

TRANSITIONS IN YOUTH: CONCEPTUALISATION  
PROPOSAL AND CONSEQUENCES ON THE  
COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGIES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims at presenting two main ideas. The first is that the study of professional paths is insufficient to understand the "transition" process. The main problem lies in the fact that when we come to refer to "insertion in the working life" using the term "transition", we change the theoretical paradigm but this change has at least, up to now, had almost no consequences in methodology.

The second idea is that the "labour market" can be seen as an area of socialisation and, in this way, the transition is not the direct result either of the specificity of the "labour market", or of the characteristics of the individuals (family, class, skills, age, back-ground, professional changes, etc.), but a process of social construction that results from the complex game between the educational and training policies, work and employment systems and the strategies of professional insertion of the individuals, in each country.

Finally, we will conclude with some considerations about the application of the above ideas on the comparative analysis.

## RESUMÉ DE LA COMMUNICATION EN FRANÇAIS

Dans ce texte, deux idées principales sont développées. La première défend que *l'étude des parcours professionnels* est insuffisante pour comprendre la *transition* professionnelle. Le principal problème provient du fait que l'usage du terme "transition" pour désigner l'"insertion dans la vie active" a été l'indice d'un changement de paradigme théorique, mais ce changement est resté sans conséquences au niveau méthodologique.

La deuxième idée est que le "marché du travail" peut être considéré comme un espace de socialisation et, dans ce sens, la *transition* n'est pas le résultat direct, ni de la spécificité des marchés du travail, ni des caractéristiques des individus (origine familiale et de classe, niveau d'instruction, âge, formation, changement de profession...). La transition est un processus de construction sociale qui résulte

d'un jeu complexe entre les politiques et les mesures existantes dans chaque pays, les systèmes d'éducation-formation, le travail et l'emploi et les stratégies d'insertion professionnelle des individus.

Pour finir, la réflexion porte sur les conséquences de l'application de ce modèle sur les méthodologies comparatives entre pays.

## **I. The theoretical context of the approach to professional insertion**

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1. The study of professional paths of individuals has its roots in the theory of human capital, focusing upon the supply of labour and the characteristics of the individuals.

When we witnessed the increase in the rates of structural unemployment of individuals with different levels of training, even in the long-term, and that firms tend to cut costs more by reducing employment than by cutting salaries, the insertion in the labour market became more and more difficult. The idea of life-time employment was replaced by a rotation process between employment - unemployment - inactivity. From the methodological point of view we questioned ourselves about the efficiency of "insertion questionnaires", applied 9 months after leaving school.

This positive step did not resolve the problem. Why, in order to understand the transition process, we focus only on the professional paths of the individuals, when it is becoming more and more obvious that the demand side of the labour market is as important as the supply side?

2. If we follow the point of view of the "*theories of segmentation*" of the labour market we should consider the transition as a process arising from the conditions imposed by the firms, based on their forms of personnel selection and labour management. In this perspective, the obstacles to labour mobility are of a structural type and are determined by the behaviour of the firms, which develop networks of mobility according to whether they recognised, or not, the training and previous professional experience: human capital is a kind of "risk capital".

Professional paths are therefore determined to a large extent by the firms. The difficulties and inequalities of "professional insertion" are due not so much to individual characteristics and behaviour as to the companies management methods.

3. More recently, Rose (1984) drew attention to the need to integrate institutional aspects that constrain the flows of mobility and act simultaneously on the demand for and supply of labour, highlighting in this way the institutional dimension of the management of the labour force.

From this point of view the reformulation of the notion of "professional insertion" implies that we have to reduce the importance given to the internal labour market, to consider also the significance of the external market and the particular relevance of the intervention by public agencies.

The "insertion in working life" comes to be seen as a process that results from interaction among companies, the state, and other agents, with the productive system playing a vital role. In this perspective, and to stress the multidimensional and temporal nature of this process, we come to refer to "insertion" as a process of "professional transition".

Thus, the difference between "insertion" and "transition" is not just a problem of terminology but above all a difference of theoretical content. If we agree to use the term of "transition" we need to have a methodology in accordance with the needs associated with that notion. That is: besides the analysis of the individuals behaviour it is also necessary to study the productive system and the way the state intervenes.

We will argue in what follows, that this three aspects of analysis always constitute a coherent system in each country. As a result, the comparative analysis at the international level can not be limited to the comparison of the professional paths of young people.

## **II. From the "market" to "professional space": The notions of space and socialisation**

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1. What is said above presupposes a basic theoretical rupture with traditional theory, beginning with the very notion of the market.

Rodrigues (1986, 1991) in her book on the **Employment system in Portugal** supports the idea that the "market" is a space which is neither natural nor neutral, nor even with freely circulating. It is a space where a complex process of structuring of employment develops and which is constructed upon strategic behaviour of the State, employers, Unions and workers and, whose shape may vary in different historic periods and from country to country; it is also a space with many Institutions - the filters of the employment system - which structured it, in an irregular form.

So, the professional paths of individuals in *transition* occur in this space.

Our general hypothesis is that the shape of the employment system and the way it works is not neutral either in the formation of those paths or in the behaviour of the individuals.

We can look at the employment system as a space of professional mobility and professional<sup>1</sup> socialisation, yet a process of social and technical learning - and therefore also as a mean of acquiring skills-, and as the construction of specific socio-professional relationships.

We say "construction" because the individuals are not passive agents in receiving information, but participate actively in the processes of learning. The notion of socialisation (Dubar, 1992) is not, in this way, connected to the function of an "educational agency", but as a wider interactive process - with positive or negative socio-professional experiences and because of this, inducers of differentiated strategies of professional insertion - between the individuals in transition and the system of employment in which they find themselves.

It is easy to understand that the *Employment Systems* in different countries, as socio-professional spaces, are different, as are the groups in transition. The first can offer more or less opportunities and possibilities of choice. There are numerous scenarios. In a space empty of opportunities for example, the individuals can equally change space - that is, emigrate - or stay and be subjected to a progressive process of professional depreciation.

We can not understand the differences in the transition in Portugal, Spain or Germany without understanding the "professional spaces" that constrain the professional paths of individuals.

## 2. For a definition of transition

In this framework the notion of *transition* can, in our opinion, be formulated from what we call the *Employment System*, considering the set of the following:

- structures - family, system of learning/training, business dynamics, etc.;
- agents - State, business associations and unions and individuals, and
- social and economic mechanisms that contribute to the creation and transformation of the flows of mobility to employment, in inter-action with the process of reproduction of the labour force which integrate this flows.

To be more precise, the transition can be analysed through a set of mechanisms which interfere in the structuring of the demand for employment and which are as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> This idea of "labour market" as a space of socialisation was suggested by SILVESTRE, J. J. in 1978 and latter developed in MAURICE, M.; SELLIER and SILVESTRE, J. J., 1982.

- i. The productive system creates permanent flows of labour force through its power of attraction or rejection, producing privileged paths of mobility at the same time that it determines its volume and structure;
- ii. This is a selective process closely associated to quality and quantity of employment that mobilises, according to the methods of management of labour force, the type of qualifications, the organisational models and the processes of production;
- iii. The above mentioned vectors which are structured by supply, together with those that shape the demand for employment - levels of schooling, qualification, teaching, employment and training policies, organisation of education/training systems - occupy the space in which the paths of mobility are found, working as a kind of filters where the individuals in transition go through (see diagram I);
- iv. The probability of going through (or not) one or more than one of these filters, depends on the selective power of supply and on the strategies of insertion of the individuals;
- v. These "filters" contribute to the transformation of labour force<sup>2</sup> that goes through them.

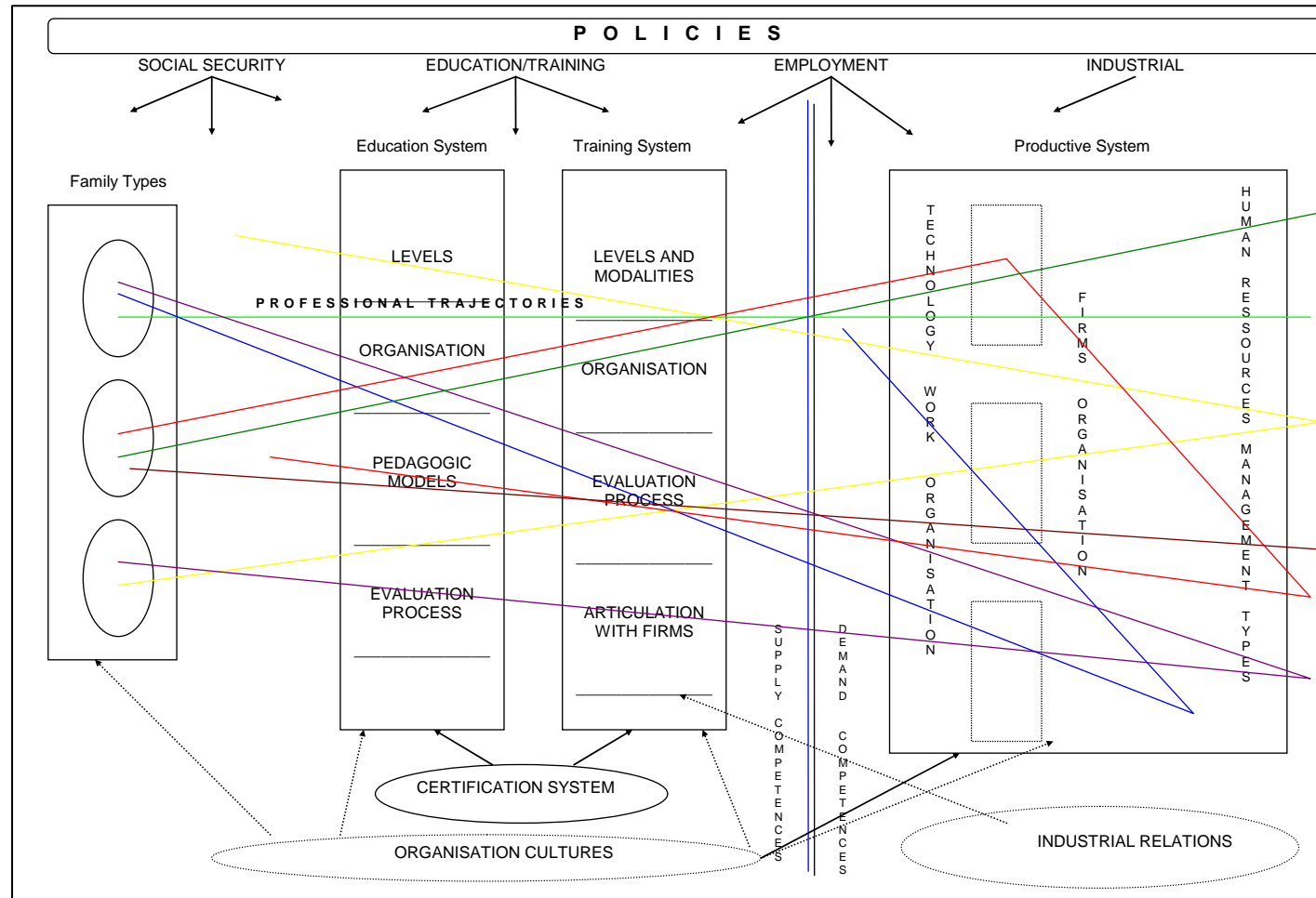
This approach defines simultaneously a particular way of conceiving mobility. It does not only deal with the flows of labour force to employment, according to their orientation, composition and intensity, but to understand the kind of social relations which produce them, according to strong characteristics of professional space and the behaviour of individuals.

### **DIAGRAM I – Analysis Scheme of the Transitions Process**

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<sup>2</sup> The transformation of labour force is underline by the problem of acquisition, decomposition and recomposition of skills as a process of learning which comes from socio-professional mobility of individuals and groups, that is from the socialisation process. This perspective of acquisition and transformation of skills, as an articulated set of process of formal and informal learning is called by RODRIGUES as "*educational system in the true sense*" (1991, 1994)





In this way, mobility is not necessarily a producer of skills as far as it is developed in the heart of a pre-existing space whose specificity can equally induce, maintain or give value to the pre-acquired skills, as it can devalue them, opening the way to their deterioration, destruction and/or rejection of this space.

Following this line of thought, the professional transition can not be reduced to the centrality of the market, or to the intervention of the State which varies according to historic moments and societies. So, it is necessary to consider from the start all those involved and the nature of the relationships established among them, to rationalise in terms of the consequences on transition.

### 3. From professional paths to trajectories: a theoretical and methodological question

Transition, as we have defined, is a process of mobility which occurs through time<sup>3</sup>. The analysis of this process requires a methodology based upon longitudinal studies.

These studies can however answer different theoretical assumptions. The traditional theoretical point of view, for example, tries to understand the adjustment process between supply of and demand for labour, the behaviour of the individuals to work as an autonomous factor of the supply, the means of access, use and valuing of information on the market, the investment in human capital, etc.

From another approach, the study of trajectories according to Bourdieu, should be privileged. More than the application of a technique, it can work as a kind of a *bridge-concept* between the individuals and the professional space in which they move in. The trajectory is the result of the interactive process between a specific professional space and the individuals holding schooling, social, technical and cultural resources.

Thus, the study of professional trajectories is not so much an end in itself, as an "outline of mediation" which allows us to understand the transition, conceived as a result of the processes of change between the individuals and the relevant institutions of socialisation in this sphere of work. Its heuristic potential lies in the fact that it condenses the constraints of the structures - here made objective in "professional space" - in the individuals freedom of choice relatively to their insertion in the work life.

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<sup>3</sup> It is in this statement of time that we find the processes of mobility and socialisation which are the basic distinction between an approach in terms of market and another in terms of space (MAURICE et al, 1982)

At the same, the trajectory expresses the socio-professional relationships which contribute to the formings (and transforming) of professional space.

From the methodological point of view it becomes necessary therefore to understand the professional trajectories, not only in the way that the individuals witness them, but in connection to the relevant context of socialisation in which these paths are shaped. This context is defined, generically, by a time and by the places occupied by the individuals - which are the filters that define the structural discontinuity of the employment system -, following a certain sequence and chronological duration.

The professional trajectory is therefore seen as a double decline:

- a) that which connects the structural marks of professional space which interfere in the demand for employment, that is the role of the firms, the training institutions, the transition policies and the professional paths taken by the individuals.
- b) that which results from this process of professional mobility in the transformation of previously acquired skills (Vaneclou, 1982).

In this sense, we conceive the professional trajectories as ways of recomposition and/or decomposition of knowledge that defines, at the same time, different levels of employability and models of professional transition, according to the success/failure of the demand for employment, the quality of the employment in which they are placed and to the processes of socio-professional classification/declassification which underlie them.

### **III. For a comparative methodology: the societal approach**

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As we suggested in the previous sections the study of transition presupposes two levels of analysis: professional spaces and trajectories, conditioned by, to a great extent, self-determined individual strategies. That is, the two levels of analysis form a coherent entity and are not independent of each other: the most successful transition, for example, cannot occur in professional spaces without opportunities of employment in quantity and quality.

This kind of approach has consequences in comparative methodologies among countries. Doing *a comparison exercise*, based on the previous scheme, *term by term*, we would probably get a list of this kind:

1. The family context is different, in terms of economic and cultural resources and expectations in relation to the future of the children<sup>4</sup>, which is vital in the forming of the future strategies of young people;
2. The organisation of the education/training system, the curriculum, pedagogy, methods of evaluation, certificates, etc., strongly condition the motivation of progression through the levels of education and of insertion in the “work market” and are very different among countries;
3. The education/training and employment policies and in particular the policy supporting insertion, are also different;
4. There are different strategies of restructuration of a business nature, according to the kind of insertion in the markets, the sectors, the policies of industry, etc. (Villevall, M.C., 1992);
5. As a result, there are significant differences in the methods of management of the active population and in particular, in the processes of transition.

From the aspect of the search for employment, young people can have a family and school trajectory with either success or failure until reaching the "labour market". Therefore the conditions on arrival are very different not only in terms of levels of schooling and diplomas, but also in terms of personal predisposition created by previous experiences and which lead to more active strategies, reactive strategies, or to "escape" when faced with difficulties<sup>5</sup>.

To sum up, *the characteristics of professional space constrain the opportunities of employment in quantity and in quality, as much as the subjective resources of young people and their strategies of insertion in the “labour market”*.

How, therefore, can a comparative approach be developed?

Maurice, Sellier and Silvestre (1982) proposed a methodology based on the so called “societal approach” which, in our opinion, is particularly appropriate to the transition question.

According to the authors, there should be three different view points (See diagram II):

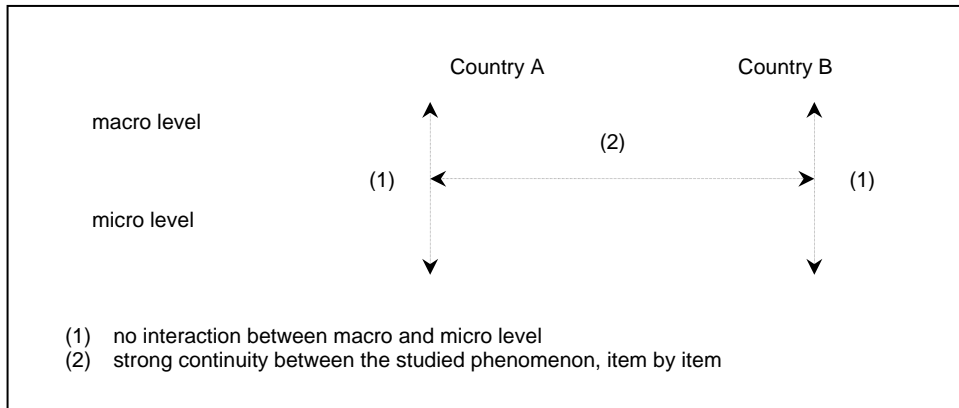
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<sup>4</sup> A recent study on the social mobility of second generation of emigrants in France, concluded that the most successful were those from Magreb, which was explained by the investment strategies of the family of origin which gave preference to the education of the children; on the other hand, the Portuguese preferred to increase savings, and as a result, wanted children to start work as soon as possible.

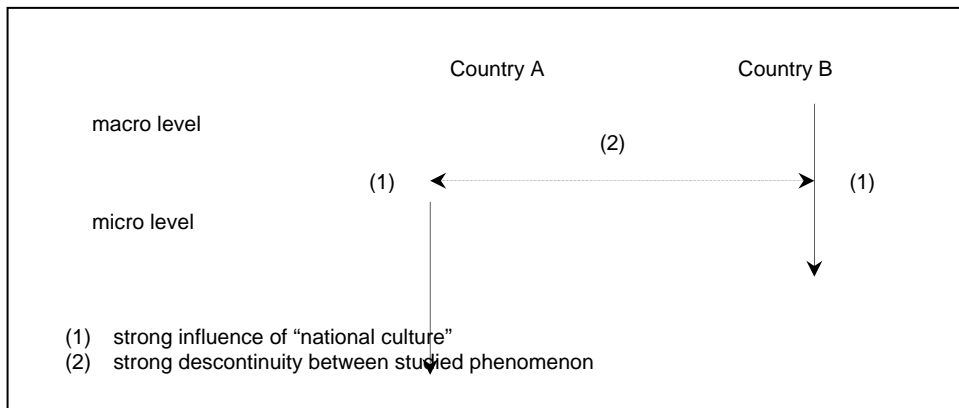
<sup>5</sup> In relation to this *The Error of Descartes, emotion, reason and the human brain*, Lisbon, Publicações Europa-América, 1995, is a particularly stimulating reading.

## DIAGRAM II – International Comparison Methodologies

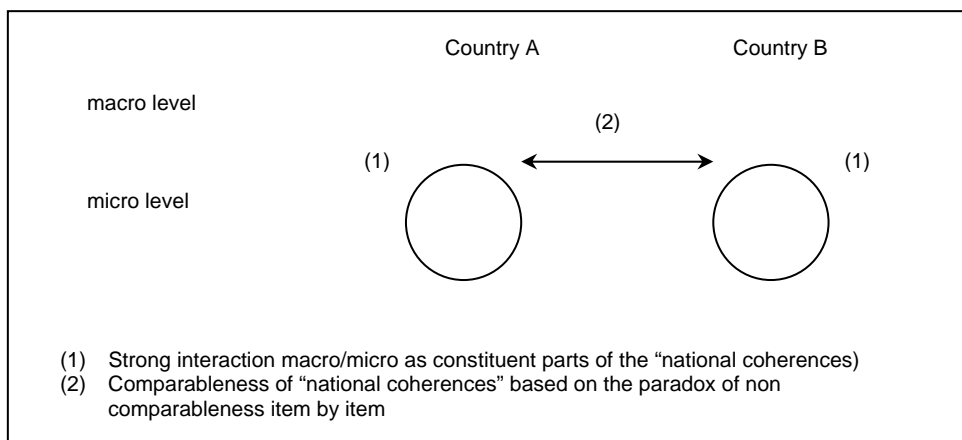
### Cross-national Comparison



### Cross-cultural Comparison



### Cross-cultural Comparison



Source: Maurice, M. (1989), op. Cit., pp. 180-182.

- “*Cross national*” comparison which, assuming that all countries tend towards the same model, admits that comparisons could be made item by item so that “functional equivalents” could possibly be found;
- “*Cross cultural*” comparison, which is centred on the specificity of each “national culture” that, in practical terms, presents some difficulties: will the elements be comparable?
- “*Inter-national*” comparison (societal analysis), which defends that it is not the elements one by one which should be compared, but the coherences between the elements, that is, the “national coherences”, in this case among the professional spaces, individual strategies and the professional trajectories

When putting the comparative analysis of transition into effect, what would the results be of the application of each one of these perspectives? On a purely speculative basis the results could be the following:

- *Comparing item by item*: the differences could possibly come from the difference between policies of support to insertion and of the levels of schooling. It would be necessary to act on these aspects.
- “*Cross cultural*” analysis: the differences would be based on the cultural tradition of a specific country, in that there has always been a very limited relationship between education/training and firms, for example, which would allow the problem of managing supply and demand to be resolved;
- “*Inter-national*” analysis in each country there is a coherence between the kind of family, the model of the system of education/training and the organisational, technological models and of the methods of management of manual labour in the companies.

Applying this “inter-national” comparative methodology to the scheme we proposed above, we can reach some conclusions: to improve the processes of professional transition of young people it is not enough to act on this or that sub-system (employment, schooling or training, firms, technology, etc) or even act on all of them: the policies have to form a coherent set and to be in accordance with each national context. Probably they have to be different from country to country.