A Problem of Connectedness

Composite Report on Unemployed Graduates

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What do our socio-biographical studies tell us about graduate unemployment, its origins, its consequences, and its meanings for those who experience it?

First we have to note that possession of a degree reduces the relative chances of an individual being unemployed, throughout Europe. [1] Although graduate unemployment has grown, in proportion to unemployment generally, it is generally less than half the level of unemployment rates generally, or unemployment among the comparable generation. It is evident why. In virtue of their relative educational success, graduates have skills and a proven capacity for self-discipline in excess of many non-graduates. Graduates mostly have the opportunity of 'trading down', of placing skills at a lower level in the labour market then they originally intended or hoped. A graduate may be able to find work as a clerk, or a secretary, or in a tourist bureau, jobs which could be perfectly well done by non-graduates, but for which graduates are at little disadvantage, and probably even at some advantage in the competition for them.

Some specific meanings of 'graduate unemployment'

In fact, 'graduate unemployment' turned out mean something more specific than a combination of being unemployed and at the same time a graduate. Most of our subjects have defined 'unemployment' not in absolute terms, as lack of <u>any</u> job, but in relative terms, as absence of the employment appropriate to a graduate. 'Stable employment' turns out to mean this, since employment would only be considered 'stable' by most of our subjects if it met the aspirations that led them to become graduates in the first place. (And maybe also led their families to want them to become graduates).

Some of our subjects (Zenon from France, Steven in England, for example) did find work from time to time. The problem for them, and for others who were dependent on their families, or on social benefit, was that they could gain access to the work which they really wanted. Work for graduates, in other words, is defined by our subjects as work which is consistent with definite aspirations, which are rarely merely for a job of <u>any</u> kind. The problem for graduates is how to match the aspirations which they have formed, and/or which their families have for them, with

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[1] The exception to this in our National Reports is Greece, where graduate unemployment is reported to be higher rather than lower than the rate of unemployment of the less well-qualified. This can be attributed to the backwardness of the Greek economy (restricting higher-level job opportunities), and the high availability of low-skilled seasonal employment (for example in the tourist industry.) It may also be a function of high inequality, and low public support for the young unemployed. Better off families who can support their children through university are also more likely to be able to support them in waiting for a job opportunity consistent with their status aspirations than poorer families are able to do.)

the actual opportunities which they find accessible to them. This idea of accessibility involves a third variable, that of 'resources' of various kinds, which a graduate needs in order to grasp and make use of employment opportunities.

The problem of graduate unemployment can be understood in terms of this triangle, of the matching of aspirations, opportunities, and resources, in a given place, social space, and time.

aspirations

resources *opportunities*

The situation of unemployed graduates can be mapped in terms of the consistency or inconsistency which obtains between their aspirations, the capabilities and assets of different kinds which they bring to the graduate employment market, and the opportunities available to them. Interventions which seem to improve the situation of unemployed graduates, now or in the future, can be focused on each of these dimensions, all of which are socially constructed in different ways.

Disappointment in this particular generation

A common feature of the experience of all our sample is that they belong to an age-cohort (we chose subjects recently out of university, and generally under 30) whose members found themselves looking for work in a period when unemployment across Europe was much higher than it had been twenty or thirty years earlier. The parental generation's experience had been of steadily growing employment opportunities, and a very favourable job market for graduates. We might say that the earlier economic expansion had induced an expansion of university education, but that this had come to a halt when many of the products of this system arrived at the threshold of the labour market. There are national variations, in one case (the former East Germany) very marked indeed, but the pattern is common. Thus, for several of our French subjects, the possibility of descent into the larger mass of unemployed youth, dependent on State assistance, is a real anxiety. Matthias, one of our Swedish subjects, found his aspirations to follow a contemporary and secularised version of his father's vocation blocked for the time being by the crisis of the Swedish welfare state and of the country's vanguard role in aid to the Third World. (Matthias's father was a photographer for a Swedish church mission in Africa and Asia, Matthias wanted to be an ecologist, also working abroad.)

The most catastrophic example of a collective experience of blocked opportunities was from the former East Germany. Here several of our interview subjects had seen their cultural and social capital largely devalued by the collapse of the Communist regime. In the 'main case' of Heike Frenzel (see German National Report) a favoured and uncomplicated trajectory of social reproduction, based on her father's successful career in the ruling Party, had been put into crisis by the cancellation of her grant for doctoral studies. Her husband's career as a teacher of 'Marxist' social science was likewise terminated, and a family which had been able to sponsor both of them had lost most of its power to do so. These events have impacted on to the family life of our subject too. A marriage contracted within one set of shared assumptions and aspirations has been thrown into crisis in particular by the devaluation of the husband's resources, which had not been backed in his case by a privileged social position. Our German subjects had suffered the most dramatic experience of a world-turned-upside down, in which

having 'done everything right', in their educational experience, they find that circumstances wholly outside their control have apparently destroyed prospects. The German National Report comments that such an imbalance between past reasonable expectations, and what a society practically offers, is potentially undermining of social legitimacy and stability.

To a broad extent, we can say that our sample reflect a generational misfortune and experience of disappointment, though of course many, in fact a majority of graduates, have escaped this, given the continuing relative advantages of graduates in the labour market, the fact that in some nations the burden of redundancy has been inflicted on the older generation at the other end of the occupational cycle, and by limits to the scale of the recession in most of the nations in our study.

Who is at greatest risk of graduate unemployment?

Within any category and at any prevailing level of disadvantage some individuals will be more vulnerable than others. In conditions of high average unemployment, individuals will find themselves out of work who in conditions of fuller employment would be able find work relatively easily. The incidence and explanation of the average level of employment or unemployment is a matter quite distinct from the explanation of why particular individuals are vulnerable to becoming unemployed. It is important to keep these issues distinct. If one does not do so, one finds a public argument beset by category confusions.

Such confusions can be of two opposite kinds. Either (most commonly) the unemployed are held to be responsible for their state of unemployment, or the poor for their poverty. (Some of the current programmes of 'remoralising' and 'resocialising' the young unemployed, in Britain for example, in part make this assumption, though the general object of finding more work is to be supported.) Or, the faults of individuals (criminal acts, for example) are attributed largely to the social constraints of poverty or discrimination, as if there were no variations or choices in the ways individuals respond to these circumstances.

We might think of this, in the terms of Margaret Archer's morphogenetic social analysis (Archer 1995) as two separate dimensions of social explanation - constraints which are a property of structures, on the one hand, and outcomes which are a property of individual or collective action on the other. Both dimensions need to be taken into account, each situated temporally in relation to each other, if one is to generate valid and sufficient explanation of social realities. That is to say, structures constrain individual choices. Individuals respond to these constraints in certain ways. The outcomes of their responses modify these structures, which provide the constraining context for a later set of social actions.

In the case of graduate unemployment, we must note on the one hand that higher levels of unemployment, and indeed variable and specific kinds of unemployment in different countries of our sample, have adversely influenced the life-chances of our subjects, and in part explain the situation in which they find themselves. But it is also the case that our graduate unemployed have sometimes been 'selected' for disadvantage by their quite specific biographical trajectories, and by deficits in the resources which they have been able to bring to the graduate labour market.

For example, a number of our subjects, as in several other categories of 'risk' which have investigated, reported traumatic family experiences. Bereavements in childhood or

adolescence, experiences of particularly conflictful divorces, or violent family histories, have left some of our subjects carrying a heavy burden of depression or anxiety. (Ophelia and Platon, from France, are examples of young people with such histories).

This is itself a complex question. Some young people told a life story in which painful and difficult family relationships remained very central. Where bereavements and severe parental conflict have been features, it seems safe to view these as having imposed some specific additional burden on those subjected to them. It seems reasonable to identify such circumstances as an objective risk. But there are many other cases in which subjects narrated family histories in which there is no such obvious trauma, but which nevertheless are experienced by the subjects as a source of difficulty. (Antonio, in Italy, is such an instance, as are several of the French subjects). Yet other individuals narrate a family history whose complexity has become a positive resource for them, sometimes enabling them to establish their own individual identity by working through differences with or between their parents.

Our research shows, as one would expect studies based on biographical methods to do, the complex and individual ways in which an individual identity, and set of occupational choices is established. With some of our subjects who seem paralysed by such a history (Antonio in Italy, for example) it might seem that there is no way forward that did not run through achieving some understanding of, and thus reflexive distance, from these familial preoccupations. For others, mere separation, and some new social relationships, might be the key, if this could be achieved. But it does seem safe to note, especially as this corroborates our other sample groups, that severe family trauma make it much more likely that an individual will be 'selected' to suffer disadvantage in a situation of generalised social risk. Just as, on the contrary, it seems that individuals whose families remain a source of internal and/or external support to them, (the families of Steven, Matthias, and Heike, for example) will have an enhanced capacity to surmount structurally-induced obstacles.

Instrumental and intrinsic orientations to education and work

Our biographical studies tell us that have students have pursued degrees for different reasons. One useful classification of these, developed in the Spanish National Report, contrasts instrumental with intrinsic or vocational goals. The latter one might equally think of as the aim of self-development, an aspiration to 'authenticity'. Conventionally, subjects such as law, accountancy, or engineering have been regarded as based on an instrumental motivation, in which the prospect of good earnings and secure employment are the major consideration, whilst arts and social science subjects, which involve a larger measure of what one might call 'identity work', have been thought of as expressive or intrinsic.

This is however an oversimplification. Students can readily be vocationally- and intrinsically-committed to careers in business or engineering. They can equally follow courses in the arts not out of specific interest or commitment, but out of a diffuse wish to achieve a degree and the status which goes with it. Some of our subjects - Guillermo from Spain, for example - studied law not from either an intrinsic or even an instrumental commitment to a legal career, but out of passive conformity to his family's wishes. The Spanish National Report identifies activity/passivity as a separate motivational dimension, to capture this element of passive conformity. We can identify a three-fold classification of motives for obtaining a degree - desire for intrinsically meaningful work, desire for work that will bring a secure income, and desire merely to achieve the status and social recognition that goes with a university degree. Intrinsic meaning is not of course a property of a course of study by itself (intrinsic interests

may go in many directions), but of a student's relationship to it.

However, it seems generally that subjects such as the humanities and social sciences, which do not prepare students directly for any particular occupation, attracted students who were more 'intrinsically' or 'expressively' motivated, than subjects such as business studies or technology whose avowed object is to prepare students for the graduate labour market. This 'intrinsic' dimension is demonstrated by the higher risk of unemployment which such graduates faced. These courses appear to provide a space in which aspirations can be formed, often delaying the moment of occupational choice, even until after graduation. For several of our sample, university has been a mutative and positive experience in these ways. (The French National Report describes several graduates in these terms.)

Some of our subjects were highly conscious of desiring to find work which would be fulfilling and interesting to them. Steven, with his desire to be a designer, Zenon, with his wish to work in cinema, Matthias, with his wish to work as an ecologist, are examples, and there are many more, especially in the subjects from England, France, and Sweden. 'Graduate unemployment', for these subjects, meant enduring a situation in which they were trying to match their rather specific and high aspirations to a difficult job-market. Their precarious situation, in two of these three cases, arises from the fact that the 'resources' they brought to the task of job-search (access to appropriate networks, family support, relevant cultural capital) were only marginally qualifying for this. It remained uncertain whether these graduates would achieve anything like their aspirations, and how much they would have to scale these down in order to find stable work.

In some occupational fields where work is perceived to have a high intrinsic or expressive value (work in the media, the arts, intellectual work of certain kinds), and where a high value is placed on originality, the labour market seems to be characteristically structured in such a way that it maintains a persistent surplus of aspirants over achievers. In effect, those who wish to enter these occupations (actors, journalists, artists, designers, for example) pay a price in security, in stability of income, and probably in average long-term earnings, for the possibility of finding work that they would find personally fulfilling.

It is easy to represent this situation as dysfunctional for all concerned (too many arts graduates, over-supply of arts degrees, too many of these graduates unemployed or employed below their capacities.) But in two respects at least, this seems not to be the case. After all, for one thing, the existence of this number of students and graduates who wish to study subjects from intrinsic interest does arise from a choice of values. Even when some governments, like the British, have in the recent past tried to discourage such non-instrumental choices, by reducing the value of grants to students, and the like, they have largely failed to alter the balance of student preferences. And secondly, it seems that 'markets' in the arts, media and information industry seem to depend on diversity and innovation, and thus on the existence of a self-replenishing pool of creative workers and performers, who contribute the innovatory 'cultural genes' that these sectors require.

The Thatcher (Conservative) governments in Britain wanted the education system to serve wider societal interests - especially those of economic competitiveness - and sought to strengthen its ties with business enterprise in various ways. But they also perceived education, including the universities, as enbodying a culture which was generally inimical to business values. Functionalist models which see education as a mere sub-system of a social order unified by certain common values fail to recognise that sub-systems of a society -

whether it be organised religion, education, or the military - each have their own value system or sub-system. The education system gives especial weight to the idea of the value of individual development, and of learning itself, and attracts people to work in it who hold these values.

It seems particularly evident from the British, Swedish and French subjects that the experience of university did for many students involve a project of self-exploration and self-definition. Although most of the graduates had no choice but to the face the task of how to earn a living through work, they in some cases remained loyal to an 'intrinsic' and identity-specific idea of what that work should be. We thought some of our subjects showed admirable determination in trying to hold on to their ideals for themselves in the face of objective difficulties.

Differences between national university systems

National university systems have adapted in different ways to the problems of how to match rather abundant and demanding aspirations among students, to the reality of opportunities which are much more scarce. The British system was formed as an elite one, selecting students fairly rigorously (for academic ability and cultural and social capital, mainly) but providing a well-supported and well-structured educational formation. Characteristically, university education took place in a university away from the family home, establishing the university milieu as a separate context of socialisation. The peer-group network established by students at university becomes an important form of socialisation, and later of support in the early years of entry into the job market, and reduces dependence on the family of origin. We found, incidentally, that absence of strong peer-group network during or subsequent to university years, was a concomitant of the situation of graduate unemployment. Many of our unemployed graduate sample, especially those with the greatest difficulties in adjusting to the problems of finding work, were rather isolated from a peer group that could support and assist them. Some of them had reverted to an almost total dependence on their families of origin. Although this situation is partly no doubt a consequence of lack of insertion into the graduate labour market, it can also be a contributory cause of this.

Most of those who entered the British system at 18 could expect to graduate less than three years later. Even as it has expanded, now to take 30% of the 18-year old age-group, it has tried to retain these characteristics, though with mounting strain as the 'average unit of resource' is reduced (by over 40% since 1976). Sweden has a similarly 'intensive' and well-supported system, though with a different guiding social democratic ethos of expanded opportunities.

Other national systems, such as the Italian and the French, have responded to popular pressure for access and opportunity in a somewhat different way. They have conferred access to higher education as a formal right of citizenship, but have allowed such a deficit of resources and structures as to make it inevitable that many students would fail. In effect a responsibility which in Britain and Sweden has been contained within the universities, in these more liberal, open-access systems has been left to the students and their families. Or at least, this is true of the more 'massified' elements of these systems. Generally, in all nations, those institutions which are inhabited principally by the future social elite provide a more intensive educational formation. Such institutions are both product (through what it takes to gain admission to them) and producers of scarce cultural and social capital.

Our studies show that higher educational systems in our sample countries can serve students, especially the more vulnerable ones, very badly. Our Italian National Report describes how little Italian universities do to provide a context for interaction between students and university staff, or even between members of student cohorts, in the educational work-setting at least. Instead of a structured, interactive process in which students explore a field of study, and its relevance to themselves and possible later employment within it, students are left to fend for themselves, facing examinations which can become highly instrumentalised and largely cut off from the intrinsic goals and tasks of learning. Our Italian Report describes a 'reflexivity deficit' as a common consequence. That is, students emerge who are rather unprepared to reflect on or negotiate the 'triangle' constituted by opportunities, aspirations, and personal resources. It is the negotiation of this triangle on which successful placement in a position of graduate employment depends.

Such 'unreflexive' systems tend to encourage, or at least leave unchallenged, a passive and conformist relation to education. Whereas in other university systems the main axis of differentiation appears to be between instrumental and expressive orientations to study and work, in the southern systems an additional and important category must be added, which is the merely credentialist, or one based on passive conformity to familial expectations.

One reason for this, in Greece, is that the power of family is perceived to lie not merely in the domestic and personal sphere, but extends into the economy and labour market too. Several of our Greek subjects expected that graduate jobs, if they found them, would come from clientelist patronage or political connections, mediated largely by their fathers. In this situation, a university education can be little more than a way of marking time, or of acquiring a qualification which be formally necessary for, but certainly isn't expected to provide anything specifically relevant, to subsequent work. The inflated and patronage-ridden public sector is the location of such students' job-ambitions, in which the attainment of security and status are the overriding goals. [2]

In these 'southern' systems, students tend to remain dependent on their families for longer, and the influence on them of the university, as a distinct sphere of socialisation is less. In theory, one might think this family-centredness might leave students more 'in touch' with the real world of employment, and less alienated from it by unrealistic cultural aspirations. But in reality, the opposite seems to be the case. It seems that an intense experience of university education, perhaps through the networks and communicative skills it nurtures, perhaps because it mobilises students' own capacities to engage with reality, aids subsequent adjustment to the labour market.

One element in this process of adjustment is probably the achievement of independence and differentiation from the student's family of origin, a separation which seems optimal when it is accompanied by a continuing experience of parental commitment and support. The experience of graduates who have remained materially dependent on their parents well into their adult lives, and indeed may have lived at home with them since childhood without real interruption, seems in some instances to be an experience of delayed maturation if not regression. Our Italian study reports some male graduates as at risk of being permanently

[2] Nicos Mouzelis (1978) is an authoritative source on this distinctive feature of Greek society.

confined to this situation, as failure to find work leads to their devaluation as prospective marital partners, and hope of establishing a family in their own generation is put at risk. It is not so much that such graduates face social exclusion, in southern European societies, as a state of protracted non-differentiation from their family of origin. The Spanish National Report describes this as a serious risk in a situation when the higher job aspirations of the decades after democratisation have been blocked by economic recession.

A number of interesting connections emerge from the consideration of these national differences. It seems, for example, that enforced family dependence, a system of occupational placement which is also unduly dependent on familial networks, and a large state sector overly invaded by such clientelism, are associated with credentialism and conformism in the university system. (Indeed jobs and preferment within the university system may itself influenced by these s patterns).

The presence of a competitive, modern market economy seems to work to some degree in the opposite direction, by requiring more specific skills and motivations of students, and providing a context which gives greater value to individual capability and achievement. Whereas the intensive, supportive, but individualised formation of some northern university systems might seem on the face of it to be rather inimical to a free market climate, the opposite seems in fact to be the case. The demands of a modern market economy for autonomy, flexibility, and reflexivity amongst its employees appears to give a renewed functionality to university systems which offer a more intense experience of socialisation and individualisation.

Differences between the experiences of men and women

It seems that for women, especially in the south European countries, the perceived 'risk' of graduate unemployment is in some cases reduced by the alternative frame of identity of marriage and family-building. In several cases, this would plainly be experienced as a retreat or even as a defeat of (for example, in the case of Olga, from Greece, who had dreamed of becoming a singer, or beautician, until her father proscribed these occupations as sexually dangerous or dishonouring.) But still, it is a retreat, and a default identity, modelled on those of the parents, which remains available to some women as it appeared not to be available to men in the study. Men did not appear to abandon girl-friends because they could not find graduate work, but men did sometimes seem to find it difficult to find and retain partners when their economic situation remained precarious, or worse.

One could say that in this respect women in those societies which retain strong traditional family ties and obligations are less at risk of exclusion, but that they also have less opportunity to establish a distinct and independent individual identity. Among the French subjects, there is no such differentiation by gender, the young women having identity-based projects just as men do, and showing similar combinations of perseverance and vulnerability as the young men in trying to hold on to or realise them.

National similarities and differences in graduate unemployment

There are both similarities and differences in the outcomes of our investigations of graduate unemployment in our seven nations. As the research was undertaken after some years of economic recession, this graduate cohort were at a relative disadvantage compared with their recent predecessors. There was a structural reason why their aspirations, nurtured during years of prosperity and economic development, should now be at risk of being excessive in

relation to the opportunities available. The Spanish study reports experiences of 'blocked emancipation', journeys of young people towards independence from their families and autonomy having come to a (perhaps temporary halt) as they are forced back on to reliance on their families for the means of life. The Swedish study reports a sharp downturn in opportunities, especially seriously felt given an earlier national confidence that the Swedish educational system could function as a successful social escalator on a large scale. The main discovery of the Italian research is the valuable concept of a 'reflexivity deficit'. Whilst generally valuable as an evaluative measure of university systems' capacity to prepare their students for the realities facing them, this idea had a particular critical purchase on the university system of Italy, and its South in particular. Here a 'reflexivity deficit' was an endemic feature of the structure of university education. In this area it was difficult for the 'pre-modern' strengths of the social relations of the South to compensate for deficits in a supposedly 'modern' social sector. As in Spain, the possibility that young graduates could live at home, and continue to receive support, long into their adult lives, does avoid social exclusion, but does not do much to establish graduates as autonomous individuals. The East German experience was an especially catastrophic one for young graduates, though once the painful adjustments to lower expectations had been made, it was becoming clear that new opportunities were appearing for them, so large are that nation's economic resources. In Britain and France, our focus has been on the particular aspirations of some of the unemployed graduates we studied, and on the tenacity with some of them pursued them. These biographies convinced us that the aspirations of graduates for work which they felt to be meaningful and authentic should be respected, and were a potential resource both for individuals and society. Greece, the most 'traditional' of the national societies we studied, was also unique in the apparently higher risks of unemployment to which its graduates were exposed, compared with the less qualified. This was itself a consequence, however, of 'pre-modern' features of Greek society - low public support, the emphasis on status ,. Compared with risks of to which its graduates were exposed,.

What should be done about graduate unemployment?

If we map the problem of graduate unemployment via the triangle of aspirations, resources and opportunities, interventions become conceivable at any of these three points. The opportunity structure faced by graduates is in part a function of the overall level of economic activity, and the competitiveness of the economies in which it takes place. Clearly, an economy in recession is going to pose more severe problems for the cohorts who graduate into these conditions, than an economy in a condition of steady growth will do. Our sample were generally disadvantaged by their moment of entry into the labour force, compared with some of the predecessors.

The dimensions of aspirations and resources are intimately linked. Only the aspirations which graduates have the resources (in all their different aspects) to fulfil are going to be beneficial to individuals. Good university systems, from this point of view, will be those whose structures serve to bring resources, aspirations and opportunities into a 'reflexive' relation to one another.

Our findings suggest directions both for further research, and for public policy. It would be beneficial to investigate the different degrees to which universities in Europe build into their

curricula and pedagogies systematic links with the labour market. How far do they encourage the 'reflexivity' necessary for students successfully to match their aspirations with the resources they have available to them, and the market opportunities which exist? There are many methods by which this can be done - specialist vocational counselling services within universities, work-experience and mentoring schemes, through occupationally-relevant curriculum design, and through structured 'tutorial' relationships between students and lecturers which allow enough scope and duration of contact for these issues to emerge within the normal learning process. The attention being given in public policy in several countries to preparedness for the labour market for less qualified youth is also appropriate at higher educational levels. Although the need might appear to be less acute - graduates, after all, are among the relative successes of the educational system - the potential benefits are considerable, as are the losses to individuals and society when educational investments expensive in time, money, and human energy, are 'wasted'. It should be possible to develop projects which seek to pilot innovative ways of bringing universities and the graduate labour market into a closer and more effective relation to one another. [3]

Our research suggests that the problem of graduate unemployment is not the outcome of there being 'too many graduates', but of the lack of connections, both in practice and in conception, between universities and the world of work.

References

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[3] A project partly suggested by the SOSTRIS research, and joining three universities in partnership with 'Skillswork' (an 'active labour market' agency in East London engaged in economic regeneration) is now piloting new forms of linkage between employers in the Cultural Industries sector in this region, and educational programmes which are relevant to them. This programme intends to enhance the connectedness between university-providers, and employer-users, of graduate skills.