Europe’s future depends on its youth [...] and the current crisis compounds the need to nurture young human capital.

(European Commission 2009, 3)

Since its discovery – or «invention» – in the 18th century, youth has been repeatedly referred to as the ‘future of society’. A more recent protagonist in this appraisal of youth is the European Union, especially the European Commission. In the Commission’s White Paper «New Impetus for European Youth» (European Commission 2001) this is reflected by the slogan «youth as a resource». However, the meaning and implication of youth as a resource is rather ambiguous. The notion of resource is an economic term referring to something to be mobilised and does not necessarily conceptualise young people as active subjects. While celebrated in the White Paper as a progressive turn in youth policy – compared to approaches of «youth as a problem» – and accompanied by the call for more participation of young people, it reflects a discourse which questions the participation of young people in particular and their agency in general. The current discourse on young people in research and politics consequently is characterised by two extreme positions: the one position sees young people as passive and/or as victims, inhibited from action through structural constraints; the other position sees young people as taking conscious rational choices apparently prioritising individual short-term advantages over long-term collective values. Both sides share the concern young people may not reproduce given societal norms, values and order, especially with regard to transitions from school to work, to family building and participation as active citizens. While adult concerns regarding inter-generational continuity can be seen as a general aspect of the generational position of youth (Mannheim 1928), the current youth discourse reflects the particular trend towards societies describing themselves as knowledge societies (Kuhn 2007). Young people are referred to primarily in terms of human capital; they are said to invest too little in education, not to be ready to adapt their aspirations to labour market possibilities, to postpone family building – and not to participate as citizens. On the one hand, a scientific rational choice perspective – con-
An activation welfare state in explaining this consciously or not – supports protagonists of an activating welfare state in explaining this by a shift in norms and values and making young people self-responsible for their own human capital (cfr. Breen - Goldthorpe 1997; van Berkel - Hornemann Møller 2002; López Blasco et al. 2003; Harsløf 2005; Pohl - Walther 2007). On the other hand, a more structuralist approach connects to ‘old’ social democratic positions according to which social change towards more uncertainty and precariousness undermines young people’s personal autonomy and reduces agency (cfr. Furlong - Cartmel 1997; Ball et al. 2000). Both explanations however, share the diagnosis of young people as not acting enough, not in the ‘right’ way – or not at all.

This article is intended to reflect on the meaning and implications of young people’s agency and challenge the mainstream discourse by a biographical perspective on the one hand and a comparative European perspective on the other. A first section discusses the meaning of agency in its relation to social structure, especially under conditions of a de-standardisation of transitions to adulthood and resulting biographical dilemmas. The second section introduces the perspective of motivation, primarily a psychological concept of human agency which however does not necessarily exclude taking account of unequally structured social contexts in which individual agency generates and evolves. A third section reports some findings of qualitative research with regard to fundamental principles of agency which have been reconstructed through young people’s biographical narratives on their subjective decision-making processes. The fourth section relates individual agency to different social contexts. Focus lies on the institutional and cultural structures in which young people’s biographies are embedded and which represent different normalities of being young and growing up.

A comparative model of different ‘transition regimes’ is presented and discussed with regard to the scope of agency they provide. Conclusions will focus on different ways of looking at young people in order to deconstruct assumptions of normality which tend to guide youth policy, practice and research.

The theoretical perspective as well as the qualitative research findings presented in this article result from three studies carried out within the framework of the EGRIS network (European Group for Integrated Social Research; cfr. EGRIS 2001; du Bois-Reymond - Chisholm 2006) which have been funded under the 5th and 6th EU framework programmes for research:

– **Youth Policy and Participation (YOYO)** (2001–2004) was concerned with young people’s motivational careers in relation to their transitions to work and the potential of participatory approaches for enhancing motivation. In country reports, the national transition systems were described. In individual and focus group interviews young people were asked to elaborate on their transition experiences (N=365). In 28 case studies, projects addressing youth transitions were analysed by means of document analysis, expert interviews (N=140) and a second round of interviews with most of the young people (N=290) (Walther et al. 2006).

– **Families and Transitions in Europe (FATE)** (2001-2004) investigated the role of families in youth transitions in terms of support and dependency. The study consisted
of country reports and an institutional survey with young people (N=1,800) at the end of their education or training (quota sample). Then in each of the nine regions, approximately 40 qualitative interviews (N = 360) were carried out with young people and with 30 of their parents (N = 270; Biggart - Kovacheva 2006).

Youth – actor of social change (UP2YOUTH) (2006-2009) was a thematic network carrying out comparative literature reviews and expert hearings with regard to transitions to parenthood, transitions to work of young people with a migration or ethnic minority background, and youth participation. The overall objective was to better understand the relation between young people’s agency and social change (Walther et al. 2009).

Rather than reporting the research findings as such, this article uses them to explore the complexity of young men and women’s decision-making and coping in transitions to work and the varying scopes of action within different institutional contexts.

II- «WHAT IS AGENCY»

UNDER CONDITIONS OF THE DESTANDARDISATION OF THE LIFE COURSE?

What does it mean speaking of young people’s agency? What does it mean if contemporary young people are said having ‘less’ agency than in former times as a result of or resulting in social change; or if some young people are held to have less agency than others due to unequal resources and opportunities? Can we refer to agency in terms of ‘less’ or ‘more’?

In linguistic terms, agency rather refers to the general human capacity to act intentionally, of taking decisions in general whether to act or not to act, than concrete action. While a general capacity to act does not imply that every person can in all situations choose freely how to act, especially not in ways which are equally socially recognised, clarification seems necessary with regard to the meaning of ‘choice’: the idea of young people’s ability to act goes along with the fundamental option of making a difference to the surrounding world. They decide on a very basic level if engaging in taking such option or refraining from intervention. However, if and how this intervention is really having some effect making a difference, only partly can be controlled by the individual. This assumption of a «space between structure and agency» (Settersten - Gannon 2005) in which individuals do invest energy and activity (or not) does not imply ignoring structural constraints. In this regard, one differentiation of Anthony Giddens seems to be helpful:

... circumstances of social constraint in which individuals ‘have no choice’ are not to be equated with the dissolution of action as such. To ‘have no choice’ does not mean that action has been replaced by reaction ... This might appear so obvious as not to need saying. But some very prominent schools of social theory, associated mainly with objectivism and with ‘structural soci-

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1 Title of Emirbayer and Mische (1998).
2 In Italian, agency may rather be ‘l’agire’ than ‘l’azione’.
... have supposed that constraints operate like forces in nature, as if to ‘have no choice’ were equivalent to being driven irresistibly and uncomprehendingly by mechanical pressures» (Giddens, 1984, 15).

This confusion might also appear in people’s self concepts and personal horizons which are structured and deeply rooted in biographical and social context:

What people believe is possible for them (their personal horizons developed within cultural and structural influences) [does] determine their behaviours and what they perceive to be ‘choices’ [...] Whether a person under-estimates or over-estimates their extent of control is very consequential on their experiences and socialisation (Evans 2002, 250-251).

Empirical evidence on the impacts of social inequality on young people’s lives shows that a majority of ‘disadvantaged youth’ act in a less successful, more risky or deviant way than the average and consequently achieve lower social positions. Yet this does not apply to all youth from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The existence of a successful minority implies that social structure does not determine but rather interacts with subjective interpretation and meaning-making as well as inter-subjective negotiation processes (Pohl et al. 2009, p. 103).

Agency therefore can be conceptualised in terms of structured intentionality or «constrained choice» (Folbre 1994): it includes a considerable part of structural forces, without neglecting the subjectivity of its actors (young women and men themselves). Giddens’ notion of the duality of structure relies on the assumption of symbolic interactionism that individuals are actively involved in the construction of social situations and in the production of meaning – subjectively as well as collectively (cfr. Mead 1959; Garfinkel 1967). Thereby agency always has a transformative capacity that involves power while at the same time there are institutions and dominant discourses which decide upon the power given to such agency.

In their article aimed at opening up the «'black box' of human agency», Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 966) explain the dialectic relation between structure and agency by a temporal model linking biographical past, present and future. In this sense, agency is the... temporally constructed engagement by which actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations» (Emirbayer - Mische 1998, 970).

Agency is rooted in past experiences – socialisation – but at the same time implies imagination of oneself in the future and thereby a creative act. Past and future interact in how individuals interpret situations and make decisions in the present. Agency can be defined as coping with demands which derive from the complex simultaneity of de-standardized and re-standardized transitions into adulthood in terms of struggling for and creating themselves some space for having a choice or for doing something according to own ideas.
But what does this mean for young people, especially young people who are said to be affected by increasing uncertainty and a vanishing of future (Leccardi 2005)? Economic flexibilisation, the decoupling of education from employment and the increase of individual qualifications, especially among young women, since the 1970s have contributed to a de-standardisation of life courses (cfr. Beck 1992; Marshall et al. 2001). Transitions are prolonged due to longer education and training programmes, but also due to longer job searches and periods of unemployment. They have become reversible since steps towards independence may have to be taken back: in cases of unemployment, partnership break-up or because another option appears to be more attractive. Moreover, transitions have become fragmented inasmuch as transitions related to housing, family, partnership, citizenship or lifestyle are no longer a direct consequence of the transition from school to work as suggested by the Fordist assumption of linear status passages. They follow individual rhythms and logics whereby transitions can be characterised using the metaphor of the ‘yo-yo’ (see graph 1; EGRIS 2001). This is also reflected by more and more young people finding it difficult to associate themselves exclusively with youth or adulthood but seeing themselves somewhere in between, as this young German woman interviewed in the FATE project:

I am not adult because of my financial dependency which hinders me from living my own life. But of course, as regards to my development I am adult! (R., 31, female, Germany).

Graph 1 – The de-standardisation of youth transitions

De-standardisation also refers to a diversification of transitions. Although for many young people work and family continue to represent key elements of their life plans, their trajectories change underway, as declining birth rates suggest. The YOYO-
study identified a range of different transition patterns (see also Evans 2002) among the young people who were interviewed (Walther et al. 2006):

- **Smooth transitions** without major interruptions in line with the institutional logic can be found on all educational levels but less frequently, especially among the unskilled.
- **Upward mobility** corresponds to institutional promises of equal opportunities but requires additional motivation to accept longer routes and to leave familiar social contexts behind.
- **Institutionally repaired transitions** characterise transitions with interruptions (e.g. early school leaving or unemployment) which have been overcome by remedial intervention;
- **Alternative transitions** depart from the institutional logic in favour of subjective identification with individually created trajectories such as in self-employment or the arts.
- **Stagnant transitions** describe cases in which progress is blocked by interruptions and in-and-out movements reinforcing both risks of social exclusion and disengagement.
- **Downward or damaged transitions** are characterised by the accumulation of risks in different areas of life thereby leading to and increasing marginalisation.

Since theoretical sampling was applied in the YOYO-study, there is no information about the distribution according to socio-economic status and national context. Nonetheless, the findings may serve as an exploratory device for potential representative and longitudinal research of young people’s trajectories into adulthood. Moreover, the typology is relative inasmuch as it reflects the diversification of transitions in relation to national assumptions of normality and standard trajectories between school, training, and employment. What it clearly does reveal is the increase of non-linear transition patterns. The more distant these are from the respective standard life course, the more risks they display which are not covered by education or welfare. At the same time, the diversity of transition patterns implies that they do not depend on structural forces alone but are also mediated by individual agency and decision-making. In more and more situations individuals are confronted with the need to take decisions – regardless of unequal possibilities – and they are increasingly alone in taking these decisions because their trajectories differ from those of their parents as well as their peers. What applies for one may not apply to the other, at least with regard to individual moments of decision-making. The individualisation and ‘biographisation’ of the life course implies that individuals have to constantly assess the fit between their subjective needs and interests and the external demands and possibilities, by asking: what does a certain option mean for me? (cfr. Alheit - Dausien 2002; Henderson et al. 2006). Thus, de-standardised transitions confront young men and women with a ‘planning paradox’ (Stauber - Walther 2006): the lack of reliable prescribed pathways requires them to make their own life plans, the viability and end result of which, however, are highly uncertain (see Blossfeld et al. 2005). One key factor of successful transition may be the biographical competence or ‘biographicity’ to reflect upon and take decisions which are both meaningful and viable (Alheit - Dausien 2002). Another factor is the subjec-
tive motivation of young people to make a decision between more than one option or take any decision at all. Without understanding how young people perceive their situation and arrive at certain decisions, institutional gate-keepers tend to disregard their coping strategies and to categorise them as solely deviant or harmful.

III - MOTIVATIONAL CAREERS IN BIOGRAPHICAL TRANSITIONS

Understanding individualised decision-making requires analysing the motivation for taking a certain decision – or not. And the reversibility, fragmentation and uncertainty of yo-yo-transitions suggest that more effort, more reflexivity and more motivation is needed in order to achieve a biographical situation which is sustainable and satisfying.

Different approaches in motivation psychology may be summarised by highlighting the relevance of two main factors in understanding and explaining individual motivation. The first factor is the subjective incentive to strive toward a certain goal which results from a fundamental need or subjective interest (e.g. Vygotskij 1962; Maslow 1970; Heckhausen 1991; Krapp 2002). Within the field of motivation psychology there is a general consensus in distinguishing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation according to internal or external incentives. Intrinsic motivation refers to an activity that is done for its own sake. It provides meaning and authenticity for the actor and is self-determined (Deci - Ryan 1985). Extrinsic motivation relates to indirect effects of activities; in particular when imposed by somebody else. When adapted to transition decisions: do I want to work as a carpenter because I enjoy woodworking? (intrinsic motivation) or because there are no other jobs available, I need the money and otherwise I lose my entitlement to benefits? (extrinsic motivation). Obviously, extrinsic motivation is less sustainable because it decreases as soon as the indirect effects are achieved or external pressure decreases (cfr. Bandura 1977).

The second important factor in understanding motivation is the subjective belief of one’s own ability to reach a goal. Does a person locate the control over their experiences inside or outside him or herself? Does he or she have a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura 1997)?

Motivation is not static but dynamic and process-oriented. It develops in terms of motivational careers, a concept adopted in analogy to the one of ‘learning careers’ which

constrain and … enable future experiences [composed of] … events, activities and meanings, and the making and remaking of meanings … and of relationships and the constant making and remaking of relationships (Bloomer - Hodkinson 2000, 589).

Experiences can either reinforce initial directions towards motivation or demotivation or they can represent critical moments of motivational change, in which an individual either discovers (or loses) interest for a certain activity, or experiences an increase (or decrease) in relevant resources or competence. Motivation is not just a
personal disposition, but rather evolves from experiences within social contexts. The fact that access to subjectively meaningful goals as well as to resources, skills and experiences of control are interrelated with social structure justifies the reference to a social inequality of motivation (Walther 2009).

With regard to the transition patterns, one may argue that alternative transitions are specifically characterised by a high level of intrinsic motivation. This can also be involved in repaired transitions since they depend on actively taking second chance opportunities, unless being enforced by extrinsic activation measures. Even stagnant transition patterns may hide considerable individual efforts, which are constantly frustrated by structural constraints, e.g. a lack of jobs. Smooth transitions require less motivation if the relationship between career aspirations and qualifications is balanced, or enormous motivation to compensate for a lack of resources. Institutional actors however tend to take high motivation for granted, which thereby often goes unnoticed in cases of success (Walther et al. 2006).

Compared to such complex interactions involved by motivational processes institutional actors like employment service officers or representatives of education and training programmes tend to interpret the fact that navigating through de-standardised transitions requires more intrinsic motivation in terms of an economic and profit-oriented interpretation of individual decision-making. On the one hand, young people are often addressed as thinking too much in economic terms if they refuse jobs or a place in a training program which offer little monetary reward. This is in line with theoretical concepts of the so-called ‘underclass’ (Murray 1984). On the other hand, they are expected to think more economically in the sense of later returns when it comes to investing in education. Similar to the analysis of educational decisions in terms of ‘rational choice’ (Breen - Goldthorpe 1997) such assumptions prove to be one-dimensional and static rather than open for the complexities and dynamics of modern biographies. The underlying methodological individualism neglects the processual interaction between structure and agency in the emergence of needs, interests and preferences while at the same time failing to explain what is perceived as subjectively relevant in a specific ‘decision-making’ moment (cfr. Giddens 1984). As Emirbayer and Mische put it:

… many rational choice theorists have made great strides in accounting for the contingencies and uncertainties involved in choice making ... However, we maintain that even these more sophisticated versions of rational actor models are still grounded in presuppositions that prevent them from adequately theorizing the interpretive intersubjective construction of choices from the temporal vantage points of contextually embedded actors (Emirbayer - Mische 1998, 966).

In fact, young men and women in transition often find it impossible to quantify their needs and interests so as to bring them into a clear hierarchy of preferences. Feeling forced to prioritise among demands from different life spheres which are at times contradictory, young people are confronted with biographical dilemmas. These biographical dilemmas may result from contradictory external demands, e.g., whether to increase qualifications or enter the labour market, or to choose from options which neither meet subjective interests nor guarantee labour market integration. In particular, when barri-
ers resulting from inequality and discrimination are added to past experiences of failure, biographical dilemmas may result in a generalised de-motivation and lead to a feeling of not having any choice at all (cfr. Pais 2003; Leccardi 2005; Walther et al. 2006).

If one looks into quantitative or qualitative studies on the values young people attach to work, which may be regarded as their initial motive in transition, two key findings seem to represent a rather general trend across different European contexts. First, most of their life plans are still oriented towards the standard biography. Second, in contrast to public stereotypes and assumptions of rational choice, non-material aspects such as social contacts and self-realisation are the highest values. Where an instrumental meaning of work prevails, it relates to realising a standard biography rather than to exaggerated income aspirations (cfr. Henderson et al. 2006; Walther et al. 2006; Eurobarometer 2007):

It should be a job which I look forward to when I get up in the morning ... Of course, money is important. You cannot live without it, sure. But I prefer a company where the atmosphere is ok and that work is fun (O., male, 23, Germany).

However, such general orientations have to prove their validity in – dilemmatic – biographical situations in which they compete with contradictory demands from other life spheres.

A concept which appears more appropriate for understanding decision-making in such biographical dilemmas is the concept of ‘coping’. Originally developed with regard to individuals’ attempts to maintain or regain active control in critical life events (Lazarus - Folkman 1984), ‘coping’ has been extended to everyday life management and self-identity in terms of a «sense of coherence» under conditions of uncertainty and risk involving both subjective meaning and objective abilities to act (Antonovsky 1987; cfr. Keupp et al. 1999). Böhnisch (2001) conceptualises biographical coping as the interaction between subjective motivation and structurally accessible resources and opportunities. It is argued that young people’s coping strategies provide access to understanding their motivation and decision-making processes in de-standardised transitions.

IV - COPING WITH BIOGRAPHICAL DILEMMAS

In the following, a set of principles of agency are presented which have been reconstructed from the FATE and the YOYO interviews. They do not represent different types of coping strategies which exclude each other, but principles which do coexist in the coping strategies of many young people confronted with de-standardised transitions. In other words, they stand for conditions which individual coping strategies have to meet in order to provide a subjective sense of coherence.

3 All following quotes from the YOYO project (Walther et al. 2006).
1) A first principle in the coping strategies of young men and women is their belief in their right to choose. First, choice is part of the cultural foundations of individualised late modern societies, whether one sees them as democracies or as consumer societies. Second, individuals are continually asked to choose and to decide for themselves. Since collective patterns of life planning are no longer available, identification with own biographical decisions becomes even more important. Third, individuals know that they will ultimately be made responsible for these decisions (cfr. Bauman 1995; Evans 2002). In ‘choice biographies’ (du Bois-Reymond 1998) choice applies also to work. In this respect, the level of income is not the most important criterion; only if there is a need to compensate for second choice careers in which non-material aspects such as social qualities or ‘fun’ are absent. ‘Fun’ is often misinterpreted as a superficial and hedonistic orientation of young people. A closer look, however, reveals that it is young people’s cultural expression of self-realisation and authenticity, values which are widely held as self-evident qualities of ‘good work’:

I would like to do something that is fun. That is important. That’s what work means for me (S., female, 24, Germany).

The mere fact of having a choice proves itself to be as important as specific qualities of work. Decisions which appear as irrational and as contributing to marginalisation, like dropping out of school or withdrawing from institutional support (the so-called ‘status zero’ or ‘inactive’ youth), may represent active choices made by those who feel they have no real choice, but still need to maintain a self-concept as authors of their life histories (cfr. Williamson, 1997):

It wasn’t my choice, you know? … In fact, I didn’t have any choice … and at a certain point you do not see any sense in continuing applying for training or jobs (I., male, 19, Germany).

2) Another requirement of coping strategies is that they allow one to keep options open. This results from the fact that available resources and life course trajectories often neither correspond to young people’s original interests nor do they guarantee their viability in the future. Yet, for most young men and women they are the only options available. As a result, they do not engage wholeheartedly in formal pathways in order to remain flexible in case other opportunities arise which correspond more to their own interests – or if the institutional career promises do not materialise. Keeping options open is a response to both the individualisation and flexibilisation of transitions. It corresponds to the fact that postmodern identity work, as Zygmunt Bauman (1995) states in contrast to modern concepts, means to keep the identity fluid and open for change rather than aiming for stability (cfr. du Bois-Reymond 1998). This, however, makes it more difficult to motivate oneself to take advantage of the available resources, such as education or training:

I still feel torn, I don’t know yet what I really do want for the next years … For the next months I am doing theatre; perhaps something will come up … but I haven’t taken any concrete decisions for myself (S., female, 22, Germany).
Another aspect related to the fragmentation of life course transitions and the fact that not all transitions result directly from labour market entry is that work-related coping strategies need to be reconciled with other demands. Transitions in different life spheres are decoupled from each other and pose different demands, which have to be coped with individually. Reconciliation tends to be seen as a demand related to family and work, particularly in female life courses:

I am responsible for my brother. His mother died and I slipped into this role. That makes me feel more adult ... Once he completes his apprenticeship I will do my own things ... You need to be an egoist (N., female, 26, Germany).

In a more general perspective, however, reconciliation is not only a demand in female life courses. In a concrete situation, it is no longer easy to decide whether a qualification, quick money, family obligations, partnership or standards of peers are more important. Such decisions are typical dilemmas arising from de-standardised transitions, decisions which from an institutional or economic perspective do not necessarily appear as rational (cfr. Henderson et al., 2006).

The demand of reconciliation extends to the relationship between career and youth cultural image or lifestyle. Identification with a certain life plan or an occupational choice requires to imagine oneself as man or women in future – and to appreciate the picture emerging from this imagination (cfr. Goffman, 1959). This is less and less the case for the standard biographical blueprints while they also contradict with the images developed in peer cultures and displayed in the media. Moreover, under conditions of uncertainty the perpetually gendered identity questions – who am I? who do I want to be? – need to be constantly posed anew. Coping strategies, therefore, must allow for self-presentation or the ‘staging’ of one’s own self so that individuals can experiment with developing their own life style and receiving feedback from others during processes of identity work (cfr. Stauber 2004):

We were sitting with the friends and I said that I had found an apprenticeship. The others: As what? Me: Road works. The others: Oh, shit. Me: Guys, that’s what I thought in the beginning. But it is not that bad. You do not only stand there with the shovel … You also have to use your brains (M., male, 19, Germany).

It is obvious that young men and women with higher qualifications, more affluent family backgrounds and stronger social networks, which are both dense and widespread have less difficulties with constructing their biographies according to these principles. They follow smooth or upward transition patterns; or they feel self-confident enough to opt for alternative transitions, knowing that in the case of failure they still have the chance to reorient towards more conventional careers. At the same time, even with sufficient resources there are no reliable or predictable ways to put these principles into practice and to reconcile them with the demands of the formal transition system. Another aspect of the contextual framing of young people’s agency are different institutional contexts and the different cultural normalities of growing up. In the
next section, the biographical perspective will be complemented by a comparative one aimed at analysing varying scopes of biographical agency for young people in different national transition systems.

V - COMPARING SCOPES FOR BIOGRAPHICAL AGENCY IN DIFFERENT TRANSITION REGIMES ACROSS EUROPE

One might argue that coping with de-standardised transitions is easier within institutional transition structures that provide alternative options to choose from and identify with, that are flexible enough for individual biographical patchworks, and that provide all young people with the material and immaterial resources they need. It is suggested that international comparison can provide insights into whether different ways of shaping youth transitions – in terms of structuring education, training and welfare support – allow for different scopes of biographical agency. Such a comparison may start from Esping-Andersen’s seminal ‘three worlds of welfare capitalism’ (Esping-Andersen 1990). While comparative welfare research focuses on differences in compensating for a loss of income from paid work, the notion of ‘regimes’ in a more general perspective refers to different forms of institutionalising the role of state, market and family in regulating the relationship between society and the individual. Regimes result from historical processes and mechanisms of path dependency and show considerable stability over time. Based on the relationship between individual entitlements and collective demands, welfare regimes stand for ‘climates of normality’ which also influence biographical orientations and which can therefore also be interpreted as ‘life course regimes’ (Lessenich 1995). The regime model implies a generalisation in terms of ideal types, while differences between countries of the same regime type are just as neglected as the fact that national transition systems contain traits of all regime types – just to different extents. Rather than describing specific national systems, groups of countries are clustered according to overall rationales in regulating life courses. In the following, reference will be made to the modification of Esping-Andersen’s model by Gallie and Paugam (2000), who distinguish four welfare regimes according to their regulation of access to social security: the universalistic regime in the Nordic countries, the liberal regime representing the Anglo-Saxon countries, the employment-centred regime of Continental Europe and the sub-protective regime type of the Mediterranean countries (see also Andreotti et al. 2001).

Obviously, the interpretative value of such a model is primarily heuristic. It may help in the selection of countries to be compared and it may simplify the interpretations of differences. However, ongoing comparative analysis is needed in order for it to adapt to changing realities like those resulting from de-standardisation or those following the global trend towards activation policies. Thus far, the typology is limited to Western Europe. Central and Eastern European countries can neither be included into existing regime types since their socialist heritage prevails in specific norms (e.g. regarding female employment) nor do they form a single ‘post-socialist’ regime, as the
dynamics of transformation lead to increasingly heterogeneous policies (Walther-Pohl, 2005).

In order to apply a typology of welfare regimes to the comparison of youth transition contexts it needs to be extended. While social security remains important, structures of education and training also need to be considered, especially with regard to dimensions of stratification and standardization (Allmendinger 1989). Likewise, it is necessary that the relation of education and training with concepts of work and structures of labour market entry (Müller-Gangl 2003) as well as to mechanisms of doing gender be considered (Sainsbury 1999). Such structures are reflected by the particular design of programmes for unemployed youth. Underneath such policies, dominant interpretations of ‘disadvantaged youth’ emerge according to the ascription of transition problems to either individual deficits or to structures of labour market segmentation. Such cultural patterns also influence individual biographical processes. In fact, different transition structures are reflected in young people’s narratives about their transition experiences. In the following section, the main traits of four transition regimes are briefly outlined (see table 1; cfr. McNeill-Loncle 2003; Walther-Pohl 2005; Walther 2006; Walther et al. 2006):

The universalistic transition regime in Nordic countries such as Denmark is based on an inclusive education system. Four out of five school leavers earn certificates which give them access to higher education. Although education and training are standardised, they are flexible and allow for individual learning plans. At welfare level, individual rights are based on citizenship status and embedded in collective social responsibility. The right to social assistance applies to young people from the age of 18 onwards, regardless of the socio-economic situation of their families. If participating in formal education or training they receive an educational allowance. The employment regime is characterised by an extended public sector which goes along with broad access options and high rates of female employment. Due to generous public childcare, young women do not have to anticipate a high burden of reconciling family and work. Education, in the broad sense of personal development, is the focus of transition policies. Counselling is widely institutionalised throughout all stages of education, training and transition into employment, and is primarily orientated so as to reinforce individuals’ motivation. While ‘disadvantage’ refers to individuals not being ready to engage in an individualized choice biography, most ‘second chance’ measures aim at (re-)opening access to established and respected options rather than forcing an individual to scale back his or her aspirations and adapt to low status careers. Although scopes have recently started to narrow, the activation of labour market programmes is based on a broad understanding of being active and having choice as central for individual motivation. In general, individualised education and welfare options encourage and support young adults in experimenting with yo-yo-transitions – as long as they do this within the system – which young people experience as natural:

It is my education, and I have to use it for something, so I have to work it out ... it is me who decides (M, female, 18, Denmark).
### Table 1 – Transition regimes across Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension Regime</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Social security</th>
<th>Employment Regime</th>
<th>Female Employment</th>
<th>Concept of Youth</th>
<th>Concept of Disadvantage</th>
<th>Focus of Transition Policies</th>
<th>Expenditure* Educ/F-C/ ALMP</th>
<th>Policy trend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Universalistic</strong></td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Not selective</td>
<td>Flexible standards (mixed)</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Open Low risks</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Personal development, Citizenship</td>
<td>Individualised and structure-related</td>
<td>Education Activation</td>
<td>DK: 8,3 / 3,8 / 1,5 FL: 6,3 / 3,0 / 0,7</td>
<td>Liberal (more labour market orientation)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finland</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Employment-centred</strong></td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>Standardised (dual)</td>
<td>State / family</td>
<td>Closed Risks at the margins</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Adaptation to social positions</td>
<td>Individualised (Pre-)vocational training</td>
<td></td>
<td>A: 5,4 / 3,0 / 0,5 D: 4,5 / 3,3 / 0,6 F: 5,6 / 2,5 / 0,7 NL: 5,6 / 1,2 / 0,1</td>
<td>Liberal (more activation)</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Liberal</strong></td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Principally not selective</td>
<td>Flexible, low standards (mixed)</td>
<td>State / family</td>
<td>Open High risks</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Early economic independence</td>
<td>Individualised Employability</td>
<td></td>
<td>IE: 4,8 / 2,5 / 0,5 UK: 5,5 / 1,6 / 0,1</td>
<td>Liberal (more education)</td>
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<td>UK</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-protective</strong></td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Not Selective</td>
<td>Low standards and coverage (mainly school)</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Closed High risks (Informal work)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Without distinct status</td>
<td>Structure-related 'Some' status (work, education, training)</td>
<td></td>
<td>IT: 4,4 / 1,1 / 0,5 PT: 5,4 / 1,2 / 0,5 ES: 4,2 / 1,2 / 0,6</td>
<td>Liberal (deregulation) and employment-centred (training)</td>
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<td>Portugal</td>
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**Post-socialist countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Social security</th>
<th>Employment Regime</th>
<th>Female Employment</th>
<th>Concept of Youth</th>
<th>Concept of Disadvantage</th>
<th>Focus of Transition Policies</th>
<th>Expenditure* Educ/F-C/ ALMP</th>
<th>Policy trend</th>
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<td>Romania</td>
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Eurostat data on expenditures for education/families - children/ active labour market policies in 2005 (except ALMP exp. in DK for 2004).
Others realise the freedom of choice they have:

A lot of students did that: changed their plans. This shows that you have matured and developed... and then it is good that you can change it (F., female, 19, Denmark).

The *liberal* transition regime model predominates in the UK and – less accentuated – in Ireland and values individual rights and responsibilities more than collective provisions. In most parts of the UK schooling is largely organized comprehensively until the age of 16 while in Ireland differentiated routes do exist. In recent decades, post-compulsory education and training programmes have met great diversification and have moved towards a more flexible system, with a variety of entrance and exit options. This system has replaced a situation where, until the early 1980s, the majority of young people would directly enter the labour market after leaving school at the age of 16. Since then, labour market flexibilisation has facilitated the shift from manufacturing towards service jobs with significant increases in female employment but also in precarious work. While benefit entitlements are tied to citizenship status, the level of benefits is low, increasingly limited in time and conditional upon active job search. Thus, universal access to welfare coincides with a highly individualised responsibility for the own life course and an individualised attribution of disadvantage to a culture of welfare dependency, which some young people – in the sense of a self-fulfilling prophecy – have internalised:

Being on benefits for three years I had begun to lose sight of my personal goals. I was afraid to come off benefits; to go back to work; afraid to set goals, but most of all afraid to fail (L., female, 23, UK).

In youth unemployment programmes, immediate labour market entrance is still the main goal, while education and training options are short-term and lack reliable standards.

You fill in forms... and then you hear nothing, unless they have a proxy job going where there’s no money and you’re treated like a slave (J., male, 18, Ireland).

Activation policies like the New Deal for Young People can be characterised as ‘workfare’ in the sense that they are primarily a means to control and apply pressure with regard to individual active job search. After a gateway phase for orientation job-seekers have to choose among subsidised employment, training, voluntary or environmental engagement. If they do not comply, sanctions are put into place. In the context of the liberal transition regime, yo-yo transitions result from the flexibility of education and employment and from the risks young people encounter. In sum, recent trends in youth transitions can be interpreted as public investments in preparing individuals for becoming self-responsible ‘entrepreneurs’ of their own labour force.

The *employment-centred* transition regime accounts for the continental European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands; the latter representing a hybrid of
liberal and universalistic traits. In this regime type, school is organized more selectively allocating the younger generation towards specific occupational careers and social positions. As a consequence, in Germany only one third of school leavers holds an education certificate which makes them eligible for higher education. Vocational training, which can be company-based, like the dual apprenticeship system in Germany, or mixed, as is the case in the Netherlands, plays a central role. It is relatively standardised and thus reproduces a highly regulated employment regime which, in Germany, is linked to the normative concept of work as ‘vocation’. Labour markets are divided into a highly standardised and protected core – with women clearly underrepresented – and precarious peripheries; a particular phenomenon in this regard is the Dutch part-time labour market. While young people in the Netherlands are automatically entitled to benefits, this is not the case in Germany where social security distinguishes between a high level of compensation for those included in social insurance and residual social assistance. Therefore, activation policies are still limited in scope and coverage mainly functioning as mechanisms to recruit jobseekers for a narrow range of measures not allowing for choice:

It [the Employment Service] … is an administration after all. They are not in the mood for working. Just staring into your file, going bah, bah, treating you like a cow (O., male, 23, Germany).

Disadvantage and youth unemployment are interpreted as young people not being ready for this socialization and allocation process due to learning or social deficits (in Germany those failing to enter regular training are referred to as ‘not (yet) trainable’). Separated pre-vocational measures aim at compensation for these deficits – often without providing any form of income – rather than leading to regular qualifications or jobs. Here, yo-yo transitions mean that young adults are torn between restricted options for individual choice and strong demands and implications of standard trajectories, a process of reconciliation which they have to pursue individually against the normative power of institutional facts:

Yes, in secondary school you get pressure. They always tell you, you must have vocational training, training, training, without it you will never make it… Many only because of pressure… start some vocational training (J., female, 21, Germany).

The sub-protective transition regime applies primarily to the Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain and Portugal. Due to the low share of standard work arrangements and the high rate of unprotected living conditions, the family and informal work play a significant role. School is structured comprehensively and many achieve upper secondary certificates. Nevertheless, until recently the rate of early school leaving in order to work was high, as exemplified by the phenomenon of child work, (especially in Portugal). Vocational training is not well developed, is mainly provided by professional schools, and the involvement of companies is low. Due to the economic weakness of many regions and the orientation of labour law towards (male) breadwinners, youth transitions are structured by a long waiting phase during which
young people depend primarily on their families. Not entitled to social benefits they engage in precarious jobs – either in the informal economy, such as in Italy, or in fixed-term contracts, which are extremely prevalent in Spain. Labour market segmentation and a lack of training contribute to very high rates of youth unemployment, particularly affecting young women. Higher education plays an important role in providing young people with a status in this waiting phase, although many either drop out before reaching the end of their degree or become over-qualified. Policies addressing youth transitions can be characterised by the discrepancy between comprehensive reform plans and a structural deficit in implementing them, which also applies to activation policies. Most important policy objectives aim at prolonging school attendance and modernising vocational training, while labour market policies focus on job creation through incentives for employers and assistance for self-employment. The general objective behind such policies can be characterized as providing youth with ‘some’ official status. Unlike in other regimes, yo-yo-transitions do not develop against dominant assumptions of youth but emerge from a social vacuum:

We are alone… If you have friends, fine, otherwise … (G., female, 19, Italy).

It could be stated that the transition system provides neither choice nor flexibility nor security, instead individuals depend on the extent of family support. Some young people seem to have perfectly adapted to a neo-liberal labour market:

Oh sure… there’s no work, but keeping complaining and day-dreaming about the ‘permanent job’ seems to me a waste of time… You have to create your job yourself, inventing new professions, considering your own wishes (P., female, 21, Italy).

The obvious structural differences raise the question of how this is reflected by young people’s decision-making processes and transition patterns across transition regimes. Unfortunately, no comparative longitudinal research which includes such dimensions has been carried out. Anglo-German comparison suggests a higher proportion of smooth, repaired and stagnant transitions in Germany and a higher share of upward, alternative and downward transitions in the UK (Evans 2002). However, the validity of such findings is necessarily restricted since the typology builds on the relationship between individual trajectories and the standard life course models dominating in the given transition system. What may be ‘alternative’ in the employment-centred regime might be smooth and normal in the universalistic one.

However, different transition regimes can be analysed in order to understand the extent to which their institutional structures allow for choice, keeping options open, reconciliation and self-presentation. The different transition regimes are built on different cultural values and interpretations of social reality and thereby imply different meanings of success with regard to youth transitions. Behind the different concepts of ‘disadvantaged youth’, different notions of youth can be identified. That is, societal expectations for young people impact the models of motivation applied in addressing youth transitions.
The importance of choice and motivation in the universalistic transition regime reflects that youth is first and foremost associated with personal development. This implies a broader definition of success than merely becoming part of the labour force. Youth is not only seen as a potential resource for society but also for young people themselves. The state does not only provide support for growing up but also for ‘being young’. This system includes a flexibility or individual solutions that allow for reconciliation with other aspects of life. This is much less the case in the liberal transition regime, which is governed by the assumption that youth transitions should lead as directly as possible into economic independence. Here, choice depends on individual resources and local opportunities and reconciliation with other life demands is the responsibility of the individual. The employment-centred regime shows a similar pattern, in which success is also narrowly defined, but here in terms of socialisation for and allocation to pre-defined occupational positions. Compared with the liberal regime type, success is not only defined in economic but also in normative terms related to a given social order. In this way, possibilities for self-presentation are also restricted. In the sub-protective regime type structural deficits and family dependency contribute to a status vacuum for youth, in which inclusion into any system is considered a success – whether this is education, training or employment. In principle, the structural deficit of the transition system implies spaces which are open for individual agency. This is, however, only true for those young people whose families can afford to cushion long periods of waiting and/or experimentation, while the others are confronted with precariousness (Walther, 2006).

While such illustrations of narrower or broader notions of success and scopes of agency in different regimes of youth transitions are certainly ideal-typical, they can be related to harder, systemic definitions of success, such as young people’s economic independence. Table 3 reports selective findings of the Eurobarometer survey in which young people between 15 and 29 years have been asked for the main source of their income.

| Table 2 – Most important source of income (in %) indicated by young people (15-29) in 2007 |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| **Denmark**                     | **35** | **37** | **56** |
| **Germany**                     | **35** | **37** | **56** |
| **Italy**                       | **37** | **37** | **56** |
| **UK**                          | **56** | **56** | **56** |
| **Regular job**                 | **57** | **35** | **37** | **56** |
| **Benefits**                    | **5**  | **6**  | **0**  | **11** |
| **Allowances/grants**           | **22** | **13** | **2**  | **11** |
| **Relatives, partner**          | **5**  | **26** | **50** | **14** |
| **Casual work**                 | **5**  | **15** | **9**  | **5**  |
| **Other, don’t know**           | **5**  | **4**  | **1**  | **3**  |

Source: Eurobarometer 2007
It is interesting that Denmark, where young people enjoy a broader scope for experimentation during their transitions, has the highest percentage of young people living on own income from paid work. In Germany, in contrast, a relatively high share of young people report casual work as their main source of income. This reflects the long-term decline of the dual system in securing the social and labour market integration of the younger generation. The fact that in Italy most young people depend on relatives is not surprising if one considers the structural deficit of the transition system. Another interesting difference results from comparison between the UK and Denmark. Both countries show a strong tendency towards activation policies but differ in terms of income paid by public institutions. In Denmark, every fifth young person refers to educational allowances as his or her main source of income; which gives evidence of their position in society as ‘learning citizens’. In contrast, the UK, with its emphasis of individual independence, takes the lead with regard to those living on benefits.

VI - CONCLUSIONS

This article has been concerned with challenging a one-dimensional perspective reducing young people’s agency to the relation between inputs (orientations and values) and outputs (decisions and actions) and paying more attention to the complexity of decision-making processes. It has been argued that institutional assumptions of normality underlying both politics and research concerned with youth are increasingly different from the social reality, as it is experienced by the young men and women themselves. First and foremost, institutional perspectives on youth transitions have been confronted by the increasing diversity of transition patterns emerging both within and beyond the linear life course. Second, the subjective relevance of institutional trajectories for young people has been questioned by reflecting on the dynamics and the social inequality of their motivational careers. Third, it has been argued that decision-making processes of young men and women in transition should not be interpreted in terms of one-dimensional investments and returns. In fact, their transitions imply increasingly biographical dilemmas. This is reflected by the coping strategies that young people develop with regard to transitions. Choice, keeping options open, reconciliation and self-presentation are some key requirements of young people’s agency and decision-making in de-standardised transitions in order to balance their identities and maintain a sense of coherence. A first conclusion therefore is that understanding young people’s agency requires a biographical perspective. This implies:

• engaging in reconstructing motivational processes across biographical time and relates motivation to the task to achieve coherence within the individual biography;
• taking into consideration that biographies can no longer rely on future as something to be planned but to be open for when it happens or to be dreamed of;
• enlarging the view on agency as individual towards complex negotiation process within social networks consisting of informal and formal relationships, strong and weak ties;
• understanding concrete actions not as the linear expression of rational choice but as strategies of coping with biographical dilemmas in a subjectively meaningful way.

Here, the biographical perspective has been developed with regard to young people’s transitions to work. However, it can also be applied to the issue of political and social participation. For several decades now there has been a debate whether young people are being depoliticised. While some interpret the decline in voting or in organisation membership as political apathy and indifference towards society, others refer to alternative and more spontaneous forms of participation such as in the anti-globalisation movement. The UP2YOUTH project started the other way round: it did not ask what young people are not doing, not enough or not in the right way, but what they are actually doing and if there may be signs of changed forms, meanings and contents of participation in these activities.

A biographical perspective implies looking at young people as subjects, as co-citizens and co-actors of social integration rather than a resource (human capital), for whatever and however defined societal purposes, which needs to be mobilised and activated without involving them in defining what the ‘common good’ is. The presented research findings suggest that young people are agents of social change – regardless of how other societal actors address them. In fact, the perspective of youth as a resource hides that young people do not have to be mobilised. They are moving but in most cases not where institutional actors are looking because there are no societal spaces where young people can negotiate their agency. Schools are governed top-down, public space is both more commercialised and more controlled while in many cases youth research accepts to observe and analyse young people only according to pre-defined institutional categories such as success in education or the labour market. Thereby, many activities, decision-making processes, negotiation and struggles of young people coping with everyday life and their construction of biographical futures remain hidden.

A way of questioning and deconstructing the normalities which guide policies and research is applying a comparative perspective. It relies on the fact that social contexts influence the way in which young people are looked at, the meaning youth has in a society and the extent to which young people are able to deal with transition demands according to subjective interests and priorities. The article has analysed the different scopes that different transition regimes provide for the biographical agency of young men and women inasmuch as they are more or less favourable to the principles inherent to young people’s coping strategies and motivation. Comparison shows that in Denmark young people do enjoy a citizenship status which secures choice by individual welfare rights, especially inasmuch as the role of students is concerned which is endowed by individual rights and choice through individualised education plans.

In sum, young people’s agency enfolds within and without institutional backup but it can be empowered by flexible and individualised institutions which provide access to support and resources while at the same time allowing for individual choice.
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