

# Youths and Mediterranean Youth: From Aesthetics to Demography

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Contemporary society extols the image of youth, based on aesthetic criteria, while at the same time it makes the situation of youths as individuals precarious. This paradox is especially paradigmatic in the Mediterranean basin, where the gap between the two shores is relevant to demographic studies and the theories of the clash of civilizations. The analysis of factors such as migrations or fertility rates highlights the lack of young people that the Mediterranean area will experience in the coming decades, a phenomenon whose extent will finally depend on the political and socioeconomic framework of each country.

## Youth as an Aesthetic and Demographic Ideal

The arrangement of age groups, together with the arrangement of sexes, makes up this great form of classification that, starting from the biological, articulates every society. In this way, gender roles and the social construction of age groups become one of the basic characteristics of all social organisations. What seems clear to us for anthropological or ethnographical study, owing to the recognition of cultural distance, is also so for sociological study. Much more for demography, whose basic material is its analysis of the sex and age of the people who make up a specific population, together with the changes in the demographic behaviour of generations, associated with the socio-demographic events that correspond to them.

A dual paradox in the consideration of youths and youth characterises our contempo-

rary society, which is extended by the process known as globalisation. The first has to do with the individual and the social image of age: the reserve with which youths are observed in contrast to the surrender to the image of youth. An image nurtured by an aesthetic ideal centred on the cult of the body and nourished by the interpretation of Greek-Roman classicism made since the 19th century. Meanwhile, moreover, we find the transposition of these supposed values assigned to age as a biological attribute of the individual in the population, which relate youth to what is emergent and age to what is decadent. Thus, the so-called aged societies, as is the case of the developed countries, are characterised by negative values, such as loss of drive or creativity, irremediably related to a dark prospect based on doubts about the sustainability of the pensions system. This is the disappointing vision of “societies of the elderly, living in old houses, ruminating on old

ideas” predicted by the demographer Alfred Sauvy. In contrast, the societies with young or relatively young structures are almost always considered with optimism, as potential human resources despite the evident difficulties that these societies and the young individuals that form them can experience. The paradox soon emerges in seeing how the economic and social conditions of the countries characterised by one structure or another manifest a balance completely inverse to this biologicist tendency to resolve matters quickly which is so commonly accepted.

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The Mediterranean region has become, very much in spite of the 479 million inhabitants of the different countries that comprised it in 2005, an example of this dual paradox. Countries in the Mediterranean region are faced with different population structures: 119 million youths would find themselves subjected to the cruel reality of seeing youth exalted while at the same time their situation, as individuals, becomes more precarious or, even worse, is under suspicion. In this respect, the Mediterranean has become a paradigm of a supposed demographic gap, used to defend the so-called “clash of populations”. Samuel P. Huntington always uses the comparison between the differential demographic growth of Spain and the Maghreb, of Palestine and Israel, or of Serbia and the Albanese of Kosovo, to explain past, present or future conflicts in the region.

It should be noted that this same writer makes the age group of youths the main potential threat of these conflicts, accusing them of being especially inclined to protests, instability, reforms (*sic!*) and revolutions.<sup>1</sup> Although not with such an extreme vision, a generalised trend is observed towards focusing the subject of Mediterranean structuring on the demographic background and, within this, both youths and youth appear in first but not a very good place. We intend to analyse these prejudices from the demographic viewpoint but also with an open blue view, as Ernst Bloch would say, in our case, a Mediterranean blue.<sup>2</sup>

## Demographic Determinants of Youths

As we have said, the period called youth is a social construction that, as such, in each specific society can respond to realities completely different from the historical and anthropological point of view. After the Second World War, in the developed countries a whole youth movement emerged which, together with Romanticism, could be one of the historical periods from which the image of youths in the 21st century most derives. Different realities came together in this new image of youth,<sup>3</sup> most notable among which is the role played by the construction of the welfare state and the universalisation of secondary schooling which would mark the 1970s. In the second place, there has been mention of the crisis of parental authority, which during the same period was strengthened by the rural exodus

1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Touchstone Books, 1996.

2. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1986.

3. Carles Feixa, *De jóvenes, bandas y tribus*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1998.

and the reindustrialisation of many European countries, and which in some of them adopted the form of international migration, widening the generation gap. In the third place, in parallel, the discovery of the young as a bed of mass consumption is noted, which fostered a growing presence of youthfulness in the media. Lastly, the so-called sexual revolution and the criticism of puritan morality is noted and would reach its peak in the aftermath of May 68 and the hippy movement. All these changes were marked out with legal redefinitions, such as the determination of adulthood, which in its time was lowered to eighteen in most countries, or socio-demographic redefinitions, such as the inversion of intergenerational flows of adults towards minors, the contraception revolution<sup>4</sup> or the evolution itself of the population structure, with many of them coinciding with the baby boomer generation reaching youth.<sup>5</sup> It is very tempting to relate the changes experienced by youth with the extraordinary growth of the number of young adults.

A second moment, the most recent, has its origin in the economic crisis of the 1970s, and although at first it deepened the most negative aspects of youth, that is, the fear of disorder and marginalisation embodied by the youths who had been unable to enter the labour market or were expelled from it, an almost opposite path soon followed, the product of the effort in the investment in human capital, that is, in education.<sup>6</sup> The added year in education with the aim of improving expectations of entry into

the labour market, brought with it a de facto increase in youth dependency, measured in resources but also in temporal terms in the delay in becoming independent economically and with reference to family and home. Especially in countries where the welfare state is weak, above all in relation to those of Northern Europe, as is the case of most Mediterranean countries, this investment was sustained by the family environment, which thus paid the price of lengthening the period of dependency. Therefore, the expansion of university studies to broader layers of society and the lengthening of dependency have in the end moved the frontiers of what we call youth, extending them, on this occasion, at the top.

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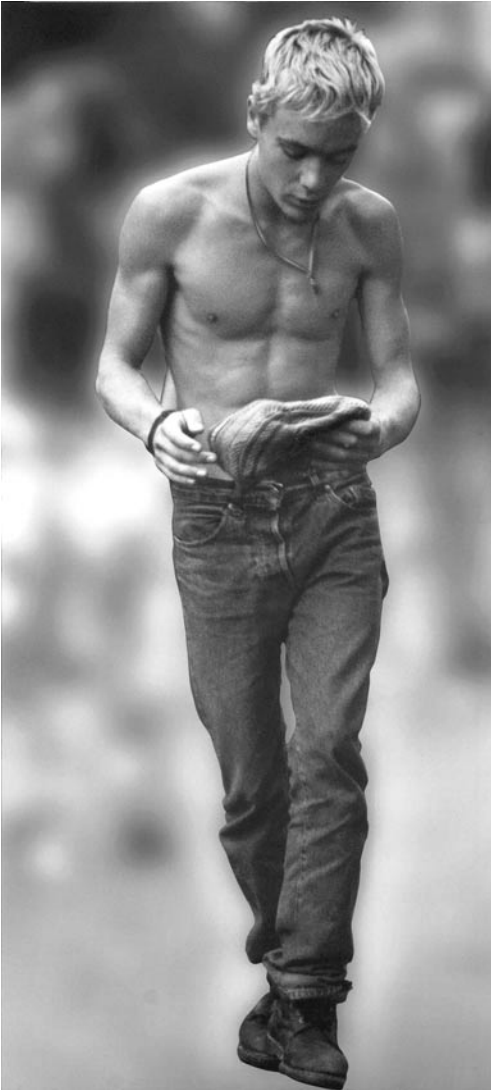
Once again, this evolution, which we have explained very broadly, has its correlation in socio-demographic changes. Together with the process of female emancipation, the mutations experienced in the social definition of ages are one of the causes of what some demographers have classified as the Second Demographic Transition,<sup>7</sup> which explains the transformations that have taken place since the end of the 1960s mainly in matters of fertility, marriage rates, and in family structure. These changes occurred with diverse chronologies, marked both by the impact of the economic crisis

4. Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*, London, Fontana Books, 1975.

5. Richard A. Easterlin, *Birth and Fortune: The Impact of Numbers on Personal Welfare*, London, Grant McIntyre, 1980.

6. Enrique Gil Calvo, *Los depredadores audiovisuales. Juventud urbana y cultura de masas*, Madrid, Tecnos, 1985.

7. Dirk J. van de Kaa, "Europe's Second Demographic Transition", *Population Bulletin*, vol. 42, no. 1, March 1987; Dirk J. van de Kaa, "The Second Demographic Transition Revisited: Theories and Expectations", Symposium on the Population Change and European Society, European University of Florence, Florence, 7-10 December 1988; Ron Lesthaeghe, *The Second Demographic Transition in Western Countries: An Interpretation*, Brussels, Princeton University Library, 1991.



Dario Villalba, *Dancing*  
(Marlborough Gallery Barcelona).

new generations, explain their speed and intensity. The extension in the Mediterranean countries of the Southern shore can continue on this same path that, in contrast to the opinion of the defenders of the Second Demographic Transition, has no reason to obligatorily converge in its indicators and forms, and cannot be read as an indicator of modernity or progress. A final demographic phenomenon must be borne in mind for this redefinition of youth. Here, we refer specifically to the rise in life expectancy and the improvements in the old age group: that the addition of years of life, in conditions of health that cannot be compared with the conditions experienced by previous generations, has acted both on the redefinition of old age and on that of youth. It could be argued that, from a collective perspective, the years of life gained at one extreme have also allowed the lengthening of the period that we agree on calling “youth”. In the 21st century, in most developed countries, the entry of the baby boom generations into youth is marking and will mark the conception of the young, who will become a scarce resource. As happened in the previous period, the volume itself of youths, in this case their decrease and relative scarcity with respect to adults, will have a determinant effect on the perception of the young and youth.

### Between Ageing and the Demographic Bonus

and by the institutional framework and the demographic tradition of each region. The pioneers were the Scandinavian countries, followed by the central Europeans, joined in the mid-1970s by those of the Southern European Union, such as Spain, Italy, Greece and Portugal. The material conditions, but also the normative gap between old and

Let us leave aside the young for a moment and consider the structures by age of Mediterranean populations. As we have already suggested, while some are defined by the ageing process, others continue to show population profiles characterised by their youth. At the two poles we find Italy, with 19.7% of people over 65 while in Palestine, Syria or Jordan they repre-

sent only 3%. What we call demographic ageing is no more than the growth of the proportion of people over 64, a product of the continued decrease in fertility, the so-called ageing from the bottom (referring to the population pyramid), and of the increase in life expectancy, what is known as ageing from the top. In most European Mediterranean countries both the decrease in fertility (and the consequent reduction of the youngest generations) and the improvement in life expectancy (and, therefore, the growth in the elderly population) have been singularly intensive and concentrated, producing as a result a very acute rate of ageing. A good example is Spain, which went from 2.92 children per woman during the period 1965-1970 to 1.18 in the period 1995-2000. Italy lagged behind: from the 2.49 in the second half of the 1960s to 1.21 in the last five years of the 20th century. Increased life expectancy has also been detected in these two countries: during the same period both went from 71 years of life expectancy at the end of the 1960s to 80 years at the end of the 20th century. The proportion of elderly has increased from almost 10% in 1970 to 16.8% in the case of Spain and 19.7% for Italy in 2005. With respect to the young, however, until the 1990s the baby boom generations still predominantly comprised these age groups and it will not be until the 21st century when the groups of baby boom generations begin to enter, the less numerous being those of the baby burst. To give an idea of the volume it is worth mentioning that, following on with the extreme cases of Spain and Italy, the number of youths between 15 and 29 would pass in the first case from 9.7 million in 1995, when it reached its maximum, to 6.7 million predicted for 2020;

in the case of Italy, from a maximum of 13.5 million in 1990 it would pass to 8.8 in 2015. The voices of alarm, as always, feel justified by the predictions made about the future of this population structure. It is in this next decade when the effect of the diminution of fertility will be fully felt in the reduction of the number and proportion of the young.

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On the Southern shore of the Mediterranean the situation in terms of the population structure is very different and also contrasted, but more in the percentage of minors (future young people) or the elderly than in the percentage of these young people today. Thus, in Tunisia the under-15s make up 26% of the population and in Palestine they reach 45.6%, while the over-64s obtain minimum values of 3% in Palestine, Syria or Jordan, and a maximum of 7.2% for Lebanon. Although the oscillation of the youth group is lower in the countries of the Northern shore, between 32.5% in Syria and 26.5% in Palestine, it is in any case above the 16.6% in Italy or 20.5% in Spain. The also rapid decrease in fertility,<sup>8</sup> although still far from the minimum values of the Northern Mediterranean, as well as the more moderate rate of ageing, has meant that some authors, when referring to the structure by age of the population, talk of the “opportunity bonus” or the “demographic dividend”.<sup>9</sup> With these terms they make an indirect reference to the beneficial

8. Morocco has gone from 7.1 children per woman in 1965-1970 to 2.4 in the first five years of the 21st century. In Tunisia, the reduction has been even more drastic, going in the same period from 6.9 children per woman to 2.1. Algeria, for its part, has gone from 7.4 to 2.5.

9. David E. Bloom, David Canning and Jaypee Sevilla, *The Demographic Dividend: A New Perspective on the Economic Consequences of Population Change*, RAND MR-1274-WFHF/DLPF7RFIUNPF, 2002.

demographic situation of finding populations where the number of dependent people (minors and the elderly) falls, while that of the active population reaches maximums. This process is parallel to the extraordinary improvement in the levels of education among the most recent generations, both masculine and feminine. However, exploiting this potential depends on the capacity of the labour market to absorb the entry of young people, as well as the urgent challenges of improving the production system and fighting unemployment.<sup>10</sup>

Some scholars, in relation to what happens between the two shores of the Mediterranean, have sought to see in the relative scarcity of youths on one shore and the relative excess on the other the main reason for the migratory movements from south to north. As if they were dealing with the theory of communicating vessels, they have made clear a supposed principle of osmosis of the population, considering both the fertility levels and the structures, which the demographer Joaquín Arango has satirically christened as “hydraulic population theories”.<sup>11</sup> In this way, migrations would be a way of making the low fertility of the developed countries less severe, or of compensating the structural deficits. This vision outside of demography, and which does no more than replicate the arguments of neoclassical economics extrapolating the differences in population structure to salary differences as the cause of migrations, only

seeks to displace to the demographic the existing clamorous economic imbalance, the true cause of the majority of migratory movements. Unfortunately, that simplistic explanation has been popularised under the name “replacement migrations”, following the report of the Population Division of the United Nations published in 2001,<sup>12</sup> which seeks to appear rigorous by shielding itself behind the population forecasts and a spurious causality. It should be said that the response of demography, which has been blunt although not without a sense of humour, questions the principle of osmosis in demographic matters to the point of reducing it to the absurd. The British demographer David Coleman shows that in order to make good the structural deficit in the relationship of dependency of South Korea, the world population would not be enough.<sup>15</sup> To belie such a hypothesis others have pointed out how at this time international migrations take place with great intensity between countries with similar levels in terms of fertility and the age structure of their populations. The great African regional movements of the Gulf of Guinea or of Austral Africa, for example, have been taking place between countries with high fertility and young structures while, at the opposite extreme, the fertility rates of Eastern European countries with migration towards European Union countries are also notable for values even lower than those of receiving countries and for a notably aged pyramid.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, the Span-

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10. Regui Asaad and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahmi, *Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge?*, Population Reference Bureau, 2007.

11. Joaquín Arango, “La ‘cuestión migratoria’ en la Europa de fines del siglo XX”, in Jordi Nadal (coord.), *El mundo que viene*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1994, pp. 63-94.

12. *Replacement Migration: Is It a Solution to Declining and Ageing Populations?*, Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, 2001.

13. David A. Coleman, “Replacement Migration, or Why Everyone Is Going To Have To Live in Korea: A Fable for Our Times from the United Nations”, *The Royal Society*, no. 357, 2001, pp. 583-598.

14. Myron Weiner and Michael S. Teitelbaum, *Political Demography, Demographic Engineering*, New York/Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2001.



Dario Villalba, *Here* (Marlborough Gallery Barcelona).

ish case, far from being evidence, as a quick glance at the demographic indicators would apparently suggest, is unbeatable proof that undermines this hypothesis. Although it is true that Spain has stood out, together with Italy, for the minimums recorded in fertility and the maximums in the lengthening of life expectancy, which in their turn has had repercussions on the rate of ageing, so

has the migratory boom experienced in the first years of the 21st century taken place when the baby boom generations were in the labour market.<sup>15</sup> The comparison of the flows received by Spain and Italy is very illuminating: Italy, which began the decrease in its fertility before and reached lower levels than Spain, has received less immigration but, most importantly, has coincided in the

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15. Andreu Domingo and Fernando Gil, "Immigration et évolution de la structure de la main-d'oeuvre au Sud de l'Union européenne", *Population*, no. 4, 2007, pp. 825-846.



time and ages of these flows, thus showing the causal relation of the flows with the economic rather than the demographic situation.<sup>16</sup>

## Youths, Protagonists of Migrations

If the reason for migrations is not found in the deficit of young people, what is their role in migrations? First, we should point out that the weight of the migratory movements between 15 and 29 years of age is very important, especially in the last five years, from 25 to 29, which together with the 20-24 age group, are usually the main protagonists of the phenomenon (in Spain, for example, 1 out of every 3 immigrants who arrived between 1997 and 2006 were aged between 20 and 29). Second, we should recall that the flows taking place in the Mediterranean, albeit the most important, are not limited to those who cross the sea from south to north. There are other extra-Mediterranean centres of attraction, such as the countries of the Persian Gulf, but there are also other flows of migrants from third countries who arrive in significant numbers both in the countries which are clear receivers of immigration on the Northern shore, and the countries which are at the same time sources and receivers of immigration. An example of the latter would be Morocco or Algeria in terms of Sub-Saharan flows, with a foreign population of 2% in 2005, or Egypt or Libya in terms of flows from other neighbouring countries, with 2% and 11% respectively. Those who believe that 2% is a very low percentage should note that Spain, if we leave out the microstates of Liechtenstein and Luxemburg, today heads the list of EU countries in foreign population

percentage with 10%, while in 1999 it only reached 1.9%.

However, to really understand the role of the young in migrations, in contrast to the idea of replacement based on the demographic structural deficit, we propose the idea of complementarity between migrants and non-migrants. Specifically, the complementarity between immigrant and local youths, and especially between immigrants and the native generations of youths, which responds to the socio-demographic changes in the very definition of youth (but also of gender roles). Together with an especially positive economic situation, socio-demographic complementarity would be the phenomenon that would effectively explain the unusual growth in migrations received in Northern Mediterranean countries in recent years, especially in the Spanish case, which has positioned itself at the head of the flows received in the whole of Europe. The increased level of education and with it the expectation of entry in the labour market, together with the mass entry of women, would be the key pieces in this phenomenon, effectively amplified by the growth of the number of elderly people. If on the one hand the entry of baby boom generations, and with it the relative scarcity of youths in the labour market, can be considered an incentive for immigration, we should bear in mind, however, that this phenomenon will also represent a substantial decrease in consumption, which should lead in its turn to the creation of work places. In any case, the economic cycle will continue to have the last word in the future demand for workers. This complementarity in fact represents an unequal access to a segmented labour market in which immigrants always enter behind natives with the same level of education. It is therefore a

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16. Andreu Domingo and Fernando Gil, "Desigualdad y complementariedad en el mercado de trabajo: autóctonos e inmigrantes en Italia y España", *Revista Italiana di Economia, Demografia e Statistica*, 2007, pp. 75-100.



type of migration oriented towards the demand for jobs requiring few qualifications, in contrast to the programmatic declarations of the European Union, but also in contrast to the declaration of some source countries, which make the “brain drain” an element of political negotiation. To put it another way, the less-qualified young have more to gain on this type of circuit than the educated youths of source countries, who will find themselves caught in a bottleneck of the over-qualified. Moreover, most young immigrants from 25 to 29 should be considered as adults if we define them from the perspective of their autonomy, given that they are emancipated in terms of home, family and economically.

*Voices continue to warn about the possible conflict generated by cultural differences between autochthons and alloctones*

Lastly, whatever the reason for migration, there is no lack of European voices that threaten us with the ethnic substitution of the population in the destination countries, and in keeping with Huntington’s discourse continue to warn about the possible conflict generated by cultural differences between autochthons and alloctones, or about the inevitable decline of cultural and ethnic identity in the receiving countries.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, we would like to point out that many of the fears awoken by immigrants conceal the fear of generational replacement. Within this current, the immigrant and the supposed cultural distance are confused with the youth and the generational distance. Applying an additional turn of the screw to this issue, among some autochthonous citizens, on more than a few

occasions, rather than a distance there is a real gap with the non-immigrant youths, with their own descendants. This is because they are closer to the values represented by some of the young migrants – the values of effort, self-realisation through work, the importance of family ties or gender roles, for example – than to the values of their children and grandchildren. Those who profess such future fears should be warned, with exquisite tact, that the future has already arrived, and that the country they remember either never existed or only exists in their nostalgia.

### **Youths: Between Stigmatisation and Utopiasation**

On both shores of the Mediterranean this ambivalent perspective is sustained about youths and youth that, on the one hand, keeps the individual stigmatised, whether because of the potential turbulence attributed to them or accusations of hedonism, while youthfulness is imposed as an aesthetic value. Literature has reflected this extraordinary paradox, precisely exploring the socio-demographic factors it involves, and trying to explain the transformations in the two segments of life that have changed the most in recent decades: youth and old age.<sup>18</sup> Together with the redefinition of ages, this same literature that attempts to explore and participate in the creation of the social imaginary clearly shows the contradiction between individual behaviour and collective needs, which since its birth has been the Gordian knot that has occupied the centre of demographic thought.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we

17. David Coleman, “Immigration and Ethnic Change in Low-Fertility Countries: A Third Demographic Transition”, *Population and Development Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2006, pp. 401-446.

18. Andreu Domingo, *Descenso literario a los infiernos demográficos*, Barcelona, Anagrama, 2008.

19. Paul Demeny, “Population and the Invisible Hand”, *Demography*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1986, pp. 473-487.

find works that set out futures where erasing the passage of time is an obsession, and where youths must dissimulate their condition, such as *Globalia* by Jean-Christophe Rufin,<sup>20</sup> where the young man is seen as the force of social change par excellence. Or works such as that of Michel Houellebecq, with his novel entitled *The Possibility of an Island*<sup>21</sup> in which, based on this same mystification of youthfulness, the youth is regarded in clearly accusatory terms, in a world where the body and sexual attractiveness dominate as a source of power, where intergenerational transferences benefit the young and where ageing, the discovery of obsolescence, is accompanied by an unspeakable process of moral suffering.

The lengthening of dependency which comes with the extension of education in the information society seems to be a process with no return, even in the most favourable economic situations which induce some of these youths to abandon their studies in favour of the immediate benefit that comes with entry into the labour market. The discourses that censure the young in one way or another, which barely hide their class roots, are discourses aimed against the worker, against the changes in gender roles, against political transformation, or which pressure for an unconditional entry into the labour market by the youths who live in both Northern and Southern countries. Once again, what is happening in the Mediterranean region is no exception, but does attract attention because of the unusual intensity and rapidity with which these changes are taking place.

The reduction in the number of youths in the countries of the Northern shore, which we

are now already seeing, will be replicated in the future in the countries of the Southern shore. The demographic cycles in the next twenty years, however, are completely different: the relative scarcity of youths in the north will correspond to the entry of some baby boom generations in the south, but also to a different calendar, which will reach the maximum in 2010 for the countries of the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and in 2035 for those of Makreb (Libya and Egypt). These baby boom generations will be followed by baby boost generations.<sup>22</sup> With a negative economic situation, a reduced volume that puts pressure on the labour market can be beneficial, quite the contrary of what happens with baby boom generations. The demographic potential continues, therefore, to depend on the economic context.

The scarcity of youths will be generalised in all Mediterranean countries, stagnating at the 120 million between 2005 and 2040 according to official prospects of the United Nations, as a consequence of the succession of increasingly more reduced generations because of the decrease in fertility. Their significance will also decline owing to the growth in the number of elderly, thanks to the improvements in mortality, which it is predicted could pass from 50 million in 2005 to 130 million in 2050. The scarcity of youths should work in favour of the individuals of this age: the baby boost generations should benefit from their increased value, while seeing a reduction in competition among them. This, at least, is what has been seen historically.<sup>23</sup> However, the institutional and political context of each country will be definitive in the conditions of life of the young.

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20. Paris, Gallimard, 2004.

21. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

22. United Nations predictions: *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision Population Database*, New York, United Nations, 2007.

23. Richard A. Easterlin, *op. cit.*