

**The Long-Term Destabilization of Youth, Scarring Effects,  
and the Future of the Welfare Regime in Post-Trente Glorieuses France**

*To be published Fall 2010 in*

*French Politics, Culture & Society*

<http://journals.berghahnbooks.com/fpcs/>

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Sciences-Po

The future of youth is old age, and beyond. My aim here is not to forecast the social conditions for entry into the future labor market, in the 2020s say, but rather to analyze the consequences of contemporary problems (the scarcity of jobs, unemployment, the stagnation of wages, and so on) for the life chances of youth. I also analyze the first cohorts of adults socialized in the economic slowdown of the 1970s and 1980s to understand the long-term consequences of the *crise*. This essay therefore focuses on the consequences of the (des)integration of youth in France in the context of mass unemployment and *déclassement scolaire* (over-education and diploma inflation). This French experience is interesting in itself.<sup>1</sup> When put in comparative international perspective, however, we can see even more clearly the long-term difficulties facing a number of countries: it is not just a matter of the sacrifice of the youth of today; early career problems create “scarring effects” in the future and pose risks for the future of welfare regimes.<sup>2</sup>

The aim here is to understand how the French welfare regime serves as an important factor in the emergence of cohort-based economic constraints that produce specific social generations.<sup>3</sup> I highlight generational “scarring effects,” that is, the irreversible consequences

of short-term fluctuations in processes of socialization on the long-term life chances of different birth cohorts. These scarring effects can affect specific birth cohorts in countries where the welfare regime provides the context for increasing polarization between middle-aged insiders and young outsiders and where young adults lack resilience in facing early career difficulties.

We examine the concept of “social generation” in relation to the distribution of well-being and life chances, and we seek to understand how the French welfare regime can be undermined over the long-term by an unbalanced distribution of social benefits when the young become the first victims of economic downturns. The French case is marked by strong generational imbalances: as I will show, on account of the shift from the economic boom period of the *trente glorieuses* (from 1945 to 1975) to the era of *croissance ralentie* (slow growth from 1975 to today), a generational rift (*fracture générationnelle*) emerged between the generations born before 1955 (the early baby boom generations and the previous ones, who benefited most from the economic acceleration of the postwar period) and those born after 1955 (who were victims of economic slowdown, high youth unemployment, and the social problems that came as a consequence). This fracturing entails, too, an “insiderization” of previous generations (socialized in the period of economic expansion) and an “outsiderization” of new ones. This *fracture générationnelle* is often denied by policymakers and in the public debate;<sup>4</sup> however, the long-term implications of these generational dynamics may have major consequences for the stability of our welfare state. International comparison provides some useful benchmarks in this respect. Scarring effects and the lack of resilience to early adulthood career setbacks appear to be more extreme in France, but they are occurring in a number of other countries as well.

## **Fragmentation of Youth(s)**

Youths (the plural is crucial) are the groups of people engaged in a process of “transitional socialization,” a period of time after “primary socialization” (as dependents in families and in school) and before “secondary socialization” (in the long-term life course of formed adults).<sup>5</sup> The problem nowadays is that the old institutionalized functionalist life course is gone.<sup>6</sup> The process of transitional socialization is more and more fragmented, and many “adults” fail to obtain a stable independent status. Not only is the process longer, more differentiated between the upper and lower middle classes; it is also less secure. Three stages of youth have therefore emerged: a “first youth” with first experiences in transition, before age 25; a “second youth,” generally between age 25 and 30 years old, defined by partial social independence in the labor market<sup>7</sup> and by long-term dependence on family economic support (because of the disconnection between wages and housing costs); and a “third youth” for those who fail in the process of transition, a social *déclassement* and a situation of never-ending dependence on family solidarity, until age 35 or even later.

The social attainment of the new cohorts of young adults, moreover, is constrained by three important conditions. First of all, the French system remains polarized by the distribution of two main resources—inherited economic assets (i.e., wealth), on the one hand, and educational credentials, on the other. Even if some fractions of the upper middle class have higher positions in both respects (as is common, for example, with physicians and lawyers), the two axes are highly differentiated and remain poorly correlated in France. In the welfare regime of the 1960s, the lower earnings of public-sector civil servants went hand-in-hand with higher symbolic status and better access to subsidized housing, services, and consumption. Today, in the newer generations, the stable social status enjoyed in public companies or the civil service is highly valued and helps offset the mediocrity of wages one

can expect in these sectors. The second constraint that has emerged is that education has become both more necessary and less sufficient as a condition for social success. Personal investment of time, effort, and resources into education has become vital, but the “returns to education” cannot be taken for granted. The diplomas of highly selective *grandes écoles* have a stable value, whereas mass universities (including the many campuses of the University of Paris, and even the Sorbonne) produce legions of educational *déclassés*. As a third constraint, the process of social attainment is concentrated in time, and any early mismatch between one’s diploma and one’s early post-graduation social position has huge consequences in terms of long-term life course in the labor market.

As a result of these constraints, we can observe a fragmentation of youth along three dimensions. The first dimension is age fragmentation: economic dependence in “first youth,” before age 25, is generally accepted, but it takes on a negative connotation during “second youth” (until age 30), and for “third youth” (after 30) it creates shame for the parents and a feeling of failure for the young.

The second dimension is family solidarity. Whereas in the 1970s in France, family support was quite neutral in its effect on status attainment (average wages, even at age twenty-five, were sufficient to cover the housing costs of standard young families), the economic resources of parents and their generosity are now crucial for young people. Youth with similar earnings and from similar social milieus may have starkly different standards of living depending on whether they receive help from families for childcare, housing, access to a mortgage, and the like.

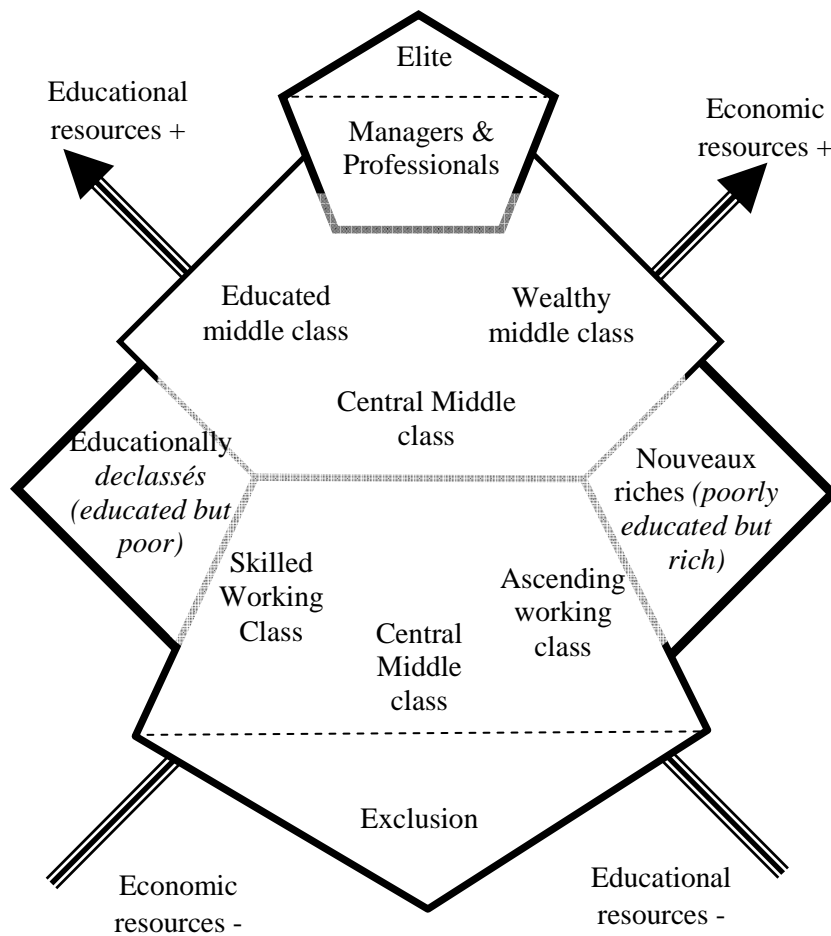
The third dimension is type of education and social context. At the top of the French social structure, elite *grandes écoles* alumni have experienced no strong transformation of their social status over the last forty years. Their transition from school to

work is still fast and linear. Their couple and family formation process differs little from the experience of their predecessors in the 1970s. Family support is not crucial for these elite graduates, since independence in the stable job market is generally taken for granted. Gender differentiation is weaker than in other social groups, and is declining, even if women are more often oriented to the public sector and to skilled welfare jobs, and men to well-paid segments of the private sector. By contrast, the least educated strata<sup>8</sup> is subject to extraordinary risks of unemployment. Youth of working-class origin leave school at an average age of 17 and begin to acquire some stability in employment at age 25 or later, and gender differentiation is strong. This means that in working-class milieus, the average age when a son or daughter finds economic independence and leaves the parental home is higher than in highly-educated families, where youth usually leave home before gaining a bachelor's degree.

Between the end of school and the beginning of stable employment (when it happens) less well-off young people experience a long period of leisure with few economic resources: they make up a stratum of money-poor and time-rich youth. In this group, ethnic minorities are overrepresented but are not the majority. Most participants to the 2005 riots came from this stratum and were either members of the "first youth" generation or elder "second youth" working-class sons who lacked a means of political or collective expression.<sup>9</sup> They had neither social visibility nor political commitment. If youth from this strata lack family support, they most likely feel a keen sense of exclusion. For young people with moderate levels of education (typically the baccalauréat or the "bac + 1"), the situation is even more complicated since social perspectives depend on specific factors, such as type of education (liberal arts *versus* marketable knowledge), the extent of potential family support, social capital, and the acquaintances parents have at their disposal. A tradition of entrepreneurship can have a dramatic effect. Today in France, moderately-educated youth

from unpropertied families (the public-sector middle class, for instance) experience a high risk of economic marginalization when they fail to penetrate the public-sector employment system, where jobs are now scarce, or when they enter the informal art, culture, media, and journalistic sector.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1.** The diamantine social space in the twenty-first century France



This social context can be explained to some extent by using the “diamantine scheme” of the French social class system. The scheme combines Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of social space with Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong “double diamond” class structure.<sup>11</sup> The various elements of this diamantine scheme might move upward or

downward, enlarge or diminish, and separate or agglomerate with neighboring categories. For instance, the left corner of “educationally *déclassés*” (over-educated poor) is much larger today than thirty years ago, when the public sector expanded to such an extent that it could absorb the moderately-educated youth of the early 1980s. Conversely, the “nouveau riche” corner on the right side of the scheme was small and marginal in the 1980s but has since expanded with the growth of small companies, mainly in high-tech development and computer-related services. That said, many contemporary young “nouveaux riches” are not so new, in fact, since most of them benefited heavily from family support when their companies were created.

The fragmentation we have described creates a picture of youth today in France as a poorly organized age group. There appears to be a sharp contrast between the youth of the 1970s and that of nowadays—between (the illusion of) a unified vision of the 1968 generation and (the reality of) contemporary fragmented youths. A more accurate picture would depict the emergence in the recent period of a paradoxical generation defined by its lack of own identity, a lack that is precisely the source of its identity. This picture has strong empirical bases: whereas French youth of the 1970s gave the impression of embracing a cultural and political unity against the conservative right-wing governments and the cultural symbols of former social generations (notably the generation of the Résistance, the 50-something age group of 1968), today’s youth have developed no strong cultural or political symbols of identification with which to create an apparent unity to disguise its obvious and increasing diversity. Hence we need to probe more deeply, beyond the level of cultural and political expression, to see the forces at work in social generation formation in France today.

## **The Multidimensional *fracture générationnelle* in France**

The economic slowdown in France has provoked a dramatic multidimensional *fracture générationnelle* since the late 1970s.<sup>12</sup> This portrait is grim, but it is founded on strong empirical bases, on robust analyses of standards and alternative sets of microdata offering convergent results. Three principal topics will be highlighted here: first, the economic marginalization of new entrants into the labor market and its direct effects on social structure; second, the long-term consequences of this deprivation in terms of socialization and life chances; and finally, the consequences for the political participation of these cohorts, and their support for the contemporary welfare regime.

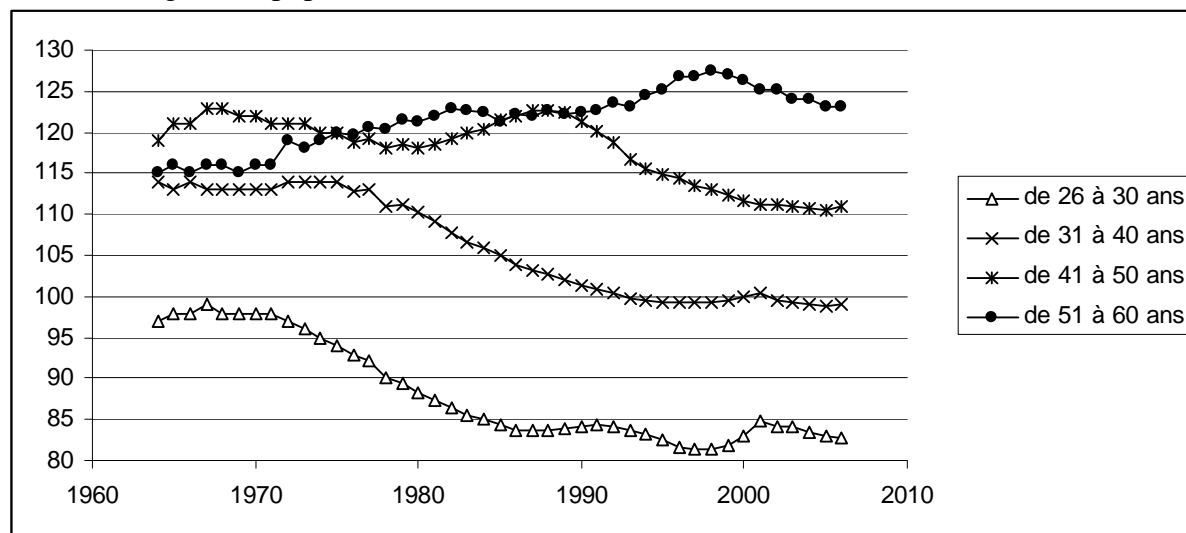
### *The Economic Decline of Youth*

The first aspect of the dynamics of social generation formation in France is the change in the cohort distribution of economic means. A large redistribution of earnings and incomes occurred between the seventies and today. In 1970, the earning gap between age groups 25-30 and 50-59 was 18 percent; the gap has stabilized at about 50 percent for the past ten years. During the *trente glorieuses*, the young wage earners generally began in the labor market with the same level of income that their own parents enjoyed at the end of a complete career. For the past twenty years, we have observed the stagnation of the wages of the young, while wages for older people have grown by 20 percent or more. Here is a new social balance between age groups, whose consequences are not completely understood by social scientists. But it is not simply a change in the relative position of age groups: members of the elder generation (now, those at age 55, more or less) were relatively advantaged in their youth when



compared to their seniors, and now, too, when these seniors are compared to their young successors. The generational gaps result from double gains and double pains.

**Figure 2.** Relative net annual wage by age group of the male population, 1964-2006 (100 = average male population)

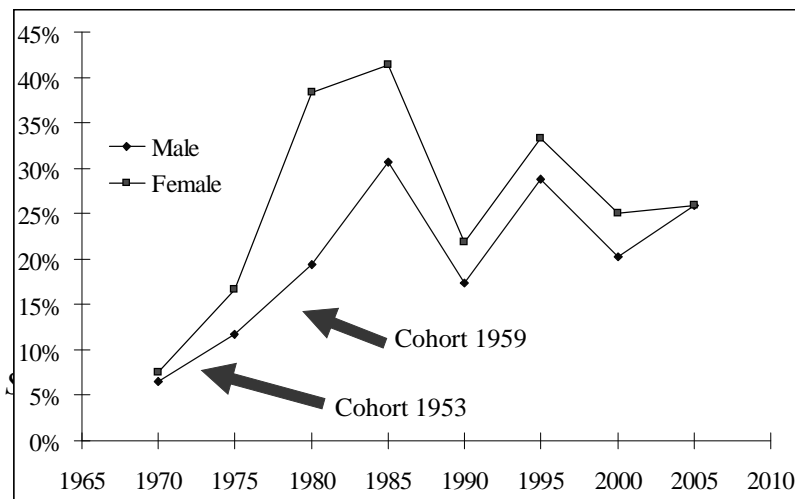


Source: INSEE Déclarations annuelles de données sociales (DADS)<sup>13</sup>

How can we explain this increasing gap? In fact, this is a consequence of changes in collective bargaining (or *compromis social*, meaning formal and informal decisions and agreements between social actors such as employers, trade unions and the state) that occurred during the mid-1970s and early 1980s. This transition in the social value of generations shifted from benefiting newer generations, as a positive future we sought to invest in, to protecting stability for adults and seniors stability, even at the expense of the young. The main factor in the redistribution of well-being concerned unemployment. High unemployment rates were socially acceptable for young workers, provided that adult employees with dependent children could avoid these difficulties. In 1974, the unemployment rate of those who left school twenty-four months before, or less, was about 4 percent; by 1985, those who left school recently had an unemployment rate of 35 percent, which remained the case through

1996; in 2002, at the end of the recent wave of economic recovery, it was close to 18 percent. The unemployment rates of recent school leavers are strongly reactive to the economic situation, whereas the middle-aged and senior rates remain more stable: an economic slowdown has serious consequences for younger adults, and recovery first benefits new entrants in the labor market. Evidently, the perverse consequence of collective bargaining that leads to the protection of adults at the expense of newcomers is a lack of socialization of the new, sacrificed generations. Even if they are now adults, with dependent children of their own, their unemployment rates remain much higher, and their earnings abnormally low, when compared to other age groups, because of a kind of “scarring effect.” At the end of the eighties, the unemployment rate of the group at age 40 to 44 was still about 4 percent and is now over 8 percent. This “scarring effect” is even clearer concerning earnings: the cohorts of new entrants in the labor market in a time of downturn have to accept lower wages; conversely, for young workers, a strong economy allows them to negotiate better earnings. After this entry point, the earning gaps remain because of the lack of a catch-up effect on earnings: some generations are about 10 points above or below the long-term trend, because of the point at which they entered the workforce, and after age 30 the relative benefit or handicap remains stable.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 3.** Risk of unemployment for those who left school less than 12 months before

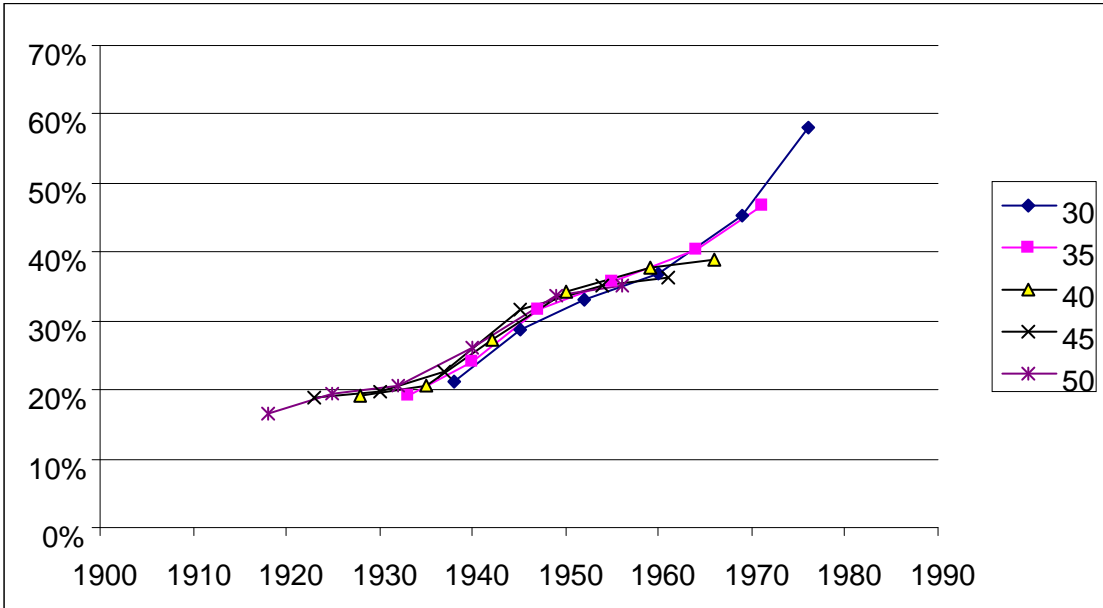


A complementary factor relates to the dynamics of occupational structure and the stratification system. In France, as in the US, the standard hypothesis of stratification change suggests that the long-term educational expansion of the twentieth century, and the emergence of a knowledge-based society, have stimulated the enlargement of the middle and upper-middle classes.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the newer generation could have benefited automatically from the expansion of the occupational groups of experts, managers, or professionals (*cadres et professions intellectuelles supérieures*)<sup>16</sup> to whom we often add middle management and lower professionals in the private and public sectors (such as school teachers and nurses). These groups exemplify the “new technical middle class” whose social hegemony was predicted in the seventies (*professions intermédiaires* in the official French nomenclature of occupations).

The cohort analysis of the expansion of this group shows that from the cohorts born in the 1920s to those of the 1950s the share of this group increased—from 27 percent to 42 percent at age 50, for instance. This growth is significant and substantial, but two strong nuances must be underlined. First, at age 35, we notice a complete stagnation from cohort

1945 to cohort 1975. Second, the pace and slope of these transformations are much slower than in the case of mid-level diplomas, such as baccalauréat (at the end of French secondary education). From the eldest to the youngest, the share of baccalauréat owners increased from 17 percent to 60 percent of a cohort.

**Figure 4.** Male population with at least a baccalauréat

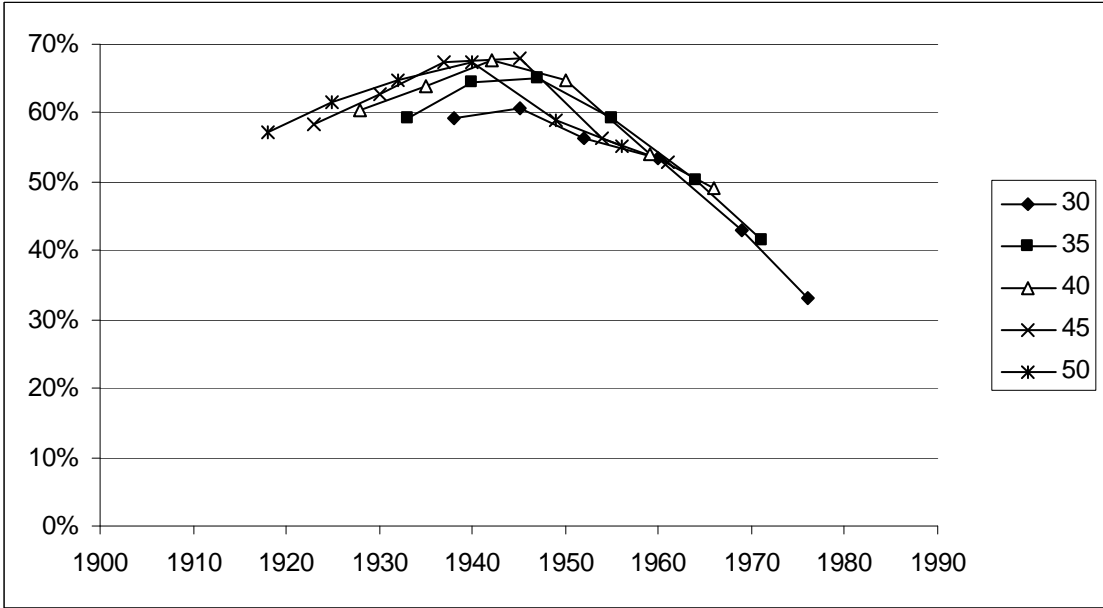


*Source:* 1968-1975-1982-1990-1999-2006 Censuses INSEE microdata N=26 million on the original source<sup>17</sup>

As a consequence of this mismatch between the two trends, we can measure the steep structural decline in the value of baccalauréat in terms of probabilities of access to middle-class positions. In this respect, a baccalauréat (and no additional degree) provided a 66 percent probability of gaining access to middle-class positions for the early baby-boom generation; for those born in the mid 1970s (their own children), the baccalauréat provided only a 33 percent chance of gaining access to middle-class positions (the others being routine

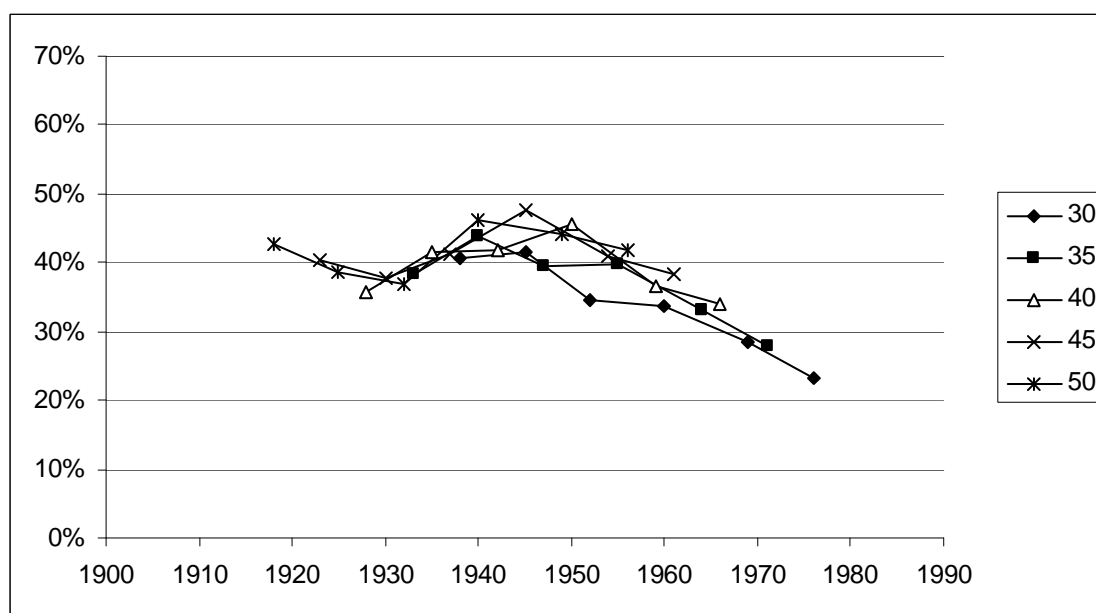
white or blue collars, or unemployed, or out of the labor force altogether). The descriptive results given by the cohort diagram are validated by more rigorous models deriving from Age-Period-Cohort models.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 5.** Male population in middle-class positions and with no more and no less than a baccalauréat



All these results obtained on the male population have similar consequences for females: the situation of females improved from pre-baby-boom to early baby-boom generations, but later generations experienced greater difficulties.

**Figure 6.** Female population in middle-class positions and with no more and no less than a baccalauréat



Source: 1968-1975-1982-1990-1999-2006 Censuses INSEE

How, then, can we explain the following paradox? The first educational boom for the early baby-boom generation did not produce diploma inflation (although access to the baccalauréat doubled, this educated population was absorbed by the job market), but the second educational boom (experienced by the cohorts born between 1970 to 1975) created a huge number of educated *declassés*. In the late 1960s, during the last third of the *trente glorieuses*, France experienced a dramatic expansion of the public sector and of high-tech large companies (manifest in such sectors as Airbus, France Télécom, nuclear energy, electricity, the health system, universities and research centers, and so forth), creating strong demand for highly qualified employees with higher education. The first cohorts of the baby-boom (the 1945 cohort, which was thirty years old in 1975) were surely not a sacrificed generation since they enjoyed longer education in the context of a dynamic labor market, and they did not face the diminishing returns to education that subsequent cohorts have faced. The

second educational expansion has not been marked by strong labor market transformations. In this respect, the cohort born in 1970 has witnessed no clear progress in the social structure of jobs, despite massive educational development. During the 1990s, however, the socioeconomic situation for “seniors” (who were the former “juniors” of the seventies) improved significantly. Moreover, these elder generations kept the intrinsic value of their diplomas when they were 25: there is no competition between much more educated youth and poorly educated seniors. This means that in the corporatist regime (that is, the Bismarkian-style welfare regime where trade unions tend to support the insiders’ interests), the senior core insiders are not in competition with highly-educated young. Here, then, is the central process of diploma inflation at work: whatever the level of education of the new cohorts, the young are in competition for new jobs, which are scarce, and not for the jobs of seniors.

### *Scarring Effects and Generation Dyssocialization*

These transformations, then, are not simply a problem of youth, since they have permanent effects. The cohorts that are lucky enough to avoid mass unemployment and find positions they enjoy will benefit from this positive launch for their whole life, and conversely, other unlucky generations will be subjected to negative consequences of early failure that will affect their life chances. Those who are “lost in transition” do not make up for their early difficulties.<sup>19</sup> The assessment of the long-term impact of these early difficulties is central to this line of argument: if young, deprived generations do not catch up, a kind of long-term *hysteresis* effect appears, which we can call a “scar” or “scarring effect,” since the handicap seems definitive and enduring. Age-period-cohort analysis shows that cohorts who experienced a difficult (favorable) entry because of a context of recession (expansion), continue to suffer (benefit) from a relative delay (advancement) in upward mobility when they

are compared to the average situation. The relative position of a collective cohort at age 30 is rapidly crystallized, and there does not appear to be a substantial catch-up effect later on.

How can we explain the lack of generational catch-up? Those who had benefited from a period of entry marked by a strong demand for skilled jobs experienced faster career and earlier labor experience at higher levels of responsibility, with better wages; these individuals (and the cohort they constitute at an aggregated level) retain the long-term benefits of the early opportunities they enjoyed, which will positively influence their future trajectory at any later age. For those who entered the labor market under difficult economic conditions, the periods of unemployment they faced, the necessity to accept less qualified jobs with lower wages, and the consecutive delays in career progression, imply negative *stimuli* for their own trajectories (decline in ambition, lack of valued work experiences) and could appear as a negative signal for future potential employers. The hypothesis we present here for France is that cohort-specific socialization contexts imply long-term opportunities and life chances for individuals and for their cohorts; when the difficulties disappear, the cohorts who faced these problems continue to suffer from long-term consequences of past handicaps.

In more concrete terms, the cohorts born during the forties, who benefited from the economic acceleration of the late sixties, were relatively privileged compared to the previous cohorts, and were also relatively advantaged when compared to the later cohorts because of the lack of progress for the young from 1975 to the present. We can generalize this observation: the cohorts who entered the labor force after 1975 and experienced an economic slump and mass unemployment have been the early victims of new generational dynamics, and they retain the long-term scars of their initial difficulties in the labor market.

An important point we cannot develop at length here concerns the consequences of educational expansion. If the level of education has increased in the cohorts born in 1950 to



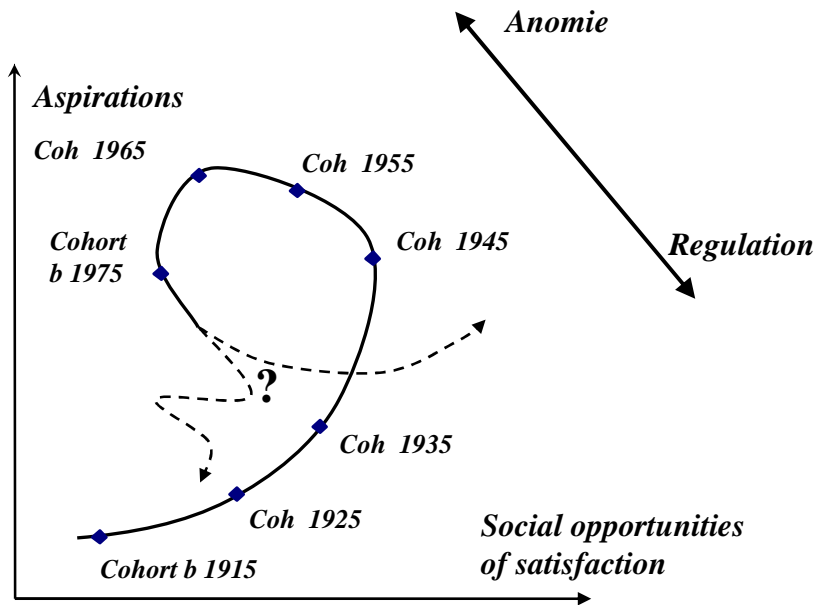
1975, that positive trend was accompanied by a strong social devaluation of educational degrees.<sup>20</sup> More specifically, the first cohorts of the baby boom have benefited from an expansion of education at a time when the rewards to education remained stable: even if there were twice as many *baccalauréat* recipients in the 1948 cohort than in the 1935 one, their likelihood of access to higher social or economic positions did not shrink. On the other hand, the generations that followed had to deal with a strong trend of devaluation in terms of the economic and social returns to education. The first consequence was a rush to the most valued and selective schools and degrees (to the elite *grandes écoles*, such as École Polytechnique, École Nationale d'Administration, Sciences-Po Paris, etc.) whose value remained stable, but whose population became more and more selective and perhaps more discriminating in terms of social origins. The second consequence was a strong devaluation of less prestigious universities, which became less exclusive and had much smaller per capita endowments in comparison to the *grandes écoles*. Likewise, the best secondary schools have become more selective, with major consequences in terms of urban segregation. In the French case, the school system was traditionally the central institution of the Republic and at the heart of its idea of progress, providing strong support for French-style social democracy and meritocracy. The collapse of the value of degrees, then, implies a destabilization of this myth and a pessimistic outlook on progress, developments that we can expect to have political consequences.

Now that we can see many of the accumulating effects of this long-term slowdown, which began twenty-five years ago, we can compare two social and genealogical generations.<sup>21</sup> For the first time in an era of peace, the youth of the new generation are not better off than their parents at the same age. In fact, the “1968 generation,” born around 1948, are the children of those born in 1918 who were young adults in World War II and who

worked in difficult conditions at the beginning of the *trente glorieuses*. The condition of the baby boomers was incomparably better than that of their parents. But the following genealogical generation, born around 1978—that is now between twenty-five and thirty years old—faces diminished opportunities of growth, not only because of an economic slump, but also because of their relatively poor outcomes in comparison to those of their own parents, who did very well.<sup>22</sup> We now observe rising rates of downward social mobility connected to the proliferation of middle-class children who cannot find social positions comparable to those of their parents.

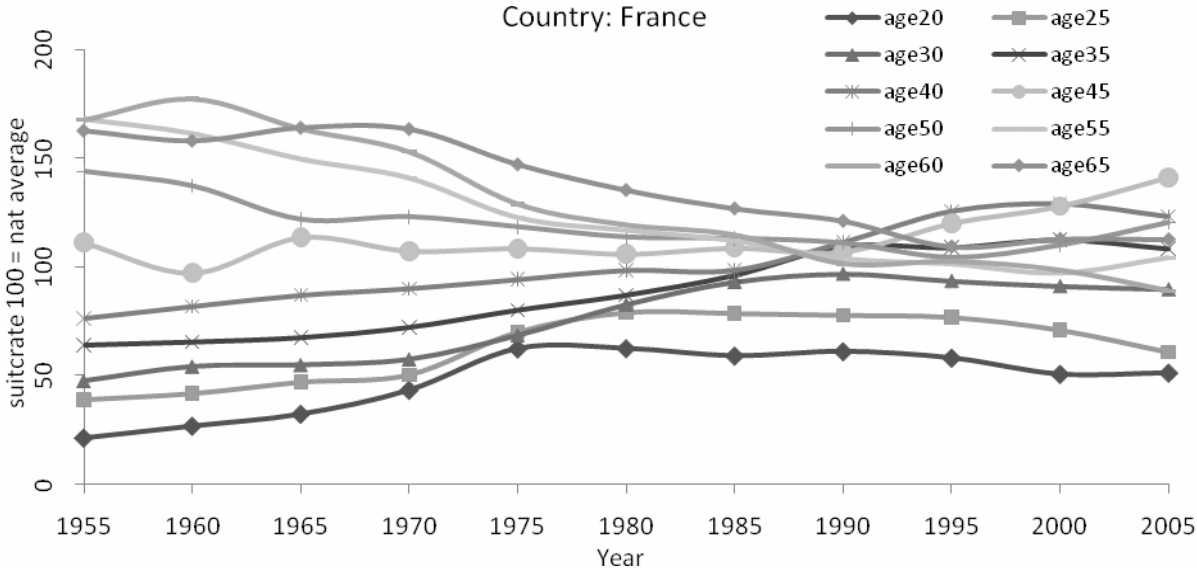
These diminishing resources and opportunities imply, for the newer generation, an exceptional risk of dyssocialization.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, since Émile Durkheim and Robert Merton, we have known the dangers of a gap between aspirations (which result from early socialization, notably in the family) and achievements. Today's generational transmission problem comes from a lack of correspondence between the values and ideas that the new generation receives (individual freedom, self achievement, valorization of leisure, etc.) and the realities it will face (centrality of the market, scarcity, lack of valuable jobs, boredom, etc.). All the generations of the twentieth century experienced that lack of correspondence between aspirations and achievement: the early baby-boom generations were socialized in the context of their parents' values (scarcity, self-sacrifice, submission to a society where work remained the central issue, lack of leisure) linked to the hard times of the thirties and after, but they eventually experienced the *trente glorieuses* and the period of fast growth that offered them comfort, affluence, and opportunities for emancipation and leisure. For them, dyssocialisation was not so problematic.

Figure 7 - The “Folium of Descartes” curve of anomie



The gap could be more difficult for the current young generations experiencing shrinking opportunities. As we have seen, the new generation apparently has longer educational careers and acquires higher academic qualifications than did its own parents, but the intense devaluation in social and economic terms of their improved educational assets could provoke a cruel confrontation with reality (i.e., “lost illusions”). The psychosocial difficulties of the new generation (notably, violent behavior, incivilities of many kinds, suicide, etc.) could be linked to the gap between what young people assume they deserve and what they are able to achieve.<sup>24</sup>

**Figure 8.** Relative suicide rate by age groups (100=national mean suicide rate)



In France, the cohort analysis of relative suicide rates<sup>25</sup> from age 25 to 69 demonstrates over the last forty years a strong cohort consequence of the economic slow down. The 25-year-old population of 1975 (born in 1955) run higher risks of suicide than do people who were at age 20 ten years before. The top rate of suicide at age 25 is reached in 1980 (born in 1955). Then we detect the top at age 35 in 1990. This suicide rate dynamic is a wave whose edge is shifting, and it follows the cohorts born in 1955-1960. The cohorts born between 1955 and 1960 are the first cohorts of a generation sharing a risk of “oversuicidity,” compared to elder generations socialized in the context of the economic expansion of the *trente glorieuses*. These former cohorts are still distinguished, even at age 50 or later, by low levels of suiciduity, whereas the new cohorts socialized in the context of job scarcity face higher risks that increase rapidly with age.

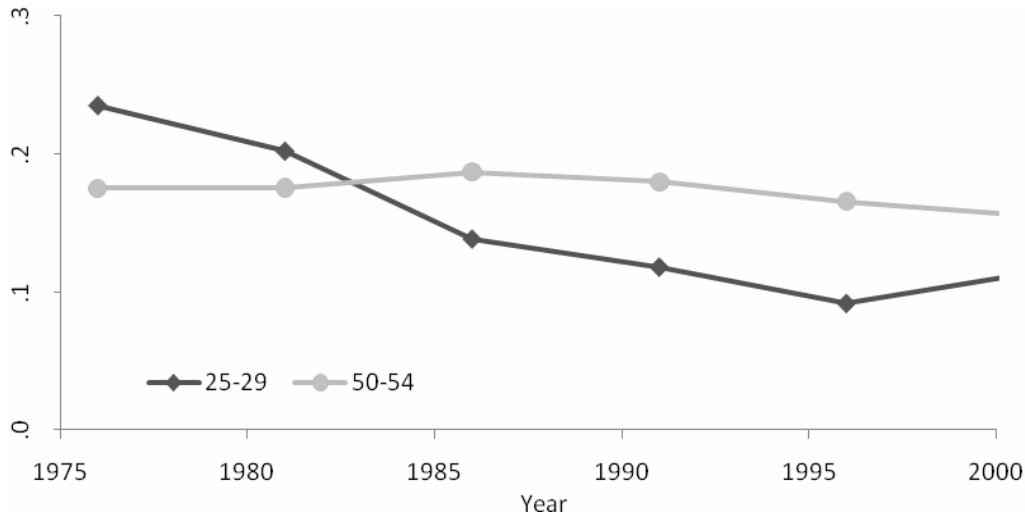
*Problems of Political Representation*

Destabilization in the generational distribution of well-being is accompanied by changes in access to political power. Profound changes have occurred in the access that various age

groups have to political representation and power, not to mention the interest they have in political issues. Here we can apply Robert Putnam's theory of social capital decline regarding the replacement of the American "civic generation," born between 1920 and 1940, by the following one.<sup>26</sup> In the French context, the argument is more appropriate if we switch the term "civic" with "mobilized," and the 1920-1940 birth cohorts with the 1940-1950 ones—in other words, the first "baby-boom generation." In terms of participation in politics, this point is very clear when we consider the last thirty years.

Even if, for the most part, people lack interest in politics and political matters, the variations in participation in political discussions with friends are strong, particularly when we collapse the results by age groups. In the late seventies, 25 percent of those aged 30 to 34 frequently engaged in political discussions with friends; that proportion had fallen to 12 percent in the late nineties. The decline is severe when we compare this generation with older age groups, notably those between 50 and 55 years of age, who were significantly more likely to engage in political discussions when surveyed in the late nineties. Evidently, for people at age 30 in 1977 and age 50 in 1997 (i.e., the cohorts born near 1947), political socialization occurred during the late sixties in the context of the events of May 1968 and its consequences.

**Figure 9.** Frequency of political discussions with friends

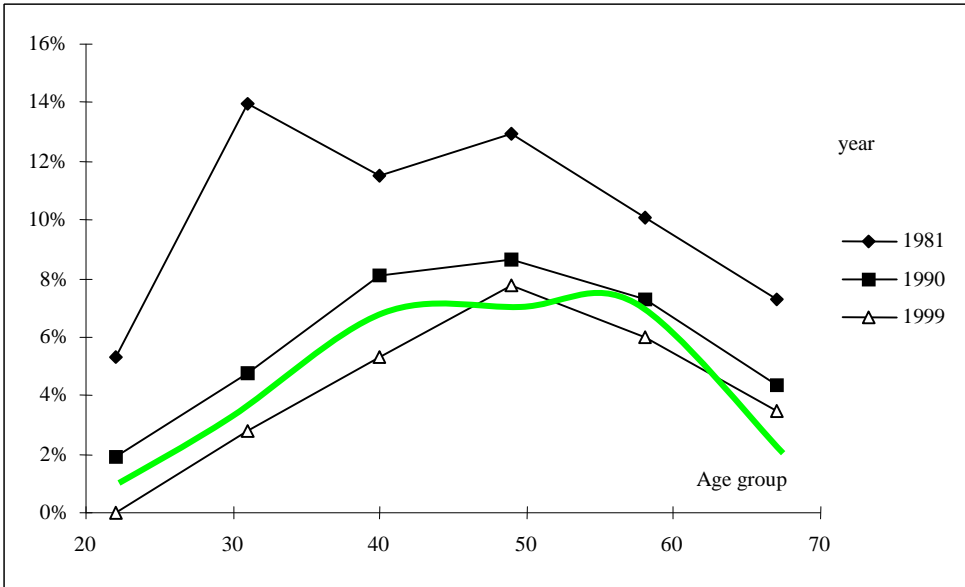


*Source:* Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File 1970-2003, GESIS-ZACAT<sup>27</sup>

An important characteristic of the “mobilized” generation of 1968 (the first cohorts of the baby boom, born in 1945-1950) is its stronger participation in collective action in its youth, which continued in the decades that followed. By contrast, the specificity of the cohorts born after 1955 and particularly in the late 1960s is their lack of political mobilization: occasional political discussions and declining political participation, notably in traditional political institutions (voting, trade-union membership, parties, and even serving in elective office). Since the phenomenon is not so new now—after two decades—and since this generation’s lack of participation is so clearly visible in these institutions, French political leaders have become conscious of the long-term problem implied by the difficulty in attracting young members and militants. However, the effort required to change the trend is so massive that, despite the regrets expressed for the situation, nothing is done to change it.

What is the evidence? For trade-union members, the dynamic is very strong, since the socialization effect seems to be significant: for a given cohort, the percentage of trade-union members at age 30, or even before, is a good predictor of this percentage at later ages; since it is about 2 percent in 1999 (and not 14 percent as in the early 1980s). True, there has been a slight revival of trade-union membership: the 2008 European values survey (France) shows a bounce back to rates of participation between those of 1990 and 1999. But the overall picture for trade unions is one of stagnation rather than a real comeback.

**Figure 10.** Members of Trade unions by age group from 1981 to 2008 (green line) in France

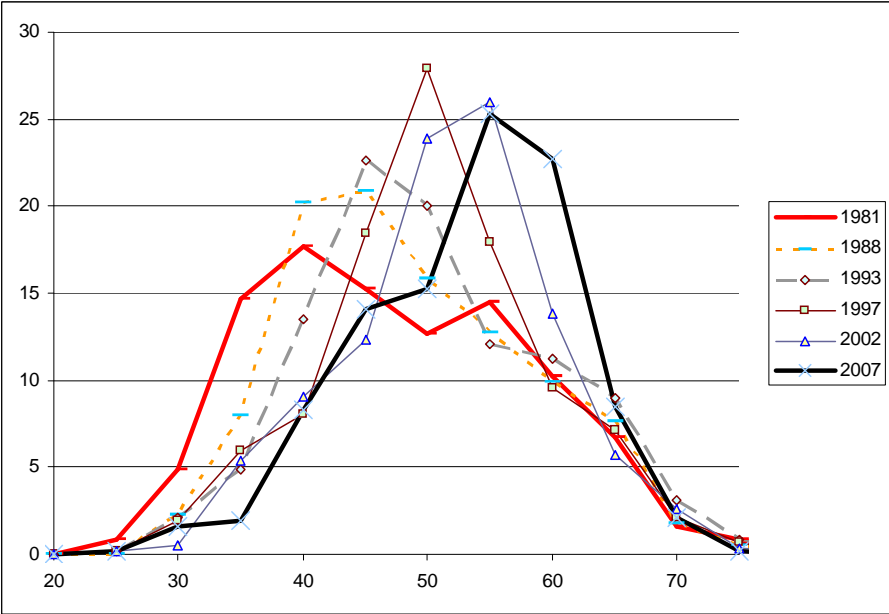


Source: European values survey cumulative file (1981-1999)<sup>28</sup>

When we consider the membership base of trade unions and parties, the newer generation’s participation is two or threefold below the early baby-boom’s rates. What about elected officials? At the Assemblée Nationale in 1981, 38.1 percent of the *deputés* were 44 years old or less, compared to 15.1 percent in the new Assemblée Nationale of 2002. In fact, between 1997 and 2002, the most significant change is the drop in the age group between age

45 and 49, which fell from 18.5 percent to 12.3 percent: political representation of those born after 1953 is clearly declining. If the French electorate is growing older (the age of the average voter jumped from 45.5 to 47.5 years old between 1982 and 2002), its representatives, and those at the highest levels of decision-making who will shape the future of France, are aging at a much faster rate. The elections of 2007 confirm these trends: the age distribution of the Assemblée Nationale has never been so unbalanced: in 1981, for one député over age 60 we had one député below age 40, a ratio of one to one; in 2007, this balanced ratio jumps to one junior to nine seniors. A cohort analysis provides a strong generational vision of French politics.

**Figure 11.** Members of Assemblée nationale



Source: Base Sycomore

The interpretation of this dynamic may be more subtle than a simple trend of aging: the political generation that had been socialized with the events of 1968 could enter very early



into the highest spheres of political institutions at the end of the 1970s and 1980s; now, many of the members of this generation are still active in politics and, since no new political upheaval has shifted the dynamics of representation, no new political generation appears to have emerged. Homogeneity in terms of the age of the French “*classe politique*” is now substantial, and the question of the transmission of political know-how and ideological and organizational legacy remains quite problematic for the coming decades. A consequence of this trend is the growing age gap between the real French society and its political representatives. Here, in terms of generations, political power is more accessible to those who are already dominant in terms of social and economic power, and the younger generations, who lack comparable material resources, also suffer from a loss of democratic influence, and even interest, since they are not engaged in political discussions. The lack of clear collective consciousness is a remarkable trait of the democratic debate at the present time. In fact, most young employees in many economic sectors are clearly conscious, at the individual level, of the asymmetric generational play in which they are acting. The political behavior of the young, characterized by distance from institutions and by stronger instability, is somehow rational: why would they invest political energy in a system where their present and future position is quite unclear?

In terms of political prospects, we should assess the consequences, notably for the sustainability of democracy, of the decline of political socialization. The first problem is the generational transmission of democracy, which supposes a strong civil society whose absence makes the socialization of newer cohorts problematic. Participation in democracy assumes shared social knowledge, political know-how, and the ability to insert oneself into the collective networks of political bargaining. Since many institutions are led today by a homogeneous group of baby boomers who will retire at the end of the decade, and since

almost nothing is done to socialize a new generation of successors, the sustainability of the political system is quite uncertain and the risk of generational micro-struggles is very high.

The second problem is a question of long-term decision making. Many weighty decisions at the national level (retirement, health, debt issues, etc.) are made by a political class whose remaining life span is generally shorter than that of the average population; the new generations that will have to face (and pay for) the long-term consequences of today's choices do not participate in the decisions made about their own future, because they are presumed to be too young (even if they are 40 or older). That generational asymmetry or bias implies that many reforms are designed to have little immediate negative impact on elders and to delay payment of the costs of reform to the point that it threatens the future well-being of newer generations. Therefore, the social contract between generations seems to be both unclear and unstable.

### *Problems of Welfare Regime Sustainability*

It may seem that social and structural reforms affect the entire population, whatever the age or generation. But in fact, social welfare, welfare-state dynamics, and the welfare regime<sup>29</sup> change with the succession of cohorts. We have to analyze this point and its consequences for social reforms and *in fine* the sustainability of our contemporary welfare regime. This crucial factor could show that the expensive but efficient public health and pension schemes of the present day could collapse with the future cohort replacement of older “welfare generations” (born between 1925 and 1950) with the generations that follow.

When France's public pay-as-you-go retirement system was created in 1946, the principle was that wage earners had to participate (and work) for at least thirty years before gaining access to a full pension. Thus, in 1946, those who were 35 or older—that is, born

before 1910—were generally excluded from the new system. Indeed, in large industries, in the public sector and in protected segments of the economy, arrangements had been developed to fulfill the contract, but most workers in smaller firms, those who had experience in agriculture or as self-employed business people, even though they were alive during the creation of this large system of welfare, were already too old to benefit from most of its outcomes: they were destined to fill the ranks of the impoverished elderly<sup>30</sup> during a golden age for youth. Conversely, today, the new generation leaves school at age 21, loses three years in episodes of unemployment, freelance or non-standard, non-protected activities, and begins its participation in the retirement system at an average age of 24. If we add forty years of contributions (the current requirement which most French seniors can meet because they could start working much earlier than the youth of today) or 46.5 years (the time requirement proposed by the French employers union), we discover that our present system of early retirement (at an average age of 58, with an average level of income close to the employed population) is simply inaccessible for the newcomers. In the most probable scenario, the generations of pensioners to come will not benefit from the generosity of the current system, even if they contribute heavily to the high level of protection that benefits today's seniors. This point is even clearer when we analyze how the lower half or third (in educational terms) of the young generation, which has to wait for years before obtaining a stable position, is socialized within the working world and the political and welfare system. We now socialize the young within a much more unequal system than in the early seventies, and the greater inequalities within today's younger generation will have consequences for their future trajectory.

Some optimistic observers of these trends argue that with a long-term annual rate of growth of about 2 percent, the retirement system will eventually balance itself out. Moreover,

when the baby-boom generation begins to retire, a process already underway since 2007, new jobs will be available for the younger generation. However, the risk is double here: on the one hand, perhaps we overestimate the number of new positions that will be created, since productivity gains might be obtained at the expense of new entrants; on the other hand, even if new positions become available, members of even newer generations could seize these new opportunities, and an intermediate sacrificed generation, yesterday too young and tomorrow too old, could be the double victim of social change. King Lear could suggest another troubling prospect: long wars of succession among competing generations.

If the existence of such dynamics can be established for the pension system, the same kind of argument can be developed for many other aspects of the French welfare system (the health care system, social expenditures for families, education, etc.). In fact, our French egalitarian system of large homogeneous middle classes of wage earners, which reached its apogee with the generations born during the 1930s and 1940s, seems to be disappearing progressively in a cohort dynamic of dismantlement and disentanglement that the newer generations are experiencing.

### **Conclusion**

If in the United States much of the struggle over downward mobility takes the form of intra-cohort disruption and conflict, in France the key problem is intergenerational decline. France is less a country of “falling from grace”<sup>31</sup> than of the incapacity of the young generation to inherit the wage earner middle class status of their parents because of the lack of positions in the “new” middle class. But the young generations experience a strong rise in education, and are more often than not the children of upwardly mobile baby-boomers. They often also experience the downward dynamics that come from holding lower-middle-class positions, and

this contradiction can produce a kind of generational dismemberment of the “new” middle class.

The emergence of a immense *génération précaire*, youth who paradoxically are middle-class in terms of education and underclass in terms of socio-economic position, is the outcome of social policies that gave opportunity and protection to mid-aged and senior populations at the expense of juniors. This development manifests a generational bias in political choices corresponding in some respects to the demographic imbalance of age groups in trade unions and political parties.

For the past three decades the main consequence of this dynamic has been the political apathy of the young, interrupted intermittently by brief episodes of street mobilizations or protests, such as the December 2005 riots in the lower-class suburbs or the 2006 mobilization against the government’s employment policy reform. Such events notwithstanding, apathy remains the principal response of the young, from the top to the bottom of the social scale. The alumni of the most prestigious and selective institutions of higher education (the *École Normale Supérieure*, *École Polytechnique*, *Sciences Po*, and the like) are prepared to participate to international competition: for them, response to challenge is a choice of individual effort much more than collective mobilization. Most of these graduates enter the labor force and prefer their own *cursus honorum* to collective mobilization. The “real” middle class that is educated in less selective or prestigious universities can face severe difficulties entering the labor force, and for them the response to challenge is an oscillation between a lack of political participation, left-wing ideological commitment, and short periods of political mobilization and activism. The less educated and the lower-class young remain in a more anomic situation where lack of political integration goes hand in hand with extreme frustration and a hostility to politics in general. Hence, the

French context is characterized by the absence of the young as a political force and by the absence of young politicians in government.

The political consequences are difficult to forecast and control, especially as young adults and their parents become more conscious of the social downward mobility of the new generation, and as parents begin to share the pessimism of their children.<sup>32</sup> The situation is made even more unstable by the approaching retirement age of a great many political leaders, the accumulating frustrations of the young, and the increasing gap between the population's aspirations and the decisions its leaders are making. Up to now, most political groups, unions or movements organized by or for the young have failed to transform the situation or institutionalize collective interests, despite widely felt desires that they do so. Striking, too, is the degree to which these trends are individualized at the level of consciousness: the collective mobilizations of the "movement *génération précaire*" have failed to aggregate atomized individuals in an enduring way, although they have succeeded in spreading a broad social consciousness about these problems. Right now, most mobilisations in the middle-class young are toward the (extreme) left wing, but there is a risk that anomic individualism could be transformed into the kind social pessimism that reinforces a trend toward rightwing authoritarianism, notably in the lower classes. This is one way to interpret the victory of Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2007 presidential elections, in so far as he gave voice to demands for strong authority. By the same token, we may also see a backlash in 2012 with a groundswell of participation by the young in anti-Sarkozy movements and parties.

The problems analyzed here, however, reach far beyond the election day of 2012 and are rooted in long-run trends. The consequences of these problems, in political terms, are complicated and quite pervasive: the 2002 presidential elections had demonstrated the destabilization of the lower middle classes and of the young generations who did not vote for

the socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin. The year 2005 showed five emerging movements in the young: the secondary school pupils against the reform of the *baccalauréat* (the François Fillon reform, named for the former minister of education), the “precarity generation” mobilization, the “30-something movement,” and, last but not least, the October-November 2005 suburban riots. The long 2009 movement inside universities, whereby fifty-nine universities were disrupted for weeks, is only the most recent event. This sequence of protests will by no means end here, because despite the anomic aspect of these mobilizations their objective underlying causes are still developing. Under these conditions, apathy may yet well abate, and the rise of the young generation as a stronger political force may well yet come. If modern France is the child of revolution, it remains the country of mobilizations: might we yet be on the eve of revolution?

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Or Southern European, Latin, or, better yet, Mediterranean experience, which is shared with Spain, Italy, and Greece. A deeper comparative analysis is provided in Louis Chauvel, “Comparing Welfare Regime Changes: Living Standards and the Unequal Life Chances of Different Birth Cohorts,” in *Consumption and Generational Change: The Rise of Consumer Lifestyles and the Transformation of Later Life*, ed. I. R. Jones, D. Ekerdt, and P. Higgs (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 229-73.

<sup>2</sup> See David Ellwood, 1982, “Teenage Unemployment: Permanent Scars or Temporary Blemishes?” in *The Youth Labor Market Problem, Its Nature, Causes, and Consequences*, ed. Richard B. Freeman and David A. Wise, National Bureau of Economic Research Conference Report (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and M. Gangl, “Welfare States and the Scar Effects of Unemployment: A Comparative Analysis of the United States and West Germany,” *American Journal of Sociology* 109, 6 (2004): 1319-64.

<sup>3</sup> There is no room here for a comprehensive analysis of “social generation” as a powerful notion in the analysis of social change (see Louis Chauvel, “Social Generations, Life Chances and Welfare Regime Sustainability,” in *Changing France: The Politics that Markets Make*, ed. Pepper D. Culpepper, Peter A. Hall, and Bruno Palier [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006], 150-75). If demographers and quantitative sociologists prefer “birth cohort analyses,” that is, people born in the same year (Norman B. Ryder, “The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change,” *American Sociological Review* 30 [1965]: 843-61), the European tradition is much more open to the holistic and historical analytical capacities of the notion of “social generations” (François Mentré, *Les Générations sociales* [Paris: Éditions Bossard,



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1920]; and Karl Mannheim, “Das Problem der Generationen,” *Kölner Vierteljahrshefte für Soziologie* 7 [1928], 157-85, 309-30), defined as specific groups of cohorts sharing social patterns and/or collective identity features. In the European social sciences, the “*génération 1914*” (the *génération sacrifiée*) of young adults of the First World War was a dramatic example of a dynamic whereby groups of individuals of a same cohort could enter into a concrete community of fate over its life course, even for the survivors. Despite controversy over the question of just how concrete and coherent this common fate could actually be, “social generation analysis” has shown that the socialization period of early adulthood can have strategic consequences for the future of the young because of these “scarring effects.” In any event, these scarring effects must be assessed since the “transitional socialization” is not necessarily sufficient to create or promote durable generational traits: they need a continuous process of collective recall to reinforce the social generation’s identity, which would progressively vanish otherwise (Henk A. Becker, “Discontinuous Change and Generational Contracts,” in *The Myth of Generational Conflict: The Family and State in Ageing Societies*, ed. Sara Arber and Claudine Attias-Donfut [New York: Routledge, 2000], 114-32). Age-period-cohort models have been developed, empirically, to reveal generational effects, which can be discerned when specific traits appear in the “life line” of specific cohorts (K. O. Mason et al, “Some Methodological Issues in Cohort Analysis of Archival Data,” *American Sociological Review* 38 [1973]: 242-58; and Y. Yang, “Social Inequalities in Happiness in the U.S. 1972-2004: An Age-Period-Cohort Analysis,” *American Sociological Review* 73 [2008]: 204-26).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, CAS (Centre d’analyse stratégique), *La mesure du déclassement, Document de travail*, miméo, 2009.

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[http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/La\\_mesure\\_du\\_declassement\\_version\\_a\\_imprimer\\_V4.pdf](http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/La_mesure_du_declassement_version_a_imprimer_V4.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> Talcott Parsons, “Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States,” *American Sociological Review* 7, 5 (1942): 604-16.

<sup>7</sup> Independence of housing and access to work.

<sup>8</sup> The remaining 40 percent of secondary school dropouts, who are heterogeneous in terms of marketable skills, some of them receiving competitive credentials as skilled workers, others not.

<sup>9</sup> Hugues Lagrange and Marco Oberti, eds., *Émeutes urbaines et protestations: Une singularité française* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Camille Peugny, *Le Déclassement* (Paris: Grasset, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979); Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong, *The New Class Society* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Louis Chauvel, *Le Destin des générations: Structure sociale et cohortes en France au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Second Edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), preface; and Louis Chauvel, “Génération sociale et socialisation transitionnelle: Fluctuations cohortales et stratification sociale en France et aux États-Unis au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle” (Mémoire d’Habilitation à Diriger des recherches, Sciences-Po, Paris, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> The cohort diagram is a strong descriptive instrument for the analysis of cohort effects. It compares the achievement at the same age of different cohorts. If the curves are linear, we

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have a stable progress by cohort. If we see nonlinearities, such as cohort accelerations and decelerations affecting the same cohorts, we can analyze long-term cohort effects.

<sup>14</sup> Chauvel, “Génération sociale et socialisation transitionnelle,” Chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> Henri Mendras, *La Seconde Révolution française: 1965-1984* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988); and Daniel Bell, *Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> The French representation of the social stratification system in terms of occupation is different from the American one; the French tradition is very strong and contributes to a declining but still central “classist” vision of French society, shared by most social scientists, the media and social actors. In this respect, the contrast with the US is dramatic. See also S. R. S. Szreter, who develops a comparative view of the difference in the representations of middle-class occupational groups, in “The Official Representation of Social Classes in Britain, the United States, and France: The Professional Model and ‘Les Cadres’,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, 2 (1993): 285-317.

<sup>17</sup> The cohort diagram is a strong descriptive instrument for the analysis of cohort effects. It compares the achievement at the same age of different cohorts. If the curves are linear, we have a stable progress by cohort. If we see nonlinearities, such as cohort accelerations and decelerations affecting the same cohorts, we can analyze long-term cohort effects.

<sup>18</sup> Y. Yang, “Social Inequalities in Happiness in the U.S. 1972-2004: An Age-Period-Cohort Analysis,” *American Sociological Review* 73 (2008): 204-26; and Y. Yang et al., “The Intrinsic Estimator for Age-Period-Cohort Analysis: What It Is and How to Use It?” *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (2008): 1697-1736.

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<sup>19</sup> The expression, “lost in transition,” comes from C. Brzinsky-Fay, “Lost in Transition? Labour Market Entry Sequences of School Leavers in Europe,” *European Sociological Review* 23 (2007): 409-22.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Chauvel, “Valorisation et dévalorisation sociale des titres: une comparaison France – États-Unis,” in *L’État de l’école*, ed. Agnès van Zanten (Paris: La Découverte, Paris, 2000), 341-52.

<sup>21</sup> During the twentieth century, an average age gap of about thirty years separated parents and their children.

<sup>22</sup> These parents are able to help their children in different ways with the intensification of *solidarités familiales* (transfers and transmissions between generations, both financial and in kind, culturally and materially) that Claudine Attias-Donfut describes in “Rapports de générations: transferts intrafamiliaux et dynamique macrosociale,” *Revue française de sociologie* 41, 4 (2000): 643-84. But at the collective level, the first and the most efficient *solidarité* would consist of a redistribution of social positions.

<sup>23</sup> The distinction between dissocialization and dyssocialization is essential. In Latin, the prefix dis- means “lack of,” whereas in Greek, dys- means “bad,” “difficult,” or “not appropriate.”

<sup>24</sup> Louis Chauvel, “L’uniformisation du taux de suicide masculin selon l’âge: effet de génération ou recomposition du cycle de vie ?” *Revue française de sociologie* 38, 4 (1997), 681-734.

<sup>25</sup> The relative suicide rate is averaged to 100 for all age groups from age 20 to 69.

<sup>26</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

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<sup>27</sup> The diagram tracks the percentage answering “frequently” to the question: “When you get together with friends, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?” We present periods of five year compilations of probabilistic samples of about 3000 individuals per year; the statistical uncertainty on each dot is therefore about +/- 2.0 percent.

<sup>28</sup> The point “age 22” refers to the age group 18 to 27; people at age 22 in 1981 are 31 in 1990 and 40 in 1999; the trade-union members remain at 5 percent of that cohort. The dynamic here is a kind of generational extinction of trade unions.

<sup>29</sup> By welfare regime, I mean the complex system of decision-making over, and the production and distribution of, social resources, where hierarchy and the other dimensions of social differentiation are major issues. This regime includes work regulations, family supports, and the “third sector” (a broad rubric that includes associations, foundations, trade unions, and many local or religious institutions, all of which can play an important role in the development of social capital and the civic participation of the population). The shape of the class system is a consequence of the welfare regime. See Gøsta Esping-Anderson G., *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> In 1959, when a minimum income for old people was created (one third of the minimum wage of that age), it covered more than 50 percent of those 65 years and older; nowadays, this minimum income is about two-thirds of the present minimum wage, but covers 8 percent of the same age group, since the currently generous public pay-as-you-go scheme covers almost anyone. Before, the old age groups were poor and unequal, but now they are comparable to the active population in terms of average income and of standard deviation.

<sup>31</sup> Katherine S. Newman, *Falling from Grace: Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

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<sup>32</sup> Peugny, *Le Déclassement*.