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Youth and feelings of belonging in Latin America: causes and risks of social fragmentation

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Over the last few decades, Latin American societies have undergone structural and secular reforms that have caused far-reaching social fragmentation extending over many spheres of social life. It is therefore pertinent to ask whether this has affected the socially shared notions that define a common sense of belonging. What has happened to such sentiments and how have they changed in the heat of the changes that have taken place in the region? This article analyses the weakening of two institutions capable of engaging individuals and generating shared perceptions, wishes and values, which had become key mechanisms of integration and social cohesion in the past: namely school and work. In this context, the article reviews the experiences and meaning of school and work for young people from the most disadvantaged sectors of the population, and the emergence of new competing institutions that display increasing capacity to engage and give meaning.

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I

Introduction

Social fragmentation is a key feature of a new social problem that is hovering over contemporary Latin American society. Although related to other issues of similar level and importance, such as social exclusion processes and increasing socioeconomic inequality, social fragmentation has its own specific connotations. As an *ad infinitum* process, it can be seen as a path leading to the dilution of social issues, or, to be more precise, their individualization (in Beck's terms, institutionalized individualism). Nonetheless, in the case of Latin America at least, social fragmentation is deeply interwoven with processes of socioeconomic exclusion and inequality involving compartmentalized lifestyles and biographic experiences, with urban spaces, domains of sociability and fields of interaction that are also fragmented. One could continue citing examples of this phenomenon in other spheres of social life, but in all cases it involves fragmentations that are permeated by inequality and risks of exclusion.

Over the last few years, perhaps decades, Latin America has undergone far-reaching but silent transformation processes. Alongside political transition, economic crises and changes in the roles of the State and market, less specific social changes have also been unfolding in our region, which are just as relevant as the previous ones or even more so. These are currently being expressed in a society that is very different than what it was few years ago and, particularly, in a new social structure. Today's poverty is not the same as yesterday's; contemporary cities face new challenges—insecurity in particular, and others related to urban segregation, territorial stigmatization, fear and sociability with “others” (Kaztman and Wormald, 2002; Portes, Roberts and Grimson, 2005; Saraví, 2007). Consumption has assumed an unprecedentedly central role, both in the social order and in the subjectivity of individuals (Bauman, 2007). Lastly, social inequality has reached levels that were unimagined in the recent past, even penetrating societies with a broad-based middle class that seemed to be diverging from the Latin American pattern (Reygadas, 2008).

As a result of these and other processes, we are living today in deeply and increasingly fragmented societies. Not only is this revealed in the material conditions of existence, but, as I shall try to argue in this article, it also permeates the meaning of institutions

—an aspect that has been studied less and hardly valued at all until recently. The growing concern for social cohesion in our region and elsewhere can only be understood against a backdrop of disintegrating senses of belonging. What are the shared values that make it possible to define a shared sense of belonging? What has happened to those values and how have they changed in the heat of structural and secular changes that the region has undergone in recent decades? Are the deepening of inequality and the emergence of social exclusion processes causing fragmentation in factors that are crucial for the social order? Is it possible to agree upon certain values and norms of collective existence without a shared foundation that stems from a common sense of belonging?

In this context, it is pertinent to question whether, in the most deprived sectors of our societies, which bear a heavy and longstanding burden of disadvantages, earlier socially shared senses of belonging have been weakened by the emergence of new frames of reference. As a contribution to this broader and more ambitious discussion, this article focuses exclusively on an analysis of the meaning attributed to school and work by young people from deprived or vulnerable urban sectors.

Focusing on education and the labour market is not a random or capricious choice, but reflects the fact that, for most of the past century, these two institutions were key mechanisms of social mobility in our region and, consequently, also of integration—to a greater or lesser degree depending on the specific national setting in question (see for example Bayón, 2006). This should not be interpreted as an idealization of the recent past; nor should one assume that in those years education was a channel of social mobility that was equally accessible to all, or that poverty and precarious jobs were unknown to young people from low-income sectors. Instead it means that both institutions were recognized in society as key mechanisms of mobility and social integration. This recognition might have been expressed in terms of experiences or merely aspirations; but, one way or another, it became the fundamental pillar of personal and social life in all cases.

The initial question I pose on this subject is simple: do young people from low-income sectors, and

particularly those living in the most disadvantaged and vulnerable conditions, still see school and work as mechanisms of social mobility and paths to integration? The full answer is not merely yes or no, for the question invites a far-reaching exploration of the crisis of meaning from which these institutions are suffering, and of their current ability to construct social subjectivities and the consequences that may arise therefrom. This is not a spontaneous social mutation, but the outcome of an intensive social fragmentation process. Nor does it involve new subjective constructions that are capricious and post-modern in meaning; instead it is a crisis whose outcome produces institutions that are unable to engage individuals and construct subjectivities.

II

The experiences and meaning of school

Latin America has made sustained progress in terms of access to education and educational attainment over the last two decades. The proportion of children and young people attending school has risen significantly at all levels — particularly primary, where universal access has been achieved. In terms of attainment, practically all young people today complete primary school, and many of them go on to complete secondary (see ECLAC, 2007).² Nonetheless, secondary education continues to pose major challenges, for while access has increased massively, it remains a school level of little capacity to retain students and the highest dropout rates. Regionwide even today, over half of young people between 20 and 24 years of age fail to complete the 12 years of education — the minimum level of schooling which, at the end of the 1990s, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) considered necessary to avoid poverty. In the case of Argentina, a recent report

The analysis and arguments presented below draw on various information sources, the most important being the results of my own research on youth and vulnerable transitions in Mexico and Argentina, based on intensive qualitative work with disadvantaged youth.¹ Nonetheless, an attempt has also been made to systemize the numerous references found among studies on youth and other issues in various Latin American countries, which were consistent with my own findings and hypotheses. There is no doubt that our region is extremely diverse, and generalizations nearly always ignore important specific features. Accordingly, the analysis is focused on Mexico, while remarks on other countries are used to strengthen an argument that might reflect common regional trends.

sponsored by the World Bank actually states that young people born between 1975 and 1980 were more likely to complete secondary school than those born 10 years later, between 1986 and 1990 (Giovagnoli and Verter, 2008).

This difference in educational attainment is not unrelated to inequality in the social structure. In all of the region's countries, the percentage of young people that enter and complete secondary education falls sharply with the income level and educational climate in their homes of origin. Mexico is a paradigm case: in 2002, 63.2% of 20-24 year-olds from families in the highest income quintile had completed secondary school, compared to just 12.0% among those in the poorest quintile. Even more worrying are that inequality persists, despite progress in expanding the educational system, and the education gap between the wealthiest and poorest sectors has been widening. In Mexico, the difference between those two income quintiles in terms of the proportion of 20-24 year-olds completing secondary school not only failed to narrow in 1989-2003 but actually tended to widen (the ratio grew from 5.1 to 5.3). In Argentina, the report mentioned above states that schooling among the three wealthiest quintiles increased by between 1 and 1.2 years in the last decade, whereas the two poorest quintiles only gained between 0.7 and 0.8 years of schooling. As a result, the education gap continued to grow (Giovagnoli and Verter, 2008). In Latin America

¹ Both pieces of research combined quantitative analysis with intensive fieldwork. The study on Argentina was based on the Permanent Household Survey (EPH) and 60 semi-structured interviews with young people of between 15 and 29 years of age in two areas of Greater Buenos Aires (Lanús and Florencio Varela). The research in Mexico drew on the National Youth Survey (2000 and 2005) and a total of 38 semi-structured interviews with young people of the same age held in several low-income boroughs of Mexico City (Iztapalapa, Nezahualcoyotl and Valle de Chalco).

² Hereinafter the term "secondary" will be used to mean 12 years of formal schooling.

as a whole, the ratio between the percentages of 15-19 year-old students from the first and fifth per-capita income quintiles who were behind their school age-group increased from 2.5 to 3.8 between 1990 and 2006 (ECLAC/OIJ, 2008).

One needs to ask, therefore, what factors explain why over half of all young people today still fail to complete secondary school, despite all the efforts made. As most of them come from the poorest households and those with the poorest educational climate, the question can be specifically targeted on youth living in situations of greatest social disadvantage. Why does secondary school have such little power to retain them? In the terms in which the question has been posed, part of the answer seems almost inevitable and obvious: the economic needs of their families would be one reason why they drop out of school. This factor helps to explain the phenomenon and represents one of the main obstacles to spreading and increasing educational attainment among this sector of the population. Nonetheless, others also need to be considered, such as the “meaning” of school and the importance of formal education in the expectations held by low-income youth. A number of studies have started to recognize a possible central role for both factors. For example, a short report by the Information System on Educational Trends in Latin America (SITEAL, 2007, p. 4) ends by asking whether young people interrupt their education because they need to go out to work, or whether they move into the world of employment because they perceive that school does not meet their expectations, or simply excludes them. Along the same lines, based on an analysis of the National Youth Survey for 2005 in Mexico, Reguillo (2007, p. 81) states that, even taking account of structural difficulties, school is less and less able to retain young people.

Recent research on vulnerable youth in outlying areas of Mexico City showed that the experiences and meaning of school are permeated by a state of mind best described as boredom. Adolescent tedium, especially in relation to school, may seem self-evident and can easily be inferred from daily interaction with young people in this age group. But, as Cristina Corea points out in *Pedagogía del aburrido*, it can also be interpreted as a pointing finger, as a sign, among others, that some experiences are now empty of meaning (Corea and Lewkowicz, 2008). In other words, the boredom that permeates the school experience of the most disadvantaged young people can help explain the meaning that school has acquired for this population group.

Boredom seems to be a state of mind that is typically significant (in) and almost exclusive to the secondary school level, which, in practice is the key school dropout period. Moreover, boredom is not something these young people associate with a specific activity—it is not that studying, reading, doing homework, sitting in classrooms or any other school occupation is boring—but an attribute they associate with school as an institution. As can be seen in the following quotes from two young people who dropped out of school at 14 years of age, after starting secondary, the boredom of school relates to a loss of interest in studying.

Why did you start to have a few more problems? Yes, a few more problems. *Why?* Well, I got a more bored with school, my classmates and “desastre”, I wasn’t much interested in studying, but I enjoyed causing trouble, to relieve the boredom (Martín, 18 years, Valle de Chalco, México).

You were telling me then that the main reason for abandoning your studies was economic...? Well, not the main reason no, because... studying didn’t interest me much, so I didn’t make any effort. I wasn’t motivated and I also had many problems at school. *What type of problems?* Well I didn’t do my homework, so my marks dropped a lot, I started to behave very badly... (Rubén, 22 years, Iztapalapa, México).

Underlying the boredom are feelings such as impatience, extreme apathy, waste of time or aimless existence. In other words, it is not an activity that is boring, but a purpose that is not valued that somehow justifies the boredom. The sense of tedium projected by these young people relates mainly, although by no means exclusively, to the meaningless of doing and being (in school). In the first few pages of *Chicos en banda. Los caminos de la subjetividad en el declive de las instituciones*, the authors question the extent to which attending school means coming out changed, in other words whether it is a place that actually leaves a mark on its pupils (Duschatzky and Corea, 2002). The boredom expressed by the young people when interviewed can be interpreted as an answer to this question, since it reveals their perception that school is incapable of generating any change, or of leaving any mark on its pupils’ development.

This crisis of meaning at secondary school level has also been noted in other studies undertaken in

different national contexts, with individual variants and features. A recent report on vulnerable youth in Peru states that many young people have lost interest in studying or working, so the expectations deposited in both institutions are very low and lead to a state of uncertainty and inactivity characterized by not knowing what to do (Benavides, 2008). Something similar seems to happen among young people from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. An analysis of the changes that have occurred in these poor Brazilian neighbourhoods over the last 30 years shows that, after witnessing underemployment and unemployment among friends and older brothers and sisters who stayed longer in school, [these young people] conclude that there is no point in education (Perlman, 2006, p. 170). In my own research on at-risk youth in Argentina at the start of this decade, I also found a similar crisis of meaning, compounded by a lack of capacity to engage on the part of the school and other stakeholders. At that time I wrote: "What we find in young people suffering from institutional exclusion is precisely that these possible links [with the school] are all absent. There is no expectation of entering the next (university) level; either there is no commitment with parents, or else the latter have no influence on young people's decisions; they do not perceive any potential achievement since this seems a very distant and uncertain goal, and in many cases they sense that school also has no interest in keeping them" (Saraví, 2006, p. 111).

Boredom at school generally seems to be linked to what young people from low-income sectors tend to call "*desastre*" in Mexico or "*bardo*" in Argentina. Although "*desastre*" is a form of entertainment that involves breaking or transgressing certain established rules, essentially there is a clear link with boredom. Rather than opposites, these are two ways of manifesting the same state of mind: while boredom expresses meaninglessness through passivity, "*desastre*" does it through action, by doing. Among other things, it involves challenging the authority of teachers, cutting class, not submitting homework, having fun and going out with friends when they should be in school. As Martín indicated in the interview quoted above, "*desastre*" seems to be a mechanism for relieving the boredom caused by the meaninglessness of school. The latter loses its significant and "performative" capacity.

No, I used to try, but then in the third year (secondary) I went off the rails, because we were causing trouble. *In what way?* In the first and second year I was more interested in things,

but not in third year no, then I quit classes... (Mariana, 16 years, Valle de Chalco).

Then I stopped studying because they expelled me. Well, the first time they expelled me, or the second really... I asked my mother to give me a chance, to let me enter secondary school again. She said, "Yes, why not, I support you", but from the start I did it with the idea that I was only going to fool about cause trouble. I only lasted a few months and then left, but it was not because... it was because I didn't want to go anymore, nothing else, more than anything I didn't like going to school. *You didn't like it?* I liked it, but I liked doing what I wanted (Alex, 18 years, Iztapalapa).

Why did you leave? The thing is... like all young people who find school hard and get into trouble. *What do you mean get into trouble?* When I was more... involved in studying, there were always friends who would say "come on, let's go out..." in other words a bad influence. And once you start to fool about and cause trouble, you get to enjoy it... So I got hooked on it. I was no longer going to school, I was out causing trouble, and then... That's why I say I got into trouble, because everything went wrong (Javier, 20 years, Valle de Chalco).

This set of practices has a lot in common with what Paul Willis defined as the counter-school culture of British working-class youth in his classic *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*. He argued that beyond the form and specifics of the practice, there is a deep-rooted scepticism of the value of the qualifications that could be obtained in relation to the sacrifices needed to obtain them: a sacrifice not simply in terms of lost time, but in the quality of activities, commitments, and independence. The sacrifice could even be exorbitant, yet possibly ultimately meaningless (Willis, 1977, p. 126). Boredom and "*desastre*" are expressions of secondary school's superficial role in the perceptions of these young people in terms of their life, or at least, their scepticism in relation to it. The qualifications obtained will not significantly change their job opportunities, and they do not seem necessary for the type of jobs they are likely to get.

Do you really believe that school or studying are important? Yes of course. Of course it's

important, but, as I say, not many people take it that way, or expect to get a good job; and that's a fact. Once I was talking to a friend who is a master bricklayer, and he asked me: "Why are you studying?" and I replied: "I want to make a lot of money without much effort". And he said: "Well I didn't study and... I supervise works, I make sure they are done well and I'm earning a good wage without doing anything." And then you start to think "That's true, you're making a big effort to get ahead while others have success by only knowing how to fix a wall" (Emilio, 17 years, Valle de Chalco).

The substantial difference compared to the argument put forward by Willis is that in England at that time this process helped to reproduce a working class that these young people would join and thus start to develop a job career from an early age. As will be seen in the next section, conditions in the labour market today are very different, and work itself is facing its own crisis. The same process today no longer leads to a collective homogeneous and predictable category, but to an uncertain multiple destination. As Reguillo points out:

Concern —as a constant— about lack of work, reflects a major mismatch between young people's imaginations, the dominant social expectations (integration through work) and the reality perceived by youth —a reality in which school is no longer the traditional trampoline to productive integration; and, although, it still has an aura as a place of knowledge, in the youth perception such notions seem unconnected with the possibility of social mobility (Reguillo, 2007, p. 105).

The boredom that permeates the experiences and meaning of secondary school is not a state of mind that is exclusive to the most disadvantaged young people; nor is it proposed as the main cause of school dropout. As noted above, it is a sign which, in conjunction with others, reveals the changes that have taken place in the meaning attributed to school. Nonetheless, this combination can also have cumulative effects that help explain why school is unable to attract or retain some young people from the most vulnerable sectors.

The importance attached to school in the home is another sign of those changes, although it could either be something that increases the meaninglessness of secondary school or, in contrast, a factor of resilience in

the face of apathy or doubt among young people. The expectations placed in education, emotional support and even pressure to continue studying from the family or a "significant other" can become crucial, beyond the retention capacity of school as an institution. For middle- and higher-income youth, completing secondary school is a firmly established and undisputed premise of the family order. For many low-income families, it is a key challenge involving major efforts and expectations. In both cases, this situation can help combat doubts and uncertainty among the young people themselves. Schoon and Bynner (2003, p. 24) have highlighted the importance of parental interest and commitment for school performance, by stating that one of the factors linked to positive adaptation of students is a stable family environment, in which parents provide support and show interest in their children's studies, and want them to continue beyond the basic education level. When Rubén was asked about his lack of motivation for staying on at school, he spontaneously mentioned the lack of interest shown by his parents.

I don't know; actually I think it also relates to communication with parents, doesn't it? If parents don't communicate very well with you and are not backing you, supporting you and everything... That's what I felt... that I never had support from a mother who would say "Hey, let me see what you're doing, what mark did you get?, or I'll help with your material", or something like that. No. *How did you feel?* Well... You feel very much on your own, you get despondent, don't you? You say "No matter how hard I try they don't support me" (Rubén, 22 years, Iztapalapa, México).

Many comments like this one, very similar ones in fact, were made by young people interviewed early in this decade in Argentina (see Saraví, 2002), all of whom claimed that their own lack of interest in school was reinforced by the lack of commitment and support they perceived from their parents. The importance of school in family members' concerns, expectations and interests is a key factor for remaining in the school system. Statistical data confirm and afford greater reliability to the qualitative findings that direct conversations with vulnerable young people capture in full. For example, in Argentina, the likelihood of starting secondary education was 93% among young people who felt their parents were highly involved in their education, but only 78% among those who did not perceive the same interest. The contrast is even

greater in terms of completing secondary, which is much more likely among young people who felt supported by their families (73%) than those who did not (16%) (Giovagnoli and Verner, 2008). In Mexico, data from the National Youth Survey (ENJ) 2000 reveal a similar relationship between staying at school and the degree of communication young people have with their parents regarding school — a variable that indirectly indicates parents’ interest in their children’s studies. Even when controlling for the educational climate in the family of origin, the percentage of children whose school performance is poor tends to rise when school is talked about less. As figure 1 shows, in families of poor educational climate, the proportion of young people not subject to educational deficit³ rises from

18%, when there is little conversation about their studies with their mother, to 40% when there is a lot; whereas in households of better educational climate the increase is from 40% to 70%.

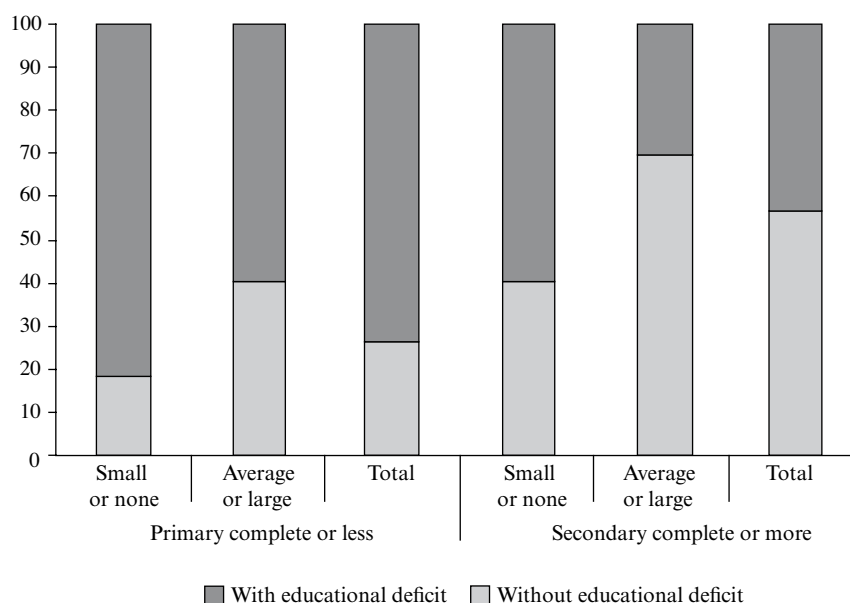
School is not only losing its central place in many families, but its value (or usefulness) is actually starting to be questioned in some social settings. Education as a channel for mobility and social integration faces competition from alternative routes that have gained recognition and acceptance, given the few expectations placed in school. In fact, work is initially one of these competitors still today.⁴

³ “Educational deficit” is defined, among young people who have already abandoned school, as not having completed 12 years of education; and, among those who continue studying, as being behind their school age group.

⁴ Another competitor for school in the case of young women is an early start to family-making, either through marriage, motherhood, or both. This article does not analyse family as a potential “competitor” of school, since its purpose is to demonstrate a process of successive “disillusionments” that occur between school and work.

FIGURE 1

Mexico (urban areas): young people of 25-29 years of age, without and with education deficit, according to the schooling of the mother and degree of communication with the mother on studies.
(Percentages)



Source: prepared by the author on the basis of the National Youth Survey, 2000.
Note: Urban areas with at least 15,000 inhabitants.

So which was more important for you: studying or working? I've always preferred working. Why? Because that way I feel you're more... how can I put it? You earn your own money, you buy the things that you most need, you earn more to help in your home. In fact, I've always preferred earning money than studying, since I was a little girl, I've always liked doing other things better than studying. Because I was never a very good student, I never gained recognition for that (Karla, 20 years, Valle de Chalco, México).

As figure 2 shows, “lack of resources” is one of the most important motives justifying school dropout among young people who failed to complete the 12 years of education. Nonetheless, equally relevant are a loss of interest in continuing to study (22.7%) and the need to work (22.9%) —aspects which to some extent are complementary, as can be inferred from the interview with Karla above. Among young men, both of these factors are even more important than

lack of resources (26.7% and 30.5%, respectively, compared to 21.0%).⁵

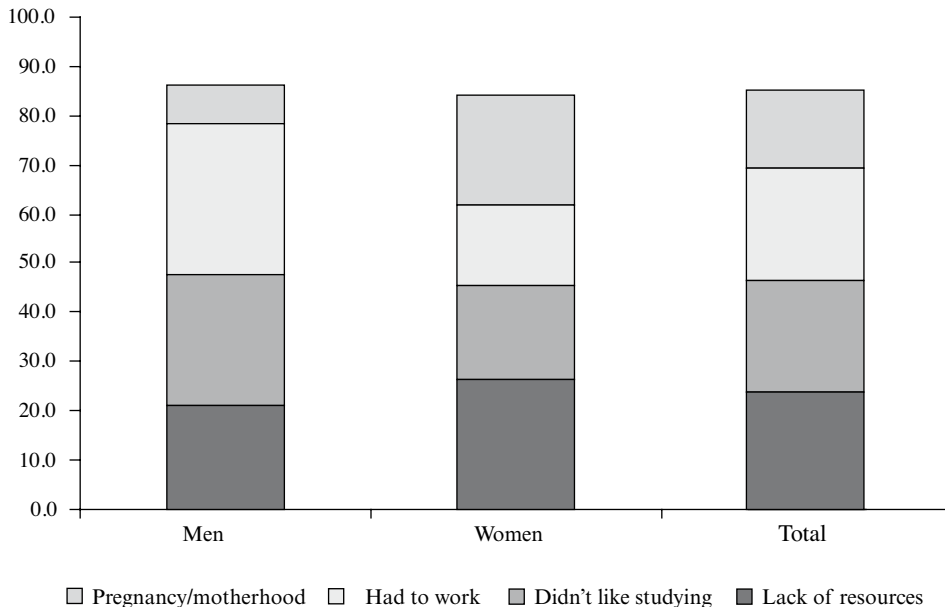
These figures suggest a gradual loss of interest in education, but also an increasingly high valuation of work. The importance of the latter stems basically from its capacity to give access to consumption and to satisfy economic needs — family and personal ones, as well as symbolic and identity needs, which are also important in the process of becoming an adult. But just as the meaning of work has become confined to the domain of consumption, the meaning of school has also been pared down, and as result it has become comparable to work.

The meaning attributed to post-primary education relates almost exclusively to its potential to generate

⁵ A recent survey in Argentina produced similar results; 52% of young people who dropped out of school cited work as the main reason for their decision, whereas 16% attributed it to low academic performance and 8% to pregnancy (Giovagnoli and Verter, 2008).

FIGURE 2

Mexico (urban areas): reasons for school dropout among young people of 20-24 years of age with educational deficit
(Percentages)



Source: prepared by the author on the basis of the National Youth Survey, 2000.

Note: Urban areas with at least 15,000 inhabitants.

higher income in the future. In other words, both secondary and other education levels are evaluated essentially in terms of what they add to income-generating capacity—whether having better “academic credentials” will translate into greater economic reward. This limited perception of school, dominated by a market-centred approach, raises new dilemmas by making it comparable and commensurable with work. Firstly, the long-term reward promised by school comes into conflict with the immediate income—no matter how small—offered by work, even if this is informal and precarious. This is not an insignificant point, because no matter how small the income, what is at stake when opting to stay in school is not only a several-year investment of resources and effort, but also the need to cope throughout that time with an undefined identity, or one that is questioned in some social settings, namely being a student.

Secondly, the problem does not amount simply to waiting for a few years to harvest the fruits of a higher educational level, for it is a road strewn with uncertainties. As mentioned by several of the young people interviewed, the various economic, family and personal factors mean there is no certainty that they will be able to complete such a long training process. For that reason, fear of failing in mid-course fuels a socially supported tendency to think that it is best not to start the course at all. “Losing time” or “wasting money” are expressions I have frequently encountered in direct relation to this tension.

Thirdly, if a young person still opts for school despite these doubts, the final insult is that nowadays it is not clear that a higher level of education effectively

guarantees the possibility of obtaining more and better income. As Janice Perlman (2006, p. 176) argues, “More years of schooling, often seen as the panacea by policy makers, has not significantly improved access to employment in a changing economy.” This is not only perceived and pondered by young people themselves, but also by a family and community environment that can shift preferences in one direction or the other. As noted by Schoon and Bynner (2003, p. 25), owing to the different opportunities and constraints faced by young people from more or less privileged families, they and their parents make different calculations of the potential costs and benefits of choosing between the various educational strategies. The experience of family members, friends or acquaintances is a powerful argument that leads to the virtues of school being questioned if only valued for its economic potential. According to the latest National Youth Survey held in Mexico in 2005, only 38% of young people stated that education served to earn more money, while 44% claimed it had enabled them to obtain work. Another way of reading these data is to say that about 60% of the young people interviewed did not perceive that additional schooling led to higher incomes or finding a job. These figures, in themselves worrying, are even more critical in the lower economic strata, where only 21% and 25% of young people, respectively, saw education as leading to better income and job prospects. Thus, while consumption is increasingly pre-eminent as a value and pillar of individual and social life, and even a key factor for integration-exclusion, at the same time, young people—in particular the most deprived—do not see school as useful in this regard.

III

The experiences and meaning of work

The previous section noted that the two key reasons cited by young people for dropping out of school are “the need to work” and “lack of interest in continuing to study”. In Mexico, one in every four 15-19 year-olds who stopped studying said they did so because of the need to work; and in Argentina half of all dropouts cited that reason. What needs are satisfied by work? What does it provide young people in their transition to adulthood? What factors promote it and favour it?

To say that the need to work is directly related to income may seem self-evident. While apparently trivial, however, it raises a number of issues that are worth examining in greater detail. The first is that by giving priority to income and money, other aspects often associated with work are neglected. “Vocation” or the notion of a “calling” to undertake a given activity, does not form part of the image held by the young people interviewed. Also apparently absent is the idea of work relating to a craft, occupation, or

association to belong to, as it traditionally represented for the “working class”, and as a way of embarking on a job career. Work is not a source of identity in any of those aspects. The first element, therefore, is that in low-income sectors, the meaning of work has shifted from the sphere of production to the domain of consumption.

Was that the only reason for leaving school? No, although I also liked the money. Ah!, why? Had you been working before? Yes I was working before, I worked and studied. Then, when I stopped studying I started to work during the day and I earned more; then I tried to return to studying, but I no longer earned the same amount, I'd got used to the money. Yes, then I started to earn more, and I started to see life differently, so you tend to learn more and feel more important when you start to earn more (Francisco, 18 years, Valle de Chalco, México).

Work is no longer an end in itself, but a means; its value stems from its status as a means to achieve other ends. In this sense it is closer to consumption than to production, where work becomes relevant both economically and symbolically. Firstly, the contribution to the family income made by children produces significant direct economic effects, but also has identity repercussions by triggering a realignment of authority roles within the family; and it provides the chance to gain autonomy, independence and individuality. Secondly, earning money is also valued, since it makes it possible to satisfy needs —not only family needs but also personal ones that pertain to being young, which are also clearly gender-specific (Pérez Islas and Arteaga, 2001). In other words, access to consumption through work has significant repercussions for the identity-building that takes place during the transition to adulthood.

It is not through production, but through consumption that the adjustment of roles, spaces of autonomy and independence, and identity recognition among peers and others takes place. Nonetheless, work involves a cruel trap for large swathes of young people, particularly those who are in situations of greatest disadvantage and vulnerability. The expectations they place in work quickly start to dissipate in the early years of work experience, since their youth means that the conditions of early jobs tend to be uniform: in the absence of major intra-cohort differences or contrasts, precariousness pervades the entire youth labour market.

Nonetheless, as the years pass, young people in better situations tend to gravitate towards better jobs, while the most disadvantaged become trapped in a segment of the labour market that is characterized by precarious and unstable jobs and low incomes (Saraví, 2008). What for some will become a memory of the start of a job career, for others will remain a permanent feature of their work experience.

The National Youth Survey in Mexico asked young people about the characteristics they valued most in their current job, to gain a rough idea of the expectations for work held by different youth segments, and how they have evolved through time. The different answers can be classified in the following three categories: (i) aspects relating to the satisfaction of material needs; (ii) aspects relating to development of a job career; and (iii) aspects not related directly with work, but with the outside-work activities to which work gives access or encourages (see table 1).⁶

In terms of the total number of replies in each age group, the three categories maintained roughly the same ratios: just over half of young people prioritize aspects relating to the job career, about 30% value outside-work activities highest, and the rest emphasize the satisfaction of needs. Nonetheless, an analysis of the results obtained by educational status shows, firstly, that there are significant differences in the replies given by each age group, and, secondly, that these vary substantially as age increases.

Among 15-19 year-olds with no educational deficit, the percentage of replies prioritizing job-career aspects relating (46.5%) is similar to those relating to activities outside work (39.3%). Nonetheless, among adolescents of the same age group with an educational deficit, the gap between the two types of reply is substantially wider (54.2% and 29.6%, respectively). In other words, most young people who fall behind their age-group at school at an early age, or who have already dropped out of school, seem to have expectations concerning the possibilities work provides for pursuing a job career, whereas the preferences of those who continue their studies are focused on factors outside work.

⁶ The replies in each of the three categories were as follows: (i) aspects relating to the satisfaction of material needs: “wage or salary”; (ii) aspects relating to a job career: “that you learn”, “that you gain experience”, “that you can move up”, “that you do what you like”, “that you are applying what you studied”; and (iii) aspects relating to activities outside work: “that there is a good environment”, “that you have time to study”, “that you have time to be with your family”.

TABLE 1

Mexico (urban areas): expectations from work, according to degree of education deficiency and age group
(Percentages)

	Educational deficit		Total
	Without	With	
Age group: 15 to 19 years			
Aspects relating to satisfaction of material needs	11.0	12.9	12.2
Aspects relating to job career	46.5	54.2	51.3
Aspects relating to activities outside work	39.3	29.6	33.2
Other aspects	3.2	3.3	3.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Age group: 20 to 24 years			
Aspects relating to satisfaction of material needs	11.0	15.1	13.7
Aspects relating to job career	60.1	48.0	52.3
Aspects relating to activities outside work	25.5	33.8	30.7
Other aspects	3.4	3.1	3.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Age group: 25 to 29 years			
Aspects relating to satisfaction of material needs	8.4	16.4	13.3
Aspects relating to job career	66.1	47.1	54.3
Aspects relating to activities outside work	18.9	30.9	26.4
Other aspects	6.6	5.6	6.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Source: prepared by the author on the basis of the National Youth Survey 2000.

Note: Urban areas with at least 15,000 inhabitants.

Nonetheless, these preferences change substantially as age increases. In the 20-24 year age bracket, and even more so in the next group, the categories that generate the largest percentage of replies among young people with and without education deficits are reversed. While a clear majority of 20-24 year-olds with higher levels of education (60.1%) value job-career aspects, the trend is even clearer in the 25-29 age group, where two out of every three young people with no educational deficit (66.1%) focus their expectations on this aspect of work. In contrast, as age, and hence labour-market experience, increase, the job career starts to lose weight in the expectations of young people with less education, who increasingly rank aspects outside work (33.8% and 30.9% in the 20-24 and 25-29 year age groups, respectively), and income (15.1% and 16.4%).

Here again, the aspect that older youth most like about their work differs significantly according to educational status, which suggests that this will have a different degree of centrality in their future life. Furthermore, as time passes, the preferences indicated

by each group of young people reverse. Those with a greater continuity and higher level of education soon come to value the opportunities their work can provide to engage in outside activities, such as time to study. As they grow older, and (as predicted) they start to complete their studies, they rank the chance to develop a job career ahead of outside-work factors. In contrast, the perceptions and expectations placed in work by young people with an education deficit follow the reverse pattern: job career gradually loses its centrality, perhaps as a result of rapid disillusionment, and instead they start value the wage and various extra-work aspects such as the working environment or to be able to spend time with the family.

The most disadvantaged young people move rapidly from enthusiasm to disenchantment, as reflected through a parallel shift of expectations placed in work. Following their initial work experiences, they start to perceive the precariousness of their job and a lack of better opportunities. It is not that they were unaware of that at the outset; but a situation that seemed temporary then is now seen as a long-term

sentence. They soon come to recognize a truncated job career stuck in precariousness as an inevitable future; and they slump from enthusiasm to disenchantment. Expectations shift away from work itself, which becomes almost a necessary evil, and they start to value other aspects related to it.

The young people interviewed repeatedly mentioned that their work offered them no possibilities for “growing”, “developing”, or “progressing”, which causes them to change jobs and seek new opportunities, where they again face the same frustration. Many others describe this job experience in terms of “boredom”. As in the case of school, boredom is now expressed in terms of the loss of meaning of work.

So why did you chop and change jobs? Because I didn't know what I wanted, in other words I wasn't aware, or not fully aware. I was bored, and simply (said) “I don't want to know anything anymore” (Marcos, 27 years, Nezahualcoyotl, México).

Work becomes meaningless; it ceases to engage people and becomes just a necessary evil. It is therefore logical to predict that job-career aspects will initially take precedence in the valuation made by low-income youth, but as these young people gain experience their expectations will shift towards activities outside work. High rates of job turnover, or more specifically continual job changes, reflect these sensations and perceptions. In a recent article on the new challenges facing labour market entry by young people in Latin America, Weller (2007, p. 73) reaches the same conclusions. The author refers to the job trap as one of the main tensions facing young people today, and poses it the following terms.

“Young people place a high value on work as such, but their experience with actual jobs tends to be frustrating. *While there is a growing functional perception of work as primarily a source of income (and one that in some cases has to compete with others offering higher returns for less effort)*, for many young people it is still the cornerstone for the development of their personal identity, not least because of the new social contacts they forge in the workplace. *Often, however, the initial experience of work does not live up to expectations, with many young people reporting low earnings, few opportunities to acquire skills and know-how, threats of dismissal, ill-treatment, sexual harassment or unpleasant personal relationships; in short, conditions that do not help them fully realize the potential contribution work can make to their individual and social development”* (italics added).

In his article, Weller mentions two key aspects: one has already been referred to, and the other will be the topic of the next section. The first is the “functional perception” of employment, in other words, as argued in the foregoing paragraphs, that the expectations deposited in work shift towards the sphere of consumption, which leads to frustration. The second aspect is that this shift in the meaning of work and its reduction to an exclusively instrumental nature, allows alternative or competing paths to emerge, particularly among the most disadvantaged youth segments. It is the fact that alternatives have emerged, and particularly the situations in which young people have to face them, that reveals the crisis of work and school as key institutions in this stage of the life cycle.

IV

Alternatives in the face of institutions in crisis

The crisis of meaning affecting both institutions has led to the emergence of new alternatives that stand alongside school and work and are starting to act as spaces of integration and meaning. The alternatives available to disadvantaged youth are not exhausted in the labour market; just as work seemed initially to be an alternative to the meaninglessness of school,

today alternatives to the meaninglessness of work are also emerging, such as migration, evasion and criminality — all of which are forms of a common situation of exclusion.

For young people from Mexico and Central America in particular, migration to the United States offers a chance to achieve the consumption

opportunities and social mobility that were originally expected from work. Various studies have revealed a revival of migratory flows. Data for 1997 show that 17.5% of United States residents who were born in a Latin American or Caribbean country were 15-24 year-olds. The proportion of those born in Mexico was even higher, representing 1/5 (20.3%) of all migrants of Mexican origin (CELADE, 2000). This same trend is reported by Canudas (2004), who shows that the likelihood of Mexicans migrating to the United States is significantly higher during adolescence and early youth, tending to peak around 18 years of age among men and between 16 and 26 among women. This is clear from the most recent data, which show a substantial proportion of youth among people who decide to migrate: every year about 400,000 migrants leave Mexico, of whom that just over half (225,000) are young people (García Alonso, 2006).

Well my Dad said to me “Look, you’re doing no good here, find something to do over there even if it’s only washing cars. See what you can do over there” [...] And afterwards there was a time when I wanted, I wanted to consume the world. *Why did you go to... there?* Because I wanted to have everything, I wanted a car, I wanted a house, so that was my idea. I wanted that immediately, I badly wanted to have a car and the second thing was the house [...] *Did you have experience, or knowledge of United States, people who were already there?* Yes, for example my uncle was there but... well he came back from there and we chatted and you form illusions, don’t you? *Oh yes! What attracted your attention?* Well, the houses, I suppose? *Here?* No, in the State of Puebla, I mean they come back and build their own homes. So, I said “if they can do it why can’t I?” Then to be able to go, you know, I got some money together and asked my father for a bit; and yes, he gave it to me, but said “you must pay me back later”. *How old were you when you left?* 19 (Marcos, 27 years, Nezahualcoyotl, México).

Why did you go to the United States? Well, one reason was that I had relatives over there, and they came back wearing great clothes, many things like that, you know what I mean? Things that probably many people (didn’t have), especially people in the neighbourhood who hadn’t gone... So I wanted to experiment, “to try it out”, like an adventurer. In other words,

despite the fact that my mother was no longer living, I said “well, what the hell?” like “What am I doing here”, you see? “I’ll see if I can get ahead over there.” My father said to me “Well you know what you want; if you want to go I’ll help you”, so I went to the United States. *How old were you?* I was... 14, nearly 15 (Lucas, 28 years, Nezahualcoyotl, México).

These cases show clearly that migration is becoming a depository for expectations that were initially placed in work until experience in this domain proved unrealistic. In Mexico, it is estimated that of every 10 young people who join the labour market at 18, only four find a formal job, another three enter the informal economy, and the rest attempt to cross illegally into the United States (García Alonso, 2006). Marcos and Lucas belong to this latter contingent, and, as can be inferred from their comments, consumption again seems one of the most important motivations for migration, since it makes it possible to gain peer recognition (among both sexes), gain independence and autonomy, obtain goods and even progress and “get ahead”. It is now migration that makes it possible, through consumption, to satisfy the same old economic and symbolic expectations; in reality, this means continuing to put your faith in work, but outside the country’s borders. As the foregoing comments make clear, migration is also a channel that not only enjoys social recognition and acceptance, but is also encouraged in certain community and family settings.

As noted by ECLAC, international migration, particularly to the United States, is dominated by young potentially vulnerable migrants who display disadvantaged conditions in terms of educational achievement and labour market participation, and a likely rapid transition to adult life” (ECLAC/OIJ, 2004, p. 66). Along the same lines, Reguillo (2001, p. 13) states that apart from being a sign of the times, the migratory movement is directly linked to the growing exclusion experienced (and suffered) by millions of young people on the continent. Interviews consistently revealed an emerging pattern of migration that coincides with this framework of vulnerability among young migrants: a family context that encourages young people to leave home; early school dropout, precarious labour-market entry and an uncertain future; a migratory project that is not clearly defined or planned, largely motivated by desires for consumption, a sense of adventure, and the pursuit of peer recognition in the community of origin.

Nonetheless, migration is not the only response to the unfulfilled promises of school and work; there are others which are also directed towards boundaries — not geographic borders, but the boundaries of social integration. In addition to young migrants who as such “are no longer there”, there is a very large proportion of young people who are also not there, even though they have not abandoned their countries of origin. As indicated in SITEAL (2008), it is not exclusively the labour market that has absorbed adolescents that school was unable to attract or retain, or simply expelled; a varying but substantial proportion of adolescents are outside both school and work, which thus aggravates their social vulnerability. This is a youth sector whose links with institutional affiliations are seriously weakened, for whom the meaningless of

the main traditional channels of social integration has cast them virtually adrift.

Table 2 shows that this is not a negligible group. In most of the countries of the region, considering “urban areas” only,⁷ roughly 10% of adolescents between 15 and 17 years of age are not studying, but are also economically inactive. In other words, apart from not working, they are also not looking for a job. The proportion of young people in this situation of institutional disaffiliation is growing

⁷ Based on countries that have national data, it can be seen that the percentage of young people in this situation is tending to increase, considering the country as a whole and not just urban areas. The increase is generally less in the Southern Cone countries, but very significant in Central American countries.

TABLE 2

Latin America (selected countries): young people who are not studying and are economically inactive, by sex, income and educational climate of the home, 2006
(Percentages, urban areas)

Country	Age	Total	Sex		Household incomes		Educational climate	
			Men	Women	Deciles 1-3	Deciles 7-10	Low	High
Argentina	15-17	8.2	7.0	9.4	10.9	2.2	20.2	1.5
	18-24	15.1	7.3	22.2	23.2	4.7	31.5	5.6
Brazil	15-17	7.3	5.3	9.2	10.5	2.5	11.0	1.7
	18-24	14.1	7.1	20.9	23.6	6.3	21.3	5.2
Colombia	15-17	11.4	9.8	12.9	15.7	5.0	18.1	3.3
	18-24	13.2	6.6	18.6	19.2	6.0	21.3	4.9
Chile	15-17	5.8	4.5	7.1	8.4	1.7	13.4	2.0
	18-24	16.3	9.1	23.6	25.6	9.5	32.3	10.8
Ecuador	15-17	6.6	3.8	9.5	10.5	3.0	11.5	2.4
	18-24	13.9	3.4	24.4	22.9	7.4	23.6	6.7
El Salvador	15-17	13.7	7.7	19.7	19.7	5.3	20.0	5.6
	18-24	22.3	11.3	31.2	33.6	12.9	29.9	12.5
Guatemala	15-17	11.2	4.6	17.2	14.1	8.5	14.7	1.4
	18-24	19.1	3.6	32.7	24.4	13.9	22.3	6.8
Honduras	15-17	12.8	9.9	15.3	18.2	6.1	18.8	5.6
	18-24	17.4	5.9	26.9	27.5	9.2	26.1	5.7
Mexico	15-17	11.7	5.4	18.8	18.5	6.8	18.1	3.9
	18-24	17.7	3.1	31.2	29.0	9.5	26.5	9.2
Panama	15-17	6.8	6.9	6.7	10.8	1.8	20.6	1.8
	18-24	13.9	3.4	23.2	25.0	4.4	31.2	6.0
Paraguay	15-17	7.2	3.6	10.6	12.3	1.3	13.1	2.4
	18-24	13.2	5.7	19.6	15.9	7.1	21.3	12.8
Uruguay	15-17	12.3	11.5	13.2	18.5	2.7	25.8	2.2
	18-24	11.1	5.1	17.0	18.6	3.7	25.8	2.3

Source: prepared by the author on the basis of tabulations of the Information System on Educational Trends in Latin America (SITEAL). Note: Household incomes indicate the position in the household per-capita income distribution; the educational climate of the home refers to the average number of years of schooling among family members over 18 years of age (low = less than six years, medium = 6-12 years, high = more than 12 years).

substantially in the 18-24 year-old age group; and the percentages tend to be higher among women, owing to an early introduction to domestic chores (see note 4). Nonetheless, this does not diminish the seriousness of the problem; whether in the private space of a home or in the public domain of the street, conditions of exclusion can be as dramatic for men as for women.

Here again, as in the case of migration, although now in a much more accentuated way, young people suffering from institutional disaffiliation tend to display a series of disadvantages that aggravate their condition, not only in terms of vulnerability but also in terms of exclusion. In all of the countries analysed, without exception, the percentage of young people in this situation from the poorest households greatly exceeds those whose families are better placed in the income distribution. In Argentina, the proportion is 11% compared to 2.2%; in Chile, 8.4% compared to 1.7%; in Mexico, 18.5% and 6.8% and in Uruguay, 18.5% and 2.7%, respectively, to mention just a few examples of the gap between the poorest and wealthiest households in terms of the proportion of adolescents who are excluded from school and work. These differences are repeated, but in a much more accentuated way, when the educational climate of the home of origin is considered (see table 2). Studies of specific countries have shown that, over the last few years, adolescents and young people outside school and work have tended to suffer from a higher concentration of other social disadvantages in terms of education, poverty, and family composition (Saraví, 2004 and 2006). A SITEAL study on Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico highlighted the same trend and concluded that the fact that increasing homogeneity of those who are socially excluded suggests that it will be more difficult to implement inclusion policies. (SITEAL, undated).

So what are you doing now... I mean with your friends, in the community? Well nothing, its true... the people in the neighbourhood... well, the young people, of my generation, are stuck in the mire of drugs... maybe some less than others, but everything is immediate with drugs. *Have they stolen?* Yes. *And the money is for that?* For that, for drugs, I mean we don't steal every day, or go out to steal every day to obtain the drugs, but there are times when... I'm not making excuses, you understand? Because stealing itself is obviously bad, but .. but no, so far, up to now we've not done that [...] *Did you go to other places to steal?* No, here in the neighbourhood. Not our own

neighbours, no, but... yes... people we knew, because whether or not they are friends we know them, for we all know each other, we grew up here together (Jesús, 18 years, Iztapalapa, México).

So is the neighbourhood unsafe? Are there many problems here? Yes!! a huge number. Kids are lost nowadays... probably because of hunger or drugs. More because of drugs, because they... People say if they don't have work they'll steal to buy brand name trainers like Adidas. And they go out to steal, they buy clothes and stuff, and three hours later steal again, but they already have clothing and everything, and they go to drugs. That's how it works. *Are your friends in that situation?* Yes. *And you, how... why aren't you in that situation?* Why don't I steal? Because I'm afraid, because if I go out and get shot... I... sometimes I feel like doing it too, going out to steal, not to buy a pair of training shoes but to feel cool, you know what I mean? To help my family more, right? *Do you think you could live better or earn more by stealing rather than going out to work?* No, because one day you'll lose, one day you'll lose, you understand? I was arrested once (Matías, 21 years, Lanús, Argentina).

In fact, social exclusion is significantly worse for young people involved in illegal activities. A situation of institutional disaffiliation usually goes hand in hand with engaging in unlawful activities and the increasing violence that characterizes the large Latin American cities, particularly their "new" exclusion enclaves (ECLAC, 1998; Perea, 2007; Rodríguez, 2004; Saraví, 2004). Given the increase crime and violence in the major cities of our region over the last 15 years, insecurity has become one of the main topics on the regional public agenda. Moreover, various studies on this subject show that young men from poor families, who are unemployed or have precarious jobs and low levels of education, are more likely to be in this type of activity than members of other social groups (see Kessler, 2007; Perea, 2007 and the collective volumes published by ERIC/IDESO/IDIES/IUDOP, 2004; Azaola, 2004; Moro, 2006).⁸ Underlying the growing participation of young people in these criminal and

⁸ As a result, a stigmatization and criminalization process has been triggered among poor youth, which represents a new disadvantage for the most vulnerable and deprived young people in our societies.

violent activities are factors such as changes in the meaning attributed to the traditional channels of social mobility; their frustration as a result of experiences in these institutions; and a new socio-cultural scenario that is heavily dominated by consumption.

In an analysis of the reconfiguration of the class structure in Latin America, Portes and Hoffman (2003) note that criminal activities have become established as one more adaptation alternative, alongside other strategies such as migration. In certain settings and activities, particularly those linked to drug trafficking, merely participating in them can be a source of recognition and social mobility, since it increases consumption opportunities. As noted by Benvenuti (2003) in the case of Rio de Janeiro—a city where poverty rates are extremely high and 36% of adolescents from the lowest socioeconomic strata neither study nor work—the income opportunities offered by drug trafficking gangs can be exceptional. Nonetheless, this is not simply a survival or adaptation strategy of the “mertonian deviance” type. As shown in previous sections, the meaning of both school and work has been profoundly devalued; both institutions have been overwhelmed by a mercantile logic that values them exclusively for their income-generating potential. Consequently, as argued by Kessler (2007) in the case of the “*pibes chorros*” (street-based juvenile thieves) in Argentina, a supplier logic is imposed that erases boundaries and equates work with crime as a way of generating income. The following quote from the study by Janice Perlman shows that a similar process is occurring among young people from the Rio de Janeiro favelas.

That sense of not believing it would make a difference and not even trying anymore was simply not present in the first generation of rural-urban migrants. Their idea was to do whatever it took to survive in the city. Another story that sticks in my mind is that of a young man who went to see about a job as bus fare collector. He began by saying that he found that type of work humiliating. It was fine for his father’s generation, but he expected to do better. When he was told what the pay would be, and he deducted his travel and lunch costs, and the cost of the clothing and shoes he would need to buy, his net earnings would be so low as to be virtually insignificant. He would end up travelling three to four hours a day and working another twelve for little or no gain. So he remained at home, “flying kites” like a little kid, his father told me. If the father complained, the son would say “Don’t pressure me or I’ll join the drug trade” (Perlman, 2006, pp. 170-71).

Youth participation in criminal and violent activities suggests a scenario of meanings in crisis and institutions that are unable to engage their subjects. In this setting, several alternatives arise which are not only equivalent to school and work, but start to display a number of virtues for the most deprived groups. As stated by Reguillo (2008, p. 221) in the case of drug trafficking in Mexico and in relation to the growing presence of young people in this activity, their empowerment in various domains of social life entails filling a vacuum, compensating for an absence and crisis of meaning.

V

Conclusions

Senses of belonging, which include a set of shared perceptions, values and wishes, are crucial to social cohesion. In that regard, education and work have played a leading role in the recent history of Latin American societies; both formed part of a collective imagery that accompanied the modernization and industrialization processes of the past century, representing social mobility channels *par excellence*. This does not mean that it happened that way always and for everyone, although experience confirmed this image in many cases. Nonetheless, it was not only experiences that underpinned the strength of these two

institutions and the meaning attributed to them, but their capacity to influence and mould subjectivities, and their capacity to construct a subject around a set of norms and values which govern social life (Duschatzky and Corea, 2006, p. 82). Those shared meanings in terms of school and work were not directly expressed in the material domain exclusively, but also in a set of values and desires that revealed and made possible a common sense of belonging.

The initial purpose of this article was to investigate the extent to which the fragmentation processes seen in other spheres of social life have now affected senses

of belonging. The analysis undertaken suggests that the meaning of education and work has changed and become weakened in the perceptions and expectations of certain segments of the population, particularly vulnerable segments of urban youth. The crisis of the two institutions stems from their inability to engage young people from social sectors that have a long history of cumulative disadvantages and today are on the verge of exclusion.

From this standpoint, the school-to-work transition, which is naturally problematic in contemporary society, involves new dilemmas. Firstly, evidence from various sources shows that a growing number of young people have started to view secondary education as incapable of improving their conditions of life—not only as a result of their own experience, but because education has become discredited as a channel of social mobility. Secondly, the labour market, in which low-income sectors traditionally placed their expectations for advancement, has been similarly discredited by widespread precarious jobs and careers that remain stuck in poverty. The meaning of school and work as mechanisms of social mobility has been undermined along with their semantic and performative capacity. At the same time, consumption is increasingly pre-eminent and becoming a social inclusion-exclusion mechanism and a badge of identity (Reguillo, 2007, p. 85), while also helping to reformulate the meaning of those institutions.

In this setting, in Mexico and elsewhere in our region, alternatives have arisen that are comparable to school and work. The crisis of meaning in the two institutions has spawned new competitors such as migration, criminal and illegal activities or evasion. García Canclini (2007) states that given the difficulties of achieving work and consumption within the

prevailing social order, young people from the most disadvantaged sectors organize themselves in parallel societies constituted on the fringes of legality. The presence of these societies, traversed by inequality and exclusion, reveals the absence of a common sense of belonging; in other words it broadens the problem of social cohesion.

In fact, in Latin America, the social fragmentation of urban spaces, social rights, domains of sociability and interaction, and even lifestyles, biographic experiences and consumption habits reveals an accentuation of inequality and in some cases the appearance of exclusion processes. This article has attempted to show that shared values are also becoming weaker in terms of key institutions such as education and work, which signifies fragile social cohesion.

From this standpoint, the dilemmas that appear on the public agenda are becoming more complex. School dropout is not only the result of a lack of resources or family support; migration is not just a matter of networks; insecurity is more than just a problem of juvenile delinquency and dysfunctional families; and exclusion does not boil down to poverty among the most vulnerable young people. Thus far, most of the responses have aimed at “managing” social fragmentation. But it is difficult to construct shared senses of belonging and institutions that are able to engage individuals around a set of socially shared norms, aspirations and values, without eliminating the profound levels of social inequality that exist today. In the meantime, societies will become increasingly fragmented and we will continue to experience the consequences of persistent processes of social exclusion, which—to paraphrase Touraine—call into question the chances of living together.

(Original: Spanish)

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