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The Masters degree as a depository of hopes: a discussion of time and age factors

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Introduction

Due to the inherent complexity of the subject under analysis, we will focus mainly on the socio-demographical profile of young people doing a Masters degree in Portugal with the aim of problematizing it within the framework of youth sociology and time sociology as well as the main thesis addressed by these two disciplines in the context of contemporary ways of life and socio-political trends. The central questions are therefore, the following: How can we conceptualize the modes of living that young people adopt when faced with the need to simultaneously manage work, family and educational demands? To what extent do these young people understand the Masters degree as a means of achieving educational capital in the form of improved skills? What is the relevance of gender and how can gender be understood as a “mediator” of people experiences and expectations as regards post-graduate education? Can we effectively argue that age is a determinant in Masters Education attendance? These questions entail complex conceptualizations, which in turn demand rigorous processes of selection from among the existing theoretical paradigms addressing youth today. After presenting the methodology we concentrate on the data analysis.

1. Method

Data used in this paper is provided from a study carried out in Portugal using a survey and interviews with Masters’ students enrolled in the year 2005/2006. The methodological approach of this study assumes an epistemological concern in understanding the regularities of lived time experiences and the meanings individuals give them. In the first stage, the sets of data used in this paper were obtained through the analysis of statistics from official organisms of data collection. This analysis allowed us to characterize the evolution of the number of registered Masters’ students and the number of Masters’ degrees obtained between 1990 and 2006/2007 in Portugal. After

defining the sample through the method of layered sampling according to the scientific subject, we carried out a survey by sending a questionnaire to all the selected Masters' students who, in 2006/2007, had enrolled on 776 Masters' courses in Portuguese public universities.

In all, we received answers from 200 students on 88 Masters' courses, representing 13% of the existing Masters' courses. For the purposes of the questions addressed in this paper, we analyse only the answers and data corresponding to people between 20 and 33 years old.

3. Socio-demographic data on Masters' students

3.1. Number of masters and people enrolled in Master Degrees in Portuguese universities

As shown in the following table, there has been a massive increase in the number of people searching for a Masters degree in Portuguese universities and the trend will be to increase even more. This rise is also concomitant with the increased number of women entering higher education and their willingness to pursue a Masters degree.

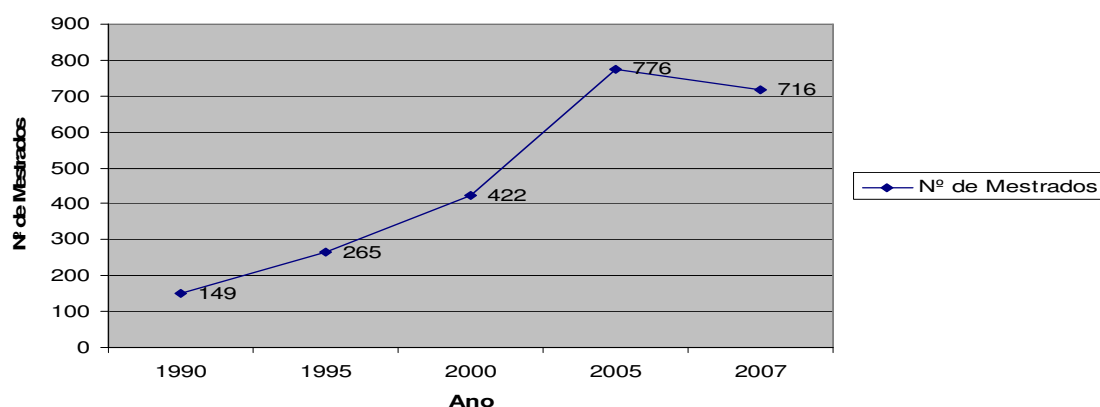
Table 1 – Number of Portuguese people with a Masters degree according to gender and subject area

Years						
Subject area	1995/96		2000/01		2005/06	
	W	M	W	M	W	M
Education	116	73	163	75	754	234
Arts and Humanities	190	112	196	102	382	169
Social Sciences, Commerce and Law	219	241	353	427	634	441
Sciences, Maths and Informatics	156	153	158	150	343	241
Engineering, Industry and Work	76	217	140	193	154	282
Agriculture	34	23	18	12	35	24
Health and Social Promotion	35	8	43	15	150	68
Services	27	24	69	93	185	150
Total	853	851	1140	1067	2639	1609

Source: GPEARI, 2008 (exclusive years)

In the following graph there is information about the evolution of Masters Degrees in Portugal offered by public universities is presented. It is noted that the greatest increase was verifiable between 2000 and 2005, which is in accordance with the pressures for universities to enlarge their educational offer and also guarantee some sources of financing.

Graphic 1 - Evolution of the total number of Masters Degrees



Source: GEAPRI and “Expresso” newspaper, 28 April, 2007.

Table 2 - Distribution of respondents according to sex and age group

Sex	Age Group				Total
	Between 20 and 29 years	Between 30 and 39 years	Between 40 and 49 years	> 49 years	
Masculine	30	23	11	1	65
	46,2%	35,4%	16,9%	1,5%	100%
Feminine	74	40	17	1	132
	56,1%	30,3%	12,9%	0,8%	100%
Total	104	63	28	2	197
	52,8%	32,0%	14,2%	1,0%	100%

Source: Survey of Masters’ students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

Still, as is verifiable, the majority of Masters’ students surveyed in our study are women (66, 5%). This is a visible effect of the democratization processes characterizing Portuguese public universities since the Seventies (20th century), which led to the entrance of people from different social strata and facilitating the access of women to higher education, with clear implications on the problematization of youth, post-graduate research and family-work articulation profiles. The situation is rather different as regards the doctorate level insofar as at this level women tend to be represented in lower numbers, especially in the pure Science areas.

Table 3 - Distribution of respondents by sex in the 20 to 29 years age group

Sex	N	%
Masculine	30	28,8
Feminine	74	71,2
Total	104	100

Source: Survey of Masters’ students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

Younger students are in the majority single (65,4%), however this result is particularly more evident for men than for women. We assume that this trend towards the choice of not having children nor living together with someone reflects a deep sociological profile of modern modes of living and

experiencing biographical temporalities, where it is found that women who invest in school and education tend to delay or suspend their (probable) family and personal projects, precisely defining “periods” in their life temporalities. This action, which we may call a “strategy”, also evidences women’s need to manage their time in such a way that they can effectively increase their level of education and gain autonomy (employability) regarding their entrance to the regular labour market.

Table 4 - Distribution of young respondents by marital status and sex

Marital Status		Sex		Total
		Masculine	Feminine	
Single	N	19	49	68
	%	63,3	66,2	65,4
Married/Civil Union	N	11	25	36
	%	36,7	33,8	34,6
Total	N	30	74	104
	%	100	100	100

Source: Survey of Masters’ students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

Furthermore, the majority of younger people surveyed are not parents (93, 3%). This is in direct accordance with the statistical evidence for the increase in age average regarding the having of children, which constitutes a trend explained either by cultural changes or by economical and social reasons, namely the lack of stable working contracts. However, men when comparing with women in the same situation, tend to have more children. This is not only due to the fact that more men are married but also to the existence of a sexual division of labour which corresponds to a sexual division of social time manifested in the fact that more women have to plan their life choices in advance: they must choose between having to increase their level of education, carrying out a professional activity and having a family life. This also results in the existence of a sexual division of regular labour, with men having more chances of getting a job with stable conditions at an earlier age than women. This is especially important because it helps to understand the strong feminization of Masters Degrees insofar as they also work as subterfuges from the lack of regular employment or experience of precariousness.

Table 5 - Young respondents by sex and presence/absence of children

Sex		Having Children		Total
		Yes	No	
Masculine	N	3	27	30
	%	10	90	100
Feminine	N	4	70	74
	%	5,4	94,6	100
Total	N	7	97	104
	%	28,8	71,2	100

Source: Survey of Masters’ students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

Indeed, younger people tend to be employed either in jobs with contracts with a defined limit or in more precarious working contracts, such as fellowships – (17,5%), or part time (6,8%). An important group is declared to be *unemployed* (14,6%). Again, the type of professional situation indicates the peripheral experience of these people in the global regular labour market.

Table 6 - Work status of young people

Work status	N	%
Self-employed full-time professional	1	1,0
Self-employed part-time professional	3	3,9
Employed full-time professional	52	50,5
Employed part-time professional	7	6,8
Unemployed	15	14,6
Research fellowship holder	18	17,5
Traineeship	5	4,9
Domestic services	2	1,9
Total	103	100

Source: Survey of Masters' students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

It is not easy to classify the respondents according to the social group to which they belong although it is notable that almost all of them belong to the groups of lower-grade professionals; administrators and officials; higher-grade technicians; managers in small industrial establishments and supervisors of non-manual employees. Sex continues to be a discriminating variable insofar as women tend to have more temporary and fragile working contracts than men in the same age cohort. Despite the temporary nature of all employment, sexual division of labour is concomitant with age division of labour. Women tend to be more concentrated around jobs in public organizations (36,4%), mainly in areas related to services and education, and men more in private organizations (45,8 %).

Table 7- Social Class

Individual Indicator of Class	N	%
Businessmen, Managers and Liberal Professionals	8	10,0
Public Servants	64	80,0
Independent workers	7	8,8
Routine non-manual employees, higher grade	1	1,3
Total	80	100

Source: Survey of Masters' students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

4. Masters education: between intellectual gains and practical apprenticeship

As stated, we assume that one of the main features of contemporary youth, as highlighted in several studies, is that this group is under pressure to pursue higher levels of education. On the one hand this is justified on the basis of the construction of the information society and its need for long life learning by way of improving technical skills and professional profiles. On the other hand, this also may be interpreted as a result of a socio-political “interest” in maintaining a greater group of young people in the margins of the formal and regular labour market, thus not classifying them objectively as unemployed. Theories of work sociology tend to emphasize this idea arguing that

young people's choices are somehow the result of strong and overwhelming processes that work to keep them outside the centres of the labour market.

People questioned in our survey declare that they are interested in doing a Masters degree because they expect to obtain from it two further relevant qualities: a) intellectual valorization and b) professional knowledge and training. This is a very pertinent conclusion insofar as the studies referred to above also tend to highlight that young people, due to the difficulties they encounter in entering the formal labour market as well as the experience of an intense and persuasive discourse disposing them to follow higher levels of education, tend effectively to use higher education as a way of occupying time, and simultaneously, to improve their skills and competences. Despite being a usually implicit and unconscious process, insofar as they consider both the precariousness of their professional activities and the act of being enrolled on a Masters degree a «normal» condition of their life cycle position, it is a fact that they actually believe that the Masters' education will furnish them with the relevant contents and methodologies of action in professional terms. This is pertinent data as a Masters degree is not traditionally envisaged as a way to obtain technical training.

Table 8 - Motives for young people doing a Masters degree

Motives	N	%
Personal and Intellectual Valorisation	84	80,8
Professional Valorisation	73	70,2
Improvement of technical training in the area	66	63,5
Improvement of technical knowledge	55	52,9
To move into scientific research	38	36,5
Career Promotion	20	19,2
Occupation of time	11	10,6
To move into a doctorate programme	3	2,9

Source: Survey of Masters' students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

This data also sustains the idea that despite young people understanding and accepting their situation as normal, they effectively wish to change it and so invest strongly in a Masters education as a way of improving their chances of entering the labour market. This self-awareness is especially noticed in an analysis of the interviews (E1, E6, E10, E15), in which the respondents explain that doing a Masters signals the possibility of improving knowledge and having time to control possible job offers. As stated by the following interviewee:

A Masters degree is useful for opening some doors and for occupying the time when we are unemployed (E1 – Woman, single, no children, 23 years old, Laboratory area , unemployed).

Moreover, a Masters degree may also be a way of achieving personal fulfilment, especially noted by women who, sometimes postpone their projects regarding education in order to give priority to their husbands' careers and then return to education in later phases. This idea is expressed

in the following statement:

I thought that, in the future, when I have established my professional life and maybe ...just maybe, with a more solid base, I thought the Masters could give me some extra value even in my teaching career, in terms of promotion ... something I could add to the baggage of what I already have (E10 – Woman, married, without children, 27 years old, non-Laboratory, working full-time).

If gender does appear as a discriminating variable in this representation of the Masters degree as a way of improving skills to enter the labour market, it does take on more importance when it comes to the scientific area studied at the undergraduate level because people trained in the area of education, are far more worried about the difficulties of securing and then keeping a job than people from engineering, for example.

5. Biographical paths and the Masters degree

It has been our focus until now to search for the motives that may explain people's interests in doing a Masters degree. It is possible to conclude, so far, that these interests are strongly shaped by the social-economical constraints that characterize modern societies and their systems of functioning. Data from other European cultural contexts state that despite the deeply held feeling that life course is increasingly de-standardized.

Indeed, studies using longitudinal methodologies and addressing youth as a social concept and construct have emphasized the pressing need people feel to define and experience life paths which are gradually de-standardized and subjected to several arrangements and prioritizations which vary considerably according to their perception of their professional situation – real and projected. There has been a very pertinent problematization developed in sociology of time studies addressing the effects of institutional de-responsibilization upon people's individual times (Araújo, 2005); this theoretical framework defends that beyond understanding the "post-modern" individual as responsible and autonomous it is necessary to consider the power of institutional times and their effective interference upon people's lives, even if individuals do not have or do not acquire actual consciousness of this influence. Young people doing Masters Degrees, given their socio-demographical profiles, tend to signal that the Masters was not important to them as regards other projects they would like to accomplish, except where it made them less available for accepting or searching for another professional activity. Nevertheless, as doing a Masters Degree demands investing time in education it also involves making choices regarding other possible and desirable events. The literature has stressed that biographical times are always shaped by gender. Women

choose occupations according to the type of temporal structures behind them, mostly as regards the adjustment required between the occupation and their possible biographical choices. This managerial attitude towards biographical time is thus more marked in the case of women, who tend to stress their need to postpone any project for having children, to suspend leisure activities and spend more time with relatives, while young men tend to stress the interference of the Masters upon their willingness to go to another country or search for another professional activity. It is especially relevant that it is mainly women who refer to having children and other familial projects as factors in their decision- making.

Table 9 - Dropout rates by sex

Reasons for Dropping out		Sex		Total
		Masculine	Feminine	
Having other professional activity	N	9	27	36
	%	69,2	62,8	64,3
Being with family	N	1	5	6
	%	7,7	11,4	10,5
Leisure activities	N	2	9	11
	%	15,4	20,5	19,3
Moving house	N	2	7	9
	%	15,4	16,3	16,1
Marry/Live with another person	N	5	10	15
	%	38,5	23,3	26,8
Having children	N	-	7	7
	%	-	16,3	12,5
Moving country	N	5	3	8
	%	38,5	7,0	14,3
Personal/Family projects	N	1	4	5
	%	7,7	9,1	8,8

Source: Survey of Masters' students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

The information collected by the way of interview also stresses these tendencies. The interviews evidence, however, a special focus on the way doing the Masters degree caused a shortage of time for leisure and other activities (E2, E3, E7, E11, E12, E14, E15, and E16).

For some of the individuals who were unemployed or were undertaking part-time jobs, this concentration on doing a Masters and the need to complete it within the given deadlines justified their inertia regarding the possible search for a better job during the time they were undertaking

the Masters degree. In the following excerpt the interviewee is able to express that the Masters time period made it impossible for them to have leisure time or search for a more permanent job. As argued by the interviewee, *“during this period I abdicated, perhaps, having a full time job, but I have also abdicated searching for one* (woman, single, without children, 23 years old, Laboratory, unemployed).

This finding, seen as a possible option from the point of view of the people involved, makes the increasingly strong discourse, which teaches young people to direct their interests either at school or leisure activities in today’s societies, powerfully clear.

6. Doing a Masters degree and the future

The future as a central dimension of social time (Araújo, 2005) is addressed in the literature of sociology of work, (Mercure, 1995,1996; Dubar, 2000; Lallement, 2003), and lifestyles and stratification (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006). The central idea is that the degree of reaction and action of people in their daily life varies according to the representations they have about the future, its extension and the degree of power they think they have to change and manage it. Specifically, we follow the hypothesis that young people believe they do not have control over their present and so even if they plan and conceptualize a future, they lack faith in it, they lack desirable believe and energy to assume it in the form of projects. In fact, as was stated in the previous point, young people doing a Masters degree are to some degree experiencing a waiting phase: they are in a limbo insofar as they are not full-time students but neither are they, nor do they feel, like full-time workers. Although they experience these two sources of identification simultaneously, varying from a hedonist present based to a present fatalist one (Alessio, Guarino, Pascalis, Zimbardo, 2003) the main feature of this experience is the uncertainty that characterizes both personal and family plans as well as professional ones. Therefore, as regards professional expectations for the future, young people tend to stress their willingness to have another job, which is understandable considering they are working in precarious activities. Nevertheless, there is a high percentage of people talking about the possibility of emigration (44%), which testifies to some degree, to the increased level of self-awareness on the part of those people already in the labour market but with precarious contracts (mostly in the areas of social science) concerning the lack of chances for them in Portugal at present. This should not be considered apart from another important factor, which is the fact of these people showing a low level of self-initiative as regards employment. This characteristic is also evident in the data, which shows that for those already in the formal labour market; the expectation is to remain in the same job.

Table 10 - Future Projects by sex

Projects		Sex		Total
		Masculine	Feminine	
Remain in the same place of work	N	17	38	55
	%	70,8	65,5	67,1
Change job	N	10	35	45
	%	52,6	60,3	58,4
Be promoted	N	12	12	24
	%	63,2	25,0	35,8
Emigrate	N	13	20	33
	%	59,1	37,3	44
Find employment*	N	5	10	15
	%	83,3	90,9	88,2
Without expectations	N	3	2	5
	%	30,0	14,3	20,8

Source: Survey of Masters' students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

These findings show that despite the centrality of the present in young people's lives, they are very focused on the consequences for life in the near future, being also strongly convinced that their futures are highly dependent on their own actions and efforts.

7. The centrality of work

As already stated, modern self-concepts are radically ambiguous in the sense that they seem to vary according to a multitude of variables that are continuously changing. Portuguese society is at present going through a process of modernization but, as explicit in a more recent European social survey, it still places a strong importance on religion, family and work. As regards work, Portuguese society is considered to highly value dedication to a professional activity, understanding it as the favoured means for self-fulfilment. Therefore, leisure time as well as participation in social movements and other organizations with a social purpose is regarded as less important. From a macro social perspective it becomes clear that people are worried about their professional futures insofar as work is not only a source of self-fulfilment but also the most important source of individual and family survival. On this point we cannot argue that this is a special feature of young people, men or women. In fact, it refers strongly to Portuguese socio-cultural models of action that we find already well documented. As regards sex, it is noticeable that women, in particular, tend to mention work as a way of obtaining and gaining security.

Table 11 - Conception of work

Conception of work	N	%
Means of personal fulfilment	92	89,3
Means of survival	66	64,1
Means to security	39	37,9
A duty to others	32	31,1
Means to rise up in life	19	18,4
Source of social prestige	15	14,6
A way of making others getting richer	5	4,9
Means of obtaining money	6	5,8

Source: Survey of Masters' students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities N= 103

8. Work, Masters and family

The centrality of work raises important questions regarding the forms of articulation with other spheres of the social (Guerreiro and Abrantes, 2004). However, this group of people, despite addressing and anticipating the eventual interferences between the two domains, does not yet evidence great difficulties in managing them. Comparing the total of people surveyed, the youngest are those who are more satisfied with this articulation, which makes sense considering that they tend to be single and without children, two important conditions for allowing them to have more time and opportunities to put together different aspirations. Nevertheless, men tend to present higher levels of satisfaction in comparison to women of the same age (see Table 12). As already stated, this information is directly connected to the results and reflections provided by other bibliography which has been stressing that even in the same positions of life cycle and even without considering the effects of having children upon the construction of gender, women tend to take on more tasks related to domestic work and the family, which demands more time availability of them. The interviews have clearly shown that women, especially when they are studying, are more easily interrupted and called upon to participate in the resolution of private affairs, and that they tend to have less leisure and free time.

Table 12 - Evaluation of the degree of balance between private life and work by sex

Sex		Degree of balance			Total
		Unsatisfactory	Satisfactory	No opinion	
Masculine	N	2	26	2	30
	%	6,7	86,7	6,7	100
Feminine	N	11	60	3	74
	%	14,9	81,1	4,1	100
Total	N	13	86	5	104
	%	12,5	82,7	4,8	100

Source: Survey of Masters' students enrolled in 2005/2006 in Public Universities

Despite the theoretical developments concerning the diminishing weight of class as a determinant variable of time organization, we still maintain that the original hypothesis is consistent. In fact, higher status in social hierarchy appears to be connected with increased time compressions and difficulties in managing time, which appears to be linked to the level of demands on time made by employers. In fact, a special feature of the data we obtained has to do with the recurrent critiques from young people about the way time is structured both by universities and organizations of work insofar as they, especially those in employment, claim not to have time or opportunity to manage their schedules in order to participate actively in the exercises set out in the Masters' programs. This question addresses, in particular, the problem of social responsibility of organizations.

Concluding remarks

We conclude firmly that the post-modern thesis is inadequate for studying young people's times. Furthermore, we find that some schools of traditional time sociology have been inaccurate regarding the interpretation of youth as an experience of transition for two additional reasons: first, more social groups and cohorts of age have to be considered in transition from the angle of subjective time experience as well as from the angle of macro-political trends mostly as regards employment, work and professional lives; second, there is no longer any such a thing as linear and sequence phases between education, work and labour. Not only has empirical analysis been revealing that people are living these phases as simultaneous but also that they have to learn to deal with these simultaneous times (Araújo, 2005). The role of institutions is, however, fundamental in improving ways of instituting a consolidating politics of time which could address the implications of these changes upon individual lives as well as upon collective actions (Araújo, 2008).

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