

Original Research Article

Political Market and Constraints on Access to Employment among Youth: Case of the District of Abidjan

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Abstract: This article analyses the link between the social imaginaries of professional integration and the employment situation of young people in the District of Abidjan. Thus, the interviews analysed in the light of the theory of the strategic actor revealed that the social imaginaries of the professional integration of young people consist of a salaried relationship. In this logic, the latter invite themselves into the political market by offering their militancy in exchange for paid work. But thy disillusionment as a result of political marketing at work and poorly kept promises; what helps to keep them unemployed. This production invites reflection on the preliminary actions to be taken for young people before any investment oriented towards entrepreneurship. Similarly, it questions the interest of the involvement of young people in the democratic game.

Keywords: Access to employment, precariousness, poverty, social representations, political marketing.

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INTRODUCTION

After two decades of strong economic growth centered on the entrepreneurial state and the sovereign state, Côte d'Ivoire experienced a deep financial crisis at the end of the 1970s. This is marked by high domestic debt and payment arrears to businesses, the reduction in producer prices of export products and the rescheduling of the external debt (GIDIS-CI, ORSTOM, 1992). From then on, the State entered into a series of structural adjustment programs (PAS), including loans subject to conditions in order to fuel public finances. Added to this are structural measures for businesses. Indeed, to guarantee performance and financial balance in this area, some companies are rehabilitated, others are liquidated or privatized. This situation is not without consequences on employment because from 1980 to 1985, companies record a loss of approximately 70,000 jobs concentrated in the units most exposed to the cutbacks in public expenditure (ENSEA, ORSTOM, 1996). In addition, the public sector is forced by recovery measures to limit recruitment (Alpha, 1993). To deal with this unprecedented employment crisis, the State is initiating active measures whose objective is to encourage young people to self-employment and to promote micro-enterprises. In 1982, the Center for Assistance and Promotion of Enterprise (CAPE) was created for the technical and organizational assistance of entrepreneurial initiatives (Ministry of State,

Ministry of Employment, Social Affairs and solidarity, 2012). It is in this context that on June 20, 1990, in La Baule, the country is invited to engage in a democratic process materialized by the multiparty system. Democracy then appears as an essential conditionality to continue to benefit from financial support from donors (Bouquet, 2007). It also gives the people the opportunity to change the mode of governance of their resources, through the choice of an ideology or a leader. This era then marks the emergence of political competition between candidates in different elections; competition which now punctuates the country where the employment situation continues to deteriorate. Indeed, the financial leeway defined by the devaluation of the CFA franc is not used effectively against the previous increase in poverty (Cogneau, Mesplé-Somps, 2003). Nevertheless, the professional integration of young people through self-employment continues through the National Employment Plan 1991-1995 comprising five programs including that of hiring assistance, the special job creation program, the priority hiring program for nationals and the rapid job creation program. On the other hand, social funds targeted at employment have been released (Ministry of State, Ministry of Employment, Social Affairs and Solidarity, *ibid.*)

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Similarly, in the aftermath of the post-electoral crisis of 2011, the Ivorian government put in place the National Employment Policy in order to increase decent job opportunities to reduce unemployment and increase the quality of employment (Ministry of State, Ministry of Employment, Social Affairs and Solidarity, op.cit.). Moreover, since 2012, the Ivorian socio-economic context has been characterized by a remarkable performance because the country has posted a growth rate of more than 8% between 2012 and 2015, i.e. a higher rate than the world average estimated at 3.3% and that of Africa about 4.5% (Ministry of Employment and Social Protection, 2016).

Despite these successive political efforts aimed at increasing entrepreneurial initiatives and the remarkable socio-economic context of the country, access to employment for young people is struggling to improve. As proof, 80% of the unemployed in Côte d'Ivoire are young people and 25% of them are inactive, compared to an average of 11.9% in Sub-Saharan Africa, an unemployment rate that seems underestimated (Kouakou, cited by Kouakou, 2020). The objective of this work is to analyze the social constraints of access to employment for young people. To achieve this, the article is structured around two points, namely: i) the social representations of employment among young people; ii) the professional integration strategies deployed by young people.

METHODOLOGY

The surveys were carried out in the Abidjan District. Economically, as the capital of Côte d'Ivoire, this constituency alone represents 40% of Ivory Coast's GDP (www.jeuneafrique.com). However, the agglomeration is not spared from the employment problem; worse according to the statistics provided by the 1998 census, if at the national level, the unemployment rate was 4.6%, in Abidjan, this rate reached 17% in Abidjan. In 2006, the household standard of living survey highlighted that one young boy in 20 was unemployed and 17.5% among young girls (UN Habitat, 2012). This situation leads to favoring this District, namely the municipalities of Cocody, Yopougon and Songon, as the geographical scope of this study dealing with the issue of access to employment among young people.

In view of the objective of the study, qualitative research was preferred. In this dynamic, the study population is made up of young people. As a social construct, the concept of young person varies from one context to another and is evolving. Thus, Côte d'Ivoire, since 1972, through decree number 72-746 of November 24, 1972, sets the age of youth from 16 to 35 years old (Ministry for the Promotion of Youth and Employment, 2018). But taking into account the minimum legal working age in the country which is 14 years and the effects of the crisis of the decade of 2000-2010, with its socio-professional consequences, the

national employment strategy considers young people in terms of employment, anyone aged between 14 and 40 (Ministry for the Promotion of Youth and Employment, *ibid*). This category being defined as young people, the sample of the present study is made up of these young people without distinction of the employment situation. In this respect, it includes employed, unemployed, underemployed or unemployed individuals. Indeed, the unemployed person, in addition to being unemployed, has been unemployed for at least two weeks, has looked for a job during the last 30 days and is immediately available if a job is offered to him (Ministry for the Promotion of Youth and Employment, *op. cit*).

As a result, an interview guide on their representations of employment and their socio-professional integration strategies was sent to this social category. Based on random sampling and the principle of saturation, forty-two (42) young people were interviewed.

In addition, with the aim of triangulating information, four (4) individuals, members of various professional integration structures, including two (2) at the Youth Employment Agency and two (2) from NGOs, was subjected to an individual interview. The collection of this field data took place from March 13 to 28, 2023. To these data are added those collected during documentary research on the issue of employment in Côte d'Ivoire in general and that young people in particular. All these data were analyzed in the light of the theory of the strategic actor because this allows us to understand the rationality of the regular behavior of the actor. This theory defines rationality as the ex-post inferred foundation of empirically observed regularities of behavior that adjust to the behavior of other actors and are constructed according to the situation.

Thus, the following results were obtained.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the survey highlight the social imagination of professional integration among young people and the strategies used to achieve it.

II.1. Social imaginaries of youth employment

The term imaginary refers to what only exists in the imagination, without reality, where one feels a pure invention of the mind that has no corresponding reality (Charaudeau, 2015). From this definition, the social imaginary is a way of apprehending the world that stems from the mechanics of social representations and builds meanings on objects in the world, the phenomena that occur there, human beings, their behavior; transforming reality into a signifying real (Charaudeau, *idem*). In this logic, the survey data highlights the social imaginaries of employment among young people. For them, only paid work is perceived as employment, unlike self-employment.

II.1.1. Salaried employment as the only employment statute

Wage employment is a method of income distribution, a monetary compensation which gives the worker a proportionate right of access to collective production. Any person who has undertaken to carry out their professional activity under the direction of one or more people for remuneration is considered an employee (Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, 2017). In this sense, salaried employment is characterized by a link of subordination of the employee towards the employer, the payment of a salary (Dacheux and Goujon, 2012). For the respondents, professional integration is equivalent to paid employment. This is what the words of BA, 32 years old, show when he explains that: *"a job for me is when you do a job and you get paid. The salary can be per month, per week, it depends."* In these words, employment is seen as a relationship in which one receives a salary from a third person to whom one has offered one's labor force. Comments also supported by TY, 29 years old, who affirms that: *"employment is the fact of putting one's skills at the service of a private or public structure and that one receives a salary well defined in a contract"*. Through these definitions of employment provided, we see the valuation of the salary relationship between the State or the structured private sector. This is the observation made by the head of an NGO for the professional integration of young people when she says that: *"Young people have difficulty imagining their life outside of civil service competitions or recruitment into a company"*. This discourse testifies to the idealization of employment provided by state structures or by the private sector. Better still, it demonstrates the legitimization of a relationship of subordination in any employment situation; as PN, 36, says when she maintains that: *"in life, we go progressively. With a small diploma or a skill, you have to try to be taken somewhere, and gradually, you gain experience and you climb the ladder to reach the level of success you want."* This ideal of professional integration slows down the involvement of young people in any other form of employment relationship other than salaried employment. This is perceptible in the words of an NGO manager who adds: *"young people today do not want to get involved; when they are presented with a job opportunity in entrepreneurship, they find it difficult or that the income is not sufficient. Sometimes they register and they disappear. Finally, we learn that they are in politics."* Obviously, the salary relationship represents a professional trajectory of success among young people.

This social construction of employment is not without consequences on the image of self-employment.

II.1.2. Self-employment seen as a transitional situation

Self-employment describes a situation in which the employee and the employer appoint the same natural person (Mahwa, 2007). Self-employment among respondents appears to be a transitional situation. This is what is reflected in the words of TR, employed in a public structure promoting self-employment, who states that: *"the State is doing its best to provide young people today with technical and financial means in order to facilitate their self-employment. Even if a few manage to stand out when they benefit from it, most go back to square one or choose other paths after a certain time, that's the problem."*

This concern of the respondent finds clarification in the words of SG, 33 years old, when he declares that: *"you see, I am an graphic designer, currently, I am more or less solicited and on my own account. But what I earn isn't enough to cover my expenses for the month... With my skills, if the State or a local company recruits me, I'll be fine"*. These comments reveal the experience of the respondent perceived as a temporary situation due to the absence of a salary relationship. He is also supported by KA employed in a structure, 38 years old, who says that: *"I am an electrician, but I cannot compare myself to agents of the CIE. In addition to their regular salary, they can make money in the field like us here..."*. This testimony adds to the feeling of inequality experienced by respondents in access to income, due to the independent nature of their activity.

These remarks show that self-employment is perceived as under-employment. Underemployment can be understood from two angles. The first is the situation of any young person who has a job and who involuntarily has worked less than forty hours a week when he is available to do more. When the second definition, it is linked to remuneration below the SMIG (Ministry of Youth Promotion and Employment, op.cit.)

This perception of self-employment contributes to constructing it as a transitional situation. This is confirmed in the words of DR, 27 years old, who states that: *"while waiting to be taken somewhere, I am getting by for the moment with home lessons with my legal training"*.

Clearly, although it is paid, any activity carried out outside the public service or the private sector is perceived by the respondents as underemployment, resourcefulness, temporary employment for survival.

These social imaginaries valuing salaried work, promote strategies among young people.

II.2. From political activism as a means of professional integration to disillusion among young people

In a context of multi-party politics initiated since 1990, the period of electoral elections leads to competition where the demand for activism grows. We are witnessing the deployment of political marketing as a means of action used by organizations to influence the behavior of populations in their favor (Lendrevie *et al.*, 2009). Its purpose is to pilot and manage commercial exchanges in a competitive situation. This opportunity is favorable for young people who offer their activism in exchange for their professional integration.

II.2.1. Political activism, bargaining chip in the political market

The political market is a space of interaction between the government represented by politicians and bureaucrats, identified as supply on the one hand, and citizens who represent demand on the other hand (Montmarquette, 1988). One of the characteristics of this market is the election of government representatives. Thus, it is not uncommon to see the votes of citizens exchanged for goods produced by the government. (Montmarquette, ditto). The data collected shows that some young job seekers arrive on this market with their activism, which they offer to government officials as a means of exchange. This is what G. O, 37, describes when he explains that: " *the surest way in Abidjan here to have a job is to belong to a political party, to be active in the movements of youth of these parties . »*

These remarks are supported by DL, 33, who affirms that: " *when you are very active in a political youth movement, you have access to party leaders, whereas it is these same leaders who hold decisive positions in public administrations. or private. So, it's easy to be recruited there . »*

Activism is collective action organized in the political space; it is a mobilization project part of a logic of defense of a material or abstract interest (Dubet, cited by Baillet, 2001). It is an act of active membership in a political party in a logic of demand, defense of the interests and ideologies of this party (Neveu, 1996). It is therefore of undeniable importance for political actors in electoral competition. This is why, campaigning for a political party constitutes, for the activist, a privileged channel of access to employment. This is what is reflected in the words of BC 32 years old, who says that: " *currently I am a taxi driver despite my diplomas. I have submitted files to different structures and have continued to do so for 4 years. But so far, no response. There is a friend who told me to come and join his party's youth movement and my situation will change. Himself, it is thanks to this that he is in a good structure today.*"

Political actors, depending on their position within the state apparatus, hold the power to provide jobs to activists, because it is up to this state apparatus to regulate the job market. The person who has knowledge of the rules of operation of the organization has the power to change the rules, to arbitrate between the rules, to create them (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). With regard to the social contract based on reciprocity, the activism of young people made available to political actors requires the latter to know how to return the equivalent in importance of what they received to the donor (Polanyi, 2007).

However, the field data conducted show that, paradoxically, this professional integration strategy keeps some youth unemployed.

II.2.2. To the disillusionment of young people

The objective of political marketing is not to serve the people or public action. On the contrary, it allows competing actors to influence in the direction of their objectives (Lendrevie *et al.*, idem). This strategy of political actors is perceptible in the words of TS, 37 years old, in these terms: " *To meet a politician and ask him your problem is not easy, I would even say impossible. But wait for the campaign period, they even come to the neighborhood here to meet us. These comments are confirmed by NJ, 36 years old, youth leader, when he states that: "during the election period, we don't have time; especially us who are active in our neighborhoods. Last municipal elections, I was contacted by a candidate's campaign team to mobilize young people in my neighborhood. I was asked to form a youth movement to campaign among our populations. In addition to the means to be made available to me for meetings and other races, I and my colleagues were promised a position if the candidate won."* These comments highlight the professional offers made to young people in exchange for their activism, during electoral periods.

The development of this strategy being circumstantial, the promises are not always kept, once the competition fades, after the electoral deadlines. This is perceptible through the words of BM 39 years old, when he says that: " *I was a youth president of a party that was in power. They had promised to admit me to a respectable competition in public administration based on my diplomas. For this, it was I myself who organized the recruitment and mobilization of young people from my commune for the activities of my party. In any case, I was ready to do anything for my party when I saw my reward. But I was made to wait until today, the party is no longer in power, and here I am without a job.*" These comments which describe the disillusionment of young activists with unfulfilled promises from candidates. Better still, they show how the imagination of success through salary ratios leads these young people to the disillusionment induced by political marketing.

II.3. DISCUSSION

The data from the survey reveal that the imaginary professional integration of young people is wage employment. They also describe strategies for gaining access.

II.3.1. Wage employment, the imaginary of professional integration for young people

Lefeuvre *et al.*, (2017) note that social imaginaries of employment limit access to employment among young people. Indeed, according to these authors, in Côte d'Ivoire, the public or private sectors that young people seek to integrate is clearly inaccessible to them, because of the jobs available in 2016, the public sector created less than 2% while 31 % of young people dreamed of being hired there. The observation is the same among the authors with regard to the formal private sector. According to them, the sector created 2% of jobs the same year compared to 25% of young people wishing to access it. Koffi (1994), justifies the displayed interest of young Ivorians for wage labor. For him, this situation is linked to the fact that they overestimate their diplomas and office work. The author continues by affirming that this preference for salaried employment has its origins in the post-independence period when, upon gaining independence, the State began to train civil servants, executives or Ivorian elites, in order to replace the settlers in the various administrations. Also, adds the author, we were witnessing the enhancement of the status of civil servant by the State, as a Welfare State at that time. Moreover, he adds, the other urban or rural trades such as repairers of agricultural machinery or tools, masons, carpenters, vulcanizers, plumbers and others are exercised by foreigners, who have come from the sub-region as supporting labor in building the economy. In this logic, the post-colonial period laid the structural foundations of the job market by favoring wage relations with Ivorian diploma holders to the detriment of entrepreneurship reserved for other foreigners.

Through this position, the author shows that the social imagination of the professional integration of young graduates comes from the mode of governance of the political power that founded the Ivorian economy. This position is supported by Cogneau and Mesplé-Somps (1999). These authors note that during the period of structural adjustment experienced by Côte d'Ivoire in the 1990s, when the structured private sector, in particular companies, benefited from financing from the Ivorian State, large-scale actions were limited to the place of self-employed workers belonging to the so-called informal sector. The privileged relationship of the state with employees to the detriment of entrepreneurial initiatives is also noted by Koffi *et al.*, (2011) for whom the state contributes to the weakening of entrepreneurial initiatives. These authors note with young entrepreneurs the high interest rates of bank loans, the weight of taxation, corruption, unpaid invoices from the State to SMEs. These elements

promote, for Koffi *et al.*, the premature bankruptcy of micro-enterprises and the discouragement of entrepreneurs. In this, the position of these authors justifies the social construction of self-employment as a transitory situation as revealed in this study. Young people who devote themselves to entrepreneurship have the time to be hired by the State or by a relatively large company.

In this respect, the article describes the strategies for accessing these forms of employment.

II.3.2. From youth strategies for the professional integration to disillusionment

The social imaginary of access to salaried work leads to the development of strategies with the actors identified as holders of this work.

Roubaud (1994) describes the preponderant role of personal relationships in general, in strategies for access to employment in Yaoundé. To show this, the author insists on kinship or friendship to the detriment of conventional means such as placement agencies, competitions or direct requests addressed to employers. He further states that more than 57% of the unemployed in this city use personal networks for their professional integration. In addition, he adds, nearly 72% of members of the formal private sector have received information about their employment through their connections, while 28% of public sector employees use it.

In this logic, the author is supported by Soulez and Kartochian (2006) who show the importance of personal relationships in obtaining an internship, considered as their first work experience, for 239 students who completed an approved internship. Ferrant (2012) follows suit based on a South African Household and Income survey. The author notes that certain ethnic groups are overrepresented in the labor market. He justifies this reality by the fact that the unemployed person surrounded by active or employed peers, increases the possibilities of being active or employed, insofar as the network is a productive channel for finding a job. Ferrant (*idem*) explains that agents transmit information about vacant positions to other agents to whom they are connected. The positions of these authors are of undeniable contribution to us, because they show that ethnic personal networks allow the professional integration of job seekers. But the points of view of these authors qualify the results of the present study because through a deterministic posture which presents the impact of the family network in obtaining a job, these authors highlight a weak involvement of the individual in his job search. However, this work describes the free will of young people who choose their paths to employment through their activism. At this level, Subileau (1981) gave the reasons for this choice of actors. For the author, the quest for identity, the search for disalienation, socio-

political promotion and socialization are the four basic elements of activism. But Baillet (2001), observing the movements of North African immigrants in France, observes that activism cannot be understood as a static fact, to the point of identifying fixed causes. According to him, activism evolves and adjusts according to the dynamic interests and objectives of the actors who militate. Thus, the author identifies three periods of activism led by organizations aimed at the integration of Maghreb communities. The first period is marked by vocational activism characterized by the defense of ideologies, the second period is illustrated by ideological-instrumental activism. This combines both political interests and the aims of economic success. As for the third period, it sees the deployment of utilitarian activism which is mobilized by North African migrants for purely professional purposes, devoid of political interest. Moreover, for the author, Gaxie's theory better reflects this reality of utilitarian activism at work when the latter studies the case of political parties. According to Baillet, Gaxie's theory is innovative in that it shows that political parties provide positions of responsibility, permanent jobs, and cultural capital. This observation, which presents activism as a factor of social integration, is consistent with the results of this article in which activism appears as a means of access to employment. However, the authors rarely address the question of the reliability of electoral promises.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this study, it appears that the social imagination of professional integration is nourished by a wage relationship with the State or the private sector. Also, self-employment is perceived as underemployment. In this logic, activism is favored by young people as a means of exchange on the political market. This situation is not without consequence on the situation of employment of young people because the electoral promises result from their weak respect. This contributes to keeping young people unemployed. The year 2023 was dedicated to youth by the State, which favors substantial investments oriented towards the self-employment of young people. If these social imaginaries linked to employment persist, they lay the foundations for the low effectiveness of these policies aimed at the professional integration of this segment of the population. Also, this work opens the debate on the stakes of the participation of young people in the democratic game, essential for peace and sustainable development.

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