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**Towards a new relation with education and work?
Youth transitions in Europe and in Latin America**

PEDRO ABRANTES

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Av. das Forças Armadas, Edifício ISCTE, 1649-026 LISBOA, PORTUGAL, cies@iscte.pt

Pedro Abrantes has a PhD in Sociology (ISCTE-IUL, 2008) and is a researcher of CIES, ISCTE-IUL, especially in the area of Sociology of Education, currently working as visitor researcher at CIESAS (Mexico). *E-mail:* pedro.abrantes@iscte.pt

Abstract

This paper discusses the current experiences of young people both in the educational systems and in the labor market, tracking the objective and subjective relations between both social fields. Based on different statistical sources, major trends in Europe and in Latin America are compared, in order to sketch some global tendencies but also regional paths. The main argument is that, even if uncertainty, non-linearity and individualization are increasing worldwide, actually the European youth and the Latin American one face diverging risks and opportunities, due to unequal economic structures and cultural frames, as well as recent political orientations.

Key-words: education, work, youth, Europe, Latin America.

Resumo

Neste artigo discutimos as actuais experiências dos jovens tanto no sistema de ensino como no mercado de trabalho, procurando captar as relações objectivas e subjectivas entre esses dois campos sociais. Com base em diversas fontes estatísticas, comparamos as principais tendências na Europa e na América Latina, com vista a traçar algumas tendências globais, mas também diferenças regionais. O nosso principal argumento é que, se bem que a incerteza, o carácter não linear e a individualização das carreiras se acentuam em todo o mundo, actualmente a juventude enfrenta riscos e oportunidades diferentes na Europa e na América Latina, devido a diferenças substanciais nas estruturas económicas e quadros culturais, bem como a orientações políticas recentes.

Palavras-chave: educação, trabalho, juventude, Europa, América Latina.

This paper presents a comparison of young people's experiences in Europe and Latin America, particularly concerning the transition from educational systems to labor markets. So, the main trends and linkages on both schooling and working experiences, during the last two decades, are sketched in order to track convergences and divergences.¹

Beyond the descriptive purposes lies the intention of testing the theory of a changing relation of youth with these major institutions of modern life, in the terms discussed in the theoretical framework. So, the idea is to address central questions of worldwide sociology such as: are education and work eroding values among young people? Does this trend vary among countries and/or social classes? Is education a key factor for the integration and success in the labor market? Is individualization process generating new perspectives and experiences towards school and work? Are there growing pressures to social fragmentation?

One may wonder about the relevance of discussing such questions through a comparison between Europe and Latin America. Why these regions? First of all, one is usually associated with developed North and the other with developing South (even if we should discuss the directions and intensity of development in both regions), so we may discuss which trends are probably global and which may be actually reinforcing world gaps and inequalities. Besides, powerful historical links connect these regions, especially around cultural references, since European colonial impositions were particularly strong (languages, religions, traditions) in Latin America. Thus, a central attention is paid to the comparison between Southern European countries (especially, Portugal and Spain) and Latin American ones.

Our analysis is based on recent statistical data produced by major international institutions. These data are complemented by some national reports on youth, namely from Spain and Mexico. Social researchers have today a huge quantity of worthy data available, increasingly informed by social sciences and able to sustain comparative studies. However, to rely on indirect institutional surveys entails also some limitations. Data from different countries not always rely on the same categories and,

¹ This paper was developed during my stance in Mexico City. I shall thank to *Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian* for providing me a short-term scholarship, as well as to *Centro de Investigación y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social* for receiving me so kindly, as visitor researcher. This paper is also in debt to the useful and bright insights of Gonzalo Saraví, my supportive supervisor at CIESAS.

when they do, the meaning of such categories may vary from a country to another (sometimes, between regions of the same country). Moreover, statistical data usually measure individual conditions and resources (income, education, household, etc.), their geographical distribution and evolution as time goes by, while relational and structural mechanisms causing such diversity and inequality are not cleared out (Reygadas, 2008). Still, theoretical questions addressed have an objective side and a subjective one. If the first is observable, at least in very broad terms, by extensive data, attitudes, values and expectations are much more complex and intimate material, so that international surveys may only achieve rough sketches, allowing multiple interpretations and discussions, demanding for intensive qualitative data.

This paper is organized in five sections. Firstly, major theoretical questions are pointed out, informed by prestigious sociologists worldwide. Secondly, the recent evolution of educational patterns and experiences in both regions is discussed. Thirdly, an overview of main tendencies of young people's experiences in the labor market is sketched. Fourthly, we analyze the current (both objective and subjective) value of education for work integration. Fifthly, the situation of those not working nor studying is debated. Final lines are dedicated to systematize major trends observed and to discuss in which extend data achieved allow to address departing theoretical questions.

1. Theoretical framework

Sociological literature on youth, education and work is rather abundant, worldwide, so the difficulty is to settle a heterogeneous but coherent framework, out of the ocean of references. Other complex matter is to understand in which degree some theoretical statements can be applied to distinct world regions and generations. Our essay is based on the assumption that there is an intimate linkage between young people's experiences concerning education and work, although being different social fields.

The classic perspective on education-work linkage is based on solid studies, as Lipset and Bendix (1959), demonstrating that industrialization allows a growing impact of education on professional status, reducing the effect of social background. So, social mobility would be higher in more industrialized regions and countries. However, this assumption was based on data from European and North American countries until the 50s. Research developed during the 70s and the 80s, especially in

Latin America, Africa and Asia, found many cases where industrialization do not enlarge opportunities for social mobility, at least for those in poorer segments of the population (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001).

Linking macro- with micro-analysis, Bourdieu (1979) has shown as occupational market in modern societies is a competitive field, mostly structured by economic and cultural capitals. Since schooling achievement relies strongly on family cultural background, the condition for a double reproduction (economic and cultural) is established. This statement is sustained by important inquiries in developed countries, from classic Coleman's report (1966) to recent PISA assessments (OECD, 2004 & 2007), demonstrating that the impact of social background in students' performances at school is stronger than any internal schooling effect.²

This structural analysis may be combined with actors-based perspectives, such as Willis' (1977) argument that working-class students develop a counter-culture in school, explicitly evading formal rules, as a way of resistance against an institution that deny their own background. More recently, Dubet & Martuccelli (1996) stated that education is a plural space, enabling a diversity of experiences and "logics of action", partially related with students' social background, but also influenced by school-based dynamics. And Duschatzky (2003) posted that schooling appears as a borderline experience for young people in social disadvantaged contexts, a field of opportunities to overlap social exclusion or a mechanism to reinforce it, according to each school institutional culture.

Based on a comparison between the British and the French educational systems, Ball & Van Zanten (1998) also underlie that different schooling ethics emerge within modern educational systems. However, these authors add that such "ethics" are strongly connected with increasing market competition pressures, allocating young people from an early stage in distinct "educational circuits", partially according to their capabilities, but mostly with their family economic and cultural background.

² First studies on developing countries, during the 70s and the 80s, found a higher influence of school quality in students' achievements, arguing that Coleman's and Bourdieu's statement was valid just for developed societies, but most recent researches did not confirm this differential pattern, probably due to progressive regulation and homogenization of the educational systems in Africa and in Latin America (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001).

Concerning the labor market, our study is guided by major references on economic globalization, employment de-regulation and fragmentation (Beck, 2000). Growing specialization and global competition led to a crisis in labor-capital relations, and therefore to increasing patterns of unemployment, underemployment and social inequalities, during the last quarter of the 20th Century. While a global informational elite emerges, a “structural vulnerability” in the secondary (local) labor markets deteriorates working conditions for most workers worldwide (Castel, 1995; Castells, 1996). Education become a powerful key to access to the privileged minority, but other skills and connections are often requested, pushing aside a segment of highly educated young workers, mostly from poor family backgrounds and less prestigious schools.

Stressed by these new scenarios on education and labor market, young people conditions and pathways have been explored by specific research on youth. In very broad terms, these studies have pointed out the emerging complex and non-linear paths of transition from education to work, including an extension of semi-dependence status, a time used for experimentation often supported by parents and, in richest countries, partially by the welfare state (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Pais, 2005 [2001]).

Some studies of recent graduated young workers has shown that initial instability in the labor market tends to decrease during the life-time – being an “age effect” rather than a “generational effect” – and it entails learning and freedom opportunities, at least while economic independency may be postponed (Hamel, 2003). However, we may wonder if this is still true among unskilled workers, when promotion and training opportunities are low, informal work is high, companies’ de-localization is easy and standards of living are, in many cases, decreasing. In the more dramatic cases, the formation of an underclass youth, hopeless and excluded from social networks, unable to project a life on their own and easily enrolled in illegal activities or highly dependent of social care, appears also as an effect of this new transitional challenges (Williamson, 1997).

This is also the framework of recent studies on youth in Latin America, focused on the challenges of social fragmentation, due to contradictory trends: if high- and some middle-class youngsters have long educational careers and are able to engage in global patterns of life and work, both the educational system and the labor market are unable to integrate many young people, especially those from poor

backgrounds, blocking economic development and generating circles of informality, inequality and exclusion (Miranda López, 2003; Pieck, 2005; Saraví, 2009).

Recent comparative researches have shown how the transitional “institutional frames” not only vary between countries but also play an important role in young people’s careers (Shanahan, 2000; Raffe, 2001). So, pathways tend to be more predictable, protected and unequal, in countries where education and work are strongly regulated and linked (Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands); while they tend to be multiple, non-linear and risky, in more liberal systems (United States, Great Britain, France). Researches on Southern Europe argue that transitions become longer and more dependent on family support, due to weaker public intervention, emerging a third model, more vulnerable to informal networks and social exclusion (Cavalli & Galland, 1995; Brannen et al., 2002).

The combination of de-regulation, permanent uncertainty and complex biographies lead famous sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992; 2000; & 2003, with Beck-Gernsheim) to present the concept of individualization as a central feature of contemporary societies. According to this theory, a new relation of individual actors with central institutions of modernity – as education, work, family, politics and so on – arise. Instead of ritual collective adhesion, passive neglect or explicit resistance, current social agents (especially, young people) claim for singular, reflexive and negotiated relations with these institutions, developing original identities and forms of participation, in order “to live on their own”. This trend implies the weakness of traditionally organized collective action, reinforcing some social inequalities and individualized risks, but also pushes the silent collapse of authoritarian institutions.

2. Educational patterns: European integration vs. Latin-America fragmentation?

Recent statistical data on educational outcomes show a parallel movement of expansion of the educational patterns in Europe and Latin American, but also an apparently widening gap between regions, from the 90s on.

Actually, in Latin America, from 1990 to 2002, illiteracy rates fall from 20% to 13% among young people (age 15-29), being residual in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay but remaining over 20% in rural areas of Central America (CEPAL & OIJ, 2004;

SITEAL, 2008). Average number of years that young people spend in formal education has also grown from 8.6 to 9.5 (United Nations, 2007).

However, in 2002, just two-thirds of the Latin American youngsters (age 15-29) accomplished primary education, 35% completed secondary education and 6.5% of the population from age 25 to 29 held a tertiary degree (CEPAL & OIJ, 2004). Besides, recent reports (SITEAL, 2007 & 2008) has shown that schooling attendance rates, after growing considerably between 1990 and 2000 (above 2% per year), particularly among girls, has slowed down in the following years (data available until 2006), to values near zero (below 0.5%), especially affecting poor teenagers in the urban areas.

In Europe, in 2006, schooling rates from 3 to 19 years old was 92% and average number of years in school was around 17, almost one year more than in 2002. Considering the 27 countries, 59% of young people (age 15 to 24) are involved in education and/or training courses and just 15% leave school with no more than compulsory lower education (although this rate is still over 30% in Spain and Portugal). Enrollment in tertiary education has increased 25% from 1998 to 2006, so that around one-third of young people currently attend higher education, being involved in the “knowledge triangle” (European Commission, 2009a & 2009b). Not surprisingly, young people (age 25-34) have considerably higher educational levels (81% with upper secondary and 31% with higher education) than the whole active population (respectively, 70% and 24%).

A recent OECD report confirms our argument. Data available show the growth of population in Europe that has attained upper secondary and tertiary education, notably in the Southern countries, where the educational rates until the 70s were not so different from Latin American most developed countries. Thus, as we may see in table 1, generational gap concerning tertiary education is higher in Italy, Spain and Portugal, than in Brazil or Mexico. That is, educational levels of population from age 45 to 54, mostly educated in the 70s, were very similar among those countries, but Southern European countries present some advantage in the younger generation (who has made most of the educational career in the 90s and in the beginning of the new century), comparing with the Latin American ones, excepting Chile (OECD, 2009).

Table 1. Educational degrees of population in two age cohorts, in 2007*

	Age 25-34		Age 45-54		Generational gap	
	Upper secondary	Tertiary	Upper secondary	Tertiary	Upper secondary	Tertiary
Italy	68	19	48	11	42%	73%
Spain	65	39	44	23	47%	70%
Portugal	44	21	20	10	120%	110%
Mexico	39	19	29	15	34%	26%
Brazil	47	10	31	10	52%	0%
Chile	64	18	44	11	55%	63%

* Original table, composed with data extracted from OECD (2009).

Considering mentioned trends in Europe (European Commission, 2009a & 2009b) and in Latin America (SITEAL, 2007 & 2008), this gap may be widening in the first decade 21st Century, so major differences are expected for those who are currently teenagers, the next generation entering in the formal labor market.

Moreover, national comparisons evidence that regional gap is stretching in Europe, since the Southern countries are closer to the Central and Northern educational patterns than twenty years ago (Martins, 2005). In Latin America, schooling development appears to be more contingent, so that for instance upper secondary rate among young people vary from over 60% in Chile, Argentina and Uruguay to less than 20% in some countries of Central America (CEPAL & OIJ, 2004). Latin American countries also face major internal inequalities, concerning social class, race and municipalities. Even if the access to education experienced a decisive democratization during the last decades, the gap between young people who attend school and those who actually achieve a terminal degree is huge.³ This phenomenon emerges in primary education, particularly in poor Central American countries, and it spreads in secondary education, affecting 32% of Brazil teenagers and 24% of Mexican ones. Besides, this problem is strongly connected with high retention rates,

³ Most of the young Mexican early-leavers points out the lack of interest in school as the main reason for their exit, but they recognize that the ultimate decision was made by their family and not by themselves (AA.VV., 2007).

since most of these early leavers were retained more than one year during their educational career (Sourrouille, 2007).

Considering educational equity, Latin-American levels are dramatic: around 95% of high-class youth complete secondary education while less than 10% of low-class youngsters do it. In Mexico, for instance, these rates vary from 92% to 6% (Sourrouille, 2007). Social unequal patterns are also observable in Europe, where less than one-third of young people (aged 25-34) who have a disadvantaged socio-economic background complete higher education, a rate even lower among boys (European Commission, 2009a). But there was decisive upgrades concerning democratization, in particular, in Southern Europe, where many young people from low-educated backgrounds are nowadays studying in university, partially supported by the state. For instance, in Spain, 62% of descendents of former college students accomplish tertiary education, while this rate is 25% for those whose parents just attend primary school (INJUVE, 2008).

Some reports note that educational growing patterns in Europe reflect a crisis in the youth labor market (United Nations, 2007). Meanwhile, a part of educational expansion in Latin America is actually hidden by current population growth, and extreme poverty affecting a huge part of families oblige many children and teenagers to leave school in order to start working in the informal sector (see following topic).⁴ However, if population has grown, the whole economy (including labor force, production, market) is also naturally bigger, so educational resources and demands should progress accordingly. Besides, Latin America is currently reaching the *demographic bono* (less people in elderly group and in the younger one), a period in Europe characterized by a great educational development (60s and 70s). After that, elderly groups become numerous and demand increasing public resources.

Anyway, investment in education is actually growing faster in Europe, and there is an integrated framework to achieve common goals, including a reinforcement of regulation procedures as well as European specific funds for educational improvement in poorer regions. In Southern Europe, public investment on education is

⁴ For instance, Mercado & Planas (2005) argue that educational expansion during the second half of the 20th Century, in Mexico, was faster than in Europe, even if percentages show the opposite, due to demographic growth. Comparing the cohort of 1960 with those born in 1970, the authors note that percentage of those with tertiary education was the same (15%) – actually decreased among boys and increased among girls – but the number of students in higher education has grown around 50%.

around 90% of the total expenditure in this sector. In Latin America, from 1995 to 2006, the increment of public expenditure on educational institutions was very slow (except in Brazil), due to low economic growing rates, so that expansion was mostly supported by private investments, achieving more than 20% of total expenditure in education and leaving aside millions of poor young people (OECD, 2009).

There is an increasing concern to compare not only attainment rates, but also the quality of schooling experiences. According to PISA, there are significant differences between performances in reading, mathematics and science, among students aged 15. In average, Latin American teenagers have lower results than European ones, but this gap is not widening, especially in Math, since the Latin-American improve their results from 2000 to 2006, while the scores decreased in many European countries, including Spain, Italy and Greece (OECD, 2007). In reading skills, a decrease was observed in most of OECD countries, but curiously not in Chile, nor in Portugal.

In opposition to a common sense idea, most Latin American teenagers attend public schools, as well as in Southern Europe. However, PISA also shows that private-public gap is higher in Latin American countries, mostly due to differential school socio-economic environments. That is, average students' scores in private schools are higher, since these schools concentrate young segments of high- and middle-class. For example, in Mexico, although private schools present higher scores than public ones, if both family and school socio-economic differences are neutralized, students perform better within the public system. In European countries, there are very distinct models, but the gap between private and public scores are not so relevant, considering both family background and test scores (OECD, 2004 & 2007).

In contrast with performance scores, both Latin-American and Southern European students present high levels of instrumental motivation, interest, enjoyment, sense of belonging at school and self-conception in Mathematics and Science, than Asian or Northern European ones (OECD, 2004 & 2007). This apparent contradiction may be explained by three cultural characteristics of Latin America and Southern Europe: (a) students are comparing themselves with older generations, presenting low educational levels, or with other teenagers who already leave school; (b) less awareness, competition and auto-criticism among youth; (c) an empathic cultural orientation, that is, a tendency to not openly disagree with statements posted by an authority source, even if it is an anonymous survey. Not surprisingly, in both regions,

the correlation between these indexes and performances on tests are very low, compared with those observed in Northern Europe or Asia.

But the schooling experience indicator with a higher (negative) correlation with students' performance is anxiety at school work (to worry, to feel helpless, to get tense and nervous), and the higher levels were also observed in Latin American countries, explaining more than 10% of scores variance. Number of hours spent at school is also lower in Brazil, Mexico and Uruguay than the OECD average, and the principals in those countries reported the higher levels of teachers' shortage (deficits in quality and availability of human resources) as well as the lack of educational resources (instructional material, computers, calculators, library and science equipment).

3. Youth labor market: are we talking about the same uncertainty?

Europe and Latin America also present different patterns and trends concerning youth labor force. The share of economic active teenagers (age 15-19) is higher in Latin America, and it dropped just 3 points, from 44% in 1990 to 41% in 2005 (in Brazil this rate is 55% and remained stable during the 90s and the first years of 21st Century). Note that in Latin America, more than 10% of young people marry and/or have children before getting into the 20s (see table 2). The decline in boys' activity rates was partially compensated by an increase of the participation of girls in the labor market. Meanwhile, in Europe, the economic active teenager's rate fell from 32% to 26%, affecting both girls and boys (PRB, 2006).

Table 2. Teenagers' (aged 15-19) economic activity and family constitution rates

	% economically active		% of family constitution	
	1990	2005	Marriage	Motherhood
Italy	29	24	1	1
Spain	30	24	2	1
Portugal	46	37	4	2
Mexico	44	39	11	7
Brazil	56	55	11	9
Chile	25	23	9	6

* Original table, composed with data extracted from PRB (2006).

Considering the whole youth (age 15-29), participation rates has remained stable in Latin America, around 57%, from 1990 to 2005, since male participation decrease, from 75% to 71%, is being replaced by female participation growth, from 40% to 45% (CEPAL, 2008). Besides, it is important to consider that other 20% of young people, especially girls, deal with heavy unpaid daily responsibilities, usually supporting their families.

Meanwhile, the size of youth labor force in Europe has decayed, but it is also higher than 50%, mostly due to the different options of part-time jobs and distance education, available mostly in Central and Northern Europe, enabling to start working while studying (United Nations, 2007). Therefore, activity rates among young people are higher in countries as Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom – where the majority of young workers are also students or apprentices – in contrast with Southern or Eastern Europe, although the latter reveal higher school drop-out rates and poverty rates.

The possibilities of European young people (age 15-24) to be unemployed or underemployed are high, especially among girls, but these changes have declined from 1990 to 2005. Youth unemployment rate (15.4% in 2008) is nearly twice the percentage observed among the whole working population. Southern countries register the worst scores (more than 20% in Spain and Italy) and higher gender gaps. Short-term unemployment is dominant among youth, but for instance in Italy and Greece more than one-third of those unemployed couldn't find a job during the last 12 months (European Commission, 2009a).

In contrast, youth unemployment rates has spread in Latin America, around one-third between 1990 and 2002, affecting nearly 23% of working teenagers and 17% of aged 20-24 (United Nations, 2007). Although unemployment increment was higher among boys, girls were also affected and still register the highest rates (Schkolnik, 2005). Data from 2005 suggest a slight decrease in the first years of the 21st Century, especially concerning long-time youth unemployment, which felt from 16% in 2000 to 11% in 2005. Even though, chances of youth unemployment is more than two times higher among young people living in poorest 20% of households, in comparison with other 80% of the population, suggesting an everlasting pattern of social exclusion (CEPAL, 2008). Besides, current crisis is probably reversing the positive trend registered in the first half of the current decade.

A major part of those youngsters who are working in Latin America (69% aged 15-19; 49% aged 20-24) are in low-productivity occupations, with few (or none) labor protections and training opportunities, including self-employed workers, unpaid workers, employees of familiar companies (fewer than 5 workers) and domestic workers. This rate has increased during the 90s and the first years of the new millennium, and it is especially high among girls (United Nations, 2007). 7 out of 10 jobs generated during the 90s were in low-productivity services (CEPAL & OIJ, 2004). Thus, 68% of the working teenagers lie in the informal economy (SITEAL, 2008) and just 33% of the young people (aged 15-24) have health insurance (CEPAL, 2008). For instance, in Mexico, more than 70% of young workers never had an employment contract and just 14% was succeeded in obtaining a job through formal procedures, such as newspapers calls and job services (AA.VV., 2007).

Comparing with national average wages, young people's salaries were declining during the last two decades, particularly among low-educated workers, being just 33% for teenagers and 57% for those aged 20-24 (Weller, 2007; CEPAL, 2008). The number of working students is lower than in Europe, although it has increased from 15% in 1990 to 21% in 2005 (CEPAL, 2008).

It would be expectable an increase of the young people segment dedicated to professional or managerial employments, due to educational expansion during the 90s. However, in 2002, just 19% of young people (aged 25-29) held such positions, a similar rate than twelve years before (Schkolnik, 2005). Financial and social jobs increased just from 27% to 28%, and the share of young people enrolled in these sectors is more a less the same of the whole active population (CEPAL & OIJ, 2004). Young people in traditional services have decreased (still 26%), but retail became the main activity sector, employing 28% of young people.

Low-wages and short-term contracts also affect a higher proportion of European young people, compared with other generations, but most of them entail basic social security and training opportunities. In Europe, 40% of young people (aged 15-24) work under temporary contracts because they could not find a permanent job, and this rate is higher than 70% in Portugal and Spain.⁵

⁵ Part-time jobs are also increasing in Europe, enrolling 25% of youth labor force, in some part enabling young people to remain studying. But for instance in Greece almost 70% of part-time young workers declared they would prefer to be in a full-time job (European Commission, 2009a).

In contrast with a common sense idea, placing young workers in professional activities, European young people are also mostly working in wholesale and retail trade (age 15-24) and manufacturing (age 25-29). Most of those in the younger group may be completing their studies while they are working for instance in a shop, but it is relevant that about 35% of young people aged 25-29 are in low-skilled occupations and other 25% are skilled manual employees (European Commission, 2009a).

Due to labor market instability, European young adults who live independently of their parents are more likely to live in poverty, so there is a major tendency to postpone transition to independent adulthood, especially in Mediterranean societies. Youth vulnerability in the labor market is, thus, partly hidden by social protection (higher in Northern Europe) or by family support (especially in Southern countries), but those who are unable to benefit from these resources (for instance, immigrants) face a great danger of social exclusion. In contrast, poverty affects 57% of Latin American children, against 35% of young people aged 20-24, reflecting the importance of working, even in low-productivity sectors, in order to improve household living conditions (United Nations, 2007).

Considering attitudes and expectations toward work, in Latin America, recent surveys and focus groups did not notice a disaffection tendency (AA.VV., 2007; CEPAL, 2008). Actually, to have a stable income to be independent and/or to help the family (instrumental motivation) is considered the most important factor to work, especially among the older groups (aged 25-29), but self-development, working climate and learning opportunity are also factors pointed out by many youngsters, especially those who have higher educational degrees. In contrast, most young workers reveal their criticism towards labor market dynamics, in aspects related to low-wages, work instability and employers' illegal practices. Only 30% of the Latin American youth consider that companies respect regulations on minimum wage, contracts, dismissals and working hours. These data indicate a clear perception of recent de-regulation and deterioration of labor-capital relations, but also a strong aspiration to taking part in a more stable and fair labor market.

Similarly, a recent European report points out: "contrary to a widespread opinion that young people are more instrumental and less interested by work, young people (< 30) have a more 'expressive' relation to work, i.e. a greater request for self-fulfillment in work (esp. when they are highly educated): the human relations at work

and the social usefulness are important to them, as well as the opportunities to express oneself at work, the interest of the work, the feeling of success and the level of autonomy” (European Commission, 2009a: p. 31). Thus, social protection and opportunities for development are major requests among young workers, rather than work stability. In this report, educational expansion and feminization of the labor market are referred as major factors that impulse such “expressive turn”. However, data also show that young people’s relation to work changes drastically when they are independent, and particularly young women turn to more instrumental attitudes towards work after maternity.

4. Does school still matters in the labor market?

As we have seen, education is becoming the main activity of young people, mostly in Europe but slowly also in Latin America. Meanwhile, the labor market presents increasing problems to integrate huge segments of youth, especially those from poor backgrounds. Therefore, a key question to address is if extending time, resources and efforts spent by young people (and their families) in education leads to a better (usually later) incorporation in the working sphere.⁶

In Europe, 80% of those who have a tertiary degree are succeeded in obtaining skilled jobs (legislators, managers and technicians), while just one-quarter of those without such educational level do it. This proportion remained stable during the last decade (from 1998 to 2006), suggesting that educational growth was absorbed by labor markets (OECD, 2009). However, there are huge contrasts among countries. For instance, in Spain, in spite of recent economic growth, the proportion of young people (aged 25-34) with tertiary education in skilled jobs has not risen from 60%, during the last decade, and more than 20% of graduated males are craft workers or machine operators (European Commission, 2009b). And in Portugal, the rate of graduated workers in skilled jobs is still high (above 80%), but has decreased 11% during the last decade, suggesting that demand for tertiary educated workers is much slower than supply increment.

⁶ An important and related question (but not the same) is if growing public investments in education are, in fact, promoting economic development and social equity.

Moreover, European citizens with no more than lower secondary have three time more chances to be unemployed, in comparison with higher educated workers, and such gap has increased from 1998 to 2008 (Eurostat data), especially due to de-localization of low skilled manufacture. The proportion for female young workers is even higher, indicating that education is a most decisive investment for them. However, these rates vary geographically: in contrast with Germany or the United Kingdom, in Mediterranean countries, the “unemployment gap” due to education is wide in the older generation (40-64 years old), but not in the younger group (European Commission, 2009b). And for Portuguese young workers this gap has almost disappeared (Eurostat data for 2008). Besides, transition from education to work is also affecting highly educated youth: just 66% of young people with a tertiary qualification are employed one year after their graduation (European Commission, 2009a). A recent report on Spanish youth underlie that skilled young workers very often accept low-paid, temporary and heavy works, hoping to be promoted in the future, in order to escape to long-term unemployment (INJUVE, 2008).

In contrast, in Latin America, highly educated young people have fewer chances of being employed than lower educated ones, and this pattern remained stable from 1990 to 2005, among boys, and was even reinforced among girls. In 2005, young female workers’ unemployment rate was around 12%, in low-educated sectors (as in 1990) but it rose to 19% in highly educated segment (from 13% in 1990). Among male workers, those with higher possibilities of not finding a job were young people with intermediary educational degrees (10 to 12 years of schooling).⁷

Considering some indicators of work quality, the overview is not so disappointing for Latin American students. While among those with low education, 23% are managers or professionals and 26% are in low-productivity jobs, for the higher educated these rates are 49% and 7% (Schkolnik, 2005). Moreover, highly educated young people’s average income is more than twice the income of low-educated ones – this gap is widening from 1990 on and it is progressive during the life-time, so that adults’ high-educated average income (older than 30) is three-times

⁷ Some authors has recently argued that being unemployed and searching for a job request a minimum of expectations and resources that many poor low-educated young people couldn’t afford (García Guzmán, 2009), but this is not consistent with the fact that unemployment rates are much higher among young people from poorer households.

higher than those with low educational degrees. Young workers with intermediary degrees are surprisingly just a little better than those with lower education, confirming the low status of technical and vocational training in Latin America. Income gender gap is also stretching among high-qualified workers, while it is widening among low and intermediary ones (Weller, 2007).

However, compared with European patterns presented above, we may consider that in Latin America the relation between education and work is far more problematic, since only half of the higher-educated young workers are enrolled in highly-skilled jobs (80% in Europe) and a significant part are working under very precarious conditions.

A research in Mexico shows that, until the 60s, professional jobs available were more than workers with higher education, but just 30 years later three graduations was taking place for each high-skilled position available in the labor market (Muñoz Izquierdo, 2001). The author concludes that the surplus of private investment in education decayed, in all educational levels, but especially concerning the intermediary degrees (9 to 11 years of schooling). Meanwhile, comparing different universities, he found out that the value of higher education in the labor market (measured by current average wage of former students) might vary dramatically according to the institution. These findings lead some authors to argue that an educational segmentation is taking place, generating distinct pathways and institutions to different social groups, according to the demands of an increasingly polarized labor market. For instance, Miranda López (2003) underlie that the potential of education in providing social mobility, socialization references and critical developmental is undermined through such process.

Facing this scenario, it may be surprising that most of Latin-American young people, according to recent surveys, consider education as the major factor to be succeeded in the labor market, way beyond other factors as interpersonal connections or simply luck (AA.VV., 2007; CEPAL, 2008). How to understand this perspective, in the context of such vulnerable education-work relations and also considering the young people's criticism toward public regulations and working organizations? On one hand, as in the case of education (see above), one may wonder if these positive statements reflect some lack of information or a cultural tendency to give an answer considered polite in face of an unknown inquirer. On the other hand, considering current powerful fragmentation pressures (Saraví, 2009), one may wonder if social

cohesion in Latin-American societies is not actually relying on such ambiguous faith. Taking into account the closure of Latin American high-class (Reygadas, 2008), education may be the only way available to get there, even if it is a tricky one.

Although the objective relation between education and work is stronger in Europe, young people are apparently more skeptical.⁸ These data may be understood in the context of a youth somehow supported by the state and/or by their families, but clearly aware that conditions available and skills requested by the new economy are not those of the earlier generations and are just partially developed in schools. Unfortunately, there are no direct comparative data between the two continents, concerning perceptions and expectations on the labor market, to enhance more powerful interpretations.

5. Is there life outside school and labor market?

In previous pages, the situation of young people who are in education or in the labor market was under discussion. Activity rates have slightly decreased during the last two decades, but average educational careers are longer, so that we would think that one trend balances (and explains) the other. But not necessarily. Both in Europe and in Latin America, a significant segment of youth are neither in education, employment nor training (while a growing number are enrolled in both).⁹

Recent European statistics show that more than one third of young people aged 15-24 are neither in education nor in working activities. A part of this group may be voluntarily in this situation, joining some cause or enjoying a “sabbatical year”. However, if we add that this rate is around 20% in countries usually known for such

⁸ As the main reason for the difficulties in finding a job, 12% considered the lack of training opportunities and 11% the inappropriate job orientation at school. Moreover, considering the most useful qualities to find a good job, young people pointed out factors that are hardly central in school curricula, such as communication and teamwork (27%), technological skills (17%), knowledge of the business world (9%) and good appearance (6%). And one young European in three accepts to take a job below their qualifications, but just if it allows some stability and a good salary (European Communities, 2007). According to a Spanish recent survey (2008), more than 50% of young workers with tertiary education or a professional degree consider that their current jobs has nothing to do with their studies, doubling the rates observed four years before (INJUVE, 2008).

⁹ Extensive data on this category are usually rough and incomplete, so that qualitative approaches are very useful to a deeper knowledge.

activities, as Denmark and the Netherlands, and it is more than 50% in some Eastern European countries, one may wonder if the main reason is not effective troubles during the transition to the labor market. Actually, in most European countries, more than 50% of young people (aged 15-24) are inactive one year after leaving school (European Commission, 2009a).¹⁰

It is interesting that Northern European countries, where activity rates among youth are higher, are also those where young people stay longer at school and achieve high levels of education. In these countries, around 50% of young people are enrolled in both contexts and just 20% are not involved in any of them. In Eastern Europe, young people usually have long educational careers but face now difficulties in obtaining an employment afterwards. And in Southern Europe, most young people traditionally leave school early, without a professional degree, in order to start working, but those who are enrolled in higher education use to delay the entrance in the labor market. But a recent report on Spanish youth shows that this contrast may be not so effective anymore. Compared with 2000 and 2004, data from 2008 document that people are studying longer but they are entering in the labor market at an earlier age. Meanwhile, the rate of young people not studying nor working remained stable (INJUVE, 2008).¹¹

In Latin America, the situation of young people not working nor studying is identified by social scientists and some public institutions as a current problematic and dangerous feature. For instance, at 15 years old, 25% of inactive young people are not attending to any educational course. Almost the same percentage is both working and studying. The situation of not working nor studying is more common in rural areas, where many young people is informally supporting family activities, but almost 30% of the teenagers from urban poor backgrounds (both from formal and informal sectors) who are not working, at age 15, are not attending school either (SITEAL, 2007).

Recent data from ILO (in CEPAL, 2008) estimate that 22 millions (around 20%) of Latin American young people (aged 15-24) already left school and are not

¹⁰ Note that European statistics seldom consider informal activities. So, especially in Southern countries and recently in Eastern countries as well, many of those youngsters may be enrolled in some undeclared works, while they are applying for a more regular and stable job. Anyway, this fact does not refute the increasing difficulties in young people's move from education to the labor market.

¹¹ Possibly, more higher education students are taking low-skilled jobs (many of them part-time jobs in shops), in order to provide their autonomy and consumption patterns, being privileged by employees, in comparison to early school-leavers.

employed, not even in the informal economy. 81% of them live in urban areas and 72% are girls. Most of them (around 75%) are not looking for a job.

Under this segment are the tougher situations of marginality and delinquency, health diseases and additions, as well as pregnant girls, young parents and teenagers helping their households in many ways (SITEAL, 2008). More specific information was necessary in order to provide a deeper analysis. Anyway, the inability to develop a life-project and a regular career, within formal institutions, lead these groups very often to dramatic situations of social exclusion, especially due to the growing contrast with those enrolled in education and/or regular labor market. For a huge part of Latin American youth, the only opportunities to match their aspirations is to enroll in illegal activities or to immigrate, both ways entailing considerable risks (Saraví, 2009).

Obviously, each society is unique. One may argue, for instance, that social networks (especially family ties) and informal economy are stronger in Latin America, providing pathways for young people's integration and well-being, while being aside of education and work in Europe leads more directly to social exclusion. Moreover, different dispositions and skills arise from a life on the edge. Perhaps, it is true. However, we may also wonder if these traditional ties and informal maps are not being eroded by globalization and modernity, especially in their capability of providing the life-styles and the equity patterns required by the new generations.

Last remarks

Some common trends were observed throughout our comparison. During the last two decades, educational patterns have increased considerably both in Europe and in Latin America, enrolling almost all children, most of the teenagers and an increasing segment of young adults. In some part, this tendency reflects difficulties of insertion in the labor market, but it is also a result of increasing investment, from public institutions as well as from families and young people.

Meanwhile, working conditions became harder for young people, especially for those with low educational levels. But even for those with tertiary education (and especially for those with vocational studies), the chances of being unemployed or employed in a distinct area, probably in a temporary and sometimes part-time job, has

spread. However, youth activity rate has not fallen, retained by families' economic needs and by young people's aspirations to autonomy, leading to an increasing percentage of working students. On the other side, those who are not working nor studying are also more than twenty years ago, in both continents, reclaiming for specific social policies.

In opposition to a simplified idea of globalization as homogenization, some growing contrasts were also evident through our analysis. Some of them are related to different rhythms of change. For instance, due to a common political framework, educational expansion and democratization are increasing faster in Europe, especially in Southern countries. So, the educational gap between both regions has widened, since the expansion in Latin America was slower, contingent and unequal, not benefiting the poorer regions and social groups. Similarly, the possibility of studying and working simultaneously is increasing faster in Europe, but it is also growing in Latin America.

However, other contrasts suggest not only a difference of rhythm but effective diverging trends. In opposition to Europe, youth unemployment and underemployment (enrollment in unskilled jobs, without social protection and training opportunities) have grown in Latin America. Similarly, although the slower and unequal educational expansion, the possibility of being unemployed or enrolled in a unskilled job after accomplishing tertiary education is increasing for Latin American youngsters, in contrast with their European fellows. That is, education-work linkage is changing in Europe but it is not weakening, while in Latin America growing pressures challenge this link.

So, the European are increasingly studying with a "sense of need", facing serious risks of social exclusion if they decide to leave school early, while Latin American youth experience secondary and tertiary education with a "sense of possibility": some of them are simply not able to study, and others may choose, but the value of education for their integration in the labor market became highly dependent of other factors. Further analysis would be needed, for instance, contrasting different "educational circuits" and their relation with labor market, as well as the effects of formal and informal "transitional frames".

Anyway, our analysis refutes the neoliberal assumption that more de-regulated and unequal labor markets, as those of Latin-America, would be better in preventing youth unemployment or in promoting flexible partial integrations, enabling young people to remain studying. In contrast, in the more regulated systems of Northern Europe, the rates of both education and work enrollment are higher, and the percentage of people not working nor studying is lower. The statement that the

increment of young people's job opportunities would be a direct result of economic growth is also challenged by our analysis.¹²

Our findings also question the argument that population growth hindered educational development in Latin America. There is an obvious increment of educational institutions, but labor force, production and market are also much bigger than a few decades ago, so that expansion encompasses all systems. But modernity in Europe implied a “structural shift”, in the sense that scientific and technological knowledge are spread through broad sectors of economy, being able (and useful) for an increasing part of the population through education, and thus improving their working and life conditions (Costa et al., 2000).

Back to our initial questions, our findings do not confirm the idea of an erosion of education and work values. Actually, most young people are investing longer in education, in order to promote their effective integration in a skilled, challenging and well-paid employment. A growing segment is simultaneously working in unskilled temporary jobs, supporting their families or improving their autonomy and consumption practices. In opposition, our analysis suggests a more flexible and individualized relation with education and work, but qualitative studies would be necessary to develop such theory.

Meanwhile, a growing minority is neither studying nor working. In Europe, most of them are searching for a job correspondent to their aspirations and educational degree, supported by families and/or by public programs, but long-term unemployment may lead them to frustration, low self-esteem and social exclusion. In Latin America, many of them are not even searching for a job (around 15% of the whole youth), including a huge diversity of situations, from those who are enrolled in hard family duties to those who are involved in illegal activities.

This paradox – education and work are central arenas of most young people's life-experiences and projects but they are turning to be “distant worlds” for an increasing number of them – challenge the concept of societies built during the 20th Century, based on social cohesion and equity principles. If this fragmentation pressures are being mitigated in Europe, until now, mainly through state intervention, they appear to be strongly “naturalized” in Latin American cultures and economies.

¹² Focusing on the Spanish case, the higher rates of GDP growth in Europe, during the last decade, does not reversed decisively the high levels of youth unemployment, underemployment and temporary contracts. And those who are not working in their field of specialization have actually increased.

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