executant, without being granted any form of autonomy in the execution of tasks, but strictly following instructions given by superiors and sticking rigidly to the methods of work indicated. Such extremely close supervision seems particularly insupportable to young people who are well qualified or who already have a certain amount of work experience. In such circumstances they can feel an acute sense of frustration, provoked on the one hand by their inability to distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive context by showing off their skills, and on the other to capitalise on the theoretical and practical knowledge gained in the course of their academic or professional careers. Young employees can also feel insufficiently recognised when their suggestions are rejected not on account of any intrinsic weakness but simply because of their own youth, this being experienced as the imposition of a stigma that disqualifies them in their reactions with others.⁴⁴ Their age is seen as indicating a lack of relevant skills and experience that denies them all credibility. Finally, confinement to the status of learner is very hard to accept. Newcomers understand this as expressing a fear of losing power on the part of their immediate superiors. They then find themselves uncomfortably situated in relation to a rhetoric that ostensibly encourages initiative or the development of a critical attitude amongst new recruits, with a view to exploiting their dynamism, their capacity for creativity and innovation, and promoting the young generation as a vehicle of change. The young can find themselves caught amid different injunctions that are hard to reconcile. Faced with such ambiguity, they can be tempted to see the others, their older colleagues, as the source of their difficulties.

In the case of older workers, the lack of recognition that gives rise to intergenerational tensions is more connected with the devaluing of their experience at work. A Portuguese manager, a woman in her 50s, explains how she sees it:

⁴⁴ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

A certain experience is important, and experience isn't something you get from reading, you get it through contact, through working with people who've been there longer. So I've nothing against young people who come into an organisation, but don't tell me the ones there already are no good for anything any longer. There are people of say 60 who are very valuable.

Such a loss of social and occupational status may result from a number of factors. It can result first of all from the relegation of older workers to sectors where they are suddenly expected to adapt to a results-oriented culture, or confined to areas where jobs are being lost or which are marginal to the strategic objectives of the company. Faced with a threatening environment that offers no hope in terms of career progression, growing old on the job seems to mean for some a long period when the routine character of the work represents a loss of status compared to the promotion expected to mark the last years of a career, as a form of a posteriori recognition of experience acquired and years spent with the firm. The injustice is particularly acutely felt when, for the workers, seniority connotes a personal commitment that is expected to be reciprocated.⁴⁵ The results of the Eurofound survey show how career prospects fall sharply with age: 41 % of European employees under 30 said they had good prospects for advancement, 32 % of employees between 30 and 49, and 21.5 % of those 50 and over. In all countries investigated, with the exception of France, this falling off in career begins in the 30s. It is in Portugal that the fall is sharpest, with 50 % of the under-30s saying they had good prospects for advancement, 38 % between 30 and 49, and 15 % of those 50 and over. In France, the youngest two groups share the same situation, with 35 % hopeful of advancement, with the figure only falling in the 50s, down to 22 %. Germany, the figure is 39 % for the youngest, 21.5 % for the oldest; in Belgium 49 % and 29 % respectively; in Italy 33.8 % and 19 %; and in Hungary 36 % and 12 %.⁴⁶ If it is logical that careers have largely been made by the time employees reach their 50s,

⁴⁵ Delay and Huyez-Levrat, "Le transfert d'expérience est-il possible?"

⁴⁶ Eurofound, EWCS 2010.

with a concomitant reduction in prospects for change or advancement, employees in their 50s find themselves in a particularly uncomfortable position, with prospects of advancement blocked for four out of five and retirement age threatening to retreat further into the distance.

Older workers who have difficulty in adapting to successive changes can suffer a fall in occupational self-esteem and end up feeling that they have nothing to pass on to their successors. They can also be tempted to hold new arrivals responsible for their plight. Changes and reorganisations are frequent, as shown by the results of the EWCS 2010 survey. To the questions whether new processes or technologies were introduced or substantial restructuring or reorganisation carried out at their workplace in the last three years, directly affecting their working environment, 42 % of European employees answered yes to the first and 34 % yes to the second.

Career management systems and tensions around the struggle for posts can lead to friction, as testified by two Portuguese in their 40s:

- I think that relationships are more difficult between people of the same age than otherwise. What explains people not being on good terms even when they're of the same age is the fact that they are in competition for the same things; they're competing for the same posts.
- In a very competitive environment, you have to play professional survival games ... it's for the sake of survival, in a quite concrete way, for there are few winners.

Frictions of this sort are more evident between adjacent age groups, between the young and those of the middle generation. The latter can feel themselves at a crossroads, increasingly aware that their position may be under threat from the young (better qualified and more flexible) and that the typical career trajectories of their elders are no longer available (with prolongation of working life and the end of early retirement schemes). In this climate of competition for jobs, retaining a monopoly over the possession of skills and qualifications can seem to some to offer a way of resisting the increasing insecurity of their social position and neutralising the real or perceived threat that new recruits may pose to their future. Alongside career management systems, some current forms of organisation of work may also contribute to the devaluation of the

experience of older workers, thus prompting them to adopt hostile attitudes to younger colleagues. We may note, in passing, that terminology is not neutral either. For some years now, the talk has been not of seniors or experienced workers but of older workers, ageing workers and an ageing active population.

Among the imperatives of the current organisation of work, the insistence on mobility has the effect of making seniority suspect.⁴⁷ While once it was considered a sign of professionalism, experience and maturity, it is today associated with stagnation, resistance to change, incapacity for personal development, obsolescence of skills. The generalisation of a radical conception of change (as opposed to the idea of gradual reform) has likewise resulted in a vast writing-down of the value of experienced workers while at the same time promoting a model of development in which history is no longer seen as a resource but as a cost, a brake on the process of modernisation. This approach necessarily implies a view of age as a form of disqualification.

Finally, the development of a culture of early retirement⁴⁸—firmly established on mainland Europe, the results of two decades of business and government efforts to encourage the early retirement of older workers—have led on the one hand to a kind of “premature ageing” and on the other to negative stereotypes of older workers, assumed to be relatively unproductive and unmotivated. Such representations are gradually internalised as self-evident by young and old alike.⁴⁹ The cynicism that certain older workers can develop in relation to new recruits and also to the firm and its development probably reflects a loss of control over reality associated with the feeling that their careers are no longer on the right path in terms of the hopes they may have had, compared to other colleagues in the same cohort.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Robert Castel, *L'Insécurité sociale: qu'est-ce qu'être protégé?* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

⁴⁸ Guillemard, *L'Âge de l'emploi*.

⁴⁹ Desmette and Gaillard, “When a ‘Worker’ Becomes an ‘Older Worker’”; Gaillard and Desmette, “(In)validating stereotypes”.

⁵⁰ Delay and Huyez-Levrat, “Le transfert d’expérience est-il possible?”

Delay et al. insist on the organisation's own responsibility for the quality of intergenerational relations.⁵¹ It is the firm, in fact, through its overall strategic orientation, its human resources policies—on age management more particularly—and the forms of supervision and methods of work that are adopted, which helps create the conditions that determine whether relationships between age groups will be beneficial or prejudicial.

6.5 Distance and Closeness Between Generations

In an increasing number of instances, the transformation of working environments over the last two decades has disrupted intergenerational solidarity and existing processes of intergenerational transmission. Since the late 1980s, the reciprocal loyalty and mutual recognition of a group conscious of sharing a common fate seem to have come under threat. Relations between the generations have also been disrupted by the coexistence of two modes of valorisation of work, the creation of distinctive areas of work for the young, the exclusion of older workers, mass unemployment and precarity, and also by certain discourses that cast doubt on the capacities and the value of older workers. This breakdown in intergenerational regulation and the increasing differences in attitudes and beliefs between age groups have led many researchers to propose the existence of an intergenerational conflict, said to impact on a number of areas:⁵² on modes of management and attitudes to change,⁵³ the integration of age

⁵¹ Delay, Méda and Bureau, "How Do Socio-Organisational Systems Support Competition...?"

⁵² Luc Ferry, "Interpréter Mai 1968", *Pouvoirs* 39 (1986), pp. 5–14; Louis Chauvel, *Le Destin des générations. Structure sociale et cohortes en France au xx^e siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1998).

⁵³ Jean-Claude Marquié, "Contraintes cognitives, contraintes de travail et expérience: les marges de manœuvre du travailleur vieillissant", in Jean-Claude Marquié, Dominique Paumès and Serge Volkoff, eds, *Le Travail au fil de l'âge* (Toulouse: Octarès Éditions, 1995), pp. 211–244; Chantale Lagacé, *Pratiques de gestion et représentations du vieillissement. Recherche exploratoire menée dans le secteur de la fabrication métallique industrielle*, research report presented to the Comité Sectoriel de la Main-d'Œuvre dans la Fabrication Métallique Industrielle, Montréal, INRS Urbanisation, 2003.

groups at work, perceptions of conflict or exclusion in the workplace.⁵⁴ From this point of view, the more experienced workers represent for the young an unattainable objective, or, on the contrary, a countermodel. For older workers, newcomers sometimes threaten their security in employment (particularly when restructuring is on the agenda), or, more fundamentally, threaten the values and representations of the world that undergird their sense of recognition. Adopting a somewhat determinist approach, certain authors analyse these situations as the outcome of a “struggle for power” between different generations that do not share the same trajectory or the same opportunities for integration into employment. Some qualify this analysis. For Chauvel, for example, the idea of intergenerational conflict is rooted in a particular period in recent history, when the young of the 1980s began to question their elders’ model of society, while today the radical ideas of that time have little purchase.⁵⁵ To the contrary, with the increasing prevalence of precarious employment, the young seem to be chiefly concerned to find a place, uncomfortable as it might be, in today’s society. The youth rebellions that occurred in certain European countries and elsewhere in 2011 and 2012 however would seem to vividly illustrate both the demand for a place and the rejection of a social model that has failed to keep its promises.⁵⁶

Relations between young and old comprise both solidarity and tension, closeness and distance. The interviews carried out in the six countries investigated reveal young people to be fairly realistic about work but also engaged in fashioning a new relationship to work, defined in new terms, seeking to balance work with other commitments while valuing stability and work satisfaction, and also having regard to objective advantages in terms of quality of work, level of income, labour-market regulation and social protection. Older workers seem more nostalgic. They seem to have less control over their situation than one might suppose,

⁵⁴ John Cultiaux, “Agir dans un monde flexible. Une expérience singulière”, in Matthieu de Nanteuil-Miribel and Assaad El Akremi, *Une autre flexibilité. Travail, emploi organisation en débat* (Paris: Érès, 2005), pp. 137–154.

⁵⁵ Chauvel, *Le Destin des générations*.

⁵⁶ Espido Freire, *Mileuristas. Retrato de la generacion de los mil euros* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 2006).

given their relative security of employment and the levels of pension they can still look forward to. The older generation are nostalgic for what has been lost—stability of employment, linear career trajectories and the ideology that went with them—even though they may not be losers themselves, to the extent that for the most part they enjoy long-term contracts of employment, better pay, regular advancement and advantages in terms of pensions. According to the national surveys, the last century saw older generations better protect their advantages, passing the cost onto the younger generation, notably in terms of jobs and social security. The more advantaged tend to project onto the younger generation a regret for the job for life that was theirs. In the interviews, the idea of a younger generation in difficulty, suffering precarity and lacking in prospects, is more often advanced by the old than by the young themselves. The results of the survey carried out by Mercure and Vultur in Québec also evidence this differential perception of the situation of the young.⁵⁷

Exchanges between the generations take place in three different places: at the workplace, on the labour market and within the family; at each of these three sites, the relationship between generations has specific features.⁵⁸ In the workplace, the young are seen as the stronger, with more self-control and more security than the old. Those of the older generation experience a tension, with formal knowledge and qualifications more highly valorised than experience. They often entered employment without specialist degrees or significant professional qualifications and gained advancement through solid experience. They now see themselves threatened by young people who have degrees, technological skills and foreign languages. In some cases, young people go straight into supervisory or decision-making positions on joining the workforce, on the basis of their formal qualifications, or because they are better suited than the old to certain types of tasks, disrupting the traditional hierarchies, based on experience rather than the possession of specific skills. Despite the fact that they often win the battle of skill against experience and that they see themselves, as they are seen by others, as confident and reliable,

⁵⁷ Mercure and Vultur, *La Signification du travail*.

⁵⁸ Adele Lebano, Maria Teresa Franco and Silvana Greco, "So Far, So Close: Generations and Work in Italy", in Vendramin, ed., *Generations at Work*, pp. 193–219.

the young run up against objective difficulties in the labour market, and their conditions of employment are less advantageous than those of their elders.

On the labour market, the distinction between core and peripheral workforce corresponds more or less to a segmentation between older and younger, though the security of the middle generation seems to be bought at the cost of those at both extremes of the age range. Most research and most public policy have thus focused on the young or on older workers. In their analysis of the Italian labour market, Adèle Lebano and her colleagues are very clear on this segmentation by age, equally found in other countries.⁵⁹ The Italian labour market is still characterised by strict rules on the hiring and firing of workers and the rarity of flexible forms of employment. Labour-market regulations underlie the high rates of unemployment among women and young people. The system of recruitment, high starting rates of pay and strict rules on the termination of employment strongly limit employment opportunities for new entrants. As few jobs are available to them, many young people live with their parents until they find stable employment. The Italian system of employment protection has often been described as rigid, characterised by high barriers to access unemployment benefits and to exit from the labour force. New regulations, notably regarding temporary contracts, have partly relaxed this rigidity, at least at the level of recruitment, and this has significantly accelerated the flexibilisation of the labour market over recent years. These government policies, and notably the promotion of non-standard forms of employment, have considerably changed the recruitment possibilities for businesses and these changes have gradually altered the structure of employment. At first, following the introduction of temporary contracts, the rate of unemployment fell significantly in Italy, especially among young people between 25 and 29, whose unemployment rate fell from 17.7 % in 2000 to 10 % in 2008, only to rise again to 17.7 % in 2012. In Italy, the division between insiders and outsiders tends to map onto that between young and old, the young mostly being in unstable employment and the traditional transitional period between education and work tending to turn into a “permanent condi-

⁵⁹Lebano, Franco and Greco, “So Far, So Close”.

tion". Furthermore, the young are largely excluded from systems of social protection. This happens in part because they are working in the newest sectors of the economy, characterised by the most non-standard forms of employment, but also because they are most often non-standard workers—part-timers, temporary workers, agency workers or freelancers—and so excluded from the protections aimed at standard workers and their families. A relatively significant discontinuity between generations arises too from differences in the meanings attached to work and the role and importance it has in their lives (see Chap. 5). For young people, life is no longer organised around work, not at least to the same extent as in earlier generations. According to young workers, work isn't the only thing that is important, work is not the most significant constituent of identity, the only means to emancipation, the measure of personal value or the organising principle of gender relations within the family. Structural changes combine with subjective orientations and the changing meanings attached to work.

In Italy, the generations are nonetheless close, their relations in great part shaped by the interacting impacts of national social policy, mechanisms of redistribution and the distinctive role of the family in the culture. In terms of social security spending and security of employment, authors often evoke a bitter competition between generations, due to limited resources and the imbalance between spending on pensions and spending on unemployment, and also the precarity of young people's livelihoods.⁶⁰ In Italy, 61 % of social spending goes on pensions and only 3 % on unemployment. Yet generations seem very strongly connected when one looks at parents and their offspring. Parents stand behind their children in supporting them in their choice of work, helping them find employment and providing them with the stable foundation needed to deal with unstable employment or unemployment (financial support, help with the purchase of a home). In fact, the Italian system of social security is largely based on the family, and this Mediterranean model reinforces both the role of the family and

⁶⁰ Carlo Buzzi, Alessandro Cavalli and Antonio de Lillo, eds, *Giovani verso il duemila: Quarto rapporto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996); Paul Johnson, Christoph Conrad and David Thomson, eds, *Workers versus Pensioners. Intergenerational Justice in an Aging World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

the system's neglect of the young.⁶¹ This picture of the situation finds confirmation both in the interviews carried out and the results of the major Italian surveys.⁶² Young people tend to remain with their parents not simply because of a distinctive culture of the family⁶³ but because the support of the family is an economic necessity given low pay and difficulty finding housing. In 2010, 52 % of young men between 25 and 34 lived with their parents, as did 36 % of young women the same age. The parental family is also enormously important for employment: according to a study by the IARD research institute, the family and the immediate friendship network are more important in the search of employment than are formal or institutional channels.⁶⁴

In all the countries surveyed, in fact, the three generations appear to differ significantly in both their subjective attitudes and expectations and their objective conditions of work. Despite this, the survey revealed no evidence of a conflict of generations in everyday work. There are a number of explanations for this.⁶⁵ First of all, in some countries the young are not engaged in the same kind of work as their elders. In most large industrial firms, early retirement schemes mean that the very oldest generation is no longer present, while at the same time most of the young are to be found in more highly skilled jobs in the service sector, or in call-centres, fast-food outlets or other low-skilled employment. In certain sectors in particular there is no longer any face-to-face encounter of generations.

⁶¹ Maurizio Ferrera, "The Uncertain Future of Italian Welfare State", *West European Politics* 20:1 (1997), pp. 231–249; Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Social Foundations of Post-Industrial Economies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶² ISFOL, *PLUS - Participation, Labour, Unemployment Survey* (Rome: ISFOL, 2006); IARD, *Sesto rapporto sulla condizione giovanile in Italia* (Milan: IARD, 2006); Consorzio Interuniversitario AlmaLaurea, ed, *VIII Rapporto sulla condizione occupazionale dei laureati. I laureati di primo livello alla prova del lavoro* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006).

⁶³ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁶⁴ IARD, *Sesto rapporto*.

Nonetheless, our research suggests that the young are not really aware of being members of a generation, a fact that prevents them from forming a true generational unit in Mannheim's sense⁶⁶ and so becoming collective agents of social change. At the same time, other factors generative of other kinds of ties seem to be more significant determinants of work-group cultures: gender, skill, rank, employer prestige and so forth. Another interesting reason for—or perhaps consequence of—this unexpected absence of intergenerational conflict might be the fact that the young and their elders are represented by the same trades unions, the common interest in such a case transcending and masking intergenerational rivalries. It may be noted however that the young are less likely to join a trade union than are older workers.⁶⁷ In addition, especially in countries like Italy where the family retains an important role in social regulation and in the redistribution of income, there is what Cavalli calls the paradoxical complicity between the young and old, the young not challenging their parents' generation when the latter defends its security of employment and its pensions, being aware that the "privileges" accorded to the older generation also benefit them in terms of the resources and support their parents are enabled to offer them. The general picture of relations between generations is one of great solidarity between parents and children and fierce competition with the children of others.⁶⁸ In the private sphere, then, one has the odd combination of a supposed intergenerational tension at work and a marked intergenerational solidarity within the family, which continues to support its children for an extended period. In general, the older generation supports the younger generation financially, while the younger generation support their parents in the tasks of everyday life. The financial support parents offer their children is made possible by the public intergenerational contract that provides them with the resources

⁶⁵ Anna M. Ponzellini, "Perspectives for Good Management of the Generations at Work and Pathways for Greater Social Cohesion", in Vendramin, ed., *Generations at Work*, pp. 293–319.

⁶⁶ Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations".

⁶⁷ According to Ebbinghaus and Visser, *Trade Unions in Western Europe since 1945* and Visser, "Union Membership Statistics" there has been a general decline in membership among those under 25 or 30, in part likely the result of the bias in trade union policy in favour of adults and older members.

they need for it, and the public contract is thus the precondition for the private contract between generations.

Ambivalence is perhaps the term that best characterizes the relationships between generations.⁶⁹ The idea of ambivalence captures the fact that social relationships are mediated by attitudes, behaviours and practices marked by both solidarity and conflict: emotional support and emotional conflict, autonomy and dependence on the other, the need for closeness and the necessity of distance, to mention only a few ... The experience of ambivalence is not intrinsically negative, but it represents a challenge in that individuals have to negotiate social situations traversed by tensions, calling for a greater reflective capacity than do other situations more homogeneous in their structures and expectations.⁷⁰

In the labour market—if one takes into account all the variables affecting different generations' economic and social power, both privileges in terms of security of employment and benefits in terms of education—it is not so easy to say who comes off the best. In a certain sense, the obsolescence of skills and technologies and the risk of unemployment they pose to the older generation balance the insecure employment and status disappointment experienced by the young on starting to work. Yet it is likely, in the long term, that the younger generation of today will pay the greater price for the current imbalance of systems of social protection.

⁶⁸Tito Boeri and Vincenzo Galasso, *Contro i giovani* (Milan: Mondadori, 2007).

⁶⁹Götz Richter, "Generational Perspective on Workplace Relationships: A German Perspective", in Vendramin, ed., *Generations at Work*, pp. 99–128; Eric D. Widmer and Kurt Lüscher, "Les relations intergénérationnelles au prisme de l'ambivalence et des configurations familiales", *Recherches familiales* 8 (2011), pp. 49–60.

⁷⁰Widmer and Lüscher, "Les relations intergénérationnelles", p. 51.

7

Conclusion

Once devalued and disdained, work has become, over the last three centuries, the most important focus of utopian energies. In the Early Middle Ages synonymous with pain and suffering, work gradually acquired the meanings it has for us today; at first a means to a different end—creating wealth or earning an income—and hence the key to autonomy and emancipation, it was reimagined in the nineteenth century as an activity enabling humans to transform the world, remaking it in their own image, before then becoming the chief means of social integration in predominantly wage-earning Western societies.

As Lalive d'Épinay noted, the mid-twentieth-century explosion of growth rates in Europe suddenly made the dream of the nineteenth-century utopians a real possibility: a labour that was simultaneously created, work that not only produced the goods necessary to meet people's needs but also gave expression to both their individuality and their shared humanity, as Marx had foreseen in the *Paris Manuscripts*.¹ A work, then, that would simultaneously fulfil all its several functions; and a work that had been invested, as available productive resources expanded, with multiple—and contradictory—expectations. For things didn't turn out

¹ Lalive d'Épinay, "Significations et valeurs du travail".

quite as nineteenth-century socialist thinkers had thought: when Marx spoke of work in future becoming “a first need of life” he meant not work as it existed in his day but unalienated work, work disalienated by the abolition of wage-labour. We know, on the contrary, that workers’ well-being—their rights to work, welfare and consumption—came to be anchored in the wage-relation, and that they found security in the advent of the wage-earning society. Having a job became crucial, and the State was expected to ensure that jobs were available. At the same time, as Habermas put it: “For the burdens that continue to be connected with the cushioned status of dependent wage labour, the citizen is compensated in his role as client of the welfare state bureaucracies with legal claims, and in his role as consumer of mass-produced goods, with buying power.”²

For the three dimensions of work are contradictory: if work is no more than a means to a different end—creating wealth or earning an income—as it is represented in the equations of the economists, it is the *product* of work that counts, and not the workers as individuals or the nature of the work that they do. Customary representations of the economy make it very clear, especially in the stylisation represented by the production functions, that labour, partly substitutable for capital, is significant only as a “factor” and that it is indeed the quantity or value of the product that counts. If, on the other hand, work is thought of as an activity in which people pit themselves against both nature and each other, transforming the world in which they find themselves and displaying to others who it is that they are—if work is this process of creation and self-creation, then the manner and circumstances in which it is carried out are just as, if not more, important than the ostensible product. And finally, the social compact that is constitutive of wage-earning society, whereby dependence of the sale of labour power is consented to in exchange for the recognition of rights, puts the balance between employer and employee requirements at the heart of the social dynamic while denying either side a monopoly over the theoretical or practical definition of work.

Until the late 1970s, the social contract was sustained by the West’s high rates of growth, which made the flaws of Taylorism and Fordism

² Habermas, “The New Obscurity”, p. 55.

tolerable. The crisis of the 1980s, the replacement of Philadelphia Consensus by Washington Consensus and the spread of the neo-liberal doxa first through the English-speaking world and then through continental Europe were accompanied by new forms of work organisation, said to allow not only more flexible production more responsive to consumer demand but also greater employee involvement. The Toyotist principles of just-in-time or lean production, zero defects and total quality production were adopted alongside new principles of management. Firms went along with, if they did not indeed positively promote, people's new expectations of work: at a time when the continuous improvement in levels of education and training nourished the desire for more responsibility, initiative, autonomy and variety of work, firms adopted modes of organisation calling for more autonomy, risk-taking, multi-skilling, subjective involvement and personal engagement.

But what Daniel Mercure and Mircea Vultur call the “elective affinity” between the new personal values of self-expression and self-fulfilment (Inglehart's “post-materialist” values) and firms' new demands in terms of flexibility did not lead to harmony—far from it. For employers were unwilling or unable to go all the way: autonomy was hedged about with controls, while reporting requirements multiplied, just as did the indicators that allowed employee performance to be closely and continuously monitored; work intensified through the 1980s and 1990s and modes of organisation were transformed without any increase in employee participation in decision-making or management. More generally, certain general precepts developed by international institutions since the 1980s (in, for example, *The Welfare State in Crisis* of 1981 or the *Jobs Study* of 1994, two major reports by the OECD³) gained almost universal governmental acceptance, notably the idea that Western economies could adapt to globalisation only by increasing flexibility, and more particularly by controlling or reducing pay, limiting employment protection, reducing unemployment benefits, activating welfare and bringing about “structural reform of the labour market” more generally. Social and employment policies as a whole have thus been more or less subordinated to economic policy, reducing them to no more than adjustment variables of the lat-

³ OECD, *The Welfare State in Crisis* (Paris: OECD, 1981) and *Jobs Study* (Paris: OECD, 1994).

ter. Add in rising unemployment, which although unevenly distributed across EU member states has proved to be a regularly recurring phenomenon, and it is easy to see that the hopes invested in work in Europe—by young people in particular, but also by women, whose ever-increasing participation in the labour market has promoted the emergence of new expectations of work—are far from having been fulfilled.

In reality, while the discourse on the human value of work has been maintained—a rhetoric that allows one to say everything and nothing—and with it the idea that individuals should find meaning, self-expression and self-fulfilment in work, there has been a marked dualisation of the workforce and of the relationship to work: for directors, senior managers, intermediate occupations and skilled occupations more generally there is self-expression and self-fulfilment, while for manual and clerical workers and the low skilled there is tedium and lack of autonomy—but even high-skilled occupations are now coming to suffer the ills of post-Taylorist work.

It is true that different European states have reacted differently to the OECD prescriptions in their European Commission translation, and have varied in the speed and scope of structural reform. Forms of work organisation and forms of management still differ, too, as we have seen throughout this study. The relationship to work also varies by country, even if there are shared features, such as the rise in expressive expectations, the desire for meaning, the persistence of instrumental expectations, and—almost everywhere—the convergence in the expectations of women and men.

But nowhere have firms established conditions that would lend plausibility to the idea of work being “the first need of life”. This would likely require, as Isabelle Ferreras has recently argued, that the firm cease to be an affair of the private sphere alone and become in a sense a public space, and that work itself, rather than being ruled by a relationship of strict subordination, become a shared project governed by all involved: capital, labour and external stakeholders.⁴ In reality, even the objective of quality employment once adopted by the EU, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, has fallen by the wayside. The immense expectations invested in

⁴ Isabelle Ferreras, *Gouverner le capitalisme. Pour le bicamérisme économique* (Paris: PUF, 2012).

work thus remain unfulfilled, at least for the great majority, even in the countries where these are greatest.

Are such expectations even realisable? In *The Case for Working with Your Hands* Matthew Crawford argues—very much as Friedmann did—that work has lost its meaning through the division of labour, and also, and more fundamentally, as a result of the development of capitalism and the wage-relation, and will not recover it while these are still with us.⁵ In their book on the meaning of work, which they explore through people's relationships to work, Mercure and Vultur, on the other hand, see the possibility of a mutually beneficial convergence in the “elective affinities” between changes in the system of production and today's new expectations of work, at least for those ready to take the road of flexibility and the entrepreneurial self. They identify the emergence of two types of work orientation compatible with the new norms of management prevalent in modern organisations, associated with highly educated individuals who are prepared to invest themselves in work, who look to it for individual development and personal reward, and have no problem with modes of flexibility that suit their own needs and expectations. As Mercure and Vultur explain, the new forms of organisation, which valorise individual initiative and promote competition, accord with the new, individualistic and agonistic values of some of the highly qualified young, who are prepared to involve themselves totally in a project so long as their efforts are rewarded.

Can the same be said of Europe? Everything will depend on the forms that flexibility takes there, and on Europeans' ability to accept or power to oppose them. In fact, the picture drawn by Mercure and Vultur suggests that young people in Québec are much more prepared to accept the flexibility firms ask for than are their counterparts in France, for example. But economic crisis may well overcome reservations: it was in response to Germany's economic difficulties in the early 2000s that the Hartz reforms were introduced, radically polarising the country's active population by obliging some to accept hyper-precarious mini-jobs and forcing the long-term unemployed to find

⁵Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York: Penguin, 2009), published in the UK under the title *The Case for Working with Your Hands: Or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good* (London: Viking, 2009).

work at any price, while the more highly skilled remained protected. It is economic crisis, too, that has seen Spain and Italy—known for the rigidity of their labour markets, according to the OECD—drastically rewrite their employment protection legislation, and France seek to “secure jobs” with legislation making it easier to sack people, in line with the demands of the employers’ federation. Economic crisis and the uncontrolled development of the digital economy could well bring with them a new phase of flexibilisation and labour-market reform that would make the kind of work that Europe’s people hope for an even more distant prospect, at least for the great majority, while doing nothing either for the wider distribution of skills that is the precondition for a high-value-added economy.

Yet another outcome is possible, and could become a reality if the ecological crisis were to be taken seriously. For it is now clear that we need radical changes not only in our modes of production and consumption but also in rates of growth and types of production, if we are to bring about the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions required to avoid catastrophic global warming. Reduction of the rate of economic growth and the greening of industry might well offer an opportunity to change work as well, so long as Europe proves capable of anticipating change and finally implementing effective retraining and job-protection mechanisms across the continent. The transformation of Europe into a region capable of a new prosperity and a redefined progress⁶—measured by the availability of decent work and the ability of workers and consumers to collectively control the sustainable production of goods and services so as to meet their essential needs—might serve its citizens as a concrete utopia, one that would offer them work that they recognise themselves in.

The reinvention of work thus entails taking seriously the hopes and expectations of so many of Europe’s workers, young people and women among them: for meaningful work that allows the expression of individuality and makes a useful contribution to society; decent work that fits in with the rest of life and enables workers to fully play their parts as citizens, friends and parents; civilised work that is fairly shared among all members of society.

⁶Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (London; Sterling, VA: Earthscan, 2009); Isabelle Cassiers, ed, *Redéfinir la prospérité* (Paris: Les Éditions de l’Aube, 2010).

Methodological Note

The “Social Patterns of Relations to Work” (SPReW) research was carried out under the EU’s Sixth Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration. Extending over a period of 27 months between 2006 and 2008, it brought together researchers from 6 countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Portugal) and trade union and government partners. The goals of the research were to examine changes in the relationship to work across the generations, to identify the factors making for solidarity or tension between the generations, at work and in related contexts (family, transition to adulthood, etc.), and to explore the political challenges and other implications of these changes.

The research involved qualitative, quantitative and comparative studies. The qualitative study was based on 163 narrative interviews (some 25 per country) grouped by age (under 30, 30 to 49, 50 and over). The interviewees were all in employment, whether permanent or precarious; women and men were interviewed in more or less equal numbers; and all skill levels were represented. A common interpretative framework was developed for the content analysis of the interviews. The individual interviews were supplemented with 18 group interviews (3 per country)

intended to further explore issues raised in the individual interviews and to identify areas of intergenerational tension. The quantitative study involved the secondary analysis of data from existing international surveys European Values Study (EVS), International Social Survey Program (ISSP), European Social Survey (ESS) and from relevant national surveys in the countries involved. The comparative study looked at national examples of good practice regarding intergenerational collaboration, youth integration, knowledge transfer and active ageing at work, setting these in the context of EU policy.

More detailed information is available at www.ftu-namur.org/sprew

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