

“In the first half of the twentieth century, Europeans went from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood, and they reached a settled young adulthood by their early 20s. No more.”

The Long and Leisurely Route: Coming of Age in Europe Today

JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT

Marie, age 28, is a student at a university in Denmark, studying psychology. Currently she is in Italy, collecting interviews for a research project, and living with her Brazilian boyfriend Pablo, who is studying engineering there. Her plan is to become a psychologist who works with deaf children and their families, but much of her life is up in the air right now. How much more education should she pursue, if any? She and Pablo would like to marry and have two children eventually, but when? Their lives are busy now. How could they fit children in amid their other ambitions and adventures?

GLOBAL YOUTH

Sixth in a series

If there is one thing that is certain about Marie's existence, it is that her life is vastly different from that of her mother or grandmother when they were 28 years old. Just 50 years ago, all over Europe, the median marriage age was in the early 20s. For most young couples, the first child came about a year after marriage, and was soon followed by another, with many couples going on to have three or four children. Few young people received education past their mid-teens. By the mid-20s, the typical European was well settled into adult roles, with respect to both work and family.

Then, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, the typical path from the late teens through the 20s changed. First came the introduction of the birth control pill, in the early 1960s, which made it relatively easy for young people to begin their sexual lives in their teens without the fear of an unin-

tended pregnancy. Premarital sex soon became common and widely accepted as the norm. Also, the economy's basis changed from manufacturing to information and technology, and the new economy led more and more young people to pursue more and more education, often well into their 20s. The median marriage age rose steadily and soon became higher than ever before. It is now nearly 30 in most of Western Europe, and still rising. Age at first childbirth became steadily later as well, and now instead of having three or four children most Europeans have two, or one, or none at all. The total fertility rate across Europe is now just 1.4 children per woman.

In sum, over a period of just a few decades, from the early 1960s to the present, the lives of young people in Europe (as in other industrialized countries) have changed so dramatically that a new period of the life course has been created. In the first half of the twentieth century, Europeans went from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood, and they reached a settled young adulthood by their early 20s. No more. Today, young people in Europe go from childhood to adolescence to what I have called “emerging adulthood,” before they enter young adulthood. For most people, emerging adulthood lasts from the late teens until the late 20s.

Europe is diverse, of course, and there are important differences between east and west, and north and south, as well as within countries according to social class and ethnic group. But it is nevertheless possible to paint with broad strokes an overall picture of what characterizes emerging adulthood in Europe today. On the basis of my research into the phenomenon generally, I have concluded that five main features distinguish emerging adulthood from the adolescence

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that precedes it and the young adulthood that follows it. Emerging adulthood is the age of identity exploration, of instability, of focusing on one's self, of feeling in-between, and of possibilities. All of these features can be found in the experience of young Europeans.

PURSuing THE IDEAL

First, emerging adulthood is the age of identity exploration. This means it is a time of finding out who you are and what kind of adult life you want to pursue, mainly in terms of love and work. In the course of emerging adulthood, young people explore possibilities and move closer to making enduring choices in both of these areas. With respect to love, most emerging adults have involvements with a series of love partners. In contrast to adolescence, when love relationships are mainly for fun and recreation, during emerging adulthood love relationships are usually entered with the underlying question: Is this the kind of person who would be a good partner for me for life? In northern (but not southern) Europe, one way of answering this question is through cohabitation. The majority of northern Europeans now cohabit with at least one partner before marriage. In both north and south, the goal is to find not merely a reliable marriage partner but a "soul mate," someone who provides an ideal complement to one's own identity.

With respect to identity exploration and work, emerging adulthood is a period of trying out a series of educational and occupational paths in search of a job that provides an ideal identity fit. In work as in love, expectations are high. The goal is not to find a mere job but a job that is self-fulfilling, enjoyable, and personally satisfying—in short, a job that is an expression of one's identity.

This issue has special meaning with respect to Europe's educational systems. Although there is variation within Europe, in most countries across the continent a crucial decision has to be made at age 14 or 15, in choosing which type of secondary school to enter. Will it be a university preparatory school, or a business school that provides preparation for jobs such as accounting, or a trade school that teaches skills for jobs such as plumber and electrician? Once this choice is made, it is difficult to change tracks later. This system, however, was

developed over a century ago, when the meaning and purpose of work were quite different—that is, when the purpose of work for almost everyone was simply to provide for one's self and family. Now that the goal of work is identity fulfillment, the old system is incompatible with emerging adults' desires to try different educational and occupational paths until they find the one that provides the right identity match. The clarification of one's identity is something that takes place today primarily in emerging adulthood, not in adolescence.

Consequently, today one can observe a growing tension between European governments and emerging adults. The governments wish to discourage emerging adults from changing tracks once they have entered one. The longer emerging adults stay in the educational system, and the more often they change educational paths, the longer they constitute budget liabilities to the government, rather

than taxpaying workers. However, emerging adults increasingly experience the old system as intolerably rigid and inflexible. As their identities become clearer in their late teens and perhaps early 20s,

they seek to change educational and occupational paths to match their identity needs, and they press their school officials and governments to allow them to do so. European systems are growing more flexible in response to the demands of emerging adults, but governments give this ground reluctantly for financial reasons.

A TIME OF STRESS

A second feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the age of instability. In the course of their identity explorations, emerging adults frequently change directions. Finding a soul mate and identity-based work is a tall order. These goals are elusive, and in their pursuit of them emerging adults change love partners and change jobs and educational directions.

This instability, in most of Europe, is reflected in residential changes. In southern Europe, most emerging adults stay at home into their late 20s, and many young men stay home even into their early 30s. However, in northern and eastern Europe, the typical pattern is to leave home in the late teens, following secondary school. For the next decade many residential changes follow: moving in with a roommate, moving out when

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the roommate becomes tiresome, moving in with a romantic partner, moving out when the relationship sours, moving within their country or to a different country within Europe (or perhaps to the United States) for a period of educational training, an occupational opportunity, or simply a travel adventure.

It is the instability of emerging adulthood that sometimes makes it a difficult period. For most emerging adults, their late teens and 20s are a time of high well-being and optimism (more on this below). However, the frequent changes that emerging adults experience can be stressful. Changing love partners can be exciting, but it can also be unpleasant, especially when one is the recipient rather than the initiator of the change. Similarly, emerging adults change jobs and educational directions in search of new opportunities, but each change requires an adjustment that may be stressful.

In Europe, an especially notable source of instability during emerging adulthood is unemployment. Rates of unemployment in Europe are typically about twice as high for emerging adults as for other adults, and are especially high in southern Europe. The experience of losing a job, or of striving to find employment yet being unable to do so, is frustrating and demoralizing for emerging adults. For example, one study in six European countries reported high rates of psychological distress among emerging adults who were unemployed. In a follow-up study six months later, the distress had eased only for those who had found a full- or part-time job or had gone back to school.

THE APEX OF FREEDOM

A third feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the self-focused age. By this I mean that emerging adulthood is the time in the entire life course when people are most free from institutional demands and obligations. Children and adolescents have to attend school daily, and the rest of their daily lives is structured by their parents and other adults. Beyond emerging adulthood, most adults' lives are structured by obligations to employers, love partners, and children. In emerging adulthood, people have more freedom to decide for themselves how to live than they have ever had before or will ever have again.

One distinctively European form that the self-focused age takes is the increasing pervasiveness in Europe of a "gap year" between the end of secondary school and the beginning of university or

other postsecondary education. During their gap year emerging adults often travel to other European countries or the United States, for a vacation or to work. Or, they may stay at home and simply have a year or two of working in temporary jobs and having fun with their friends.

Of course, it has long been true that some young Europeans have been unencumbered and footloose during their 20s. In Europe during the nineteenth century, at the height of Romanticism, there was an ideal, especially in Germany, of young men having a *wanderschaft* or *wanderjahr*, that is, a period in their late teens or early 20s that would be devoted to travel and self-exploration before settling into adult commitments. Similarly, in Britain many upper-class young men enjoyed a "continental tour" or "grand tour" of Europe before entering long-term adult roles.

These experiences, however, were reserved mainly for the elite, and solely for young men (young women would not have been allowed to travel without a chaperone). What is different today is that the opportunity to experience a self-focused period between adolescence and young adulthood, perhaps including travel, is available to a much broader range of young people in Europe, and to young women as well as young men. The gap year is a classic example of emerging adulthood as the self-focused age. It is the kind of experience that is only possible in emerging adulthood.

"Self-focused," incidentally, should not be confused with selfish or egocentric. Emerging adults are notably *less* egocentric than adolescents are, considerably better at taking the perspective of others. This is one of the reasons most of them get along much better with their parents than they did as adolescents. They learn to understand their parents as persons, with goals and needs much like their own, and so they judge them less harshly.

ON THE WAY BUT NOT THERE YET

The fourth feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the age of feeling in-between. Most people from their late teens to their mid-20s feel they are neither in adolescence nor adulthood but somewhere in between. This is in part what led me to the term "emerging adulthood," because I believed this term described well their feeling of being on the way to adulthood but not there yet. These findings were surprising to me and many others a decade ago, but they have now been replicated and extended many times in the United States, across social classes, regions, and ethnic groups. Highly

similar findings have also been reported by now in South Korea, Australia, Argentina, Israel—and in countries all over Europe. Feeling in-between is a remarkably pervasive feature of emerging adulthood. It is not until about age 30 that most people report feeling fully adult.

Equally surprising are the criteria that young people in Europe (as in the United States) now use to mark the entry into adulthood. Traditionally, marriage has been regarded as the definitive marker of adulthood. Across a wide range of cultures around the world, marriage has had the connotation not only of joining together a man and a woman in a lifelong bond, but also of marking the marriage partners' rise to status as adult members of the community. Now, however, studies all over Europe and in other countries show that marriage no longer denotes adult status. In interviews that ask open-ended questions, it is almost never mentioned as a criterion for adulthood. And in questionnaire surveys that offer various possible milestones for indicating adulthood, it repeatedly ends up close to rock bottom in importance. The same low rating has been found for other traditional criteria such as finishing school, starting full-time work, and having a child.

If not the traditional markers, then what today signifies adulthood for young Europeans? The most important markers of adulthood now are *individualistic*, mainly these three: accepting responsibility for one's self, making one's own decisions, and becoming financially independent. A clear shift is evident from markers measured externally by the community, such as marriage and finishing school, to markers measured internally by the self, such as accepting responsibility for oneself and making independent decisions.

AIMING HIGH

Fifth and finally, emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities. It is a time of life when hopes run high, because few doors have been firmly closed and all dreams still seem alive. Emerging adults' dreams are usually different from the dreams of children and adolescents. Emerging adults rarely dream of being a movie star, or a rap star, or a professional athlete. Instead their dreams are more down-to-earth: a soul mate for life, and work that

is enjoyable and pays well and maybe even does some good in the world. Even if life is difficult in the present for emerging adults—as it often is, since their jobs often do not pay very well and the search for a soul mate can be frustrating—nearly all of them believe that eventually life will be kind to them, and they will attain at least some semblance of their dreams.

I developed this theory on the basis of my research with Americans, and some readers may think now that this sounds very American, the idea of emerging adulthood as the age of possibilities. Americans are well-known for their optimism, perhaps because their country has not been the battlefield for the world's worst wars, as Europe has. However, the same high hopes that I found among American emerging adults I also found among emerging adults in Denmark, and Danes are hardly known for their sunny spirits.

It may be that emerging adults in the United States are optimistic not because they are American, but because they

are young—which is why young Europeans share their optimism. As Aristotle observed long ago, dreams are cheap among the young because their dreams have not yet been tested in the fires of real life. We adults know all too well the things that can go wrong in the course of adult life because we have experienced them or seen them happen to people whom we know and love. But in the world of the young, during the age of possibilities, it seems that no one is going to end up experiencing a bitter divorce, and no one is going to end up in a dead-end job they hate, and no one is going to suffer from alcoholism, or a terrible accident, or a financial disaster, or chronic mental or physical illness, or an early death. Everyone will find a lifelong partner, and a great job, and live happily ever after.

THE RESTLESS AND THE EXCLUDED

It is, of course, important to recognize that not everyone in Europe enjoys equal access to the freedom and opportunities of emerging adulthood. Compared to the rest of the world today, and any part of the world in the past, European states have been marvelously successful in spreading the affluence of their societies so that the great majority is middle class, with only a small proportion of rich

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and poor. This generalized affluence is an important condition for emerging adulthood, because remaining in education into one's 20s and then searching for identity-based work are luxuries that are possible only if it is not necessary to find a job, any job, from an early age in order to help one's family survive.

Most young Europeans enjoy the benefit of this general affluence and experience a long and leisurely emerging adulthood, but there remain areas that are struggling economically—for example, southern Italy, parts of northern Great Britain, and some of the countries of Eastern Europe such as Romania and Albania. In these areas, economic pressures are greater and consequently the freedoms and opportunities of emerging adulthood are restricted. All over Europe, as in the rest of the industrialized world, education is the key to occupational opportunities, and whoever receives relatively little of it is likely to struggle in emerging adulthood and beyond. The manufacturing jobs that formerly provided well-paying (if also tedious and often dangerous) work for working-class men are scarcer than in the past and growing scarcer every day.

At the same time, it is important not to overstate the influence of social class on emerging adulthood in Europe. Because of the generosity of the European welfare state, combined with tax systems designed to redistribute wealth across the population, the range of social class differences is narrower in most European countries than it is in the United States, which may result in fewer differences between emerging adults of different social classes. Having interviewed both middle-class and working-class emerging adults in the United States and Denmark, I have been struck by their similarities more than their differences. Across groups, they seek a soul mate and self-fulfilling work, and during their emerging adult years they hope to have some self-focused fun.

Perhaps more important than the class issue in Europe is the issue of immigrants. In recent decades many have come to Western European countries hoping to obtain the benefits of their affluent and well-functioning societies. Some came originally as “guest workers” to do the sorts of jobs that affluent Europeans prefer not to do; others have come as refugees from unstable, war-torn parts of the world. Now the children of many of these immigrants are

reaching emerging adulthood, and, because they have grown up in European societies, their expectations and aspirations for their lives are similar to those of other young Europeans.

However, as they pursue educational and occupational opportunities during this time in their lives they frequently find doors barred to them because of racial and ethnic discrimination. Resentment and rage often follow—and sometimes riots, as with the young Muslims in France in 2006. This response in turn generates further discrimination, increasing the urgency for solutions to break the cycle that have so far proved elusive.

THE CAUSE OF A CRISIS?

Recognizing the development over the past 50 years of emerging adulthood as a new period of the life course illuminates a variety of issues, among them Europe's demographic problem. The continent has too many old people and not enough young ones. Worse yet, with each year there are

more and more old ones and fewer and fewer young ones. Life expectancy is steadily increasing, but young people are not having enough children to sustain the population at its cur-

rent level. Not one country in Europe—north or south, east or west—has a birth rate that reaches the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman. In the countries of southern and eastern Europe the birth rate is especially low, barely one child per woman. If this pattern continues in the decades to come, it will make the welfare states of Europe extremely difficult if not impossible to sustain.

This is a well-known problem. Less well-known is how the development of emerging adulthood is a fundamental cause of it. Low fertility rates have multiple causes, of course, but one important cause appears to be that young Europeans have grown accustomed to the fun and freedom of emerging adulthood. Many find themselves reluctant to give up this lifestyle once they reach age 30 even as more of their peers are moving into family responsibilities. A recent survey in Germany found that one-fourth of German men in their late 20s had no intention of ever having children. The main reason they gave for this decision was that they did not want to be bound by that responsibility. That is, they prefer to continue to live the self-focused life they have come to enjoy in the course of emerging adulthood.

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Further insights on emerging adulthood and fertility in Europe come from recent ethnographic work by Carrie Douglass of Mary Baldwin College, along with her colleagues. They are anthropologists who set out to investigate the human experience behind the European trend of lower fertility rates. In exploring the larger question of how the nature of young people's lives has changed now that they no longer devote their 20s to marriage and caring for young children, the researchers unearthed a great deal of fascinating and important information on emerging adulthood.

Douglass and her colleagues describe the diversity that persists in Europe, but the consistent theme across countries is that young people want to enjoy a period of freedom and independence between adolescence and adulthood. In Norway, for example, most young people want to have children eventually, but they have set a number of prerequisites that must first be fulfilled: to live independently for some years, to finish their education, to be settled in a job, and to have lived with a partner for some time. There is also the expectation that the 20s will include a period devoted to travel or some other self-focused, self-developing activity. There is a clear social norm that emerging adulthood "should" be enjoyed for some years before parenthood is entered.

Douglass's own ethnographic research in Spain provides a complementary example from southern Europe. In recent decades the median marriage age in Spain has risen to nearly 30 and the fertility rate has plunged to among the lowest in the world despite a strong cultural tradition of large extended families. There are a variety of reasons for this change, including new occupational opportunities for women, but the largest reason appears to be that young Spaniards prefer to focus in their 20s on enjoying the freedom and fun of emerging adulthood. People in their 20s repeatedly told Douglass that marriage (and especially children) would put a damper on their ability to go out, to travel, to go skiing, to "enjoy life." This comfortable lifestyle is aided by remaining at home with their parents' care and support until marriage. Asked why they remained home well into their 20s, emerging adults in Spain would reply, "Why should we leave? We're fine here. We live in a 5-star hotel!"

Eastern Europe, after decades of oppression under communism, is rapidly headed toward the Western European model of emerging adulthood. In the Czech Republic, for example, the freedom to "work, travel, and study" during one's 20s is

now highly prized. Unlike in much of the rest of Europe, low birth rates are viewed not as a crisis but as a happy manifestation of the new freedoms that Czechs gained with the fall of communism.

The lives of emerging adult "singles" are romanticized in Czech popular culture. Singles are young men and women of marriageable age who choose not to marry. They are depicted as part of a global youth culture, whose lifestyles have more in common with those of young professionals in New York and Paris than with their own parents'. But rather than resenting the enjoyments of the young, parents generally support and encourage their children to enjoy the emerging adult freedom that they never had. As elsewhere in Europe, when they finally feel ready to have children, young Czechs most frequently have one or two, and some decide to have none at all.

EUROPE'S BEAUTIFUL PROBLEM

If the growth and pervasiveness of emerging adulthood is a primary cause of Europe's demographic problem, what is the solution? In fact, there may not be one. Europe could let in more immigrants from countries that have much higher birth rates, but that has not worked very well so far. Clearly, the political trend at the moment in Europe is to let in fewer rather than more immigrants.

One possible note of hope is that most young Europeans hope and expect to have more children than they actually end up having. This has suggested to some observers that there may be policies that governments can develop that would encourage and allow young people to have as many children as they would like—for example, by providing free day care or more cash assistance to young parents.

I am not optimistic. (I am not an emerging adult, so I have no obligation to be optimistic.) It seems likely that the gap between how many children young people say they want and how many they actually have is mostly the result of factors that cannot be ameliorated by government policies. You get to be 28 or 30 and your soul mate does not show up on schedule. So you find someone later than you expected, and by that time you feel like you only have time to have one child after all. Or you find that you have fertility problems when you try to have your first child in your 30s. Or you have your first child and then you get divorced. Or you find a partner and you want to have two or three children but your partner does not. Or you have a first child, and you are trying to keep your

