

Childbearing intentions and postponement in times of  
uncertainty

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**Postponing motherhood in today's high-speed  
society**

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## The structure of this presentation:

- The acceleration of time in contemporary Western societies
- The consequences of this process in relation to biographical time
- Delayed motherhood: the case of Italy
- The postponement of motherhood in the light of the sociology of time

# ***1. The acceleration of time and the predicament of the future in contemporary Western societies***

Social acceleration is not a phenomenon confined to our times. The modern age is strictly intertwined with the acceleration of time (Koselleck). This process redefines the relation between past, present and future.

The role of speed in conquering broader economic and financial arenas and the all-pervasive presence of new information technologies in our life. The principle of instantaneity as a core dimension of global time (Laidi)

We experience daily pressure to accept everything that 'goes faster' (Gleick) – viewed as synonymous with greater efficiency and competitiveness in the market and in everyday life.

While we increasingly manage to save time, thanks to the new technologies, we are simultaneously more aware of the scarcity of time.

This paradox gives rise to a vision of the 'acceleration society' as the form of society within which "technological acceleration and the growing scarcity of temporal resources (...) take place simultaneously" (Rosa)

## ***2. The consequences of these processes in relation to biographical time***

Changes in the ways in which time is conceptualised and experienced: the increasing evanescence of past and future as referents for action; the present as the only dimension available for making choices (Heller). Temporal acceleration “burns up” the past and the future.

While social time appears to be running increasingly fast, some biographical times seem to be slowing down: for example the transition to adulthood is now increasingly prolonged and uncertain; it stretches out over time; its exact threshold is increasingly difficult to pinpoint.



The destandardisation of the transition to adulthood: the mechanism of deferred gratification is in crisis. The end of the 'life project' as the driving force behind life courses (Berger and Luckmann). What happens to motherhood as a project in this context?

Men's and women's biographies are now increasingly homogenous. Their relationship with social time is aligned, but there is a difference in their awareness of the multiple nature of the times of life (for example, different relationships with the times of the body; different awareness of the human limits of speeding up)

There is another important gendered biographical difference: different historical starting points, for men and women, in the (modern) construction of biographies:

- For men: preparation for work through study/training; working life; retirement (Kohli)
- For women: study; forming a couple, motherhood; paid work as experience present in but not central to the construction of identity.

In our uncertain context, an increasingly important role is played by short-term plans, in the timeframe of the 'extended present' (Nowotny). Many young men and women focus on this kind of present to exert control over the biographical uncertainty generated by the rapid changes that characterise contemporary society.

- The relationship between the lengthy transition to adulthood and young women's biological clocks: a contradiction that gives rise to a specific form of anguish.
- The biological clock follows a different pace, not the accelerated speed of social clock.

- When women legitimised their sexuality, motherhood became a choice rather than a destiny (Melandri). But, above all in Southern Europe, this free choice now clashes with social conditions that tend to negate it. Uncertainty, especially related to precarious work has become the specific contraception of the current period (De Martino).

### ***3. Delayed motherhood: the case of Italy***

Young women are experiencing a specific, gendered uncertainty . The time for motherhood tends to be postponed. In Italy, for example, the average age at which women have their first child is now 32 (ISTAT 2012).

- There is also an increase in the number of women having children over the age of 40, and a fall in the number of children born to women under 25. These figures are now the same, standing at 8%.
- Italy and Ireland are now the European countries with the highest percentage of older mothers.



Compared to a century ago, on average women are now having their first child 16 years later. These changes are due to the changes in women's identity construction paths.

### ***3. The postponement of motherhood in the light of the sociology of time***

The indications that emerge from analysing women's experience of time (Adam, Bryson, Davies, Saraceno):

- beyond dichotomous approaches (public time vs. private time; time of nature vs. time of culture, times of the body vs. social times)

The multiple times of life and their non-hierarchical structure (beyond the breadwinner vs. caregiver dichotomy )

Priorities change over time, according to different life situations (eg motherhood). Today: the importance for young women to carve out time for themselves, not devoted to others ('me' time).

This distinctive *plural* experience of time, which is rich in potential, including in terms of ethics, is as yet unrecognised socially. What's more, it readily gives rise to existential contradictions that are difficult to resolve - for example when motherhood tends to 'cut off' personal time.

- The inherent ambivalence of young women's biographical time and their experience of motherhood. Postponement as a temporary biographical solution to reconcile times of life that cannot be rendered hierarchical.

In the context of the contemporary postponement of motherhood, we should also note the role played by fatherhood in the new century: the changes in representations of fatherhood are not always matched by actual changes in social practices or a change in men's life course patterns (Oechsle, Müller, Hess).

## *To conclude*

- The acceleration society generates new biographical uncertainties and prevents life projects from taking shape.
- In this context the postponement of motherhood can be seen as a defensive response to the increasingly extended and fragmented transition to adulthood (and the uncertainties that accompany it).

- This is the negative side of the situation. The positive side recalls the connection between this postponement and the ambivalent nature of 'women's time' (Kristeva) – the desire to be present in more than one world and more than one time simultaneously, beyond imposed hierarchies and dichotomies. From this perspective the postponement of motherhood can be seen as a sign of the strength of contemporary female subjectivity.