



## Urban Youth in the Reconstruction of Social Order in Ouagadougou: Generational mobility as an indicator of social dynamics

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**URBAN YOUTH IN THE RECONSTRUCTION  
OF SOCIAL ORDER IN OUAGADOUGOU:  
GENERATIONAL MOBILITY AS AN INDICATOR  
OF SOCIAL DYNAMICS**

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## Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to analyze information based on a survey of young urban people in the city of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, looking at the way in which their position is clearly articulated in urban social dynamics. The hypothesis defended is that the emergence and evolution of the youth group stresses a movement which is at the heart of the reproduction and transformation of the entire society. To better understand the historical function of youths, the sketch of this sociology of generations will revisit the theoretical notions and make a critical comparison of this polysemic conceptualisation of a practical process in the roots of evolution. This dynamics is only visible in the observation of individual and collective strategies, but simultaneously represents the ratio of youths in the ancient order of things. It is the collective social position, the youthful social ideal and the forms of generational stabilization in the general course of history. The paper ends with a presentation of a theoretical attempt to formulate a strictly sociological design of the concept of "youths", which will enable practical usage of a category hitherto marked a priori by common sense.*

Keywords: youth, urban social dynamics, Burkina Faso, modernity

## Resumo

*O objectivo deste trabalho é analisar, a partir de um inquérito junto de jovens urbanos da cidade de Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, a maneira pela qual a sua posição se articula na dinâmica social urbana. A hipótese que aqui se defende é a do surgimento e evolução do grupo jovens acentuar um movimento que está no cerne da reprodução e transformação de toda a sociedade. Para entender melhor a função histórica da juventude, o esboço desta sociologia de gerações revisita as principais teorias sobre este conceito e confronta, de forma crítica, a conceptualização polissémica de um processo concreto de evolução de itinerários. Uma dinâmica que só será visível através da observação de estratégias individuais e colectivas que descrevem, simultaneamente, as relações entre a juventude e a ordem antiga, a posição social colectiva, o ideal social juvenil e as formas de estabilização das gerações em movimento no curso geral da história. O artigo termina com a apresentação de uma tentativa teórica de formular uma concepção estritamente sociológica do conceito de juventude, permitindo o uso prático de uma categoria até agora marcada por concepções apriorísticas que emanam do senso comum.*

Palavras-chave: juventude, urbano, dinâmicas sociais, Burkina Faso, modernidade

*A very simple thing, and one that we do not think about is that the aspirations of successive generations of parents and children are made from different stages of the structure of distribution of goods and opportunities and access to different goods (...) And a lot of generational conflicts are conflicts between aspirational systems formed at different ages.*

Pierre Bourdieu  
La "jeunesse" n'est qu'un mot, 1978

Young people are actors and subjects of the new African sociability but researchers and political decision makers know little about them. Young people are seldom in their rightful place, too fast relegated to the social frameworks of recklessness, carelessness and irresponsibility, first as troublemakers, then as victims of the urban crisis. The youth social group is the subject of this standard treatment, which is not a guaranteed success in solving of problems involving urban youth. It seems that the methodological autonomy of the youth category allows us to question the obligatory homogenization of young people. The youth social group is in effect dogged by numerous contradictions in which society is the theatre. Although it is possible to regard young people as *transhistoric* and *transcultural*, it is equally imperative to historicize this representation of young people through the ages and also to discuss the methods of their appearance as a legitimate social category. This double articulation, which can appear to be contradictory *a priori*, emphasizes a forgotten function of the categorization of youth in human society.

The famous Bourdieu phrase "Youth is just a word" (1978) portrays the defining boundaries between old and young as a key control in any society and thus assigns each sector of a well defined population a representation and a specific social role. It remains to be seen for whom, out of the categorization and function, the social process is actually regarded as essential in the dynamics of history. My idea on this subject is that, in the dilution of borders of youth that Bourdieu points out, social function is the easiest way to express its radical new uses and new historical role as the bearer of the stages of social evolution. It is not just simply a biological renewal of a certain group of people but a regeneration of a social order whose connection between old and young is constitutive. In ever-evolving African societies, categorization, and categorization by age in particular, expresses a shift, the subversion of an ancient social order and the emergence of a constantly changing new order. In this sense, the age division expresses very clearly, beyond the evidence of social manipulation of a biological fact, "specific laws in the functioning of the field" (Bourdieu, 1978), historical in African societies.

The aim of this study is to identify the social effects of integration in urban development: a social integration which should always provide a point of reference for social dynamics. The method of urban rooting determines the perceptions of reality and expresses the contradictory behavioural tendencies in local social dynamics. This social distribution is a prerequisite for the formation and the crystallization of old and new systems of sociability. From this base methods for youth to adapt in the social gap of modernity produced by imperial expansion are born. But before presenting the results of our research, we will, by way of introduction, review theoretical obstacles to the sociological analysis of youth considered here as a means of acknowledging ways of forming a new social order that can determine the pace of change in urban African society.

### **Young people's context and positions**

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African young people, having spearheaded the slogans of the independence era, quickly went from elation to mistrust from political power. A promising future group, young people are often perceived as a threat to the established order and, worse, as a hallmark of social irresponsibility that threatens the entire social<sup>1</sup> structure. This general atmosphere has strongly influenced social studies, which make them a kind of *dangerous class* or the object of mystical evocation of the future or a coherent, mechanical reproduction and. However, the often abstract evocation of this social process ignores an essential fact which is that social reconstruction needs *support* to carry its movement and it is in youth, considered as a spearhead of social development, that social mobility is expressed<sup>2</sup>. It is certain that at the centre of African social recomposition, which is subject to turbulence, the youth category plays an important role in always aspiring to exceed the present conditions. But, as noted by Alain Cugno,

If youth is the future of today, and the concept is very attractive, we must lay emphasis on the word "today". Then it will be possible to reflect on what relations must exist between generations, what hospitality they are owed, what training

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<sup>1</sup> It is recognized that this dissenting figure does not exist everywhere in all African societies. Without really threatening the social order, it can in certain cases, as in Toubou, show a form of regulation of social contradictions. "But while," observes Catherine Baroin, "other methods of dispute are offered to us, including adulthood, it is not the case of this society where, in spite of dissenting ideals, the moral code dominating young people is in total conformity with that of adults, i.e. what is important above all is not to disobey the rules of honour. This is the basic rule. It will never be called into question, on the contrary as witnessed in the cases of previously mentioned spontaneous disputes" (Baroin, 2001: 170).

<sup>2</sup> Claude Lefort observes that Machiavelli already analyzed the Florentine political struggles according to *youthful* characteristics of opposite factions. *Youth* is compared here to an open spirit, acceptance of progress which brought together those who shared *Florentine humanism* and are opposed to conservatism (Lefort, 1978).

they must have to pass on what is transmitted which should be comprehensible so that everything else which is passed on is clearly understood (Cugno, 2008: 71).

He also stresses the importance of relationships between generations in the formulation of youth strategies, but it is because of this aspiring condition that young people should not be confused with any biological basis or simply reduced to a simple social classification process. However, the study of youth leads us to observe the historical social movement as well as the mode of production in modern society. The mechanical and utilitarian approach is not just seen as an exploited expression that minimises the functioning of biological classification in the scanning of social reconstruction and invention of modernity. It is in this undeniable sense that these two social bodies are intimately related and the social tendency that carries the youth group can be perceived as an affirmation of a certain social freshness linked to the structural renewal of the entire social order. This article takes a critical approach to category in use, *youth*, in order to determine how it can contribute to an understanding of the production of a social order.

The examples cited here have been taken from a survey on urban youth carried out in Ouagadougou in 1994 (Kinda and Ouédraogo, 1994)<sup>3</sup>. This quantitative and qualitative study made it possible to articulate theoretical perspectives with a concrete social reality that I qualify as historical. The survey was conducted in five districts of Ouagadougou – Dapoya, Bilbalgo, Pissy, Tangin and Bendogo. The questionnaire was given to 500 parents and 1,000 young people from the five districts with different social backgrounds. In this article, I outline and explain the results of the survey of a sample of 300 individuals living in the Dapoya district. This universe comprised two thirds (200) young people aged 14 to 25<sup>4</sup> and one third (100) parents. The survey aimed at a better understanding of the integration of young people from a central axis with the work of young people in urban society. Issues related to housing and youth identity were also articulated with the social reproductive process ongoing in a new emerging modern African society. Former place of residence of the *Praetorian Guard* of Mogho-Naba, emperor of the Mossis, very early in during the colonial period Dapoya became the auxiliary district of French administration. A central residential area close to the main market, the district took in Dioula traders who came from Mali.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified in the results, in particular figures inserted in the text are results from this research.

<sup>4</sup> These age groups are naturally for convenience sake linked to the simultaneity of actions and the sociological survey and do not meet any epistemological or theoretic requirements other than common sense. The disadvantages of this choice are minimal, as it is the social mobility of actions in this part that is being studied and not a temporal space of closure.

Dapoya was subdivided in 1953 and in 1955. This urban unit had the advantage of containing the different social strata of local history in a remarkable social and spatial continuity.

We thus started with the fact that the city reflected a modern social identity based on development and public administration that came from colonisation but is now decentralized and subject to urban crises and new modernity, which produces particular urban strategies that are nevertheless characteristic of the development of a post-colonial African city. The survey looks at how young people placed in this original historical situation are faced with the old society brought by their parents and deploy their own initiatives and highlight the invention of an original social order that is in many respects opposed to the former way of life. The size of the sample and the methodology used in the research make it possible to broaden the interpretive field. The quantitative survey used three types of questionnaire aimed at three main typological entities hypothetically identified in domestic groups. The first was for parents and the second for at least two young people from the same household. There was an equal distribution of gender in the young people's and parents' groups alike. These different social pathways of each person surveyed were opened and placed in relation with the whole social urban group, which revealed how the dynamic relationship functioned. We must add that this survey was supplemented by a qualitative survey in the form of interviews, the results of which are only briefly reproduced in this article, due to lack of space.

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### **Young people and the old social order**

The future projection of a new conception of how urban areas function is based on the findings of the present. Participation in activities in the current social order defines the constraints and at the same time offers resources to facilitate urban life which is built by each young person in Dapoya. This reality, subjected to social criticism of young people, is the old city of the old ones, the parents. It is obvious to say that the old people's world differs from that of the young people and the Dapoya population has benefited from a situation which was favourable from the outset. Where housing is concerned, the early subdivision of the district allowed easy access to plots and most of them were acquired at this time, but there was a peak period of rental occupancy and lifelong tenancy granted by the family court. Dwellings are modern as there are two to four rooms per home. Almost all of the dwellings had electricity and water. The household structure, though small, preserves some of the traditional features, as young people are al-

lowed to stay on in the family home. Leaving home here undoubtedly occurs late for economic reasons but, contrary to the way of life in Europe, very few young people justify their remaining at home out of fear or guilt experienced as *emotional betrayal*<sup>5</sup>. Overinvestment by parents in their children following the shake-up of the domestic structure by capitalism<sup>6</sup>, which greatly influenced family history in Europe, is found little in African families as yet.

In this historical context, the sense of each person doing their best for the future is an important indication of the conception given to individual and collective life. Based on the definition of social success perceived as a slight shift, there is a slight contradiction between the generations of parents and children. So for 91 young people, access to work is the main indication of social success. For 39 others, in addition to employment, the main component of social success, there is setting up their own home, buying their own dwelling and having a means of transport (preferably a car). Social success for girls boils down to setting up a home, which is the response of 112 young women interviewed. This vision is consistent with the traditional social future ascribed to girls. However there is a slight modernistic thrust. For 53 girls, the formation of a couple is closely associated with employment. Girls leave access to landed property for the boys: "I do not need it, because I'll live with my husband" said one of the girls. But some girls voice their desire to own property, which reflects a safety precaution underscored by the decline in marriages and social and material safeguards acquired before. A number of respondents think that the ways to guarantee social success are "work understood as willpower, courage and educational success" and with a bit of "luck" the goal of a good home can be achieved. These four elements – employment, the couple, owning a home and a mode of transportation – are the main basis for social success. It should be noted that these representations must always contend with the rebellious harshness of social reality. Even when young people move away from their parents, in their day-to-day lives they never really break away. Although the social world is open, it is nevertheless very unsure and the risks of entering life alone without protection remain in young people's consciousness. No social instance, state welfare, family or association offers sufficient protection that would allow them to assert their independence and smoothly enter social life. These higher authorities, on which young people are still largely dependent, hardly authorize a radical, prolonged challenge, on pain

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<sup>5</sup> This is the case for many young Europeans, as highlighted by Cécile Van de Velde. She notes that in Europe, "Different attitudes between the state, the family and the job market when paying for the dependence of young people forms a deeply explanatory characteristic of borrowed pathways, which condition the degree of familiarisation of studies or the main forms of leaving home" (Van de Velde, 2008: 222).

<sup>6</sup> See Shorter, 1977.

of permanent exclusion, which would mean certain social death. We must stress that the young people's ideological system seldom grows into open social rebellion. This radical, dramatic urban marginalisation especially affects *disaffiliated* young people, often from the rural areas.

In terms of employment, the old ones recognize that it was easier to secure work in their day. The possibilities offered to young people then were more important. At that time, the state recruited. "Even illiterates could find work and a diploma was still worth something", recalls an old man. Based on their own experiences, these same old people observe that the first job was found through recruitment processes, apprenticeships and by clientelistic social relations often based on ethnic ties. In those days, with some strings, a diploma, luck and dynamism, one was virtually guaranteed a job. According to the old people, in our days, the shortcomings of young jobseekers are impatience, pride, laziness and *scheming*. Occupations at that time are the foundation of the professional rankings, according to the old people. As to the question of their preferred occupations, they mention the civil service, retail and even the obsolete interpreter... What matters to these old people is job security, and the assurance of a good pension. For young people, a new social hierarchy of occupations is established on this professional development. They mention computer science, electrical engineering, accountancy, secretarial studies, midwifery and pharmacy. These occupations virtually guarantee self-employment with a relatively high income. For 103 young people, it is the salary that makes a job worthwhile, while for 66 it is the "love of the profession". Opinions are divided on the issue of whether the young people of today can find the necessary resources to access these professions. The old work ethic that structured individual morality seems not to be present in today's young people, who tend to be lazy and subscribe to the easy modern life. But it is uncertain that this new attitude to work is not in itself an unexpected continuation of the spirit of civil service long promoted by the colonial administration, whose main player in the world today is still the salary.

Today times have changed: The merchandisation of life and the destructive individualisation of traditional affiliations have gone. Access to employment is more and more difficult, landed property is unattainable and, even worse, young people feel that they have fewer assets to deal with the harsh realities of life. They think they have been left to their fate. The social logic which parents believe can shape their future no longer meets the requirements of life today. School, for example, which was the joy of parents, no longer has anything to offer. Traditionally seen as a means of social promotion, school today shows signs of slowing down which can be explained, say the young people, by "its failure

to adapt to social and economic realities". As a means of social promotion, it has become an "unemployment factory" and the results of the survey clearly emphasize the emergence of another facet of school amongst young people. In effect, only three young people (out of 200) cite school as a means of social advancement. On the other hand a significant number (86) of the survey's population take a radical position vis-à-vis school, considering quite simply that it offers no advantage. School has lost its prestige among young people.

This perception of school by young people reflects a shared sentiment that the school establishment is a dead end which certainly leads to unemployment. The school system is thus torn between old-time social scrutiny and current economic and social requirements. It tends to respond to demographic and social pressure and does not sufficiently address the needs of the new economy imposed by accelerated, commercialised modern life. Undoubtedly, and young people and parents agree on this point, it is disconnected from the professional scenario prepared especially for the increasingly rare *administrative job*. Even the state is in crisis undergoing a permanent adjustment which renders its ability to recruit extremely limited. It is a reality that seems widely recognized by Dapoya's young people. Only 24 young people out of 200 think and feel that school is still a way to enter the workforce.

Of a total of 57 school dropouts more than half of them are girls, which demonstrates the inequality in terms of access to education between boys and girls. This division is less obvious in urban areas than in rural areas. The girls here are also under pressure to get married rather than find a job. In the Dapoya district, 34 out of 57 young school dropouts left due to a "lack of financial means" and nine because of repeated failures. A tendency to desert modern school en masse is quite clear. Of the 57 school dropouts, 28 would not have gone back to school even if favourable solutions had been found for their situation. It is as if this decline in going to school is not seen as a social injustice or a personal failure but more as *liberation*. This devaluation of school reflects a more and more prevalent sentiment, which is spreading, that school is not the best means of social salvation. At most it is recognized that school instructs and educates to earn a diploma, but these school products are losing their old value and importance. Faced with this rejection, school still holds out for 92 young people who still attend to "acquire knowledge and diplomas". But nobody is able to explain what they are good for. Whether they are educated or not, 174 of them still believe that the advantages of education are "training, open mindedness and diplomas". 160 young people believe that a young person up to the age of 25 must be devoted to studies or job-seeking. No less important, 80 young people in the sample, far

from the abstractions of the education system, believe that one of the occupations of young people is “learning a trade” or “looking for employment”.

The difference between the two worlds is obvious. The two groups are fully aware of the growing gap between their different ways of life. The world in which parents built their careers is collapsing. Former methods have lost their effectiveness when confronted with today’s problems. This breakdown of social cohesion requires a clear redefinition of intergenerational relations. The historical process is not unique to African societies, says Van de Velde (2008: 221), in comparison to contemporary Europe. She regards the “emergence of a generational dynamics as a game, according to some authors, likely to lead to a broad renegotiation of the «social contract» that links the present and older generations”. At the heart of this renegotiation is a social renewal.

### **Social belonging: a rupture?**

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For young people, social resources are clearly defined. The people they can depend on in case of hard luck are their parents in 75 percent of most cases. This distribution is not changed by level of education or age. However, recourse is broader and repeated at about the age of 20, and it mainly concerns girls. Parents are more often called upon because of financial problems specific to boys. This recognised parental umbrella is in fact only an intention, since realistically young people equally recognize the limitations of parental assistance. The intervention of parents is based on a dying concept of *parental duty* for a quarter of the cases. The justification and acceptance of parental intervention in these specific areas are based on young people’s lack of capacity to manage the symbolic and material aspects of urban life and naturally on the experience of older people, who can help the younger ones face life. For a minority, 29 out of 200 young people, recourse to parents is hypothetical and frankly illusionary because their ambitions are beyond the social capacity of their parents, who are constantly subject to disparagement. The wisest recognize that times have changed, and in these new times, young people must take charge. If they understand that the domestic unit is the first level, the first place for establishing social memberships, these famous *strong bonds*, other levels of community participation also have a place. Many studies today tend to strongly qualify the mechanical opposition between traditional and modern and, as noted by Jean-Charles Lagrée, focus more:

on the fact that tradition is embedded in the process of change. Tradition nurtures modernity. As they become involved in the process of generating modernity, societies rely on traditions, habits and norms inherited from the previous generation,

traditions which have given evidence of their reliability. The leap into the future, undertaken by the new generation, cannot be successful without the mobilization of the resources of the past. There is a change of paradigm but it occurs through the continuity of a renewed past. (Lagrée, 2004: 106)

In effect, in the building of modern society, continuity is often based on a certain respect for the old rules. Thus, in certain aspects, young people still share the values of their elders and in the turmoil of modernity, the previous generations are mirrored, often unacknowledged, and a buffer in the face of the risk of losing social status. There is a regular decline of young adults within the domestic structure, as noted by Giovanni Sgritta in the case of Italy, that leads to increasing “the burdens and traditional responsibilities of the family and defers independence” (Sgritta, 2008: 29). It should immediately be stressed that this conformity to traditions is a way of reformulating and transforming them while conserving their old formal identity. This is the case noted by Eric Gable when carrying out studies of youth clubs in Guinea Bissau. These youth groups pretending to be autonomous and oppose elders reconstructed an order consistent with the social dynamics. Observing the historical context of reinventing *traditions*, the author concludes: “Invented traditions provide comfort to people uncomfortable with confronting the possibility that they are making up their society as they go along”<sup>7</sup>. Respect for the old order of things enables generational mobility and an invention of new social relations.

On the example of plans to get their own home, more than half the young people, however, only rely primarily on themselves. Parents’ help, despite everything, is present and is manifested rather timidly in all phases of the plan. This conviction that parental intervention is possible is based on promises made and on *filial duty* which they still believe compels some parents. But the ravages of introduction of the market economy in the old communities continue to restructure and transform the status, role and identity of members of domestic communities:

The gendered division of household work no longer underlines the daily patterns of life, but the generations come to express different perspectives on the value of

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<sup>7</sup> Gable, 2000: 202. We might risk a historical comparison and note that these youth organisations appear at a crucial moment of social change. The French historian Robert Muchembled notes that “spread everywhere under different names, youth organisations changed considerably in urban milieus as of the 16th century. It is better to look at their main features in rural settings, where they remain belatedly and strongly rooted. There a specific, clearly delimited youth universe is defined to which were added in the 16th century young nobles and clerks of tender age. Mandatory, belonging to the youth group was a rite of passage between childhood and adulthood (...) This transition status is a form of adolescence without the word but in the limited framework «a peer group” (Muchembled, 1988: 297).

work. There is a new division between waged workers and non-waged workers in the household. The younger generation advocates the values of waged work in an economy whose restructuring measures competence and adult participation more in terms of what work will yield in wages to be used to buy goods from the store than what it will yield in relational identities. (Sykes, 2003: 15)

In this social context, we understand that the old ethics are only very marginally in use. Friends, enshrined in the old world, offer little solidarity. At this level, we note the clear exclusion of the state and employers who can do nothing and have no solidarity duties. The absence of the state is undoubtedly a historical fact that ensures a higher return on capital<sup>8</sup> and offloads social support functions onto domestic communities.

As regards employment, the recourse set up has changed. While young people want to rely on themselves and their parents, it is especially a paradox that they rely on the state the most for employment. The public and para-state sectors have been the major providers of employment for educated young people. Today the economic crisis is not always accepted by young people “brought up in the mentality of a welfare state”, which created, according to a parent, “places in its institutions and all we need to do is to meet the standards give the right to occupy these positions. There are no more places, the institutions are failing, the standards are drifting”. But old conceptions endure. *The welfare state* in the collective imagination is always present in people’s minds. 91 young people interviewed still depend on the state for a job. This selective extension of community action gives a clear perception of each community instance. But this recognized importance of the state as a form of community mobilisation is based on a contradictory vision of common government. It is the state that recruits and in theory it is the state that has the resources and young people think they are the future of the country for which the state is responsible. But it is also the place for personal relationships and the combined efforts of friends and family should be made in a dynamic and open public space. Community instances are thus places of influence of belonging at lower, domestic levels that try to privatise the state by subjecting it to private, competitive interests.

Relations at this level of most immediate belonging, i.e. kinship, are sometimes questioned. If cohabitation is possible with “good people”, like friends, it is mainly with parents that it seems conceivable for the simple unique reason

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<sup>8</sup> On this question see Jeffrey and McDowell. They say, “In both Western capitalist societies and many Third World countries, the costs of social reproduction are increasingly being transferred from the state to households or individuals” (2004: 131-132).

of kinship. But there is no unanimity on this and the interpretation of positions requires prudence. "Bad people", parents-in-law, for example are rejected for two reasons, the likelihood of misunderstanding and cultural taboo and finally unbearable and strict parents are not to be tolerated. On the role of their parents, young people point to the disinterest of those who do not make plans for their children. More than 75 percent of the young people interviewed believe that their parents do not have career plans for them. The small minority that think so mention only education and guidance counselling. These limits on parental captivity open the door for possible separation, leaving home, or radical disassociation foreseen by young people. This break offers not only advantages but also considerable drawbacks. The result of this separation is different depending on gender. For boys, freedom, responsibility and openness to life experiences is not fulfilled without a compulsory breakaway. No more than two-thirds see no disadvantages and those who did saw risks of delinquency and insecurity. From the girls' angle, there is no advantage to breaking away and leaving home except the possibility of learning from life and greater freedom which can be used for questionable activities. The disadvantages are countless. Prostitution is the danger mentioned most, followed by insecurity and loneliness. The separation from the parental community is still largely "a man's problem". Boys leave home more often than girls, who remain very dependent on the domestic unit for reasons which are particularly associated with their general social position in the society.

The city favours the emergence of a type of new individualism. It is "every man for himself, God for us all", they like to repeat. The famous African family is now just a myth. The *nuclear* family is becoming more and more central as a social norm. Traditional values such as solidarity do not fit the economic requirements of this new lifestyle. The domestic unit is reduced and becomes the only place of solidarity where affectivity, sharing of resources, mutual assistance should be expressed, according to 144 of the young people interviewed. In the event of financial, health, education, accommodation and employment problems they only think of relying on their immediate social group, their restricted family. If the family unit remains the framework of expression of solidarity, this does not prevent conflicts from developing, as this protective function also involves constraints that are often challenged and resented. This is how, while 124 young people find advantages to living in their parents' home, they point out the drawbacks of cohabitation as lack of freedom and disagreements with parents. The parents, in 27 interviews, considered that cohabitation promotes a "certain taste for the easy life". Therefore it is not surprising that a vast majority considers that "one day all young people must leave their parents' house".

We could legitimately think that this erosion of basic community structures is beneficial to new forms of association and urban solidarity. It is not. Because they lack time, because they show no interest in unsolicited, generally benevolent activities and finally because they are young and “selfish”, Dapoya young people are not part of the associative life which does not really exist in the district. The social world of young people is relatively homogenous since it is made up mainly of individuals engaged in the same activities and who are of the same age. Amongst them the familial relationship is clearly in decline in favour of freer friendships and associations. Alongside this familial framework, there are other still timidly emerging solidarity networks – friendship and associative networks. Thus 37 young people interviewed believe they can count on their friends from various fields of life. To a lesser degree, the friendship network is the most active regarding the people they spend time with. In a general way this network is apparent in moments of socializing such as recreation, outings, chats, society games and studies. A process of decomposition and recomposition of solidarity is ongoing and it cannot limit social efficiency *a priori*. Through school and diversified intermingling, parental emotional exclusiveness gives way to a more open socialization. But, before we deduce an independence of *youth cultures*, we should clearly refuse this current essentialization of this social position. Based on the case of South Africa, Zegeye noted:

In these studies, black youth culture is essentialized to a point where the uneven level of consciousness about the identity of blackness among black people is coarsely glossed over. This consequence is the product of an uncritical application of a western-derived social science paradigm that refuses to acknowledge the unique position of the black youth culture to the extent that no one is sure any longer who is black, what youth is and whose culture is being talked about in the notion of “black youth culture” (Zegeye, 2004: 853).

The powerful community, ethnic and regional ties of the parents enter very lightly in the formation of the new urban sociability. However it should be noted that in African urban spaces social relations are more complicated. Jean-Marc Ela (1983) noted a recomposition, in the city’s *neo-fraternities* that show only the form of classic kinship without ever resting on the traditional criteria of forming family ties. After a long spatial neighbourhood, relations between certain urban city dwellers become veritable family solidarity, perhaps compensatory, as has existed in traditional Africa.

## Young people today: an expletive social position?

The urban crisis shows young people as a formidable category, a source of social disruption. How is this general question received by the young people themselves? Starting with urban cleavages, how do young people fit in social dynamics?

Included in the movement of social recomposition, professional strategies, for example, are based on the new perception of occupational space and the intrinsic ability of each occupation to withstand a crisis. It is thus that metiers without a future cited first are those in the unofficial sector, trade and administration. This judgement is largely counterbalanced by half non-responses, from which we can say that in reality this visibility is still limited amongst young people. The lack of future that characterizes certain activities, according to them, means that the sectors indicated are unstable, unprofitable and already very saturated. This perception of occupations considerably marks career plans. The classification of jobs places technical professions first, followed by business jobs and health and education occupations to echo the new hierarchy of professional values. Thus young people hope to be placed according to an individual guarantee of technical capacities intending to reduce the actual effects of the crisis by adopting the appropriate means of accumulation of scarce resources. As I noted above, a positive image of the welfare state is still present in their minds but reflects much more distress than a conviction about its real capacity to provide employment for young generations. If nothing else, we continue to believe in the power of the state even though we know that it can no longer absorb unemployment. Among the proposed solutions, the most recurrent one is advocating the development of technical vocational training that "everyone can take care of himself" says one of the young people interviewed. The current educational system is again criticized. But this perspective also marks a tendency to claim a certain social independence, an individual solution that is a confirmation of technical independence.

But fulfilment of career plans and dreams is met by obstacles connected to shortage of money and resources, a lack of vocational training and rejection of job applications. This occupational reality check affects certain young people who believe that they will do whatever work "they can find". In this study, the limitations of socialisation through work appear clearly. Never totally assured by the welfare state, shaky and producing very little of its own institutional or occupational culture, finding a job weakly influences the formation of individual identities. These are influenced by many social experiences whose crystallization in the hard core staff is rather random and often temporary, thereby pointing to the fact that the social strategies can change according to the stages of life.

However the new social situation is a new definition of job characteristics. For a job to be “interesting”, it must meet certain criteria often combined with a vocation, therefore freedom of choice, and especially in terms of pay, which is the first mark of interest. More employment allows social positions to be consolidated in the social turmoil of the crisis and also brings independence and social well being. The situation of young people, even transitory, has led to a social definition of activities consistent with the requirements of this period of life. Up to 25 years of age, the principal activities of young people should be to undertake studies to learn a trade and, for the minority, have a job. It seems that this ideal traditional vision meets with obstacles such as cost of education, lack of vocational training centres and laziness.

The perception of this situation, even in the project, is based on the critical treatment of young people in today’s society. The first tool of social advancement, school, is decried today. The vast majority of young people have no interest in it. School no longer holds promises of upward mobility because it leads either to rare, uninteresting administrative employment or to unemployment, while the new social structure requires greater proximity between training and work, in the opinion of the majority of the young people interviewed. Moreover, this technical requirement reflects a desire for independence and personal wellbeing and rarely leaves its custodian defenceless in this bitter struggle for life. In this crisis situation, the new values on which the new society is based must set apart a category of young people unsuited to the new social order. This is how the lazy are excluded from social success because only work pays, along with the poor because money is indispensable. The more untrustworthy ones, according to the criteria of formal education, show that until recently general knowledge is less and less needed to succeed, while school was until recently, and still is for a number of parents, the surest way to social advancement. The new strategies are characterized by an attempt to break with the old order, whose immediate performance values are not obvious. This reorganization requires the same provisional definition of life in the future. Stressing the elusiveness of this *floating* social reality, Jeffrey says:

In the field of youth cultures, scholars working in the global south have described the recent emergence of vibrant cultural practices of unemployed masculinity which are not explicitly linked to the class position of young men. While the nature of these cultures varies widely across the globe, certain dominant motifs tend to appear across individual cases. In particular, and broadly consistent with the young men belonging to “Generation Nowhere” in Meerut, several studies point to men’s efforts to emphasize their *dislocation* from broader processes of spatial and

temporal change, affiliation with local notions of modernity, and detachment from work understood locally as demeaning (2008: 746).

It is this dislocation that we find in internal or external migration<sup>9</sup> that carries the aspirations of many young people in Africa today. We must also recognize that migration carries with it a certain rupture, uprooting and relocation. It is always contradictory by maintaining the presence, even illusory, of returning to a place of origin, often more nostalgic than experienced. The *provisional* immigrant status<sup>10</sup> quickly becomes a permanent installation while it cements the social position of a young person who has become *responsible*.

The idea and reality of youth are theoretical and socially expletive, that is to say it is like an adjective in a sentence without being necessary to the meaning. But Jeffrey, faced with this difficulty, suggested an interesting perspective: "Understandings of the relationship between time and notions of youth therefore depend to a significant extent on how notions such as *youth* and *adulthood* are defined in different communities, cultures, and societies" (Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004: 136). And this relativism, as discussed above, does not preclude the identification of similarities inferred from the social dynamics by historical proximity. In all cases, the perspective must be centred around the position of the young people, as representational and a bundle of objective conditions of existence. For as noted by Maira and Soep:

The process of conceptualizing a site for local youth practice as embedded within national and global forces is what we mean by a "youthscape", but such an approach does not imply a formulaic analysis. (...) In a transnational perspective applied to youth culture studies, "the local" is of course not simply the binary opposite of "the global" – traditional, fixed, authentic, grassroots, progressive, and, often, feminized – even if it can take on these representations for young people who may, often strategically, draw on the meanings of multiple "locals" in their lives (2004: 262-263).

## **A violent return of margins?**

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Criticisms by young people are a way of defining the conditions of adjustment of social dynamics set in motion by their elders. The question is to know how to hang on, in favour of ongoing social restructuring, to a corrected social situation.

<sup>9</sup> See "Migrations entre les deux rives du Sahara", *Autrement* (2005).

<sup>10</sup> On this question, see Sayad, 1999.

This adjustment must by definition have a sense of success<sup>11</sup>, of new criteria for social value. On this issue, a division must be made between the social journey differentiated between boys and girls. Success for the boys is “above all to have a job”, “their own place to live” and “set up a home”. For the girls the order of preference is reversed; the priority is a household, employment comes after and not too far behind the desire to meet a good husband. The conclusion is clear: the means of managing the old order needs a renewal of immediate perspectives but, in reality, their objectives are still traditional since they do not deviate from the assigned social roles.

The modernistic shift in criticism is not apparent in the restructuring of objectives that remain stable. The dialectic of social dynamics, by expressing young people’s disenchantment, falls back on the old cycle of urban society which changes very slowly but decisively. If aspirations remain constant, they do not always reflect the same social functions. Access to real estate comes with a requirement of new independence, separated from traditional communities. The phenomenon is one of the consequences of urban individualisation. It is thus the claim for housing that concerns only an individual home and all other types of accommodation are rejected and tolerated only for recreation such as sport. The means of access to housing is based on its purchase to emphasize the importance of individually owned property. This individualisation is also reflected in the composition of domestic units: the ideal size, always based on the results of our survey, of a household irrespective of sex, is four to six people. The future household should be made up of a couple and their three children.

Forms of collective mobilisation are no longer favoured by young people, as more than 40 percent say they are not concerned by this type of joint action. If they recognize its utility, it is in sport and culture that this collective participation is possible and desirable. Although the orientation of livelihoods adopted by young people is not inconsistent with the western social order, it seems clear that they are trying to negotiate a mobility that reflects the traditions and foundations of western modernity. Thus with borrowed values taken from history that compete with the social African scene, young people build a provisional society, in the interval of a generation, which will also age by the inevitable ever changing social evolution. This reminds us that young people, individually and collectively, will grow and become old, while a new generation of young people appear...

Social restructuring produces a relative offset between the old social order and the aspirations of young people today. The case of Dapoya shows that the

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Naville once stressed that the definition of *success* is so important that it serves workers as a basis for *fundamental demands* and for renovating *family relations* (Naville, 1972). See pages 106-140.

cultural framework, which still allows solidarity mechanisms, further limits the strong trends towards marginalisation of young people. But not taking into account the initiatives of youth risks one day causing violent urban opposition. The failure to put into perspective urban young people surely threatens the flow of current dynamics. In the face of an urban crisis which limits the insertion of young people, by means of employment and accommodation, there are many who live in this confusion. The erosion of community membership and limited confidence in central bodies are a favourable ground for demands for self-employment as a last resort. But this individual perspective of insertion in urban life will not resist the disillusionments to come, disillusionments that will be built on current strategies, the consequences of which cannot be predicted.

Has the restructuring that caused the social crisis affecting Burkinese society given itself a way to avoid the marginalisation of young people and powerful return of margins? The abundant use of the term *youth* as an intellectual category or practical political concept is not always based on the precise definition of this group, which has been established, categorized and socially full of diverse prejudices. This reoccurrence today encourages greater clarity and rigour in the construction of this intellectual edifice represented in a social category that is so present and poorly known. The lifting of this vagueness around the notion of *youth* will help clarify public actions and theoretical knowledge of the dynamics of social *reproduction* at the heart of which we can find *young people*, a critical review of this concept which is essential.

## **Young person, an omnibus concept?**

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Jean-Luc Piermay states:

Certainly the signs of a deep questioning of social balance are increasing, it is more difficult to highlight which are more important and isolate those whose consequences will be great for the future. The effort of reflection which is necessary for this is even greater than the conceptual framework which has been long based and often still is – Africanist research (1993: 66).

The study of young people, as a sociological category<sup>12</sup>, is not immune to two major pitfalls that increase or distort understanding and reduce the heuristic value of the sometimes conflicting social components. The first takes into account

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<sup>12</sup> Here we must recall the very important distinction between social reality and sociological reality. As Gaston Bachelard says, "Science achieves its goals without ever finding them in fact (...) The fact is conquered, built, recognised" (1968: 61).

that, in the name of close historicization, young people are unfairly treated as an “ideological formation that emerged in the «the age of revolution» between 1789 and 1848, and that sharpened the dialectics of the Empire” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). By refusing universalism early, such a perspective imposed on us a European universalism backed by a unique historical course. That the consequences of categorizing young people is not the same everywhere, in all societies, is obvious, but it is undeniable that the classificatory mechanism exists everywhere, as highlighted by Pierre Bourdieu. The function of this social division is universal but the representation of designated groups, qualities attributed to them and effectiveness of social order naturally undergo substantial historical variations towards conservatism or rupture. Denying the actual historical process inherent in any social order, as written by Jean and John Comaroff, allows us to retain and to discuss only the *representation* of youth:

In brief, *youth* signifies many things at the same time: terrors of the present, errors of the past, forecasts of the future, old hopes and new challenges. Of course, in all these aspects, young people are the face of the popular imagination, strongly removed from reality – a reality that often has a lot more subtleties (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 92).

It should not be forgotten that in this segmentation of social space, discourse is a means of manipulating social objects and the study of such statements cannot account for social dynamics through their confrontation with the interests of social groups involved in the struggle for the production of a social order. On this point Karl Mannheim rightly points out:

The generation unit is linked more concretely than that based on simple generational set. The same young people oriented compared to the current historical problem, live in the same *generational group*; the groups, within a generational ownership of these experiences, are different *generational units* under the same generational sets (Mannheim, 1990: 60).

Even with the denunciation of globalized neo-liberal capitalism, the generalization of the historical situation of young people, to whom a *transnational* autonomy is arbitrarily attributed, is excessive if it does not start from the singularities of local history produced by a march that is never uniform in a social space restricted to the category of *nation state*. In the historical analysis of societies, the nation state is just a word and global *social category* is a reality on paper. The second obstacle stems from too much essentialization of young people in making them

homogenous group, as if the very nature of human society does not unevenly distribute material / and or symbolic assets. But it should be recognized that most basic classifications act according to defined social interests. The order of symbols and the availability of materials always reflect the balance in sharing power of access to these assets. But even if it is premature to consider the existence of a social category that is young people, it is very risky to take for granted in a nation divided by classes; and diverse interest groups, the existence of a youth standing atop these social contradictions.

This reality is perfectly visible in the historical situation where capitalist modernity and the pre-capitalist social formations meet, from which a new society emerges with completely unprecedented systems of production, values and institutions. In a general state constraint whose ambition is to produce a long-lasting social order, multiform struggles are waged to establish the fair order of things and beings. In this present case no sense of distribution of places has been imposed, and the contradictions are apparent reflected in the formation, definition and social treatment of new generations. It is this type of situation that is questioned here. In her remarkable work, *Le fossé des générations*, Margaret Mead suggests three types of relationship between generations: *postfigurative* dominated by the power of parents, *cofigurative* in which individual learning occurs through peers and *prefigurative* “in which,” she says, “adults learn lessons from their children”. It is noteworthy that the trend of historical dynamics leans towards a liberation of the old society where “the past of adults is the future for each new generation” (Mead, 1979: 31) and membership of a new *prefigurative* society is born. The question asked at the beginning of this paper does not find satisfaction in such an easily culturalist and simple answer. The author considers the passages between different orders as a complex historical process: the historical intermediary stage, *cofiguration*

born from a rupture in the *postfigurative* system. This rupture can take place in several ways: (...) after a conquest, when the population is forced to learn the language and customs of the conquerors; (...) or as a stage in a revolution that is established by introducing the young people's new and different lifestyles (*Ibid.*: 55).

Clearly, Burkina societies combine two types of *postfiguration* though the author does not clearly define the ways to tackle the next step. In effect, before considering continuity of the dynamics, the transition from one stage to another, we must look seriously at the horizontal presence of social entities and examine the conditions of transmission, of acceptance or not, of the dominant values by new members within the social space.

A simultaneous analysis and expression of these two meanings of social development needs sociological configuration. The historical constitution of social configurations, these systems of interdependent relations and their evolution is based on the assertion of *open values* (Elias, 1981) which can cause a shift to a higher level of new relationships. On the consistency of generational cohorts, I wrote in a recent article text that “the ground swell of shared historical experience which establishes and regulates generational ensemble is itself worked by the abovementioned elements, these categories of experience, which weave the emerging new order” (Ouédraogo, 2008: 80). Of course, in some cases, young people, because strong links are developed, can constitute *generational units* who think of themselves as integrated groups. This question of membership and formation of group identities is, according to Margaret Mead (1979), the central problem in studying generation gaps. Participation in social dynamics leads each individual to make a choice to enrol in a system of thought and action from the past, present and future. We quickly understand the introduction of these systems of historical contingency linked to the reproduction of a social order which Jean-Claude Passeron says is only understandable after a radical metaphysical renunciation of the metaphysical concept of *internal contradiction* understood as a *social force*, here the *youth group*, and a *mechanical logic*. “It is not the idea of «the system» that makes use of reproductive patterns dangerous but the confusion between their operational logic and historical necessity” (Passeron, 1991: 89).

This caveat accepted, we can think of social reproduction in which young people are one of its translations, based on a delineation of interests and social values that relate to social young or adult and class social groupings. This delineation is made in disputes, in fights both symbolic and practical, secret or open, that mobilizes the entire social space, in our case that of young and old. Jean-Claude Passeron writes,

Change always happens from the outside of systematic processes, since it's the same thing to say a process is systematic or reproductive. But no social system of reproduction is so comprehensive that there is no exterior (...) This is why it is incumbent on history to form a description of dependencies and continuities with the use of models and sociological typologies we could never do without (*Ibid.*: 109).

It is then possible to identify forms of social class and consider the formation of identities around them, before understanding the attitude of the groups thus constituted vis-à-vis order and vigour.

## Conclusion: youth, an expression of social modern aspirations?

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One of the shortcomings of globalization theorizing is its general ignorance of the conditions of Africa, and often its irrelevance for explaining its realities. All the talk about movement, shifting identities, the impact of new technologies, global nomads, and other buzzwords of globalization seem foreign to a continent still struggling to fulfil the most basic of human needs (Dolby, 2006: 43).

This inadequacy of theories produced in the West is today discounted and challenged by many researchers. One of the latest examples is given by Jackie Assayag (2005) pointing to a *dominated*, externalist approach struggling to truly understand the social realities of societies in South India. It is not also certain that the thoughts developed by non European researchers are more appropriate to support these social dynamics. A project to overcome these obstructions remains to be built but its ambition goes beyond the narrow framework of this study.

Let us remember, however, that the study *youth* is an excellent opportunity to revisit these summary essentialisations and the takeover of social interests in the construction of knowledge. It seems fairly clear that the youth segment of the social process reflects a moment of regeneration of the social order and that this phenomenon is not exclusively biological in nature, an occasion for easy taxonomy necessary for a command of social reproduction. If we dare to make a comparison, like the bud of a plant, youth expresses a renewal and desire for modernity. But it should be understood that this aspiration even if driven by a need for reproduction, is never mechanical (very well analysed by Jean-Claude Passeron and beautifully translated by M. Mead in its configurational formulations). In some societies, there are many *social young ones*, older biologically than their *elders*. The classification is a way of organizing the social aspirations of everyone who would otherwise face confrontational ambitions that would otherwise lead to a general social war.

Words always crystallize spontaneous sociology made by and for practice with which sociologists must mark a distance, an epistemological break, to capture the order they are bent on imposing. In fact, one can safely say in conclusion that the term youth is another secret name for social *contenders* of all kinds and it qualifies, beyond all biological determination, tendencies, conscious towards renewal – the sense of this social production naturally cannot necessarily be representative of *progress* – of all defined social space. It is important for sociologists addressing this generational mobility to remember, with C. Wright Mills, that “the most fruitful distinction” owed to sociological imagination is that which op-

erates between “personal trials from the environment” and the “collective stakes of social structure” (Wright Mills, 1967: 10). At this stage of our study, we can say that the task is gigantic, and the project is in infancy.

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