Paola Caniglia

Antonella Spanò

SOSTRIS ITALY

UNEMPLOYED GRADUATES

AND THE REFLEXIVITY DEFICIT

Foreword

The focus of this report is an analysis of factors that help to turn exclusion from the labour market (unemployment) into social exclusion. The report is in four parts.

The six cases are presented in §§1-2 of the first part; one of them (Antonio) has been analysed in depth. In §§3-4 of the first part, we examine the factors that all our subjects share. Our interviewees have many similarities with regard to their educational paths and the strategies they adopt to enter the labour market, and we thought it might be better to focus on contextual data and concentrate on institutions, particularly the educational system and the family.

In the second part (§5), the emphasis shifts to an identification of the factors that differentiate our subjects: we have adopted the Merton model of anomie to analyse the risk of exclusion. In other words, we have tried to interpret the risk of exclusion in terms of the inconsistency between our subjects' goals (their professional ambitions) and the resources (e.g. qualifications, irregular or part-time work, or support from their families) with which they equipped themselves.

The third and final part (§6) contains some thoughts on the outcomes of this analytical model, and particularly on the new role that reflexivity plays as a generator of inequality. These are no more than initial thoughts – an attempt to 'put something' in an 'empty box' and provide some talking-points.

1 The in-depth case

1.1.1 Antonio's life in brief

Antonio is 33 years old, and was born and bred in a working-class district of Naples where he still lives. His father works in the engineering industry, and his mother is a housewife. He is an only child.

Antonio's childhood was a nightmare as far as he was concerned: all the other children in the neighbourhood – it was a green area at the time – played in the streets, but he was not able to. He was asthmatic until the age of 13, and he was also fat, and was therefore not allowed to play or work up a sweat. As a result, he lived an isolated life, not least because his mother had had a serious nervous breakdown as a young woman. She was neurotic about having everything clean and tidy (he had to wear slippers in the

home), and would not allow Antonio to bring friends home. Even now, Antonio could earn a living giving private lessons, but he cannot because his mother will not let him have students in the home. Another reason why Antonio has sad memories of his childhood ('hours and hours spent playing by myself with a paper ball') is that even then his parents' marriage was unhappy. His mother 'always treated me as if I were a daughter', in the sense that she always confided in him, and when he was 10, she admitted that she did not have sexual intercourse with his father (Antonio has always slept in the same bed as his father). His father has never been very interested in women, and the family used to make fun of him on this account (the marriage had been arranged by the two grandmothers), but Antonio was somehow tolerated. Another source of disagreement between his parents has always been their respective families. Both parents had been 'exploited' by their families: his father had practically raised eight brothers and sisters single-handed; his mother had an elder sister (who was called 'Signora' for her class), but she was like a mother to her younger brother, and looked after her parents single-handed for as long as they were alive. When her mother broke her thighbone, she moved into her parents' house for ten years while Antonio and his father remained at home.

Antonio was not allowed to play children's games, but he nonetheless took pleasure in studying. He was a thoughtful child, and thanks to an older cousin, with whom he had a somewhat intense intellectual exchange of ideas, he began to question the meaning of being and of life while still a child. After junior school, he naturally enrolled in a classical 'Liceo' (he attended a secondary school in the historic centre of the city and quite a distance from his home): however, school seemed superficial, he was unable to find a 'real teacher' [Editor's note: It is not clear to me what is meant by 'professore-maestro'. My suggestion (a 'real teacher') needs checking.], he felt different from his class-mates, and he still had the old friends from his neighbourhood. It is mentioning in this context that some of them had already left school and were beginning to take drugs.

Antonio was seized with a philosophical yearning to understand his altered state of consciousness, and was moved by a desire to travel within himself. Never having smoked even a cigarette due to childhood asthma, Antonio now began to smoke hashish; later on, he moved on to LSD and finally settled on heroin. For a while he pushed drugs – going to Morocco, buying the stuff there and then selling it. His stock within the group was high due to the fact that he studied and read everything, and therefore knew all about drugs and their effects. He was a good buyer, and earned the nickname of 'Antonio o'marocco'.

After secondary school, he enrolled at the university to study Philosophy, a natural outlet for his interests, but he did not attend classes, preferring to study at home and take the examinations on his own. However, he slowly abandoned these interests, was unable to do any study, and in the end failed all his examinations. He did not have the courage to tell his parents; they had always expected a lot of him, and he got through one year at school with a 'sufficient' grade before being severely thrashed. In the meantime, he told them he had passed, and forged the teacher's signature in his university results book. It seemed easy at the time, and he sustained the lie for six years until his mother found out what had happened and, with help from his father, forced him to resume his studies. Although it was not his own choice, Antonio continued with his studies and, studious type that he was, he was able to get high marks. In the meantime, he finished with drugs both out of concern for his health (he had acute bronchitis) and because drugs no longer interested him as an intellectual experience

During these years of studying, Antonio discovered religious faith. One day, just before an examination, he entered a church and went to confession (he can give no explanation for his behaviour). It was the beginning of a conversion that would have him spend time with a religious community, and thereafter nearly become a priest. He slept in the convent for a few days, keen to take his vows and feeling a deep sense of grace, but his parents came to take him away – and so he left.

After graduating, Antonio worked for these priests for a considerable time, organising their library free of charge, but they eventually decided to appoint someone with responsibility for the library, and Antonio was passed over. This and other disappointments (the community seemed very earthly and not very spiritual) have prompted him recently to leave the community.

After taking his degree, Antonio began to work for an association that helped the disabled, but he found out that it was a for-profit organisation supported by slush funds, and he left this too. Through the entourage of a Neapolitan politician (presently on trial for links with the Camorra, the Neapolitan Mafia) he has had an opportunity to buy a job for 20 million lire. His parents accepted without his knowledge, but they withdrew when they discovered that the money was to be paid in advance, and not after the job had been filled.

Through his contacts in the voluntary service, Antonio had an opportunity to participate in a 'territorial educator' course. However, this was yet another disappointment, because at the end of the course he was offered a

chance to do 'doposcuola' (an institution where children may study or take part in recreation activities after school-hours) and play therapy with children at risk. Other people who had not followed the course were given jobs in planned activities ('territorial interventions'). Antonio once again felt excluded, and stopped attending the meetings of this association too.

Today Antonio feels as if he were a tramp, albeit in disguise, and if his parents were to die, he would become a tramp in every way. Although well-dressed, he has no money: his parents give him 50,000 lire (approximately £22) a week in pocket money, which is enough to buy a book and some cigarettes but, like a tramp, he spends his days lounging about, waiting at bus stops and looking at people, mostly women.

Antonio is completely obsessed with sex. He constantly thinks about how to approach women. He is inhibited, he does not feel good about his body, and he feels insecure and incapable of relating to the opposite sex. During the time he worked with disabled people, Antonio fell in love with a disabled girl and spent more than a year with her, but when his mother forced him to leave her (threatening to kick him out of the house in the process), he did as he was told. This is the only time that Antonio has had sexual intercourse with a woman. All his other experiences have been with prostitutes, and he mentions briefly a sexual experience as a child with an aunt. Now he cannot allow himself such pleasures as he has no money. For a while he haunted 'red light' cinemas and gay clubs, but he found them too squalid and stopped.

In this state of considerable discomfort, Antonio's capacity for enterprise was very low. He had had ideas (like starting an association providing social services, or giving private lessons), but for one reason or another he rejected them. Without conviction, he sat a competitive examination for a PhD, although he knew he stood no chance without the backing of a professor. He applied for jobs as a school teacher, even in the north of Italy, but he doubted whether he had the courage to leave; even after graduation, he was offered two opportunities to study abroad, but he turned them down too. He hopes to do a teaching training course when one comes up. He also hopes to take a 'diploma magistrale' during the summer, but even though he has been a student, taken a degree and read thousands of books, he refuses to be examined by secondary school teachers.

Antonio feels desperate and does not even feel he has the energy to hope.

1.2 Interpretation

Childhood (the period of isolation)

The crucial experience of Antonio's childhood was isolation. It seemed to derive from two events: his illness, which prevented him from playing with children of his own age in the neighbourhood (it was normal for them to play in the street); and his mother's neurosis (exacerbated by serious nervous breakdowns at the ages of 15 and 30), which prevented him from inviting friends back home because of his mother's insistence on tidiness and cleanliness.

The isolation that surrounded Antonio's life derives from the strategy that his parents used to cope with the absence of real marriage ties. There were numerous indications that they were never a real couple: the marriage was arranged by the two mothers-in-law (Antonio's father was physically disabled, his mother was mentally ill), his parents sleep in separate beds, and they both remain linked to their families of origin.

The strategy that Antonio's parents used to deal with this 'lack of family', and the consequent internal separation within the confines of the home, was that of external isolation and an unremitting, dependent relationship on the families of origin: Antonio's mother refused to live in her own home away from her parents (she rented a house close to them); even after the baby was born, she spent all day at her parents' home; his father supported the family even after his marriage.

However, the situation in which Antonio finds himself trapped consists of isolation from the outside, attachment to the family on his mother's side (he has no links with his father's side), and separation between his mother (he lives with her during the day) and his father (he sleeps with him in the same bed at night).

The experience of isolation was to mark him and condition him later on: he retreated into himself and developed an intellectual, intimate and spiritual dimension (while growing up, he was to have an intellectual relationship with an older cousin with whom he discussed ethics, politics and economics) that helped to make him different from his contemporaries, and to make relationships with other people problematic.

Deviant years (the period of rebellion)

Apart from the fact that his asthma disappeared when he was 13, Antonio's adolescence was not characterised by any significant events. The only turning-point in his life occurred in late adolescence when his mother's

departure from the family home (she moved permanently to her parents' house when her mother broke her thighbone) coincided with a period marked by transgressive choices.

Although he enrolled at the university, presumably following in the tradition of his mother's side of the family, he did not choose Medicine (as his mother's brother had done) but Philosophy. He then began to have experiences of drugs that included tripping and pushing, and he started friendships and shared his life with young men in his neighbourhood.

His mother's 'desertion' opened up a period of rejection of, and opposition to, ultra-normal life. (He had to wear slippers in the home!). Antonio's experience of life told him that taking and pushing drugs was not so much a symptom of ill-health as an attempt to activate a possible independent existence strategy. (Although he had taken heroin and LSD, he had never become an addict.)

Falsification of the university results book (the period of dishonesty)

The phase of transgression was followed by a period of regression. As soon as he had a problem (i.e. when he failed an examination), he stopped studying but did not tell anyone that he had decided to lie and falsify his university results book.

There is evidence to suggest that the act of falsification belonged to a regressive phase, rather than an earlier transgressive one: firstly, there was stalemate after the falsification (this was a static period – it was to last 6 years – that only ended when the deception was discovered); secondly, Antonio began studying normally again – and with excellent results – after he was found out.

Resumption of studies (the period of regression)

The resumption of studies represented a turning-point in Antonio's life, but only on the surface. In the first place, it coincided with an attempt to return to an adolescent situation characterised by scholastic success, asthma and isolation, rather than by drugs. When he resumed his studies – apart from anything else, he achieved good results – he fell ill, stopped taking drugs, stopped mixing with friends from that 'environment', and did not set up a new one. However, he did not join in university life either, and as a result found himself on his own once again.

In the second place, the resumption of studies did not resolve his

ambivalence about maternal pressure. In fact, he both gave in, resuming his studies and getting as far as taking his degree, and taking issue with his mother, 'inventing' a mystical crisis that was not shared by his parents, and not being very religious either.

The double-crossing strategy (the period of paralysis)

The strategy that Antonio used to cope with the moment of decision-making was a journey from dishonesty to ambiguity: he was already 28 years old, he had finished studying, his mother had returned home after an absence of 10 years, and it was time to choose between normality and transgression. It was also time to become an adult. When he analysed the first 'act' he had carried out as an adult (i.e. taking his university degree), what Antonio did was to express his ambivalence.

Antonio no longer disappointed anyone but himself, and he opposed a counter-choice to every choice he himself made: he began to work in a voluntary association (where he was able to earn money because of his skills) and decided to become a priest; he decided to become a priest and got engaged; he got engaged and left the association; he went on a training course (new job prospects) and left his girl-friend; he returned to voluntary work, and gave it up; and he then returned to studying. Antonio worked out a double-crossing strategy which, instead of reconstructing the order/ disorder dilemma, actually concealed it. Order was apparently evidenced by study; by contrast, disorder, which was removed and banished to the sphere of unconsciousness, was translated into a systematic rejection of every solid job opening.

At present, it is not possible to glimpse the pathway that might help to reconcile the opposites (mother's/father's side, order/disorder, assuming the role of adult/escaping from responsibility) that paralyse him.

2. Other Cases

Maurizio is 30 years old and was born into a middle-class family in Naples. His parents were both over 40 when he was born. He recalls his childhood as a very happy period because he spent a lot of time with his mother, a strong and very cheerful woman. However, when he went to the 'Liceo' chosen by his parents, he experienced loneliness and exclusion: he did not like his schoolmates, his teachers or even the school. In 1984, he again went along with his parents' wishes and enrolled to study Engineering, but he did not take any examinations. Two years later, he changed faculty and enrolled for Economics and Business Studies and took

his degree after seven years. Since then, he has studied for a Master's for two years, and he is still thinking of doing one more course to improve his preparation. So far, he has been completely dependent on his father's pension, and he feels deeply depressed and frustrated. Hypothesis: he is not able to assume an adult role. Very interesting interview, good tape quality. A lot of argumentations, perhaps because the interview was conducted before the March meeting.

Giuseppe is 29 years old. He was born in a very popular part of Naples. He is an only child, his mother and father having married very late in life: his mother was 40 when Giuseppe was born. Neither parent had any education. When Giuseppe was 17, his life was drastically affected by a serious accident, and although his physical disability was only temporary, he started to feel 'different' from his friends. This was a turning-point in his life. He enrolled to study Philosophy and started reading a lot, and in the course of his university studies met a friend five years older; with this friend he shared a love of literature and writing. In 1992, six years after he enrolled at the university, he decided to complete his university studies as soon as possible, and in 1994 he took his degree. At the moment, Giuseppe is doing a voluntary apprenticeship and is not in the least worried about being unemployed. He thinks he will be able to get a job as a teacher sooner or later, and will then have enough time to devote himself to writing a novel. This is his real ambition. His family give him money for incidental expenses. Very interesting interview. Good tape-recording quality. Of our 'subjects', Giuseppe is the only man who does not appear to be losing hope about unemployment. We are wondering whether to choose him or Antonio as the case to be analysed in more depth.

Alessandra was born in Naples in 1964. She was the second child, and is seven years younger than her sister. Open-minded family, deep relationship with her father. Alessandra was a very good student at both school and university. She loves studying but her university studies went on for nearly eight years because she had a lot of temporary jobs as she followed her boy-friend to Modena, a city near Bologna in the north of Italy. She graduated in Literature (special subject: History of Art), and now earns money from giving private lessons to young students. Last year she set up a cultural association with two friends, and they are planning to offer tourist services (especially historical itineraries) to schools and government departments. Not a very interesting interview – she did not like talking about herself. Not a good atmosphere between herself and the interviewer. Many argumentations, no narratives.

Salvatore is 29 years old; he lives in a middle-class family in Naples. He graduated three years ago in Geological Sciences after failing Engineering. On getting his degree, he looked for a job by sitting competitive examinations. At the moment, he is working as a consultant for a company that does geological surveys, but he earns no money. His main problem is that he does not see himself as a geologist: he does not feel that any decisions in his life have been real decisions: what he did was simply a way of pleasing his parents. He feels bad because he has no vocation. Hypothesis: non-identification with the father figure, not up to taking on adult roles.

Sonia is 34 years old and has graduated in Electronic Engineering. Her father is an engineer, too: he does not work in the field of electronics, but he is very well off and successful. No real problems during her studies. She chose Engineering so as to be different from an authoritarian and traditional father with whom she has a deep and ambivalent relationship. Her parents' marriage was unhappy, but her mother decided not to seek a divorce so that she could maintain her three children's standard of living. Obviously her mother is not as well off as the father. Although Sonia is currently working (temporarily) for an engineering firm, she wants to become a teacher. She is not unduly upset by her situation. Hypothesis: identification with the mother as victim of the father (male power). Inability to reconcile female (marriage and maternity) and male (independence and success) roles.

3. The educational path

The biographical profiles of our interviewees have many common features in terms of their educational paths. This is particularly true of the way they have chosen their courses and lived their university lives.

A certain casualness in the choice of faculty is one of the features that unite our subjects. The choice has often been suggested by a totally generic consideration, and not by personal inclination, valuations of future working opportunities, or specific professional projects. Sometimes, choice of faculty is influenced by cultural fashions that 'invent' emergent sectors with a strong job demand; electronics is an emblematic case here because it can be supported by faith in degrees (i.e. it does not matter what sort of degree you have, as long as you have one). Sometimes, choice of faculty is a reversal of a school experience that is deemed unsatisfactory ('At school I chose Classical Studies, but I didn't like that so I opted for a science faculty.'). It is also worth pointing out that there is certain casualness in making educational choices at both university and high school. In this

context, attitudes and personal inclinations are undervalued by students and their families: <u>instrumental motivations</u> (i.e. the nearness of the school), <u>commonplaces</u> ('You are a good student, take up Classics') and <u>family tradition</u> ('You will go to a Liceo like your father before you.'), are much more relevant, and paths are often fragmented and disconnected as a result.

It is also interesting to note that such a trajectory not only marks out people from low-income families (they are presumably less well equipped to guide their children's choices), but also people from families with a stronger cultural heritage. In these families, status considerations (children of 'upper'-middle-class families must go to the Liceo – they have no other choice – and, whatever their wishes and inclinations may be, a degree is a categorical imperative) and stereotyped imagery prevail (Classical Studies provide a better education; Engineering means you get a job).

What is more, the casualness that characterises our subjects' educational decisions is linked to particular factors of the Italian educational system. Because of its inefficiency, the system actually 'burdens' families with tasks and functions that should not be their exclusive concern. Moreover, there is no guidance system in Italian schools (this would be particularly helpful as students have to choose their high school when they are only 14 years of age) or in universities, where there is a very high drop-out rate (only three out of every ten enrolled students get a degree). What is missing for the most part is an effective selection mechanism, and this lacuna may be identified in many phenomena. Firstly, it may be seen in the overall tendency of high schools to 'pass everyone', and thereby pass the application of meritocratic criteria on to universities. Secondly, in the absence of admission filters into university, a student can enrol in any faculty irrespective of his/her diploma or marks. Thirdly, with no control of any kind over the course of studies, students may enrol for the next academic year without passing the earlier exams, the only constraint being that they drop out if they take no exams of any sort over a period of eight years. This explains the large number of students who are not on a course. Lastly, as our interviewees stated, the low level of commitment required of students allows them to pass their exams, often with quite good marks, despite a general lack of involvement.

However, the main shortcoming in the Italian educational system – and this applies to universities more than cognitive factors (we study badly, we study very little) – is our inability to start appropriate processes of socialisation designed to enable students to enter employment. This inability flows from a series of factors including the absence of compulsory

attendance, a scarcity of relationships between teachers and students, few opportunities for students to compare and experiment, and no links with the productive world. They all help to produce negative results. Students therefore not only suffer from a serious deficit of professional identity ('The problem, Parson said, isn't acting as an engineer, but being it'); they are also unable to activate the networks (and therefore the information circuits) that are vital when carving out a path in the labour market. In other words, universities are unable to transmit the behavioural rules, models of action and 'rules of the game' that are a key resources in building up a professional identity.

Even at a personal level, the absence of selection and the low levels of participation in university life have negative outcomes. The comparative ease with which they have coped with their studies generates a sense of inadequacy as regards their abilities: in other words, as nobody puts them to the test, they doubt their own capabilities. It follows that they are assailed with a deep sense of insecurity when they leave the 'shell' of university, and are obliged to measure themselves against the labour market. Moreover, this sense of insecurity, 'amplified' by an awareness of the large number of unemployed graduates, forces the subjects to see that, far from being a 'skeleton key' to a good job, a degree is just a pre-requisite for aspiring to one. In the absence of a professional identity, the discovery that one is not 'required' by the labour market (e.g. application forms unanswered, selection tests not passed, and competitive examinations failed), has a devastating effect on those who previously believed that a degree had godlike powers.

4. The training-work path

As an Italian family researcher is fond of saying, whereas in England when a 20-year-old boy is still living with his parents, people wonder, 'What's wrong with the boy?', in Italy, if a boy of the same age leaves home, they say, 'What's wrong with the family?'

This neat story effectively demonstrates the role that the family plays in Italian society. If shortcomings in the educational system 'over-burden' families with responsibilities from the beginning of the educational process, the harsh reality of the labour market also 'over-burdens' families by allocating them the task of supporting their children. In line with the national trend – in the country as a whole, half of all boys and more than a quarter of all girls aged 29 still live with their families – our graduates, who are 20, and might even be 30 years of age, still live with their parents,

irrespective of their social position. In other words, prolonged periods of continuing to live at home is a phenomenon that marks the whole of Italian society.

On the other hand, the family's exclusive responsibility for educational choice produces fragmented and disconnected paths, and the role that the family is forced to play at the end of educational path also causes great damage. There is a danger that our subjects' confidence in being able to rely indefinitely on family support – and therefore to remain 'young persons' for ever – will trigger dangerous 'wait-and-see' attitudes. Objective dependence is not subjectively perceived as it really is. It we take this further, we can say that living with one's parents, even at the age of 30, is considered completely normal by both parents and children, partly because there are many elements that contribute to this perception of 'normality'.

Cultural factors – the lack of strong moral pressure for emancipation by one's family is a typical feature of Italian society – go hand in hand with structural factors; the most obvious are mass unemployment and the chronic housing shortage. These factors make the independence of young people objectively more difficult to achieve, and further legitimate a condition of 'young adult': the diffusion of that condition encourages attitudes reflected in the saying 'fellowship in woe doth woe assuage'. Moreover, opportunities offered by the irregular economy and the third sector, in addition to the general tendency to continue studying after one's degree (more about that later) all become formidable alibis: money, even if it only comes in occasionally, is sufficient to give the illusion of being autonomous; activity in the third sector and continuing studies make one feel 'busy'.

It is also worthwhile noting that the possibility of relying on family support, even when there are social sanctions, has a negative impact on entry into the labour market. Like educational choices, even attempts to get into the productive world seem to be fragmented and disconnected. After an initial stage in which they try competitions, fill in application forms, reply to advertisements and so on (it has all the trappings of a 'ritualistic practice'), our graduates commence a phase of 'self-cooling out'. In other words, there is a kind of 'cooling' of their ambitions, and as a result of this they begin to give consideration to jobs that are not what their degrees might suggest. Typical of this stage is a decision to resume studying (training courses, Master's degrees, and qualifications to acquire more credentials) – and not doing much work.

However, we want to make it clear that, although these characteristics (cooling of aspirations, resuming studies and a job shortage) unite all our subjects, they are divided by individual abilities to combine these elements. We can even say – and we will take up this point later – it is the very composition of these elements that is the key to reconstructing personal trajectories and interpreting the inclusion/exclusion processes that our subjects are involved in.

5. Why similar paths give rise to different trajectories

If we look at our subjects' life-histories from the Liceo to the present day, we cannot fail to notice the large amount of features they share: not one took an active part in university life, all graduated late (all with quite good marks), all still live with their families, all have continued to study, all keep going in some job (one way or another), and all go through a phase of meditating on their expectations.

However, notwithstanding these similarities, the people we met were quite different from one another: different in the way they perceive themselves and their condition, different in the way they live in their families, different in the way they get in touch with the outside world, different in the meaning they assign to their past and future, and – more than anything else – different in attitudes towards things they do.

Accordingly, it seems that sharing situations and practices does not mean sharing the same experiences, but it can foreshadow a destiny of inclusion for some – and of exclusion for others. In other words, although our interviewees are all unemployed at the present time, only some of them appear to be exposed to the danger that their exclusion from the labour market will trigger real social exclusion. The questions we therefore have to answer now are Why are some individuals more at risk than others? and What are the main risk factors ?

Just by looking at our subjects' biographies, and particularly at those aspects which concern all of them, we can see why sharing a stage of life does not mean being on the same trajectory – why, in other words, the experience of extended unemployment does not represent the same risk for all.

If we look at all the aspects shared by our subjects at the same time, it becomes clear that an important discriminating factor is the capacity to 'combine' the resources they have at their disposal. In fact, some seem to collate their experiences in accordance with an 'organising principle' that

foreshadows the carving out of a path, while others seem to collect experiences (e.g. of studies and work) that are not part of any structure. Moreover, while the former see opportunities for training and work as finalised experiences, and see continuing to live at home as a forced but temporary stage, the latter seem to behave as if they were following a script (as if earning some money, getting qualifications and learning languages were simply 'musts' demanded by the handbook of the 'good unemployed graduate'), and see continuing to live with their families as a lifelong solution.

So what is it that makes one person, and not another, adequately 'equipped'? The idea suggested by our biographies is that this *quid* is closely linked to the existence of a professional and existential project, and therefore to the existence of a particular skill: thinking in terms of resources and objectives. This insight suggests we might try to interpret the risk of exclusion as a form of inconsistency between resources and objectives, and to adapt the model outlined by Merton for the study of anomie (he defines this as a dyscrasy between socially approved goals and socially legitimised means) to the analysis of exclusion processes.

Our adaptation differs from the original model, and means and goals are not conceived in a static way: means (as represented by training opportunities, job opportunities, and personal and family relationships) are not conceived of in terms of presence/absence, but of consistency/inconsistency both among themselves and in relation to the goal; the goal (represented by the professional objective in our model) has not been considered in terms of an aimed-for job, but as an outcome of dynamically re-thinking the process of aspirations.

Through this interpretative grid, our biographies show how this process leads to three different conditions: (a) an absence of goals (in this case, the subjects blindly attempt to identify vocational objectives); (b) an effective review of goals (in this case, vocational objectives are reviewed in the light of existing opportunities and of the resources at their disposal); (c) a blockage of goals (this case includes both those who are not able to carry out a process of reviewing their aspirations and whose horizons are still too high compared with their resources, and those who are apparently willing to review their own aspirations, but simply replace them with others that are equally unattainable given their resources).

S is a typical case of a subject without a goal. S has followed a path that others have prepared for him; there has been no personal involvement. He

enrolled at university because it was taken for granted that that was what a doctor's son did. He chose Engineering because he wanted to go along with his parents' wishes, not because he liked it; and even when he changed faculty because of problems, he chose Geology only because it was suggested by a friend whom he met by chance. S has confidently followed a route that others (i.e. society and the family) planned for him, believing that passing examinations was enough to become an engineer, and that the 'degree' would be enough to get 'the job'. However, when he finished his studies, he found that 'it wasn't true at all.' The divine power he had previously assigned to a degree disintegrated so badly that the degree has now become 'ballast'. If he did not have a degree, it would somehow oblige him to aspire to a particular kind of job, and he could realise his ambitions. At least, that is what he says. In fact, S is desperately trying to work out what he wants to do, because he does not know what he wants to do – but once again he is waiting for a solution from the outside. He adopts an utterly romantic view of work (it is something that keeps you awake all night), and is still waiting to be 'struck' by a vocation that will enable him to overcome the paralysis in which he is stuck. This case is emblematic of how the absence of a goal makes resources completely useless, despite the fact that he occasionally works for a company that does geological surveys, S is blind to the opportunities that could come from this job because he is still wondering, 'What I will do when I become an adult?'

By contrast, the case of G is a good example of how advantageous it can be to adjust one's aspirations. G grew up in a family where neither parents had received an education, but they had done a large number of jobs and had finally attained a degree of economic stability. As far as G was concerned, his degree in Philosophy with excellent marks was therefore a 'conquest' rather than a 'natural' outlet. G is far from desperate because, even if he still has a 'dream' (of becoming a poet), he has been able to have a 'short-term' objective (of becoming a schoolteacher) that is more likely to enable him to make a living. Thanks to this project, he is able to capitalise on all the opportunities he encounters. He is currently studying for a teacher's diploma, but he has also carried on with after-school activities with 'at risk' children; previously, he attended a training course for social educators and taught Italian to immigrants. All of these activities are now essential if one wants to obtain the diploma (it is not possible without an apprenticeship), and later get a job as a teacher, because they are all teaching credits. In the meantime, G knows that it will take a long time to get into the world of schools, and he is 'open' to other jobs. We may therefore conclude that his labour path may alternate continually between working and not-working, but at all events it is a path. In other words, his planning is marked by a

degree of coherence that represents a formidable antidote to the risk of exclusion.

The case of M is a classic illustration of how inability to calibrate the means/goals ratio hinders a strategy for entering the labour market. M is currently the victim of his own excessive ambition, namely a blockage of goals. He is the son of an electro-technical engineer father, now retired, and a graduate mother who became a housewife by choice. M graduated in Economics after leaving the Faculty of Engineering, obtained the lowest marks of all our interviewees and, on his own admission, never liked studying. Paradoxically, M is more of a 'convict of credentialism' than the others (he has collected many Master's degrees and has been to England for a two-month training course), and the risk of exclusion is therefore much less visible in his case. On the surface, he looks as if he is 'quickest' at identifying changes on the labour market (he is thinking of becoming a consultant in an innovative field like quality certification), and he apparently equips himself with the appropriate 'resources' (i.e. specialisations). However, his numerous qualifications are quite useless because he has no practical experience of any kind: M has reached 30 without any experience of work. His 'ritualistic' approach that involves him in collecting credits is rooted in a precise kind of reasoning whereby he systematically avoids any possibility of facing the market; for example, immediately after taking his degree, he had an opportunity to serve an apprenticeship in a consultants' practice, but he left because 'working as an accountant was not at all interesting'. The result is that now he cannot finish one of his Master's degrees because no firm will accept him for training, even on an unpaid basis: they prefer younger people with work experience.

So what do we learn from re-interpreting biographies in the light of this model?

We discover that only those who set achievable goals, and avoid disparaging (a job… any job will do) or over-ambitious (no job at all unless it is the one I want) attitudes are able to enter the labour market with a 'short run' perspective. We also learn that adopting this perspective means seeing strategies for market entry as an elastic series of steps and adaptations. In practice, it means being able to grab every opportunity (the resources), and activating a process of learning whereby the 'new rules of the game' can be learned.

In conclusion, this analysis offers us at least three issues that are worth considering: the first is that the risk of exclusion does not lie in the lack of

resources, but in an inability to combine them; the second is that the main factor in a fruitful combination is the existence of a goal; the third is that the existence of a goal is not itself a guarantee that the resources will be effectively used. To achieve this, the goal has to be the outcome of a process of mediation/negotiation between the constraints set by the productive framework and one's subjectivity (i.e. one's ambitions). So what we learn from our biographies is that the ability to choose resources that are appropriate to objectives, and objectives that are consistent with one's resources, is a critical tool for finding one's way.

6. What we learn about exclusion processes

By saying that the risk of exclusion comes from a 'misfunctioning' of the strategies of adaptation, we mean that exclusion stems from a reflexivity deficit. We take reflexivity to be a process through which social practices are constantly examined and readjusted in the light of new data acquired (Giddens).

Such a hypothesis can be 'dangerous' because, by identifying the actor as the only person responsible of his/her destiny, there is a danger of blaming the victim; however, it is systemic, rather than personal, factors that make the adoption of reflective behaviour problematic. Direction needs to be given to the reflexivity exercised, but processes involved in the socio-economic system (increasing flexibility, precariousness and destabilisation) make it increasingly difficult to imagine what the future will bring. These processes distort systems of skills, knowledge and jobs to such an extent that paths used in the past have become impracticable, and even tradition ceases to be a source of guidance.

In other words, innovation in the current productive paradigm has to be sought in a growing osmosis between the economic and social systems; it is an osmosis that requires the increasing involvement of factors that are extra-functional and a-specific in working activities, and have been extraneous to them up till now. New meta-skills are now required; these skills, which include the ability to imagine, create, sometimes even invent a job, are now crucial. This resource is essential if there is to be any reflective behaviour: it represents a great opportunity for those who have it, and a source of exclusion for those who do not.

In this contact, it is worth pointing out that the reference to reflexivity implies a reconsideration of the forms that inequality tends to assume in the current framework; it also requires a re-think of the relations that link social exclusion to the classical forms of inequality: class inequality and gender

inequality.

As far as class inequality is concerned, our research clearly shows how the factor that links the risk of exclusion to the social class is going in the opposite direction to what one once thought. It is simply that individuals from middle-class to upper-class families seem to be more exposed to the risk of exclusion, and there are at least two reasons for this apparent paradox. The first reason, which is of a cultural nature, is that in these social classes only there is a heavier load of tradition that has not only lost its role as guide, but has even become such a source of risk that it overvalues the power of the degree (a passport to employment), produces high aspirations (not 'a job', but 'the job' appropriate to their status), and hands down career models that are often not practicable. It is a kind of 'class optimism' that is totally unjustified in the present circumstances, and is in danger of becoming 'ballast' rather than a resource. The second reason, which is of a structural nature, concerns the speed at which changes in the system of jobs are taking place: they firmly restrict the 'usability' of the social relations of 'fathers' in the working paths of their 'sons'. The revolution in the content of jobs is so relevant that not only the 'knowledge', but also the environment in which it is applied, is completely new, and the heredity of 'social capital' is irremediably compromised.

In conclusion, it is becoming increasingly clear that social inequality should be conceptualised in terms of in/out, rather than up/down, and that it gradually tends to take on the form of a dichotomy between reflexivity winners and reflexivity losers.

As for gender inequality, our research has demonstrated how gender plays a relevant role in inclusion/exclusion trajectories. For men, exclusion from the labour market leads to a progressive exclusion from a chance to assume adult roles. Not having a professional role or an income lead simultaneously to a longer period of time spent living at home, and declining appeal in the marriage stakes. It is no coincidence that all our interviewees have had their girl-friends walk out on them; the result is often deep existential unease and progressive isolation.

By contrast, exclusion from the labour market for women does not involve exclusion from adult roles. On this occasion, the bread-winner ideology acts in their favour because the fact that a woman has no income does not make her any less 'desirable' on the marriage market. Moreover, the opportunity to play on another identity pole, that of reproduction, means that unemployment does not lead to a loss of self-esteem and identity, and

therefore to a loss of their affective and social relationships.

If social origin can no longer provide an explanation for exclusion trajectories, it is not true of women. Indeed, it may even operate in their favour. However, we cannot ignore the fact that even if the opportunity to rely on their reproductive role reduces the risk of exclusion, it does not provide a guaranteed defence. No woman who sees work as an important element, not to say the main element, in her identity can abandon it without serious psychological consequences. Being confined to the home, when one has not chosen to do so, generates feelings of frustration, loss of identity, and conditions of progressive isolation that themselves become a form of exclusion.