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Diaspora biographies balancing ideology and utopia: On future orientations of immigrant youth in a segregated Sweden

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Preamble: Optics, young people’s life trajectories and the school crisis

DOF (Depth of field) is a term used in photography to describe the distance between the nearest and farthest objects that appear sharply in an image. Shallow DOF, where the background appears blurry, can make the object stand out better. This is the way most scholars work. They zoom in with a shallow focus; they specialize in relation to a well-defined object of study. Then there are others with somewhat different ambitions and interests, those who strive to capture both details and the bigger picture. Sverker Lindblad’s work has involved the whole continuum from the micro to macro levels: both students’ micro political strategies in the class room and transnational governance. A scholarly equivalent to the German photographer and documenter of “Zeitgeist” Andreas Gursky, whose enormous and detailed panoramic images of the antlike activities of the Chicago Board of trade or of the garishly packaged bargains in a supermarket in Los Angeles, give us a particular perspective of life at the small scale in the global economy. It is an unusual optic.

One theme in Sverker’s research has been young peoples’ lives in school and in the transition between school and life after school (Lindblad 2001, Lindblad et al. 2002; Lindblad & Pérez Prieto 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1992; Garpelin & Lindblad 1994). These studies on students’ life projects; their careers, imagination, strategies and struggles have been framed by an interest in wider thematics such as globalization, education restructuring, social reproduction, symbolic violence and the legitimacy of schooling. Particular

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1 The text following this start was first published in: Nordic Journal of Youth Research. (2010). 18, 2, 177–195. DOI: 10.1177/110330881001800204. Re-used with permission from SAGE.
focus has been on social inclusion and exclusion, i.e. processes through which young people are qualified and disqualified for participation in school and in society. Sverker’s zoom has also involved time as a dimension. Many of his studies have had longitudinal and biographical perspectives. Young peoples’ socialization has been interpreted over time through their experiences. Relations between the past, present and the future; between experiences, visions and actions have been regarded as crucial in order to understand life trajectories and mobility of youth. Theoretical inspiration was often found in disciplines other than Pedagogy such as Sociology and Cultural studies.

My own thesis (Lindgren 2010) was a follow up of a Swedish youth-study in the large scale European project called Education Governance and Social Inclusion and Exclusion (EGSIE) which was coordinated by Sverker and Thomas Popkewitz. The youth-study focused on ninth grade pupils in three radically different socio-geographical contexts in Sweden and their lives in school, their future plans and their ideas about social inclusion and exclusion. Included in this Festschrift is one article from the thesis where I try to understand one particular observation from the EGSIE-youth study; namely that pupils from the socially and economically disadvantaged area had the strongest belief in education and the most ambitious future plans. I contacted a sample of the informants (at that point they were 24–25 years old) and I sat down with them. I asked them to look back on their lives and describe their experiences of growing up and going to school, the meaning of education in their families and how these things were related to their efforts, struggles and plans.

This particular group of informants all had two things in common: First of all, they were born abroad in countries haunted by war and ethnic conflicts which their families had escaped in order build a new future in Sweden. Secondly, they had ended up in one of Sweden’s most segregated areas; an area characterized by poverty, poor health, exclusion from the labour market and local compulsory schools were less than 50 percent of the pupils qualified for entry in a “National program” at the Upper secondary level. In the paper I argue that their biographies comprised a social and spatial – but also a kind of “temporal” – movement that formed their imagination and aspirations. In the work with the paper I found an interesting section in the autobiography of Ronny Ambjörnsson, professor emeritus of the History of Ideas, which resonated with my object of study. In his attempt to understand his own trajectory Ambjörnsson does not reduce questions of ambition, motivation and success to individual factors (or pedagogical methods for that matter); his analysis draws attention to the historical context and the symbolic mediation of culture. He argues that his and many other working class children’s lives in the 1950s were conjoined with:
history itself: the expansion of higher education after the second world war, investments by the Social democratic party regarding education and research, the changed labour market and the general discussion on making use of the talent reserve [the gifted working class youth]. The children were the bearers of a utopian vision. (Ambjörnsson 1996, 47, my translation)

Sverker Lindblad has frequently published critical articles in professional journals and newspapers. He has used research in order to question fundamental assumptions within current education policies. It could be possible to link the following text on young peoples’ educational biographies and imagination to the contemporary school debate. The so-called ‘school crisis’ and the perceived solutions appear in a somewhat different light when understood in the perspective of more profound cultural changes concerning the meaning of formal education in young people’s lives. Declining legitimacy of teaching and learning within a particular education system is an important pedagogical research problem, but not easily resolved by pedagogical means. There is no simple causal correlation between improved school results and raised expectations or earlier grading. The motivational structure of children is intertwined with the social, cultural and structural conditions and changes. There is a need for another optic.

Introduction

In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up. (Foucault 1986, 27)

The place of work in everyone’s imagination and self-image and in his/her vision of a possible future is the central issue in a profoundly political conflict, a struggle for power. (Gorz 1999, 54)

Zygmunt Bauman (2003, 12) has argued that utopian projects reflects a “nearest to universal” human “urge to transcend” in a quest for something better. This paper focuses on a particular form of such a modernist project: immigration to the welfare state of Sweden that originates in different forms of overseas oppression and, through immigration, that accumulates strong or even idealized notions of future possibilities. In Sweden studies have shown that immigrant youth, regardless of the social background of their parents, tend to have high aspirations concerning education and labour (Ljung 2000; Knocke & Herzberg 2000; Lindgren 2003). Such optimistic and meritocratic notions, however, contrast with studies examining inter generational reproduction of social exclusion. These studies have displayed correlations between, on the one side, school results, dropout rates, transition to higher education and labour market integration of young people and on the other side the economy, education level, ethnicity and the degree of housing
segregation of their parents (Jonsson 2001; Swedish National Agency of Education 2005).

In this paper I will adopt a perspective on this problematic that transcends dualisms such as true/false and objective/subjective: Paul Ricouer’s thoughts on ideology and utopia (Ricoeur 1986). I want to explore these utopian projects by using a biographical perspective. Though I am particularly interested in the social and cultural imagination that is related to such projects I treat them not as mere dreams disengaged from reality. Instead, I see them as something practical with the potential of shaping the lived reality of individuals. These projects are conflated with class, ethnicity, gender, time and place. But the aim of the paper is not to identify causal relations between the realization of particular forms of projects and certain groups of immigrant youth. The aim is to explore the production of utopian imagination and to discuss how these imaginaries are related to and challenge the dynamics of social inequality.

Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel – a vignette

In the exploration I use life history interviews with Nadia from Bosnia, Dijedon from Kosovo and Djamel from Algeria who all went to school and grew up in one of the most disadvantaged segregated city areas in Sweden. When they finished the ninth grade in 2000 less than 50 percent of their fellow schoolmates qualified for entry into a “National Program” at the Upper secondary level (which is a prerequisite for higher education). The national average that year was 89 percent. Their school is situated in a city area exposed to an intersectional social problematic related to poverty, stigmatization, poor education, exclusion from the labour market, restricted housing conditions and poor health. Many students in the area are refugees with languages other than Swedish. In terms of student performance, this school ranked among the poorest schools in Sweden.\(^3\)

In the early 1990s Nadia, Dijedon, Djamel and their families escaped civil war or political persecution, seeking a new and better life in Sweden. Nadia fled with her mother and older sister to Croatia in 1992 where they stayed with relatives for one year. Together with the father the family then escaped to Sweden. Nadia’s father is an engineer and her mother is an economist.

\(^2\) All names of individuals and places are fabricated.

\(^3\) The paper is a part of a project dealing with experiences and notions of education and social inclusion/exclusion among young people in three different Swedish communities – a rural area, an urban advantaged segregated area and an urban disadvantaged segregated area. In a questionnaire study in the three different areas in January 2000 (Lindgren 2003) students from Nadia’s, Dijedon’s and Djamel’s school classes displayed the most positive attitudes towards education and their own possibilities of succeeding in school and life. More than students in the other areas they claimed to work hard and that everyone could succeed at school if s/he tried hard.
They both have university degrees but in Sweden they took temporary jobs in other sectors. In Kosovo Dijedon’s father worked as a fitter in a factory and the mother took care of the household. When the father lost his job in the turmoil of the Bosnian war they decided to leave the Balkans. In Sweden the parents have been unemployed but are now working in different labour market projects for persons with disabilities. Djamel was born in Algeria but because his father was imprisoned, tortured and pursued by the regime, the family fled to Iraq when he was three years old. In Iraq persecution continued and the family eventually fled to Sweden. His father is a trained engineer and the mother is a school teacher. In Sweden they have both worked as assistants in compulsory education. For a couple of years, the mother has not worked for health problems. The father is now working in a family company started by the older brother. Nadia is currently studying law at the university. Her objective is to work with international conflicts. Dijedon has a university degree in media and is struggling for a job as a cameraman. Djamel has his own electronic enterprise but he often thinks about his lack of formal education.

Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel are 24–25 years old. Their lives are caught up in a struggle between two cultural systems and their complex biographical narratives are distinguished not only by feelings of hope and gratitude but also of guilt and anxiety. Together, these feelings have provided motivation and meaning in relation to their “life projects”. I shall therefore identify their biographies as utopian diaspora biographies. This concept will be elaborated below, but first I will provide some contextual background to the overall problematic. After that I will relate this discussion to a theoretical framework based on the complementary concepts ideology and utopia.

Diaspora biography and the symbolic mediation of culture

This paper’s use of biography builds on Paul Ricoeur’s notion of the narrative self; that is, the “process of self-constancy and self-rectification that requires imagination to synthesize the different horizons of past, present and future” (Kearny 2004, 108). Biography implies a dynamic, non-substantialist, notion of identity that acknowledges how narrative dimensions – the stories individuals tell of their past and the way they project their future – are intertwined with their self-understanding, action and the symbolic mediation of culture. Accordingly, social, cultural and structural conditions and changes are related to the motivational structure and the time horizons of individuals. These conditions and changes are associated with a whole spectrum of biographical “gains” and “losses” for young people (Ziehe 2000). They are
also intrinsically intertwined with the above problematic of utopian life plans among immigrant youth.

In the following I will frame the biographical narratives with “outside concepts” related to the symbolic mediation of culture (Willis 2000, xi). These do not belong to any coherent theoretical framework, but I use them as an analytical frame to discuss biographies under processes of globalization and individualization. My argument is that immigration implies a spatial, social and temporal movement which influences biographical orientations. The question here is hence how such orientations are formed in trajectories that unfold under globalization; that is where young people move from poor agricultural societies, dictatorships and/or war zones to the current Sweden.

In late modern Europe, young people’s transitions from youth to adulthood, and from school to work, are characterized by de-standardization, individualization and fragmentation. These ideas are drawn from Andreas Walther’s model of European transition regimes (Walther 2006). Different regimes describe social spaces that are “structured by a complex system of socio-economic structures, institutional arrangements and cultural patterns” which influence biographical orientations (Walther 2006, 124). According to Walther, such regimes constitute “climates of normality” which “includes ideological concepts and cultural values” (Walther 2006, 135). By using the regime model as an “interpretative background” it is possible to explore differences between different social spaces (Walther 2006, 136). Normally, individuals’ views on themselves are consistent with the current conditions and possibilities: “As young people’s orientations and strategies reflect the resources and opportunities they can ‘normally’ expect and the ‘legitimacy’ of their aspirations, transition regimes represent the different realities in which young people’s biographies are embedded” (Walther 2006, 136). Sweden, as an example of a universalistic regime, is distinguished by emphasizing personal development, by motivating young people and by empowering their individual aspirations (Walther 2006; Stauber 2007). The regime model does not include the home countries of the informants in this study. However, it is still possible to use the basic notion of different spatial realities in order to discuss how orientations inform immigrant trajectories.

The formation of such subjectivities can also be conceptualized by referring to concepts like modernity and late modernity and to Fordism and Post-Fordism. During modernity, time concepts in general had a utopian element, based on the conviction that “an imperfect present” could “be recast so as to create a perfect future” (Nassehi 1994, 48). Today such time concepts are threatened by a pragmatic politics formulated under the pressure of transnational corporations (Nassehi 1994; Jacobsson 2005). Overall the modernist – fixed, all-embracing and eternal – vision of social reform appears somewhat strange and out dated. In other words, “[t]he utopian model of a
“better future” is out of the question” and “happiness has become a private affair; and a matter for here and now” (Bauman 2003, 22–23). Transformations of subjective temporality have also been discussed in relation to young people’s identities; experiences, future orientations and transitions (cf. Leccardi 2005; Walther 2006; Stauber 2007; Vinken 2007). It has been argued that the present situation has brought with it a ‘crisis in the normal’ biography” (Leccardi 2005, 124). “[Y]outh as a preparation for work, adulthood as work performance, old age as retirement” is no longer the standard formula for the temporal biographical narrative (Leccardi 2005, 124). The relativization of traditional identities, understood in terms of individualization (Beck 1998), is believed to open up possibilities for choice and agency and for the transformations of identity. Mayer (2005) has described the historical transition from Fordism to post-Fordism and the effect of this transition on young people’s life courses and future orientations. Today life cycles are characterized by discontinuity, interruption, delay and not, as was the case under the earlier Fordist regime, by stability, continuity, progression and upward mobility (Mayer 2005).

The formation of identity is also related to what has been described as a fundamental crisis in late modern societies; the crisis of authority and legitimation (Boltanski 2006). According to this thesis, there has been a radical and important change in the ways young people conceive authorities and experience meaning in late modern societies. In the past authority was most often taken for granted. Nowadays young people seek justifications and explanations for authority – authority is always in question (Boltanski 2006). In the field of education, this crisis questions the foundations of knowledge (often discussed in terms of postmodernity), rendering the authority of teachers insecure and, in the process, obstructing the learning motivation of students – “Why shall I learn this?” (cf. Hultqvist & Petersson 1995, 211). In Sweden the meritocratic legitimacy of education is also threatened by decades of declining social mobility (Jonsson 2004). Although education is still considered as an important investment there is no longer a clear cut relation between achieved educational merit and labour market integration.

All these historical changes have an impact on the future orientation of young people and they are intrinsically conjoined with the actions and biographical constructions of young people (Leccardi 2005). For example, whereas young Swedish people in the mid-20th century grew up under social euphoria where literally everything was getting better and education was conceived as a “spearhead into the future”, the youth of today face a social and reflexive backlash that has been described in terms of the risk society (Beck 1992). In studies of social mobility it is possible to identify this

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4 Olof Palme, future Prime Minister of Sweden, public speech, 1962.
particular pattern. Under modernity working class parents supported their children and had high hopes that their children would break loose. Under late modernity this vision is less evident (Trondman 1993, 269–270).

But what about immigrant families that have come to Sweden in search of a better future? The fact is that among current immigrant parents, including those who are poor, without formal education and a secure labour market position, there is often an explicit utopian vision (Hilding 2000; Sawyer 2006). Such differences raise questions about how subjectivities are constructed in an era of global mobility. Is it possible that the sensitivity of individuals towards symbolic mediation of culture is related to their biographical experiences?

In his autobiography Ronny Ambjörnsson (1996), professor emeritus of the History of Ideas, provides an interesting point of reference for this discussion. He describes how his biography, and his climbing of the social ladder in the 1950s and 60s, was integral to the societal progress in Sweden. His and many other working class children’s lives were conjoined with “history itself: the expansion of higher education after the second world war, investments by the Social democratic party regarding education and research, the changed labour market and the general discussion on making use of the talent reserve [the gifted working class youth]. The children were the bearers of a utopian vision” (Ambjörnsson 1996, 47; my translation). According to Ambjörnsson his “class journey” was strongly supported by his parents but it was no “deliberate break up, rather a process launched by factors beyond our control, a form of destiny adjoined to a world in transition” (Ambjörnsson 1996, 23). This mode of self-understanding harmonizes with Ricoeur’s dynamic conceptualization of the narrative self. It describes the transition from an early industrial life course regime to a Fordist regime which is similar to the spatial and cultural journey that the informants of this study have experienced. Utopian imagination, as a prerequisite for human action, is thereby “constituted in the course of collective history” and “acquired in the course of individual history” (Bourdieu 1986, 467). Overall, Ambjörnsson’s autobiography serves as a point of reference for the discussion of the intertwined cultural imagination of utopian diaspora biographies. These are likewise structured by a dialogical relationship between two cultural systems (in Ambjörnsson’s case related to social class) which fosters intricate experiences of marginality and an intensified self-consciousness (cf. Park 1928). Diaspora biography henceforth refers to a hybrid and displaced narrative self (cf. Hall 1990). Dijedon, one of the informants, gives a sententious summary of this condition:

Many people of my age live in two worlds and they want to be in them at the same time. This might lead to a situation where you end up nowhere. Many of us have had big dreams, but when they are not realized, you might
end up in no man’s land. Then your worldview collapse and you might not know what to do.

In the following I will elaborate on the concept utopian diaspora biography drawing on the life history interviews with Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel. Utopian diaspora biography resembles Herbert Blumer’s notion of a “sensitizing concept” (Blumer 1954). It thus functions as a tentative, provisional and strategic guide to open up further inquiry. To conclude, this sensitizing concept is a result of an abductive dialogue between the narratives of the informants and outside concepts; it does not serve to represent immigrants as a collective, to settle causal relations, or to tell the Truth about actual individuals or their life-stories.

The utopian diaspora biography

Dijedon, like Nadia and Djamel, was born abroad, under rather traditional and spartan circumstances. He lived with his family in Kosovo in a Muslim village on the countryside. Everybody knew each other and most of them were relatives. Education had a very high symbolic value and people with a university education were respected and admired. In the utopian diaspora biography this admiration of education remains intact over time and education is thus associated with high status, increased life chances and social integration. Education is regarded as a central investment and closely connected to notions of modernisation and development. Nadia’s narrative is one example of this outlook.

Nadia: Education is very important in my family. My parents have always seen education as forming the basis for the future life. They have always pointed out that “without education you are nothing”.

The child’s parents might be well educated, but not necessarily. Narratives on education can also be about refusal; Dijedon’s father, forced by the early death of his parents, had to earn his living by working from an early age and did therefore not have the opportunity to enter formal education. Dijedon: “He often says, I wish I was at your age and were given these opportunities” A substantial part of Dijedon’s narrative is thus about fulfilling the possibilities denied his father.

These individuals had experiences from school in their native country. Schooling was characterised by nationalism, hard discipline and sometimes even corporal punishment.

Joakim: So you are saying that the school was tough?
Dijedon: Yes, it was tough …
Joakim: Rougher than at your home?
Dijedon: Yes, so rough that my father had to come to the school and tell the teacher that that it had to stop.
Joakim: What was it that had to stop?
Dijedon: We were flogged because we were dirty and so on. ... My father told the teacher: “In the school your task is to educate, I take care of the upbringing at home”.

When such children were admitted to a Swedish school, they found it fun, friendly, fair and child-oriented. Nadia: “In Bosnia everything is assessed through grading. It is a completely different perspective; everything shall be measured, everything that you know shall be measured. Here it is more about personal development”. Using the terminology of Basil Bernstein (1975) one might say that the immigration implies a movement from a “visible” to an “invisible” pedagogy. In the utopian diaspora biography this movement between different traditions, or regimes, of schooling and socialization might create problems (see below), but it might also produce forms of advantage concerning meaning, motivation and legitimation in relation to learning processes and education.

Social and spatial mobility

When families are forced to leave their native country due to escalating civil war or political persecution, they seek asylum as exiles. But the flight to Sweden is also a conscious, active search for freedom, peace and democracy. As such, the utopian diaspora biography is based on a social imaginary congruent with the modernist salvation stories that have served to legitimize educational systems around the world (Lindblad & Popkewitz 2004). These are the imaginaries circulated by policies and research since the 19th century; stories of future promises, of democracy, equality and social mobility; of “finding the better life” and about “fulfilling one’s own and national destiny, and joining of the progress and development of the individual with collective hopes and desires of the nation” (Lindblad & Popkewitz 2004, 71). When the families of Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel organised their escapes such salvation stories did not describe something present. On the contrary the distant Sweden represented part of their spatial utopia.

The families eventually settled in a segregated suburb among fellow countrymen. These areas are most often products of the so called “million programme”, a modernist housing programme launched in the mid 1960s promising social mobility via geographical mobility (Ristilammi 1994).

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Visible and invisible pedagogy are concepts that draw on Durkheim’s distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity. The latter describes a form of pedagogy characterized by implicit (and de-centred) control, child orientation and multiple and diffuse biographical evaluations (Bernstein 1975, 116–145).
Contrary to the initial political ambition, these housing areas were quickly transformed into stigmatized places associated with social problems and eventually the otherness associated with ethnicity. The socio-spatial experience of the families proved to be complex since it contrasted with views of Sweden as a safe, fair and democratic welfare state where everyone has the right to vote, to receive public health care and to benefit from a high-quality public education system. In Sweden, so they were led to believe, everyone can become what they want if they work hard. In Sweden, to quote the Swedish author and biographer Mustafa Can, “time appear[s] as rich as the country” (Can 2006, 15, my translation). Accordingly, “subjective” life chances are raised and, among non-academic parents, explicit expectations of social mobility are generated. At the same time the families of Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel gradually had to confront problems of social exclusion, segregation and discrimination. Their parents were excluded from the core labour market, surviving on temporary and unqualified work. Their housing proved to be a “catastrophe” or a “dirty ghetto” (Djamel). Their spatial utopia was turned upside down. The good place and the good life remained somewhere else. Nevertheless, in their stigmatized home area the school stood out as a kind of asylum that also represents a ticket to ride. “You have to get away from there, you must not get stuck” (Nadia).

Responsibility, social control and legitimation

Such children often hear stories from the home country. If conditions are safe, the child might also visit the environment in which s/he has grown up. The presence, in such stories, of ethnic conflicts, persecution, war and human suffering evoke complex feelings that somehow seem to transcend traditional notions of gratitude and guilt.

Joakim: Do you often think about the flight?
Dijedon: Yes, I do.
Joakim: How does it feel when you think about it? Do you feel lucky or …
Dijedon: (Pause) I see it as destiny. I don’t know about luck and misfortune … It might also be a misfortune that I got here, that I did not get to be a part of it [the Kosovo war of 1999]. Not that it is anything good (pause) but it is still a part of life that some get to experience and others don’t.
Joakim: Do you feel like you have been lucky on their behalf?
Dijedon: Well. If you talk about luck it is like “good that they died and not me”. Almost as if I were glad that they died … after all these are friends and relatives. They got killed in the house where I was raised. That house is burnt to the ground so when I walk there I think that I just as well could have been among them. That being so it does not feel good to call it luck, because it is their misfortune … or destiny.
This aspect of biography fosters a sense of responsibility towards friends and relatives who has been left behind, and towards parents who has had to give up their old lives and careers. The obligation to make something out of one’s life is also strengthened by feelings of gratitude and guilt towards the receiving country, Sweden, that are projected on to the child via their parents.

Djamel: Things that my father has gone through has affected us all. … My father used to say to us children: “We have escaped from all that [political persecution] and now we shall be successful. We have come to a country that has helped us. We shall educate ourselves in order to give something in return, you shall get jobs, pay taxes, pay back. We have received so much, we shall also give something in return”.

As pointed out by de los Reyes & Mulinari the diaspora condition “enforces particular codes of conduct and strategies of adaptation” (2005, 120, my translation). To be an immigrant, a stranger, means that you have to legitimize your presence – “to prove your innocence” (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005, 120). By emphasizing this “emulative” (Tilly 1998) aspect of the diaspora’s circumstances, it is possible to establish a non-essentialist understanding of the fact that family members, most often the father, are exercising strong social control. Such emulation is a product of the diaspora condition, and not a cultural disposition of certain individuals. This family socialisation, however, is based on a modern conception of authority and legitimation.

Djamel: My father never bought any Nintendo or Gameboy, it was school, school, school. … I was not allowed to play [such games]: “Either you work or you study”. … Even if I had finished my homework and done well at the test I was not allowed to go out and play sometimes. He was hard. … His thoughts were kind, but I was a young child, I wanted to go out. But maybe he has helped me. Maybe I would be “doing time” [in prison] right now if he would not have been this way, you never know. I am grateful, but I also wanted to grow up and have a childhood.

The experiences of family socialisation were also given meaning in comparison to experiences of schooling.

Joakim: Were there any differences between your home and the school regarding norms?
Nadia: At home you have to be perfect because they see you all the time. In Bosnia you had to behave the same way in school as at home, behave very well. Here [in Sweden] teachers do not care as much, you could do whatever you felt like doing, but I tried to stick with my family values [regarding conscientious conduct].
While the family is often demanding and raises high standards concerning school results and grades, children seldom ask their parents to help them with homework from school. “I did not want to burden them with my homework, they had their own problems” Dijedon explained. Thus, children are often left alone to organise their learning in an increasingly individualistic school system. This overall situation might foster responsibility and independence. But it also has a potential of hurting the family relations and incur individual pain. Bernstein (1975, 40–42) has described a similar situation where the family – most often an “aspiring working class family” – accepts the ends of schooling, but has little or no understanding of the means used to transmit it. “The family wants the child to pass examination, to get a good job, and also to conform to a standard of conduct often different from the one the family possesses … For such a family, the procedures of the school are often a closed book”. Bernstein (1975, 42) raised questions that are appropriate to the diaspora condition: “What must it be like to be a parent if you are insulated from your child in this way? What must it be like to be a child unable to share his school experience with his family?”

**Adaptation, goal-orientation and then what?**

However, the complex experiences of the utopian diaspora have promoted the ability of the child to adapt to new circumstances and s/he therefore learns to (or is forced to) cope with this difficult situation. Dijedon, who at the age of eight year had attended six different school classes, explains that: “My whole life has been about adaptation. If I’ve not succeeded in adapting I have managed to make it by my own anyway”. The child, therefore, accepts different pedagogical environments, ideas and practices subordinate to her/his/the family’s overall aims. These aims are developed as an integrated part of the biography, constructing continuity between the past and the future. From an early age life is seen as a ladder or career where different rungs in the educational system are continuously identified and reached.

Work plans are another example where former experiences take part in moulding the biography. Nadia who fled the Bosnian war would like to work in international law solving conflicts.

Joakim: How have these experiences of war affected you?
Nadia: Much of it pushes me to study law. … I think about genocide, about crime and punishment. That’s why I started studying. I felt that this is not the way it is supposed to be. It feels like we spoke about this at home all the time. It was a constantly recurrent theme – war, war, war. Always present.

Dijedon first wanted to become an architect in order to help re-building his home country (his own home, built by his father, was totally demolished
during the war). Constructing, says Dijedon, means that you “leave something concrete behind”. Eventually, however, he had to adjust his plans due to “poor grades in mathematics”. He is now a trained camera man and dreams about making documentaries as a way of expressing and dealing with his memories. Returning to Kosovo Dijedon has used his camera in search for lost friends and lost places: “To construct memories is what life is all about, in a way”, he explains. This mode of biographical planning and experience contradicts assumptions about “de-temporalized” biographies that are not oriented “along a line that stretches from the past into the future” but, instead, focus merely to the present (Leccardi 2005, 141, see also Vinken 2007).

Overall work plans tend to be ambitious and either include social mobility or recapturing of the social position that parents held in the home country. At times work plans have to be re-defined. Djamel, who was a very successful student in the segregated compulsory school, applied to an upper secondary school with high status. He soon found himself isolated from the other middleclass students. He also “found out that he was not such a talented student”, at least in comparison to his new classmates. After a couple of attempts to change school he felt obliged to quit, choosing to join his brother’s business. When I interviewed Djamel, he picked me up in his exclusive German car. His new computer shop is doing well and he enjoys work. But he is not really accepted by his father who finds Djamel’s life-style vulgar and his work lacking in qualifications.

Joakim: Your father must be proud of you now. Your business is doing well …

Djamel: No, he is not proud (laugh). He wants education. He says: It doesn’t matter how much money you earn, you can earn millions, but if you don’t have any education you are not worth anything in my eyes. If I put you next to a doctor without any money in his pockets, he is worth more in my eyes. (pause). He says that educated people interact with society in a better way.

Djamel often thinks about this and about what could have happened if he had been given a chance to transfer to another upper secondary school. Although he does not fully agree with his father, he says that education is important because it “makes you talk and think in another way”. This utopian aspect of diaspora biographies makes them very fragile. They are exposed to obstacles and resistance that tend to increase over time. Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel all

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6 These young people were the first generation in this city who applied to the different upper secondary programs based on their grades and not on their geographical place of residence. This lead to a new situation as students from different compulsory schools, with different social backgrounds, became mixed in a new way.
have friends who have given up due to difficulties or discrimination in the education or labour market. Among their classmates from compulsory school, 35 percent received social allowance during 2006 and another 17 percent were registered as long term unemployed after being without work for more than 100 days (Lindgren, under review).

Nadia [On the possibilities of realizing life plans on education and labour]:
Some friends have the feeling that it is completely impossible. There is no point in trying. I don’t give a shit about this anymore. I’m going to my home country ... But many of them are still struggling. That is the obstacle I see as well, that I am still a foreigner here in Sweden. I think that it might have an effect ... that everybody checks your last name before they check your grades and everything. ... I hope not, but it might be that way.

As for now I will leave Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel. In the following section I will bring the above problematic that links diaspora biography, utopian projections and cultural mediation into contact with Ricoeur’s (1986) thoughts on ideology and utopia. My suggestion is that Ricoeur’s ideas on ideology and utopia can be used to understand the ambitious (or even “unrealistic”) objectives concerning education and labour expressed by immigrant students in Swedish compulsory education. Ricoeur has a dialectical, both/and perspective that sees individual dreams of a better future as conflated with both social change and structural power and control.

Ideology and utopia

For Ricoeur ideology and utopia are complementary collective stories and histories. They typify social imagination and are integrated into modes of self-understanding and action in a community: “Ideology and utopia have ultimately to do with the character of human action as being mediated, structured and integrated by symbolic systems” (Ricoeur 1976, 21).

Marx introduced the complex notion of how individuals and material conditions are conjoined in real life and how this real life produces “echoes” and “reflexes” – a distorted imaginary identified as ideology. One of the crucial dimensions of ideology concerns how power relations are reproduced with a minimum resort to direct coercion. Ricoeur acknowledges Marx, but chooses to place ideology within a motivational framework where conflicts between power’s claim to legitimacy and individuals’ belief in legitimacy constitute “a system of motivation that proceeds from the lack of a clear distinction between the real and the unreal” (Ricoeur 1986, 137, emphasis added). The objective of ideology – to legitimate the order or authority of power – is thereby understood as an “organic relation” (Ricoeur 2005, 124) between ruler and ruled.
On a basic level, however, the function of ideology is to promote collective images which integrate communities and individuals around a shared identity and thus serve to preserve and conserve. Ideology hence plays two different roles in a community; the basic or primitive role of integration and the distortion of thought by interest (Ricoeur 1986, 12). Whereas ideology is always connected to the present situation utopia is “the glance from nowhere” (Ricoeur 1986, 266) which works in the opposite direction advancing novelty, rupture and discontinuity and by projecting alternatives to the existing order. Utopian imagination is a fundamental prerequisite for societies and their individuals. The current late-modern situation is thus a serious threat. There is, says Ricoeur, a “loss of total perspective resulting from the disappearance of utopia” (Ricoeur 1986, 180). And, continues Ricoeur, a society without utopia would be a dead society, “because there would be no distance, no ideals, no project at all” (Ricoeur 1986, 180).

Imbalanced or cut off from one another, ideology and utopia run the risk of pathological extremes. Ideology has the potential of imprisoning subjects in reactionary conservatism or fatalism while utopia might sacrifice subjects to an unrealistic or even schizophrenic image of an abstract future without the conditions for its realisation. Accordingly, I suggest that the diaspora condition implies a spatial, social and temporal movement between slightly different internal systems of ideology and utopia – between a modern, Fordist system and a late modern, post-Fordist one.

Discussion

In this paper I have explored ambitious future orientations and life plans of immigrant youth from a disadvantaged Swedish city area using a biographical perspective. The tentative concept utopian diaspora biography describes a process where aspirations are accumulated as a consequence of the social, temporal and spatial dynamic of the biography. I have suggested that such biographies are characterised by a traditional and strong legitimation of authority and a modern conception of time and future possibilities that are eventually placed in a late modern context with somewhat different ideological content. The complex diaspora experience aggregates profound feelings of hope, gratitude and guilt as well as an unusual course of meaning and motivation which becomes part of the evolving identity. This process might be painful, insecure and demanding, but I argue that it might foster a disposition or a capital that can interact with, or compensate for the absence of, assets of economic, social and cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986). The utopian diaspora biography – with its potentials, risks and problems – is not to be understood as an individual project. It is, to paraphrase Ronny Ambjörnsson (1996), a process launched by factors beyond individual control,
a form of destiny adherent to a social, temporal and spatial dialectic between slightly different systems of ideology and utopia. Yet, as lived reality the utopian diaspora biography is individually conceived and dealt with. This has been a challenge for Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel, but perhaps even more so for the majority of young immigrants in Sweden that share their utopian dreams, but not their relative success in realizing them. This is one important aspect of the lives of diasporic youth that warrants further exploration.

As mentioned above, these biographies are framed by multiple forms of social exclusion. The most basic, integrative function of ideology is hence not realised. For example, this means that the social imaginary is not fully integrated with the symbolic praxis of education and working life in Sweden. This situation leads to problems associated with efforts to understand, decode or unmask authority’s claims. By the same token, the efficiency of the other, legitimative function of ideology is promoted. Based on a “lack of a clear distinction between the real and the unreal” (Ricoeur 1986, 137) ideology here works as a system of motivation. In a context characterized by severe inter-generational social exclusion, problems of legitimacy in relation to education and labour would normally appear. But in the spatial movement between the slightly different symbolic systems it appears as if the legitimating function of ideology is boosted. Using the Marxist concept of surplus-value, Ricoeur provides a tentative explanation of how power works by filling credibility gaps in systems of authority. Ideology, says Ricoeur, works through adding a surplus-value to the belief of individuals in order that their belief may meet the requirements of the authority’s claim (Ricoeur 1986, 183). This “Mehrwert” is “not necessarily intrinsic to the structure of production” in the single symbolic system, but to “the structure of power” in the nexus of the symbolic systems of integration and legitimation (Ricoeur 1986, 14). The process of social control associated with the legitimation of meritocratic individual agency is hence not only a matter of the local national education and labour market; it must be understood in the context of globalization. The notion of transition regimes might complement this discussion. A preliminary conclusion is that certain diasporic youth may be particularly sensitive towards claims on their individual development in the Swedish regime. The fact is that on the level of identity, utopian diaspora biographies imply an overheating of individual goals related to education and work while the picture of who the individual is in relation to these goals is blurred by means of ideological distortion. This fetishism of life chances clearly harbours elements of symbolic violence and this is especially true for individuals who blame themselves for not realizing their dreams.

When immigrant pupils are struggling with utopian projects they hence engage in (re)producing crucial aspects of the universalistic regime as a social space. When realised, these projects (re)produce ideological notions of social
mobility and meritocratic individual agency, which are notions in tune with current political discourses on social inclusion, lifelong learning and employability. Somewhat paradoxically, successful projects hence take part in the (re)production of certain norms and ideals which serve to (re)produce social inequality and social exclusion. Successful utopian diaspora biographies define the unmotivated, undetermined and not so active, independent individual. Returning to Ricoeur this means that the original or “real” relations between ideology and utopia are reversed. The utopian project inherent in such biographies actually promotes ideology on the societal level. Thus in contrast to intern (or “real”) utopian projects this form fails to challenge the existing social order. The subversive potential of utopian thinking is transformed in the flux between the two systems of everyday ideology and utopia as ideology. These diasporic biographies poses a threat to the dominant culture only when the social integration is not successful and the immigrant young people, despite being motivated and hard-working, do not manage to realise their utopian dreams. Failed or disrupted biographies might turn into lives of social exclusion – criminalisation, drug abuse and above all – its pure ideological form – religious and cultural re-ethnisation (Skrobanek 2006). In the post 9/11 context, terrorism offers an illusive phantasmagoria, the antithesis of social inclusion (cf. Ranstorp & Dos Santos 2009). Paradoxically, then, it is the ideological potential of utopian diaspora biographies that is the most threatening to the ideology of the dominant culture.

But make no mistake, Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel did not have any such political programme. They are just struggling against the grain to realise their dreams. And maybe this is the sole import of utopian diaspora biographies. They may not challenge the present hegemonic power, but they may challenge hierarchical structures in education or the labour market. They may not provide or preserve any safe identity, but they may explore “the lateral possibilities of reality” (Ruyer in Ricoeur 1986, 310). For that reason one might argue that Nadia, Dijedon and Djamel duly take their part in shaping the New Sweden.

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