

## **Aspirations of intergenerational mobility. Perception of change in young Europeans**

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*Abstract:* In this study, the importance of certain subjective variables in the aspiration towards intergenerational social mobility were examined, by using logistic regression, according to data from the PACT project. Each factor is understood as an “argumentative tool” to which the choices of the young students interviewed may be “anchored”. What stands out, other than the specifics of the individual national contexts (Italy, France, Germany, and United Kingdom), is a disparity which still seems to characterise the system of aspirations in lower social classes, together with their objective condition.

*Keywords:* Aspirations, social change, intergenerational mobility

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## **Introduction**

History seems, in recent decades, to have given new generations a considerably restructured idea of work, economy and social stratification when compared to the past. The processes of economic globalisation, which involve the markets in the first instance, have changed the world of work and produced new types of individual uncertainty concerning job opportunities, contractual stability, necessary career skills and social conflict between job seekers from countries whose trade union power and rules is not commensurate with their own.

These considerations assume greater importance in the slow recovery from a global economic crisis which, starting from the first financial signs in 2008 and the later ones in the “real” economy, led several European countries to a crisis of the welfare state system and increasingly strict economic policies to stabilise public spending. The markets are in a highly unstable condition, forced to reevaluate the fundamental driving factors (Rullani, 2010). The relationship between employment supply and demand requires new types of skill recognition (Marini, 2011) and the educational system is facing complex dialectic challenges in a changing society. Certain critics see this as a new stage in capitalism, which has radical social implications (see, for example, Gallino, 2011; Touraine, 2011).

The unemployment rate is still high (even considering heavy differences of a geographical nature), especially with regards to young people (according to 2010 eurostat statistics the ratio would be 20.9% in the EU, 9.9% in Germany, 19,6% in the UK, 23,3% in France, 27,8% in Italy, 41,6% in Spain).

If, on the one hand, the processes of the individualisation of a society based on risk seem to have been confirmed, promoting more reflective types of subjectivity (Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens, Lash, 1999; Besozzi, 2009), on the other hand we must consider how the sense of instability at work seems highly correlated to structural matters: unemployment levels, protection of employee’s jobs and cost of labour policies (Erlinghagen, 2008; Reyneri 2009; Klandermans, Hesselink, Vuuren, 2010; De Bustillo, De Pedraza, 2010).

This essay will explore the perception young Europeans have of the possibility of achieving, in the future, a socio-economic status higher than that of their family of origin. It will refer more specifically to the current differentiation in working life plans, and their biographical definition (Beck, 2008) rather than to a comparison with the existing literature on intergenerational mobility which is more often linked to studies on social inequality (Breen 2004; Ballarino, Checchi, 2006; Cobalti, Schizzerotto, 1994). As Giddens maintains, in the first phase of the modern age the concepts of rite and repetition prevailed, and the historical belonging of a subject to a specific social group was established by cognitive frames in which is inscribed the existence of the person, providing “always a frame for the action” (2000, p. 58). In the late modern age, the situation is more complex, as it is characterised by choices and decisions: the actor becomes author of a “biographical project”, grown in conjunction with the transitions of the social structures with which he/she is called on to build and to define his/her personal identity.

Following this line of reasoning, we will seek an answer to two questions: to what assumptions, or tales, are the beliefs of young Europeans linked? What influence do country of origin and starting socio-economic conditions have on the representation of change of status?

### **Family, social mobility and aspirations**

The recent OCSE report (2010) “A Family affair: Intergenerational Social Mobility across OECD Countries” is illuminating right from its choice of title. This report concerns the role that the family plays in the educational school, economic and professional success of young people.

It is not surprising that the research proves how much family background (socio-economic status and level of education) has an overall influence on the income of the subsequent generation as much as the opportunity of a good secondary or higher education does, even considering differences among the countries. France, Italy, United Kingdom and the United States have the lowest mobility rate: in Denmark, Finland, Italy and Luxembourg children whose parents have a university

degree have 30% more chance of reaching that same level of education, compared to the children of parents who have a high school diploma<sup>2</sup>.

It is clear how structural conditions of disparity linger, they are fundamentally linked to the economic and working spheres, and it is difficult to reduce them to individual choices.

Amongst the conclusions, alongside an important call for policies which reduce the existing gap, is the placing of special emphasis on the motivational risk which stems from not adequately cultivating the expression of national “talents”: low levels of social mobility may reduce professional aspirations and entrepreneurial activities, having obvious implications for the entire economical sphere.

Families represent a crucial junction, charged with responsibilities, in the transmission of cultural capital, values and beliefs that are the root of the choices a young person makes (Santagati, 2011). Growing up in a lower socio-economic class often means not being able to count on analogous levels of cultural stimulus: even parents are less likely to nurture career or higher education aspirations (Shoon, 2006) because of the difficulty in correctly understanding the availability of realistic opportunities, or, more simply, for fear of setting their children up for disappointment.

This, according to Bourdieu (1983), could be solved through a process of internalising the dominant culture and the means by which it offers specific social groups the opportunity to determine their “habitus” and future expectations, which are not equally distributed among the population. More recently, Appadurai (2004) maintained that the *capacity to aspire*, namely to imagine alternatives and aspire to a different (better) future, is not related to individual tension as much as to a cultural apparatus which is present in all social groups. Giving events a different meaning, and thus creating and knowing how to seize new possibilities, needs collective acknowledgment based on the re-negotiation of the terms with which the actual assets are determined. The development of such skills

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<sup>2</sup> The longitudinal analysis of Breen (2004) lead up to believe there is a general reduction in the intergenerational mobility (unlike in the 70's and 80's) and a substantial stability in the differences among the countries where social fluidity is low, such as Italy, France, Germany and those where it is higher, such as Sweden, Poland and Hungary.

adopts political significance and contains, on the one hand, the emancipatory potential for the poor to gain a voice (in the meaning Hirschman<sup>3</sup> gives to the term) and, on the other hand, the risk of social control by the “dominating” groups.

Ray (2006) maintains instead that *aspiration windows* are subjective in nature; they are constructed in relation to the context in which people live and in the comparison of one’s own opportunities with those of one’s peers.

Because of these reasons the aspiration level can be considered high or low only by evaluating the whole existential condition of a person, within a horizon of choice which presents remarkable personal variability.

The definition of an identity project within which it becomes possible to find a rationale for decision-making processes represents, thus, a proper dialectic which is hardly linked to a deterministic formula.

While Beck (2008) supports the pathway to a *biography of chance* in life projects, to highlight the importance of a person who risks, who experiments, who is no longer branded by historical models or defined by social categories or institutions, the venture does not occur in a social void. The cultural horizon supplies concepts, meaning and elements of comparison which can be adopted or not, yet they still represent an “order”, a “common understanding”, a reality that the subject, especially if young, must confront. Subjective dimensions, collective pressures and a sense of belonging – which are not only issues of a structural nature – allow the social actor to co-build the context in which he makes choices, determines interests and environmental opportunities<sup>4</sup>, sometimes identifying “creative exit strategies”.

In this way, Giddens (1994) speaks of two kinds of consciousness, practical and discursive, which have a transformative relationship (double hermeneutic). The former characterises the social actor as “competent” and is used in the solution of daily problems (what is done). The latter represents the place of reflective thinking (the explanation of what is done). The reasoning used to support the coherence of one’s explanations are the

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<sup>3</sup> Hirschman, A.O. (1982). *Lealtà, defezione, protesta*. Milano: Bompiani.

<sup>4</sup> Compare, for an in-depth study, Mantovani, G. (1995). *Comunicazione e identità*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

expression of a narrative need which surpasses that of action, validates the choice and facilitates the identification with one's social group.

Reflective thinking "*intrinsically alters the circumstances to which it originally referred*" (Giddens, 1994, p. 60) to the extent that the author continues to explain with the well-known statement, "we can envisage alternative futures whose very propagation might help them to be realised" (p. 51). In the same way, the interpretation of the present and the maturation of future aspirations are the result of transformative activities which can be stimulated equally by the educational world, opening the intersubjective confrontation amongst different aspirational models.

Several studies state that nourishing the individual aspiration system counteracts the weight of initial socio-economic differences (Shoon, Parsons, 2002; Shoon, 2006). This attention seems more wide-spread in Anglo-Saxon countries, where the importance of a solid education is backed by the promotion of tools which cultivate the ambition of the youth as a requirement for mature citizenship (Gutman, Akerman 2008).

The capacity to evaluate alternative options and to plan for a better future potentially belongs to everyone and cannot be considered a "scarce resource" determined by economical parameters. It is abundant in the measure in which we invest in its development, acknowledging the emancipatory value which lies in culture and creativity (Appadurai, 1996; 2004).

In the following pages a specific aspiration is analysed: the possibility of improving one's socio-economic status compared to that of one's family. This will take into account two different kinds of individual belonging, one's nationality and one's original socio-economic status.

The writer knows well that the pluralism of affiliating individual identity may in no way be considered exhaustive, and the conjecture that subjective changes may only be produced at a micro-social level is strong. The interpretation of one's chance to succeed, though, is often linked to socially-created collective narrations (Czarniawska, 2000), which allows some subjects more freedom than others on the basis of underlying assumptions. As such, various pieces of a more complex puzzle are highlighted here. These arguments can "anchor" the story of personal choices, and it is useful to study the topic in greater depth.

Giving priority to the perception of the future – through use of concepts such as social class, so much discussed and difficult to include in an operative definition – does not allude to certain predicted values but to a condition of the present. Particularly in regards to that which it represents at its peak as an expression of the planning impulse, of the fears and hopes of the young interviewees.

### **Research methodology**

The research refers to a part of the sample in the “Young People’s Human Capital and Social Capital in a Post Carbon Social Life” PACT survey<sup>5</sup>. The survey involved 10 European countries (for detailed information please see the final publication) in a complex and wide research project which aimed to study young Europeans’ prospective futures when compared with the different issues in their lives.

Regarding the purposes of this study, the samples coming from Italy ( $N=574$ ) Germany ( $N=530$ ) France ( $N=282$ ) and United Kingdom ( $N=472$ ) were used, as these countries seemed most comparable and generally representative of existing trends due to the history of their economies as well as their size and cultural diversity. A total of 1858 subjects were surveyed.

The main goal was to understand which structural and psychological variables, among those available, most influence the aspiration to improve the social and economic status of the interviewees, compared to their family of origin.

For this purpose, the binary logistic regression<sup>6</sup>, a multivariable technique which allows evaluation of probability net after other factors, was used. The criterion of Backward selection is the backward elimination

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<sup>5</sup> Pathways for Carbon Transitions, FP7 Project, Socio-economic factors and actors that shape the “post-carbon” society, European Commission, European Union - FP7-SSH-2007-1, Project Number: 225503.

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth study on this technique please see Corbetta P., Gasperoni G., Pisati M. (2001). *Statistica per la ricerca sociale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

of variables, one by one, from the equation, according to the least loss of explanatory capacity.

Our dependent variable was the aspiration to upwards intergenerational mobility (deterioration/stability versus improvement of one's condition).

The well-known concept of social class, it must be said, is useful in that it is immediately understandable, yet causes difficulties in terms of agreement in literature with regards to what it really means and how to use it. In the present work, an ex-ante classification was adopted. The subjects were asked to proceed with two types of self-categorisation before filling in the questionnaire. In the first (Which socio-economic class do your parents currently belong to?) the students were asked to specify what class they considered their family to be part of from seven different levels (very low, low, quite low, middle, middle-high, high and very high). In the second (Which socio-economic class do you think you'll belong to in 2030?) they were asked to express an evaluation of what they thought would most likely be their own social class by 2030, using the same levels of classification. The assumption was that, during the twenty years between the two evaluations, the interviewees considered reaching a secure position, also through the possible creation of their own family unit.

The value corresponding to the former self-categorisation was subtracted from the latter, obtaining a score which indicated the variability, negative (10,8%), positive (31%), or possibly stable (58,2%). Once the three corresponding groups were created, the variable was changed into dichotomous.

Independent variables were inserted in the regression which were selected on the basis of a comparison with literature and accordingly with appropriate processing performed through shift tables, which revealed correlations with the studied phenomena. Each of them was then made dichotomous, giving the value of 1 to the characteristics of which the influence was analysed (age excluded). More specifically:

- gender (female): from a comparison with the literature it is clear that women tend to express a higher level of aspiration compared to men, both regarding school success and future careers (Schoon, Martin, Ross 2007).

- age: in a number of researches aspiration levels had a tendency to decrease with an increase in age. It is our intention to verify if this is also true for the perception of social mobility or if the conclusion of the school program increases its subjective relevance.
- presence of at least one parent with a university degree: one of the main factors connected to aspiration to a higher qualification is the parents' education level, and this condition influences one's job prospective; this variable was inserted to understand if and how much it likewise influences the representation of one's chances of social emancipation.
- aspiration to self-employment: self-employment represents a good job opportunity in times of economic crisis, and is also considered desirable by more than half of the people under the age of 24 (Favretto, Sartori 2007). In different countries and in comparison with different starting conditions, is such an idea confirmed or is it linked to expectations of social improvement?
- aspiration to obtaining a university degree (or high school diploma): the ability to rely upon higher education represents the most important pathway to mobility, after socio-economic status. We wish to verify, in relation to the other variables, its level of influence on the perception of mobility.
- school performance: it has been established in scholarship, since the first research by Lewin<sup>7</sup> on aspiration levels, how much previous experience of success can influence expectations for the future. It is necessary to ask how much being successful at school therefore influences the perception of possible status advancement.
- with the purpose of understanding what values are more connected with aspiration or with socio-economic improvement, responses to the question "To make your future better, how important do you think the following are?" were considered in relation to the perceived importance of the items "Work", "Knowledge" and "Money" (terms previously evaluated in the relation to upward social

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<sup>7</sup> Lewin K., Dembo T., Festinger L. and Sears S.P. (1944). Level of Aspiration. In J. Hunt, McV. (eds.). *Personality and the Behavior Disorders*, Vol. I, New York.

mobility). A range of responses between 1 and 5 was possible (1 “Not at all important” to 5 “Very important”). After evaluating the percentile distribution, in the regression the answer “Very important” was most used, compared to the others.

- the last two inserted variables regard the “temporal perspective”, *i.e.* attitude towards long-term plans which, in the uncertain state of an individualised and deinstitutionalised modernity (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1999), leads young people to self-orientation rather than orientation towards society, to the present rather than to the future. In the PACT survey we referred to the research by Zimbardo and Boyd (2008), adopting a shorter version of the Zimbardo Time Perspective Inventory (ZTPI) by D’Alessio, Guarino, De Pascalis and Zimbardo (2003) in the questionnaire. The effective repartition obtained from cluster analysis<sup>8</sup> was used here. This allowed for a link between the time horizon and the post-carbon-society scenarios, the energy issue after the exhaustion of oil. Of the three reference groups (present, future and unbalance), the first two were dichotomised, obtaining the variables “high vision of the present” (immediate satisfaction of desires, “carpe diem”, little attention to the consequences of action) and “high vision of the future” (long-term goals, tendency to plan, evaluation of costs and benefits, attention to the consequences of action).

The regression model was later verified, searching some kind of “aspirational morphology” among the four surveyed European countries and the different social and economical statuses.

### **Aspirations to social mobility and self-employment**

An initial introduction, to give a general framework to the following analysis, is related to the four countries which were the object of the essay (France, Italy, Germany and United Kingdom). It concerns the notions of

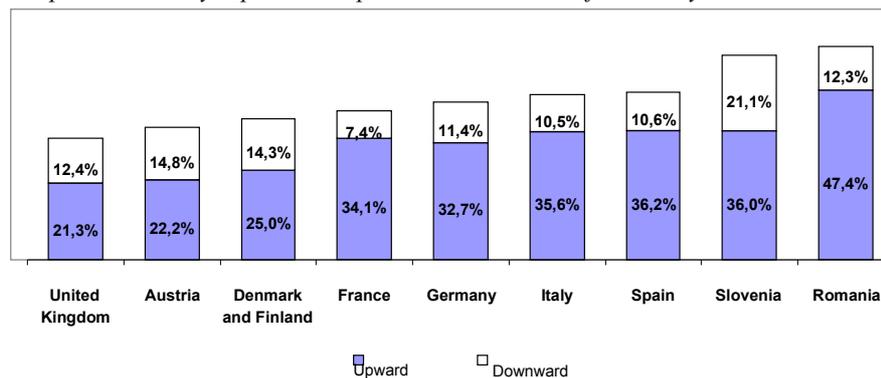
<sup>8</sup> The cluster analysis was thus carried out using the following variables: Zimbardo scale in its reduced version; gender; country; perception of the post-carbon society (questions: In your opinion, when petrol will run out?; When oil has run out, what will mainly replace it?).

intergenerational mobility of the youth of the countries involved in the PACT survey.

To confirm that perceptions, *i.e.* expressions of hopes and fears, and not objective conditions of improvement of one's social and economical condition are being dealt with, it must be highlighted that the newest countries to enter the EU, Slovenia and Romania, expressed greater vitality. More than half of those interviewed considered a variation, and in the case of Romania the aspiration to upward mobility is significantly higher than the rest of the sample (graph 1).

If interviewees from France, Italy and Germany show a similar evaluation of their chances of improvement (with percentages between 32,7% and 35,6%), the values for United Kingdom are definitely lower (21,3%)(graph 1)<sup>9</sup>.

Graphic 1. Mobility aspiration - upward and downward for country



By breaking down the data by socio-economic status it is possible to verify that the lowest class, as was perhaps easily predictable, is the class which expresses the highest aspiration to upward mobility (tab. 1).

<sup>9</sup>  $p \leq 0.001$  in this and all the following data, except when differently specified.

If differences among countries tend to be rather limited in the middle-higher social class, they tend to widen in the lower classes, especially in the working class. France and Italy are the countries where those who start from a disadvantaged position most believe that they have a chance to improve their condition, which differs from what occurs in United Kingdom where such experience applies to only one young person out of three (tab. 1).

*Table 1. Mobility aspiration: socio-economic status and country*

		Socio-economic status and country			
			Downward	Stability	Upward
<b>Low</b>	France	n	0	6	14
		%	0,0%	30,0%	70,0%
	Germany	n	0	14	16
		%	0,0%	46,7%	53,3%
	Italy	n	6	10	44
		%	10,0%	16,7%	73,3%
	United Kingdom	n	8	26	18
		%	15,4%	50,0%	34,6%
<b>Middle</b>	France	n	4	76	54
		%	3,0%	56,7%	40,3%
	Germany	n	4	124	76
		%	2,0%	60,8%	37,3%
	Italy	n	16	194	118
		%	4,9%	59,1%	36,0%
	United Kingdom	n	12	170	44
		%	5,3%	75,2%	19,5%
<b>Middle-high</b>	France	n	12	48	16
		%	15,8%	63,2%	21,1%
	Germany	n	52	108	72
		%	22,4%	46,6%	31,0%
	Italy	n	22	66	32
		%	18,3%	55,0%	26,7%
	United Kingdom	n	20	80	30
		%	15,4%	61,5%	23,1%

The aspiration to self-employment (tab. 2) appears strongly related to upward mobility, with 37.8% believing in an improvement, and a more residual 27.2% who think they could, in the future, work as an employee.

The inclination to become self-employed concerns 52.7% of the Italian youth, and 45.3% in France, compared to 29.3% in United Kingdom and 24.4% in Germany.

In recent years temporary work contracts have become more wide-spread in all European countries (OECD, 2007). Some scholars (Pedersini, 2001) have emphasised how an important part of self-employed work must be interpreted as employee work which is “disguised” (dependent self-employed). This was introduced by the law to make the market more flexible even if it is characterised by only one employee.

*Table 2. Mobility aspiration: – country and work aspiration*

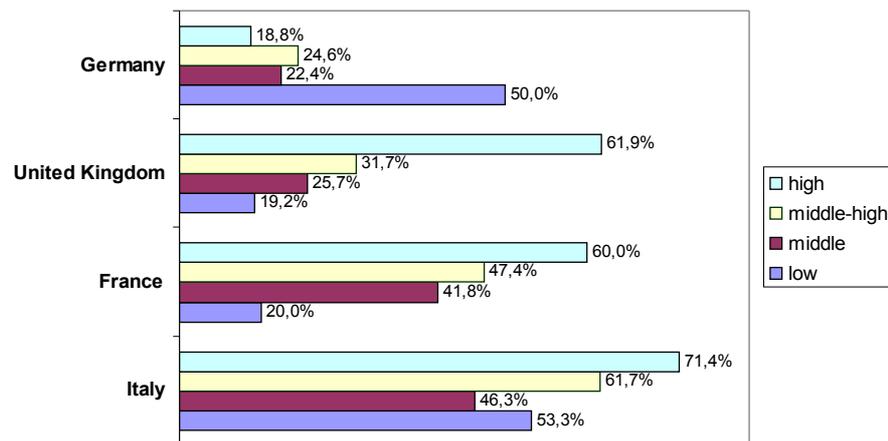
		<i>Mobility aspiration – country and work aspiration</i>			
		<i>Downward</i>	<i>Stability</i>	<i>Upward</i>	
<b>France</b>	Employed	n	8	86	
		%	5,3%	57,3%	37,3%
	Self- employed	n	12	72	36
		%	10,0%	60,0%	30,0%
<b>Germany</b>	Employed	n	52	216	122
		%	13,3%	55,4%	31,3%
	Self- employed	n	8	64	50
		%	6,6%	52,5%	41,0%
<b>Italy</b>	Employed	n	38	150	72
		%	14,6%	57,7%	27,7%
	Self- employed	n	20	142	124
		%	7,0%	49,7%	43,4%
<b>United Kingdom</b>	Employed	n	48	212	52
		%	15,4%	67,9%	16,7%
	Self- employed	n	8	86	40
		%	6,0%	64,2%	29,9%

It is clear that in times of economic crisis such contracts allow the financial risk to be contained and counterbalances economic fluctuation. Yet they mainly affect young people entering the job market. For these reasons it is possible to suggest that a proportion of the interviewees really meant to refer to the aforementioned kinds of self-employment. Proof of this lies in the comparison of the responses given by Italian and German young people: in Italy, where such contracts are more wide-spread when

compared with the rest of Europe and where youth unemployment is higher, we find greater inclination towards self-employment. In Germany, where youth unemployment rates are lower, and similar to the rest of the population, and workers' protection is higher, we can see a lower inclination to self-employment.

In any case, if in United Kingdom ( $p \leq 0.01$ ), Italy and Germany ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) self-employment is significantly related to the aspiration of improving one's social condition, as a kind of "emancipatory process", the same is not true for the French sample. Here there are no significant differences between the two inclinations and it even seems that employed work lies higher in the aspirations of the interviewees (graph 2).

Graphic 2. Self-employment aspiration – socio-economic status and country



After verifying the data according to socio-economic status, further proof was confirmed: in Italy, France and particularly United Kingdom, aspiration to self-employment increases in relation to the increase in the social class to which one is born into. Conversely, young Germans seem to consider it a characteristic of the working class, which imagines a self-

employed social condition at a rate which is more than double that of the other groups.

### Aspirational models

Binary logistic regression permitted a verification of the importance of each of the differing variables, net after deductions, with the goal of understanding which one could be the most influential. The regression model was applied to the four countries which were the object of the survey, with the goal of emphasising possible differences. The measure of the affiliation which approximates the probability to aspire to upward mobility is evaluated by  $Exp(\beta)$ <sup>10</sup>.

The main data is shown in the table 3. Immediate food for thought is related to the influence of gender: in every country, except for France, there is higher aspiration to social mobility from women than from men. This data partially confirms the survey's original expectations. As the age of the interviewees increases, particularly as they approach the end of high school, there seems only to be a marked influence for German and British young people, and especially for the latter. The four emerging models highlight several important features in their association with the dependent variable.

French students who picture their socio-economic status as undergoing a journey of emancipation seem to express a pragmatic attitude which focuses on the present. This may be supported by good school performance and the conviction that knowledge (more than money or work itself) can pave the way to a better future.

German students represent the only group where aiming at the future seems associated with mobility; a trend for "widening the time horizon" in order to define one's professional (and perhaps personal) identity is further strengthened by the aspiration to achieve a high-level qualification.

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<sup>10</sup> When  $Exp(\beta)$  has value 1 there is no difference of probability between expressing or not that characteristic; when it is higher than 1 the probability is higher (the  $Exp(\beta)=2$  means that having that characteristic, the gender for example, entails double probability to have expressed aspiration to upward mobility) whereas when it is lower than 1, it goes down.

Table 3. Upward intergenerational mobility aspiration - country

	Country							
	France		Germany		Italy		UK	
Nagelkerke R2	0,292		0,173		0,149		0,345	
N	282		530		574		472	
	$\beta$	Exp( $\beta$ )	B	Exp( $\beta$ )	$\beta$	Exp( $\beta$ )	$\beta$	Exp( $\beta$ )
Gender (female =1)			,676**	1,96 6	,638**	1,89 2	1,119***	3,06 1
Age			,282***	1,32 6			1,085***	2,96 0
Parents_univ_degree					-,940***	,391		
Self- employ orient.					,750***	2,11 8	1,027***	2,79 4
Aspiration_universit y degree (or more)			,597*	1,81 6			,968**	2,63 2
Money_for_future							1,460***	4,30 4
Work_for_future					,627**	1,87 2		
Knowledge_ for future	1,705***	5,50 1					1,232***	3,43 0
Future-oriented			,545*	1,72 4				
Present-oriented	2,057***	7,82 4						
School_performance	1,202*	3,32 5	1,565**	4,78 5				
Constant	-2,709***	,067	-6,180***	,002	-1,486***	,226	-20,83***	,000

\*\*\*  $p <= 0.001$ , \*\*  $p <= 0.01$ , \*  $p <= 0.05$  - Only the significant interaction terms are given.

That is to say a bachelor's degree or higher, which seems to confirm a certain level of trust in the educational system. In fact, as in France, current school success seems by itself to be a good indicator of the improvement of one's social status. The results of the model applied to the sample of Italian youngsters express some particular features whose interpretation is more complicated; possession of a university degree by one or both of the parents, a variable thought of as facilitating higher levels of aspiration,

could on the contrary have an opposite effect: children of parents with a university degree do not always believe that they can improve upon the current social status of their family.

An important element which may play a role, however, is self-employment, which in Italy is a typical expression of social emancipation. A job (aside from having one at all, but conceivably being able to chose one) is thought of as the most important factor in one's future.

Among the young British interviewees who picture a positive change in their status, obtaining a university degree appears significantly relevant, as is also true in Germany. They would rely more on income and knowledge to improve their future position. The idea of being self-employed seems to be, as is the case for Italy, a good indicator.

### **Influence of family socio-economic status**

It is not the purpose of this study to reiterate the strong sociological debate between those who believe that the concept of social class is outdated when interpreting phenomena and critical situations in the contemporary world and those who believe that such differences still remain when defining structural conditions of disparity.

Much more simply, as stated in the previous paragraph, this study wishes to underscore the key emerging differences. The first element of reflection concerns advancements which come with the dimension of time: among the interviewees' different socio-economic statuses there are remarkable differences ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) relating to the perception of the future (analogous results were found amongst single countries). The attitude towards the future appears to have a positive correlation with the increase in social status (low 42,1%, middle 44,3%, middle-high 53,5%, high 60,5%). This indicates that the lower social classes are also those less inclined to plan future goals, to reflect upon environmental scenarios, to prepare long-term projects. With regards to being oriented towards the present, there are no remarkable differences among the four groups.

Aspiring to gain a high qualification (bachelor's degree or higher) confirms the same trend ( $p \leq 0.001$ ), with the evidence emphasising a

disparity in the overall aspirational system of those who are in a lower economic position (low 36,6%, middle 53,4%, middle-high 66%, high 57,3%).

The results of the regression do not include analysis of the higher class, in which the number of subjects who assume a further improvement in their status is insufficient.

*Table 4. Upward intergenerational mobility aspiration – socio-economic status*

	Socio-economic status					
	Low class		Middle class		Middle-high class	
<i>Nagelkerke R2</i>	0,512		0,166		0,294	
<i>N</i>	162		892		558	
	$\beta$	<i>Exp</i> ( $\beta$ )	$\beta$	<i>Exp</i> ( $\beta$ )	$\beta$	<i>Exp</i> ( $\beta$ )
Gender (female =1)	1,484**	4,409	0,401**	1,493	0,556*	1,743
Age	,586**	1,797	0,192***	1,212	0,441***	1,555
Parents_univ_degree	-1,916**	,147				
Self-employm_orient.	-1,252*	,286	0,579***	1,784	1,484***	4,412
Aspiration_university degree (or more)			0,393*	1,481		
Money_for_future			0,848***	2,335		
Work_for_future	-3,577***	,028			0,563**	1,755
Knowledge_for_future	3,860***	47,457				
Future-oriented	-1,681**	,186	0,858***	2,36		
Present-oriented	-,954	,385			0,653**	1,922
School_performance					1,014**	2,756
Constant	-7,499*	,001	-5,282***	0,005	10,172***	0,000

\*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ , \*  $p \leq 0.05$  - Only the significant interaction terms are given.

Also in this case the influence of the gender variable (with a *Exp*( $\beta$ ) it is markedly higher in the low-class) and an increase in age is systematically worthy of note; this phenomenon is confirmed to be decisively transversal.

Inclination towards self-employment particularly characterises the middle classes, with a marked result in the middle-high-class (an analysis of the shift tables of the high-class does not show correlation between improving status and work orientation). Entrepreneurship is perceived as an opportunity to change the current position but the sense and conditions of the enterprise assume different characteristics in the two middle classes.

In the middle class model the obtaining of higher qualifications and, more generally, a tendency towards planning for the future, characterise those who picture social progression. Here, reaching a satisfying economic condition (money) represents, at least in part, its completion.

The middle-high-class values the “work” (its quality, the capacity to choose the job they prefer) as a distinctive element. This is anchored to a higher belief in current school success, expressing a greater concern with the present time, daily life and the satisfaction of immediate desires (presumably also as consumers).

In an opposite manner the low class data indicates a negative correlation between the self-employment work variable: those who aspire to self-employment trust less the possibility of economical success, compared to those who aspire to employed work.

It may be supposed that self-employment is perceived more in terms of precariousness, uncertainty and risk rather than in the romantic view of entrepreneurship.

Among the students belonging to the low-class, counterintuitive data is recorded: those who have at least one parent with a university degree seem to express lower expectations of upward mobility than those who do not. Plausibly, understanding the parents’ difficulties in achieving a better social position, even if counting on a high qualification, could reduce the hopes of having a different personal journey in the future.

The “work” value is not perceived as an aspect which may improve one’s future: those who imagine it is, i.e. those who think that the type of job chosen can influence the quality of one’s lifestyle, imagine with lower frequency an improvement of status (or even fear a further worsening of it).

The variable which, net after deductions of the others, seems to explain the entire model (with high R<sup>2</sup> of Nagelkerke, 0, 512) and the idea that “knowledge” really makes a difference ( $Exp(\beta)$  of 47,457) represents its

emancipatory energy. A wide-spread image, introduced in the strategy of Lisbon in 2000, which perhaps echoes the narratives of “knowledgable societies”, has a strong commitment to democratisation. It is based on new guarantees for routes into education, equal opportunities and advancement contingent on merit.

The potential of improving one’s status risks, in this sense, being linked to external conditions which are out of one’s control and out of individual choice. Particularly considering how the determination to get a university degree is lower than in other social groups. Perhaps for these reasons negative associations emerge both in that which concerns orientation towards future and present: the boundaries of optimistic thinking are reduced in the period of anticipation, particularly on a personal level, as long-term plans become narrower and immediate desires more difficult to satisfy.

## **Conclusions**

This essay, which has been of an explorative type, intended to emphasise those structural and narrative conditions that give a basis to the perception of upward intergenerational mobility.

Results confirm, coherently alongside the literature on the topic, how the female population in the sample expresses such aspiration at a higher level than does the male one, in all the countries except for France, where the levels are instead analogous. Yet, even if we consider the ambivalent data of systematically attaining higher performance at school, in Italy and United Kingdom this expresses a remarkably lower aspiration to reaching a university degree. Besides, what must be highlighted is how a focus on the present prevails among women whereas orientation towards the future prevails among men, and this can be generalised from a geographical standpoint.

Even if it holds true that such spheres are connected to the evaluation of future scenarios in the *post carbon society*, and thus include considerations which are related to future sources of energy rather than just to the

“temporal perspective”, it is a result which requires further levels of in depth study.

Approaching of the end of higher education represents a step in the educational path where the issue of “intergenerational mobility” is more immediate. Whilst among the younger students the idea of stability compared to family status prevails, the conviction of being able to improve one’s socio-economic condition increases with age (significant differences are also present in the fear of losing already acquired positions).

Reflections relative to the aspirational models in those four countries which are the objects of the study, even if evaluated with the aforementioned precautions, reveal differing levels of trust in the educational system between the interviewees. Particularly in that which concerns the possibility of future socio-economic improvement, aspiration to obtaining a university degree is in fact only associated with upward mobility in Germany and United Kingdom. School success influences only in a selective way, only becoming indicative in the case of Germany and France.

The presence of parents with a university degree is characteristic of the model less than the initial hypothesis assumes. If no positive associations become evident between any of the four countries’ samples, among the young Italians the phenomenon is the opposite, undifferentiated between different social classes: more specifically, those who have parents with a university degree intend to reach higher education but they do not imagine that this will entail higher socio-economic opportunities. It must be noted that, in fact, obtaining a university degree seems to offer less opportunities for upward social mobility (33,3%) than does a high school diploma (40,5%).

In other terms, if the German educational system and the British one are positively perceived in their effectiveness as “status vehicles”, in Italy the relationship between the level of education and the vertical mobility which had characterised the history of the past fifty years seems to be broken, at least in the minds of the interviewees. A correlation between social emancipation and self-employment seems instead to be confirmed, common to both Italian and British students.

The family's socio-economic condition continues to represent an important discriminant, also in terms of aspirational models.

The middle class seem to find in entrepreneurship, or in the research of the ideal job, an answer to their desire for change.

Even highlighting the lively and positive energy coming from the social classes of lower status, in reference to the desire for social mobility, a persisting disparity must be noted: the lower the possibility (or at least the perception of it) of obtaining a university degree, the more restricted the long-term seems to be, the more reduced is self-employment as an emancipatory tool.

The prospect of changing one's condition seems to be "delegated", by the subtraction of opportunities, to new regulatory principles, rather than "conquered" with the strength of one's plans for the future. The very presence of a parent with a university degree risks lowering expectations and aspirations, in a complex framework of disillusionment which risks feeding a so called "hope in the waiting".

Further in depth studies, conceivably of a qualitative nature, shall be necessary to explore some of the emerging contradictions, to understand the individual histories and rationales which are at the root of real choices. They would be equally appropriate in verifying how much and in what ways such "anchors" really constitute bonds, or if they should instead be considered in terms of opportunity.

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