PROCESSES OF INDIVIDUALIZATION IN STUDENTS

Middle and Upper Sectors in Argentina

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Abstract:
This article summarizes the sociological discussion of modifications in the relationship between the individual and society, and the processes of disinstitutionalization that would seem to characterize society at the present time. Using the database from an empirical study, the article identifies asymmetries in the processes of individualization experienced by students in the final year of secondary school. These asymmetries are associated with various social, family and school conditions that provide the students with very different expectations, resources and skills for approaching decisions, in response to the demand to be genuine.

Key words: young people, relationship between the individual and society, family, role of the school, Argentina.

Social scientists agree that the structural changes of contemporary society are modifying relationships between the individual and society.

The characterization of this link has been a central topic of sociology. According to traditional ideas, there is a definitive separation between the individual and society; and society, which exists above and beyond individuals, molds their conduct through a socialization process that builds subjectivity. Thus subjectivity is nothing more than the incorporation of social aspects that define customs, aspirations, values and interests. From this conception, individuals are a product of society.

More modern theories of socialization state that the process includes not only an internalization of values, but also a social construction of the body. As a result, gestures, movements and postures are not natural: they are marks that express certain social positions and trajectories. Bourdieu coined the concept of *habitus* to explain this corporal learning. In the same sense, Foucault refers to the technologies of government based on certain knowledge that is aimed at generating individuals in agreement with the dominant project.

Elias (1990) advances by freeing the concepts of individual and society from the previous meanings, and placing them in a reciprocal relationship. Thus society shapes the individuality of its members, and individuals participate in the construction of society through vital acts that implement possible, viable strategies within the interdependence of the social network. According to this position, modern society exerts an incessant individualizing action that is modified permanently through negotiation; constant redefinition of the ties between the individual and society is assumed.

A series of authors believes that our times are characterized by a profound modification in the relation between the individual and society, a relation that favors individual primacy over the determinations of society. According to Beck (2000), industrial society as a system—the dynamics of economy, politics and science—has provoked its decomposition as interrelated experiences and has uprooted individuals from the security and forms of standard life. Bauman (2000) suggests that early modernity "uprooted" people to be able to "re-root" them, so that once the rigid framework of social absolutes was fragmented, the individual's task was to adopt the new regulatory frameworks of action.

The absolutes—sites of inherited belonging—were replaced by the fabricated memberships of class. In contrast with the process of individualization, in the current stage of capitalism, which Bauman calls liquid, no pre-established flowerbeds exist for us to "re-root"; what exists is a "variety of chair arrangements" of diverse sizes, styles, amounts and locations, obligating men and women to be in permanent movement and holding no promise whatsoever of "completeness". Individuals, now chronically uprooted, have no perspective of being "re-rooted" at the end of the road.

Thus modernity is undergoing a process of disinstitutionalization, which is expressed in the inefficiency of the institutions that were created during the industrial era to regulate and determine individual behaviors; i.e,. the institutions that were to serve as the existential framework for containing and marking individual trajectories.

The articulation of state, school and family formed the institutional support of the modern social order which in turn invented a work ethic and lay morals that imposed duties and obligations as demanding as the previous religious dogma. The ideal of sacrifice and faith in progress sustains the modern project. And it is exactly this network of institutions and justifications that seems to be changing.

Much has been written about the decadence of the nation state. Our interest here is not to recreate that discussion, yet for the topic at hand, mention must be made of the symbolic loss of the nation state as the articulator of order and the supplier of universal meaning for the set of actions carried out in a given society. The absence or weakness of this actor underlies the fragmented configuration of our society.

Extensive literature also analyzes the changes in the family as an institution, in terms of its composition as well as the type of links among its members. Demographics explain the new types of union and dissolution, the emerging types of family composition (cohabitation, single parenthood, merged families) and the redefinition of matrimonial trajectories (Torrado, 2003).

Women's liberation and the processes of individualization have eroded the hierarchical structure of the patriarchal family. A democratization of family ties and a change in the forms of interaction undoubtedly exist. The family has become a point of encounter of its members' individual projects, replacing the traditional conformations that created a sole project for the family members' life trajectories. Gender, age and relationships used to define duties and generate mandates that determined future trajectories and life options. Individual possibilities were based on categories established by nature, and determined by men's decisions (Beck, 1999).

Very different positions are used to evaluate these changes. According to Beck (1999), for example, we are in the presence of an expansion of individual freedoms, in which conflicts and commitments between generations are processed through agreements and negotiations. Other authors (Laïdi, 2000; Tedesco, 2003) believe we are experiencing a crisis of inter-generational transmission, since the "transmission carried out in the family is no longer supported by the acceptance of the principle of authority […] and the only valid principle is the democratic principle, or in other words, the relativity of opinions" (Tedesco, 2003:58).

According to the research data on which this article is based, the family context is a permanent reference in young people's discourse, as well as an aspiration (Montes, 2004). As expressed by these results, the horizontal ties that permit open dialogue between generations are the family characteristic that young people value most. At the same time, when these young people's parents (the young people of yesterday) refer to their families of origin, they criticize the lack of communication between parents and children, intolerance, and the absence of support for individual projects. From such discourse, horizontality constitutes a satisfactory advance for all family members. Giddens (2000) refers to "pure"

relationships to describe articulations based on emotional communication, in which the derived recompenses are the fundamental basis for their continuity.

The trends of disinstitutionalization also affect schools. According to Dubet and Martuccelli (1998), the image of a school standard that "overflows" into students' personalities is no longer acceptable. The model of the republican school, in which the conduct of various actors is strongly regulated and previously defined, is undergoing a crisis. Applicable here are all the considerations regarding the passage of a disciplinary society. Foucault (1996) characterizes such a society as having social domination constructed through a network of devices that produce and regulate the customs, habits and productive practices for the society of control (Deleuze, 1991), where power is exercised by means of machines that organize brains directly through communication systems and information networks.

At the same time that institutions lose their ability to regulate, the ethical frameworks that condition action are modified. Bauman (1999) sustains that the aesthetics of consumption govern in place of the previous work ethic, which refers to a founding principle of normative engineering and the policy of industrial society. Linking effort to individual and social dignity permitted, on one hand, the satisfaction of the nascent industry's demand for labor, and on the other hand, the establishment of a normative principle that regulated public and private morals. According to this author, the work ethic at present does not provide structure for the community or for young people from the middle and upper sectors. The aspiration of these groups is not a dignified life, but the good life that is obtained by optimizing the possibilities of choice. In fact, the value of work is now a factor of stratification (Tiramonti, 2004) that differentiates the middle and upper sectors (which associate work with vocation and personal fulfillment) from the lower strata on the social scale (which remain bound to the principles of the work ethic, and associate it with a socially dignified condition).

Along the same line, Lipovesky (2000) refers to a post-moralistic society that he characterizes as repudiating the rhetoric of austere, integral, Manichean duty while crowning autonomy, desire and happiness with individual rights. This ethic requires no major sacrifice, no "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps", and no heroic duty: only reconciliation between happiness and celebration, virtue and interest, and future imperatives and the quality of life in the present.

Should we believe then that young people construct their life autonomously from the network of institutions in which they are involved and in which they spend a large part of their existence? What presence do families and scholastic institutions have in the ways young people are acting out their individuality? What resources and conditioners do they use to form their own lives?

The research we are presenting throws light on this problem by showing the complexity of the family's and school's new forms of presence in the construction of the "men and women of the future". Our basis for preparing this article was a series of interviews carried out with young people from the middle and upper middle sectors of the city of Buenos Aires and its metropolitan area. Excluded from our analysis are the members of lower segments of the social scale and segments named by sociological literature as the excluded or marginalized—now a significant presence in Argentina, both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

In spite of the importance of the lower segments, this stage of our research fixes its gaze on the middle and upper layers, in order to study the heterogeneity of situations that occur within a social group that has been subject to change while maintaining a degree of autonomy from the demands for survival. A previous stage of our research included young people from the lower sectors, who are moving through a process of what Robles (1999) calls "individuation"; in this process, the imperative of the individual construction of the future becomes abandonment, which is expressed in the syntagma of "getting along the best you can". Below we shall include an experience with this group, obtained during our research.

On the other hand, in a social space characterized by disintegration and marginalization, the processes of disinstitutionalization are obvious data of a reality that has been fairly described as being at the margin of society's network of institutions and exchanges.

Asymmetries in Students' Individualization Processes

During our fieldwork, we recorded various indications that this process is clearly reconfiguring the relations among young people, families and schools along the entire spectrum of sociocultural positions. The process is characterized, however, by a heterogeneity of manifestations and a certain autonomy from socioeconomic ties. In this sense, we are able to affirm that by excluding the lowest sectors (which are subject to the tyranny of need and the threat of disintegration), the different manifestations of individualization along the middle and upper parts of the spectrum are explained by cultural variables.

In our opinion, the point of convergence of family cultures, young expectations, and forms of scholastic socialization, is where different experiences of individualization are constructed. In the following sections, we shall attempt to characterize the diverse situations we have identified among young people from the middle and upper classes of Argentine society.

Resisted Individualization

For young people from the upper and middle classes, the possibility of constructing their own life is practically neutralized by a family and school setting that inhibits the appearance of options that alter predefined trajectories. Such students may belong to the traditional elites or have their origins in the conservative middle sectors. In both cases, the school settings selected by the family are confessional institutions. Belonging to these sectors marks some differences within the group.

Families in the traditional elites fear disfigurements of the social order, which up to the present time has permitted the reproduction of their privileged situation. Explicit, conscious strategies exist to impede alternative options. A trait in the daily life of young people from this sector is the regulation of their activities in strong institutional frameworks.[1] The schools they attend are organized hierarchically, and maintain rigid disciplinary control that sustains the effectiveness of the fear of punishment. This is the structuring axis of institutional activity, and even teaching is subject to the demand to reproduce order. The organization of classroom work is a function of a rigid scheme of conduct (with the exclusion of teamwork in the classroom, which would have a relaxing effect on behavior); even academic achievement is processed as a device that serves discipline.

Parents from these sectors build a strong barrier around their children's schools, in order to support their regulatory effectiveness and thus exert a policing power to neutralize any modification to the *habitus* of the family setting. Efforts are concentrated on the homologation of the family and school *habitus*. Traditional nuclei inhabit worlds conceived as organic order structured around respect for hierarchies, traditions, and reverence for family lineage. Such young people are permeated by pride in belonging to a social sector that legitimates their privileged position in family traditions. Their expectations coincide with their previously marked trajectories. Their university studies are associated with traditional professional activities, and few desires to construct a "different" life are seen.

The same inhibition to construct "individual" options is present in young people from the middle sectors who attend religious schools. In this case, their families are more horizontal than the previous group. The values of love and affection are esteemed as the cohesive element for a group that generates a dense presence in its children's conscience, naturalizing mandates and neutralizing the alternative imagination. The family appears as the obligatory reference in each definition, and would seem to be the sole legitimate reference to justify action. These young people have more of a presence of the

neighborhood than the previous group, and the neighborhood also serves as a space of control and regulation. We could state that the neighborhood, family and school construct a frontier that defines young people's options.

The institutions attended by these young people have an organization homologous to that of their family group. Authority is defined as a friendly, close presence, always available as a source of dialogue and comprehension. Interpersonal ties, affective obligations, and an understanding of the functionality of the rules sustain the disciplinary framework. Extensive pastoral work and control of consciences (and imagination) generally remove any options other than those indicated by the family and school.

In both sub-groups, a search for personal gratification is not the central motivation of action. Although awareness of the young people's interests and tastes is present in their parents' discourse, such awareness appears as part of the necessary concessions for attaining the functional adjustment of the young people's behavior. The adults seem to recognize that times have changed, and that something must be conceded so that their children continue on the appropriate path.

Without doubt, the effectiveness of the settings and conditions of conduct we are describing must be verified by studies that follow up on these young people's trajectories. And although beyond family and school efforts, the individualistic reconfiguration of the social order will place these young people in situations that require them to assume responsibility for their actions and participate actively in constructing their future, we can hypothesize that their choices will have a clear anchor in family and school regulations.

Individualization as a Mandate
The universe of young people in the research sample used as a basis for this article, includes a group that seems to be clearly inscribed in a form of individualization understood as an extension of their options and margins of freedom.

These young people are from the educated middle strata, whose strategies and current positions are related to the historical constitution of the middle classes in Argentina, as well as the reversal of the dynamics of social ascent that characterized our society during the first seventy years of the 20th century.

The middle classes, conformed in the early 20th century primarily by the children of immigrants, became disconnected from their situation of origin through a strategy that combined obtaining educational credentials with entering a growing labor market (which was changing as a consequence of the beneficial ties between the domestic market and international trade).

The egalitarian matrix that characterized Argentina until the 1990s, was the result of a unique processing of social competition for available resources. The aspirations of social ascent were met by the broadening of public education, which contained an implicit promise of economic and social promotion.

In a previous article (Tiramonti, 2004), I proposed that these sectors used their own strategies to attain upward movement—a product of their clear identification of the resources available to them for mobilizing social ascent. Therefore, far from being a group limited in autonomy or restricted to imitating the strategies of the upper classes, the middle strata were formed by tactics of their own. They came to be a sector capable of innovation and the timely use of available resources.

This digression to the middle classes is justified because our data show that groups from these middle strata, based on their traditional strategy, took action in the late 1900s to neutralize the trends of social descent. Their aim was to maintain or increase their positions in the process of restructuring that has taken place in Argentina in recent years.

The young people from this group come from a family setting already subject to the demands of individualization. Their parents are associated with the economy's most dynamic activities. They navigated the transformation of the 1990s with success, either because they had adequate employment or because they made an intelligent interpretation of situation. As a result, they were able to move according to the demands of the moment. They were flexible, and competed for strategic spots in the market. Thus they are groups that made changes during times of upheaval, and value the ability to move, adapt and take advantage of opportunities.

They are educated groups that consider knowledge a strategic resource for obtaining a position in the market, and they select schools that emphasize academic excellence. In this case, in contrast with the previously described elite group, knowledge is valued as a source of personal gratification by students as well as by their teachers and parents. Those who "know" are admired and respected. Knowledge is the resource that legitimates authority. The proposals of educational institutions include seminars and unconventional subjects that encompass various dimensions of culture and art.

At the same time, the parents and teachers give strong support to the young people's creativity and to their ability to utilize their available resources in an original manner. It is as if they were saying, "Here are the resources that we are providing for you for your future journey. We do not know what your route will be, but we believe that this is what will be useful for you. It will depend on you to combine and update these resources to turn them into useful capital for your self-fulfillment in life."

Personal fulfillment and a gratifying activity that permits ongoing growth and the development of individual potential have become a requirement for these young people. Not only must they make their own interpretation of reality and decide how to insert themselves into the situation, but they must also make choices that guarantee them a life of personal development.

In their plans for the future, these young people construct alternatives that attempt to add personal gratification to an analysis of the market's viability for certain occupations. They construct new meanings for traditional professions, and combinations of knowledge and occupations that allow them to relate functionally to a market that is changing in structure and generating new occupational niches.

These young people's family settings are organized horizontally, but their networks and presence in the young's people lives, references and options, would seems to be considerably less dense than among the groups analyzed above. The rule would seem to be the construction of individual projects that are contained in and encouraged by the family group. Characteristic of this social sector in Argentina is the presence of a "psi" discourse in the family's way of thinking and its relationship with young people.

The institutions these young people attend are organized around the permanent stimulus of personal responsibility, self-control, and the gratification of school work. A disciplinary regime is mounted on the individual construction of responsibility to sustain satisfactory order for interaction and the development of academic activities. The authority is a close, kind presence who is attentive to students' intellectual and emotional needs. No one is unnoticed by directors and supervisors, and everything is processed through conversation and reflection. No mood, conflict or problem eludes the comprehensive attention of the school's agents. The setting, however, is not family-oriented or based on interpersonal relationships; on the contrary, it has objectified norms and rules of the game, and relationships with students are marked by an intellectual distance that provides them with a specific connotation and differentiates them from family relationships.

In summary, the group's construction of its future is based on a permanent search for self-fulfillment filled with the gratifications of interesting, novel occupations capable of providing an attractive meaning to existence.

Competition as a Condition of Defining an Individual Project
Competition seems to be the motivation to action for a group of young people from the upper and middle social sectors. In these cases, self-fulfillment includes the ability to stay on track at all times, and the gratification of proving permanent willingness for self-improvement.

These young people think like leaders or outstanding personalities destined to direct others. Included in the category are those who move in very different sociocultural circuits, and imagine themselves leading unconnected worlds. The criteria that define success or failure in each one of those worlds are different or are associated with unequal attributes and values.

Some believe they will compete in a globalized world where they can move without obstacles in obtaining an education according to their aspirations, or in having fun, traveling, or visiting friends. In this fundamentally masculine world, they will compete for success in business, perform leadership functions in companies, have beautiful families, and live in houses worthy of the magazines that show the lives of the rich and famous.

They imagine a world very similar to their current world. We could state that they are preparing to be successful in that world. These are not young people planning to cross the frontier of their habitat or modify their settings; there are not jumps, only the option to take responsibility for the risks of competition that will allow them to remain in the same sphere, with the same privileges. They do not want to win a new world or a world of their own; they want to win their own position by updating the required strategies, adapting to new demands, being flexible and ambitious, and always competing for top positions.

These young people attend institutions that occupy all of their time and that serve as a framework for the control and selection of friendships and recreational activities. Their institutions are bilingual and aim at educating cosmopolitan, competitive individuals; they have a pedagogical and institutional organization that favors learning the value of effort, high standards, and competition (Ziegler, 2004).

Other young people who are strongly motivated by competition consider themselves intellectual, social or political leaders. They attend "super difficult" public schools, which they enter after having passed through a rigorous selection process. They believe they are representatives of a tradition of "enlightened" leaders, and they organize their lives around permanent intellectual competition. The existing pedagogy is based on excellence and the value of knowledge as a legitimating source of positions of privilege.

In contrast with the previous young people, this group travels through heterogeneous spaces that provide them with experiences, contacts and resources to nourish their fantasies regarding the future. They imagine themselves successful in constructing a world that will be their own and often different from their parents' world; in some cases, they are motivated by their parents to start on the road of competition, and in other cases, they have personal options that break away from the inertia and habits of their origin.

This group includes males and females who emphasize intellectual competition as a way to breach the barrier of family determinations. In these cases, they consider themselves the true architects of their future, and suffer from feelings of being uprooted because of the distance they take from their family of origin.

The schools they attend challenge them permanently in terms of intellectual competition, and construct an institutional setting that demands constant self-improvement. School is almost like training for competition that will occur in an undefined future, in which individuals will vie for top positions.

In this group, the search for a good life is quite visible, yet it is not the strongest motivation for action. These young people value the efforts required by competition, and are willing to sacrifice time with their friends or postpone other activities in order to remain on the path of excellence.

The technologies of government utilized by these institutions are centered on constructing competitive individuals who regulate themselves through a permanent desire to update their abilities.

In summary, although all young people are affected by processes of individualization and the requirement to "be themselves", each individual approaches the experience based on different social, family and school conditioners, which provide resources, inhibitions, skills, expectations, and fears regarding the way young people construct their futures.

Note

[1]At the other extreme of the social scale, young people's lives are spent in public or private spaces that are not institutionalized (the neighborhood, the streets, friends' houses, the dance club). School, as previously pointed out, is unable to sustain and impose a normative framework different from its surroundings. In this case, as above, school is homologous to the social setting, but the social setting is marked by anomy. Present in this group is a demand for the replacement of institutions and regulatory frameworks to guide their children's lives. They are searching with desperation for rooted locations to attenuate the anxiety of a compulsive individualization processes without resources or a social safety net. It is a "civilizing" demand for the school, a demand for incorporation into the codes of the accepted, and a request for a guide for action to to construct a trajectory of inclusion. It is an appeal for the school to construct an organization to neutralize the effects of "disaffiliation", the term Castel (1997) uses to describe the exclusion of individuals from participation in the networks of sociability and protection systems that "cover" an individual against the risks of existence. School becomes the frontier of integration but does not provide passage for students out of their situation of vulnerability.

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