Pro and Con

One of the most oft-debated subjects today is the structural changes within education. There are passionate debates about whether young people's inequalities of opportunity have increased or decreased. One view is that the system has become more open during the restructuring, while others argue that the changes that took place in the 1990s led to a more “elite-centric” system. One group emphasizes the diversity and multifaceted nature of the system, while another points to a deep division within, namely, the growing exclusion of the children of uneducated rural social groups from the system of education. Adherents of one view see the inevitability of the creation of a market-compatible system of schooling, while others point out the destructive effects of the market on equality of opportunity. Those arguing for a market-compatible education—especially in the field of higher education—emphasize that different social groups make conscious choices as to where and in what direction they want to take their careers. The other side argues, however, that social selection was never as strong in Hungary as in the 1990s. This claim is substantiated with data that show that 80% of students in elite institutions of higher education (arts and sciences, medical school) come from about one quarter of all high schools.

The Two Scenarios and Social Inequalities

Having spoken of the debates in Hungary, the reader ought to be reminded of the debates that arose in Western Europe about the relationship analysis between social inequalities and youth, as well as future prospects for young people. The starting point of all these debates is the idea that we have entered into a new era of youth research. The theoretically and methodologically innovative traditions of the 1970s were challenged by the sobering analyses of the 1980s about the nature and social consequences of youth unemployment. These studies emphasize that structural changes can be expected that have—at least potentially—an effect on the very concept of “youth,” as well as the social category of young people in general. Demographic, technological and economic changes, as well as education and training, change the regulatory mechanisms of youth transitions. Whether young people's values and attitudes toward their lives and futures change as well, and if so, in what way, remains a topic for debate. And if this is so, are such changes an added “plus,” independent of the structural changes, or are they fundamentally constituent parts of structural change (Chisholm 1993, 49)?

The new concept of “youth,” the social inequalities that determine young people's situations, are related to the thesis of the “sub-social class.” Halsey showed that the differences between the well-off majority and the marginalized minority have deepened since the mid-1970s. Poverty has spread. According to him, in 1983, 36% of the British population lived on or near a level that required assistance. The “two countries” started becoming more and more differentiated based on

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1 Excerpt from an article published in Korunk 1998/6, translated by Tamás Bakó
the place of residence as well: the economically deprived are stuck in the progressively worsening conditions of the inner city, while those who can afford it move to the suburbs (Halsey 1988, 29). German youth researchers have accepted the observation regarding the transformation of the vast majority of society into an affluent middle class, which has general consequences for “youth” as a category.

The possible alternative in the relationship between youth and social inequalities is embedded into the debates about the future of postindustrial society and the social division of labor, which are conducted in light of the structural unemployment, technological innovation, and disparity of wealth of developed societies. Two scenarios can be developed in this debate with regard to youth.

In the first scenario, that of unemployment, the “two countries” model that developed in Great Britain in the 1970s is maintained, with flexible workforce reserves made up of the disadvantaged, which forms the secondary sector of the double labor market. The social risks related to this are evident. Youth unrest is but one of these risks, and it, coupled with ethnic unrest, would have an explosive effect, given that the youth of racial/ethnic minorities is more and more likely to attribute its own disadvantaged situation to institutionalized racism.

The other scenario is that of an increase in leisure time, which would erase the stigma of the unemployed, who would then form the basis for a new jobless leisure class. The movement of this toward the labor scenario would lead to a better appreciation of education and the faster integration of youth into the middle class.

Both scenarios regarding youth are contained within the changes taking place in Hungarian society today. The question is particularly pertinent in East European societies, where industrial societies in the past forty years were forced to follow the industrial societies of Western Europe while having social structures based on East European models. In other words, when interpreting social inequalities, we cannot circumvent the question of social transformation.

References
