

## Book reviews

Natália Alves (2008). *Juventudes e inserção profissional*. Lisbon: EDUCA & Unidade de I&D de Ciências da Educação.

As the holders of academic qualifications which attest to long and intensive educational trajectories, today's young graduates find themselves facing a future in which uncertainty reigns and risk lurks around every corner. For many graduates, a degree no longer guarantees immediate access to more specialized, better-paid jobs, while employment induction processes have lost the linearity which for centuries characterized them: employment for graduates has become a social and political problem (p. 290).

This excerpt provides a clear statement of the central theme of Natália Alves' *Juventudes e inserção profissional*, published by EDUCA and the educational sciences R&D Unit of the University of Lisbon, and the faculty of psychology and education science of the same university. The objective is to describe and explain a recent phenomenon which has made the transition from higher education to the employment market a "social and political" problem. But what's called into question is not the "loss of efficacy" of university education in securing the best jobs for graduates, for as the author is careful to point out "the situation has deteriorated, true, but graduates are still a privileged group in the employment market" (p. 291). Instead, Alves examines the way this "long and complex" social process of transition from the world of education to that of work, viewed from the perspective of the concept of "professional integration" (a term which originated in French sociology), makes such a strong mark on the biographical trajectories and identity construction processes of young graduates, and raises questions on many current policies on public education (higher education, in this case).

Drawing on her vast knowledge of the literature and her personal experience of sociological research – on the relations between the education/training of young people and the work they encounter on leaving school/university, in the vocational training and university contexts – Natália Alves succeeds in reconciling the construction of a theoretical framework of analysis with the formulation of a problem.

The theoretical framework (to which the first three chapters are dedicated) takes as its references the two concepts which give her work its title: *youth* and *professional integration*.

For the first of these references, *youth*, chapter 1 provides a brief but enlightening description of the "process whereby youth becomes a general concept and acquires social consistency" in the modern world, principally via the massification of youth experience. It's in this context that youth is seen as a "social problem" and as a "scientific construct" including the very notion of a plurality of "youths". Quoting from a vast number of authors from different sociological traditions and citing data from many different countries, Natália Alves then addresses the emerging phenomenon of "extended youth" and its consequences for "youth policy" and education, with youth itself increasingly heterogeneous in its characteristics and separated from "adult life" by not just one but several frontiers. Finally, she examines the situation in Portugal, in the light of research principally carried out from the 1980s onwards.

The second reference, *professional integration*, takes up chapters 2 and 3, in which Alves presents two key texts for understanding the professional integration of young people as a phenomenon and for analysing the employment policy directed at this segment of the population. Both are presented with remarkable clarity and succinctness, and on the basis of an extensive review of the literature from various linguistic, scientific and

theoretical traditions. Where possible the author adopts a comparative approach, especially with regard to “employment policy” and the findings of studies on “professional integration”.

Chapter 2 starts with an analysis of the concept of “professional integration” (its emergence and development) within the context of other expressions also used to designate “this phase of life in which young people put their education behind them and start looking for a job”. Alves then moves on to a theoretical discussion of the various perspectives which reinforce the social dimension of this phenomenon and its connection with labour and “social inclusion” policy. The chapter closes with an extremely lucid and convincing analysis of the way “professional integration becomes a social problem”, drawing on evidence from the situations in France, the United Kingdom, Portugal and Germany.

Chapter 3 examines “professional integration” in the light of public policy, focussing on “the problem of unemployment and its solutions”. Once again a comparative perspective is offered, this time drawing on examples from Germany, the UK, France, Sweden and Portugal. As the different examples show, different “integration policies are based on different conceptions of youth and are informed by diverse views on the causes of youth unemployment”. Alves then examines the different “explanatory theories” for “youth unemployment”, from the “big picture” interpretations which place the blame on the current economic situation to those which point to the defects (or ill-adjustments) of youth training. Regardless of which perspective is adopted, the “professional integration of young people” is seen in all the different countries examined as a social and political problem, one which lies at the root of public intervention in the process of transition to working life, whatever form this intervention takes. The existence of such policies has given rise to the growth of a “sociology of professional integration”, the principal findings of which Natália Alves examines in the light of research conducted in France, the UK, the USA and, more particularly, Portugal.

After this theoretical framework for analysis of the concepts of “youth” and “professional integration”, Alves finishes with a chapter dedicated to the formulation of a specific set of problems relative to the particular issue of the professional integration of young university-leavers.

How this issue is constructed is justified by the fact that, as Alves notes in her introduction, this book represents a distillation of the conceptual principles which served as the foundations for the empirical research carried out for the doctoral thesis presented by the author in 2007 at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Lisbon: “*Inserção profissional e formas identitárias. Percursos dos licenciados da Universidade de Lisboa*”<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, the question of the “professional integration of young people” gains an extra dimension in the context of mass access to higher education, with a consequent increase in the number of graduates who “enter the job market at a time when the world’s economies are faced with ever-shorter growth cycles and the effects of the processes of internationalization and globalization”. Natália Alves therefore paints a highly symptomatic picture of the recent expansion of higher education in Portugal and other countries, together with the “inequalities” which this expansion has brought, examining its impact on the increased heterogeneity of the student population and the changes in the employment opportunities open to graduates.

The conclusion which Alves draws from her appraisal of the studies cited in this last chapter represents a challenge in terms not only of the “reform” of higher education but also the analysis of the relationship between training and employment. “The professional integration of higher education graduates is today an issue which is part of the political agenda in nearly every industrialized country. The loss of certain privileges which for centuries had been enjoyed by those holding higher education qualifications has sparked heated debate on the situation of the employment market, and higher education establishments have not escaped attention. (...) [Yet] higher education graduates continue to enjoy clear advantages on the employment market which have little or nothing to do with the alarmist discourse produced by the media and echoed by public opinion. It’s true that job insecurity is more widespread and that stability takes longer to arrive, but the comparative advantages of a higher education qualification in the employment market in general, and in professional integration processes in particular, remain unquestionable, in Portugal as in EU countries” (p. 300).

As will be readily appreciated from this review, Natália Alves has produced a work which is fundamental to an understanding of the relations between education and employment, in a general sense, and between university graduates and professional integration, more particularly. The theme is addressed with admirable theoretical consistency and at the same time in clear and accessible language, something which, sadly, cannot always be said of academic texts of this nature. Its clarity and accessibility make it a work of considerable educational value, and one which examines issues which on many occasions are formulated by the author herself, given the failure of many theories to accommodate them.

Limitations of space meant that only the part outlining the theoretical framework of the doctoral thesis of Natália Alves could be included here, and this is perfectly understandable. Those interested are strongly recommended to consult the aforementioned work in its entirety, however, particularly the author’s analysis based

on her numerous interviews of young graduates undergoing professional integration. Only in this way can a full appreciation of the heuristic potential of the arguments and theories presented here be arrived at.

One final note on the moment of publication of this work. The reflection and research which are the flesh and bones of this book date from a period which we can now identify as the end of an economic cycle (marked by the “crisis” of 2008-2009), and belong to a time before the effects of the Bologna Process on the reorganization of access to higher education, duration of courses and the status of degrees in the hierarchy of qualifications began to make themselves felt. Many of the presuppositions and data concerning the education/training/employment issue and the consequent professional integration processes of young graduates can be expected to change. And when this happens it is not just the issues that change, but also the way we view them and the solutions we find. We would be well advised to wait until the present historical period comes to an end before making definitive

pronouncement on the validity of many of the conclusions to be drawn from this work.

#### ENDNOTE

1. Professional integration and forms of identity. Trajectories of graduates of the University of Lisbon

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