

Final Report Category 1 - France

In this report, we study first of all the statistical risk, that is to say, the probability of graduate unemployment. We then study the strategies of our informants facing this risk.

The statistical risk

The unemployment of young graduates remains lower than the average rate of unemployment but it has doubled during the 1980s and 1990s. Two and a half years after their graduation, the unemployment rate of the young graduates of 1984 was 6.5%. In 1988, it was 6.5% and in 1992 the rate had risen to 11.5% (12% for the second cycle graduates who are our concern). Graduation is therefore no longer a cast-iron guarantee of protection against unemployment.

Moreover, the insertion of young diplomates into the labour market has become less rapid and more precarious. Nine months after graduation, the rate of unemployment for the cohort of 1992 is 19.5% (16.5% for those graduating from the second cycle). The level of precarious labour contracts has also risen: 46% in 1988 compared to 54% in 1992.

Finally, the salaries obtained are lower and the social positions occupied are less favourable. For the second cycle graduates from the sector of arts and human sciences, the median salary 30 months after graduation declined by 10% between 1990 and 1994. If one looks at the jobs occupied by the second cycle graduates from the sector of arts and human sciences, we can see that they are distributed in a very particular way: 3% in industry, 24% in the market tertiary sector and 72% in the non-market tertiary sector.

30 months after graduation, 38% are titular teachers, that is to say, occupy professional posts. For this reason, downward mobility appears less important than elsewhere: 29% have intermediary employment, 20% have workers' jobs. On the other hand, these professional posts are less well paid than those in the private sector.

In other terms, the statistical risk of being unemployed or suffering downward mobility presents itself in a special fashion for the second cycle graduates from the sector of arts and human sciences. Statistically, there are two modes of insertion for them with different risks and advantages:

In the public sector, the level of precariousness is less, the risk of downward mobility is not so great, but one must be prepared to accept lower wages and a less prestigious social status.

In the private sector, the level of precariousness and the risk of downward mobility are greater, but the professional posts are better paid and carry greater prestige.

We shall see that this problematic of private and public, of ambition and renunciation, is present in the strategies of the young graduates. But these strategies are being deployed in a context of a general increase of the levels of qualification (Compared

with 10% in 1980, in 1992, 20% of young people who stopped their studies were second cycle graduates, of massive levels of youth unemployment (about 30%), of precariousness of jobs and even of pauperisation.

The situation of young people at the moment of entry into adult life is almost always less favourable than that of their parents. On the other hand, their parents, when they were entering adult life in the 1960s and 1970s, were in a better situation than had been the case of their own parents. This context inevitably influences the strategies.

The lived risk: the strategies

Our inquiry is not sufficiently exhaustive to pretend to be representative. Neither can we pretend to have identified all the strategies. That is why we treat each strategy on its own. At the moment of the inquiry, certain strategies seem to be winning strategies, others uncertain, others in the end losing strategies. But we cannot predict the future. A strategy is an orientation which appears at a particular moment in a trajectory. This trajectory itself is the product of a particular configuration, that is to say of the sum-total of the interactions that a person has with a series of people important in his or her environment, and of the history of these interactions, both those which have been abandoned and those which continue and those which have been created. Each configuration being singular, unique, so is each trajectory and also each strategy as well.

Here are the different identified strategies:

1. (Alexander). Adjustment by lowering of his previous expectations (to become a journalist or historian) in order to match the means available and find a stable job in the public sector as teacher Alexander is not afraid of social exclusion. Social exclusion is defined by Alexander in two ways: as the situation of others, the youth of the suburbs; or as economic poverty, referring to the situation of his grandparents.
2. (Sylvia). Lowering of expectations as a function of the labour market (displacement from the private sector to the public sector). Sylvia is not afraid of social exclusion, despite the fact that her difficult trajectory led her to demand the RMI [*Revenu Minimum d'Insertion*] for several months.
3. (Zenon). Double strategy: adaption of means in order to realise his aspirations in the private sector (make films) and a strategy for survival (illegal work in the building trade). Zenon is not afraid of social exclusion, though registered as unemployed. He fears only that his current situation will be prolonged indefinitely.
4. (Esther). Choice of precariousness to realise her ambitions (make music). She has no fear of social exclusion. She knows that her income will remain low and her situation precarious.
5. (Ophelia). Choice of marginality in order to realise her aspirations (healing others with Eastern techniques). Social exclusion, for Ophelia, is Assistance, the fact of asking from the State, which she has never done and she thinks she will never do, even though she has already lived with the RMI and

unemployment benefits. She thinks she will always be able to sort something out and find enough to survive on.

6. (Platon). Maintaining an aspiration (to make films) which is manifestly unrealisable at least in the actual objective and subjective situation. Strategy of failure. Platon is afraid of social exclusion which he defines as economic poverty. He is haunted by the fear of not having anything to eat.

7. (Jakez). Maintains a social ambition (to be an intellectual) which is unrealisable in the actual situation. Strategy of waiting. Jakez has great fear of social exclusion, defined as downward mobility *declasserment*. To be excluded is to be registered as unemployed, to be with the RMI, is not to enter into the system.

Strategies 1 and 2 appear as winning strategies, but one does not know what may be the medium and long term consequences. Unless the stability achieved in employment permit re-orientations of career leading to the achievement of the aspirations. Renunciations of one's original aspirations could one day be costly,

The effects of strategies 3,4 and 5 are still indeterminate. Objectively, they have little chances of success. They are characterised by ambivalence, despite the ostensible choices, and by an imaginary dimension, a dream woven on the basis of the family romance. But they can give rise to future adjustments which will be paid for by downward mobility that will be more or less painful according to the experiences accumulated on the labour market.

Strategies 6 and 7 seem to be losing strategies. However, since the aspirations have not the slightest chance of being realised in the actual situation, they will necessarily change. The strategy of failure (6) could lead to the aggravation of a depression which is already present and the start of a career of institutionalisation. The future of the waiting strategy (7) is uncertain: an exit from indeterminacy is still possible and can still permit the realisation of social ambitions.

The inquiry permits us to understand the nature of these strategies, their dynamic and their formation. The experiences on the labour market and the evolution of aspirations during the biography are good indicators of the consistency of these strategies.

In strategies 1 and 2, there is a *closeness* between the little jobs undertaken, therefore professional experience acquired, and the target posts eventually sought. The individuals accept precarious working conditions, difficult and under-qualified tasks; they are professional experiences through which they realise the gap between their qualifications and the labour market, and adjust their aspirations to their means and their means to the aspirations.

In strategies 3, 4 and 5, there is a *gap* between the little jobs undertaken and the aspirations or the posts sought.

In strategies 6 and 7, the professional experiences may or may not be related to the aspirations, but they do not result in any modification either of the aspirations or of the means. The professional experience leads to a negative

choice (not to be a salesperson, a cook...) which goes to the point of obliterating the memory (I have forgotten the name of the firm), of obliterating the project (I saw that I wasn't gifted) or stays as a positive experience that does not result in a choice (I thought of registering in a school after this experience, but I didn't do it...).

In the same fashion, the consistency of strategies can be tied to the history of the aspirations, that is to say, to the different projections which the individuals have been able, at the different periods of their childhood and their youth, to make onto their own future.

In strategy 1, the aspirations converge progressively (journalist, universitarian, community organiser [*animateur*], teacher) while in strategy 2 the search for security (I did not choose, I did not dare, I took what I disliked least) makes it easier to renounce the dreams of childhood and of youth (doctor, historian, circus dancer).

In strategies 3, 4 and 5, the aspirations come from childhood and do not change, even if ambivalence can be detected in the fact that other aspirations or doubts have cut across these vocations.

In strategy 6, there are very different aspirations with no connection with each other (priest, shoe-maker, comedian, film-maker) and in strategy 7 the common point of the aspirations is that they represent the sought-for social position (universitarian, architect, musician).

The common point of all these trajectories is that the university career starts, develops and finishes in a negative fashion. Choice by subtraction (not doing what one would have wanted to do), by elimination (that which was least unpleasant), by imitation (what one's friends did, what one's parents wanted). Studying was characterised by retreat, which was shown in social relations with their peers, or in the studies themselves, or in both. In five of the seven cases, the individuals left their studies at Master's level (*maitrise*)

In other terms, these students suffered particularly from those 'campus blues' which lead to the impossibility, within the framework of the mass university, of realising "the construction of a point of view", the key for achieving access to the level of the third cycle and the Doctorate.

This negativity has however different forms and has different effects upon the trajectories.

In trajectory 1, one finds an error at the start, a feeling of loneliness, of disorientation and of loss, which leads to a painful renunciation of aspirations (to put a cross on, to cancel, one's dream). In trajectory 2, there is regret about one's relations with one's peers (seen as transitory) and indifference to one's studies but no failure (the person achieved their Masters degree). The renunciation of aspirations will be a consequence of the confrontation with the labour market.

In trajectories 3, 4 and 5, there is a painful experience, either in one's studies (discouragement, the feeling of being lost) or in the relation with other students (the atmosphere), or in both. The aspirations have not changed at the end of their studies from what they were at the beginning.

In trajectories 6 and 7, retreat, indifference, discouragement concern both the studies as well as the relation with peers.

The subjects have another point in common: they were not brilliant pupils at school. It is therefore necessary to connect up the university trajectory and the school trajectory.

In trajectory 1, the school past is good but not exceptional and it is marked by a period of wavering, connected to family life, at the moment of entry into secondary school, as well as by a period of hesitation about orientation, a doubt about the possibilities of realising his aspirations, at the moment of entry into *terminale* [the final class of secondary school]. In trajectory 2, the school past was average, that is to say from the point of view of the family, mediocre.

In all the other trajectories, one finds painful school pasts, the memory of failures, of re-doing the work, of getting increasingly behind with work. In trajectory 5, the school past is good (I was proud of my good grades), but these performances are cancelled by 'shame', by 'complexes', the feeling of rejection, because the marginality of the family was expressed in the language, the clothes and finally the reputation of the children. There is a remarkable convergence between the school past and the strategy (of chosen marginality).

The configurations of social and family milieu

In all the cases, the strategies and trajectories appear as the product of the familial and social milieu. The particular configurations of this social and familial milieu permit us to understand and to articulate the formation of aspirations, the school and social trajectory, the influence of family ruptures and deviations, the role of the siblings, the influence of the educational model held by the family and finally the nature of the transmission from parents to children. To do this, it is necessary to study the configurations in their individual particularities.

In configuration 1 (Alexander), the parents did not determine his professional aspirations but political and ethical ones. The child received the mission to act upon the world, to fight injustice, and he adhered to this mission, in a liberal and open educational model which did not exercise any pressure to obtain access to a social position, to any rank. In this configuration, the school career appears to be made easy for the child: when young, he was incited to read the newspaper; extra-scholastic experiences were favoured (he passed a certificate of 'community organiser' [*animateur*] which enables him to do some small jobs in that sector). The different cultural origins on both the father and the mother's side were valued, as well as working class social origins on both sides, enhanced on the mother's side by the auto-didactic character of the worker-grandfather, a lover of books and of

mechanics, and, on the father's side, by a militant communist great-uncle. The separation and then the divorce of the parents created a period of difficulties which were overcome to the point at which Alexander sees rather the advantages of the situation: having two houses, two holidays, a larger family thanks to the half-brothers and the step-parents. In humorous vein, Alexander argues on the basis of this rupture to make fun, with his brother, of his father who had succeeded in his professional life (better than he thought he would) but not in his family life. Finally, between a father who is a higher professional and a mother who is a social worker, Alexander did not feel obliged to confirm the upward social mobility of his parents. The object of the transmission is on the side of militantism, the father being a 'social hero' and the mother, socially involved by her job, having also a militant past.

Alexander's hesitations between the job of community organiser *animateur* and the job of teacher, reflect the importance of this question. He knows that social and political involvement is more obvious in the role of organiser, but there is more security in the role of teacher, and he justifies his choice by spelling out that this job is not incompatible with involvement. One could in this case speak of an *open configuration*.

In configuration 2 (Sylvia), the formation of aspirations occurs against, in opposition to, the mother, a professor of sciences in a college. Sylvia does not know what she wants to do, but only that she does not want to do as her mother has done. The family configuration is stifling, because the father is also a scientist (cadre - a chemist) and the school past is painful because, the oldest of four brothers and sisters, she is the only one who did not succeed in sciences at school, while having to experience her mother as maths teacher both at home and at college. The educational model is relatively authoritarian, and Sylvia, to reduce the pressure, must down-grade herself, must convince her mother that she is not brilliant, that she is average, that the mother must not wish to push her too far. The transmission is spoiled, the only thing that Sylvia dreams about is a distant grand-mother who healed people with plants. But the most effective transmission is probably realism. The subject does not take risks, does not dare,, chooses by subtraction, and immediately adjusts her post-university aspirations (to become director of human resources in a private company) when it appears that her qualifications cannot be 'cashed in' on the labour market. She resigns herself to remaining in the public sector where she has found a job of secretary, hoping to improve her position through competition or to return to the private sector thanks to her acquired professional experiences. One can speak here of a *closed configuration*.

In configuration 3 (Zenon), the aspirations (to make films, at all events to have an artistic career) are rooted in the family romance (the desire of the mother to be a singer, her interest for the cinema, moments spent in front of the radio, the father's gift of a walkman cassette player and some music cassettes). In effect, the parents (working-class father, the mother domestic help) have only transmitted the popular work-ethic (the need to work) and pushed the child to study, without giving a content to this work and without orienting the child in his studies. Zenon has not had a painful school past but was obliged to renounce his first professional project (sound engineer) because he had not taken the school-subject-track that he needed to. Taking account of his original social milieu, his school and university career is good, even very good. But the choice of the university track is not accompanied by any career plan and this university title (degree in plastic arts) has no value on the labour

market. In this configuration, there are elements which push Zenon towards upward social mobility and others which block this promotion. Zenon has diverse cultural origins, the father is Algerian and the mother is Spanish. Are these origins a resource or a handicap? The parents saw this as a handicap, their residential strategy (avoid the popular quarters and the outskirts) was designed to protect children from the problems which they believe that immigrants meet in neighbourhoods where they are in great number. On his side, Zenon in general valorises multi-culturalism, but is oriented more towards his mother. He values Spanish culture and even pushes his mother to revive her original culture (he speaks Spanish with her). This orientation is linked to a biographical event: Zenon was raised by his aunt in Spain from birth till he was two years old. He has often returned to Spain and has the dream of living there one day. He considers, on the other side, without devalorising Algerian culture, that he could not adapt himself to live there. This orientation is linked to the devalorisation of the father, disqualified by his unemployment, his alcoholism, his violence his lack of reference points. When one considers the siblings, we see that the sister is oriented towards the father. She has married a Muslim, and respects the practices and ideas of this religion. One can here talk of a *cleft configuration*.

In configuration 4 (Esther), everything comes from and goes back to the mother: the desire to make music and to live from it, the taste for languages, the support at school and support for the learning of music throughout a difficult and painful school career, during which Esther has to deal with peers who succeed better than her, with greater ease, including in the domain of music. The social trajectory appears marked by the downward mobility of the father, an unemployed journalist become a free-lance journalist, and the ambitions of the mother. The educational model is that of autonomy, but an imposed autonomy: "go for it" and "be original". The departure from the family home was not chosen and appears as a forced entry into autonomy. The mother hopes that Esther will invest in her housing and wants to contribute towards installing her in this housing, but Esther resists, declaring "I'm not a Barbie doll". The brother and the sister, younger, have gone for more ordinary careers, while practising music as amateurs, and this re-assures the mother worried about the success of her first choice.. One can speak of a *maternal configuration* .

In configuration 5 (Ophelia), the aspirations (to become a therapist) have been taken from the family romance, from the side of the paternal grand-mothers. The principal objective of life is defined against the mother: Ophelia does not wish to reproduce her mother's chaotic life. However, obtaining the university diploma (philosophy degree) is presented as the satisfaction of the family imperative, a compensation for the painful scholarly past of the mother, obliged to go to work after her certificate of studies although she had certain possibilities, obliged again to marry at the age of 18. At school, Ophelia was also supported by her father, who had undertaken higher studies. But she lived principally at her mother's, whose educational model was permissive and violent, eccentric and normative. It is the father who insisted that she pass the baccalaureate when she had decided not to attempt it.. Coming from a working-class milieu, the mother has been herself a worker, then an employee, and ceased rapidly to work. Coming from a better-off background, the father has been an insurance inspector and then trainer. Ophelia's current professional aspirations (to heal with Eastern techniques) mark both a refusal to belong to the popular classes at the same time as the reproduction of the marginality and eccentricity of the mother. The biographical story is full of ruptures acts of violence, of deviations which go back to the maternal grand-parents and come down to Ophelia by way of the mother :

mental illness, consanguinity, suicide (by hanging) acts of collaboration with Germany, illness (diabetes) drugs, alcoholism, violence, divorce of the parents, family conflict, abortion... The story presents the father as a victim, of his own mother who abandoned him at the age of five, and of his wife, who refused all sexual contact, stopped him from working, provoked his unemployment and broke his career. Ophelia presents herself as a victim, obliged to take responsibility for her two sisters, sacrificing herself. The ambivalence and the opposition of orientations are such, between the father and the mother, in the image of a trajectory tossed about between the two homes and the two affiliations, that one could speak of a *pendulum configuration*.

In configuration 6 (Platon), it is the paternal career that defines the aspirations. The son hopes to repeat the social success of his father, but thinks that he has not been sufficiently supported at school. The social trajectory of the parents is chaotic. Daughter of a wine merchant, the daughter marries, shortly before the bankruptcy of her father, the son of a poor and self-taught petty artisan, to whom she very rapidly reproaches his table manners, his lack of principles, his lack of class, in opposition to her own comfortable childhood in a castle in the Bordeaux region where a tax inspector taught her the piano. She did not follow any higher studies and found her path in a religious sect, exercising her charisma over her son. The father had a brilliant higher education career at the Central School which made his marriage possible, and he had the post of engineer: the 'good life'. But then the firm closed, and the father became unemployed. He started his own enterprise, with the aid of his wife, leading a life-style beyond his means, and he died in a car accident at a moment when his firm was on the way down. In the biographical story, the ruptures are many: mis-match of the parents, depression of the mother and the two aunts which Zenon attributes to a family heritage, depression and repeated suicide attempts of the sister, death of the father ("Everything was smashed, my golden dream was broken, I had something high in mind and suddenly the staircase to get there crumbled"). However the older sister did manage to achieve a good level of studies before closing herself in her room and in her depression, and the younger brother, a *normalien*, is a professor of philosophy (but Zenon has no relation with him). The opposition of the social trajectories is so strong, of both the parents and the children (who call each other with the formal *vous*, which is very rare) that one has to speak of an *odd, or non-matching configuration*.

In configuration 7 (Jakez), the aspirations (to be an intellectual) are those of the intellectual bourgeoisie into which the parents have come in a trajectory of upward social mobility (workers on the father's side, middle-class on the side side of the mother). In the same way, the choice of the study of philosophy responds entirely to the wish to equal the parents. The school trajectory was well supported by the parents, who placed the child in an elite college after a primary education in an experimental school. School difficulties started with this transition and have continued. They are attributed to the anxiety of the father, to his fear of downward social mobility. Jakez presents himself as the carrier and the victim of the anxiety of his father. The educational model is seen sometimes as authoritarian and sometimes as lax. The divorce of the parents, passionate and painful, is presented as an explanation of his difficulties, as well as an obscure episode of his childhood which led him to be placed in the experimental school. Jakez presents himself as an only child. The half-brothers and half-sisters on both sides are viewed only as rivals to be eliminated. The mother being practically absent from the biographical story, despite

her real influence on certain key-events, one can speak of a *paternal configuration*.

The inquiry then tends to confirm the fact that reproduction is not an automatic and simple process and so the fact that the transmission of family capital must be studied over several generations, in the lineages and in the marriages.

Young graduates and risk

Risk and the strategies confronting risk can now be grasped at the moment when the individuals come across unemployment, after finishing their studies. What we will show here are the factors of autonomy:

autonomy in respect of the parents

social life and sexuality

social and political commitment

nature and range of reflexivity

In strategy 1, (Alexander), the parents are held at a distance. Alexander has an intense social life and a stable sexual partner. His left-wing involvements converge with his professional objectives. The biographical story is organised. Alexander reflects on the past and anticipates the future. He feels himself to be *in his chosen place*

In strategy 2, (Sylvia), the parents provide a material support (housing) but they put on pressure for studying and working. Emotional support is not perceptible. Social life is restricted, Sylvia describes herself as timid and secretive. She has a girl friend and, for the last two years, a boy-friend who support her. There is no social or political involvement. The external world appears reduced to the family, to work, and to these two friends. The feeling is of being *in her subjected place*.

In strategy 3 (Zenon), parents provide neither material nor emotional support. Social life has been intense, both at school and in the small jobs, but not at the University, and Zenon has the feeling of finding himself quite alone, and no longer having any friends. But he does not know why. Reflexivity often takes the form of rationalisation. Sexual life is chaotic (adventures without any future, rupture). Zenon has been class representative for several years, but he talks of it principally as a mode of seduction. He is today interested in the question of migrations, through the family relations on the paternal side. The dominant sentiment is that of being *between* two places, between the most dominated fraction of the popular classes (foreigners forced to work illegally in order to survive) and the cultivated class of art and cinema.

In strategy 4 (Esther), the material and emotional support of the parents is so strong that Esther feels accompanied by a 'guardian angel'. But the pressure is strong. Social life is entirely centred around music to the point at which Esther has cut her links with her non-musician friends. The story says nothing about a sexual partner. Class delegate, Esther evokes without conviction the risk of the extreme Right. Reflexivity is made up of the listing of negative character traits: fear, the lack of motivation, the lack of courage. The only positive self-definition has been given by

the mother (“ the desire to be original ”). This imperative to be autonomous results in a dependence on the parents such that Esther seems to be *in the place of another*.

In strategy 5 (Ophelia), the parents are handicaps, problems, histories to bear, in the eventuality of a serious material problem, she could get help from them. Social life is absent from the story, completely absorbed by family relations, and the only experience with a sexual partner that is mentioned is a failure resulting in an abortion. Reflexivity is important, linked to an ongoing psychoanalysis. She surrounds herself with mysticism. Psychoanalysis and mysticism, without reference to social and political reality, converge to attribute to Ophelia *the place of the victim* who sacrifices herself, of a martyr to whom “happiness is forbidden”.

In strategy 6 (Platon), parental support is reduced to the attempts of the mother to enrol her son in her religious group. No social life is apparent, and the only sexual experience is a failure. Reflexivity rests on the dramatic events of the family history many of which Platon indicates that he no longer remembers -- his memory has many ‘holes’. During that family history he feels himself “go off in all directions”, that is to say, the feeling of uneasiness, guilt. That which appears is the alternation of de-valorisation and over-valorisation, that is *the absence of a place*.

In strategy 7 (Jakez), the material support of the parents enclose him in a material comfort from which the parents cannot extract him, since they do not do what they say they will do (the threat to stop supporting him materially is not put into execution). Social life is seen as superficial, Jakez thinks that he has no true friends (because of a permanent rivalry). The story makes no mention of past or current sexual partner. Being in analysis, the reflexivity is intense. Everything is connected back to the family history of which Jakez feels himself to be the product and the puppet, weak, immature, non-engaged (if it is not through the militant story of the parents), deprived of responsibility. He is in *the place of the person who waits*.

Conclusions

It is not possible to generalise, but we can make a few remarks about strategies, risk, and young people in a situation of risk.

1. The strategies

The biographical stories incite one to ask oneself if it is correct to talk of strategy. Alexander has a strategy because he knows the content of professional futures and of social positions between which he chooses with his resources in mind and for which he organises and plans his life. In the same way, Sylvia knows the labour market in relation to which she adjusts her means, on the basis of which she resigns herself to a professional future and a social position.

To speak of strategy for the others is an abuse of language., unless one considers that each individual is the strategist of his own life, even if he masters nothing, which would remove all meaning from the term. Zenon, Esther, Ophelia, Platon and Jakez are rather in search of a strategy and employ tactics, that is to say, actions and thoughts which enable them to support, to live rather better than less well, the situation in which they are.

Strategies or tactics are first of all determined by the objective situation of the

individual and/or that of their parents. Jakez can stay in uncertainty and Esther in music for as long as the parents support them. Conversely, Zenon can only dream of cinema and Ophelia of medicine if they take a variety of small jobs, have access to unemployment benefit (which they can only get if they have worked long enough) or register with the RMI.

2. Risk

Naturally, the strategies and tactics depend equally on subjectivity, but this is socially determined through the social trajectory of the parents and grand-parents. It is unthinkable for Jakez to enter 'into the system' of unemployment or the RMI, it would need a very great objective and subjective change for him to accept it. Platon's fear of being hungry one day is narrowly linked to the downward social mobility first of his mother and then of his father. Ophelia has made with her mother the experience of a precariousness which is never that of poverty, and it is that which she envisages for herself. Esther cannot even imagine what is poverty or social exclusion. Zenon knows it, but he also knows how to work, in different domains, so well that the only domain where he makes errors, where he does not succeed in making friends, is the milieu of art, of culture, of cinema, from which he is socially too far distanced.

The risk of social exclusion, for the young diplomates of higher education, presents itself, at this stage of their trajectory, less as the loss of a social position (since they haven't acquired one) and more as the difficulty of finding one. A double difficulty : one has to succeed in leaving the family and succeed in finding a place on the labour market, but not just any place. The principal problem is that of leaving the family "with one's head held high". What the recent history of youth is characterised by, namely the increase in the duration of indeterminacy and the risk which flows from that (marginality, precariousness, poverty) can therefore be grasped on the basis of objective data -- the probability of downwards mobility compared to their parents -- and, thanks to the biographies, in their subjective dimension: the desire and the difficulty for a successful exit from the family, that is, by occupying a social position which is not socially 'downwards' compared to that of the parents. The risk of marginality, precariousness and poverty is therefore the risk that flows from the prolongation of the period of indeterminacy for all those who cannot acquire a social position acceptable to their family.

3. Youth in a situation of risk

The most striking feature, in the interviews, is the fact that the young people are all alone in their confrontation with risk: enclosure within the familial network, weakness of the social and friendship network, absence of social or political involvement, closure from the world. Risk is experienced in a relation of oneself with oneself, one's past, one's present, one's future. The world, society, other people are elements of an external backdrop to the situation, without any influence upon it. The risk is individual, the solution must be also individual.

The diploma can therefore become a handicap. It breaks the solidarity of the young diplomates from the non-qualified youth who are massively victims of unemployment,

youths of the popular classes, youth of the suburbs. The diplomates distinguish themselves from these categories, either because they come from a more comfortable milieu or because, succeeding in getting their diploma, they believed they would extract themselves from there. It is striking that the only subject manifesting social and political involvement comes from a family whose working class past has been valorised.

One will conclude with this idea inspired by Norbert Elias and according to which individualism is the product of the gap between aspirations and objective constraints. What Elias forgets to mention is that involvement is also the product of this gap.

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