

## **Introduction**

### *Towards a Post-Carbon society*

*Silvio Scanagatta*<sup>1</sup>

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The research focuses on transition towards a post-carbon society (PACT)<sup>2</sup> and it aims to analyse the social changes towards values, representations and ambitions of young Europeans when there will be a society so changed by the end of oil resources.

The theme is especially important because this generation of young people is that generation that will be an adult or an elderly person when this change will occur. It is then necessary to study the culture of those persons who were born and are now living in the Carbon Society and to see if they are orientating to prepare themselves, at least culturally, for the future.

The assumption, naturally, is that young people are more aware and concerned about the future but, as we will see, the hypothesis of the research has falsified (see below). Our starting point was that the adolescents are the individuals that orientate more their aspirations for a “better society” trying to explain the gap between the possession of environmental knowledge and environmental awareness.

The research was aimed to demonstrate that from these cultural models stemmed an idea of future lifestyle more coherent with the respect of the environment and therefore more frugal and basic lifestyle.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology – University of Padua, via Cesarotti 12/13 – 35123, Padova (Italy). E-mail: [silvio.scanagatta@unipd.it](mailto:silvio.scanagatta@unipd.it)

<sup>2</sup> PACT - Pathways for Carbon Transitions - was financed by the Seventh European Programme (project code 225503) and coordinated by Enerdata (Lead Partner). The topic of the University of Padua was entitled *Young People's Human Capital and Social Capital in a Post Carbon Social Life* (2009-2011) and coordinated by Silvio Scanagatta (Department of Sociology, University of Padua).

Therefore to support the investigation of the entire interdisciplinary group of research, our role has been to understand the basics of openness to cultural change, or at least the most delicate points of resistance. The expectations of the European Union is in fact to understand which policies of dissemination of ideas are favored, especially regarding educational institutions, which still are one of the best vehicles to spread young people's ideas.

### **Hypothesis, data and method**

The research - *Young People's Human Capital and Social Capital in a Post Carbon Social Life* – is aimed at:

1-identifying , in view of the various agencies of socialization (family, peer groups in their various forms, school, and other) of young Europeans, the social-cultural factors affecting the formation of different outlines of credibility. It is intended to understand which agencies make up the main formative reference for the young interviewees on the basis of social-demographic characteristics of the latter. This will provide for the prefiguring of suitable and effective formative paths and policies.

2-analysing scenarios of future life (desired and expected) that European adolescents imagine in their own transition to adulthood and to the post carbon society, and to understand what kind of influence is exercised by interaction (interplay) between SC (Social Capital) and HU (Human Capital) in the representation of these scenarios, as well as the social-cultural variables that influence the creation of differences. In the definition of future life scenarios, the focus was both on the ability of young Europeans to envisage the period when oil sources will be exhausted and alternatives that will replace it, and on various aspects of daily life (transport, labour, entertainment, interpersonal relationships, etc.).

Consistent with the back-casting perspective of the project, the assumption that drives these objectives is that, the comparison between expected and desired scenarios can provide various useful indications to policy-makers to identify appropriate formative channels and promote effective policies compared to the reference values of the new European generations. The questionnaire was given the title “Youth, Energy and Future” and subtitled: “Pathways for Carbon Transitions”. In its definitive

form it was composed of 4 different sections: 1) you and your personality (school, values, personality); 2) the future that you imagine; 3) the future that you would like; 4) socio-demographic data about your family. The total of variables was 190 though in reality a large part of these were array questions whose values contained 4 or 5 elements so that the compilation time, depending on the language, was calculated at between 35 and 45 minutes overall.

In six months, by a snowball sampling procedure, 4,186 questionnaires completely filled out were collected, while another 621 were not completed and thus were not considered valid. The greater part of the questionnaires, 92%, were written completely inside of a school context, 2% were begun in a school context and finished elsewhere, while 6% of those interviewed responded in an independent manner, presumably from their own homes. The aggregate data show the participation of 42 schools with 187 classes involved in a large number of EU countries and, in any case, the original target countries of the investigation are well represented. After the data cleaning the data set was composed by more than 2000 questionnaires.

### **Main results**

The objective of the research was to investigate the young perceptions on the topic of energy, sustainability and future life scenarios. The results from this survey underlines:

1. *The centrality of school in the life of young Europeans.* The gathered information confirms the centrality of school, as medium in the journey between their daily lives and their future adult lives, within the network of educational references for young Europeans. The scholastic institution is not the only socialization arena that the young people consider legitimate in influencing their own educational journey. It emerges that education is still considered as a springboard from which to build a future and for the transition towards adulthood, representing a vehicle through which to proceed with campaigns regarding the opportunities and risks linked to a post-carbon society. To this end we consider the importance attributed to school by the young students, above all the males, as they look for help in the search of the “deep meaning of life”. That does not mean that family and a network of friends do not have a strong impact on their construction

of the imaginary society of the future. On the contrary, further confirmation as to the centrality of the education system and its social acknowledgment is provided by the survey of the social capital of the young Europeans and the importance and value of friendship, which is typical in this age-group and which underlines the particularity of the peer group in confirming one's identity. Therefore we are not talking about young people lacking in social relationships outside of school, considering school as the only socialization arena, but that the educational institution continues to play a central role in the daily life of young Europeans. If school represents the bridge across which we find adulthood, it constitutes therefore the junction from which the complexity of the changing cultural scene is disentangled. This causes us to consider school as the epicentre of the distribution of educational projects aimed at the adolescents of today's carbon society against the adult of the post-carbon society.

2. *Misinformed and fearful of life in a post-carbon society.* The hypothetical end of oil does not seem to worry young Europeans who link the issue to a sufficiently remote time and do not imagine that it will coincide with their daily lives or interfere with their habits and experiences. The youngest, born and raised in a time of uncertainty and risk showed the most detachment and the least fear: we imagined them "surfing to the future" with an attitude that on the one hand foresees them as already aware of a context characterised by continuous change and therefore already educated and adapt to instability, which they perceive as normal and therefore do not worry about it, to on the other hand immersed in their present and incapable of imagining possible different future scenarios. The "older" individuals (over 16) tend to view the end of oil as a more short-term possibility (within 50 years) and demonstrate an ability to foresee different scenarios which are almost entirely negative. Even when they showed to be capable of identifying possible alternatives they seemed to be more the result of slogans than of realistic lifestyles. Some regional exceptions can be pointed out however, in particular France, which we can imagine as well connected to social and educational policy and whose young people demonstrated awareness and sensitivity. Even when identifying the states "guilty of pollution", the young people tend to turn their attention towards countries outside Europe, identifying the two great peaks of world capitalism as the countries responsible. The same is repeated when they chose possible "saviours" where, within a highly varied

context, the USA emerged again. The young people do however place great trust in science and knowledge: in the future the young Europeans feel that they can trust scientists and doctors and that knowledge and education represent important supplies for their future. The appeal of knowledge in the daily lives of young Europeans is therefore strong: knowledge is interesting and useful in their eyes to those who possess it but also something to which they can aspire. Another institution among those who are worthy of the trust of the young people is a young and *super partes* institution, that is, the European Union.

Our results underline a diffuse lack of sensitivity and knowledge among young people regarding environmental issues: a lack of knowledge, that causes imprudence, serenity and security or a strong fear, splits our sample. This context does not exclude, but rather seems to be particularly favourable towards educational projects aimed at increasing their knowledge of the future and the tools necessary to live in it, as promoted or carried out by the figures that gain their trust (scientists, doctors and members of the European Union).

It emerges an almost “religious faith” about the capacity of science of problem solving that the change will happen without changing the actual wellness and the lifestyle.

This general result from the first analysis has introduced the researcher to a second level of exploration with more sophisticated statistical instruments, to best analyse the components of these expectations.

Andrea Sciandra (*Social capital and social network sites: an empirical analysis of European high school students*) analyses the theme of social capital, with an accurate research in terms of trust, size of personal networks, volunteering activities and usage of social network sites (SNS);

Emanuela Rinaldi and Andrea Bonanomi (*Adolescents and money: values and tools to handle the future*) get deeper the system of value of money on their future with a particular focus on materialism and post-materialism bounded to the importance of money and consume;

Debora Viviani (*The beauty as a value. The present and the future*) gets closer to the thematic of beauty from different points of view, starting from the “natural attitude” to the importance of this value in adolescence and trying to understand how it is oriented also to the future;

Paolo Angelini (*Aspirations of intergenerational mobility. Perception of change in young Europeans*) analyses the theme of social mobility, with the

logistic regression, presenting the different perceptions in different social classes. Reflections on the aspirational models reveal different levels of trust in the educational system;

Alessio Surian (*Transformative learning and youth agency within present and future urban scenarios*) presents some results on the side of revelations about the themes of environment and sustainable development. In particular the author explores which are the agencies that young adolescents see as more relevant for the future;

Francesca Guarino (*European adolescents awareness from energy supply to life perspectives*) analyses the social representation of “energy” in the post-carbon society revealing the uncertainty on which adolescents are already accustomed. In Guarino’s essay the capacity of the Fukushima disaster to take young Europeans (mostly in Italy and Germany) to change opinion on the theme of nuclear fusion has been taken into account;

Francesca Setiffi (*Talking about school and values. Educational expectations, values and beliefs of European young people*) analyses the school as a source of legitimation, identifying the differences between males and females and the diverse perception of future in those students with a negative scholastic performance.

From these studies emerges the lack of educational policies coordinated by the European Union. In particular young people seem to know very little about the relation between consumed energy and the results on the condition of future lifestyle. Energy appears to be as a non essential component, because it is considered as obvious. It is known for the damages that some of its productions may cause, but it is not seen as an integrated part in everyday life. Only with this kind of attitude the society can indeed become stakeholders pushing for a better and more qualitative use of energy, but this is a goal that involves a scholastic commitment not less than that of the seemingly more important subjects, such as literature or mathematics, or other technical teachings. Finally, the role of schools and education in the transformation of value systems and representations needs to be taken into account to provide a communication campaign on future life scenario coordinated by the European Union and directed to raise awareness among high school students of today who will be the citizens of tomorrow.