

The Janus face of austerity politics

Autonomy and dependence in contemporary Spain

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Abstract: How is social reproduction possible in a context of precarious employment and austerity policies that have defunded welfare? The paradox of autonomy and dependence is present in intergenerational relations of support and conflict at various scales. It emerges, on the one hand, in the neoliberal injunction to be individually responsible for one's own present and future wellbeing, an aspiration that is impossible to fulfill. On the other hand, it is expressed in the increasing recourse by younger active cohorts to the care work and assets of their older kin—in particular retirement pensions and a home. Finally, policy calls to transform the pension system oppose younger and older generations in the accountings of social security financial sustainability and question the fairness of existing public pension schemes.

Keywords: class struggle, entrepreneurial self, generations, kinship, neoliberalism, pension, privilege, social reproduction

“Who gives shelter to a couple with two children if not your parents? It is very tough, because with 40 years that I have they cannot treat me as if I had 14 . . . and that I have to depend on my parents . . . when I have a husband and children and supposedly I should have an autonomy . . . and you go back to being 15 years old and being in your mom and dad's home, with everything that it implies . . . because since then [when you were 15] you already are 40 years old.” Marta is unemployed and has been living with her parents since 2010 when, unable to pay the mortgage on an apartment she and her husband had bought, the couple was evicted. Eventually, they divorced, the ex-husband moved to

another region of Spain, and he stopped providing alimony. She stayed with the children at her parents while she enrolled for various training courses and tried to find odd jobs, even as she tried to get financial aid from various institutional schemes. She confided to me in 2013 that she hates having to “depend” on state “aid”: “I don't want any aid, what I want is work,” she angrily asserts.

Marta is among a generation of younger adults in Ferrol (Galicia) that have come to depend on their parents' willingness to house them, share their income with them, and care for their children. She speaks of her parents' generation misapprehension of her situation: “They expe-



rienced the postwar [post-Spanish Civil War], the Transition [to democracy], their life became better. Now they cannot understand that I cannot make my life better. They cannot understand why youth cannot move forward and still depends on them.” This system of dependencies is fragile, however, because one of its pillars, the public pension scheme that provides income to the elders sheltering younger adults will not be available to most of them. Of her eight brothers and sisters, Marta thinks only one sister “will reach a pension” (*llegar a pensión*) because of the precarious work and irregular contributions of the rest as well as the defunding of public pensions and structural transformations to the system.

At the center of present-day tension between autonomy and dependency in Europe is the articulation between intimate intergenerational kinship relations, the labor market and other income opportunities, and the state’s mediation between generations in the form of the pension system. In Spain unemployment, indebtedness, job instability, and austerity policies foster everyday interdependencies that provide support through personal networks or formal institutions. This happens in a context that promotes the entrepreneurial self but where expectations of individual autonomy are paradoxically increasingly difficult to fulfill. At the same time, intergenerational forms of care overlap with conflict and resentment at different scales. Solidarity obligations that weave everyday actions of support around parents, children, friends, and neighbors are confronted at another scale with a discourse of privilege of access to resources such as jobs (stable labor) and income (retirement pensions). This configures a complex and contradictory map of responsibilities and ultimately poses the question of the sustainability of the social system.

This article is an enquiry into social reproduction understood both at the scale of the intimate reproduction of life framed in social units, such as the household and kinship networks, and at the scale of the continuity of an encompassing, differentiated social system: a society. A first sec-

tion will address the discursive extension of the concept of “generations” to address social conflict. The following sections will explore the actual resources, discourses, and practices that enable personal autonomy and produce economic and social dependency. I will then analyze the argument of intergenerational inequity that has become mainstream among policy makers in the debate around pension reform. The conclusion will address the various frameworks for social reproduction put forward, their scalar articulation, and their consequences.

The larger framework enfolding what I will describe for Spain is that of neoliberal transformations that have defaced “embedded liberalism” and the social protection and regulations that constrained capital accumulation. As Harvey has aptly described it, neoliberalization rests on “the financialization of everything” (2005: 33) and has resulted in a restoration of class power based on the paradoxical articulation of an unfettered entrepreneurial freedom ideology and the regulatory support to corporate monopoly (Harvey 2005). Ideologically, the entrepreneurial aspect of people’s livelihoods becomes the basis for reconfiguring welfare as mere “assistance” for those who have failed to self-provide but still “deserve” to get help, while privatization processes extract formerly public services from the reach of the many. At the same time, the financialization of accumulation has shifted the weight from surplus value to monopoly rent extraction, on the one hand, and from value expansion through production to asset-price inflation (e.g., bubbles), on the other (Foster 2010; Harvey 2004; Lapavistas 2009). As a consequence, this has highlighted the role of political elites in their production of privilege for capitalist corporations. The deep form of neoliberalism that Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002) define as a rolling out of the state appears as the subservience of national power to non-elected political institutions that organize capital accumulation on a world scale often through the regulation of privilege. Privilege, then, is increasingly understood by citizens losing ground as the locus of struggle: laboring

classes are shifting from class struggles around exploitation to struggles for or against privileges in attempts to redefine boundaries of inclusion and exclusion to accessing resources (Narotzky 2019). But, as I will show in this article, in relation to the discourse around generational confrontation, this is not a straightforward process but one full of ambivalence and where powerful social agents intervene to reconfigure conflict in terms of intergenerational inequity.

For over a decade, I have been doing ethnographic research in an industrial town in the northwestern region of Spain, Galicia. Although Galicia is generally known as a poor fishing and agricultural region that provided large contingents of migrants to South America during the first half of the twentieth century, less well known is that it also developed an important industrial structure in its coastal towns. The industry rested on shipbuilding, both civil and military, automobile production, paper mills, and food processing—canning, freezing, and drying of fish. Ferrol, the concrete town where I have conducted fieldwork, has been home to two of the largest shipyards in the country, civil and military, a steel factory, a chemical plant, and more recently, a natural liquid gas regasification plant. This industrial vocation started in the eighteenth century through the establishment of a military shipyard and arsenal, which very soon also gave rise to organized labor movements. For the last two hundred years, a diverse social configuration—male industrial workers (shipyards), female canning factory workers, female homemakers, an important contingent of navy personnel of various ranks, and civil engineers—has marked the character of the town, its livelihood, and its conflicts. The boundaries between these social groups were both clear in terms of status and prestige and porous, as shipyard and arsenal personnel of different kinds mingled day to day. The main conflicts confronted shipyard workers and their superiors—employers in the private civil shipyards and public and navy personnel in the public military yard—around wages and work conditions, and during the dictatorship

included claims for political representation and democracy. Starting in the 1980s with the restructuring of the shipyards, and increasingly at the turn of the new century, the configuration of stable jobs has given way to a predominance of temporary precarious jobs in small and mid-size enterprise (SME) contract firms in logistics and the service sector, migration to larger urban centers, and an impressive number of retired workers.

I have focused my research on the laboring classes and the transformations that the latest financial crisis and austerity regime have brought about in the lives of different generations.

Class struggles or generational struggles

This article addresses the widely experienced breakdown of social reproduction in Ferrol and Spain, and the struggles to overcome it. The paradox of autonomy and dependence emerges as a Janus-faced conundrum in the everyday life of people. On the one hand, the neoliberal push toward individual responsibility for one's own present and future wellbeing pushes unemployed or precariously employed people to "reinvent themselves" through self-innovation during their active years and for those in stable employment to plan their retirement avoiding dependence on the public pension system. On the other hand, the increasing recourse to kinship, other solidarity networks, and state benefits to make a living, overwhelms people's lives with mixed and contradictory results in terms of self-worth (see Martin, Wig, and Yanagisako's introduction to this special issue).

During my fieldwork I have observed the complexity of intergenerational and intragenerational relations of support and confrontation. I have also witnessed how the expansion of unemployment and precarity impacted the younger generation in this industrial area and what kinds of opportunities were available to them. Although the housing bubble of the early 2000s also affected Ferrol in terms of jobs earned or lost, other "bubbles" had a greater im-

fact locally, for example the clean energy bubble (as many shipyard jobs had been converted into jobs in the manufacturing of rotor blades for wind turbines). However, the major shock was the demise of contracts in shipbuilding and the effects it had on the local economy.

The 2008 financial crisis accelerated the shift toward “new” forms of labor. Unemployment rates above 20 percent—above 50 percent for younger cohorts—have had lasting effects on the labor market and on people’s aspirations, projects, and identities. Paid and unpaid work, temporary jobs, small entrepreneurship, and social and solidarity cooperatives overlap with kinship obligations, citizenship entitlements to subsidies and benefits, and contractual relations. In this conjuncture, questions of dependence and autonomy become central markers of people’s worth and are often expressed in terms of “generation troubles.”

The concept of “generation” has various meanings with no clear boundaries that often tend to overlap with that of “cohort,” the latter category defining a concrete birth position in a chronological timeline. For Karl Mannheim (1952: 276–322) generations were defined by a common socio-historical location that exposed them to similar experiences, predispositions, and actions. Interestingly, his understanding of “generations” departs from an analogy of “generation” to “class,” both factors expressing a location within the social structure that configured agency. Duane Alwin and Ray McCammon (2007) distinguish three meanings of the generation concept. The first relates to kinship and refers to the social reproduction of the family; the second refers to the location of birth cohorts in historical time; the third is linked to agency as cohorts come to participate in events in terms of a particular socially constructed identity. In my analysis, I will use “cohort” for the second meaning, simply describing a chronological location, while the term “generation” is used for both the first and third meanings, what I have described as two scales of social reproduction at the intimate and societal level respectively. What I will try to disentangle is how the societal

meaning has developed in recent years attached to a concrete neoliberal project aimed at erasing class and dismantling social security systems.

A recent *Guardian* article¹ speaking about the protests in Hong Kong and Chile pointed at the young age of the protesters and declared that class-based struggles had shifted and transformed into intergenerational conflicts. Struggles were now about unfulfilled expectations and imaginings of a future social position and wellbeing that had become elusive. This generational aspect was also the one highlighted by a movement in Spain that, in 2011, defined itself as “*Juventud sin Futuro*” (Youth without a future), which stressed the breakdown of social reproduction that affected them: “*Sin casa, sin curro, sin pensión, sin miedo*” (No house, no work, no pension, no fear) was their slogan. They were very clear in their demands—a stable job, a home, and a retirement pension—broadly addressed at those in power. They critiqued how bailing out the banks had defunded social benefits, such as education, and endangered the viability of their future. In sum, their aspirations were those of their parents, to have the security of a job, to be able to access a place to live independently, and to have a decent retirement when the time came. Much has been written about the fact that young people do not aspire to the same kind of stability that the baby boomers enjoyed, often internalizing the imposition of uncertainty and flexibility as a choice (Bradley and Devadason 2008; Brannen and Nilsen 2002; Leccardi 2005). In the massive mobilizations that took place at the beginning of the crisis in Spain, this does not seem to have been the case. Indeed, the cohort that was at the center of mobilizations, mostly university students or recent graduates, pointed at the generational aspect of the economic recession as a way to show the breakdown of basic expectations for making a living (the intimate scale), but they addressed their protest to the establishment, those in government (the societal scale), not to their parents, the “baby boomers.”² The movement eventually merged with others to form the Indignados-15M mobilization in May 2011 in Spain.

But is the generational aspect the fundamental one to explaining mobilization and unrest? And if so, what does it express? Several authors (Bristow 2016; White 2013) have pointed at the extension in the last 20 years of the generational conflict discourse, in particular as it relates to the social security theme and to the health and pension systems' unsustainability. They historicize the rise of the "baby boomer problem" as a demographic argument developing initially in the United States and soon imported to the United Kingdom from the mid-1980s onward and directly addressing the need to downsize the welfare state, in particular health and pensions, on the grounds of "intergenerational inequity." This policy argument is grounded in the technical device of "generational accounting" that soon became an international standard for national budget accounting (Auerbach et al. 1992; for a critique see Bristow 2016; Lemoine 2016: 189–195; White 2013), which inscribes social security rights as financial liabilities and assets in a generational public ledger that ascribes distributive obligations unfairly between active (contributors/debtors) and passive (beneficiaries/creditors) age cohorts. Jonathan White (2013: 216) defines as "generationalism" this "systematic appeal to the concept of generation in narrating the social and the political" that results in naturalizing—as a demographic injunction—the need for the neoliberal rolling back of public services, on the one hand, and framing the conflict in moral terms linked to the unfair privileges—instead of rights—of the "baby boomer" generation, on the other hand. With this new framing and accounting procedures conflict shifts to the generational argument that creates a new powerful form of common identity while class differentiation disappears from the debate. Generationalism can be found increasingly during the 1990s in the expert reports addressing the unsustainability of the pension system in particular and in the discourses of neoliberal governments. It becomes inscribed in European Commission documents (European Commission 2010, 2012) and preambles to pension reform laws (Boletín Oficial

del Estado 2013). Nevertheless, the ideological maneuver substituting generational for class conflict is not straightforward, as social mobilizations often present generational conflicts as part and parcel of class conflicts.

Since the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis, Spain has witnessed many mobilizations addressing the social economic effects of the recession and of austerity measures. General strikes have highlighted the consequences of recent labor legal reforms that made redundancies easier, downplayed collective agreements, and reduced unemployment benefits. Other massive demonstrations during the 2011–2013 period were launched in defense of public services such as healthcare and education, and more recently, public pensions (Narotzky 2016), revealing that responsibility for protecting livelihood is seen to rest on political rather than economic actors by those participating in the mobilizations. At stake is a particular understanding of the substance of citizenship and of the state's role in caring for and upholding the right to life. Traditional labor movements focused on the relation between workers (labor) and employers (capital) in terms of returns to labor and capital (wages vs. profit), and of working conditions, understanding these two axes as the main pillars for making a living and having a life worth living. This constituted mainly an economic understanding of social reproduction, one that was gendered and followed the ideologically hegemonic articulation of income and care, market and non-market provisioning of life-sustaining resources. In Ferrol, the shipbuilding industry and its auxiliaries provided the largest proportion of employment—what locals describe as the "*monocultivo*" (monoculture)—and strong unions had fought for, and achieved, economic and social rights. Arguably, these struggles were predicated on the expectation of a male stable job and a "family wage" even as many women also earned an income in fish-freezing factories or as homeworkers in clothing manufacture. Present-day mobilizations, instead, focus more broadly on social reproduction at the experiential scale of household livelihood, and

at the structural scale of the continuity of the system as a whole, hence the stress on the institutional responsibility of “the state”—an abstract entity that is nevertheless conceived as a singular, personified agent, sometimes nuanced as “the government.” Although some massive demonstrations such as the Dignity Marches of 2014 and 2015 that claimed the right to “bread, work, and a roof” were not framed in generational terms, their demands were similar to those voiced by “*Juventud sin Futuro*.” In these movements, work remains a central demand often tied to income, autonomy, and self-respect. In addition, food and housing are highlighted as entitlements, and the language of rights and the reference to the Constitution is preeminent. Discursively, claims for housing have slid from younger cohorts’ demands for a “house” (*casa*), understood as a base for achieving independence, to older, precariously employed adults’ demand for a “roof” (*un techo*) heard as a more anguished scream for basic protection from homelessness—the homeless are described with the phrase “*los sin techo*” (those without a roof).

At the same time, legal changes to the social security pension system have resulted in an important loss of households’ purchasing power and have seen massive and recurrent demonstrations of retired people all over Spain, but especially in the old industrial regions. These mobilizations defend “decent pensions,” but they try to present their claim as an entitlement that goes beyond personal interest and embraces future generations, those of pensioners’ children and grandchildren; their main banner states “*Estudiante, trabajador, estamos luchando por tu pensión. Únete a nosotros*.” (Student, worker, we are fighting for your pension. Join us). In contrast to the mobilizations against pension reform in France, which have mainly moved active workers, in Spain the retirees are the ones organizing and demonstrating in the streets. Two possible explanations for this difference come to mind. First, the extreme precarity of younger cohorts’ jobs inhibits their sustained mobilization as well as the organizational infrastructures—such as unions—they are involved

with. Second, unemployed members of kinship networks depend on existing pensions to a larger degree in Spain than in France. Indeed, what moves these retirees to action is the fact that their pension has often become the main income sustaining an extended family of precariously employed younger kin. Again, here, the language of “rights” and the understanding that these were “conquests” of the working class during and after the transition to democracy is pervasive. The class component is an important aspect of what configures the older generation’s understanding of entitlements, as these “rights” appear explicitly as the result of working-class struggles that the democratic state should protect. For this generation of pensioners, the experience of their active adult years is that of the Franco dictatorship. They have an acute memory of their combats to change economic and political relations to achieve and consolidate rights such as free unionization, job security, living wages, democratization, social services, and universal access to health and education. In their view, rights are not privileges granted by the state, instead they have been “produced” and workers “own” them, hence the discourse of “dispossession” that accompanies the mobilizations and their stupefaction at “expert” mainstream economic discourse and the media presenting them as “privileged.”

Indeed, these benefits to a public pension were presented by pensioners in Ferrol as the result of collective—literally “class” struggles—and are therefore attached to the working class as a whole as inalienable rights to the social wealth.

Autonomy: Reinventing oneself

In industrial settings such as Ferrol, people perceive the loss of an economy based on production as a material and moral loss—of stability, of citizenship entitlements attached to employment, and of an ethos of hard work and rewards attached to effort. Today, jobs in industry—especially the shipyard, onshore wind turbines,

or steel—are the most prized and considered “better” even when located in contractor firms. Residents acknowledge that newer jobs, in services and logistics—the textile giant Inditex has an important hub that provides six hundred jobs locally and six thousand in the immediate area³—are transient, impermanent, not something one would like doing for the rest of one’s life.⁴ Precarious livelihoods block the production of a valued identity stemming from work, divorcing toil from valued positions in society. The material devaluation of workers through deskilling, instability, and wage reductions results in people feeling morally devalued, in feelings of inadequacy and shame (in terms of knowledge and the fulfillment of family obligations). Those with permanent employment are afraid of losing their jobs. Casual workers are afraid of not being rehired, and workplace harassment becomes the norm, especially for women.

When I interviewed her in 2015, Ana María, who has had a permanent white-collar job in a SME for 17 years, explained:

The crisis forces people to do things they don’t want to do just to make a living. They accept work below their level of qualification. They earn very little. The situation makes you bear everything, displacement, flexibility, increased surveillance. There is an upsurge of “machismo” as well. There is overwork and stress, and work harassment transfers to the body. You get sick, your productivity goes down and they sack you. There is fear when you have a job and your wage goes to help your mother-in-law, your parents, pay the mortgage, car insurance, school books, and keep a nest egg in case there is an unexpected problem. These make multiple fears.

In this conjuncture, the official mantra to “reinvent oneself”—endlessly voiced by the media—appears not as a choice but as a necessity both in terms of making a living and regaining self-esteem. Although the percentage of people in

the area who earn their main income in this way remains very low, between 5 percent and 7 percent except for a peak in 2011,⁵ many see their future in entrepreneurial forms of making a living that are strongly publicized by institutions and the media.

The official discourse—supported by experts, local agencies, the government, and the European Union (EU)⁶—is that wage work will be replaced by entrepreneurship, represented by startups of all kinds and innovative forms of self-employment. Local and regional institutions recurrently organize workshops aiming to induce young people to set up a small business or become an innovative self-employed entrepreneur. The latest promotion video for new entrepreneurs by the Xunta de Galicia declares “entrepreneurship is quality future.”⁷ Among these potential “new entrepreneurs”—mostly unemployed younger people—the injunction to “reinvent” oneself is received with ambivalent feelings, often welcomed as an opportunity while accepted as a necessity. Entrepreneurial programs propose a neoliberal ethos of self-help and individual responsibility, of hard work and achieving autonomy—as opposed to depending on state benefits or being in the subordinate position of waged employment. They also echo an older imaginary (present in agriculture, artisan manufacture, and commerce) of “being my own boss” and accessing “freedom.” These are training and coaching programs purportedly teaching entrepreneurial skills and instructing on how to apply for targeted funding from the regional administrations channeling EU funds. Young people targeted by EU start-up funding⁸ embrace becoming an entrepreneur as a creative form of self-valorization where talent and imagination will provide a meaningful way to earn a living. Others feel that they are pushed to become “entrepreneurs”—business-oriented—against their will, when they only want to make a living and would prefer a stable job. Such is the case for many self-employed workers at the end of subcontracting chains or freelancing service jobs, who are at pains to think of themselves as entrepreneurs and resent the pressure of social

contributions and taxation, together with the diminished coverage they will get in case of unemployment and when they retire. For these young entrepreneurs, the need to get indebted to financial institutions but also to family and friends, in terms of money, of “labor help” for the business project, or of the caring of children and the household, also becomes an added burden.

In Ferrolterra, most entrepreneurial ventures that have emerged during the economic crisis that began in 2008 are tied to agriculture, commerce, or service sectors. Beauty parlors, small shops, market stalls, organic agriculture production, and bars. Many result from the lack of alternative employment and narratives start with “I was laid off” or “there is nothing for me in the labor market” and insist that they “now work much harder.” The hassle of the bureaucratic paperwork necessary to become an entrepreneur and the endless workdays moderate the feeling of newly acquired freedom. Fiscal, financial, and personal dependencies become less visible under the ideology of autonomy and freedom of the entrepreneur. In reality, reinventing oneself as an entrepreneur in the present conjuncture engenders a number of dependencies, many of which are based on the social network and family assets that help provide credit, labor, and care. All of this puts stress on the “independent ventures” because failure often drags a wider network of people into trouble (especially in the frequent case of indebtedness) (Loperfido 2020).

Dependence: The reconfiguration of kinship obligations

In the spring of 2012 I joined a group of women, members of a socio-cultural association. They were mostly older women, the wives of retired industrial workers who had been active in the resistance against the dictatorship and were now trying to organize a solidarity network to help out those most in need during the crisis. A couple of younger women were also present.

The conversation turned to “the crisis” and to the feeling of anxiety that pervaded young people’s everyday precarious existence, their inability to forge an autonomous life and support a new family and also their feeling of impotence, their lack of instruments of struggle. The older women expressed the extension of this anxiety to their own situation, revealing the transformation of lifecycle expectations in the present conjuncture. Victoria, a widow in her late 70s told the following story:

I ran into this neighbor who said to me: “You are lucky [in the crisis conjuncture], you have your pension, your problem is solved and you can relax.” But I answered: “Maybe my problem is solved but not that of my children nor that of my grandchildren.” People say that we pensioners have our problem solved, but we are deeply involved in the crisis, because *our children are part of our life*.

Carmen, in her 60s, added, “You sacrifice your needs in order to give it [income] to them [adult children]. We don’t even think of it, we give it to them. If many grandmothers and mothers were not supporting their children . . . the grandparents . . . we are supporting our grandchildren. If they didn’t have our support, this thing [effects of the crisis] would be much worse. But this was already the case during the restructuring of the shipyard: I had my parents to help us.”

Past experience, here, helped understand present-day intergenerational dependencies. During the layoffs that took place throughout the restructuring of the shipyards in the 1980s, however, these mutual help networks complemented other solidarity processes articulated around unionized labor. This was now becoming increasingly difficult as Esperanza, also in her early 60s, explained. In her view, present-day precarity had weakened unions and young adults, especially those with children, could not afford to confront employers lest they lose their job and are blacklisted. She proposed that retired people, who “have nothing to lose,” should wage the

struggle for their children's wellbeing in their stead. Esperanza suggested, in fact, the political dependence of young precarious workers on the previous generation who would be the ones capable of making claims to change their economic situation. Defending their pensions was one such struggle as this income is often the main support of the extended family. These "grand-parents" as they define themselves, organize to defend the public pension system in a movement that some experts, neoliberal parties, and the media have characterized as a defense of "privilege." I will address this alleged privilege in more detail after presenting a different view of the consequences of intergenerational support.

Paula, in her 30s, worked in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and was the youngest in the group of women I was talking to. She had a different perspective and was very critical of what her older friends were proposing. In her eyes, older generations should not materially support younger ones or take on their struggle. She thought that her generation did not mobilize precisely because the older generation was overprotecting them and taking on their responsibilities. She refused what she saw as a form of dependency but still thought that older people should transmit their lived experience of solidarity and struggle. She wanted to learn from the older women's experience but didn't want them to replace her, as this would deprive her of her own "life." By learning from these older women, she sought to create the conditions for establishing continuity between generations—through social reproduction of gendered strategies of struggle—while preserving her sense of autonomy and independence.

In September of 2015 in another of my visits, the solidarity I had witnessed in the previous years seemed to be receding. The family had become a refuge of last resort, and many young people came back to their parents' homes after years of "independent" life.

Carmen, previously quoted, and Juan's son, Pablo, a journalist in his late 30s who had worked in a regional newspaper, was one of these "domestic refugees" as his father called them. For

15 years after he graduated, he lived on his income and rented an apartment in the city where he worked. He lost his job in 2013 and now lived at his parents' small apartment, sleeping in his teenage bed that he sometimes shared with his girlfriend. He got temporary jobs tutoring through acquaintances, but he was mostly idle. Juan, the father, a retired shipyard worker and a militant activist of the Marches for Dignity unknowingly echoed Paula's critique and decried young people like his son for taking refuge in their parents' home and not confronting the real problems that are destroying them. He declared: "They come in search of a home, of food, of any work we can provide. We help them because we care for them, because they are our children . . . *but our children could be other people's children and, to be fair, we should open our home to others that are not our children.* . . . I think we are doing the wrong thing, this is not the alternative, this is an historic mistake. What we are doing helps perpetuate those in power" (emphasis added). For this labor leader turned social activist there is a shift in the form of solidarity where kinship support networks, which are closed to non-kin, become a perverse instrument inhibiting young people's collective mobilization. According to Juan, his son criticizes everything but "he does nothing to change it, he doesn't get together with others in his situation in order to collectively mobilize. . . . And he doesn't do it because we have him with us." Autonomy for Juan is linked to collective struggle, to the organized objective of change, but his son's access to the family safety net gives him some means of livelihood that contribute to demobilizing him. Juan's reading of the predicament of this younger generation is very different from Esperanza's who sees them as trapped in their precarity; but both are active in helping them out at home and mobilizing collective solidarity.

This precarious generation appears simultaneously angry and depressed, feels deserving and shameful. In these newly extended households, conflicts arising around domestic chores, sexuality, pocket money, and idleness highlight the tension between the desired autonomy of

the young adults and their forced dependence. With the reform of the pension system, moreover, resources are getting scarcer and the “grand-parents” generation is exhausted and anxious about the future, about what will happen to their children when they are no longer around to help. While autonomy expectations of active adults are thwarted, moral responsibility of retired parents grows.

The argument of intergenerational inequity

This new pattern of moral obligations and material transfers cannot last, however. To those working today in an increasingly precarious occupational environment, it is evident that their pensions—if any—will not be equivalent to their parents’ pensions. While the number of years required for a full pension grows (it is presently set around 37), the ability of those in precarious jobs to contribute for such a long period is reduced. Moreover, while the replacement rate of the “defined benefit” public pension decreases to minimums, the possibility to make provisions for the future in the other two pillars of the ideal “three-pillar system” (“defined contributions”, and private) is unrealistic for the precariously employed. Likewise, the possibility of accumulating assets such as homeownership that could eventually provide retirement “rents” is practically impossible. Hence, they will not be able to reproduce their parents’ solidarity: an extended family model of kinship obligations where support and care run from older to younger cohorts continuously. The generation now in their late 60s and early 70s are often taking care of their own parents, their children, and grandchildren, using retirement pensions as the main income distributed through the domestic network. As they are quick to point out, this is a burden that they have not chosen and cannot last.

Therefore, obligations, transfers of income and care, autonomy, and dependency are mediated by a transformed structure of the labor market and of the welfare system that makes it

unsustainable in the long-term, rather than by a demographic crisis. This systemic failure of social reproduction is strongly felt by households where pensions are the support of extended family networks. When, in 2013, a reform of the public pension system de-linked pensions from consumer price index,⁹ negatively affecting pensioners’ purchasing power, and as a result, their capacity to support the wide network of dependents, pensioners initiated recurrent mobilizations that are still ongoing. In September 2018, the new social democratic government returned to pension indexation, provoking severe admonitions from Brussels and conservative-liberal parties.

Indeed, following the European Commission (2010, 2012), Spanish governments of all colors have repeatedly warned about the “unsustainability” of the public pension scheme.

In policy and expert reports, pension fairness is now defined by an actuarial approach characteristic of insurance business’ risk calculation that differs from the classic definition of intergenerational equity developed at the turn of the twentieth century. That view was based on the idea of a socialized collective obligation of all present generations toward preceding generations that had invested their work in making social life possible (Bourgeois 1896)¹⁰ and on the social pooling of resources geared to resolving intra- and intergenerational downturns in livelihood (Beveridge 1942). A continuous chain of dependencies linked generations through time to the social reproduction of a particular collective community. The actuarial perspective instead defines sustainability in terms of financial accountability and viability, and individual life-long self-responsibility for wellbeing and the economic accounting of obligations between generations (Le Lann and Lemoine 2012). The state’s moral responsibility as guarantor of the social reproduction of the nation, a transcendent and imagined community of citizens (Anderson 1991), is replaced by a managerial task of accounting that transfers responsibility for social reproduction to each individual person (Eichhorst et al. 2011; Eu-

ropean Commission 2010; Le Lann 2010). The discourse of pension sustainability—conceived in financial terms—has replaced that of social solidarity between age groups and of retirement pension as a citizenship right.

The sustainability argument, presented as a matter of intergenerational fairness, results in a virtual confrontation between generations for scarce resources. The media often report this in terms of “privileges” that the older generation does not want to give up, rather than as hard won entitlements that the older generation is defending.

Frameworks for social reproduction

Although the changing situation of this industrial town in Spain has to be considered in its specificities, it is far from unique. The tension between dependence and autonomy that the breakdown of expectations has brought to active adult cohorts is widespread in Southern Europe (Bendit et al. 2006; Leccardi 2005; Narotzky and Pusceddu 2020). In particular, we find that the reconfiguration of the domestic moral economies during recession contradicts in practice austerity policies affecting the state’s responsibility toward long-term social reproduction. These issues connect at a structural level but at the same time produce an experienced disjuncture in the everyday lives of people, one that increases ambivalence and anxiety. While young adults are grateful to their parents for supporting them, they resent having to depend on them. Pensioners supporting younger kin are also ambivalent about their role in creating passive and dependent adults with no long-term perspectives. For younger adults, also, gratitude at home toward parents’ everyday support gets entangled with abstract misgivings at what they are told is an older generation’s struggle to retain privileges that harm the young.

The case of Ferrol carries lessons for anthropological analysis far beyond this region in Northern Spain. First, it illustrates the connection between scales of social reproduction: The

microscale of the household with its income opportunities and its intergenerational solidarities and intimate conflicts cannot be understood without analyzing the macroscale of industrial restructuring, delocalization, the labor market, and the various governance scales that configure local spaces and opportunities for making a living.

Second, the material and moral aspects of making a living and having a life worth living are codependent and express the interconnections between economic opportunities of different kinds, concrete networks that circulate resources, moral claims, and personal obligations that sustain material circulation.

Third, temporality is present in material aspects such as the crystallized gains of the Transition class struggles that consolidated a welfare system, expressed in the pension system but also in the public system of education and healthcare. It is also present in the imaginings of the future that both younger cohorts, such as those mobilized in “*Juventud sin Futuro*,” and older cohorts, such as those mobilized in the “Dignity Marches” or the “Pensioners’ tide,” have about expectations of livelihood opportunities and desired freedom.

Fourth, the dominant ideology of individual autonomy supported by the concept of self-responsibility for the present and the future is elusive in practice albeit recurrently wished for by the younger generation. In fact, the metaphor of reinventing oneself, as the engineered result of one’s own creative knowledge and energy, clashes repeatedly with the multiple dependencies—finance, labor, care, and affect—that materially and symbolically support entrepreneurial forms of autonomy. Both as support and obstacle to autonomy, dependencies are present and strongly felt.

Fifth, from the point of view of the general structure of the national economy, this situation of prolonged dependence of active generations on state subsidies, often through their retired parents’ pension, proves useful. It enables the “internal devaluation” of labor costs that has become the central objective of Southern Euro-

pean nation-states in order to enhance national competitiveness in the crisis conjuncture. This represents a form of transfer from labor to capital through the mediation of the state.

Finally, if we think in terms of social reproduction at various scales, what we observe, analytically, is overwhelming interdependence.

Dependence and autonomy, generational accounting and generation thinking, are frameworks and categories used by policy makers, the media, and some groups of mobilized citizens (e.g., *Juventud sin Futuro*) to give meaning to these overarching and multiscale relationships in society. The form of individual or distributed responsibilities that they help configure are crucial in defining social worth and the modes through which power is exercised, reconfigured, and resisted. Structural conflicts of social reproduction understood in terms of generational confrontation obscure the class differentiation that underlies them and the intergenerational solidarities that enable immediate everyday survival.

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Notes

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/26/young-people-predisposed-shake-up-established-order-protest> (accessed March 16, 2020).
2. Although adult cohorts born in the 1950s and 1960s are being increasingly described as “baby boomers” in the Spanish media, this is very recent and is clearly an import from Anglo-American discourse, as the connotations of that historical period in Spain are very different. They are linked to the penury of post-Civil War scarcity and repression as well as to the “development miracle” of the late 1960s.
3. https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/santiago/2019/03/18/inditex-vertebra-alto-porcentaje-economia-provincia-corunesa/0003_201903S18C4991.htm (accessed March 26, 2020).
4. Instituto Galego de Estadística (2012); for 2019, see https://www.ige.eu/estatico/estat.jsp?ruta=html/gl/DatosBasicos/DB_MundoLaboral.html (accessed March 26, 2020); <https://www.laopinioncoruna.es/opinion/2019/05/05/retos-empleo-temporalidad-crisis-industrial/1399004.html> (accessed March 26, 2020); and <https://www.europapress.es/galicia/noticia-sindicatos-advierten-temporalidad-desempleo-galicia-20191024155621.html> (accessed March 26, 2020).
5. Estrutura de ingresos dos fogares grandes concellos, Ferrol, https://www.ige.eu/web/mostrar_actividade_estadistica.jsp?idioma=gl&codigo=0205002 (accessed March 16, 2020).
6. www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/SummaryReportSeminarYouthEntrepreneurshipRev.pdf (accessed March 16, 2020); European Committee of the Regions (2017); <https://www.consilium.europa>

- .eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/142702.pdf (accessed March 16, 2020).
7. <https://emprego.xunta.gal/portal/es/emprendedores-y-autonomos.html> (accessed March 16, 2020).
 8. <https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/en/content/youthwiki/39-start-funding-young-entrepreneurs-spain> (accessed March 16, 2020).
 9. Boletín Oficial del Estado. 26-12-2013. Ley 23/2013, de 23 de diciembre, reguladora del Factor de Sostenibilidad y del Índice de Revalorización del Sistema de Pensiones de la Seguridad Social.
 10. Léon Bourgeois (1851–1925) was a French politician. He developed the theory of “solidarism” as a quasi-contract among present and future generations continuously indebted to previous and contemporary members of society.
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