The "NEET" category from the perspective of inequalities

Toward a typology of school-to-work transitions among youth from lower class neighborhoods in the Brussels Region (Belgium)

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Abstract

This paper proposes a critical analysis of the NEET category. We argue that it is both too focused on individual responsibility and too homogenizing to enable the development of public policies and measures capable of responding to the needs of the most excluded youth. We respond to these needs using a qualitative approach that has allowed us to account for the diversity of young people, especially the most marginalized, living in lower-class neighborhoods of the Brussels region. Our approach generates a NEET/non-NEET typology that helps deconstruct NEET as a statistical category by identifying social situations that are both diverse and temporary. This typology challenges the tendency to reify young people and to hold them responsible for their own circumstances. Furthermore, our typology shows how NEET situations result from trajectories shaped by structural dynamics as well as relations and processes of inequality. These may stem from social class, experiences of migration, or the intersection of the two, and inevitably exercise an effect on both school and job market environments.

Keywords: NEET, youth, lower class neighborhoods, social and ethno-racial inequalities, qualitative sociology

1. Introduction

Since the economic crisis of 2008, transitions from school to work have become even more unstable and insecure than they had been during the 1990s, especially for the least qualified and most precarious classes of young people. This population experienced prolonged periods away from formal education, job training, and the job market (Wolbers 2014). The development of European statistics on youth who are so-called "NEET" (not in employment, education, or training) toward the end of the first decade of the 2000s illustrates the growing concern of European authorities regarding youth disengagement, school dropouts, and unemployment, especially among the most vulnerable. Furthermore, over the same period, we can observe a growing consternation in political leaders over the increased indifference of young people toward traditional politics and a rising fear among these leaders of their own inability to keep youth engaged in the prescribed democratic process.[3] In response to these concerns, the European Youth Guarantee was promoted in order to make NEETs a priority target group (Salvà-Mut et al.

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[3] European Commission White Paper of 21 November 2001: "A new impetus for European youth [COM(2001) 681 final; not published in the *Official Journal of the European Union*].

2017). In this context, EU member states have developed numerous programs and measures targeting NEET youth, fighting the phenomenon of dropping out, and/or working for their labour integration?

This paper proposes a critical analysis of the NEET category. We argue that it is both too focused on individual responsibility and too homogenizing to enable the development of public policies and measures capable of responding to the needs of the most excluded youth. The review of the literature that we present in the next section shows that many researchers have expressed this kind of critique and attempted to deconstruct the concept in order to better target young people in greatest need of help. Nevertheless, we have noticed two shortcomings in previous research. First, until now, studies have been mostly quantitative and have not necessarily succeeded in including the most vulnerable subjects. Second, they have not sufficiently explained the mechanisms and processes of inequality that produce NEET situations. We will respond to these needs by bringing qualitative sociology of inequality to bear on the analysis (Fassin 2000; Galland and Lemel 2018). We will present socio-anthropological fieldwork inspired by the ECRIS method (Olivier de Sardan 1995), a qualitative approach that has allowed us to account for the diversity of young people, especially the most marginalized, living in working-class neighborhoods of the Brussels region. Our approach generates a NEET/non-NEET typology that will help deconstruct NEET as a statistical category by identifying social situations that are both diverse and temporary; this will help us to challenge the tendency to reify young people and to hold them responsible for their own circumstances. Furthermore, our typology shows how NEET situations result from trajectories shaped by structural dynamics as well as relations and processes of inequality. These may stem from social class, experiences of migration, or the intersection of the two, and inevitably exercise an effect on both school and job market environments.

2. Review of the Literature

A review of the literature reveals that many critiques of the NEET concept have been proposed. The first criticism highlighted the homogenizing effects of a statistical indicator that reifies a wide range of young people whose experiences and positions are very diverse, especially with regard to their degrees of exposure to social risk and threat of exclusion (Bynner and Parsons 2002; Inui 2005, Lunsing 2007; Furlong 2006; Yates and Payne 2006; Mac Donald 2011; Eurofound 2012, 2016; Serracant 2014; Tamesberger and Bacher 2014). The NEET concept generates a certain confusion, as if the youth that it covers were all in an identical situation of vulnerability, leading both to welfare policies that are not necessarily needed and to the failure to take into account people whose work situation technically excludes them as NEETs but who nevertheless hold extremely precarious positions on the job market (Furlong 2006; Serracant 2014). Furlong (2006) argues that it is necessary to disaggregate the variables at play in order to create policies that better target youth who truly need help returning to school or applying for training or a job.

A second criticism of NEET is that it relies on the framework of the new paradigm of social welfare, which sees the individual as being in charge of her or his own destiny and associated risks. Furlong (2006) describes how NEET was born in a context of increasing restrictions and conditions related to the "activation" of people benefitting from social programs, both in general and especially in the case of youth. In Belgium, the creation of these policies began at the end of the 1990s. Many studies illustrate the influence of such "conditionality" on public measures

intended to promote school retention and job training (Van Parys and Struyven 2013; Van Hemel et al. 2009). Serracant (2014) recalls that the European Commission's objective of developing a systematic monitoring of young citizens who are neither at work, school, nor training was part of a wider European employment strategy to "activate" individuals in such a way as to augment and maximize their "human capital". The newer conditions attached to social programs are clearly visible in the NEET concept from this angle, for it is used as an indicator to discriminate among youth according to their degree of activity, intentions, and attitudes toward employment. On one side are the unemployed who are actively looking for a job, and on the other, the so-called inactive unemployed, that is, those who are not actively looking for a job or who are, for whatever reason, unavailable for the job market (Salvà-Mut et al. 2017). Relatedly, Van de Velde (2019) deconstructs NEET by showing how it flows from the neoliberal commandment to occupy oneself—the call to spend "productive and useful time", which hammers young people's ears as they move along the path to adulthood. Thornam and Gomez Cruz (2018) show how NEET is part of a long-term tendency toward digital "bureaucratisation, neo-liberalism, and individualism" while elucidating its contradictory implications. The concept simultaneously suggests quite negative connotations about young people's situations even as it erects them into neoliberal subjects, that is, subjects responsible for their own condition and future (Thornam and Gomez Cruz 2018).

A third essential critique of NEET as a European indicator is that it paints an oversimplified picture of social inequalities and mechanisms of exclusion by omitting systemic and structural factors affecting people's trajectories (Thompson 2011; Serracant 2014). Proposing the narrower concept of "NEET-restricted" as a new indicator to serve both as "complement" and alternative to the standard indicator defined by the OCDE (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)/Eurostat, Serracant (2014) demonstrates the link between economic crises and percentages of NEET in the population, and therefore that NEET status is clearly related to long-term unemployment. Serracant recommends taking greater account of structural changes in the economy and job market. Eurofund (2016) uses data from the EU Labour Force Survey to disaggregate NEET into seven subgroups: (1) re-entrants; (2) short-term unemployed; (3) long-term unemployed; (4) unavailable due to illness or disability; (5) unavailable due to family responsibilities; (6) discouraged workers; and (7) other inactive. In this disaggregation, the short-term and long-term unemployed are numerically the most important subgroups of NEET youths. Along the same lines, Thompson (2011) argues that the structural inequalities that are built into educational systems and the job market ought to be better integrated into analyses of youth transitioning from school to work.

We wish to take up that challenge: to better integrate the inequalities structuring educational systems and the job market into the analysis of youth in transition. Given that various disaggregations of NEET have already been undertaken, as noted above, yet have never been based on in-depth qualitative methods, we offer a theoretical framework in the following section that stems from a qualitative analysis of inequalities. This will enable a better understanding of the processes and chains of processes that give rise to NEET situations.

3. An approach to social and ethno-racial inequalities

Our analysis of NEET situations relies on a theoretical framework that combines two distinct yet complementary bodies of literature. First, qualitative sociology of inequalities aims to analyze

differentiated positions with regard to inequalities and feelings of injustice. It also analyses the various processes and accumulation of inequalities. (cf. Galland and Lemel 2018). In French sociology, research has often followed in the intellectual footsteps of Pierre Bourdieu, emphasizing how inequalities become embodied, especially via the concept of habitus. Indeed, Bourdieu's approach illustrates how structures of inequality and relations of domination lead to self-selection within the working classes. Young members of dominated classes internalize their low chances of access to higher education so deeply that they transform this exclusion into a voluntary choice—virtue made out of necessity. The gravitation of working-class youth toward forms of education and jobs that are objectively dominated appears, at least in part, to be the result of a horizon of expectations shaped by their daily existence and experience of social segregation. These generate a particular lifestyle, that is, a habitus of class: a feeling of unbelonging amid more dominant positions in the social space.

This dimension of Bourdieu's work has inspired qualitative studies that have revealed points of tension and conflict between the logics of the school and the family, suggesting that these are core factors that lead working-class youth to drop out of school (Millet and Thin 2005). Other studies have analyzed processes and discourses through which social disparities are naturalized and legitimized. For example, again under the influence of Bourdieu (and Passeron), some recent work in sociology of education has shown how educational structures and measures deploy rhetorics of meritocracy and individual responsibility (Millet and Croizier 2016). These discourses help legitimize inequalities, a fact that is rife with consequences for working-class children and youth's ability to learn and to construct their own identities. Qualitative sociology has thus moved the field forward by illuminating how inequalities in students' academic itineraries add up and reinforce each other, how these inequalities are embodied, resisted, and legitimized.

Our second theoretical corpus is American sociology of race and immigration. More specifically, a branch of this discipline studies the variations of groups and ethnic minorities' modes of integration into a majority society. Myrdal (1944) outlined a systemic analysis of structural factors that have prevented the U.S. Black population from integrating. He showed in particular how policies and prejudices of Whites toward Blacks created barriers to the latter's full participation, concluding that the "Negro problem" is above all a problem constructed and maintained by Whites and their institutions. Following his lead, research on integration and participation of second generations has highlighted the primary role of governmental and societal attitudes toward foreigners. Welcoming immigration policies and public support in employment, lodging, and education foster integration and social mixing, whereas restrictive policies, prejudices, and racism lead to "downward assimilation" (de Haas et al. 2020). Immigrant families' social classes play a secondary role (Waters 1994; Alba and Nee 2003), as do the social capital of the ethnic group and the manner in which it can be mobilized. Portes's research has shown how a community's social capital can be a positive resource that allows newcomers to integrate into the host society, or a constraining resource that may actually prevent upward social mobility (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Combining these various factors, Portes and Zhou (1993) speak of a segmented assimilation, arguing that three trajectories of assimilation exist for second generations: an upward assimilation marked by acculturation to the White middle class; an acculturation to the underclass, i.e., downward assimilation; and the creation of an ethnic *community* (as opposed to *minority*) when economic ascension is accompanied by the maintenance of bonds of solidarity with and among the community of origin (Portes et al. 2005).

These two theoretical corpuses complement each other by showing how individual trajectories and identity construction among youth are shaped by relations of domination based on class, race/ethnicity, and the intersection of the two. In the context of Brussels, where social and ethnic issues overlap (Franssen et al. 2014), the combination of these two bodies of research offers a framework for our analysis and the intelligibility of our results.

4. Methods

Our theoretical orientation goes hand in hand with a qualitative methodology that highlights various societal processes at play in young people's school-to-work transitions, whether such processes are related to dynamics of inequalities or the functioning of institutions. This article uses qualitative data, which we gathered during fieldwork among young residents of the most impoverished neighborhoods of Brussels. We chose to focus on these neighborhoods because they correspond to certain geographical zones of the capital where a whole series of difficulties reinforce each other; these are linked to ethnicity, insecurity on the job market and in the household, etc. (Van Hamme et al. 2016). It was thus more likely to meet young people in unstable school-to-work transitions in these locations. Moreover, on-site encounters have the advantage of allowing respondents to speak freely, thereby reducing the bias linked to formal or institutional settings.

Our fieldwork took place in several phases. The first was an individual exploratory investigation that sought to identify qualitative indicators that might structure our field observations. Next, a collective fieldwork mobilizing 18 investigators over the course of a month sought to build a research population by favoring interaction and direct observation in public spaces of target neighborhoods. In order to diversify the research population with an eye to comparison, we included and met young people registered in social action programs (youth homes, school re-entry, labour market integration schemes); in declared and undeclared employment; in professional training; and in school. During the third phase, a deeper ethnographic study was undertaken in the neighborhoods over the course of two years. It sought to deepen young people's narratives on their trajectories by means of comprehensive interviews, especially for NEETs and those at risk of dropping out. In order to reduce the overrepresentation of boys, we also sought during this phase to diversify the interview population in terms of gender. These three phases of fieldwork mainly deployed ethnographic-type methods, such as informal exchanges, direct observation, and the trust-building.

The domain of these kids'[4] sociability within various networks of relations and informal groups of belonging, such as neighborhood "communities" and groups of "big brothers," to use emic concepts, served as the privileged channel for making first contact with our interlocutors, but also as the setting of our interactions and observations. This immersion into lower class neighborhoods allowed us to converse intensively with 93 young people. Among these, 42 were or had been NEETs, and 7 had dropped out of school. The majority were boys between 17 and 25 years of age. The male bias can be explained by the fact that girls were less present not only in the neighborhoods' public spaces, but also in social programs promoting re-entry and training. One possible explanation for this imbalance may lie in the genderedness of youth trajectories; it

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[4] Following usage in conversational English, by "kids" we mean teenagers and young adults.

is possible that the kind of discrimination that results in NEET situations shows up later for girls, at the moment of their entry onto the job market.[5]

5. Results

The theoretical framework that we have described above, combining research on segmented assimilation and a qualitative approach to inequalities, led to the elaboration of several qualitative indicators linked to subjective and objective levels of social belonging. These include class origin, membership in immigrant families, experiences of social rupture, and accumulations of inequalities within people's trajectories. We connected these elements to other qualitative variables surrounding youths' positions with regard to (1) their relations to institutions (officials, meritocracy, modalities of social policies , etc.) and society (e.g. belonging and identity); (2) their social, economic, and cultural aspirations and distinctions relative to other groups; (3) and the types of resources and networks that they deploy, e.g., familial, communitarian, or alternative (undeclared work, crime). These various indicators allowed us to identify the NEET and non-NEET typologies that we present below.

5.1. A typology of NEET/non-NEET

The first way to describe youths in NEET situations is to compare them to their peers who are not. On the one hand, our research population includes students in secondary and tertiary education, workers, and trainees. On the other, we have kids in long-term NEET situations or who have been through NEET situations in the past. However, such an approach, which depends on a comparison of current situations, faces multiple difficulties. First, NEET/non-NEET situations are characterized by factors that change over time and processes that are still unfolding. In fact, a significant number of our young interlocutors had been in NEET situations before, sometimes for years, though this was no longer the case at the moment of our encounter. For this reason, in spite of their current situation, they shared characteristics with youths in NEET situations, and are counted as such too. Other kids had never been in NEET situation at all, for example high school students and trainees, but nevertheless shared characteristics with their peers in NEET situations. Thus, for example, we met a number of students who were still in school, but whose academic trajectories were defined by repeated changes of course of study, failed years, a sense of futility, or "counter-school" behaviors (Willis 2016), such as disliking class or simply not putting effort into it. These results suggest that such youth are at greater risk of finding themselves in NEET situations in the future, and that a NEET outcome is the result of several processes and chains of processes and ought to be analyzed as such. A second difficulty arises when one tries to take into account the material circumstances in which a NEET situation occurs. Whereas young people from the most precarious segments of the lower classes spoke at great length about prolonged NEET experiences, notably due to the economic hardships they had endured, youth from more privileged social milieus, with parents able to financially sustain the gaps in their trajectories, described being NEET as "taking a year off." In other words, the difference between these material conditions means that NEET situations do not have the same effect on all young people's trajectories, nor on the narratives they present to researchers.

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[5] We are currently developing this point in an article in progress.

In addition to these difficulties, our description of the research population reveals that respondents can be further divided into types of situations. Non-NEET situations include (1) attending secondary school, (2) performing declared work or undergoing training, and (3) attending higher studies, such as university or a professional college (*haute école*); NEET situations can be (4) "discontinuous" or (5) "outside the system" (see below). These five categories facilitate comparison and allow us to describe these situations as positions in the social space and the trajectories of the youths encountered as integration in the different segments of this space. Indeed, the situations "outside the system" and "in higher education" represent opposite ends on a continuum, corresponding respectively to positions above the point of social inclusion and below the lower margin of society, while the other positions are intermediary. The majority of young people in our research population belongs to the lower classes and hase second-generation immigrant backgrounds, but there are variations: they are distributed along a spectrum ranging from the most fragile to the most stable layers of the working classes, or even the lower middle class. This distribution in social space corresponds to a distribution between NEET and non-NEET situations, following the social conditions described above. Youth registered in higher education at the time of our research often come from families whose socioeconomic position is modest but stable. Even though many have had complicated journeys through school (failed years, moving from one school to another, conflicts with teachers, etc.), their parents value their academic success, and as such they managed to obtain a secondary school diploma (CESS or *Certificat d'Enseignement Secondaire Supérieur*) and registered at the university or professional college in order to realize the social ascension in which their parents had invested via the educational system.

The most striking difference between the two groups is that youths in NEET situations do not share a sense of belonging to society or of being Belgian. They generally feel discriminated against, and thus recall the downward assimilation mentioned above. In contrast, youth who have not lived such situations and enjoy access to upward mobility have a sense of merit and believe in meritocracy: it is because they have worked and faced obstacles that they have succeeded. According to this ideology, too often, discrimination and racism are not perceived as systems of domination, but rather as individual acts by ill-intentioned persons. In certain cases, racism is not even recognized, being perceived instead as a discourse of weak individuals who do not want to make the effort to succeed.

Moreover, the two go together: a feeling of belonging seems to correspond to the perceived presence or absence of discrimination. The feeling of unbelonging and being discriminated against are the most common traits among youths in NEET situations and the most distinctive with regards to those in non-NEET situations. Alongside these differences are others, such as the degree of trust or distrust in the state and its institutions. For example, youth who are employed or in training avail themselves frequently of welfare agencies (for job-seeking, unemployment benefits, training programs, etc.) and generally come away with a feeling of confidence in these institutions. Despite bureaucratic requirements (proofs of various kinds, documentation, etc.), institutions are not perceived as vectors of surveillance but of aid, rights, and a path to upward socioeconomic mobility. This conformist relationship to institutions is not the result of chance. These situations correlate to family environments that already enjoy a certain institutional knowledge and history of positive experiences, and particularly to those where the parents already have a relatively greater amount of cultural capital.

In third place are variables that include the desire for social or economic ascension, aspirations to distinction, and "turning points" in the most complicated trajectories, following which youth with the most difficult characteristics end up in a stable non-NEET situation. This first typology, based on situations of NEET or non-NEET, demonstrates that it is necessary to analyze individual life trajectories in order to better understand the NEET group.

5.2 A typology of NEET according to individual trajectories

In spite of the problematic nature of the category, it is incontestable that some youth are in NEET situations. In analyzing their trajectories, we have separated out youths who are in NEET situations we call "discontinuous" from those who are in NEET situations "outside the system." This distinction shows that people can move from one situation to another but that these different "NEET situations" do not cease to exist. As such, more structural solutions are required if we do not want to see youth stagnating in difficult situations, rather than putting the blame for said situations on youth themselves.

5.2.1 NEET situations "outside the system"

"Outside the system" refers to NEET situations where young people are neither at school, nor in declared work, nor in training, nor seeking aid from an institutional source. At the moment of our encounters, their view of the world was organized in ways that paralleled that of majority society. Here, the frame of reference concerns the various informal organizations that shape working-class and immigrant neighborhoods. The similar trajectories of these kids allow us to identify the structural reasons that have led them to rely mainly on informal and/or illicit networks to get by in life. The story of Nordine is exemplary.

> *Born in Belgium from Moroccan immigrant parents, Nordine has a family life marked by precarity. His father was a janitor for a company but was fired after 20 years of service and now depends on disability assistance. His mother works as an assistant cook in a municipal childcare center. Nordine's narrative highlights the lack of recognition accorded to his father's years of work, which according to him ought to have led to a better socioeconomic situation for the family. He does not find it normal that people like them should have to rely on a public aid center (CPAS or Centre public d'action sociale)—"like the Romanians," the last group to arrive in the neighborhood. Everything suggests that Nordine's itinerary, as well as his feelings toward institutions and money, have been shaped by his parents' experience of precarity, thereby cutting off his access to the kind of consumer goods that he aspires to possess and which many of his peers enjoy.*

Economic difficulties in the household and the social problems that come with them are the main reasons that kids in this category cite when they describe why they have dropped out of school. In fact, as the portrait below shows, our "outside-the-system" NEET interlocutors describe very precarious material circumstances, parents lacking work or income, or single-parent homes facing the daily struggle to feed a large number of children, all of which may be combined with difficult immigration statuses or a lack of recognition of immigrant parents.

> *Maurice is first-generation Rwandan; he does not have access to Belgian citizenship and lost his father at the age of 12, an event which disrupted his school life with full force and*

marked a turning point in his family's hopes for emancipation via success at school. Ibrahim is a second-generation Moroccan from an extremely economically vulnerable single-parent family. His mother suffers from addiction disorders, and he has never met his father.

Following the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1964 and 1970) on the reproduction of inequalities at school, such family situations serve as a reliable indicator of academic failure among the children of the most unstable segments of the working class. Taken as a whole, the narratives of "outside-the-system" NEET youth reveal that they have effectively aborted their schooling after finding themselves in the most dominated tracks of the educational system (e.g. vocational school). They also relate the multiplicity of difficulties encountered at school: changes of course of study, failed years, changes of school, subjection to racist and denigrating remarks from officials (teachers, other educators, administrators), expulsions, difficulties finding new schools, and dropping out. The disconnect between their low educational capital and the institution of the school is further widened by the economic conditions weighing on their home life and the social ruptures that result from them. Nevertheless, these kids seem to have internalized the discourse of meritocracy and individual responsibility conveyed by the school institution. They experience dropping out and "screwing up," as they refer to certain of their own actions, as consequences of their own inadequacy at school and therefore their own fault. It makes sense that they would deploy these same discourses to explain how their trajectories deviate from institutional expectations and turn to informal organizations (Whyte 1993) in order to sustain the needs of the family, or even shoulder this burden for others. This relationship with the school, which demands conformity to discourses of merit and personal responsibility, is also reproduced in the case of other institutions. This is apparent in the case of Ikram, for whom reliance on Brussels's agencies for welfare assistance (CPAS) and employment (Actiris[6]) threatens her self-image as a young woman who can make it in life on her own.

Ikram dropped out during her second year of secondary school to help out with the family business, which was at risk of shutting down due to her father's illness. Describing herself as the pride of her father, she has made it without help from any institution. Her success in the family bakery further led Ikram to see her experience within the institution of the school as humiliating. She recounts that her school was "lame," that "teachers were overwhelmed and students weren't easy." Her worlds at school and at home were so different that she "didn't feel in [her] element anymore." Today, after many years of undeclared work in the bakery, she would like to start her own business, but without the help of Actiris or CPAS, which she considers as institutions that "control you and place you" in a situation of "dependence and intrude in your life." She insists that she can work to provide for her own needs without asking for help.

Other kids, even as they try to get by on their own, use public institutions strategically and partially, if only to obtain justice for themselves or because they know their rights. In the case of other institutions of the Brussels region like the police, some young people can escape the discourses of individual responsibility and merit by pointing out the responsibility of the state for their dropping out of school. As these kids tend to hang out more in their neighborhoods' public spaces, they are more exposed and sensitive to the police in their life environment, a fact which

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[6] Actiris is the name of the public service for seeking employment in the Brussels-Capital Region.

reinforces their negative perception of Brussels's institutions. In fact, in the neighborhoods we studied, police were omnipresent. Police cars sit, for example, all day long on squares crowded with young people. Frequent contact with the police and judicial institutions when their peers get arrested helps construct the relations of these youth with the institutions of Brussels, which end up being perceived as opposed to their freedom. This perception is reinforced by the fact that these kids are well aware of urban segregation. They see the differences in how kids from rich and poor neighborhoods are treated, as well as between white and racialized kids. These discrepancies are strongly felt and experienced as forms of racism. According to Nabil, it is state disinvestment in lower class neighborhoods that explains why he dropped out:

> *Nabil: "The state doesn't do the same things if you're a kid from Uccle, Jette, or Molenbeek[7]." "In 2015, we were asked what we wanted, the local government showed up. We asked for a new football field. They did it, but it took them three years to stick some fence on some concrete. They said it was because of the drug dealers. A Belgian kid from Uccle would have gotten his field. Three years to make that decision. During that time, I started smoking, doing drugs, dealing, and I quit school." "It disillusioned me about Belgium. I wondered why I wasn't considered the same as 'Jérôme from Uccle'[8]?"*

This desire for economic autonomy and the attribution of responsibility for one's own trajectory are linked to a feeling of racism that structures society more widely: relations with law enforcement that are problematic, to say the least, and with which these kids have had to deal throughout their young lives; and lack of recognition of immigrant and/or Muslim minorities, especially parents. This is in spite of the fact that the parents' generation contributed to the postwar reconstruction of the country; yet degrees earned in their countries of origin remain unrecognized in Belgium. As such, a desire for economic autonomy and a sense of government responsibility among youth in situations "outside the system" go hand-in-hand with distrust in Brussels's public institutions. These are perceived in the best of cases as unhelpful, but more often than not as simply trying to exercise control. The non-take-up of institutions and services must be understood from this angle, as these kids experience has taught them that "*you can't depend on anyone*" and that "*you can only count on yourself.*" This, then, is why they invest themselves entirely in the informal organizations of their neighborhoods, which, in a sense, parallel the official institutions of Brussels. As such, their discourse does not express a binary identity that is diametrically opposed to that of the white, "Belgian" majority. In terms of identity, working-class and immigrant youths mainly refer to, and invest themselves in, their immediate environment—the neighborhood, the square, the corner—while disidentifying with the with groups located even a few blocks or squares away. They thus demonstrate the signs of downward assimilation into the most precarious segments of society. Though their group identity may well also extend to ethnic and religious belonging, shared material conditions are nevertheless the determining factor in the structuring of group bonds. It is clear that such situations are not the result of individual decisions, but rather of accumulations of inequalities within trajectories and processes. These include experiences of families, especially parents, with

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[7] Uccle is one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of Brussels, while Molenbeek is one of the poorest with a high concentration of young people of foreign descent and as such highly stigmatized, even more so since the terrorist attacks of 2015 (Paris) and 2016 (Brussels). As to Jette it is a neighborhood that is currently going through a process of gentrification.

[8] Jérôme is used here as the stereotypical name for a white, rich kid from a rich neighborhood.

institutions for their own administrative needs, or contact with school officials. The experience of the school serves as a juncture that crystallizes the relationship of youth, especially boys, to other Brussels institutions.

5.2.2. "Discontinuous" NEET situations

"Discontinuous" NEET situations refer to unstable work situations. In this case, our interlocutors did not all share the same kind of situation with regard to work/school/training at the moment of our research. On the one hand, there were some who were neither at school, nor in higher education, nor in training, nor in a declared job. Nevertheless, among these were kids who had recently had a job or were planning to return to school or to get training. On the other hand were kids who had a temporary job or training at the moment of our encounter, but who were at risk of losing them, or who had previously been "outside the system" for periods ranging from several months to a year. In other words, these young people had work situations that were not stable, oscillating between jobs, training programs, and unemployment. This instability is quite typical of school-to-work transitions of youth with weak qualifications.

This category of NEET situations illustrates that young people's individual decisions do not depend so much on their attitudes as on the absence in a given moment of opportunities for stable work. The least qualified are especially affected. The shared characteristic of youths in "discontinuous" NEET situations is that they have not finished studies in highly valued tracks of Belgian secondary education. Like their peers "outside the system," many have had complicated school trajectories. Although the majority have obtained a high school diploma (CESS), it was in a vocational or professional track, or they dropped out of higher education once they had begun it.

The case of Aya exemplifies the type of relations that youth in "discontinuous" NEET situations have with institutions like the school, CPAS, Actiris, the police, or even non-market services, which they associate to the state. Bureaucratic requirements or a sense of being unheard, judged, or subject to suspicion push some of these kids to avoid these institutions, either altogether or except as a last resort, preferring to find paths to work or training through their own social capital. In other words, they are critical of the implementation of contemporary "workfare/welfare" policies in their school-to-work transitions, for they see it as contributing directly to the difficulties in their trajectories.

> The last time that Aya, a young woman of second-generation Moroccan origin, was supposed to receive a welfare benefit, she waited four months before going to CPAS. During one of her recent visits, a social worker had made an inappropriate remark. She explains: "I wanted to keep the application moving along, the administrative stuff, so I took out my second cell phone where I have 3G. The guy made a remark, like 'Ah, here you are at CPAS, yet you have two cell phones and 3G...'" Aya strongly resented the ruse that one must use in order to "not have trouble at CPAS." For her, that experience was proof that the social worker was not interested in listening to her or in accepting her for who she was; instead, he transformed the issue of income from a legal criterion into a question of morality. According to Aya, "everything is so formal at CPAS, there's no one to confide in." Beyond the administrative procedures themselves, it is the feeling of being judged and unheard that makes Aya criticize the institution and avoid public aid until she

no longer has any other option. "Maybe I need CPAS today, but before, I worked to pay for my stuff. They like to forget that. They like to make you think that to ask for help from CPAS you're supposed to be in the street, but I know full well that it is my right!"

The relationship with institutions is also shaped by forms of discrimination and racism of which young people say they are systematically victims or witnesses, be it at school or with the police in public spaces.

Abdel says that he often resents that people are afraid of him or see him as a threat because of the color of his skin: "In public transit, whether it's the little old lady or the tall blond, as soon as they see me, they clutch at their purse, as if they're afraid that I'll grab it from them... after a while, it gets old!" In contrast, Aya is aware of the advantage that she has over her brother when it comes to getting a job because of the fact that she is a woman. Employers feel less threatened by her, but they see him as a "hoodlum." She recounts how she had to convince the manager of a Quick fast-food restaurant to hire him: "If I hadn't put in a good word for my little brother, he wouldn't have gotten a job. I already worked at Quick and I asked the manager to hire him. But it was obvious that if he had just shown up for an interview, they would have never accepted him because he has the look of a 'hoodlum.'"

Nevertheless, the negative image that institutions reflect back to youth in "discontinuous" NEET situations does not lead them to retreat to informal organizations. Their identity formation deploys a binary framing opposing a minority "us," which is subject to discrimination, to a majority "them," that is, "Belgians." This dichotomy is not just the result of racism and obstacles to inclusion. Unlike their peers "outside-the-system", youth in "discontinuous" NEET situations desire to participate fully in majority society and accept its frame of reference. As such, even though most of them come from the second or third generation of immigrant families, they do not identify with Belgium, but with their origins. As an example, Allan presents himself as Belgian, but does not see himself as a "proper" Belgian because of discrimination. This feeling of exclusion corresponds to a situation of marginalization, rather than a total exclusion in which the frame of reference changes. Kids who fall in this category do not invest themselves in the neighborhood's many informal organizations to build their future. This does not mean, however, that they do not invest in the neighborhood itself.

For example, Malika completed a vocational program in chemistry, but was unable to pursue higher education because she also had to work to sustain her household. At the moment of our encounter, she was unemployed but wished to return to school to become a social worker, a desire to which she was dedicated. Moreover, she is actively involved in improving not only her own future, but also that of her peers in the neighborhood: she organizes homework "schools" and neighborhood outings. As for Allan, he dropped out in grade 5 of a vocational secondary school, after several changes of course of study that were difficult to get through. After a period of hesitation spent "outside the system" and in the informal economy, he managed to obtain a limited-term contract as an outreach assistant at the Brussels transit authority, the STIB, under a "first job programme". This gives him a bit of security, though he does not yet want to think too much about what will come next. Allan is a respected figure in the neighborhood: he is a "big brother" who

> *positions himself in public spaces as a model for his peers with regard to social cohesion and intends to continue positioning himself as such.*

Illustrating Portes's argument that the social capital of ethnic communities can potentially be negative, youths in "discontinuous" NEET situations simultaneously identify with the neighborhood and feel its debilitating limits. As such, some see it as a place of bad influences that can lead them down a wrong path. Indeed, some aspire to live somewhere more comfortable, especially to build a family. In terms of origins, kids in this category come from families that are somewhat less fragile than their "outside the system" peers, but still generally from working-class parents of modest income.

Conclusion

Beyond merely confirming the critiques that have already been made of NEET as a category, these results demonstrate that the "problem" of youth in NEET situations is above all one of their social environments and how they are treated. The differentiation of NEET and non-NEET situations illustrates this well. As identity construction and identification are always relational, the differentiated trajectories we have analyzed show that being in a NEET situation correlates strongly with rejection of these kids by Brussels institutions and majority society; this rejection also extends to their families and environments. The triple segregation that these kids experience in Brussels—urban, educational, and on the job market—reveals the lack of openness toward them on the part of majority society and the lack of investment in public policies that would enable their socioeconomic emancipation. This triple segregation heavily impacts the trajectories and identity construction of ethnic minorities living in precarity. As the life narratives of our young interlocutors show, withdrawal from majority society and its institutions does not express any kind of lack of will, but a resource for living and surviving in a stratified society that is insidiously hostile to them. Each of the NEET situations we have described thus expresses a way of confronting mechanisms of exclusion that are differentiated according to one's social position.

As such, beyond problematizing the category, these results indicate that public aid intended for NEET youth simply does not correspond to the kinds of problems that they are experiencing. Instead, it conveys a normative conception of what being young and integrated means according to the majority group. It thus seems that the NEET concept tells us much more about the desires and fears of public authorities and majority society than it does about the real problems of its target population. The ambiguity of NEET as a concept and its deployment through public policies seem to render these policies unable to keep their promises. We can thus wonder whether said policies are truly meant to foster inclusion for disadvantaged layers of society by promoting social mobility, or whether they merely serve to rhetorically obscure a policing apparatus whose function is to manage the perverse effects of an unequal system that produces marginality. The lived experiences of the youth in our study suggest that NEET as a category and the policies that flow from it serve to euphemize, and thus to naturalize and justify, relations of domination. Confronted with the great transformations of the system of production and the rise of structural and mass unemployment, the ideology of work readiness and school retention maintain the *illusio* that individual self-improvement can lead to changes in one's social trajectory and integration into better-positioned segments of society.

Declaration of interest statement
The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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