



11th RJS Meeting « Youth commitments »

Structural constraints, reconfigurations and levers

29, 30 and 31 January 2024 UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Proposals for papers should include:

- A title
- An abstract of maximum 1,000 characters including spaces (In case your proposal is selected, this abstract will be published in the conference booklet)
- An argument of maximum 4,000 characters including spaces on the problematic, the theoretical framework, the method and the main research results

Submit for 15th May 2023 on: <https://forms.office.com/e/vDw6v4kmsA>

Important dates:

- **15 May 2023:** submission
- **July 2023:** return of the Scientific Council to the authors

In what places, with what goals, in what forms, according to what modalities, to what degree and on what scale are young people committed today? What responsibilities do young people take on and intend to pursue in the various classic fields of commitment, such as politics, associations and trade unions? Are the categories of commitment or disengagement relevant to understanding young people's relationships with the school institution, work and family? What links are forged between different forms and spheres of youth engagement? How do geographical and historical contexts and societal frameworks influence them? Can we observe new modalities, new spaces and specific vectors of commitment or forms of "demobilisation" - or even non-commitment - among young people?

This is the initial set of questions that led to the choice of theme for the eleventh RJS. Of course, commitment is a soft scientific category. As Becker (2006) points out, commitment refers to forms of action that unfold in different domains and that can be compromised by constraints of different kinds and that are shaped in specific contexts. In contemporary societies marked by profound cultural, socio-economic and political transformations, can we observe the effects of these changes on both the transitions to adulthood and the content and modalities of young people's engagement? This questioning of the 'different regimes of youth transitions' and their implications for young people's commitments is still in its infancy (Van de Velde 2008, Gozzo & Sampugnaro 2016, Soler-i-Martí & Ferrer-Fons 2015; Win & al. 2020).

In his attempt to theorise, Howard Becker (op. cit.) emphasises that the coherence of commitments is inscribed over a more or less long period of time, as well as through a set of value systems within which the mechanisms and processes of commitment construction unfold. Again according to Becker, this

notion makes it possible to highlight the mechanisms and processes within which 'past actions' will articulate interests and values to a trajectory of activities that were initially external to it. Consequently, these 11th RJ&S Meeting invite us to study the commitments and disengagements of young people as "social processes" (Garneau 2019), underpinned by diversified systems of meaning, and this without limiting ourselves to the theoretical frameworks provided by the interactionist paradigm, but by adhering to the tradition of theoretical and methodological openness of the RJ&S, which are rooted in various disciplines (sociology, history, law, psycho-sociology, economy, etc.).

The levels of analysis are indeed plural and interstructural, ranging from major contemporary transformations to lived experiences and social practices, via societal, institutional and organisational contexts as well as intermediate social spaces and the deployment of collective actions. These levels can also be cross-referenced with more categorical or intersectional approaches that allow for the observation and interpretation of commitments in terms of class, gender and ethno-cultural affiliations and social relations. The relationship between young people's multiple identifications and commitments is particularly relevant here. For example, which identifications influence the forms of commitment and to what extent do they shape the individual and collective identities of young people? How do these commitments and identifications manifest themselves in the transnational space and what types of belonging do they entail? How are identifications negotiated with local commitments and feelings of belonging? This questioning of commitments and identities must include religions and spiritualities, in order to deal with the recent metamorphosis of the relationship to the religious in multicultural societies.

The question of obstacles and constraints is particularly relevant for young people from dominated groups, whether they are racialised groups and/or members of the working classes, gender and sexual minorities. Beyond the question of constraints, this RJS Meeting invites us to develop a transversal dimension devoted to the need to address the questions on the different forms of commitment by taking into account the diversity of youths. By "Youth' is Just a Word", Pierre Bourdieu ([1978] 1984) intended to emphasise, on the one hand, the arbitrariness of the divisions between ages, and on the other hand, the blurring between the different youths brought about in the French context by mass access to secondary education. The growing synergy between the media and advertising and the importance of social networks are at the heart of the evolution of the 'structure of feeling' in many societies, including non-Western societies (Nilan & Feixa 2006; Pasquier 2005). They contribute to the development of a youth culture that contributes somewhat to the illusion of belonging to similar youths. However, it is important to question the way in which class, gender, ethno-cultural and socio-geographical divisions had structured and structure the commitments of young people (Rillon 2016 ; Zancarini-Fournel & Artières 2008 ; Bérout et alii. 2011). How do such differentiations manifest themselves in the processes of both engagement and non-engagement, as well as their articulations? How do young people position themselves in their commitments in relation to the different class, gender and racial assignments and the inequalities and dominations they express? The gender dimension being a central dimension in the work of the RJS, all proposals mobilising it are particularly welcome.

This call for papers aims to elicit documented responses to questions formulated from a variety of fields. Five main thematic axes are proposed for the papers. Four of them are quite classical: (axis 2) citizenship and political participation; (axis 3) the school institution, education and culture; (axis 4) sociability, family and communities; and (axis 5) the economy, work and employment. These axes are neither exhaustive nor watertight. Thus, work that examines the relationship between the commitments and non-commitments of young people in different fields and spheres is encouraged, particularly in the context of a more general axis (axis 1) that can challenge the concept of youth commitment and other related notions and concepts: actions, demobilisations, mobilisations, etc. Through the RJS, the aim is to tread off the beaten track and open up new theoretical and empirical horizons. On this last point, proposals that develop comparative approaches through Western and non-Western fields are welcome.

Axis 1. Theoretical, epistemological and methodological issues

A first axis will question the very notion of commitment/discommitment/non-commitment of young people as well as the different approaches and methodologies.

First of all, it must be noted that the theme of commitment circulates in a context where there is a repeated call for commitment, i.e. a moral injunction to commit. On the other hand, non-commitment can be disqualified or stigmatised. Thus, for example, the step from commitment to empowerment is quickly taken, particularly in a series of public action devices promoted by the state or in environmental struggles. In other words, the importance given to the constitution of a society that aggregates a sum of commitments fits quite well with the dissemination of a norm of individual responsibility in public action mechanisms, and with a neo-liberal conception of society.

In the analysis of youth practices, it seems essential to deepen this critical questioning of the universe of moral and political references of commitments and the role of institutions. It is also a question of laying the foundations or milestones of a properly scientific definition of this idea of commitment. In other words, under what conditions can the notion of commitment be useful and relevant for questioning contemporary youth practices?

In addition to the development of fundamental epistemological reflections, this axis proposes to question this notion for young people themselves: what does it mean to be committed when you are young? Are there scales of value for young people in the different forms of commitment? For example, is volunteering in the rugby cafeteria a form of commitment in the same way as taking part in a group working to protect the climate? And so on.

Of course, engagement as a research issue questions the methodologies used as well as the ways of defining, approaching and studying specific fields. Presentations are therefore expected on the different ways of working on, with and/or for young people.

Axis 2. Citizenship and political participation

A second axis deals with the different forms of participation of young people in the political, associative and trade union fields.

It first invites us to re-examine the different forms of commitment of the younger generations in the light of the major changes in contemporary societies that are at the heart of this call and, in so doing, to take a stand in relation to the classic debates on political participation (Becquet & Stuppia 2021; Earl et al. 2017). Thus, contrary to the thesis of a participation deficit among young people, since the 2000s numerous studies have shown the importance of less conventional forms of participation among young people, particularly through online participation or ephemeral mobilisations, to the detriment of more institutionalized forms (Becquet & Stuppia 2021; Oinas & et al. 2018; Musleh 2011). Youth is extremely present on social networks, so it elicits new, accelerated forms of investment (Collin 2015; Vizcaíno-Laorga et al. 2019).

We could examine the different repertoires of action of young people in the face of the major political, social, economic, environmental and health crises that mark the beginning of the 21st century. For example, we could study the ways in which the rise of widespread distrust of political institutions in European countries (Lardeux & Tiberj 2021) or the failure of democratisation trajectories in the Maghreb countries shape the different forms of political participation of young people (Abdu & Skalli 2018; Saidani 2018; Laine & al. 2018; Kassir 2016). Or: to what extent do the Covid-19 pandemic or global warming, which strongly challenge the global economic system, contribute to reinforcing cleavages or rather to the emergence of links between different types of youth participation? Can variability in the forms of engagement be observed (online/offline) in a before-and-after health crisis?

This axis also invites us to question and analyse the capacity of young people to tinker with different repertoires of action but also different identifications. In a context of the end of grand narratives and the explosion of contemporary isthmuses, what are the different regimes of justification mobilised by young people when they engage in struggles and social movements? In multi-cultural societies, what is the place of religiosities and spiritualities in the different forms of youth participation? How do they relate to other dimensions of identity, for example those relating to class, gender and ethno-racial categories? Some authors propose to study the political participation of young people today by trying to go beyond the divides between private life and forms of public engagement (Pleyers & Capitaine 2016). This approach could be relevant for studying the multiple identifications of young people and their articulations at the heart of their different forms of participation.

Axis 3. The school and young people's commitments

The third axis invites us to question the school institution in two distinct directions, the relationships between which it would be interesting to study.

The school structures, like those with a cultural vocation, are spaces of socialization favourable to the taking of awareness or responsibilities the political dimension of which can be more or less accentuated and facilitated by the school. Whether it is the responsibility of a class representative, a contribution to the animation of the school or university campus or participation in social movements related to societal issues (school reform, climate, sexism, racism, work, etc.), the forms of commitment of young people in school, especially in high school and university, are multiple and undoubtedly appropriate in different ways depending on the country, the resources or the activist capital (Matonti & Poupeau 2004) that young people are endowed. One of the objectives of this axis would be to study these commitments, to decipher their diversity, to socio-graph their audiences and their segmentations, by analysing the way in which educational or cultural institutions favour or do not favour them, encourage or repress them.

Youth as a social age (Bourdieu op cit.) is increasingly a time of commitment to studies (Verret 1975), schooling or vocational training, due to the injunction to have diplomas and accumulate them (Beaud 2002), which has become more pronounced in most European countries, but also around the Mediterranean. This axis will therefore also seek to question the commitment of young people to school, understood as a commitment to the profession of pupil (Perrenoud 1994), to the order or form of schooling (Douat 2011; Vincent 1980) or to the relationship with knowledge. The aim will be to examine the way in which young people think about and practice 'school constraint' by varying the training structures (apprenticeship, vocational school, higher education, etc.), the relationship to the diploma (Millet & Moreau 2011) or the disciplinary matrices (Millet 2003), on the one hand, and the social, gender or racial characteristics that shape 'ways of being in the world of school', on the other.

These two directions, which may seem to constitute two quite distinct worlds, are posited in this axis as being in close articulation, the capital mobilised in the two fields undoubtedly having common registers and the school form perhaps being one of the characteristics of civic engagement. This axis therefore invites contributions that could study the extent to which young people's societal or associative commitments owe to the forms taken by their school commitment and, conversely, how much disengagement and dropout from school and political commitment are associated.

Axis 4. Families, communities and sociability

While the sociology of youth has indicated the multiple evolutions of the entry to adulthood (such as the postponement of life as a couple or of a parental project), and while the sociology of the family has underlined how families are the theatre of a variety of relationships and lifestyles with new intimacies and commitments (Chambers & Gracia 2022), to what extent do these evolutions imply transformations in the family commitments of young people? What place and meaning does the family have for young people? What does it mean to be a family? What about sexual and/or love commitments? And so on.

Beyond the family and marital sphere, we need to look at the various forms of sociability in which strong or weak, lasting or ephemeral ties are forged. Mark Granovetter (1973) popularised the strength of weak ties, and the COVID 19 pandemic highlighted the usefulness of strong ties in the event of a major crisis (Collectif d'analyse des familles en confinement, 2021). This broadening of the theme leads to questions about the importance of peer groups, sports and leisure clubs and associations, neighbourhoods and communities of affiliation, not to mention social networks and virtual worlds. Which social activities do young people engage in? Or, on the contrary, which ones do they avoid? What are the social and gender differentiations revealed by these commitments or non-commitments?

As Robert Castel (1995) has theorised, the security of the individual in our contemporary societies is dependent on the link to employment, the social security system, but also on sociability networks. There is therefore also reason to question the role of commitments in the processes of social protection and vulnerability of young people. Moreover, sociability is not necessarily a vector for social integration, which would express adherence to the norms and practices deemed legitimate in a given society. On the contrary, they can support deviant, rebellious and alternative participation, whether or not it is criminally reprehensible; they can manifest identity withdrawal as well as support the construction of new identities; they can be the bearers of conservative or innovative practices... All in all, how can we analyse and interpret the sociabilities that young people invest in?

This set of questions is of course only indicative, as the field covered by this axis is vast, complex and changing.

Axis 5. Work and employment

Axis 5 focuses on the various changes in the labour market that primarily affect young people and their consequences on the modalities of engagement in work and employment. In particular, does the prevalence of precarious forms of employment at the beginning of working life (fixed-term contracts, outsourcing, temporary work, self-employment, etc.) shape the different forms of commitment and relationship to work of young people? What are the effects of these transformations on their professional aspirations?

Faced with this precariousness and the uncertainty it generates, young people find it more difficult to commit themselves professionally and no longer consider work as a value that structures their identity. Some studies, without neglecting the differences within a generation, even go so far as to assume the existence of a 'Generation Y' (Pichault & Pleyers, 2012). Other research, on the contrary, confirms that work remains, in Western countries, a central value in the construction of social identities, including among young people (Cultiaux, 2012). What about inter-generational differences today? What is the situation today in non-Western societies around the Mediterranean?

But to confine oneself to such an approach would lead to conceal the diversity of intra-generational forms of commitment. Between 'pragmatic commitment' - where the relationship to work is essentially instrumental - and 'reflexive commitment' - where it is central to the identity of the individual - (Cultiaux & Vendramin, 2010), how do young people position themselves in relation to their social characteristics (social origins, gender, geographical origins, place of residence, level of qualification, etc.)? How is the commitment to work and employment shaped according to gender and the cultural and social capital of young people?

Finally, what are the relationships between the different forms of commitment and non-commitment? Are there continuities or discontinuities between the different professional, political and associative commitments of young people?