ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

Between the Rejection of Work and Uncertainty: Exploring Young People's Narratives on Life Trajectory Construction in the Basque Country

Entre el rechazo del trabajo y la incertidumbre. Aproximación a los discursos acerca de la construcción de trayectorias vitales de las personas jóvenes en Euskadi

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the narratives of young people in the Basque Country concerning the construction of their life trajectories within a context shaped by uncertainty and a growing rejection of traditional employment models. Drawing on a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews, it analyses the perceptions and strategies developed by these young people to navigate labour market precarity and a lack of opportunities. The findings reveal a diversity of approaches and attitudes towards work, highlighting the central role of education, continuous training and social support networks. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Basque youth navigate a changing labour market and the structural challenges they face in striving to build a stable and meaningful life.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo explora los discursos de los jóvenes vascos en torno a la construcción de sus trayectorias vitales en un contexto marcado por la incertidumbre y el rechazo al trabajo tradicional. A través de una metodología cualitativa basada en entrevistas en profundidad se analizan las percepciones y estrategias que estos jóvenes desarrollan para afrontar la precariedad laboral y la falta de oportunidades. Los resultados revelan una diversidad de enfoques y actitudes hacia el empleo, destacando la importancia de la educación, la formación continua y las redes de apoyo social. El estudio contribuye a la comprensión de cómo la juventud vasca navega en un mercado laboral cambiante y los desafíos que enfrentan para construir una vida estable e íntegra.

PALABRAS CLAVE: precariedad juvenil; incertidumbre; trayectorias vitales; análisis de discurso; sociología del trabajo; rechazo del trabajo.

1. Introduction

This article reflects on the resistance to work and the pursuit of stability among young people in contemporary society. The current generation of young people seems to be caught between a blurred and distant future and a past that no longer fits with present-day notions of life, as if awaiting guidance or direction that never quite materialises. Is it that ever more is required in order to achieve stability? What obstacles do young people face in their quest for such stability? What alternatives and life trajectories are they developing in response to the instability and uncertainty surrounding both their personal and collective futures?

The pervasive nature of precarious employment poses a significant challenge to traditional notions of stable work, profoundly shaping the formation of life projects and trajectories among young people. Far from following a linear and coherent course in work and life, today's young people are building their lives amid obstacles, uncertainty and a sense of guilt.

The rise and consolidation of neoliberalism has clearly transformed both the world of work and prevailing understandings of employment. Employment, once considered a factor that guaranteed a degree of material or symbolic stability, now contributes to the precarisation of life across all spheres. Young people's development and ways of life are increasingly marked by uncertainty, immediacy and the demands of a socio-economic order that has succeeded in colonising virtually every aspect of life: our relationship with the labour market, with resources, with institutions, with others and even with ourselves. Unemployment, temporary contracts and overqualification are presented to young people as naturalised phenomena, leaving them with little option but to adapt to precarious conditions in order to move forwards.

Shifts in labour dynamics and working conditions have placed precarity at the centre of young people's experiences in today's society. This phenomenon, together with evolving expectations and life needs within this generation, presents significant challenges and calls for in-depth reflection.

This research arises from the need to understand how precarious employment conditions are shaping the experiences and outlooks of young people in the Basque Country. The core issue addressed by the study is how young people's life plans and trajectories are being adapted to a labour context defined by precarity. In doing so, the study questions the central role of employment as a guarantor of both individual and social development.

The aim is to examine how life projects and paths are being shaped in a labour environment characterised by instability. To this end, a qualitative methodological approach has been adopted, based on in-depth interviews designed to capture the personal experiences and perspectives reflected in young people's narratives.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Young People as a Vulnerable and Precarious Group

Sociological research into young people experiencing precarity is essential given the social, political and economic changes they face, as well as the evolving role of the welfare state in contexts marked by austerity (Ibáñez, Fernández and Alonso, 2017). According to the study *Youth, Emancipation and Housing Needs in the Basque Country*, conducted by the Basque Youth Observatory (2021), 35% of young people aged 18 to 34 had achieved emancipation. However, the follow-up study carried out two years later, in 2023, reveals that access to housing has become increasingly difficult, with only 31% of young people in this age group living independently.

Similarly, the study *Youth in the Basque Country in the Labour Market. Analysis of the 2021 Labour Market Census*, also conducted by the Basque Youth Observatory (2021), shows that over half of employed young people hold temporary contracts, while the majority of unemployed young people have previous work experience, although only a minority receive any form of economic support.

Nonetheless, defining youth remains a complex task. Ballesté and Feixa (2019) highlight its heterogeneity and intersectionality, while Bourdieu (1990) stresses the importance of understanding youth as a social construct. Villa (2012) suggests referring to "youths" in the plural, in order to capture the idea of a collective composed of heterogeneous individuals who share certain social and living conditions but are also shaped by varying forms of domination and power.

The transition to adulthood for previous generations followed a more linear pattern, generally based on economic and residential independence, integration into the labour market and the formation of a nuclear family. By contrast, the life trajectories of today's young people are more diffuse, fragmented and less clearly defined, diverging from these traditional pathways (Casal, Merino and García, 2011).

Analytical perspectives on youth transitions and the formation of adult life vary considerably. Some focus on subjectivity and individual agency, portraying young people as active decision-makers regarding their futures and emancipation (Moreno, López and Sánchez, 2012). Others, however, question the assumption that young people have access to a range of opportunities, pointing instead to the social and employment-related barriers that are difficult to overcome.

Young people often experience obstacles and repeated shifts in decision-making as they move towards economic and residential independence. There is frequently a mismatch between socially expected transitions and young people's own perceptions of their journey to adulthood. Structural factors such as the socio-economic context, gender, age, education and ethnicity all shape these processes of emancipation and the trajectories followed by young people (Moreno et al., 2012). A historical and social analysis of the transformation of work under capitalism is therefore essential in order to understand the perspectives and decisions that shape this field.

In order to describe this condition of precarity, Guy Standing (2014) introduces the concept of the "precariat" to designate a new social class characterised by the absence of stable income, the lack of a professional identity and the erosion of a cohesive and supportive labour community. However, this should be understood as a totalising concept, which may fall short in capturing "the profound differences that exist among precarious workers, which are rooted in structural inequalities related to family background, economic, cultural or symbolic capital, and their role within the productive process" (Gil and Rendueles, 2019, p. 31).

For this reason, and in an effort to avoid obscuring the dynamics of class struggle under advanced capitalism, it is essential to examine the evolving nature of labour conflict within the capitalist system. In the context of post-Fordist capitalism, a process of increasing precarisation can be observed, marked by the deterioration of working conditions and a growing sense of institutional uncertainty. Scholars such as Giddens (2008) and Bauman (2017) highlight rising job insecurity and low wages among young people, whose ways of life are shaped by a complex interplay of economic, political and cultural factors.

Precarity is thus conceived as a condition of deprivation or insufficiency that extends beyond the sphere of employment. It is therefore crucial to consider the multiplicity of factors that contribute to young people's precarious lives, including not only economic and occupational but also social dimensions (Gil and Rendueles, 2019).

The sociological study of the 18–29 age group is particularly relevant, as this population represents a significant segment of society. In Spain, for example, the Youth

Institute (INJUVE) defines youth as falling within this age range and structures its programmes and policies in areas such as employment, training and social participation accordingly. Youth policies are primarily targeted at this group, as it constitutes a pivotal stage for gaining access to stable employment, continuing education and full integration into society (INJUVE, 2020).

Nevertheless, youth is recognised as a diverse category, with situations and ways of life that vary depending on the spatial and historical contexts in which young people are located. This study will therefore focus on the labour and economic conditions of young people within this age group, while acknowledging the plurality and diversity of their lived experiences (Taguenca, 2009).

2.2. The Construction of the Social Problem of Employment: From the Origins of the Concept of Work to Contemporary Employment

Work is a fundamental social relationship that has played a central role in the cohesion and integration of societies. However, its conception as a social activity is historically specific. Hegel (2017) defines work as the uniquely human way of relating to nature. Paid work, or employment, is not simply another sphere of daily life detached from social, political and economic norms. Rather, "it can only be understood as a transformative relationship with nature within a process of interaction with others of our own species in order to carry out that transformation" (Martínez, García and Prior, 2016, p. 264).

Weber (1901, 1969) analyses the relationship between religious ethics and capitalism, showing how work may be experienced either as a moral obligation or as sheer economic compulsion. Marx (1978), in contrast, underscores the alienating nature of labour under capitalism, in which human relationships are reduced to relationships between things. Foucault (2002) extends this critique in *Discipline and Punish*, examining disciplinary power as a cornerstone of the modern social order and exploring the use of control mechanisms such as the panopticon to impose discipline and normalise behaviour.

Although recent sociological theories of labour relations have incorporated a variety of analytical perspectives, some scholars continue to focus on specific elements such as rational choice, individual agency, labour market structures and institutional dynamics. Labour relations are also shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, ethnicity and social class. Sociologist Joan Acker (2000), for example, explores how gender hierarchies are reproduced within labour relations and organisational structures.

Today, both institutions and the social sciences examine a broad range of factors that intersect with social reality and shape the processes of individual socialisation. The "network society" described by Castells (1999), in the context of informational capitalism, highlights the influence of media and digital social networks on young people's lives. Nonetheless, paid work continues to occupy a central role, generating precarity and shaping aspects such as access to leisure and economic security.

Another key dimension when analysing employment as a social fact and structure is the work ethic. According to Bauman (2017), the work ethic is rooted in the idea that work is inherently valuable and morally superior, while inactivity is viewed negatively. This conception played a vital role in the civilising process and in structuring modern society, placing work at the heart of both personal identity and social life. Within this framework, unemployment was synonymous with social exclusion and a lack of supervision and control.

Today, however, this work ethic has undergone a profound transformation. According to Bauman (*ibid.*), in consumer societies the moral value once attached to work has been supplanted by the *aesthetic of consumption*, which now governs social behaviour. The emphasis on individual choice in the marketplace has weakened support for welfare policies, while declining quality in public services has further undermined their legitimacy: "consumerism and the welfare state are therefore incompatible" (*ibid.*, p. 92).

Despite these transformations, the work ethic remains dominant. Employment continues to be exalted as a source of stability and personal integrity, while unemployment is stigmatised (Frayne, 2017). Society still equates employment with maturity and social commitment, disregarding other forms of contribution (*ibid.*) and framing poverty and inequality as individual failings rather than structural problems.

Gender is also a central factor in shaping labour relations, interacting with capitalism to reproduce structural inequalities. Authors such as Zetkin (1976), Kollontai (2011), Millet (2017) and Fraser (2015) have examined the subordination of women within the labour system. Labour market segregation, technological control and the division between paid work and unpaid domestic labour are all forms of patriarchal organisation embedded in capitalist labour relations (Hartmann, 1994). Likewise, authors such as Butler (2007) and Gómez Bueno (2001) challenge the work–employment relationship from an intersectional perspective, proposing a capabilities-based approach to rethinking development economics.

2.3. Work from the Perspective of Subjectivation: Existential Uncertainty and the Rejection of Work in Consumer Societies

The sociology of work must address the relationship between subjectivity and employment in order to understand the transformations taking place in labour relations. Following Casal et al. (2011), the social actor is conceived as the protagonist of their own life, articulating rationality, emotions, social constraints and strategies for the future. In this sense, subjectivities are formed in relation to the evolution of social structures.

The flexibility of production and its effects on workers, as explored by Dubet (1999), remains highly relevant, as work continues to play a central role in constructing both individual and collective identities. Alonso (2000) critiques the dismantling of Fordist employment and the erosion of job security, resulting from neoliberal discours-

es that promote competitiveness and flexibility. Labour precarity, especially among young people, generates instability and reshapes their position in society (Castells, 1999).

Lazzarato and Negri (2001) introduce the concept of immaterial labour, which not only produces goods but also configures social relations across production, innovation and consumption. This process is linked to Foucault's (2002) notion of *biopower*, which regulates bodies and populations in service of capital. Within this framework, Deleuze (1993) observes a transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control, in which instant communication and consumerism supplant traditional disciplinary mechanisms. The dynamics of consumer society undermine social cohesion (Bauman, 2017), replacing Foucault's (2002) disciplinary control mechanisms with the logic of consumption.

Control society fragments individuals, making them increasingly vulnerable within flexible capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002). Neoliberal psychopolitics fosters self-exploitation and continuous productivity (Han, 2014), replacing coercion with motivation and embedding a moral dimension that legitimises the system (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002). Instead of reducing work through gains in productivity, capitalism absorbs potential free time by expanding the market and commodifying new areas of life (Frayne, 2017, p. 80). Technology, far from granting greater autonomy, intensifies control over workers (Frayne, 2017). Simultaneously, work infiltrates private life through connected devices, blurring the boundaries between working time and leisure (Adorno, 2008), and giving rise to new forms of exploitation and reproduction of subjectivities (Browne, 2007).

The lingering influence of the modern work ethic, combined with the rise of neoliberal *psychopolitics* (Han, 2014) in consumer societies, may therefore represent a key force in shaping the identities and subjectivities of young people. This does not imply disregarding the role of social action and the potential for creating spaces freed from domination, as Pagura (2008) warns. Rather, it calls for renewed attention to structural analysis and the role of the productive system in shaping the subjectivities and actions of young people in a context where such interpretative frameworks remain limited.

In his research on the refusal of work, David Frayne (2017) interviews individuals in the United Kingdom who have voluntarily chosen to reduce the prominence of paid employment in their lives, either by cutting their working hours or temporarily withdrawing from the labour market. He begins with the premise that sociological research "may have unwittingly reinforced the work ethic, in so far as researchers have treated work unquestioningly" (*ibid.*, p. 99), without exploring the possibility that autonomous social networks and community-managed production models could reduce reliance on formal employment.

Frayne's (2017) narratives and observations reveal a *moment of rupture* or *de-reification* – a concept originally coined by Marx and later developed by Berger, Luckmann

and Zuleta (1968) in *The Social Construction of Reality* – to describe the process by which individuals overcome the forgetting of the fundamental truth that human beings are the creators of the social world. In other words, the individuals interviewed identify the point at which wage labour ceases to be seen as an inevitable destiny and becomes subject to critical reflection.

Their insights into employment show that the desire to resist is often driven by a perceived lack of meaning and autonomy in the workplace. Functional social roles, such as paid employment, can never fully encompass the complexity of individuals who are compelled to occupy them. There is always a part of the self that exceeds the social role and yearns for liberation (Frayne, 2017, p. 128).

3. Objectives and Methodology

The general aim of this research is to analyse the processes through which young people adapt their life projects and trajectories to contexts of precarity in contemporary Basque society. These adaptation processes and trajectories are examined from two interrelated perspectives: on the one hand, through the structural dynamics of the labour market and Western social systems, and on the other, through the lens of individual subjectivity, understood as being in constant interaction with social structures and other actors.

To this end, four specific objectives have been established, addressing the multi-causal nature of these adaptation processes. The first objective is to explore young people's personal expectations for the future, covering multiple dimensions such as employment, economic stability and interpersonal relationships. The second aims to identify the factors through which precarity is manifested in young people's lives, conceptualising precarity as a phenomenon made up of shared indicators. The third seeks to analyse changes in young people's essential life needs, where "essential" refers to their expectations, goals and critical reflections on their own trajectories. The fourth and final objective is to examine the current role of employment in young people's lives by analysing their relationship with the labour market.

This analysis is grounded in an understanding of subjectivity as being shaped through ongoing interaction with social structures and other individuals. For this reason, the final analysis draws on data collected through the qualitative method of discourse analysis. A total of six interviews were conducted with young people aged 16 to 29, selected using non-probabilistic snowball or network sampling techniques. This approach helps to minimise potential biases and expand the diversity of participant profiles.

In qualitative research, sample size is not determined by statistical criteria but by the depth and richness of the data gathered (González, Pérez and Rodríguez, 2015). The aim of this study was not to achieve numerical generalisability, but rather to conduct an in-depth exploration of young people's discourses in the Basque Country

regarding uncertainty and the rejection of work. Previous studies have shown that a small number of interviews may suffice when the focus is on shared meanings and situated experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Moreover, the purposive selection of participants enabled access to discursive diversity within the phenomenon under investigation. Although the sample size was limited, the data reached a point of thematic saturation, meaning that recurring patterns were identified and no substantially new information emerged from further interviews (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

The analysis aimed to identify relationships, convergences and divergences across individual narratives in order to understand the processes through which young people adapt to precarious contexts and how their life projects and trajectories are reconfigured. The study focuses exclusively on residents of the Basque Country in order to provide a more detailed understanding of how life trajectories are shaped within the regional context.

The profile of the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Interviewee profiles

Interview	Age	Student	Employed	Living independently	Gender
I1	23	No	No	No	Male
I2	24	No	Yes	Yes	Female
I3	24	Yes	Yes	Yes	Female
I4	17	Yes	No	No	Female
I5	29	No	Yes	Yes	Male
I6	24	No	Yes	No	Male

These interviews made it possible to capture the individual perspectives and lived experiences of young people in relation to their life projects, future expectations, the obstacles and challenges they face, as well as their perceptions of precarity and the role of employment in their lives. A hermeneutic approach was adopted, allowing for the identification of emerging categories and themes within participants' discourse. The analysis focused on detecting patterns, contrasts and divergences in the experiences and perceptions shared by the young people interviewed.

Manual, inductive coding was carried out through iterative readings of the interview transcripts. An interpretive approach was applied, using an inductive coding strategy based on a hermeneutic perspective inspired by grounded theory. The method of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed, with the aim of identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns within qualitative data through a flexible framework that allows for the exploration of meaning in discourse.

One of the key advantages of manual analysis is that it enables a deep, reflective engagement with the material, fostering a contextualised interpretation of participants' discourse (Mieles, Tonon and Alvarado, 2012). By not relying on software, the researcher maintains direct contact with the data, facilitating the recognition of nuances and emerging meanings (Charmaz, 2006). Moreover, manual coding allows for dynamic adjustments throughout the analytical process, enabling the refinement of categories as the study evolves – an approach well documented in ethnographic research (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

In this way, categories were established according to the discursive elements most relevant to the research objectives (see Table 2).

Table 2
Discursive elements identified in the interviews

Discursive elements	I1	I2	I3	I4	I5	I6
Has worked temporarily	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖
Identifies "self-pressure" as a key factor	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖
Expresses a desire for support and guidance during the transition to employment	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖
Reports that uncertainty shapes their life trajectory	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖
Aims to continue their education, albeit without a defined plan	✖	✖	✖		✖	✖
Expresses rejection of the idea of "stagnation"	✖	✖	✖	✖		✖
Does not see their own life trajectory reflected in that of their parents	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖
Does not perceive any improvement in conditions for young people	✖	✖	✖			✖

4. Analysis of results: Narratives of fragmented trajectories

At present, young people are confronted with the absence of a clear roadmap for transitioning into adulthood, resulting in frequent changes of direction driven by failed attempts and trial-and-error strategies in their pursuit of residential and economic independence.

The discourse analysis of interviews conducted with individuals aged 16 to 29 has provided valuable insights into multiple aspects of this process and has brought to light certain emerging trends. The life trajectories of the interviewees – in the employment, economic and relational spheres – differ in how they are narrated. However, certain core pillars appear consistently across all, or the vast majority of, the narratives and remain present throughout the interviews.

The interview script followed a broadly chronological structure, beginning with participants' school experiences and family relationships, and subsequently moving to the stage at which they begin to make – or are expected to make – decisions regarding their future career paths. The analysis also focused on discursive elements shared by those who had engaged with the labour market, as well as on their perceptions of

the experiences of close individuals in their social environment. Particular attention was given to the material and working conditions of employment, and to how these influence the formation of mental frameworks regarding work and employment. Finally, and crucially, the interviews sought to delve into participants' future outlooks and how they tend to adapt their aspirations to their current context.

As already noted, the transition to adulthood for young people today cannot be considered linear, nor can it be based on the traditional markers of integration associated with earlier generations, such as labour market insertion, residential independence and conjugal union. The ways in which young people enter and navigate the labour market vary and are closely linked to their educational pathways (Casal *et al.*, 2006). These transitions may be relatively straightforward or more complex, depending on each individual's educational background and level of training. Some young people experience rapid and uncomplicated labour market entry, often associated with lower educational attainment or early school leaving. Others, by contrast, undergo more complex transitions involving successive stages and the need to develop specific strategies.

In such cases, the strategies adopted depend on factors such as field of study, job market requirements, available opportunities and the level of family support during the education period. Educational attainment, social capital and cultural capital also play a decisive role in shaping these transitions, as individuals with greater access to such resources are generally better positioned to adapt to the labour market than those with lower levels of education and limited social support (Artiles et al., 2018). Figure 1 presents the conceptual map of the themes and topics analysed in the narratives concerning the life trajectories of the interviewees.

Figure 1
Discursive framework of life trajectories
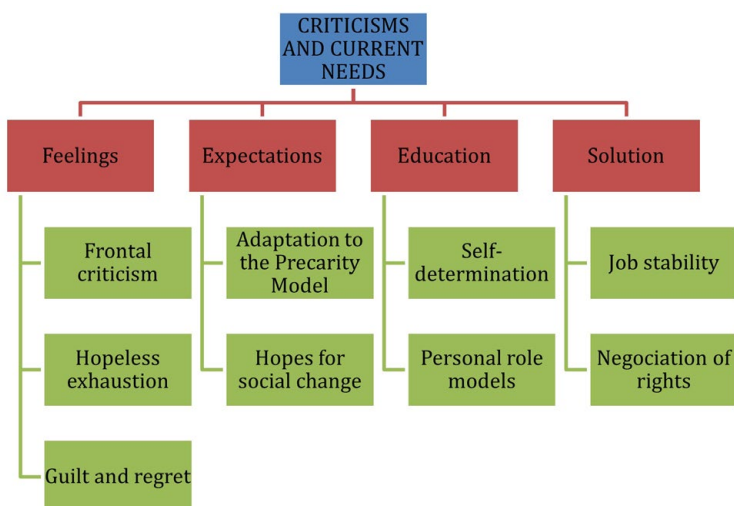
4.1. Influences, References and Changes During the Educational Stage

The main criticism directed at the education system relates to its lack of preparation for working life, particularly the limited teaching of bureaucratic procedures and labour rights. While some participants acknowledged that education had offered a degree of preparation for flexibility in life more broadly, they did not feel that it had provided adequate technical or practical preparation for entering employment.

> In terms of employment, there is a major lack of information on more practical matters – types of contracts, working conditions, collective agreements, trade unions... (I2).

Another key issue concerns the disconnect between the education system and the labour market, especially the rigidity in the selection of educational pathways. During the transition to employment, participants reported that curricular internships were often unfavourable to students and primarily beneficial to companies.

> I think education should be much more practical, and it should also guarantee internships for all students with a minimum salary, because the internships we've done were in exchange for nothing – not even a thank you. And I think we should have a bit more contact with real life, because it's really hard to be mentally strong when you come out of that situation already feeling abandoned (I3).

For many university-educated young people, higher education created expectations of autonomy and meaningful employment, which were subsequently frustrated upon entering the labour market. This often led to a point of rupture, prompting a reorientation of ambitions away from the world of work (Frayne, 2017, p. 132).

4.2. Goal or Obstacle? The Current Role of Employment in Young People's Lives

> Throughout history, work has played a fundamental role in socialisation, reaching its height during the Industrial Revolution. Although work is not perceived as disappearing, young people are increasingly less likely to view it as a mechanism of integration, due to growing labour flexibilisation and the ongoing exploitation of the workforce.

Upon entering employment, young people frequently experience feelings of disillusionment and shock, as they do not feel adequately prepared for the realities of working life. Job insecurity and the prevalence of temporary contracts are recurring themes in their narratives, forcing them to accept short-term and flexible employment arrangements.

> I've almost always worked in temporary jobs, with short shifts so I could combine them with university and, well, I've been managing more or less like that. [...] What weighs on me is the idea of losing my job and having to move back home. I've been living on my own for six years, and if my contract ends tomorrow, I really don't know what I'd do... (I3).

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The subsumption of life under capital (Marx, 2008), as theorised in Marxian thought, becomes evident as production extends beyond the workplace and penetrates all aspects of young people's lives. This results in a situation in which "the consumer lifestyle becomes increasingly unattainable for low-income groups, historically defined by a fixed purchasing capacity that enables them merely to secure subsistence or meet their basic needs" (Bauman, 2017).

As previously discussed, emancipation and residential independence are increasingly difficult for young people in the Basque Country, generating mounting anxiety and uncertainty. Shared rental arrangements have become the most common option, yet even those who do manage to achieve emancipation often find themselves in precarious housing conditions.

> Right now I have a one-year job and a decent salary, which allows me to be independent from my parents. [...] I applied for youth rental support, which gives me a bit more breathing room. [...] I also lived in Madrid for a year, and it was absolutely desperate – literally crying at night and saying: "All I've seen are windowless holes, and they're all beyond my budget," you know? [...] There wasn't a single place with windows for €400, and it was incredibly disheartening (I3).

The dominant discourse reflects the difficulty of accessing employment with decent conditions. Moreover, once employment is obtained, the precarious nature of working arrangements – particularly in relation to working hours and pressure – makes it difficult to balance work with personal life. As a result, residential emancipation remains a challenging objective and, when achieved, is often experienced as unstable and insecure.

4.3. Personal Expectations for the Future: The rejection of work amid a distorted horizon

Young people express a growing tendency to reject salaried employment, driven by multiple factors. Firstly, they seek to avoid stable employment due to dissatisfaction with current working conditions. In response to this discontent, many turn to further education and skill development, aligning with the ideal of continuous self-optimisation promoted by contemporary psychopolitics.

> I have a one-year contract, which guarantees me absolutely nothing. In a kind of desperation about the future, I enrolled in another master's in human resources, thinking it would lead to more job opportunities – but I really don't enjoy it at all. It feels like giving in to the labour market, because I don't see much of a future in my field (I3).

However, Han's (2014) notion of self-exploitation does not fully capture this reality, as young people do not pursue optimisation solely as a conscious choice but also as a consequence of adverse material conditions that compel them to reconsider their life trajectories. Educational optimisation is not always a desired goal, but rather a strategy for escaping a problematic labour context.

Although some elements of their discourse may suggest a rejection of the stability associated with *adult* life, what is ultimately being questioned is a life centred on salaried work – one that dominates daily routines and leaves little space for community, creativity or personal fulfilment.

This perspective also challenges the *false dichotomy* underlying the work dogma that Frayne (2017) identifies in his research – the widely held belief that individuals must choose between work and idleness, which devalues the social significance of activities not formally recognised as employment. As Frayne notes, based on the testimonies gathered in his study: "the decision to resist work was never motivated by laziness, negligence, or an aversion to productive activity. [...] The decision to resist work was always motivated by a powerful set of alternative moral principles" (*ibid.*, p. 113).

Another key factor underpinning this rejection – or refusal – of work relates to the difficulty of securing employment despite high academic performance. The persistent trend of accessing precarious jobs prompts young people to seek alternative paths and experiences, even when these lead to irregular and unstable trajectories. The lack of clear reference points in the transition to adulthood further reinforces this sense of stagnation.

> My idea is to go back to studying so I don't get stuck too early. One thing I noticed in my last job was that there were people my age, with responsibilities, doing that same job – and that really overwhelmed me. That's why I've decided to study again or at least try something new (I1).

The generational gap between young people and their parents also plays a role in shaping this rejection of stability, as the contexts and experiences of both groups differ significantly.

> I would have liked, above all, to have role models – people I could look up to, not necessarily in terms of work, but in terms of practical life. Someone closer to my age, who had only recently started working, but who also had this drive or desire to become independent, to be as self-sufficient as possible... (I2).

In summary, interconnected factors – such as experiences of labour precarity (including temporary jobs and roles unrelated to vocational interests) and the insecurity surrounding life trajectories – contribute to the growing tendency among young interviewees to reject traditional models of work.

4.4. Changes in Essential Needs

Young people tend to conceptualise their life trajectories differently from those of their parents, leading to a sense of disorientation in shaping their own paths. This rupture in the transmission of values and goals has resulted in a perceived disconnect – not only from their parents' experiences but also from the institutional framework of formal education. Participants frequently noted that their parents did not face the

same degree of employment insecurity, exploitative conditions or, most notably, the pervasive uncertainty that characterises contemporary working life:

> At that age, when they were younger, I think they had more luck [...]. Obviously, things have changed a great deal, and at the time, finding a job and staying in it for 30 years was completely normal [...]. My father's level of education was probably the same or even lower than many people's today, and yet he secured a stable job. So I think it's just that things were different back then (I4).

Beyond material working and economic conditions, young people also identify shifts in the collective imaginary that set their generation apart from those that preceded it. These shifts influence how they construct their trajectories and lead to increasingly diverse outcomes. The intention, however, is not to draw direct comparisons, but to understand how each life course and future expectation is developed within its own contextual framework. Despite structural obstacles, young people continue to pursue a stable model of life – yet they are often forced to do so within dynamics of structural flexibility shaped by multiple constraints.

> We're starting to realise that those elements are not the formula for success or happiness that we were always told they were. There are so many other things we need – we need a care network, we need spaces where we can talk about this discomfort – and the fact that we don't have them is what's fuelling this uncertainty, even this rejection of work. We're realising that this formula, or these elements, no longer guarantee the kind of stability that having a job might have ensured 40 years ago (I2).

4.5. Critiques of Life Trajectories and Current Needs

Young people today find themselves in precarious situations and express a critical stance towards these conditions – yet this is often accompanied by a sense of exhaustion and hopelessness. Their discourse reflects a passive anticipation of events rather than active or collective engagement.

> Maybe I didn't do everything I should have done, and now – well, now the decisions aren't mine any more, and... There's nothing I can do about it, it's already done. That's it... There's no solution (I4).

Participants also express a strong desire for support and guidance during their educational and professional transitions – from teachers, parents and other significant figures in their lives.

> I really missed an education that focused more on self-determination, on being able to recognise myself as an active subject when making decisions or when shaping my own future (I2).

Despite increasing labour flexibilisation and the persistence of precarious conditions, a growing tendency can be observed among young people to reject not only work itself but also the conditions in which it takes place. This reveals a fundamental contradiction within capitalism – which requires a compliant labour force, but also a level of income and status sufficient to ensure its own social reproduction. Theories of psychopolitics and subjectivity suggest that this flexibilisation may be limiting young people's capacity for emancipation, raising questions about the very negotiability of their futures.

The ways in which interviewees respond to and interpret these tensions appear to reflect a broader social and normative rupture: a disjuncture between the linear, secure trajectory promoted by institutional and familial models of education and the flexible, unstable social reality that young people encounter. In the face of persistent difficulties in securing employment and life stability, participants' narratives reveal a latent discontent that has yet to be fully articulated as a social problem. While these narratives express clear rejection of precarity, they more closely resemble what Fisher (2016) refers to as "captured forms of discontent" – localised expressions of deeper systemic tensions that the social analyst must interpret and amplify as part of a broader critique of the prevailing political order (p. 120).

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Youth is a social construct shaped by historical, social and political factors, making it a diverse and intersectional category. In the transition to adulthood, life trajectories have become increasingly fragmented, marked by structural obstacles that profoundly affect young people's identities and lived experiences. Within this context, work is analysed as a social relationship that generates cohesion and contributes to identity formation – an activity that is historically and culturally linked to and shaped by power, technology, gender and subjectivity. However, labour flexibilisation under neoliberalism has eroded both employment-based identity and job security, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups.

According to the report *Aurrera Begira 2022. Youth Expectations Indicators* by the Basque Youth Observatory (2022), the self-assessment of the present moment by young people in the Basque Country (aged 15 to 29) stood at 62 points out of 100 – the lowest value in the past four years. Moreover, income, employment status, leisure time and health emerged as areas with notable gaps between "perceived importance" and "actual satisfaction" (*ibid.*).

Young people's expectations for the future are shaped by employment precarity and shifting generational needs. Economic and labour insecurity directly impact emotional stability and overall quality of life. Nevertheless, the capitalist system tends to neutralise social critique by presenting its own logic as the only viable alternative (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2002). Han (2014) proposes dismantling psychopolitics as a form of domination – namely, "de-psychologising and emptying the subject so that they may be free for a form of life that does not yet have a name" (p. 62) – although he offers

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no concrete strategies for collective mobilisation. While cultural resistance may offer a potential means of challenging the dominant labour system, there is not yet a movement capable of displacing work from its central role in society (Frayne, 2017).

This raises important questions: Is there truly no way out? Is the power of capital and the control society so pervasive that it can co-opt and instrumentalise every form of resistance and opposition?

Globalisation has weakened the capacity of nation-states to manage conflict, contributing to a reconfiguration of identity in a world increasingly shaped by global flows (Castells, 2017, p. 21). Moreover, the state plays a role in the symbolic construction of social problems, often consolidating them as unquestionable realities (Bourdieu, 1997). For social conflict to emerge, disadvantaged groups must first become aware of their condition and challenge the legitimacy of the existing system (Coser, 1961).

At this juncture, it is worth asking whether Basque and Spanish societies are currently experiencing – or are likely to experience in the near future – a transition from interclass resentment to overt social conflict, driven by the stagnation of upward social mobility. More broadly, what is preventing such a transformation among younger generations?

Mark Fisher describes "capitalist realism" as the prevailing condition in which it becomes difficult to imagine alternatives to the current system. Overcoming this, he argues, requires the ability "to articulate what it is we do want – which will mean disarticulating technology and desire from capital" (2016, p. 115). Bauman similarly reflects: "Why are we so convinced that an economy not enslaved to the market is a contradiction in terms, and that rising inequality cannot be reversed? Utopia is our main weapon against the closure of debate" (2017, p. 150). Layla Martínez (2020) offers a related observation: imagining ever-worsening futures has stripped us of the ability to envision a better one. History is marked by victories, ruptures and moments of upheaval in which everything has been blown apart, creating the possibility of constructing something different. These movements of resistance have a global impact and give rise to new forms of life and cooperation, as production increasingly occurs through movement, collaboration and community.

Stress, anxiety and depression are not merely individual pathologies but symptoms of a labour model that alienates and perpetuates precarity (Frayne, 2017). Although work is often portrayed as a source of self-realisation, it frequently limits the development of creative and collaborative capacities. It is necessary to challenge the logic of economic rationality and reclaim the value of activities that fall outside the realm of paid employment (Bauman, 2017).

Overcoming the current crisis of work requires collective resistance, as proposed by André Gorz (1991), aimed at redistributing the benefits of productive development and reorganising labour relations around the principles of a freer and more dignified life. The acceleration of social change has transformed traditional labour

frameworks, giving rise to new forms of conflict and negotiation. In this context, it is essential to re-evaluate flexible employment, the unequal distribution of productive and reproductive labour, and the hegemonic logic of short-term profitability. Only then will it be possible to construct fairer and more democratic life trajectories.

This study has examined the relationship between youth, work and labour precarity from a sociological perspective, identifying the tensions and contradictions that characterise the current labour market. Nevertheless, there are certain limitations. The geographical and cultural context of the interviews may constrain the generalisability of the findings to other regions with different labour and social dynamics.

Despite these limitations, the study opens up new lines of inquiry, including longitudinal analyses of youth cohorts to better understand the evolution of their employment and life paths, examinations of how employment policies impact youth precarity, and critical debate surrounding the hegemonic centrality of work in social life. Research such as that of David Frayne, which explores the theory and practice of rejecting work, may serve as a useful reference for further exploration of youth discourses and trajectories in the Basque Country.

There is also a need to explore alternative models of wealth distribution, such as Universal Basic Income (Tena, 2018), and to expand the sociological debate around the rejection of work. This entails examining the extent to which new practices and ways of life are emerging that challenge productivist logic.

The transformation of the labour market and the questioning of work's centrality raise theoretical and political challenges that demand a comprehensive reassessment of current working conditions. Exploring new strategies for the redistribution of wealth and the reorganisation of social life may prove crucial in building more equitable, sustainable and fulfilling societies.

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