LABOUR INCORPORATION OF YOUNG SOUTHERN EUROPEAN GRADUATES IN MEXICO: THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

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Abstract

The 2008 economic crisis has had particularly negative effects on the youth labour market outcomes in Southern Europe. Thus, it is hardly surprising that many Southern European youngsters see migration as the only way to escape from under-employment and precariousness. In this context, the article studies the reasons for emigration to Mexico of a group of young graduates from Italy and Spain. The paper is based on 42 in-depth semi-structured interviews with young graduates, aged 29 years old or less on their arrival in Mexico. The article first explores the relevance of the economic crisis as the main reason behind the migration of this group. It is revealed that the interviewed graduates had a precarious labour incorporation back in their countries of origin, and migration appeared as a means to further their careers. Second, the paper analyses the interviewees' labour incorporation in Mexico; in many cases this coincides with an extended university-work transition, since many of them had not secured full-time permanent jobs before their arrival in Mexico. Finally, the paper explores the interviewees' future plans. These depend not only on their work experiences in Mexico but also on their degree of social and cultural integration.

Keywords

International migration, young graduates, economic crisis, Mexico, Southern Europe, labour incorporation

The 2008 global economic crisis has had particularly negative effects on the youth labour market outcomes in the developed economies, provoking both higher rates of unemployment and more temporary and precarious employment among the young (Van Mol 2016, Botrić and Tomić 2018). Even if unemployment and precarious work have traditionally been consubstantial to education-to-work transitions, they have been considerably aggravated by the economic crisis (Lodovici and Semenza 2012, Borlagden 2015). Echoing the discourse of an intergenerational divide, some academics reckon that young people's lives are nowadays marked by insecurity, underemployment and downward social mobility, as compared to the upward mobility of post-war "baby boomers" (Wyn and Woodman 2007, Allen 2016). This is even worse for young graduates who may also face a poor correlation between education and work, as well as a low demand for skilled workers in local labour markets (White 2010, Barbagelata 2012).

The impact of the economic crisis has been even more acute for Southern Europeans labour markets, with a special negative impact on the young ones (Choudhry, Marelli and Signorelli 2012, Cahuc *et al.* 2013). In Spain, unemployment levels among young people aged 16-19 rose from 31.1% at the end of 2007 to a staggering 58.7% in 2016 (although this figure dropped to 46.9% in 2018), while among those aged 20-24 in the same period the respective figures were 15.2% and 39.8% (30.8% in 2018). Furthermore, the contracts available for these young people were mainly temporary in the last quarter of 2018 (69.5% of the total) and a great many of these were part-time (39.6%) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2019). This trend can also be observed in young Italian graduates, who are badly affected by a structural mismatch between education and labour market outcomes (Di Pietro and Urwin 2006). Thus, Italian official data also show great differences between young people and the total working population as regards activity and unemployment rates: the activity rate is very low (17.2%) and unemployment rate very high (35.2%) among those aged 15-24, compared to 58.1% and 11.0%, respectively, for the total workforce (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica 2018). In this respect, Fashoyin (2012) considers that young people in countries with rigid labour markets, such as Spain and Italy, are at a clear disadvantage when it comes to finding work, and, when they do find a job it tends to be precarious, unstable and badly paid (Barbagelata 2012).

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many Southern European youngsters see migration as the only way to escape from under-employment and precariousness (Cairns, Growiec and Alves 2014, Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014, Rubio, Clua and Feixa 2018). Some authors have even contended that there is a new "brain overflow" (Labrianidis and Vogiatzis 2013), resulting in an outflow of young people from Southern Europe to countries in which their skills are better recognized and valued (King *et al.* 2014, Pumares *et al.* 2018). In the case of Spain, a substantial proportion of the new migrants consists of young graduates heading to the countries of Northern and Central Europe (Domínguez-Mújica, Díaz-Hernández and Parreño-Castellano 2016, Glorius 2016). Some Latin American countries have also established themselves as attractive destinations for young

Spanish graduates (Romero-Valiente 2018). Such is the case in Mexico, where Spaniards represent the second-highest foreign nationality, surpassed only by citizens from the US (Rodríguez and Cobo 2012). Although flows from Spain to Mexico have a long tradition, the number of Spanish residents has skyrocketed in the past decade because of the economic crisis (Rodríguez-Fariñas, Romero-Valiente and Hidalgo-Capitán 2016). Similarly, Italian emigration has increased since the economic crisis, mainly due to young graduates heading for Northern and Central Europe (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014, Bichi, 2017). This increase can be explained by the combined effect of a long period of sluggish or stagnant economic growth since the 1990s and the de-regularization of Italian labour markets, which has led to new (young) arrivals only gaining access to insecure, highly flexible and low-paid jobs (Tintori and Romei 2017). Interestingly enough, many young emigrants from both Italy and Spain face skill downgrading (or career stagnation) in Central and Northern Europe, since they occupy low-skilled jobs in these countries (Van Mol 2016, Lafleur and Stanek 2017). This article provides new evidence on youthful emigration from Southern Europe by studying the labour incorporation of a group of young Italian and Spanish graduates in Mexico. It explores whether these immigrants into Mexico also experience downward labour mobility or whether, in contrast, they perform well in their careers in Mexico, compared to their counterparts in Central and Northern Europe.

Although the literature has amply explored education-work transitions among young graduates, it has rarely studied post-study transitions associated with international migration (Moskal 2018). It therefore remains unclear how young graduates perceive, experience, negotiate and manage complex personal and employment transitions abroad (Li 2013). Furthermore, it has been claimed that young people no longer follow common and predictable transitions towards adult life to the same extent as in the past, but instead move between status positions and occupational activities in complex ways (Frändberg 2015). The literature on middling migrants somehow helps explain these transitions, since it focuses on young graduates at early stages of their career. This literature stresses individual characteristics (e.g., human capital, moment in life cycle) and preferences in order to explain migration undertaken before full adulthood (e.g., Conradson and Latham 2005, Peruti 2014). The bulk of this literature has focused on migration and mobility patterns amongst young graduates in global cities in the developed world, such as London. This paper also concentrates on migration of tertiary-educated youngsters (from Southern Europe) but, unlike the previous literature, this paper focuses not on cities of the developed world but on migration (rather than mobility) in Mexican cities not customarily considered as immigrant destination so far. This opens up the need to rethink international migrations in a world no longer divided between North and South but interconnected by a global network extending over an uneven spatial and social distribution of wealth and employment worldwide.

The paper is based on extensive fieldwork that was carried out with skilled migrants (i.e., with a University degree) in Mexico. A significant proportion of the interviewees was under 30 years old (42 out of 129; 32.6%).

The article observes patterns of labour incorporation among young graduates in Mexico. It explores their degree of satisfaction with their labour (and social) incorporation in Mexico and their expectations for the future. By researching two nationalities, the paper has a comparative element that is practically inexistent in the literature on youth studies, and it may also cast light on labour migration patterns and processes among young people with tertiary education in Mexico. Finally, the paper throws light on the impact of the economic crisis on the labour incorporation of young graduates, with particular emphasis on the need to recognise growing job instability within mainstream groups that are not traditionally associated with international migration (Cairns, Growiec and Alves 2014).

The next section critically reviews theories on international migration in order to assess their relevance to the study of the migration of young graduates. It contrasts classical perspectives on international migration (human capital, segment market theories) with more contemporary approaches, such as middling migrants. There follows an explanation of the paper's methodology, which is based on in-depth interviews with 42 young immigrants from Spain and Italy (aged under 30 years when they migrated to Mexico) who have now settled in four Mexican cities. The third section of the paper explores the relevance of the economic crisis as the main reason behind the migration of this group. It is revealed that the interviewed graduates had a precarious labour incorporation back in their countries of origin, and migration appeared as a means to further their careers. The paper also analyses the interviewees' labour incorporation in Mexico; in many cases this coincides with an extended university-work transition, since many of them had not secured full-time permanent jobs before their arrival in Mexico. Finally, the paper explores the interviewees' future plans. These depend not only on their work experiences in Mexico but also on their degree of social and cultural integration.

Theoretical background: Young graduate migration

Youth studies have largely ignored the experiences of young migrants (Tanyas 2012, Moskal 2018). Most research on international migration and youth concentrates on second and third-generation migrants in developed countries, with particular attention to processes of acculturation and adaptation (Berry and Hou 2017, Titzmann and Lee 2018).

Human capital theories, in contrast, seem to be better placed to understand labour migration among highly-educated people. According to these theories, workers seek to optimise their human capital investment, since it is assumed that there is a close connection between workers' human capital and wages. When there is a mismatch, workers seek migration in order to maximise their investment returns. Therefore, regional differences in labour market conditions (i.e. wages, unemployment and welfare standards) are crucial to an understanding of decisions to migrate, and individuals therefore move from places with low employment opportunities and wages to regions with more job opportunities and higher salaries (Hadler 2006). Because of their age, young

people might experience a more limited access to opportunities available in their regions of origin than adults, so emigration becomes a reasonable option for the achievement of better labour prospects (Mendoza 2018). Furthermore, among young people, university graduates are more likely to undertake migration in search of better opportunities than non-graduates (Coulombe and Tremblay 2009, Boschma, Eriksson and Lindgren 2014).

Unlike the neo-classical theories and rational assessment of job opportunities, theories on dual market and segmentation market explain migration as the result of the structure of a labour market which hampers the access of youth to stable, skilled jobs that are "reserved" for people who are older and consequently have more work experience. In other words, the economy structure pushes away young people and other less "favoured" groups (e.g. immigrants) towards secondary labour markets, serious affecting their options of upward labour and social mobility (Ortiz 2010, Domínguez-Mújica, Díaz-Hernández and Parreño-Castellano 2016). In this respect, Fashoyin (2012) considers that young people in countries with highly regulated labour markets, such as Spain and Italy, are at a clear disadvantage when it comes to finding work, and that when they do so, their jobs tend to be precarious, unstable and badly paid (Barbagelata 2012). Along similar lines, Labrianidis (2014) argues that Southern European labour markets are characterised by an excessive supply of highly skilled workers, as well as a lack of transparency in companies' recruitment methods that allow friends and family networks to play a prominent role in the search for new employees.

Going beyond employment, however, some recent studies emphasize other reasons for emigration, such as adventure, self-achievement, international experience and living in a new city. They point to a set of motivations for migration that are not necessarily centred on economic gains but indicate a quest for improved cultural and social capitals that may further upward mobility, both socially and in labour markets (Conradson and Latham 2005, Scott, 2006). These migrants have been defined as ‘‘middling migrants" who do not quite fit into the category of "economic emigrant" (Smith 2005). Basically, they are young graduate migrants from middle-class backgrounds who are in an intermediate position in labour markets, because of their age or because they are at an early stage in their careers (Wiles 2008). In order to understand their decisions to migrate, personal characteristics, human capital, social conditions, preferences and the life cycle must be taken into account in contextual and cross-sectional analysis at different geographical scales (Anthias 2012). Specific examples are the pioneering research of Conradson and Latham (2005) on young New Zealanders in London who left well-paid skilled positions in their home country to migrate to the UK for personal development, and Parutis' study (2014) on a group of young Poles in the UK whose motivations for migration were to obtain international experience and learn English. Nevertheless, research on "migrants in the middle" is sparse in migration studies, because they do not fit easily into the categories of unskilled (with lower levels of formal education) or highly skilled migration (with a better position in labour markets). In this respect, Favell, Feldblum and Smith (2006)

criticize the false polarization of literature that considers migrants as either élite or proletariat, ignoring a large portion who do not fall into either of these categories.

An increasing number of young people are embarking on short-term international migrations in search of a "global experience" while postponing their transition to adulthood (i.e. postponing their full incorporation into labour markets). Indeed, mobility has become an important marker for youth in many different global contexts (Marcu 2012), and the term "mobile transitions" describes transition pathways under conditions of mobility (Robertson, Harris and Baldassar 2018). Thus, different places create experiences that produce memories, which are wrapped in feelings and play an important role in constructing identity (Marcu 2012). In a similar vein, the concept "liquid migration" appears to be useful for explaining some young people's migration projects. It has been used to analyse intra-European migration among young people who try their luck in new and multiple destinations, benefiting from open borders and open labour markets, because they have few family responsibilities in their country of origin (Engbersen and Snel 2013, Bygnes and Erdal 2017). Considering all these (contrasting) theoretical perspectives, the article analyses the labour experiences of 42 young graduates from Italy and Spain in Mexico. The next section explains the methodology behind this study.

Methodology

This paper is based on 42 in-depth semi-structured interviews with young graduates, aged 29 years old or less on their arrival in Mexico. As seen in Table 1, the interviewees comprised 25 men and 17 women, half of them (20 out of 42) single and most of them without children at the time of their interview. All had a university degree, and 60% of the interviewees had obtained an MA or PhD, mainly in Social Sciences (64% of them). By nationality, 31 were Spaniards and 11 Italians. During their university studies, some of them enjoyed mobility fellowships in a country other than their own (i.e., they had undertaken an international migration before Mexico). Because of their age, the time spent in Mexico was relatively short, ranging from one to seven years. Finally, they had skilled jobs in Mexico, with 21 out of 42 enjoying technical responsibilities (Table 1).

TABLE 1 HERE

These 42 interviewees form part of a broader fieldwork on skilled migration in Mexico that consisted of 129 in-depth semi-structured interviews with highly educated migrants from Spain and Italy living in four Mexican cities for at least one year. Young people thus constituted nearly a third of the total sample (42 out of 129). Although the research did not attempt to achieve a representative sample, efforts were made to collect information from immigrants with different backgrounds. Therefore, we interviewed men and women in similar numbers, as well as different types of skilled migrants (i.e., managers and technicians in multinational corporations, academics and businesspeople), but not an equal number of Spaniards and Italians. This was because the former

outnumbered the latter by four to one in Mexico in 2015 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2018), and we decided to keep this proportion in our non-representative sample.

A snowball sampling technique was used. Participants were assured that the interviews will be treated confidentially and pseudonyms will be used in the academic publications resulting from the research. Most interviews were carried out at the workplace, although some were held at interviewees' homes or cafeterias at their request. Interviews were carried out from June 2014 to September 2015. The 129 in-depth structured interviews lasted an hour on average, were carried out in Spanish (the interviewed Italians were fluent in the host country language) and were fully transcribed. Interviews were structured along three lines: work, social integration and geographic issues. The interviews propitiated discussion on reasons for migrating, intentions to stay, Mexico's labour market (e.g., views on workmates, professionalism and discrimination at work), everyday experiences in Mexico (e.g. living standards, everyday spaces) and links with the home country. Data were analysed through a content analysis method. This has several phases. First, the codes were defined. Since the interviews were undertaken by the study's researchers, it was relatively easy to define and classify codes according to the interview sections. Second, using free software MAXQDA, the interviews were labelled and extracts were grouped into different topics. Finally, a systematic reading and analysis of this information enabled abstracting and the selection of relevant quotations to illustrate the main lines of analysis.

Labour trajectories prior to migration: job instability and low labour expectations in Southern Europe

With few exceptions, the interviewees for this project had had work experience before migrating to Mexico, but in every case their first jobs in Italy/Spain were low-skilled and temporary (e.g., as waiters, factory workers, hotel employees). For many of them, their first incorporation into paid work occurred during their university studies, to compensate for the scarcity of scholarships in both countries. For instance, Mercedes (27, four years in Puebla) got her first paid job at 17. She worked as a "waitress, private teacher, taking care of children, whatever" while she was studying. These jobs were generally considered "acceptable" and even positive, since they were temporary. Furthermore, the fact of getting a university degree does not change labour prospects substantially, since the interviewees continued to be placed in the most vulnerable, unstable fringe of the labour market (Ruesga, Da Silva and Monsueto 2014).

In this respect, Lodovoci and Semenza (2012) and Borlagden (2015) argued that, even if unemployment and precarious work have traditionally been consubstantial to education-to-work transitions, these characteristics have been considerably aggravated by the economic crisis in Southern Europe. The economic crisis meant that once they got their degree, their jobs did not change substantially (i.e., they continued to be temporary, low skilled and badly paid). Furthermore, the experience gained is generally insufficiently valued by employers. It is certainly the case that recent graduates have problems in getting a "real" job suited to their expectations and

education, due to a great mismatch between education and work and a low demand for skilled workers in Italian/Spanish labour markets (White 2010, Barbagelata 2012). This is the case with Christian (28, two years in Puebla), who studied journalism: "I decided to migrate to get more job opportunities. In Spain, I did a bit of everything, video editing, interviewer in a local TV, in a sport journal, journalist for a website, and, unrelated to my studies, I worked as a football coach, waiter and in public relations".

For all these reasons, some young people come to Mexico attracted by possible job openings, even without any previous knowledge of the country. Such are the cases of Camilo (33, six years in Monterrey), with a degree in electronics and industrial engineering, and Manel (28, two years in Mexico City), a journalist with an MA and international experience. When he went back to Barcelona, after spending some time in a training position in Ecuador, he could only find a job as a waiter.

The narratives of the interviewees reflect great concern about the lack of labour expectations in Spain and Italy. According to most of them, the paucity of skilled jobs (plus the precariousness, instability and low pay of the only jobs that are available) are the main reasons for these young Spaniards and Italians migrating to Mexico. In this respect, Ortiz (2010) argues that over-education is not enough for young people to get a permanent job in Spain and Italy, because the strong labour market segmentation keeps them in temporary job slots. The interviewees expressed frustration with the job openings available, rather than with unemployment, since the former did not meet the expectations associated with their educational levels.

Migration to Mexico: education-to-work transitions

As seen above, most of our interviewees migrated to Mexico due to lack of opportunities back in their countries of origin, but their reasons for choosing Mexico differed. These differences had a clear impact on their labour trajectories once they were in the country. The interviewees could thus be grouped into three labour trajectories, defined by their reasons for migration (academic/non-academic) and the point in their professional career. For a minority of them (six out of 42), incorporation into Mexican labour markets was part of their education-work transition, since their entry into the Mexican labour force was directly related to their studies for an MA/PhD degree. They later decided to extend their residence permit beyond their studies in Mexico. A second trajectory, followed by 14 interviewees, whose arrival in Mexico was related in some way to their education-work transition but they were at a later stage in their career. Once they finished their studies in their countries of origin, they temporarily entered into Mexican universities, research centres and international bodies (such as the United Nations) via scholarship/grant arrangements (e.g., post-doc fellowships). In many cases, they had to extend their education with such international grants and scholarships, because of limited access to their job market back home. Finally, the remaining 19 interviewees had migration trajectories unrelated to their education/training process. Significantly, we found people in these last two groups who had previously had a period in Mexico as

part of their studies but then decided to return to Italy/Spain and, after assessing the situation in Europe, eventually opted to come back to Mexico.

Six interviewees (out of 23) entered Mexican labour markets directly after their studies in Mexico. Some bachelor's and master's degrees require on-the-job training, and migration was possible thanks to an academic stay in Mexico. During this time, the interviewees collaborated on projects designed by private companies and public institutions. Through these collaborations, they entered Mexican labour markets and got to know the Mexican work culture. More importantly, this also helped them make contacts, friends, and even meet a partner. All this had a positive impact on their decision to stay in Mexico. This concurs with Yu's (2017) findings, which also describe transitions between education in a foreign country and the decision to remain in it afterwards.

This is the case with Davide (31, seven years in Mexico City), who arrived to finish his MA in Business Administration and, at his interview, had a small firm with some Italian colleagues. His academic stay was originally going to be temporary, so that he could conclude his MA thesis in a private university in Italy, but he decided to stay on in the country. From his experience, he reckoned that Mexico is growing rapidly and has many labour opportunities for skilled people:

> My teachers insisted on me going to Mexico as part of my MA, because they believed that the economic development of the country was slow, but it was also steady in time, without risks. They were confident about its economic development, its culture, and its opportunities for social integration, fresh contacts, and new businesses. Then I made up my mind, and following their advice, and I moved into Mexico. And it was the best choice. No doubt about it.

Not all the interviewees followed such a straightforward route from university to work. Ignacio (34, seven years in Monterrey) is good example of the second trajectory described above, which could be defined as an extended education-work trajectory. He arrived in Mexico for the first time to complete his final degree project, and then he returned to Spain and also lived temporarily in London and Venezuela. Since he could not secure a permanent position in academia, Ignacio applied for a post-doctoral fellowship in Mexico, finished his PhD and stayed on with a permanent contract in a private university. "I really decided to do the PhD in Mexico, because a fellowship allowed me so", in his own words. Similarly, Pepe (36, 15 years in Mexico City) said with irony that "he arrived in Mexico well ahead of the crisis", since he did not see many work options in Spain, either in academia or in private companies. Pepe applied successfully for a young doctor's mobility grant, which was of a temporary nature. After this grant, the university where he had been studying offered him a permanent position: "I came here for one year, then it was two…and now I´ve been living here for almost 15 years". In a similar vein, Catalina (38, ten years in Mexico City) applied for a grant to work in the UN's Mexico City headquarters. She was also motivated by her inability to find a permanent position in Spain, and she made this point very clearly at

the interview: “In Mexico, I got my first decent wage”. The interviewees above did not secure skilled jobs in Spain, reflecting the great precariousness of South European labour markets.

Finally, the third trajectory is composed of young people whose migration to Mexico was not related to any education-work process but was purely work-related. Mariana (29, one year in Mexico City) follows this pattern, because in Spain she could not get jobs related to her training as a specialist in international co-operation, and she only obtained temporary jobs as a waitress. Previously, as part of her MA, she stayed in southern Mexico for nine months, and there she started a relationship. After returning to Spain, she “did not find anything interesting”, and Mariana went back to stay with her Mexican girlfriend. They were both working in a health centre for local farmers. At that time, she was happy with the job, even if her wage was not that good. When her relationship broke down after five months, she decided to return to Spain but only found various poorly paid low-qualified jobs. Since she was not satisfied with these, Mariana returned again to Mexico. At the time of her interview, she was working in a private university.

Four general points emerge from the interviews. The first is the high degree of internationalisation of the immigrants' labour trajectories: despite their youth age, almost half the interviewees had studied/lived in different countries. Also, in some cases, they had had previous stays in Mexico as part of their studies, had then returned to Europe and had ended up migrating to Mexico. The interviews undoubtedly reveal increasing mobility among young graduates as a way of securing a better position in labour markets. The second point relates to study-work transitions. Through migration, a large part of our interviewees obtained, in many cases for the first time, a job in the primary labour market, and so they could finally develop a professional career, which had been denied them in their home country. In contrast with the evidence on young Southern European immigrants in Northern and Central Europe, all the interviewees experienced upward labour mobility in Mexico. Therefore, our evidence adds to the research on relationships between migration and post-study transitions in a country not usually seen as a destination for young graduates. The third point revolves around the transition to adulthood. Our interviewees (mostly in their thirties, but they all arrived in Mexico in their twenties) presented a prolonged transition to adulthood in the sense that, for many, their migration, which was triggered by limited work possibilities back home, was propitiated by fellowships and grants to pursue further training and education. They thus postponed their full incorporation into the labour markets in Italy/Spain. To some extent, this situation indicates that an increasing number of young people are making long-term journeys and migrations, seeking a “global experience”, and so mobility has become an important marker for youth (Marcu 2012). Furthermore, even though the interviewees' international journeys were determined by their occupational trajectories, they also went through a process of personal learning, maturity and social adaptation to a new society (Robertson, Harris and Baldassar 2018). Along these lines, the fourth point concerns the contacts and networking essential

to any understanding of labour trajectories. The extracts from interviews included above show the importance of both study-based networks and personal relationships in migration processes.

The future: should I stay or should I go?

The previous sections have shown a substantial diversity of work experiences and personal situations, and the interviewees' personal circumstances also determine their desire to stay or not in Mexico. Of all the reasons expressed in the interviews, those concerning friends, family and partners were the most mentioned. On the professional side, they especially value the fact that their jobs are in tune with their education and training (as well as the chance of future career development). In this respect, as seen above, it is important to note that many of them are in Mexico because of the poor working conditions in Italy and Spain and that they consider that the situation has not significantly improved recently in their countries of origin (Bygnes and Erdal 2017, on Spaniards and Poles in Norway). On some occasions, however, the interviewees mentioned that low wages and bad working conditions in Mexico (e.g., a poor health systems) are factors to consider when deciding an eventual return.

Moreover, when a partner decides to settle in Europe, return migration becomes more attractive. This was the case with Judit (29, two years in Mexico City), who has an MA in international co-operation. She came to Mexico through a Spanish fellowship to work in an international agency. Even though her work experience in Spain was composed of dull jobs unrelated to her expertise, her partner spurred her to return in the near future. This was also the case with Dario (28, four years in Mexico City): his German girlfriend had decided to leave Mexico, since she could not get a job there that matched her education and training. This is the reason why Dario will eventually follow her to Europe.

Others foresee a return in a longer term, only after professional success in Mexico. Luis (28, four years in Guadalajara), a graduate in administration and business, believes that he will return to Spain in a few years, once he gets more experience, but he also reckons that going back is not easy when things have gone well. Felisa (28, five years in Guadalajara) also believed that her stay in Mexico would be temporary, but she has extended her time in the country. In Spain, she worked in the field of audio visual communications, and in Mexico she has also trained in graphic design. After a while, she met a Mexican man and they eventually got married. Felisa is now successful in professional terms but she feels the urge to be with her family and friends:

> When I arrived in Mexico, I did not know how long I would stay. At first, I struggled to fit into the new society. I wanted to feel at ease here, far away from home. Then I fought for a good job, to grow professionally. One thing led to another (…). Honestly, I would like to do the job in my hometown or alternatively close to home, where my friends and family are, where I grew up. I do not see myself living here forever. But the true is that I´ve been thinking the same for four years, and here I am.

Going back in the short term? In the medium term? Manel (28, two years in Mexico City) would go back to Spain, if he and his boyfriend (also Spanish) could have a good job in Barcelona, but he thinks it would be very difficult to find a similar position in Spain. In his own words:

> If I have to, I can move wherever. I like working as a journalist, or doing something I really like, something pleasant. I do not have plans to go back. I was fed up in Barcelona, and with the Spanish situation, economy, politics, and so. My idea was to leave forever. I came here and found that things are not always fantastic, but going back in the short term, no way! Maybe in five years, if my partner or I get a good job in Barcelona, then we will go back. But going back to work as a bartender, exactly what I did, and start from scratch, no way!

Other interviewees value family life and do not see themselves living in Mexico in the long term. Enzo (28, five years in Mexico City), or instance, believes that Mexico is not a good place to have a family and raise children. In his words, "I do not want to raise a family in Mexico City, because it is ugly and dangerous. It is not designed on a human scale. Italy is more habitable". Similarly, Davide (31, seven years in Mexico City) imagined himself married with children. He presents himself as a successful businessman, and this makes it complicated to think seriously about any immediate return to Italy (where he sees the economic situation as being more difficult for business). But, when he thinks about children, he prefers Italy ("I would like my children to have contact with their roots. In Italy they could go out in the streets, have fun, go to the countryside, ride a bicycle, know the culture and the family").

The point to stress here is that even if some considered their academic sojourn in Mexico as a means to access better jobs once they were back in their country of origin (Labrianidis 2014), the reality became far more complex. In fact, the perceived adverse labour situation in Southern Europe made immigration a strong option (Yu 2017), but, as seen in the above interview extracts, personal circumstances, such as a partner and children, play a relevant role in the decision to stay or return, in line with the results of Frändberg 2015. In any case, for the interviewees, living abroad during early adulthood meant increased autonomy and flexibility but also a need to think carefully about the future (e.g., which country is better to raise a family).

Conclusions

The migration of tertiary-educated young Southern Europeans to Mexico requires a change in the analytical perspective with respect to previous research. These immigrants are not expatriates and so their migration does not have the safety net of a transnational company. Neither are they young people moving from the Global South to the North in search of better life opportunities. Our research opens up the necessity to rethink international migrations in a world no longer divided between North and South but interconnected by many global networks.

The human capital theory helps to explain the migration of young graduates from Southern Europe to Mexico, since their main reason for migration is the possibility of developing a professional career that has been denied them in their home country. Accordingly, they seek migration in order to maximise their investment returns. Furthermore, most of the interviewees reckoned that they could not obtain a good job in their countries of origin and some of them, even, said that they earned their first "decent" wage in Mexico. This also concurs with the postulates of human capital, which maintain that highly skilled people are the most likely to migrate when they are not able to fulfil their aspirations in their country of origin. Last but not least, our evidence differs from that of the labour incorporation of many Southern European young graduates in Central and Northern Europe who experienced skill downgrading after migration (Van Mol 2016).

On the other hand, the dual market theory goes some way to explaining the labour incorporation of our young, skilled interviewees in Italy/Spain (and consequent reasons for emigration): they struggled in low-skilled, badly paid jobs during and after their studies. Their narratives stress the lack of opportunities back home. It is not surprising, therefore, that many young graduates see international migration as a way to escape under-employment and labour precariousness. In this regard, although it is true that all the interviewees migrated from Italy/Spain in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, literature has outlined the structural conditions of labour markets that hamper upward occupational mobility among young graduates in Southern Europe (e.g. Labrianidis 2014, Domínguez-Mújica, Díaz-Hernández and Parreño-Castellano 2016). However, different from their countries of origin, the interviewed group secures stable and relatively well-paid jobs in Mexico. Indeed, interviewees stress that upward social/occupational mobility is their main reason for staying in the host country. From our results, it is difficult to judge whether emigration from Italy and Spain to Mexico does constitute part of a new brain drain from Southern European countries, as some scholars have concluded (Labrianidis and Vogiatzis 2013, Pugliese 2018). It seems clear, though, the existence of a brain overflow in the sense that there is an expulsion of the oversupply of young graduates (see also Breinbauer 2007, Labrianidis 2014).

Our evidence also throws new light on the concept of "middling migrants", which has recently been used to explain migration in young people. "Middling migrants" have been defined as young graduate migrants from middle-class backgrounds in intermediate positions in the labour markets (Wiles 2008). They see migration as a way of improving human and social capital in a context of greater internationalisation and increasing mobility (Smith 2005, Parutis 2014). Effectively, international migration enabled our interviewees to improve their position in the labour market and be relatively satisfied with their jobs, which are, in many cases for the first time, in tune with their education and training. However, even though some of them described their experience as an "adventure", our evidence shows that they mainly decided to migrate because of poor labour incorporation back home. This helps to expand previous assumptions about middling migrants, in the sense that this literature has positive tones and is impregnated with a sense of self-achievement. Our interviewees, in contrast, are a group

of young graduates who found themselves with a social and labour status in Southern Europe out of step with their professional career aspirations (Standing 2011), and this disjuncture forced them to migrate (Bartolini, Gropas and Triandafyllidou 2017). Therefore, international migration was their way to get jobs that reflect their education. Maybe this explains why many of them see their immigration as temporary and express a desire to return to their countries of origin. In other words, the idea of returning is fairly strong but barely seems realistic (at least in the short term).

As a matter of fact, regardless of their intentions, the interviewees have extended their stay in Mexico. In line with Frändberg (2015) and Robertson, Harris and Baldassar (2018), our results can be understood within the framework of "mobile transition", in the sense that the young graduates' trajectories cannot be understood solely in relation to economic opportunities but must also be seen through the lenses of social relationships and individual life cycles. For our interviewees, emigration to Mexico has definitely become a "global experience", in which many have found a partner and developed new social skills, apart from achieving upward occupational mobility. But their migration can hardly be seen in the framework of a short-term international migration in which full labour/social incorporations in the host country are not expected. Literature has referred to this as "postponing adulthood" (Engbersen and Snel 2013; Bygnes and Erdal 2017). Yet, rather than postponing adulthood, many interviewees abruptly entered into it in Mexico, as they confronted both incorporation into the labour market and a brand-new society.

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