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Think piece: The precariousness of the young generation and the making of flexible and employable workforce. A Bourdieusian point of view revisited

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In an interview published exactly thirty years ago under the provocative title "Youth is but a word", Pierre Bourdieu (1980) focused, from a sociological point of view, on an issue which since then has become even more important and broader in scope, namely the issue of youth and its historical and intercultural relativity, its social role and the challenges it poses. There is a very broad consensus among sociologists that these last three decades have seen deep economic, social and cultural changes, which can be summed up by Boltanski and Chiapello's (2000) view that a "new spirit of capitalism" has emerged and contributed to radically changing the rules of the game in contemporary societies. We shall therefore propose, in our contribution, a return to Bourdieu's sociological interpretation and discuss its usefulness in the light of thirty years of social change.

The question of the integration of young people into employment will be at the centre of our sociological analysis. We set out from the theoretical premise that this set of problems lies at the core of what, since approximately 1840, has been called the "social question" in capitalist societies. The transition from school to working life is increasingly becoming a critical and precarious period, marked by all kinds of uncertainties and risks, which compound what psychologists call the "crisis of adolescence" (Erikson, 1968) with the additional problem of moving successfully from the socioeconomic "limbo" of childhood and early youth to the moment when it becomes necessary for young people to "find their place" in the world of work. Against the background of this crisis, new social and political approaches have been developed, particularly in order to help strengthen, on a lasting basis, people's economic, social and cultural capabilities to cope with an ever-changing world of work which has turned the goal of an uninterrupted professional career into an increasingly rare privilege and which in fact requires individuals to develop specific skills to manage their increasingly discontinuous professional and private lives.

Since the 1980s, numerous concrete initiatives have been implemented on the basis of this capacity-building or "capabilities approach", whose main propounder in recent years has been A. K. Sen (2000).

Of course, the theoretical framework established by Sen represents a broad "coordinate system" for diverse socio-political interpretations and practical approaches. Depending on one's discipline and/or theoretical standpoint—from economics via sociology and political science to philosophy—there are variations on the same subject. This should not be regarded as a criticism of the capabilities approach, but, on the contrary, it points to its heuristic fertility and great socio-political potential.

The capabilities approach expresses clear normative views of human beings in terms of philosophical anthropology as well as views on key social issues. Both strands converge in the demand that the "realisation" of all human potentialities be promoted and supported. Since Greek antiquity, ideas about what makes a "good" or "successful" life have been at the centre of ethical and philosophical

discourse. However, while this type of thinking was initially the prerogative of an elite of free citizens (male members of the ruling class), who used it as a basis to solemnly legitimate their power, the capabilities approach revolutionises the demand for self-realisation not only by defining and postulating it as a fundamental "human right" but also by charging the political and social institutions with the responsibility of creating optimal chances for the self-realisation of all citizens. The opportunities for self-realisation would then be—to use a term coined by Max Weber (1968)—"life chances" in a material sense as well as in an immaterial sense. They would be "species powers", in the Marxist sense (Marx, 1980), which would have to be freed from different types of alienation. Thus, the capabilities approach cannot simply be reduced to a hedonistic proclamation of the way to salvation or to the establishment of heaven on earth: its aim is not to make messianic promises of happiness, but rather to call for a society where everyone is entitled to be the author of his or her own life story. From the point of view of a "sociology of socialisation", the originality and importance of this approach is perhaps most tellingly expressed by two distinctive qualities which make it stand out from classical socio-political conceptions:

- In the first place, innovation in terms of taking into account young people's situation and career projects regarded as a whole and through their own eyes and viewpoints. In this way, young people targeted by initiatives based on a capabilities approach relinquish the passive role of "clients" that need to be looked after. Instead of adopting a bureaucratic outlook to tackle the problems and difficulties encountered by young people, the aim is to take a "lebensweltliche Perspektive", i.e., a perspective based on the "world of everyday life" as the starting point for action. With Bourdieu (1982), we may say that this approach aims to strengthen the resources available to individuals (cultural, social and symbolic "capital") and then, once it has become internalised as a way of life, to serve as a sort of practical sense to enable them to find their way in an increasingly complex social world.
- Secondly, this approach is clearly distinct from a managerial or instrumental view of the problems addressed and their reduction to a purely economic dimension along the lines of "How can young people be integrated in the labour market as rapidly and as cheaply as possible?" On the contrary, contemporary social issues are regarded in terms of a comprehensive concept of social citizenship which draws no artificial distinction between the public and private dimensions of people's careers and personal development but rather strives to integrate them through a horizontal approach.
- Last but not least, the capabilities approach is characterised by a profound change in the way young people with integration difficulties are viewed (and view themselves). Habitually, they are seen in a pejorative and negative light as "problem cases", so that social work in this area inevitably takes on the appearance of a "corrective" activity aimed at remedying a number of presumed shortcomings, gaps and incompetencies. With the capabilities approach, on the contrary, the targeted persons function as active players, responsible for their own lives and equipped with a multiplicity of valuable skills which hitherto were only latent and invisible to the eyes of those who viewed the problem of precariousness from a traditional, a priori negative standpoint. As in the case of traditional education systems, such a conventional approach produces, whether consciously or not, a "catalogue of shortcomings and deficiencies" because of its extremely restrictive concept of what "capability" can legitimately mean, rather than taking the actual individual, including his or her background, current situation, needs, dreams and expectations, as the starting point to determine which personal aptitudes and skills can be mobilised to develop a project for the future (i.e. what opportunities or "life chances" [Weber, 1968] would be made available to the individual by those capabilities once they were released and activated). In the following we shall strive to combine the capabilities approach with a kind of sociological diagnosis of the "social issue" of young people affected by multiform exclusion and precariousness.

Young people: Bourdieu's point of view

According to Bourdieu (1980), the meaning of "youth" (i.e., the status of young people, their social representation, their "life chances", etc.) varies considerably from one historical period and one

culture to another. At the same time, Bourdieu points out that the same variability can be observed in the status of young people within one and the same society. For example, the relation between "biological age" and "social age" is profoundly different for the two genders. Furthermore, depending on whether a young person is socially integrated in the world of work or, alternatively, in the education system, we may speak of at least two different "youths": on the one hand, we have students with their "temporary" integration in an almost "playful" economic market; and, on the other hand, young people who are already fully integrated in the world of work, with all the "seriousness" this implies. In the first place, we may speak of a state of temporary irresponsibility in a social no-man's-land where everyday life can be improvised by combining elements taken from the world of childhood and the world of adulthood and thus, as it were, playing on both sides—an undeniable advantage, which appears to make many young people from privileged social classes want to prolong this state of affairs as long as possible so as to stay "forever young". In the second case, we find young people becoming integrated fairly rapidly and definitively in the world of adults, although in terms of biological age they are the peers of the members of the first group. The "learning to labour" which is the lot of working class youth also involves a "cooling out" process (Goffman, 1952) whereby young people learn to "fall into step". Everyone must find their place and young people are expected to grow up. According to Bourdieu (1980), however, these social borders, which up until recently were fairly clear-cut, have been blurred by the fact that increased access by lower-middle-class and working-class young people to higher education has given rise to a wide range of intermediate social groups. Young people from different social backgrounds have been placed in a sort of social limbo (schools, universities, etc.) which is separate from the world of adults. As a result, they have—at least in part and temporarily—a different way of life whereby they can all experience a relatively open (at least theoretically) world of possibilities, with a significantly wider range of career options than that enjoyed by previous generations. At the same time, however, the (very) relatively democratised access to higher education institutions is not automatically accompanied by a comparable increase in the assets accessed through academic qualifications. In fact, quite often a point is rapidly reached where there is an inflation of certain qualifications, particularly when such qualifications have become accessible to people without social status. This results in painful disappointments and frustrations as the expected benefits of upward social mobility—sanctioned by the State in the form of a degree or diploma—fail to materialise.

This, in a nutshell, is the argument advanced by Bourdieu (1980) in his sociological analysis of the situation of young people in our "bourgeois" societies.

Today we must ask ourselves whether these contradictions and paradoxes in the status of young people are not being further exacerbated under pressure from increased market competition as well as from the new skill needs associated with the new spirit of capitalism. On the one hand, being young appears to be associated, as a common denominator, with the ideal image of the highly employable and competitive worker. On the other hand, the profound changes that have taken place in the labour market, accompanied by increased job insecurity, appear to make the "adult status" so uncertain that young people's careers are becoming increasingly unpredictable and seem to be replaced by a way of life that can best be described as continual improvisation and makeshift adaptation to circumstances.

A problematic youth

For some years now, "young people" have had a meteoric career as a conceptual category exemplifying the most urgent social problems and the most burning social issues. In the first place, this seemingly "natural" and hence "universal" category increasingly appears to play the role of a generic target of all policies aimed at combating precariousness in general and unemployment in particular. Thus, young people are being placed at the very centre of today's social issue par excellence, namely the so-called crisis of the "wage-earning society". Furthermore, they seem to function as an all-purpose category, particularly extensible and flexible as a means of projecting all kinds of collective conceptions relating to insecurity, malaise and crisis (think, for example, of speeches on urban violence, juvenile delinquency or drug addiction).

As a social issue, "young people" have become the favourite target of a two-edged social regulation policy: on the one hand, they are deemed to require social protection; on the other hand, the social order must be protected from young people. Support and control are advocated as two sides of the same "social coin". Everything seems to suggest that the rapid success achieved by this variable-geometry category in different historical contexts and socioeconomic situations can be largely explained by its ability to serve as a particularly polysemic concept behind which a wide range of social relations of the dominant-versus-dominated type (including relations between "the established" and "the aspiring", "owners" and "would-be owners", etc.) may hide or manifest themselves in a transfigured or euphemistic fashion. When we speak of youth, we are speaking of social reproduction; when we ask questions about the precariousness that afflicts young people, we are talking about a social reproduction mode that is in crisis; when we ponder the causes of young people's violence, we focus on various forms of anomie and different pathologies that accompany this crisis and their negative psychological and social effects.

It is no coincidence that the issue of "youth precariousness" and its multiple forms (poverty, unemployment, vulnerability, social exclusion, etc.) has been raised to the status of a key social issue precisely at a time when we are witnessing a radical transformation of the modern wage-earning society that emerged in Europe during the *Trentes Glorieuses* ("The Glorious Thirty")[4] through a specific kind of "historic compromise". In the context of so-called "social" or "continental" capitalism" the status of "wage-earner" or "employee" was—so to speak—institutionalised on a lasting basis through government action in the area of labour law and social protection, thus simultaneously embodying a concept of social and political citizenship and a fairly standardised model of career development. This compromise has now been radically called into question.

The emergence of "young people" as an "all-purpose category" to represent contemporary economic and social problems has been paralleled by the emergence of a wide range of discourses which appear to regard the specific qualities associated with "being young" as the very basis of a new conception of human resources geared to meet the pressing requirements of an economy subject to the seemingly unavoidable and irreversible constraints of the new historical dynamics of increasingly globalised capitalism. Flexibility, mobility, perfectibility, meritocracy, adaptability, low cost, competitiveness, constant subjection to tests and reviews—these are some of the material and symbolic requirements associated with the status of "young". They have subsequently been transformed into the universal "virtues" of the new type of human resources repeatedly advocated in neoliberal rhetoric.

The aim seems to be to turn the employee of the future into an "eternal youth" who will unquestioningly accept, almost as a dictate of fate, the need to take part in an endless rat race which will never lead to a stable, recognised and secure job. "Employees" in this situation will be all the more prepared to embrace the concept of lifelong learning since they will never truly leave this strange "waiting room" where they find themselves in the company of a "reserve army" of similar workers aspiring to security, all of them eternally young in that they will forever lack a legitimate social status (Rambach & Rambach, 2001).

The concept of "employability", which is continually being served in all the different sauces of neoliberal discourse and which—thanks to its remarkable ambiguity—has crept into numerous policy statements and programmes aimed at promoting job creation and combating unemployment, is perhaps the concept which most tellingly expresses this idea of human resources that are flexible, mobile, with no attachments and no history, i.e., always young. All this leads us to believe that "youth" as a favourite category of current economic and political discourse plays the role of a "test lab" for a new kind of economic "standard" or "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1982), which would characterise someone who can be described as a self-marketing or self-promoting wage-earner, who is forced to submit his/her personal worth to the verdict of the market day-in, day-out.

[4] This refers to the thirty-year period from 1945 to 1975, following the end of the Second World War in France in 1945.

Youth as a laboratory to test flexible and "employable" work habits

The terms "youth" and "precariousness" go hand in hand, sociologically speaking: to be young means not be "settled"; not being settled goes with an absence of the goods and material or symbolic assets that give an individual a recognised social status and social value as someone who "owns himself or herself" (Castel, 1995). As a "social limbo" or "social moratorium" largely built and protected by the modern state through the education system and the wide range of rights established to protect minors, the category "youth" has proven to be remarkably flexible and adaptable to different social and economic contexts, and everything indicates that this "waiting room" of the market-based society not only plays a key role in managing a reserve army of labour in accordance with changing needs but also represents a kind of socio-economic "laboratory" or "factory" to produce and reproduce an economic "habitus" and human capital "suited to demand" in the market-based society.

In the context of the major economic changes experienced in all post-industrial countries, the officially registered unemployed are only the most visible consequence of the crisis of the wage-earning society. In fact, everywhere in contemporary societies we are witnessing a process of increasing job insecurity and increasingly precarious living standards—a process which tends to destabilise society as a whole. In addition to the forms of income insecurity recognised by the State, there is a largely uncharted "grey area" which includes broad segments of the population that face uncertainty and the absence of the guarantees, assurances and protection traditionally associated with full-time, open-ended employment. A large proportion of this disadvantaged population is made up of new generations of young workers who are joining the labour market for the first time or have joined it very recently. These young people are confronted by a "multidimensional precariousness" which results in a lack of social status and social rights, a lack of financial and domestic independence, poorer long-term career prospects, no regular income and inadequate coverage by social protection programmes. In short, instability and insecurity affect disadvantaged young people in all areas of their social, economic, professional, relational and family life. Unemployed young people are only partially included in unemployment statistics and everything suggests that this social group's lack of public visibility in official representations reflects the lack of collective knowledge and recognition of the problems and risks associated with it.

Families often must counterbalance, for varying periods of time, this absence of support. There is a division of labour (paralleling the distinction between private law and social legislation) whereby the brunt of the social protection of young people rests on the shoulders of their families (obligation to provide food and shelter, support for insertion in the labour market, etc.). But in the last twenty-five years or so, this key mechanism of social reproduction has itself entered a profound crisis and is becoming increasingly less capable of fulfilling social protection tasks. As a result, the traditional welfare state—based on an insurance system which follows something akin to a meritocratic logic in that it provides social protection to those who have worked over a period of time (and have thus paid social security contributions)—only provides support for young people in a subsidiary capacity (provision of training and education, income support when they become of age) and is therefore too static and too limited in scope to effectively address the social reproduction problems faced by the young generations. At the risk of running ahead of the argument, we may therefore advance the following hypothesis: faced with job insecurity and the deterioration of the "standard" social integration model developed during the "Glorious Thirty" (i.e., a linear and stable professional career from leaving school to retirement), young people are increasingly forced to resort to a kind of continuous "career improvisation" and to develop makeshift strategies to compensate for the absence of paid employment.

Whether paradoxically or not, increased precariousness is affecting a young generation which, on average, is more highly qualified than any other previous generation, and the gap between, on the one hand, the potential value of all the qualifications submitted on the employment market as "entry tickets and, on the other, the actual value obtained, which has been eroded by significant inflation, further contributes to the sense of crisis experienced by young people as well as by their parents/families—given that the latter have not only invested a considerable amount of financial and cultural capital in the reproduction strategies applied to their offspring but have also placed their hopes

and expectations in the success of these strategies. The reproduction crisis we are currently witnessing is not only a crisis of the material bases of society (the social situation) but also a symbolic crisis which affects the social status of these highly qualified young people, who find that the "society of abundance" has closed its doors to them or that, at best, they will be admitted to it by the back door. In conceptual terms, it is firstly the notion of multiform precariousness that is most relevant to the study of these issues. The concept of precariousness enables us, in the first place, to take into account all the phenomena young jobseekers may experience (spatial and social segregation, different cultural backgrounds, drug addiction, crime, etc.) and, secondly, to avoid the dead-end into which so much current research has steered itself by focusing on the categories of "administrative rationality" such as "unemployment", "poverty" and "insertion".

Young people today join the labour market at a particularly difficult time, when the crisis of the wage-earning society makes the transition from school to the world of work increasingly "opaque". We observe an inflation of formal qualifications, which causes a huge gap to open up between young people's aspirations and their actual chances of realising them. The rites of passage that used to characterise the socialisation process (school, training, finding a job, forming a couple, marrying and having children) no longer function as relevant markers of progression along people's life-paths. For many young people who are setting out in life, uncertainty and the disorientation resulting from a "loss of bearings" are very real problems. Of course, as an intergenerational reproduction crisis, the crisis of the wage-earning society affects all young people, and we may be tempted to adopt the term "duped generation" to describe the collective fate of toady's young generation (in view of the gap between the promises and expectations developed during the socialisation process, on the one hand, and the increasingly lower chances of realising these expectations, on the other). But we should not shy away from pointing out that it is the most deprived and "resourceless" young people in all respects (financial, educational, social and "symbolic") who are naturally the most "excluded" from society and the most marginalised economically and socially.

The slave ship

The term "slave ship" (Dubet, 1987) is being used to describe the peculiar situation or no-man's-land in which some school-leavers—who embody the gravest aspects of the social reproduction crisis—find themselves. Disrupting social reproduction in yet another way—namely in terms of "public order"—these young people make up a subgroup particularly exposed to the risk of falling into more-or-less serious and chronic crime. Thus, they are at the same time the most vulnerable youth (and hence targeted by social policies aimed at providing assistance and protection) and the most "dangerous" (and hence a primary target of preventive and remedial actions on the part of social workers and/or correctional and law-and-order agencies).

It is, therefore, those less fit to take part in the increasingly competitive race for the "goodies" promised by the consumer society who are being made to carry the can for (and, in a sense, represent) the current process of generalised regression in relation to the social and economic status gained by the previous generation. It should be recalled in this connection that the frustration inflicted on the young generation is proportional to the extent of non-compliance to a tacit ethical rule which should to govern the "relations of fairness" between generations: The new generation must set out in life from a level at least as good as that from which the previous generation set out, and no doubt this golden rule of social reproduction is no longer followed today. Basing ourselves on the anomie theory developed by Durkheim (1930), we feel justified in arguing that this complex social syndrome entails a process of strong social "anomisation". It appears to go hand in hand with a wide range of pathological symptoms, which are expressed empirically, in a visible fashion, by sociological phenomena such as rising suicide rates, falling birth rates, increased violence, the spread of anti-rational trends and the emergence of a kind of "social chauvinism" based on the collective resentment of the members of an entire generation whose common denominator is the fact that they "lost out" in the process of modernisation (see data on suicide among young people).

The characteristic low social status of young people is all the more painful in that the new "employability ideology" has made the individual responsible for his social success or failure, turning

him/her into a sort of "self-promoter" who must "sell" himself/herself for the best possible price on an increasingly competitive labour market. In other words, the prevailing economic logic holds people culpable for their inability to meet the new requirements of market competition. The re-emergence of thinly disguised social Darwinism and the increasingly blatant acceptance of the "survival of the fittest" as the key underlying principle of social and economic life is de-ethicising the "rules of the game" and pushing the individuals who are most at risk of "multiform marginalisation" towards a kind of "legal marginalisation".

Confined to an increasingly wider area at the crossroads between social assistance and the penal system—a sort of waiting room outside the sphere of sharing and bargaining in the framework of the major social institutions (welfare state, trade unions, political parties, etc.)—these young disadvantaged people, let down by the social reproduction system, are being targeted by professional practitioners in both fields and, as it were, being brought under a double tutorship. The void in which they find themselves is regarded as a potential danger not only to their social integration and to having a successful career but also and especially to society as a whole, which for the common good must be protected from these redundant members.

Childhood and youth: two variable-geometry categories

The border between youth and adulthood is not fixed once and for all, but rather, as Pierre Bourdieu (1980) rightly argues, is a function of the competitive race for status. Whilst spontaneous sociology would make us believe that "youth" refers to an immutable and hence trans-historical biological state, the actual socio-historical objectivation of this seemingly self-evident category clearly shows, as we have outlined above, that depending on the given socio-historical situation the relationship between the biological age and the social age may vary considerably.

According to Bourdieu, the adult generation (i.e., the owners of the assets, whatever their kind) may, under specific intergenerational transmission conditions, withhold the assets from their would-be inheritors by labelling the latter as 'young' and stigmatising them as irresponsible, immature, etc., while under different historical social reproduction conditions they may attribute the accolades of maturity (age of entry into employment) precociously.

In any historical period, therefore, classifications based on age may constitute a way of regarding and dividing society in accordance with an established social order in which each individual is assigned a legitimate or "natural" place and is expected to stick to it.

At the same time, we should recall, with Bourdieu (1980), that the meaning of "youth" at a particular point in history, in a specific social context, is a function of strongly fluctuating social and structural variables. This is particularly obvious in the epoch of modernity, which is characterised, as we have seen above, by a social reproduction mode increasingly based on the transmission of cultural capital and, hand in hand with this, an increasingly long average duration of youth as a socio-economic limbo functioning in the service of a system which demands increasingly higher academic and professional qualifications.

The relation between "biological age" and "social age" not only differs along gender lines but also varies significantly depending on whether an individual's social integration takes place in the world of work or, conversely, in the education system. When we consider the status of "youth" in modern societies, we must therefore speak of at least two different "youths": on the one hand, students, with their integration in an almost "playful" economic market (small temporary jobs or holiday jobs; practical and financial help from parents and/or scholarships/grants; subsidised meals and accommodation; "Bohemian" lifestyle/subculture which turns a financial necessity into a cultural virtue; highly independent use of time; stylised, unconventional way of life; etc.); and, on the other hand, young people who are already fully integrated in the world of work, with all the "seriousness" this implies, i.e. "learning to labour" (Willis, 1981) through integration in the rational organisation of daily life. Everything indicates that the typical inequalities of the economic and social world take on a paradoxical quality in the case of young people. Those from privileged social classes seem to be interested in—and to derive advantages from—a prolonged stay in this peculiar "waiting room of the

real world"; and, furthermore, everything suggests that this does not constitute a sheer (and ostentatious) waste of time before entering the world of work, but on the contrary, is—in accordance with the theoretical argument advanced in this contribution—a sort of tightly run and effective "social laboratory" for the reproduction of the dominant social classes.

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