RYOT Network

Research on Youth's Opportunities and Transitions

working paper

MULTI-FACED NATURE OF YOUTH TRANSITIONS

In this paper we examine youth transition from different perspectives, on the one hand addressing the relationship between education and the labour market and the most salient issues. We focus to provide an understanding and how LLL policies can be used to facilitate youth transitions. Hence, we want to stress the importance of promoting and strengthening the link between education and work should be considered, taking into consideration both (1) the process of preparing young people for transition whereby young people have access to and can develop the skills (i.e., knowledge, competencies, attitudes and qualifications) required by the labour market to secure, retain and thrive in productive and decent employment, and adapt to the evolving economy; and (2) the process of making the actual transition whereby young people are able to smoothly access productive and decent work opportunities that make effective use of their skills (UNICEF, 2019). To successfully answer those two processes, three elements should be held in mind: skills demand, skills availability, and prompt skills activation (ILO, 2018).

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INTRODUCTION

This working paper aims at investigating the multi-faced nature of youth transitions, delineating the complex reality with which young people must cope nowadays when imagining and planning their future, the importance of structural factors that shape youths' conditions and identities, as well as their intersections in determining different trajectories of youth transitions. We aim to pinpoint some of the questions that are of interest to the RYOT network more broadly, delineating the state of the art and research gaps in youth transition studies.

The RYOT *Youth Transitions* working group is interested in exploring the following research questions:
- How do young people and young adults navigate transitions between formal and informal education, between different contexts and in times of increased uncertainty? How do these transitions vary between different young people and with what implications for social inequalities?

- How are current macro-social changes affecting post-compulsory education transitions? With what impacts on the development and implementation of policies for lifelong learning at the global, national, and local levels?
- How do dominant policy narratives frame youth and youth transitions, and with what consequences for institutions, social structures, and the lives of young people?
- How do policies aimed at managing young people's transitions (e.g., apprenticeships, work-based learning, employability schemes etc.) function and with what outcomes?

THE CONTROVERSIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND MARKET: FROM CLASSICAL SCHOLARS TO LLL DISCOURSES

At the global level, the 2030 Development Agenda and its 17 Goals provide a platform for converging action by policy makers and multiple stakeholders across the world. Indeed, the Sustainable Development Goals are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. The 17 Goals were adopted by all UN Member States in 2015, as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the Goals[1]. Youth transitions are central across this Agenda. Specifically referring to the transition from youth to adulthood as a part of the life course, it is viewed as a process associated with social and demographic passages of a person from the educational system to the labour market and from the parental household to an independent household of one's own, and eventually, decisions about parenthood.

What makes the transitions to adulthood so special is not that it presents itself as a multidimensional sequence of events – a fact that applies equally to all later stages of the life course – but rather its density in choices that will profoundly influence the person's later trajectory. The metaphors of "pathway" and "trajectory" for transition processes have been replaced with the metaphor of young people "navigating" their ways into adult life (Parreira do Amaral *et al.*, 2020). The perceived insecurity about social and economic stability poses a threat to individuals and requires coping strategies to navigate one's life course successfully (Pandolfini *et al.*, 2022). Transitions are viewed as a series of choices, albeit affected by social background, rather than as rites of passage. Although a critical understanding of the structures and discourses that shape youth is essential, we must also consider how proactively young people respond to the obstacles and opportunities, challenges, and uncertainties that they face (Wyn *et al.*, 2020). The widening gap between youth aspirations and the realities they face shape youth transitions in their life course as well as their participation in political and societal spheres. The way youth transitions are managed by individuals is shaped by a complex interplay of various factors that can be traced back to three main dimensions: i) opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009) influenced by policy design and macroeconomic context; ii) individual abilities, attitudes, and inclinations; iii) socio-cultural background.

In such a scenario, the transitions from school to professional training and from training to the labour market and employment have gained increasing attention from the scientific literature as pivotal transitions in youth's life course, also interacting with ongoing changes such as processes of life course de-standardization (Shanahan *et al.*, 2016). Since the 1970s, critical research in different disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, pedagogy, anthropology, and economics, has highlighted how the formal education system contributes to the reproduction of inequalities. Studies adopting a transition approach (Walther, 2006) show that cultural and social capital of young people plays an important role in building the individual biographies and strengthening people's awareness and identity, as well as in determining school performance (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970). As stated by Goldthorpe (2013), social origin may have effects on the educational attainment in terms of student performance or career choices. The different subjective preferences, aspirations and orientations may be intergenerationally sustained. Following his general model, Bourdieu treats they as socially constructed, as particular people utilize social, cultural and economic capital to reproduce a social position across the generations even as the social world changes; some are better equipped to take advantage of the possibilities afforded by change in the rules configuring a

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[1] For more details: https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

field or to colonize emerging fields where the rules of the game are ill-defined (Bourdieu 1984: 357-358).Indeed, the trajectory we trace suggests that conflicts in the habitus (a là Bourdieu) mobilized by social change are generated in all kinds of relationships (e,g,, family, peer, partner), and are passed down intergenerationally (Aarseth et al., 2016). This shows the cultural dimensions intervening in shaping on the one side the individual expectations and, on the other, the choices (and related meanings) of youths in transitions. Bertaux and Thompson (1997) go further by viewing social reproduction as deeply embedded in intergenerational relational processes and conceptualizing families as units of 'anthroponomic production' (1997: 19). Therefore, life ages are culturally defined categories, also resulting from an intergenerational negotiation (Maragaggia and Benasso, 2019: 7), which becomes a crucial element in shaping youth transitions, impeding or facilitating change, within a context where the changing meanings of adulthood are negotiated (*ib.*: 2). In addition, transitions studies underline that social reproduction is far from an automatic consequence of social background: school choices and educational and working performances depend on individual life courses, which are influenced in turn by teachers and school environment (Müller, 2014), among other things.

Recently, in the context of Lifelong Learning (LLL) policies, the relationship between training and work has become increasingly central. A widening interdisciplinary research stream focuses on exploring the heterogeneity of individuals' experiences regarding the nexus between learning and labour market transitions, and the meaning that each individual attributes to such experiences (Benasso *et al.*, 2022).

Lifelong learning is defined as all learning activities undertaken throughout life, which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social, and professional reasons. It encompasses all forms of learning: both planned or unplanned (non-formal learning); in formal or informal settings; in all types of learning situations (social, workplace, schools or training providing institutions); for personal or work-related purposes (Cedefop, 2014).

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, LLL has been identified as crucial for creating economic growth and, at the same time, guaranteeing social inclusion and quality education. On this point, it is important to stress the main policy discourses underlying Lifelong Learning (Vergas, 2017; Benasso *et al.*, 2019). The first is the discourse of the knowledge economy or knowledge society, according to which the role of education is interpreted in market terms. Inspired by human capital theory (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1962), and revoking functionalism theories (Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1959), it is based on the assumption that continuous learning is essential for the changing demands of the global economy and for forming the necessary human capital, knowledge and skills. As a result, most of the education systems around the word have changed the academic subjects taught as well as teaching methods to serve the interests of the economy, narrowing the curriculum to disciplines that are thought to produce better employment prospects (OECD, 2020). The emphasis on 21st century skills, transferable and soft skills, the multidimensional concept of competence (Fondazione Agnelli, 2018) acquiring a key role within compulsory and adult education, as well as work-based learning are illustrative of this point.

According to this discourse, youth unemployment becomes a problem of a lack of qualifications and skills, while LLL is conceived as an instrument to tackle the problem of skills mismatch and outdated knowledge, to provide the right set of skills for work. In other terms, it is an instrument for adaptability to the labour market and a response to unemployment.

These trends are also connected to the consolidation of a dominant discourse highlighting the centrality of individuals and biographical choices over social structures and institutions in explaining opportunities, trajectories, and identities in contemporary societies, as implied by the individualisation thesis (Evans and Furlong, 1997). The focus is on the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their own learning throughout their lives (Vargas, 2017). This has been interpreted as the shift of responsibility from the state (as bearer of the duty to fulfil the right to education) to the market and the individual, who is now "burdened" (Biesta, 2015) with the duty to learn and to do so throughout their life. This shift has been interpreted as a symptom of the erosion of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism that, according to Milana (2012), affects the role of the state in redistributing wealth through public provision, and privatises the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The resulting changing work and life conditions have been accompanied by an increased responsibility of workers for managing their labour market transitions. This corresponds to the concept of 'employability', (COM, 2009) which clearly underlines an individual's responsibility for maintaining their employment potential in the labour market, including by lifelong learning. However, the stress on the employability outcome risks neglecting to account for the different drivers that lead workers to participate in lifelong learning, and the many ways in which the variety of learning settings support workers in managing the labour market transition they are involved in. Low skilled workers often lack the cultural resources or capital to reflexively play with their identities and actively reconstruct them (Barone, 2006), and this negatively affects their capability to successfully navigate towards satisfying transitions. One serious critique of the LLL-concept from the perspective of social inequality is to – symbolically – shift the responsibility for employment to the subject. Unemployment viewed from this standpoint indicates that the subject did not adequately develop and manage their own skill portfolio (i.e., blaming the victim). Employees are thus put in a situation in which they take on continuing education classes at their own expense and are pressured to re-prioritise their lives (Jarvis, 2009).

YOUTH TRANSITIONS: SALIENT ISSUES

Young people are viewed as a vulnerable social group compared to previous generations as they face larger, more diverse risks and uncertainties that affect their life course (Elder, 1998, Kohli, 2005). This societal development has resulted in the character of life courses being designed more individually, which entails both more choices but also more compulsion (cf. Tikkanen et al., 2020). Over the past few decades, scholars in youth research (Furlong et al., 2011, Woodman and Bennett, 2015) have examined the various gaps between promises and realities for young people in contemporary society. Transition points are seen as critical conjunctures in the life course of young people. They are of paramount importance in understanding the societal dynamics and how social inequality affects young peoples' lives. Young people experience several transition points in the life course, for example the transition from school to school or school to work, or in general from youth to adulthood. They are crucial moments in the development of their identity (Côté, 2019), in terms of potential opportunities and constraints young people may face, and in terms of reproducing or reducing social inequalities.

Youth transitions are influenced by a number of different dimensions. On the one hand they are influenced by contextual factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, and the position in the social field (Bourdieu, 1977), on the other hand by institutional configurations such as structures of the education and training system, labour market conditions, welfare provisions, family structures or socio-demographic developments. The interaction between those contextual and institutional factors shapes the individual opportunity structure (Roberts, 2009) and determines the agency and the choices of young people. In addition, these dimensions have an impact on youth's educational and employment careers. If one compares the interaction between these dimensions, one can see persistent inequalities. These inequalities are particularly evident, reproduced and cemented at the points of transitions that separate young people on the basis of their social background, gender or ethnicity. Studies such as Chisholm (1999) or Tarabini and Ingram (2018) have shown that social origin and a successful educational career are intertwined and influence the transition to adulthood.

Understanding youth transitions

Transitions are status passages in the institutionalised life course (Schoon, 2020). Opportunities and constraints are shaped by socio-historical context and are dependent on individual decision-making and agency. Youth transitions are institutionalised sequences of status-role transitions (i.e., transition from school to school or school to work) and role configurations (i.e., youth to adulthood) in the life courses that are driven by social norms regarding age-appropriate behaviour, the timing and order of status or roles. Social capital plays an important role in how youth transitions take place (Côté, 2019). Existing social capital can, for example, help young people experience an easier transition from a dependent youth to an independent young adult because they already have social ties or networks that help them to transition. Another transition point in young peoples' life course is the transition from full-time schooling to paid employment, which in turn is closely linked to other

important transitions in the life course that mark the transition from youth to adulthood, such as leaving the parental home or starting a family of their own (Nilsen et al., 2012). By using a theoretical model like the youth transition regime that distinguishes different configurations of power and normality in organising social inclusion and exclusion, youth transitions can be systematically understood and how the context can affect.

Youth transition regimes

The concept of transition regimes refers to different (national) configurations of regulation of transitions in the life course. The term regime was first developed in the context of European comparative research on young people's transitions from education to work and distinguished different factors such as socio-economic, institutional, and cultural forces that interact with and influence individual agency. This model emerged from welfare state studies (Esping-Andersen, 1990), which developed a similar model for welfare state regimes. With the help of this model, the various structures of welfare state such as the national education system can be analysed, with which one can also gain an insight into how inequalities arise and can be understood.

Walther (2006) has developed a youth transition regime model that differentiates between four types: (1) A universalistic regime that is mainly found in Nordic countries (e.g., Finland). This type is characterised by extensive welfare provision with an integrative school system. (2) The liberal regime that can be found in Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g., United Kingdom) is characterised by an adaptive and versatile education and training system, which is associated with open and easy access to employability. At the same time, this regime is often also associated with high risks and poor access to welfare and social benefits. (3) Continental countries (e.g., Austria, Germany) are included in the Employment-centred regime, in which the frameworks of education and training are more selective and standardised. The focus lies on (pre-) vocational training. Access to social assistance is not universal. Finally, (4) the Mediterranean countries (e.g., Italy, Portugal, Spain) are characterised by a non-selective education system combined with low-standard training schemes. These countries belong to the sub-protective regimes where access to the labour market is difficult, which is reflected in the high rates of informal and precarious jobs. (5) In the current version from 2017, Walther added post-socialist countries (e.g., Bulgaria, Croatia) to the youth transition regime model. However, those countries are not understood as part of a common regime, as they differ greatly due to the dynamics of the transformations.

School-to-school or school-to-work transitions

The transition from compulsory education to secondary school or employment is considered a critical moment in young people's lives. It is a make-or-break point in the life course that determines and impacts a wide range of the decisions in the later life such as employment opportunities, family formation or health and wellbeing. The decision(s) about which school a young person attends after compulsory schooling is influenced, among other things, by the educational system. The separation or selection of young people according to their skills or their future educational pathways is referred to in academic literature as tracking (cf. Allmendinger, 1989). Some education systems are more selective, starting at an early stage, with the consequence that the transition from one path to the other is strongly influenced by social capital and family background. This also leads to low social mobility and the reproduction of social inequalities among certain groups of people (Krause and Schüller, 2014). Consequently, tracking during transition periods also influences future educational and labour market opportunities (Van de Werfhorst and Mijs, 2010). Due to the pluralization of the educational offer and the labour market, making the perfect choice is seen as a complex process. The development of pluralization also brings negative factors such as greater precarity and job insecurity.

Transitions from school to school or school to work are closely linked to social policies and welfare institutions that facilitate normative transitions such as entry into employment after leaving school. Studies have shown that the character of life courses has changed (e.g., Elder, 1998, Heinz, 2009, Kohli, 2005). It has become less standardised and more individual. As a result, some transitional points in the life course such as working or starting a family, have been moved or have been postponed to a later part in the life. However, policies are still being developed and implemented as if life courses and transitions follow a specific time sequence. They often leave little room for

trajectories that do not fit into such norms. This can contribute to greater vulnerability for youth, many of whom fall through the educational tracks.

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND WORK

The importance of nurturing and strengthening the connection between education and work is recognized by different international organisations that are dealing with young people. The Council of the European Union within The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 highlights the importance of fulfilling European Youth Goal, to ensure equal opportunities for all young people to develop the necessary skills and gain practical experience in order to smoothen the transition from education to the labour market. They suggest to member countries to guarantee the recognition and validation of competencies acquired through internships, apprenticeships, and other forms of work-based learning, as well as volunteering and non-formal education as well as to ensure equal access to quality information and adequate support mechanisms to prepare young people for the changing labour market and future of work.

Regarding connection of transition of youth to work from education and skills and knowledge, there are two categories: (1) the process of preparing young people for transition whereby young people have access to and can develop the skills (i.e., knowledge, competencies, attitudes and qualifications) required by the labour market to secure, retain and thrive in productive and decent employment, and adapt to the evolving economy; and (2) the process of making the actual transition whereby young people are able to smoothly access productive and decent work opportunities that make effective use of their skills (UNICEF, 2019). To successfully answer those two processes, three elements should be held in mind: skills demand, skills availability, and prompt skills activation (ILO, 2018).

Technological, climate, demographic, and other changes such as globalisation are shaping the future of work and consequently future *skill demand*. The demand for skills appears to have changed during the late transition period (Commander and Kollo, 2008). While the impact of these changes will vary based on country context, the international organisation is trying to create skills framework that is recommended to all countries and that is creating a base for future successful transition from education to work. One of the most important recommendations of this type is European Commission Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. The Recommendation is taking into account the requirements of the world today, and on that base, it identifies eight key competences essential to citizens for personal fulfilment, a healthy and sustainable lifestyle, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion. Structural changes at the labour market and rapid development of new technologies require education systems to develop for their students critical thinking, media literacy, communication skills, digital skills, mathematics, and science, as well as skills for innovation (European Commission, 2019). Further on, regarding skills demand, it is very important for countries to match skills that will be developed during an education to the demands of employers. Currently there is much evidence to suggest that mismatch in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries is too high. Among the main challenges to the effective matching of the supply of and demand for skills on the labour markets in transition and developing economies are the weak capacities of employment services, underfunding of state-provided training services, slow reforms of education and vocational education and training (VET) systems, a relatively low level of in-house training by employers, and the existence of large informal economies combined with low levels of labour market attachment (Bartlett, 2012). This issue has two dimensions: the education and training system and the institutions of the labour market (Bartlett, 2013). Skill mismatch has an adverse effect on the efficiency of labour markets raising unemployment above the levels that could potentially be achieved given the level of aggregate demand. Efficient matching would reduce frictional and structural unemployment and ensure that vacancies are matched to workers with appropriate qualifications and skills (Petrolongo and Pissarides, 2001).

The second element of school-to-work transition is *the availability of skills* for work as demanded by the labour market. Some of the key underlying causes of skills unavailability include poor skill foundations laid in early childhood and in basic education as well as barriers to accessing skills

development opportunities in terms of cost, distance, entry requirements, and lack of alternative pathways (ILO, 2018). Additional elements that lead towards lack of availability of skills are inadequate and inefficient financing, lack of information and awareness of labour markets and misaligned study choices; and gender biases in informing study and work choices (ILO, 2018). Consequently, in many countries across the world there is lack of access to quality education and skills development. Many children and young people go to schools of such low quality that they leave functionally illiterate and innumerate. Globally, six out of ten children and young people are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. Many schools are also failing to support girls and boys to develop transferable skills needed in the workplace, like self-confidence, problem solving, critical thinking and creativity (UNICEF, 2018). Furthermore, while informal apprenticeships may provide many young people with training opportunities, particularly in low-income countries, these often suffer from poorly skilled master crafts persons, a lack of accreditation and gender biases in recruitment (UNICEF, 2018). Further on, there is substantial evidence that selective systems lead to the perpetuation of social inequalities, although the evidence is mixed and controversial. However, the general trend is for the general (grammar or gymnasia schools) to serve the children of upper- and middle-class parents, while the children of working class or more disadvantaged children are channeled into vocational and technical schools (Bartlett, 2013). It is expected that the general schools are better resourced and attract the better teachers, leading to a process of inter-general perpetuation of social disadvantage (OECD, 2007). Consequently, initial gaps in student performance may widen in tracked systems, increasing inequality in educational outcomes. The extent to which selection promotes differentiation in school experience and resources for skill formation differs between countries according to the specifics of the education system design.

The third element of school-to-work transition are factors that affect young people's search for work and labour market attachment and the moment of *skills activation*. Young people face significant obstacles in their search for work. As a result, the job search process can be protracted: the average time for young people in low- and middle-income countries to find the first job is 17 months and 53 months to find their first stable employment (UNICEF, 2019). That leads towards a conclusion that there is a long amount of time passed from the moment when skills are gained through education and the moment of its activation.

To conclude, there is both a skills gap and a skills mismatch in education to work transition, with 71 million unemployed youth worldwide and 156 million young workers living in working poverty with less than $3 a day (UNICEF, 2019). Three out of four young people not in education, employment or training are female, largely because of childcare and domestic chores (ILO, 2018). These trends come at a time where the future of work is growing more unpredictable given the increasing but uneven impact of technology on the workforce across both sectors and countries (World Bank Group, 2019).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper discussed the multi-faced nature of youth transitions, pointing out the multidimensional processes for interpreting today's youth transitions, which scholars describe as complex, delayed, and prolonged. The emphasis has been placed on how "traditional" axes of inequalities, such as class, gender or ethnic origin, influence youth transitions, and how structural factors (and their intersections) play a role in determining different trajectories of youth transitions. Here, we would conclude the paper by providing some recommendations relying on analyses on social, and namely educational policies, experiences and interventions dealing with life transitions and adulthood, at International and European levels.

- *Change in the current understanding.* In order for suitable policies to be developed, a social and political change must occur. Youth life courses as well as youth transitions have become more destandardised these days. The character of youth life courses is less linear, and the transitions have become more complex and reversible. The transition to adulthood

is used as a synonym for the transition to work life, from which the term 'normal' biography has developed, which describes the acquisition of a qualification and smooth integration into the labour market and social integration. The term 'yo-yo transitions' helps to describe the flexibilization and individualization of life courses and transitions. This is important as young people's biographies are increasingly moving away from the existing institutional structures of the transitional systems. 'Yo-yo transitions' indicate that young people are in a floating situation of insecurity, trying to develop their 'own life', but are still economically dependent.

- ***Connect (theoretical) understanding to European and International strategy frameworks.*** There are a variety of frameworks and strategy papers that helps to facilitate the transition of young people into adulthood and into the labour market. One of them is the **EU Youth Strategy**, the framework for European cooperation in the youth field for 2019-2027. The strategy aims to improve the situation of young people in Europe by creating more and equal opportunities in education and on the labour market, promoting active citizenship and thereby social inclusion and solidarity. Projects funded by funding programs such as Erasmus+ help these. Another strategy is the **OECD Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People**, which recommends that policies be developed to ensure that young people of all backgrounds and circumstances acquire relevant knowledge and appropriate skills and competences needed for the labour market. This is to be done by designing flexible and modular learning paths. Further, address and mitigate early leaving from education and training, provide opportunities to return to school or training, and support young people's transitions between different levels of education and strengthen work-based learning and apprenticeships. Finally, the **UN Sustainable Goals** and especially Goal 4 Quality Education. In general, this framework states that by 2030 it should be ensured that all young people should have complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education that led to relevant and Goal 4 effective learning outcomes, thereby increasing the number of young people with relevant skills, including technical skills, for employment and thus eliminate gender inequalities in education too.

- ***To develop and implement policies that will lead towards decreasing of skills mismatch on national, regional, and local level.*** That could be done by empowering capacities of employment services, increasing funding of state-provided training services, implementing reforms of vocational education and training, and improving in-house training made my employers.

- ***To develop and implement policies that will lead towards social inclusion and decreasing social inequalities.*** That could be done by reduction of barriers, such as cost, distance, entry requirements and lack of alternative pathways, that are disabling for some groups access to skills development opportunities.

- ***To initiate and carry out the process of formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning.*** That could be done by making these forms of learning more visible and recognised by creating a document that would be an instrument of proving that special learning outcomes have been reached, and that would have social value and be widely recognized so that young people can benefit from it, now or later in life, when returning to the formal education system or to the labour market.

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RYOT NETWORK

The RYOT network aims to encourage and enable collaboration between young European researchers and to strengthen their professional connections, going beyond their local and national contexts. The network facilitates discussion and the sharing of ideas, questions, and concerns among early career researchers. RYOT network also aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of young Europeans' life course opportunities and transitions, which encompasses a range of highly important social justice and equality issues.

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WEBSITE

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FURTHER READING

List up to five current or forthcoming publications that might be of interest to readers.

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