

People as agents of the neoliberal project: A longitudinal study of school to work transitions in Spain

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse some of the processes through which people acquire labour dispositions working for the neoliberal project promotion in a natural and legitimate way. The authors believe that the transitions from school to work provide an ideal opportunity to study such processes. The research took place in the Spanish village of Colindres from 2013 to 2015. We developed the investigation through an anthropological methodology and used different tools as longitudinal interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. In this way, we selected high school students who share significant features related to their family origins and formative period. The authors conclude by discussing how the salaried classes impose upon themselves those labour mechanics and techniques applied by advocates of neoliberal policies: job insecurity, salary precariousness, labour mobility, time flexibility, and job rotation. In this case, we have found that family, peer group and close community in Colindres establish a framework in which young people naturally learn how to face up to their precarious labour experiences without conflict. Finally, the labour marketplace obtains what it needs: an adult who makes his own free decisions as a precarious worker and a low-level consumer.

KEYWORDS: youth, transition to adulthood, labour market, neoliberalism, Spain

Introduction

Emerging from groups of dominant classes within varying countries, the neoliberal project is undoubtedly the one economic, political, and ideological endeavour that has had and continues to have a tremendous impact on the daily lives of millions of people. Moreover, highlighting the fact that we are dealing with a project whose very formulation is contradictory (in practice rejecting state intervention in the market while in policy

existing as a result of national government intervention), its success stems from the fact that it has managed to produce a culture, by affecting general attitudes (Apple 2001; Birch & Mykhnenko 2010: 2; Harvey 2006; Peck 2012), laying out a basic understanding of shared worldwide social practices (Quijano 2000: 215), and generating a way of relating and being which has ‘entered into our lives, our minds, our hearts, and our emotions’ (Torres López 2013).

In contrast, the neoliberal project changes the hegemonic discourse in which political problems and social injustices are converted into individual problems with market solutions (MacLeavy 2010: 137). The entrepreneur and consumer, the citizen with personal initiative and economic motivation, is valued (Pfeilstetter 2013). Employability is no longer dependent on macroeconomic decisions, but rather, is now the responsibility of the individual in terms of seeking to be proactive and employable (Arnal, Finkel & Parra 2013). Similarly, consumption in terms of resources becomes the only daily way in which people make decisions freely and forge a significant relationship with the world (Miller 1995).

Conversely, it is generally the case that the majority of resources are controlled by those who promote neoliberal processes (i.e. stockbrokers, financial analysts, businessmen, C.E.O.s, political conservatives and social democrats, etc.). For example, the following data shows a comparison between the percentage of participation according to total income in the United States: the top 10% have increased their control over income from 35% in the 1980s to 50% in 2012 (Saez 2013). In Spain, Navarro, Torres, and Garzón (2011) find that in 2006 around 1,400 people (0.0035% of the population) controlled about 80.5% of the GDP. Yet, the most extraordinary aspect of this accumulation of capital is that the mechanisms responsible for it (i.e. regressive fiscal politics including flexibility of labour markets, privatisation of public service enterprises, and deregulation and liberalisation of the financial system) have been and are currently implemented to a degree of legitimacy that is unheard of in the population.

This legitimacy has been cultivated through the control of a few dominant groups, amongst them, mass media communications and the education system in terms of the academic curriculum. As Harvey (2006) reminds us, the political ideals themselves that neoliberalism claims (liberty, freedom of choice, individual rights) are powerful values that can easily be taken as fact, and in this way, naturalised as common sense.

In this context, the main objective of this article is to describe and interpret some of the processes through which people are transformed, more or less consentingly, into *bourdieun*¹ agents, acting as promoters, facilitators, and/or executors of neoliberal postulates. Even though the investigation considers the study of different social practices, we will focus specifically on those associated with the labour field and the hiring of workers: salaried relationships. Given this objective, the authors regard that the transitions from school to work provide an ideal opportunity to study the processes whereby labour

¹ Agents whose behaviours reasonably (more so than rationally) respond to habitus, a collection of attitudes acquired through a manner that is more or less subconscious through a means of learning that is associated with a prolonged encounter with the regularities of the field (Bourdieu 2005).

dispositions are incorporated into schemes of perception, thinking, and individual action. The concept of the job path allows for a detailed understanding of the dynamic relationship between structural conditions and the strategies that subjects employ in order to gain access to the working world. In other words, studying the youth population offers us the possibility to assess the varying characteristics assumed by each of the processes enacted by the young people themselves, their families, and their social networks. Moreover, we suggest that these processes also decidedly contribute to the implementation of the neoliberal project within the context of labour relationships. That is, salaried workers assume and maintain naturalised dispositions that legitimise and engender relationships of wage exploitation against them in terms of the following: 1) salary precariousness, 2) time flexibility, 3) labour mobility, and 4) job rotation, etc.

Therefore, we will focus on three key transitional elements (significantly related) through which people acquire dispositions favouring the neoliberal present into their daily *habitus*: labour dispositions and work expectations learned within the family prior to attending secondary school; support structures consisting of relatives, friends, and local acquaintances who are instrumental in finding and keeping a first job and future employment; and work and personal consumption² habits, which are the reasons for a worker's acquisition of precarious labour dispositions, and which in a significant way guarantee that the system is reproduced.

This research³ spans a three-year period between 2013-2015 and utilises a methodological approach drawing from anthropology and the social sciences that incorporates a longitudinal study and includes fieldwork skills and ethnographic information. The subject pool consists of secondary school students who share similar family backgrounds and academic trajectories: these young people live in the same municipality: Colindres (region of Cantabria, Spain); they attend the only high school in the community and are participants either in the so-called Preliminary Professional Qualification Programs or the Diversification Programs (curricular studies programs for students who are close to dropping out). We conducted three semi-structured, open-ended, interviews with 14 youths, one interview for each year and individual, both males and females between the ages of 15 and 18 at the time of the first interview, and including Spanish nationals, dual-citizens (Spain and another country), and foreign nationals.

The article is divided into four separate sections. The first presents a brief overview of neoliberalism and its Spanish nuances that we consider to have already generated regularities in the workforce. Then, we offer some notes on the notions of young people and school-to-work transitions, followed by a brief methodological explanation. We then describe the relevant aspects of the school-to-work paths of young people. The ensuing subsections include the necessary information to analyse the social origin of the

² Taking into account the complexity behind the concept of consumption, it will be used here with a basic understanding as consumption as a social process (not natural) of the acquisition or incorporation of useful objects that effect the control of a significant amount of energy, work, or information in the life of a person (Narotzky 2004).

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youths, their work expectations while they are students, the job search process and their first and subsequent jobs attained (be they formal or informal employment), their support system by different social networks (family, peer groups, other community institutions), and their consumption habits (domestic or personal expenses) as a motivation to continue working. This framework serves as an excellent predictor of the real precariousness and flexibility that characterises the labour interstices of Colindres' young residents.

We conclude by reflecting upon the manner in which wage workers, on a local level, are actually leading the implementation of the mechanisms and occupational skills of neoliberalism in terms of precariousness, flexibility, spatial mobility, temporality and rotations between sectors, branches, and occupations. In the case of Colindres, we are dealing with processes in which the family, peer groups, and networks created inside municipal institutions (mostly religious and athletic) are key for understanding the ease with which relationships of dependency or exploitation are created between the working class and employers, owners, and other workers.

The neoliberal project

A large part of the recent work published on neoliberalism defines it as a long-established, complex and changing macroeconomic project, theoretically dating back to the 1920s, where the ruling classes, first in the United States, and then spreading to the majority of other countries,⁴ have been redefining, reinventing, and readapting it to fit their respective national frames. At a discursive level, the neoliberal paradigm is based on the myth of the market as a natural and neutral institution that guarantees individual liberties thanks to its efficient allocation of societal resources (Birch & Mykhnenko 2010: 5). Hence, it is the responsibility of the individual to procure for himself the tools to take advantage of the opportunities that the system offers. Stated differently: the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions of the lower classes is due to the lack of entrepreneurship or, at best, the presence of certain 'hybrid' cultural attributes (Apple 2001: 22), which preclude the kind of economic thinking which is required in always seeking out maximum benefits.

On a practical level, we are dealing with a form of governance that, relative differences of time and place aside, is associated in some way or at some level in restoring (i.e. in the United States or Great Britain), reconstructing (i.e. in China, India, or Russia), or reorganising (i.e. in Mexico) the power of the ruling elite. Therefore, as Harvey (2006: 149) suggests, when the principles of neoliberalism clash with the project of class, such postulates are easily abandoned.

As such, it is not difficult to point out some of the mechanisms and techniques (Birch & Mykhnenko 2010: 5; Harvey 2006: 153; MacLeavy 2010: 134) that the ruling groups, alongside the state apparatus, have applied on a macro-level as public policy. With neoliberalism, elites, from both developed and developing countries, have created an economic model by which they continue to accumulate wealth at the cost of the

⁴ The geographic reach of neoliberalism has global implications in the way in which countries such as China, Cuba, or Vietnam have been 'unable to shield themselves from the fierce market thinking' (Borón 1999: 141). Hence, there 'is no one neoliberalism but rather it has many hybrid forms' (Peck 2012: 14).

middle and lower classes: through privatisation of the public (from health and sanitation to education, and even pensions); integrating these services into a culture of consumption; commodification of all cultural forms (within the context of tourism); flexibility of the labour market (extending into precarious work contracts and the individualisation of the wage relationship); financial deregulation at a global level; regressive redistribution of taxes; and similar.

It is more challenging to reveal the processes by which neoliberalism becomes naturalised by the very people that are being ‘dispossessed’ (Harvey 2003). Numerous authors agree that the legitimacy to which people hold the neoliberal project is due to the ruling classes and their control over the institutions of formal education and mass media disinformation. Scholarly institutions have turned into one of the privileged spaces for creating neoliberal economic dispositions: the goal is that people, in their analysis and interactions with reality, take into consideration utilitarian aspects (i.e. seeking the greatest individual benefit) in everything that they choose and do (Apple 2001: 38; Torres Santomé 2007: 31). Consequently, the values inherent in an economy of the common good, such as solidarity, collaboration, mutual aid or social responsibility, give way to an education centred on individualism, competition, efficiency, and quality. The educational goal of creating citizens (workers, unionists, etc.) capable of taking collectively binding decisions has been eradicated and substituted by the individual with absolute personal interests (owners, consumers, taxpayers, etc.) (Giroux 2003: 30-34). As such, these teachings count on the more or less subconscious compliance of the majority of academic sector (Martínez Rodríguez 2013: 20-3, 46).

However, what is extraordinarily novel about the neoliberal order is the enormous amount of economic and technological resources that the ruling classes employ in controlling mass-media messages through multimedia consolidation.⁵ Thus, mass media are promoting the idea that there exists only one kind of mutual understanding founded upon universally accepted notions of ‘values, cultural styles, icons and images which are promoted globally by a very specific North American experience that is based on a consumption model that is completely standardised, decontextualised, fetishistically egalitarian, cheap and of low quality’ (Borón 1999: 141-2). Specifically, the communication giants construct a discourse that frees neoliberal governments and multinationals from any responsibility regarding social phenomena like higher unemployment rates, decreased living wages, the accumulation of wealth or the deterioration of health and public education systems; hence, treating them as if they were natural disasters like an earthquake or a flood (*ibid*: 146). Instead, mass communications seek to highlight the faults and failings of other particular social groups, from ethnic minorities such as gypsies or other immigrant groups, to juvenile groups like *hackers*, with the sole objective of blaming them for causing society’s ills (Torres Santomé 2007: 36).

Notwithstanding the huge impact that these accountability strategies (Bourdieu 1998) have in the creation of a common neoliberal understanding, this investigation

⁵ For example, Mediaset or Atresmedia in Spain, ABC and Disney in the United States, or the monopoly by Televisa in Mexico.

focuses on the role of the people, and the decisions that subjects make, in terms of how factors in their lives materialise into the specific labour relationships known to the neoliberal model, namely, flexible wages (precarious), spatial (mobile), temporal (work hours and indeterminate calendars) and professional (rotation between sectors, branches, and occupations). Therefore, our attention will focus not only on the decisions that young people make when transitioning from the formal education system to the job market but also the choices that are made by their families and other relevant subjects in their community.

The labour market in Spain

By way of background information, it is useful to offer a few notes on the relevant traits that have characterised the job market in Spain in the past 25 years, which, in one way or another, make it unique amongst other European countries (García Brosa & Sanromá 2011). First, the Spanish labour market has always had higher unemployment rates, even in the times of major macroeconomic boom, as compared to the European Union's average. In any case, both the creation and termination of jobs tend to happen in waves. For example, from the 1990s to 2008, there was an increase in job creation both in construction and in the service sector; but then this fell dramatically during the economic downturn generated by the fall of the international financial system at the end of 2008. In the case of Spain, in addition to the freeze, there was also a financial avalanche; the banks ceased to give credit to families and small businesses, resulting in less consumption and an increase in unemployment rates (Martínez Rodríguez 2013).

In other matters, the employed population in Spain has had to face an elevated rate of temporary work and few opportunities for part-time work at levels that are habitually above the European average. Furthermore, the unemployment demographic includes the following: youth unemployment (age 15-24 years) in particular is double the average rate of unemployment; female unemployment is always greater than male unemployment; the rate of foreigners unemployed is significantly greater; and even higher amongst the less educated; significant differences also exist between regions, supporting the general pattern that the greatest rates of unemployment exist in the southern regions (Andalusia, Extremadura) by the northern peninsula (Navarra, Basque Country) (García Brosa & Sanromá 2011).

Transitions to adulthood in Colindres (Cantabria, Spain)

The recent interest in the “youth” concept in anthropology and sociology, specifically, the contributions made in terms of processes of transition from youth to adulthood has been as profuse in Spain (Arnal, Finkel & Parra 2013; Casal et al. 2006a, 2006b; García et al. 2013) as it has been in the United States (Berlin, Furstenberg & Waters 2010; Settersten & Ray 2010), Latin America (Saraví 2009a, 2009b), and comparatively amongst various other countries (Rumbaut & Martínez 2012).

In this context, given the numerous theoretical and methodological frameworks surrounding the concept of youth, we will view it in terms of biographies and life paths.

This approach underscores youth as ‘a cross-section of a biography, that stretches from the emergence of physical puberty to one’s emancipation from their family’ and finally resulting in one’s own independent home (Casal et al. 2006a: 28). We are dealing with a theoretical focus on the process of *class*-ing in which social stratification commences with one’s childhood family and continues until the person establishes themselves independently, emancipating oneself from their family and attaining their own adult home. Specifically, we understand youth to be associated with three dimensions in the transition to adulthood: the transition from school to work (finishing school and getting a full-time job); the formation of a new family (becoming financially independent from one’s parents, being able to support a family, marrying, and becoming a parent); and the residential transition (leaving home) (Berlin, Furstenberg & Waters, 2010; Settersten & Ray 2010).

The biographical focus centres on the concepts of events, paths, and transitions, with the path being informed by the decisions and preferences of the individual (agency) within the structural precursors of socio-historic and cultural and symbolic determinations (structure). The path, as a sequence comprised of significant events in one’s daily life, presumably emphasises an interpretation of these events within the context of the past (transpired path) and the expectations of the future (likely path). The first one accounts for a series of experiences which can lead to a great disparity of results. The second one illustrates a set of probabilities informed by personal choice and societal constrictions which, in practice, will either favour (advantages) or work against (disadvantages) the individual (Casal et al. 2006a; Saraví 2009a). For our purposes, we keep in mind the outcome of possibilities which are pertinent to the process of emancipation: where one starts out in life in terms of their family origins; one’s academic goals, previous work experience, professional transition; the creation of expectations, one’s emotional life, and access to making one’s own living, etc.

The transition to one’s professional life is defined as the set of biographical processes of socialisation that begin to figure into one’s life at around puberty and then propel the young subject towards professional, familial, and residential independence and the attainment of social standing. Specifically, this article centres on the process of transition from school to work for young Colindres residents, first as a way of understanding how global thinking (the capitalistic impulse to accumulate) transforms and finds expression in multiple local and regional ways of thought (Narotzky 2004; Stephen 2005); second, as a way of reflecting on the success and tenacity of the neoliberal project within this context (Peck, Theodore & Brenner 2009; Peck 2012). Indeed, young people interest us as products of contemporary society, and they allow us to observe how micro-social aspects (the natural progression of becoming active and employable as an individual responsibility) work to tackle the macro-social ones in terms of structural changes (the flexibility of the labour market). Researching youth offers us a way to attempt to reconstruct the events that allow the articulation between the neoliberal labour project and one’s family and community lives.

Methodology

From a methodological standpoint, this investigation consists of a longitudinal study that promises to contribute to a better understanding of the biographical processes of youth. Our subject pool is drawn from secondary school students all of whom were currently enrolled at the beginning of this investigation. In May of 2013, we selected 14 students from the only high school in the Spanish municipality, Colindres. The subject demographics include the following: in terms of gender, there were nine women and five men; and in terms of citizenship nine Spanish nationals, three with dual citizenship with Spain, and two without Spanish citizenship.

Located in the Oriental Coastal region of Cantabria, precisely at the point where the Ason river meets the Cantabrian sea, Colindres lies 46 kilometres from Santander, the provincial capital, and although it is one of the smallest municipalities in the region (extending only 5.9 km²), it is known to be one of the densest localities (with 1.347 inhabitants per km²). We have numerous reasons for having chosen the village of Colindres as the site to carry out a longitudinal study of transitions to adulthood. First, Colindres is one of the Cantabrian municipalities with the greatest youth rate, at 16.94% as compared to the 13.19% average for the region (ICANE 2010). Indeed, Colindres could be considered a representative municipality since it boasts a 15.7% youth population (for the 16.4% of all of Cantabria). Second, beginning in the second half of the twentieth-century, Colindres has been one of the Cantabrian municipalities that has witnessed the greatest economic growth due mainly to the strength of the secondary sector economy (i.e. canning industries) and service industry of which Colindres accounts for a higher rate with 61% activity versus the 52% regional average of Cantabria (MMS Cantabria 2011). Similarly, in the last decade, the population has grown by 17% (from 6,786 in 2001 to 7,948 in 2011) (ICANE 2011). Finally, the majority of school-age young people attend the high school, which assures us a representative sample and facilitates research work. For interviews, we used a script addressing issues relating to formative, work, residential, and familial transitions in the lives of young people. The interview subjects shared similar formative paths (they are all in Preliminary Professional Qualification Programs or the Diversification Programs⁶); upon graduating, they plan on studying a labour-training course rather than undertaking a university degree. Equally, their childhood families include at least one member who is regularly employed, although the families that are strictly Spanish nationals tend to have a permanent job or are small business owners (fishing boats or restaurants) whereas the families that have both Spanish and foreign nationality are more likely to have temporary employment.

On a practical note, this proposal draws from information acquired throughout a period of three years. In the first year (2013), the young people were between 15 and 18 years old, and they all regularly attended the aforementioned school. At the time of the first round of interviews, five of the 14 youths had already experienced some kind of paid

⁶ We chose to look at the Preliminary Professional Qualification Programs or the Diversification Programs groups because their students are known to get to the job market faster than, for example, those graduating from either undergraduate universities or vocational training schools (Jociles, Franzá & Poveda 2012).

labour. After a final analysis of the data recorded in 2015, there were only four students who had yet to work.

In other matters, the current proposal prioritises analysing those events that have been significant to the young people in transitioning from the academic system to the world of salaried labour. The following accounts do not attempt to establish a predetermined pattern of transition, but rather they showcase a compilation of paths varying in form and acceleration, which, as a process comprised of different cases, illustrates the connection between transitional events and the neoliberal project.

The articulation between the neoliberal present and the transitional events of young people

This research documents a phenomenon that is well studied in various regions in Europe and America: an increased participation by the population in service and commercial activities, and the growth of precarious employment, both informal and flexible. Colindres is a municipality that offers significant job opportunities in terms of the aforementioned characteristics specifically with the canning and fishing industries, seasonal tourism (hostels, restaurants, second home maintenance), or childcare and elder care, incidentally, all of which preferentially employ women.

Moreover, taking into account the data obtained from interviews conducted during 2013, 2014, and 2015, we analysed the work-development paths of young people in Colindres in terms of three key transitional events: their initial socialisation (the context in which young people learn by observing and living through the decisions of their parent-mentors) and the work expectations that this socialisation generates (what opportunities do these youths see before them in terms of their professional future); the processes of job searching and consequently their first hire, or in other words, how young people negotiate their first work decisions with the decisions of others in their immediate surroundings; and the work habits and consumption of the newly independent adult.

Initial socialisation and the expectations of the young: The decisions of others

Sandra, a fourth-year student in the Diversification Program at the time of the first interview had her first work experience during spring vacation in 2013. She spent three full days (8 hours) gutting anchovies: ‘It was tiring,’ she says, ‘many hours on my feet’. In the same way that Sandra’s mother ‘inherited’ her grandmother’s job, Sandra was also introduced to work at the canning factory by her mother. Sandra tells us that only women do the job of gutting and beheading:

the fish comes in, and then you grab the anchovy and start to take its head off with your hands...you get it off and throw it in a barrel, and then you put the fish in like one of these baskets. ... At first, my mom was with me and then I did it by myself.

After this initial experience, Sandra plans to return to work at the factory ‘whenever they need me’ and in fact, she would work there permanently if she had the opportunity, just like her mother and grandmother did. This coming summer she plans to look for work:

Below my house, there is a bar that is owned by a friend of my dad’s. ... I’ve already talked to him about it, but he says that he has to talk it over with my dad first.

Nevertheless, Sandra still plans to complete a certificate course in Early Childhood Education.

Merche is “really good” at mathematics, and hence, at the time of the first interview in 2013, she wanted to finish her fourth year in Diversification and begin a course session in Business. Two years later, Merche is taking a course session in Cooking with the goal of ‘learning to cook to get a job at a bar or restaurant.’ Being the child of South American parents, Merche does not see herself joining her mother in one of her many temporary jobs, the most recent of which is gutting anchovies:

And now my mom’s goin’ to the fishery thing [canning factory], gutting anchovies, ... it’s the time of year, they could call her today telling her to come in tomorrow, ... they hire her, and she goes, and they let her bring home the left-over fish and everything. ... My mom, she goes for any job. ... Either way, I wouldn’t mind working there, but it depends on whether they want you [hire you] for your experience, and you have to be quick [in terms of beheading and gutting], because if you’re slow if they start to build up [the anchovies] ... and yeah, my mom’s shown me how to clean a fish and everything, because I’ve asked her to, dang, but to do it quickly like over there, I can’t see myself doing it.

Merche’s parents are not pressuring her to work, but she understands that she needs to find a job soon to contribute at home. ‘We’re better here, then there,’ she tells us when she compares her home situation in Colindres with that of her home country; ‘at least here we have something to eat, because *Caritas* [a Catholic charitable organisation] help us, over there, there’s no one to help you.’ Her father works by cooking, cleaning, and fixing ‘things’ at a camping site:

from March until the end of the summer’ and during the winter, he hardly ever has work, he does odd-jobs. ... At first, he would work all year and now with the crisis and, plus, since it’s winter, there’s not a lot of people.

The time that her father is unemployed is when her mother is the busiest, formally working for a company dedicated to the care of the elderly:

When my dad doesn’t work, he takes my mom... because this winter my mom’s goin’ to clean the old people’s homes... so, like, yesterday she went to Ampuero, she had to be there an hour and another hour in Laredo... and my dad was the one who took her... And when my dad’s not there, she doesn’t go, if there’s no car, she doesn’t work, she doesn’t know how to

drive... Sometimes she doesn't have to clean, she just has to talk with the elderly person... but my mom does this because she couldn't find work, and my mom, since she's all about cleaning and all that, well they [the company] took her and they always call her because she's a good worker, and also, the elderly people have a lot of nice things to say about her.

If she had a choice, Merche would rather be a teacher although she knows that taking college courses would cost 'a ton of money' that her family cannot afford. In the past year, Merche has worked by taking care of her mother's friend's three-year-old son. For two weeks of work, she was paid 80 EUR, which she used to buy her mother a pressure cooker.

Manuel, in his third year of Diversification, wants to take a course in sports education in order to later explore his professional options as a 'multisport' coach. In his case, it is his father who 'has a bar.' At least twice a week, Manuel visits his father at the bar and 'when there's a lot of people, and he's [dad] busy, well I help him'. He tells us that most of the time he helps to 'take the plates from the kitchen to the bar'. And although he does not receive wages, his father gives him 'something whenever I ask him to buy candy, athletic clothes, videogames...' Although recently his father spoke with him and let him know that this coming summer 'I have to help him,' where 'perhaps my father will hire me for the first time, he'll pay me.' If Manuel's expectations of working with his father come to fruition, he intends to use his wages to get a driver's license, buy a motorcycle and travel.

Rodrigo, a third-year Diversification student, also has dreams of entering the professional sports world (as a trainer or coach). However, he knows that his job prospects here are 'bad' and that 'there isn't much work.' His mother, who has a permanent job working at a canning factory, has yet to offer him work there, but he tells us that 'if she did, I would go... it's money and whatever pays you...' He wants to save up to buy athletic gear and get his driver's license. 'If I had a car,' he explains, 'I would work wherever, I wouldn't care, whatever came my way, even as a taxi driver.' And yet, his first work experience has been to substitute for an athletic coach, specifically leading the training exercises of children in Colindres who practice the sport. And even though he has no idea how much or even how he will be paid, he understands that he will be paid 'under the table.'

Even though the cases of Sandra, Merche, Manuel and Rodrigo have many aspects worth analysing, we have chosen two fundamental things to concentrate on. First, we are dealing with a section of their biography in which their work experiences are constructed in part by the decisions others have taken for them: Sandra and Merche's mothers, Manuel's father, or Rodrigo's mother and coach have decided the time and place for their first work experience.

Second, even though the youths have hopes of working in their associated professional fields, they understand that the economic situation is *bad*, and they are willing to work 'at whatever' so that they can earn their own wage. In general, they are informal jobs in the service sector (hostels, cleaning, elder care) that are readily available in the municipality and surrounding areas. Therefore, the majority of the youths we interviewed

will work ‘for whatever’ during the summers, with waitressing being the most prevalent given ‘there are a lot of tourists,’ or cleaning apartments or entryways that are especially trafficked during the summer time in Oriental Cantabria.

Indeed, the data gathered from these interviews shows clearly how these young people are and have been socialised within their childhood family through the flexible work practices of the older wage-earning generations, from Merche’s father taking on ‘any and every job’ in the camping sites to the immediate availability of the women when the fish arrives at the canning factories, to the hourly work intervals that Merche’s mother works as she drives herself from job to job. Above all, we were particularly interested in the work context in which Sandra (and Merche, to a lesser degree) learn to handle the anchovies: within the four walls of the *firm* (to use Godelier’s term) the young student receives her first paycheque under the close and superb supervision of her own mother, a context which, without a doubt, is a very clear expression of how the individual of the younger generation internalises salaried and temporary flexible work dispositions within significant social relationships within the *local cultural* frame of Colindres.

The first job and beyond: Negotiating one’s own decisions and the decisions of others

Silvia, a fourth-year secondary school student, has been dividing her time between working and studies for quite a while. Since her first interview three years ago, Silvia has always worked during summer vacation. Her first paid experience was during the summer of 2012: a friend that worked in a bar in the neighbouring village of Laredo told her that the owners were looking for someone to ‘stand at the bar.’ So, at 16 years old, Silvia received her first informal wages which she used to buy clothes and a smartphone. The same summer, ‘when my mother would clean houses [usually of acquaintances], I would go with her.’ Silvia recounts to us that once she even went on her own to clean a house. Finally, in the summer of 2012 she found herself a ‘stable’ job ‘in a Dollar Store’: a friend with foreign nationality that worked there asked her to ‘watch’ her job while she was away in her home country, but ‘it turned out she didn’t come back, so I just ended up staying all summer.’

During the summers of 2013 and 2014, Silvia worked in ‘the fishery factory’ of Colindres. Some friends let her know that the business was hiring, ‘I applied, and they took me’. Silvia tells us that this is how you find out about jobs, ‘one person knows they’re hiring, she tells someone else, who tells someone else, and that’s how it goes’. Silvia spent two months every summer cleaning and gutting anchovies and mackerel, 8 hours a day for 7 EUR per hour. The money went towards helping out at home, buying the latest cell phone, and saving for an international trip.

Throughout the next summer, Silvia understands that she *has to* work: ‘I don’t have anything in the works right now, but something will come up, there’s always someone that wants their house cleaned.’ Although she would like to work in some branch of the State Security Forces, she figures that ‘after I finish studying, I’ll take whatever job. ... There are so many educated people that don’t have a job, or even a lot of people that have worked in fishing that can’t find anything.’

From her first interview, when she was in the third year of the Diversification programme, Vanesa knew she wanted to be a photographer, and this is what she concentrated on in her last two years of schooling as she finished secondary school and began a training course in photographic design. She tells us that ‘now is the time for me to study and my future will depend on that: if I don’t study, well then forget it; but if I do, I can achieve everything I want.’ However, this extraordinary level of clarity does not prevent Vanesa from working every summer ‘in whatever job in order to get paid and save up’:

This summer I’m going to wait and see if they call me for the anchovies. I’ve already signed up for unemployment, a lot of girls do it I also want to take care of kids, I have a friend at church [Evangelical] and he has a business [store], and I asked him if he would have work for me, and he told me no because I’m under aged, so I asked him to let me know if he heard of anyone needing childcare my aunt knows a lot of people with kids.

Vanesa would also be willing to work as a waitress and would not mind cleaning houses. For example, her first contact with the working world was the day that she went with her mother to clean a vacation home. Although her mother maintains a stable contractual relationship with a business that takes care of the elderly, she also takes on extra work by cleaning residential homes when people she knows ask her to. Finally, Vanesa has worked the past two years caring for her niece in exchange for a nominal payment of 20 EUR a month. Although she does it ‘because [she] want[s] to and not for monetary interest’, Vanesa is saving up the money to buy herself a ‘good’ camera and to fly to visit her home country.

The transnational events described in the previous paragraphs clearly point to a well-known social phenomenon (Moreno 2009; Salas & González-Fuente 2014; Saravi 2009a): the majority of young people find their first job and continuous work due to their family and friend networks or through the members of their local community. The combination of personal decisions with the decisions of persons close to them means that the acquisition of informal and part-time jobs happen in a natural way, with the assurance that there will be no kind of labour demands that might adversely affect the boss.

Those friends of Silvia and Vanesa who tipped them off to signing up on the lists at canning factories, to work in a bar or in a store reveal that peer groups, athletic clubs, and churches are privileged spheres of (re)producing social capital between the youths in Colindres (especially for those of dual citizenship). Therefore, institutions like the Protestant Church in Colindres, Jehovah’s Witnesses or Caritas serve as platforms for creating various social networks. Young people with foreign nationalities share information over employment and can help one another with childcare, with sorting out various administrative procedures especially those associated with acquiring citizenship from Spain, or they can also lend one another money⁷ (Szwarcberg 2012). Merche clearly describes the formation of these networks when we asked for the “fishery lists”:

⁷ The seminal paper on support practices in the circulation of the means of making a living (products, services and information), speaks of the necessity to include in analyses of reproductive labour trajectories the work invested in the creation and maintenance of social networks.

If you want to work, you need to go to the business to sign up. ... A friend told her [her mother] and she went yesterday to sign up. My mom knew her from another friend and she told her [Merche's mother] because my mom also lets her know when there's work.

Finally, this combination of social capital, casual employment, and localised relationships create social contexts that allow for interactions which are key at the moment the neoliberal project meets people's personal experiences. Consequently, these interactions are also a significant factor in reproducing varied manifestations of work-capital relationships that are inherently based on an individual's need to make a living and the capital's need to extract from them the maximum surplus value (Narotzky 2004).

The new worker and consumer: Personal decisions

Susana, a fourth-year secondary school student, lives with her mother and a renter with whom they share common living areas such as the kitchen, bathrooms, and living room. Throughout our interview period in the past 3 years, Susana's mother has had many jobs mostly in the canning industry and cleaning services: working in a hotel in the summer, entryways to a business that is owned by a friend of the family, vacation homes 'in order to do someone a favour,' and lately, a group of friends from many nationalities has grouped together on the internet in order to offer their cleaning services and share jobs.

Susana's life has changed 'a ton' in the last two years. Since we met her during that first interview and then throughout her second and third interviews, she has grown from a young graduate of the high school to a working adult who is simultaneously trying to get a degree in professional development and business administration. Although Susana claims she does not work 'out of necessity,' her acquisition of employment through family-friend networks, makes her a precarious, flexible, and pluri-active worker, as well as a low-level consumer. Susana got her job when a friend approached her mother inquiring as to whether Susana could work for her in a bar she had rented in Colindres. Although the agreement between Susana's mother and her friend is framed as a favour, it can also be categorised as a relationship of exploitation in which the friend has Susana working for five hours a day (between 8 and 10 hours on Saturdays and Sundays) while paying her a variable sum somewhere between 250 and 290 EUR a month,⁸ and with a work schedule that is dependent upon closing time. Although the relationship is not under contract, the friend claims that Susana is 'in training.' Indeed, in a few days, the young woman has learned to tend bar, serve food, get things done in the kitchen and clean all the different bar areas (kitchen, bathroom, bar, sitting area). Susana comments that 'there are weekends where I break even' and contemplates that it 'would be right if I got a little more.' Yet, Susana is 'a little bit shy and scared' to bring it up to her mother's friend 'since she was the one that got me into this.' Susana contributes a certain percentage of her wages every pay period to her domestic situation: 'I give 50 EUR to my mom so she can pay for things like the internet, the water, and monthly electric bill ... and with whatever's left over I pay for my cell phone...' The work is affecting her studies to the point that Susana tells us that

⁸ The minimum wage in Spain in 2015 was 648.60 EUR a month.

although she is ‘happy’ and ‘fine,’ the work is ‘consuming [her].’

Looking at the situation in terms of what youth research tells us, Susana’s role as a salaried employee has forced her to prematurely grow up into an adult person that begins to make her own decisions and occupy a different role in society as a low-level consumer.

On one hand, what is interesting about this case is how Susana acquired all the labour habits of the neoliberal present in which we live: she is paid less than minimum wage; she does not contribute to social security; she works in all aspects of the work niche in the hotel business; she does not cause trouble with the patron-friend; and is available at any time, shift, or day, etc. The most extraordinary thing is that she has acquired all of these habits within a context of localised relationships based on economic principles existing independently of the neoliberal project.

On the other, the *need* for Susana to work is directly related to the income that the job gives her. This notion recalls an important observation that we share with Saraví (2009a): for young people, work turns into a stream of identity that comes from the production sphere (which we term “vocational work or “trade-related work”) to insert oneself into the consumer sphere. Citizenship will no longer be defined as a “communitarian” practice whereby people are bonded to a social and political contract to work together to shape the world in which they live, but rather being a *citizen* is reduced to a private endeavour, a solitary act of consumption in which the individual chooses and makes decisions in a strictly individual sense (Giroux 2003; Torres Santomé 2007).

Neoliberalism at the micro level: Precarised transitions

The success of the neoliberal labour project rests, on a micro level, on the fact that it operates with the “complicity” of people, a result of the sense of insecurity at all levels of wage workers and the threat of permanent unemployment (Bourdieu 1998). Fear creates a situation in which workers not only demand less of their employers but also acquiesce to cuts in wages, unpaid overtime, etc. (Collins 2005). If anything, neoliberalism is capable of naturalising its discourse within an “employable” population. Moreover, as we have mentioned, we are common conspirators in this practice, united under a shared neoliberal common sense.

First, the young students have a pre-defined work ethic in their cultural toolbox by which they already acknowledge the daily expectations of having to do precarious work, an understanding which is significantly influenced by the agents of socialisation in their lives: family, peer groups, local community, school, and mass media.

Before they enter the working world, these youths already accept that they must be willing to work ‘in any job,’ at whatever time, and in whatever conditions that job may offer. We have observed that young peoples’ expectations to find work in their related field of study disappear the moment that a paying work opportunity presents itself: one which is not so much found, but rather presented, thanks to family and community networks.

This relates back to the youth’s childhood socialisation, and the teachings at the heart of the family. The majority of the youths we interviewed have come to know the working world through the observation of and experimentation with the work practices of their tutor-parents. Through them, they have learned first hand (as in the case of Sandra

or Manuel) of the flexibility that is needed to work in their respective jobs in the hotel business, the canning industry or the cleaning services, all of which are the main activities in which youths have their first contact with the working world in Colindres. Through their parents, these youths have learned to adapt themselves to the seasonal nature of these three labour sectors: the coming of the fish to the port, the coming of residents to their vacation homes, and of tourists in general.

Second, some youths encounter their first job through a web of precarious relationships. They get their jobs within the context of a network of relationships that decidedly include their family, friends and other social networks tied to institutions, such as those having to do with athletics and especially those that are religious. This suggests that much of the hiring is embedded within relationships of reciprocity, that oblige the youth (as in the case of Susana) to remain at the job as a means to repay familial “debts”. However, not all families have social relationships that function as social capital with ripple effects to the potential value of economic and cultural capital. Specifically, we have noticed a significant difference between native Spaniards and other young people with foreign origins. The latter participate in social networks created through their peer groups and in churches of various denominations which open doors to the working world.

Similarly, their first jobs are significantly associated with the existence of an informal agreement through which the conditions are set by people (property owners, owners or managers of small businesses, self-employed workers, and others) who, as in the case of Susana’s boss, count on and exploit the casual and flexible nature of their agreement. In other words, our research reveals the presence of a common understanding which makes the need to prioritise the greatest benefit seem natural. For example, although Susana begins to doubt how she is treated as an employee, she nevertheless maintains that her salary is legitimate, while her mother’s friend rationalises that she must make Susana work as hard as she can because ‘she is learning.’ Merche, in contrast, informs us about the variable of being of a foreign national: ‘Can’t you see how we are?,’ the young student rebukes:

There’s a whole bunch of crisis, there’s no work, they say it’ll end but, when is it gonna get better? When I got here, it wasn’t like this. Huh? My mother worked, and she earned her money, but now, look! My own dad tells me that it wasn’t like this before because he would work and got good money but now, they even exploit the ones without papers [official citizenship documentation]! They pay you less because you don’t have papers ... my dad yes [he has them], but my dad has a friend who doesn’t have papers and he used to charge a lot less than my dad.

Third, some youths have transitioned within three years to the working world and are precarious workers and, ‘with enough luck, enough income’ (Barkin 1999: 16), low-level consumers. The work itself is not an end, but a means. Money, as in the case of Rodrigo, is transformed into a source of great gravity and attraction since it can be used to expand the possibilities of consuming products (like cell phones and clothes) associated with ‘the symbolic connotations that accompany and intervene in the processes of identity construction’ (Saraví 2009b: 100).

Indeed, the young person recreates himself as a new precarious worker, willing to enter relationships of exploitation in which he is taken advantage of by business owners and other workers with greater purchasing power.

Final thoughts

As persons, we have the social tools to move macroeconomic projects to the micro level, that is, to the local level. However, why is the neoliberal project so successful? In this article, we have argued that one of the main reasons for the success of neoliberalism (i.e. trading in “dispossession for accumulation” at an elevated level of legitimacy) is that the youth (i.e. the people who depend on the adult world to some degree) naturalise it during their transition from the educational system to the job market. This text has strived to show how precarious labour dispositions: are learned within the heart of the family in the way that adults socialise their children in terms of precarious and flexible work; are learned in the heart of the local community: family and community networks support and convince their own children to accept precarious work; at the same time, the people offering the work look to get the most out of the workers; are learned in the working world: the youngest workers accept their precarious working conditions as legitimate in a localised context that combines, in conjunction with other factors, the need to earn a living and the freedom to make decisions concerning consumption, albeit to a low degree.

Given all of this, the analysis of the individuals throughout their transitional work development constitutes, from our perspective, a privileged space to understand the way in which a common neoliberal understanding is created. Taking into account the enormous responsibility that macro-institutions as well as regional and national governments, supranational institutions, and the education system or mass media all have in the undertaking of the aforementioned cultural repertoire, it is at the very least revealing to detail the processes of internalising neoliberalism that are a result of the participation of the wage workers themselves in labour processes. Undoubtedly, we are dealing with a more or less involuntary responsibility, more or less intentional, which is produced and reproduced through the everyday practices that are socialised from the older generation to the younger, thus assuring the successful reproduction of the model in different sociocultural contexts. Indeed, these everyday practices configure frameworks of perception that incorporate precarious labour dispositions, yielding the kind of adult required by the system: a precarious worker who, with luck, is also a low-level consumer.

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Povzetek

Glavni namen članka je opisati in analizirati nekatere procese, prek katerih ljudje pridobivajo delovne dispozicije, medtem ko delajo za promocijo neoliberalnega projekta na naraven in legitimen način. Avtorja menita, da je prehod iz šole v zaposlitev idealna priložnost za študij tovrstnih procesov. Raziskava je potekala v španski vasi Colindres od leta 2013 do leta 2015. S pomočjo antropološke metodologije smo razvili raziskavo, pri čemer so bila uporabljena različna orodja, kot so longitudinalni intervjuji in etnografsko delo na terenu. Na ta način smo izbrali srednješolce, ki so si podobni glede pomembnih funkcij, povezanih z njihovim družinskim izvorom in po formativnem obdobju. Avtorja skleneta z razpravo o tem, kako so plačani razredi sami nase prenesli tiste mehanike in tehnike dela, ki jih sicer uporabljajo zagovorniki neoliberalne politike: negotovost zaposlitve, negotovo plačilo, mobilnost delovne sile, fleksibilni delovni čas in rotacija delovnih mest. Študija je pokazala, da družine, vrstniki skupino in bližnja skupnost v Colindresu vzpostavlja okvir, v katerem se mladi na naraven način naučijo, kako se soočiti z negotovimi delovnimi izkušnjami brez konflikta. V končni fazi trg dela dobi, kar potrebuje: odraslo osebo, ki se svobodno odloča kot prekarni delavec in nizki potrošnik.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: mladina, prehod v odraslost, trg dela, neoliberalizem, Španija

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