Alternatives to the employment crisis: challenges to education/training and new forms of regulation

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ABSTRACT

The paper begins with an analysis of the crisis now being faced by what was the predominant model of employment until quite recently. The employment crisis is the great social issue of our modern times. Although there is general consensus about the employment crisis, there are serious disagreements as to its precise nature and about the solutions to be put forward for overcoming it. For the predominant discourse, the information and communication technologies and the market economy have opened up a new era that offers more and better job opportunities for everyone. However, according to the critical approaches, globalisation as the universal spread of the free market gives rise to serious socio-economic inequalities between economic blocs, regions, countries, companies and individuals, casting ever larger segments of the population into situations of unemployment and precarious employment.

In view of the crisis in employment, education/training and learning are now viewed from new points of view. The second section of the paper examines the complex relationship between education and the labour market, which evolved from a situation of functional subordination of the former to the latter, during the processes of industrialisation and the construction of mature capitalism, and progressively reclaimed importance in its own right as a factor of human development and, more recently, as a promoter of active citizenship. In the course of this somewhat irregular pattern of development, education and the labour market have rejoined forces in a succession of different combinations, which are reviewed here: the emergence of lifelong education and training as an attempt to regulate the labour market in crisis; the "externalisation" of education and, in particular, of training in relation to a labour market that is incapable of autonomous self-regulation and therefore seeks the support of the sectors of education and training and social security, as in the case of flexicurity.

The final section of the paper is a contribution towards our reflection upon the alternatives. Given the predominant discourse, which considers that the evolution of both the economy and society is determined by economic laws and by technological evolution, a point of view is defended whereby there are alternative futures, namely the "market society", the "society centred on alternative activities" and the "renewed work centred society". New perspectives are also being opened up in the field of education and training, challenged by the steady progress towards a status of greater autonomy and dignity, as we head towards the knowledge society, or learning society. In the latter education and training are called upon to promote active citizenship, along a path that is full of contradictions and ambiguities that, for the time being, only allow us to sketch out a general outline of the evolution that is currently in progress.

1. The employment crisis

1.1. Characterisation of the evolution of work processes

Today, there is a practically widespread agreement about the crisis in what was, until quite recently, the prevailing model of employment. This crisis manifests itself in the increase in unemployment and the decrease in safe and regular full-time employment at a particular company based on a stable employment contract and a long-term commitment between employer and employee, in favour of the spread of a wide variety of different forms of employment whose common denominator is the flexibility, in contractual terms, of working hours, space, rules and pay. There are also other substantial alterations, such as the interruptions introduced into the cycle of working life and the reality of an irregular professional career. There is a trend towards a differentiation and segmentation of workers, an individualisation of labour relations, of professional careers and living conditions in general. At the same time, we witness the weakening of social protection (health, retirement, unemployment) by privatisation and individualisation. There are ever more people who find themselves in unstable employment situations, with low wages, no access to training and reduced levels of social protection. Some succeed in changing to a better situation, but others are caught up in a work path that is marked by their moving from one precarious job to another, interspersed with situations of unemployment. This leads to the need to find solutions to the new problems linked to the flexibility and precariousness of employment. In a context of insecurity, new regulations have to be found, along with new forms of protection that are adapted to the present-day reality, so as not to run the risk of moving backwards in social terms (Auer, 2005, 2007; Castel, 2005; Supiot, 1999).

Amongst the factors that profoundly affect employment, particular importance should be given to the globalisation of the economy with the preponderance of financial capital, the spread of information and communication technologies, the new international division of labour, the preponderance of neoliberal economic policy, the restructuring of companies according to the logic of flexible rationalisation, as well as the disequilibrium of forces in the labour market and employment relationships.

The global economy is far from being a single and undifferentiated system. On the contrary, it is profoundly asymmetrical: the economically most advanced countries are the ones with the greatest concentration of information technology infrastructures, and highly skilled human resources and activities that make an intensive use of knowledge and advanced technologies. Whilst the less developed economies only have small high-valued segments of production and large segments of available producers who find themselves in a position in which their work is undervalued, the developed economies have small segments of undervalued work and large segments of high-value knowledge-intensive production (Castells, 1998).

The ideology and practice of the free market have gained ground on a world scale. Reforms and measures designed to liberalise markets, deregulate the economy, privatise public services, deregulate the labour market, reduce social protection and make individuals more responsible for their own actions are promoted everywhere with the aim of making economic activity more dynamic and enabling its better integration into the world economy.

One of the main reasons for the employment crisis derives from the pressure that the more intense competition in global markets exerts on companies, forcing them to reduce labour costs. The hegemony and liberalisation of financial markets, the intensification of the circulation of financial capital thanks to the so-called ICT (information and communication technologies) have led to a dramatic increase and spread in speculative behaviour. Managers find themselves under pressure from “impatient capital” (Sennett, 2005). The increase in unemployment and precarious employment is not a consequence solely of economic failure and a loss of market shares on the part of companies. Private and public companies obtaining good financial results frequently decide to reduce the number of their employees. This

phenomenon shows that "the suppression of jobs has become an act of day-to-day management" (Galambaud, 1994: p. 48). Companies with good results may be closed if the return on investment is lower than that found in other companies. The efforts made to increase productivity and improve quality disappear in the midst of financial speculation, discouraging long-term investments in the company (Petrella, 1998). In turn, the instability of the market requires flexibility on the part of companies. In this context, companies try to find solutions, above all, to increase flexibility and reduce costs. It is for this reason that they concentrate on their core business and outsource and relocate other activities to areas where wages are lower. Restructuring strategies are largely inspired on lean production and re-engineering, where the motto is to "produce more, better and faster, with less".

The restructuring of companies made possible by the ICT and stimulated by global competition leads to the spread of a new form of organisation for production based on the decentralisation, segmentation and geographical dispersal of productive activities and their integration into networks through the use of ICT. This network-based organisation is understood as the model that is best suited to the conditions of market instability and increased competition because it makes it possible to enhance flexibility and, at the same time, reduce costs. The company that operates under the form of a network, in keeping with its differentiated strategies, is able to combine different types of work organisation and employment within the company itself with the aiming of obtaining both functional flexibility and quantitative flexibility. Focusing on the central activity engenders a fundamental distinction between two types or workers: the core workers linked to the central activity and the peripheral workers. Due to their high level of education, the former have the capacity to reprogramme their skills and qualifications. However, the peripheral workers do not have this capacity due to the poor contents of their jobs and the instability of their employment: they can be hired, fired, easily replaced by machines or by other people from other regions, according to the company's needs to adapt to fluctuations in the market (Atkinson, 1987; Castells, 1998; Harrison, 1994; Kalleberg, 2003; Kovács, 2002, 2005).

Globalisation and the ICT expand the possible options regarding the use of labour. With the aim of reducing costs, companies can reduce the number of permanent staff, keeping only the better qualified workers (the hard core), resort to subcontracting and flexible forms of employment, procure highly skilled professionals at the lowest possible prices, use less skilled workforces in poorer countries at low wages[1] and also obtain the consent of workers in the economically more advanced countries to accept lower wages and less favourable working conditions in exchange for their being allowed to keep their jobs. These options, which belong to the "low road" in the search for improved competitiveness, based on low wage costs and a deregulated labour market, lead to an increase in unemployment and precarious employment. At the same time, companies can look for improvement in their competitiveness through options that belong to the "high road", geared towards the development of workers' versatility and skills, continuous learning through the development of new forms of work organisation (*learning organisation*). It is a question of mobilising the intelligence of workers with a view to responding to the demands of functional flexibility, quality and innovation. This option implies improving the quality of employment, albeit with a limited range, since it affects, in particular, those workers who are linked to knowledge-intensive activities and the use of advanced technologies.

In this context of great differentiation and individualisation, the defence of the work related interests depends increasingly on individual negotiations. The concentrated power of the main economic actors (large transnational companies and their alliances, global institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank or the World Trade Organisation, is not (or is only very slightly) counterbalanced on the work side (Grupo de Lisboa, 1994). The weakened power of trade unions and the

[1] The Mexican *maquiladoras* and the Indian software engineers are good examples of this, together with the more structured processes imposed from outside in productive sectors such as "Protected Export Zones".

lack of mechanisms to defend work interests at the transnational level facilitate the advance of economic restructuring in accordance with the neoliberal logic of the "low road" to competitiveness, giving rise to a downward spiral in wages and working conditions. A paradoxical situation thus arises, as Castells shows, since never was labour more central to the process of value-making. But never were the workers more vulnerable, since they have been converted into isolated individuals subcontracted in a flexible network. (Castells, 1998).

1.2. The controversies about changes in employment

The interpretation of the employment crisis is not a consensual affair, and we can identify various different points of view: the techno-liberal perspective of the predominant discourse, the critical perspective and the theories about the end of work.

1.2.1. The predominant discourse

The predominant discourse is based on techno-optimism, the myth of the free market and flexibility, as well as on the primacy given to the economy, market principles and profit, competition and individualism. From the techno-liberal perspective, the ICT are the driving forces behind a new era of growth, productivity, competitiveness and innovation, provided that governments promote a market economy without interfering in the processes (Sahlman, 1999). The ICT dictate an inevitable march towards a cognitive society, centred on the production and exchange of knowledge, in which there is a trend towards a generalised spread of intelligent work, the creation of a large number of jobs and ever greater opportunities for all, provided that there is flexibility in employment and in the labour market, the public services are privatised and the institutions of the Welfare State that are considered obsolete are dismantled. Globalisation as the universalisation of the market is presented as a natural and inevitable process of evolution that will bring greater well-being to the whole of humanity. The mission of governments is to promote the adaptation of the national economies to the demands of the global market and to leave the task of directing and guiding societies entirely to the market and the private sector. Social rights, the protection of workers, social regulation and trade unions are seen as archaic obstacles to competitiveness and the new order. This perspective heralds the end of the wage-earning model of employment and the emergence of the business model of work. We are in the post-employment era, in which workers cease to be wage-earners and become self-employed entrepreneurs who render services, managing their work for various clients; they create their own employment and are responsible for the development of their own skills and competencies and for the management of their own career (Gruber and Brouiller, 1998; Ducatte, 1995; Bridges, 1994).

This discourse extols the benefits of flexible rationalisation[2] for making companies more competitive in the global market. The great objective is rationalising and optimising work processes, making management and the employer-employee relationship more flexible. The ideal company is the flexible company, one that is lean and trimmed down in size and concentrates on activities with a high added value under the responsibility of a stable core of managers and highly skilled workers, resorting to the signing of temporary contracts and subcontracting in order to obtain the flexibility required by the instability of the market.

The techno-liberal approach has been widely disseminated and seeks to convey the message that the changes currently taking place in the world of work are inevitable and imposed by globalisation and the ICT. This evolution is presented as the only one possible, without any alternatives; consequently, what

[2] Amongst others, its methods include: total quality management, just-in-time, downsizing, re-engineering and outsourcing.

is required of people, organisations and society in general is their better adaptation to the inevitable changes.

1.2.2. Critical approaches

The interpretation through the prism of social inequalities

Seen from a critical perspective, globalisation as the universalisation of the free market does not signify a march towards greater well-being at the level of the planet. On the contrary, should the interests of the forces in competition prevail, which are seeking, above all, to maximise their profit and power, there may be undesired and devastating social, human and environmental consequences. These consequences have been manifesting themselves in the concentration of the power of decision-making and influence over the destiny of humanity in world chains of financial and industrial companies, in the increase in social and economic inequalities between nations and within nations, in the social exclusion of the non-competitive, in individual and collective aggressiveness and in the exacerbation of ecological problems, amongst others (Grupo de Lisboa, 1994; Petrella, 1994).

Whereas the prevailing discourse announces greater opportunities for everyone thanks to the ICT, the free market and flexibility, the critical approaches draw attention to the dualisation and aggravation of social inequalities between those who have relatively strong positions in the labour market and those who find themselves in situations of unemployment and precarious employment. Seen from this point of view, we are evolving towards a dual society characterised by the increasing polarisation between a small but influential elite composed of the winners of the globalisation process (the holders of the active capital at a global level, top managers and the knowledge class) and the growing mass of available workers with working conditions that are tending to deteriorate (Beck, 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Castel 1995; Castells 1998; Castillo 1994, 2003; Grupo de Lisboa, 1994).

The elimination of social regulation and the subordination of society to the principles of the free-market based competitive globalisation implies reducing the company to a profit-making machine, leading to an increase in unemployment, the spread of precarious employment, the deterioration of the quality of work and the decline in the potential of work for bringing about social integration. The prevailing forms of employment and working conditions to be found in third world countries are also tending to spread in industrially more advanced countries; there is a trend towards the “Brazilianisation” (Beck, 2000), “informalisation” and “de-institutionalisation” of employment (Galini, 2002).

Globalisation and the ICT have given rise to a profoundly unegalitarian dynamic: those who are in an advantageous position in relation to others further increase their advantages and those who find themselves at a disadvantage see their disadvantages increased even further, or, in other words, the strong become stronger and the weak become weaker, without being able to count on the State for support, since this is increasingly withdrawing the protection that it has previously afforded to various spheres of social life. The new organisation of production and the way in which societies now function according to the global competition condemns growing segments of the population to unemployment, unstable employment, precariousness and poverty, with the risk of their being subjected to a spiral of ever greater fragility and instability.

The constant search for more advantageous places to sell and produce products and services aiming cost reduction tends to lead to growing inequality between companies and workers who form part of the same network. The fragmentation of the productive process frequently implies an unbalanced division of work between companies. The knowledge-intensive professional work that is connected with high technology, and consequently good employment, tends to be concentrated in central companies located in areas with appropriate material and information-communication infrastructures. In turn, routine operations tend to be outsourced to subcontracted companies preferably located in regions where labour

is cheap. In these latter companies, there is a predominance of insecure employment and poorly paid jobs (Castillo, 1994, 2003a, 2003b).

The increasing emphasis on insecurity

The spread of precarious employment and the lack of professional perspectives create an atmosphere of anguish, insecurity and anxiety. Vulnerability is becoming extremely strong, since several crises have appeared at the same time: the crisis of the Welfare State, the labour crisis and the crisis of the individual. (Fitoussi & Rosanvallon, 1997). Globalisation introduced according to the principles of unfettered competition undermines the bases on which the security of our lives is founded and overburdens the life of individuals with an unprecedented degree of uncertainty and anxiety (Bauman, 2001).

Precariousness profoundly affects those who find themselves in this situation, stripping them of any hope in the future. Objective insecurity gives rise to a generalized subjective insecurity affecting workers as a whole, including those who have not yet been directly affected (Bourdieu, 1998). Precariousness is not a latent consequence of an economic fatality, for Bourdieu it is a new form of domination, based on the maintenance of a widespread and permanent state of insecurity, seeking to coerce workers into submission and the acceptance of their exploitation. It is the rational management of insecurity – "flexploitation" – which establishes competition between workers on a worldwide scale.

Flexible capitalism blocks people's paths to a career, transporting them from one type of work to another and from one group to another in a lateral movement. Security and loyalty cease to exist. Constant changes and the dilution of power lead to anxiety, causing most people to feel completely disoriented. Experience and skills lose their value in favour of the capacity to sell oneself and to adapt. It is the so-called corrosion of character[3] through flexible capitalism (Sennett, 2001).

According to Ulrich Beck, the breakdown of our model of employment may have unforeseeable consequences. In the good times of the Thirty Glorious Years, full employment, safer pensions, high tax revenue, margins for manoeuvre in terms of state policy, all complemented and mutually reinforced one another. Now they find themselves in reciprocal danger: work has become precarious, the foundations of the Welfare State are beginning to crumble, personal trajectories are becoming more fragile, the poverty of old age is programmed in advance. The break with the previous model may unleash a domino effect with serious social and individual consequences (Beck, 2000).

Deregulation and the European way of thinking

Labour market deregulation (changes in labour legislation, limitation of the power of the trade unions, elimination of the minimum wage, etc.) is legitimised as the path that makes it possible to use work in a way that is suited to the conditions of intense competition and uncertainty and instability in the markets.

The flexibility of the labour market was stated to be an essential condition for promoting the growth of the economy and employment. Labour market policies are largely dictated by this neoliberal principles. However the critics of the increased flexibility of the labour market denounce its negative consequences, namely the increase in unemployment, "atypical" or flexible employment and precariousness, as well as in the inequality between groups of workers (Kovács and Casaca, 2007).

Although all countries are subject to the pressures of the flexibilisation of labour and employment relationships, such a process may follow different ways depending on the institutional structure and strategies followed by companies (Boyer, 1998; Hall and Soskice, 2001), the type of capitalism (Lane, 1989; Amable, 2003), the type of labour relations and the levels at which collective

[3] Character is expressed through loyalty, mutual commitment and the setting of long-term objectives.

bargaining takes place (Crouch, 1993), the models of social protection and the management of the transitions between jobs, the education and training systems (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Ferrera, 1996; Gallie, Paugham, 2000; Vielle and Walthery, 2003; Barbieri, 2007), as well as the models of employment (Auer and Gazier, 2002; Auer, 2005 and 2007).

Contradicting the neoliberal theses, which defend the need to promote the deregulation of the labour market and the dismantling of the welfare state as ways of making the economy more dynamic and ensuring the full growth of employment, various studies have shown that, in countries that have a universalist type of welfare regime (Denmark, Sweden) and centralised collective bargaining, the rates of participation in the labour market are higher, and, at the same time, the rates of atypical employment are lower. In the last decade, particular attention has been paid to the Danish experience which combines a flexible labour market that has high levels of social protection with a transitional labour market (Madsen, 1999, 2003; Schmid and Gazier, 2002), an experience that we shall refer to again later on when discussing the perspective of education and training. In countries where there has been a partial or limited deregulation of the labour market, there are higher rates of unemployment and atypical employment, which affect precisely those groups that are most vulnerable, amongst which are to be found young people, women and the less qualified workers. This deregulation is partial and limited because it leaves the rights of the more highly qualified core workers practically unaltered, while at the same time it make more difficult for the more vulnerable to gain access to these same rights. This type of deregulation is characteristic of the countries of Southern Europe (Esping-Andersen and Regini, 2000; Barbieri, 2007; Auer, 2005 and 2007).

While some authors stress the diversity of the models (of the economy, society, employment, etc.), others point to the convergence among the different European countries towards the deregulation that is inherent in the neoliberal model. This trend would mean dismantling the welfare state, destroying the distinctive features that have made Europe different from the United States, or, in other words, economic and social citizenship and a strong public sector (De Vos, 2005; Wickham, 2005).

1.2.3. The "end of work" theories

Included in this perspective are the techno-pessimistic approach and the theories about the end of the centrality of work in social and individual life (Méda, 1995; Gorz, 1997; Beck, 2000). The author who has perhaps most popularised the techno-pessimistic perspective is Jeremy Rifkin. According to this author, the ICT will do away with the vast majority of jobs. In the hi-tech economy, the only sector that is expanding is that of knowledge. However, this sector only guarantees jobs for a cosmopolitan elite (manipulators of symbols and controllers of technology and the productive forces), but is incapable of creating employment for the millions of people whose jobs will be eliminated in the three traditional sectors. With investments being made in re-training useless workers, the solution lies in the development of the social or community sector (Rifkin, 1995).

Since the 1980s, there has been a great increase in the number of publications about the crisis of the work society and about the end of the centrality of work[4]. For those authors who defend such thesis, formal paid work has lost its subjective quality as the centre for the organisation of human activities, self-

[4] However, already at the end of the 1960s, what was being envisaged was a society centred not on work, but on leisure, as a result of the scientific and technological revolution. But we can go even further. Marx, basing his ideas on the possibilities created by the development of the productive forces, especially technique, referred to a society centred on free activities, whose wealth is measured by the time available (non-work time) for the free development of each individual. Work as a heteronomous activity belongs to the sphere of necessity and not that of freedom. (cf. Marx, 1977)

esteem and social references. Work and production are losing their capacity to structure and organise society, alternative activities of social integration or inclusion are appearing, together with new scenarios, new actors and new rationalities inserted in a new type of society (Gorz, 1997; Méda, 1995; Rifkin, 1995).

As far as this debate is concerned, we defend a perspective that considers the coexistence of diverse and even contradictory trends in the evolution of employment patterns. Recent developments are not manifestations of one single trend defining a new era announced by the perspectives that have been mentioned here, namely the end paid employment and the generalised spread of self-employment, the generalised spread of intelligent work, or even the end of work and the centrality of other activities. In our view, what tends to prevail is the trend towards a growing diversification and heterogeneity of work and employment, and even towards its invisibility in the midst of the complex networks existing within companies and between companies (Kovács, 2002).

2. Education and Training in the attempts made at Regulation

Having considered the evolution of the context and its successive interpretations, let us now approach the employment crisis from the point of view of a survey of the theory and the macroeconomic practices of regulation.

The neoclassical hypotheses of the supremacy of the supply of skilled work, the continuity of employment and the guarantee of its suitability and stability, increasingly under threat because of the growing complexity and insecurity and the more profound disturbances to be noted in labour markets, also showed the unsuitability of the established theoretical postulates. In this way, the path was laid for the criticism of human capital theories (HCT), which, until then, had been the mainstream paradigm of the conceptual framework, and there was evidence of an ever greater need for their replacement by other approaches that were more capable of adhering to reality. It was in this context that the life-cycle theories (LCT), borrowed from other fields of the social sciences, such as sociology and demography, began to gain ground, although they were now finding an ever louder echo in the economics of work and human resources.

Thus, the individual life cycle began to be seen as the central axis for explaining the new conceptions of the labour markets. At the same time, the traditional approach, centred exclusively on labour relations, was now extended further: the life cycle undoubtedly represented the level at which fundamental elements were projected not only of individual work trajectories, but also of personal paths of education and training, together with the transitions, changes and family recompositions of their protagonists.

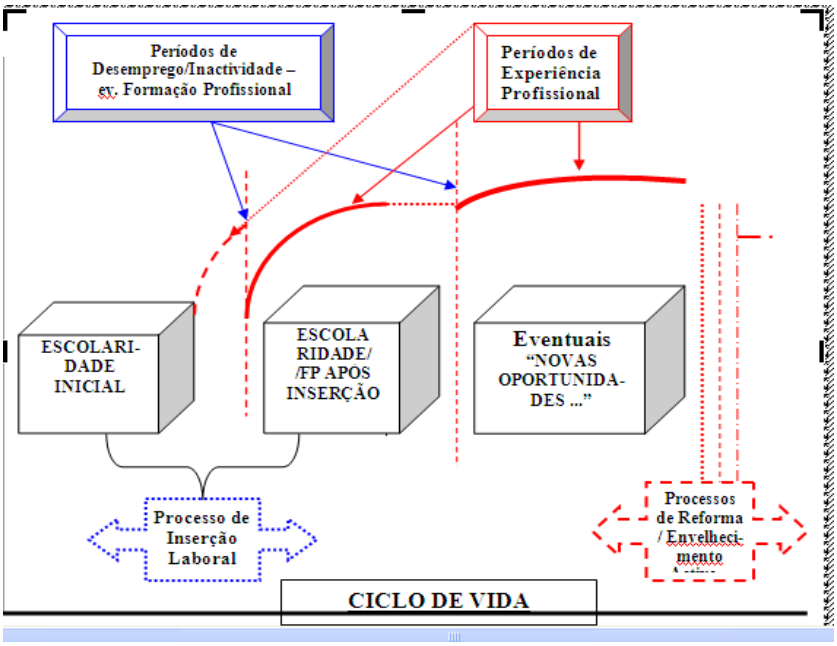
From the point of view of the relationship between work/employment and education and training, the LCT marked a turning point by considering the integrated approach to those processes. At the same time, they focused on the question of the uncertainty, discontinuity and possible reversibility of the processes and decisions taken with regard to lifelong employment and learning. Instead of the "overtaking year" suggested by Jacob Mincer[5], through which people would automatically and immediately move from school to work, what were now being postulated were processes of integration into the labour market that operated by trial and error and were time-consuming, acting as a drain on financial capital, putting strain on relationships and, quite often, resulting in inadequate and temporary outcomes. As was seen earlier, the idea of "a job for life" has been replaced by the discontinuity and precariousness of the employment relationship, with periods of employment alternating more and more with periods of unemployment and inactivity, at the same time as the boundaries that mark out the transition to retirement, at the end of an active life, are also tending to disappear, shift and become rather blurred. It should be stressed that what we are seeing now is the clear expression of two important

[5] J. Mincer (1974).

components of non-formal learning: the gains in professional experience, built up over the course of successively performed occupations, and the (possible) attendance of vocational training programmes or activities during periods of unemployment and inactivity in order to keep qualifications up to date and to make skills more adaptable. Combined with the qualifications obtained in formal education (be it initially, after integration into the labour market or obtained during a "refreshment programme"), these other forms of learning constitute what, for several decades, was conventionally known as the hard core of workers' qualifications[6].

One possibility for representing these manifestations is the one that we propose in the following figure:

Figure 1: Interdependence between the trajectories of learning and work in individual life cycles



Periods of Unemployment/Inactivity – (possible) Vocational Training
Periods of Professional Experience
INITIAL EDUCATION
EDUCATION/VOCATIONAL TRAINING AFTER INTEGRATION INTO LABOUR MARKET
Possible "REFRESHMENT OPPORTUNITIES"
Process of Integration into Labour Market
Processes of Retirement/Ageing
LIFE CYCLE

Source: Adapted from M. Chagas Lopes (2007)

[6] Based on the seminal contribution of Michel Freyssenet, *La Qualification du travail: de quoi parle-t-on?*, Paris, La Documentation Française, 1978.

2.1. Regulation through Lifelong Learning

As it has been referred, employability, a key word of employment policies in the transition to the new paradigm, calls for a permanently updated knowledge in view of the new patterns of technological innovation, the factors determining competitiveness and the uncertainties of globalisation. Lifelong learning therefore appears as being associated with an eminently functionalist perspective of education and training, seeking to maintain as "employable" (or "re-employable") those individuals whose formal educational qualifications were seen to be outdated in relation to innovation, inadequate for the production process restructuring and insufficiently flexible to respond to the uncertainties of work contexts.

However, the decisive contribution of these new concepts lies in the approach based on individual disqualification, or the erosion of human capital arising from periods in which no profession is performed due to unemployment or inactivity. Consideration of these periods of an involuntary break in the employment relationship, besides "fully exposing" the classical hypothesis of the sovereignty of the individual decision-maker, will help to justify the need for State intervention in the regulation of the processes of employment and training: the mechanisms of the labour market and the demand for and supply of qualifications do not, in fact, show themselves to be sufficiently capable of promoting or reinforcing the employability of individuals who have become "redundant". On the other hand, the fundamental notion of skill, increasingly present in the theoretical literature and political references, is seen as the vehicle for the conveyance of useful knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is up-to-date, flexible and competitive. But skills mean, above all, the capacity to effectively exercise knowledge, putting it into practice in real time at the service of production. So, no alternative is envisaged for maintaining useful knowledge up-to-date and flexible other than through the indispensable intervention of the State in maintaining and updating the qualifications of unemployed and inactive workers, namely through employment and vocational training policies.

This functionalist tendency of the LCT in their concern with (re-)employability cannot be dissociated from the distinctive features of neoliberal thinking and some of the main critical situations and vicious cycles that are unleashed by it. This has, in fact, been the case with the projection of neoliberalism into the conceptions and practices of economic policy, particularly those that governed the processes of integration until the onset of the current financial crisis: the primacy given to monetary discipline over incomes and budgetary policies, the alignment of the economies of the Member States through the stabilising orthodoxy of the central banks, in a word the excessive restraint of public deficits. The stabilising functions of income were disregarded, along with similar benefits generated by structural intervention in education, training and labour markets, and the combination of these factors with the strategy of economic and social development. All of this was done in the name of reining in the public sector and reducing the importance of the State. Yet, when the markets, in this case the labour market and the qualifications market, showed themselves to be incapable of self-regulation and unable to work together on any consistent basis, and when the likelihood of unemployment began to increase sharply, already after a fairly lengthy phase of a widespread underuse of human resources, the State had to intervene again. The alternative to the promotion of (re-)employability consisted in feeding the internal market at the cost of the incomes policy and the Social Security services, with the latter already having to cope with the increasing demographic pressure. Or, in other words, even without abandoning its strictly economic objectives, the State found itself compelled to intervene through the "activation" of employment and training as a trade-off for an expansionary budgetary and incomes policy that was prohibited by international commitments, as well as falling into the trap of "robbing Peter to pay Paul" [7], as Pierre Morin states in one of his seminal works.

[7] "(…) habiller Paul pour ne pas déshabiller Pierre", Pierre Morin (1996: p. 37).

2.2. The limits of self-regulation and the example of Flexicurity

The attempts made to regulate the labour markets in a macroeconomic fashion, in this phase of the employment crisis at the end of the 20th century, had recourse to various areas of social and public intervention, as can be seen from the example of flexicurity. Incapable of self-regulation, the labour market saw policy decisions frequently being aimed at the conception and attempted application of multidimensional models of regulation, characterised by a recourse to other areas of the public and social economy that were supposed to intervene as their accomplices. It is a clear demonstration that the division between employment policies and social policies is merely artificial, as has been stated by authors such as James Heintz (2006).

Considering the example of flexicurity, with widespread repercussions on the strategic and political conception of an integrated Europe in the period of transition to the 21st century[8], the aspects that should be made to work in conjunction with the labour market in crisis, in order to set up a coherent system of regulation, are those of Social Security and Education and Training. The clearly inevitable breaks in employment and the absence of work would then be countered by the support of a replacement income, paid under the responsibility of the Social Security, coupled with an intervention designed to maintain, or even update individual skills and qualifications. The aim of these interventions would be to keep the conditions of (re-)employability high, while also maintaining the individual life cycle as the central axis of this integrated form of regulation.

What remains to be known is whether, if the current international crisis had not occurred, such a model of regulation would have been able to enjoy effective conditions for its implementation and for its subsequent spread to societies with different characteristics from those of Northern Europe, namely the Danish one. It was not even possible to anticipate the specific outlines and profile of the crisis, and there was already an abundance of criticism of a varied nature, levelled at the proposals for flexicurity that were known at that time. There was, in particular, an insistence on the decisive role to be played by the demand for qualifications and on the possibility of this not being met, or of this only being done with a certain rigidity, in order, when the recovery came, to be able to recruit the unemployed persons who had been retrained in the meantime. It was doubted, on the other hand, whether a Social Security system that was structurally in crisis, even though it was temporarily not insolvent, had the potential to cope with this situation, since the tendency for there to be demographic pressure and the imminence of a sharp rise in unemployment were well known, as was the fact that, even in a stable conjuncture, only a relatively small part of the unemployed would be covered by unemployment subsidies. Attention was drawn to the fact (perhaps the most critical of them all) that flexicurity had only fared favourably – whilst it lasted – in economies such as the Danish one, which were characterised by high rates of innovation, even at the level of small and medium-sized enterprises, and had embarked upon processes of highly qualified tertiarisation served by a workforce whose minimum level of compulsory education already amounted to 12 years of formal schooling. And, even so, these processes were accompanied by a significant effort to implement active employment policies, within a framework of moderate deregulation and not one of ultra-liberalism (Petit, 2005).

The international financial crisis marked a hiatus in the experiments of implementing these forms of regulation for the labour markets.

[8] See, in particular, CE (2006), MTSS (2006), Wilthagen (2008), Bovenberg & Wilthagen (2008).

3. The need to reflect upon the alternatives

3.1. On the alternatives to the employment crisis

In our view, the transformations in employment patterns are part of the current dynamics of economic restructuring placed at the service of competitiveness. This is not a question of a fatal evolution dictated by economic laws or the new technologies. There are alternative futures. The future depends on the social actors, their values, their capacity for negotiation and the extent of the democracy that is to be found in the transformation processes. Within the context of determinist thought, the evolution of work and employment is dictated by the ICT and/or by the laws of the market. For such theorists, there are no alternative futures calling for the reflection and participation of the social actors with a view to their adopting political options.

From the neoliberal perspective, the solution to the employment crisis consists in the reinforcement of regulation through the market, since new jobs are created through the commercialisation of all activities (health, culture, education, teaching, research). For a greater economic growth and the creation of more jobs, it is proposed that the neoliberal principles should be extended even further (Kok *et alii*, 2004). The greatest possible liberation of the market mechanisms of social regulation with a view to increasing economic dynamism means fully developing the market society, or, in other words, subordinating society to the market laws in the context of the competitive globalisation. This type of evolution would mean the ever greater spread of the many unstable and precarious forms of employment, as well as deterioration in the quality of employment and a weakening of the integrating potential of work. It would also mean the destruction of the social regulation that had been built up in order to reconcile the market economy and social cohesion. Unemployment, the destabilisation and ever greater precariousness of employment, and the one-dimensional character afforded to the individual are the main consequences of this option.

In turn, for the defenders of the thesis of the end of the centrality of work, there are two solutions for finding a way out of the employment crisis. The first is the development of the third sector, or the social economy, which brings with it a new post-market or social paradigm, associating it with a social income and creating alternatives for those who cannot find a job in the market economy. The third sector is the privileged place for the development of a new type of society, in which political and social questions are not subordinated to the economy and in which paid work no longer amounts to the main factor of integration (Rifkin, 1995). The other solution is to develop a society of “chosen times” centred not on work, but on alternative activities (autonomous and voluntary activities, active participation in civil society and in collective affairs, as well as in the political sphere). The security of a stable and sufficient income is the first condition for this new type of society. This amounts to a universal and unconditional guarantee that is not dependent on a job, that makes it possible to live in a suitable fashion and to refuse to accept degrading occupations and working conditions (Gorz, 1997: p. 139; Beck, 1998).

The thesis of the end of the centrality of work in individual and social life is questionable. Work continues to be a predominant reference not only in economic terms, but also in psychological, cultural and symbolic terms. Most people continue to be wage earners and have a long working hours. There are not fewer wage earners, but there are more workers who are exposed to precariousness and unemployment. One of the essential problems is that a substantial part of the available jobs does not match up to people’s expectations and gives little or no guarantee of stability in terms of income and working conditions that allow for the durable integration of workers into a community of reference. In this way, despite the centrality of work, this is weakened as a factor of social integration.

In our view, another alternative is possible, geared towards the renewal of the society of work. This alternative implies a regulated labour market, the establishment of standards and principles at a global level, the transformation of work into an activity with sense and meaning that provides people with

autonomy, the use and development of knowledge and skills, satisfaction, identity and integration, the shaping of work through the interlinking of economic and social objectives (the reduction of social inequalities, a better quality of work life and, in general, an improved reconciliation of work with family life) and technical and organisational options centred upon people, a reduction in working time and flexibility without precariousness. Dialogue, participation and negotiation at all levels are the main features of the mechanisms of social regulation.

The analysis of the situation and the identification and discussion of alternatives are indispensable for ensuring that the evolution of work is not left to "fate". But, to prevent this happening, it is equally important that there should be a political determination to reduce the risks that threaten social cohesion and to rethink policies. For work to be renewed and made more dignified, it is not sufficient for there to be regulation at a national level. There must also be mechanisms for the effective implementation of decent work principles, or core labour standards (ILO)[9], and mechanisms for defending the interests of work at the global level in combination with strategies and activities from other social movements (Santos, 1998).

3.2. Alternatives for promoting and sharing knowledge

Under the scope of the criticism levelled against the functionalism of lifelong learning, attention is drawn to the opinions that see in it a mechanism for making the individual responsible for the conditions under which training is acquired for "employability", at the same time as some of the responsibility is lifted from the remaining stakeholders and, immediately, from the State for promoting effective conditions of access to employment and training. The insufficient information available about the qualifications market and the prospects for its evolution (which is an essential tool for the individual planning of learning decisions) is a clear example of this. Yet the very economicist, or utilitarian, conception of lifelong learning (LLL) has also been the subject of in-depth critical appreciation, which we introduce here through the excellent contribution that Teresa Ambrósio has brought to this debate by calling for a wider acceptance of LLL: a search for personal enhancement and the reinforcement of knowledge acquired in a "process that enables each of us to be capable of understanding and acting in the midst of this great movement that is involved in the transition from traditional societies to models of post-industrial societies …" (Ambrósio, 2001: p. 26, translated by the authors).

Taking the process of European integration as our frame of reference, it can be noted how the emergence of new critical factors has presented particularly significant challenges for LLL and for the aim of making an integrated Europe "the most dynamic and competitive Knowledge Society in the world, without overlooking the aims of citizenship and social inclusion". On the one hand, with the successive processes of enlargement, there has been a further widening of the range of education and training systems in existence, reinforcing the initial heterogeneity at the outset; however, the Community authorities continue to retain as their parameters for the building of the much-desired model of global coordination benchmarks that are typical of the Member States of Western Europe and are almost always limited in their scope or place a heavy emphasis on formal education. On the other hand, there remains the risk that, in seeking to establish nomenclatures for qualifications and skills that are uniformly valid (and certainly essential for establishing equivalences and fostering international mobility) without taking care of the processes for their review and updating, the traditional forms of education and learning will

[9] Decent work, in which people's rights are protected, is synonymous with productive work, which gives rise to suitable income with an appropriate social protection. It also means sufficient work in the sense that everyone should have full access to opportunities for earning an income. This marks the high road to economic and social development, in which income and social protection can be obtained without compromising the rights and social patterns of workers.

become crystallised and that we will ignore the multiplicity of new processes available for intervention and participation, namely in the fields of non-formal and informal learning. Or, in other words, there remains the risk of our considering knowledge as a product, or a target to be reached, instead of a process under construction, as it should be seen.

Many critics also stress the absence of any follow-up mechanisms for learning because of a lack of longitudinal information, together with an insufficient critical perspective in the contents of learning… Returning to the criticism of Wim Kok in the famous report entitled *Facing the Challenge*, John Holford (2008) reminds us that, far from becoming the most competitive knowledge society in the world, Europe has seen a widening of the growth gap in relation to the United States and Asia, and, until recently, has paid little attention to trying to provide an answer to the question of knowing which skills, competencies, attitudes and values are capable of promoting an effective participative and democratic citizenship.

We therefore find ourselves faced with the need to reflect upon the nature of the knowledge that is acquired, its apprehension and sharing, as central and decisive factors for the promotion of active citizenship, being aware that an ever deeper pit is being dug between those who have the new, useful and competitive knowledge… and "the others" (Gandin, 2007). And we should not forget that, for this reason, education and training play a more strategic role than ever in either deepening or filling in that pit, depending on whether the ideological alignment of its strategists and promoters is a more pro-neoliberal one or one that is based on social justice. Or, in other words, the production, access to and sharing of knowledge at a global level all depend – just like the creation and quality of employment – on the interaction between agents and economies of different and unequal political capacities, inserted in a process for the international organisation of production that tends to be imbalanced and shaped by the predominant economic policy measures, despite the increasing difficulties of regulation faced by the latter.

It is within this context of widespread debate and discussion that we find ourselves faced with the most recent contributions originating from the European Commission: these seek to reconcile the two extreme perspectives – the utilitarian, or economicist, one, which aims at promoting knowledge and competencies that can be bought and sold in the labour markets of the Knowledge Society, and the humanist one, centred on the full development and promotion of Active Citizenship.

In the clearly assumed efforts to coordinate European regulation in regard to the different aspects of the interface between learning and work[10], some of the Community institutions, such as CRELL – the Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning – have been seeking to identify the skills, competencies, attitudes and values that can effectively contribute towards an active and democratic (European) citizenship, with it being generally agreed that the knowledge that is to be successively built up in this way should be acquired through recourse to formal, non-formal and informal learning processes, in a coherent and consistent effort of integration between those different domains (Holford, 2008). While, at the same time, indicators of Active Citizenship and Civic Competencies are being tested, based on the regular output from the European statistical system, which shows, almost systematically, that this system does not contemplate either the dimensions or the basic support information that are essential for the success of these new approaches…

In reflecting on the possible combinations between different forms of work and the models developed for the production and sharing of knowledge in post-industrial societies, John Bentley considers three different types of scenarios (Bentley, 2006; quoted by Ruth Deakin Crick, 2008):

- "*Burnout Britain*", corresponding to the market society described in section 1, the prototype for maximum inequality in the division and sharing of knowledge, characterised by the contrast between the highly paid and highly skilled workers of the services economy, not representing more than a third of

[10] Of which one of the best known is the European Higher Education Area.

employment, but creating most of the income, and the remaining workers, the majority, unqualified and providing support services;

- "*Freelancers' Paradise*", where individualism is the keynote, consisting of the free organisation of the work processes by individuals themselves, integrated into social networks, with a high creative potential, and where companies may lose their current leading role;

- "*Equity Island*", where the contents, workloads and rewards from employment will be distributed more equitably between individuals, where these will be the bearers of qualifications and competencies that can be more widely shared, where work and training will be alternated and staggered in a more balanced fashion throughout life cycles and the measurement of productivity will include in the parameters for its calculation indicators of well-being and social sustainability.

However extreme these proposed scenarios may appear to us, they have the advantage of showing us that the conceptions of work and knowledge, as well as the forms of interaction between them both, tend to be torn between two opposing perspectives: the neoliberal one, centred on the primacy of economics and the market; the one based on cohesion and social justice (*Equity Island…*), which seeks to go beyond the dualism of the economic and social approaches to qualifications and knowledge, and which, for some authors, is based on the notion of metacompetency (Crick, 2008). This last concept, compatible with a holistic approach to competency such as the one proposed by the OECD, may be defined as…

> "*the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilisation of psychosocial prerequisites [(including cognitive and non cognitive aspects as the internal mental structure in the sense of abilities (knowledge, cognitive skills, practical skills, attitudes, emotions, values ethics and motivation), disposition or resources embedded in the individual in interaction with a specific real task or demand]*" (Rychen & Salganyk, 2003: p. 43).

In effect, that integrating vision will become inoperative if the knowledge to which one gains access is not capable of establishing permanent bridges between innovation and sustainability, the new technologies and their critical use, the capacity to deal with ambiguity and diversity, to create and strengthen community ties, manage motivation and emotion… The process of learning leading to the formation of metacompetencies will have to be conducted in a similar fashion to that of a "complex living system", to use the terminology of Ruth Crick, and it will therefore amount to an enormous challenge. There is no doubt that, faced with the aims of the operationality and coordination of the European education and learning systems, it will be possible to try to conceive of and construct indicators of education and training for active citizenship. But, above all, it will be convenient if this benchmark concept is sufficiently well apprehended and agreed upon amongst the various political decision-makers and opinion makers, before it is broken down into its integrating analytical elements and before these are translated into indicators of output and input… and, finally, before the corresponding benchmarks of education and training are deduced, thereby, insofar as possible, avoiding falling into the temptation of crystallising them into tables or catalogues of nomenclatures, i.e. taking away from them their much-desired characteristic of living systems.

It is therefore, first of all, a problem of access to and the apprehension of knowledge, in ways that make it possible to overcome the division between those who have it and the others. But it is also a question of promoting socially useful knowledge, rather than just "useful knowledge", which is a factor of inclusion and active citizenship. And also a question of fostering the permanent refreshing of learning, in order to keep the living system of knowledge active in the sense that this phrase is used by Ruth Crick. Major challenges, undoubtedly, in view of the uncertainties and lack of definition that we are faced with and which only allow us to sketch out the general outlines of an optimistic perspective.

What is certain is that the model of learning that is peculiar to modernity, centred on the nuclear and almost exclusive role of the school, has entered into crisis, as has the model of industrial work that was combined with this from an economic and functionalist perspective. The multiple forms of learning that have reached us with globalisation no longer admit the possibility of one central actor, but instead they call upon many different plans and protagonists in a network that has sometimes been termed "lifewide learning". In keeping, naturally, with the complementary perspective of the temporal alignment of learning, which is increasingly imposing itself in order to include the whole of the life cycle. At the same time, there is a heightening of indifference, not to say hostility, towards the models of education and training that are determined centrally and imposed bureaucratically: these do not fit in with the life contexts of learners, and much less with the life projects that they may wish to develop. It is therefore possible to understand the growing fondness for educational experiments of a community nature, constructed according to a bottom-up perspective, allowing for the ample participation and decision-making of those who are directly interested. An education for citizenship will therefore have to gather together different teachings and embrace the lessons of successful cases of community and multicultural education and training that have taken place in Portugal[11]. Equally, the divorce between education and work has completely ceased to make any sense, all the more so in view of the aim to construct a knowledge society, or perhaps preferably a learning society, whether or not this is regulated by institutions such as the Community ones. In fact, if it was already difficult to adapt the concept of competency, as the capacity for effective performance, to fit in with that division, the notion tending towards metacompetency will be even more difficult to reconcile with it: as we have seen, what is now being demanded is that we should know how to mobilise knowledge, qualifications and skills, but also emotions, values and behaviours, in order to perform a real and specific task… The processes of education, learning and work are increasingly being seen as reciprocal by-products, which are naturally interlinked, although the institutional or categorising frameworks into which they are inserted sometimes create artificial cracks, which are frequently highly resistant…

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[11] On this question, see, amongst others, Cortesão and Stoer (1995).

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