

How the “New Capitalism” Affects Achievement Careers: The Threatened, the Broken, the Surfers and the Icaruses*

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Abstract

Orderly, loyal and upwards oriented achievement careers have been a major mechanism of the production of inequalities in post-war western societies. They were backed by a powerful liberal ideology of a “levelled” and “mobile” society. In this paper, I ask how this emblematic occupational trajectory of organised capitalism has been affected by the slump of the 1990s, how those pursuing it interpret the changes and with the help of which strategies they try to escape, detour or dampen the rigors of crisis. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with Swiss engineers and business economists I develop a typology of concernment by crisis. It suggests that while people in earlier career phases “merely” feel threatened by the ubiquitous restructuring, engineers in their career autumn lose a great amount of privileges and are left with structurally few opportunities to detour crisis. Controllers and human resource managers in the mid-career, because of their structural positions and the resources attached to them, seize the chances to become the surfers of the crisis. The individualistic icaruses, finally, interpret their fall rather as a consequence of too overly ambitious behaviour and therefore react with psychological work on their selves.

1. The History and Politics of the Achievement Career

Each historical period features its typical biographical patterns, left by the marks of the institutional setting through which the people move and the biographical choices they make within them. According to Martin Kohli, however, biography has never played a more important role than in modernised societies (Kohli 1985; 2003). Modernisation is also a *process of institutionalisation of biography* that establishes biography as a significant principle of social structure. According to Kohli, the transformation to the modern regime of life is composed of temporalization, chronologization, biographisation and three-fold structuration centred on the employment system. It is on the backdrop of the institutionalisation of the standard biography that a series of finer, class-bound “*modal trajectories*” emerge (Bourdieu 1979: 123). Classes, or milieus, share these models of biographical orientation. They gain normative force and become part of the biographical representations and strategies of social actors. Achievement careers can be seen as a segment of those class- and gender-bound modal trajectories. Generally, they are considered to be upwards mobile occupational trajectories that follow orderly incremental steps (Wilensky 1961) in large-scale bureaucratic firms (Whyte 1956) and a rhythm where “the timing of the stages and the continuity of sequences becomes a ‘biographical marker’ leads to the attribution of success and becomes a referential condition for the future success” (Wohlrab-Sahr 1995: 234)¹.

The chances to rise socially on such a pathway are particularly great in the middle class. As a consequence, it is also in these groups that the desire to “make a career” is widespread and typical. Second, the achievement career has constitutively been constructed as a male trajectory. Historically, its development was directly related to the exclusion of “married women” and “mothers” from the labour market and the imposition of a male breadwinner family model (Wecker 1988). The habitus fuelled by the search for individual mobility and social success is therefore particularly common in the milieus of male qualified workers, commercial employees, and lower civil servants (Vester 2001). As Vester points out for the German case, the younger cohorts of these modern parts of the middle class identify themselves with identities rooted in the future, defining themselves by what they aspire to become later in life. They are striving for a better future, for “opportunities” and “perspectives,” and for an occupational position with more social prestige and rewards. In order to achieve this, they rely on educational credentials and the mechanisms of meritocratic

status allocations, which they believe rewards everyone on the basis of their talent, know-how and performance, and acts as a motivator of innovation and economic progress (Bourdieu 1979). This results in a “strong performance motivation” and an identification with occupational work (Vester 2001: 515), as those are the privileged means by which they hope to achieve their dreams of socially upward mobility (Vester 2001).

Varieties of such models of biographical orientation have historically been considerable, although some come to dominate in a given historical period. I argue that the “achievement career” was of pre-eminent importance for the post-war period, due to a number of socio-structural changes from the 1890s to the 1950s. As emphasised by several influential authors of the 1950s, this period was characterized by the strong numerical growth and simultaneous differentiation of the middle classes (Mills 1951; Whyte 1963 [1956]). As consumers and citizens, the middle classes became the target of a wide range of commercial and political attention. Its internal structure simultaneously changed fundamentally to the disadvantage of the traditional petty bourgeoisie (e.g., shop-owners and small entrepreneurs). The modern factions of the employed middle class – engineers, professionals, managers – increased in number, gained political force and came to dominate the values, ideals, and aspirations of the group as a whole. Socially and economically, the modern parts of the middle classes, as the “central constellation” of the post-war period (Mendras 1988) “*constituted the most mobile and dynamic nucleus of the society, the principal utterer of values of modernity, of progress, of fashion and of success*” (Castel 1995: 587)². They managed to impose their definition of success onto large segments of society, not in the least by their increasing control of public and political life (Castel 1995). Embedded in this kind of argument, the achievement career was to be the practical proof of the possibility of overcoming class boundaries by way of generalized social mobility. It was part of a liberal political utopia of the capitalistic overcoming of social inequalities. This political project took the form of a “levelled middle class society” (Schelsky 1965) or of a “liquid society” (Baumann 2000). American mobility research postulated that in societies where social rises and falls are the rule, mobility mixes the social structures continually up, thereby guaranteeing a stable and solidly legitimized democracy (Lipset and Bendix 1959).

Certain scholars, however, contend that the depression of 1974/75 in most western countries was the beginning of the end of the “trente glorieuses”, based on large-scale companies and careers. It was followed by additional, rather regular crises, for example in 1982/ 83 or from

1991-94. Looking back on these times from the perspective of the late 1990s sociologists, such as Richard Sennett (1998) or Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999), declared the last decades as those of a "new capitalism" or a "new spirit of capitalism". The literature suggests that in the large firms, the assumed "home" to achievement career, this led to a series of thorough transformations. Scholars ascertain that the restructuring led to a shortening of career ladders (Bouffartigue and Gadéa 2000: 93); to a replacement of clear-cut, vertical work-positions by polyvalent, amorphous and rather project-oriented tasks (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999); to new individualised assessment systems (Power 1997); and to massive outsourcing and international relocation of work. The reinforced shareholder-value orientation is said to lead to the abandonment of paternalistic – but financially "irrational" – protection policies for careers, giving rise to new recruiting and dismissal policies that are increasingly breaking traditional career ladders (Osterman 1996; Capelli 1999). According to some, this structural erosion of career has been doubled by a challenge of its *normative bases* by discourse of enterprises and management literature (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). With the emergence of the post-Fordian lean and flexible firm, the promises of a secure and successful career would have been replaced by prospects to participate in creative, stimulating, and enriching projects that overcome imprisoning boundaries (of enterprises, culture, or professions).

What are the consequences of these structural and normative changes for the achievement careers? The advocates of the end of the achievement career put into doubt most of the elements traditionally assigned to careers. Arthur and Rousseau (1996) suggest, for instance, that the dominance of the "organisational career" is being increasingly replaced by the "boundaryless career." This new type of career is supposed to be characterised by an increase in moves across firm boundaries and a series of extra-firm mechanisms that intervene during the unfolding of the career. The French sociologist Dany puts into doubt the mere vertical character of contemporary careers. She postulates that, aside from the traditional promise of a vertical achievement career and in order to dampen the clash between traditional aspirations and new realities, human resources managers would develop "*a promise of a subjective career, concerning internal horizontal mobility trajectories, through which middle management and certain professionals learn to find sources of satisfaction within positions not corresponding to traditional conceptions of success*" (Bouffartigue and Gadea 2000: 87)³. Confronted by this myriad of structural and discursive theories, it seems necessary to first cast a closer glance on the fine details. In this paper, I will therefore examine how people pursuing

an achievement career (1) have typically been affected by this structural crisis, and (2) how they interpret and react to the changes. At first, this implies the investigation of what is “objectively” happening: are people downgraded, blocked or even laid off? In which structural situations do the risks of being hit by the effects of the slump become particularly menacing? In a second, differentiating step, I would like to develop a typology of concernment by the crisis based on these objective incidents, the biographical phase and the branch- and firm-specific context these people find themselves in times of crisis. Are specific age groups more severely exposed to the crisis? Is it rather the educational background or the belonging to a particular economic sector that makes people vulnerable? In a third step, I will show how – based on their social position - people interpret the situation and which reaction strategies they employ to escape or at least to dampen the effects of a crisis.

2. Methods

These research questions make it necessary to think about approaches and methods suited to tackle careers successfully. A promising approach is the study of particular professions or occupations, popularized by researchers of the symbolic interactionist school in the 1950s and 60s (Becker and Strauss 1956). These sociologists were successful in linking the institutional setting to the individual career, and we owe them for a great number of insights on career mechanisms. They rarely thought, however, to link their studies to broader considerations of social stratification and mobility, due to their interest in the particular issues at stake within those occupations. Such a link is possible however, and would allow the overcoming of some biases introduced by the internal labor market approach. By focusing on individuals rather than career arrangements, I can observe their movements through different enterprises and economic sectors (Abbott and Hrycak 1990), as well as the differentiation of careers over time. This is of crucial importance if I wish to examine the supposed crisis and erosion of orderly and loyal achievement careers. Studying professional groups allows one to focus more specifically on a certain type of careers as occupations or professions that are structurally linked to a quite narrow choice of possible trajectories. This is because the choice of profession, as a highly identity-bound decision, reflects the orientations and values of the individual’s social milieu, translating its plans and projections towards the future. Specifically, in order to study achievement careers, it should be possible to separate those individuals with an aspiring habitus by examination of particular “career professions.”

First, I have to choose professional groups displaying an elective affinity with careers: According to Schnyder et al. (2005), the majority of Swiss managers and economic leaders hold a degree in engineering, economy, or law. Because the importance of the latter has rapidly declined since the 1980s (Barrial 2006), I will concentrate on the occupations of engineers and business economists. Both of these are typical male-dominated career-professions, the first as the pivotal occupation of the industry and the second as an all-round managerial profession of the service sector. Second, in Switzerland, the two professions happen to be among those that can be learned by the path of “Higher Occupational Schools”⁴. This means that this group first attends an apprenticeship – either in a technical or a commercial occupation – and then, usually after some years of work, returns to Higher Occupational School in order to launch an upward career. This choice involves a large sacrifice in terms of time, energy and money, and is therefore not only a verbal, but is also a practical and very reliable proof of their upward ambitions. The recruitment-pool of that educational curriculum therefore corresponds quite exactly to the milieu described by Vester (2001) as upwards-oriented: Qualified workers, commercial employees, and lower-civil-servants are highly overrepresented in comparison to other milieus⁵.

When it comes to sampling, what matters is not the statistical representativeness with reference to the totality of social characteristics, but “the absence of biases that are theoretically relevant” (Kelle and Kluge 1999: 38; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Random sampling can lead to severe biases in the case of small-n samples. I therefore relied on the method of the sampling plan, the most promising method when a researcher already has at his/her disposal a large and thorough knowledge on the field. This knowledge guides the researcher through the sampling criteria and allows to formulate the dimensions of comparison (Kelle and Kluge 1999). In the present case, I first relied on a typology of careers I developed from a sample of 440 engineers and business economists - members of an alumni association of Higher Occupational School graduates⁶. These analyses resulted in six career types (industrial-technical careers, banking-finance careers, industrial-management careers, small firm careers, service-staff-careers and financial careers) that give a good overview of the different pathway that exist for the two professional groups (Bühlmann, 2008). I then chose to interview four to six people within each career type and classified them according to additional socio-demographic or structural criteria such as age, education and economic branch. This resulted in a qualitative sample of 30 engineers and business economists.

I relied on the technique of the “problem-centered interview”, developed by Andreas Witzel (Witzel 1989). At the beginning of the interview, the researcher asks the interviewee an open question that is supposed to stimulate a narrative response while at the same time orienting the interlocutor towards the problem or the topic under investigation. Next, the researcher increasingly tries to bring in his prior theoretical knowledge or addresses the explanatory elements brought up by the interviewee. This is to deepen and clarify the discourse by reflecting, for example, on what has been said shortly before and giving the interviewee the occasion to confirm, nuance or infirm what he or her already said. In a third and final stage, the researcher is encouraged to ask ad-hoc questions that aim at an enhanced comparability of the interviews (Witzel 1989). Specifically, I stated that the interviews were on the “occupational career” in general. I then began with an open question on the course of childhood and school and continued with specific sections pertaining to the “occupational field”, “the family and leisure” and finally the “future”. I constantly encouraged the interviewees to tell their stories in narrative terms and interfered as little as possible in the beginning. At later points of the interview, I intervened more, confronting them with questions related to my research interests and asked others that allowed the comparison between interviews. The issue of “crisis” or even “structural change” (in a very wide sense) did not come up in any case. Thanks to the open interview structure, it was possible to examine how the engineers and business economists perceived both the evolution of their structural context and of their personal situation. The average length of the interviews was 75 minutes, the shortest being 45 minutes and the longest 150 minutes. As the respondents explicitly agreed to a deepening interview, they were generally willing to tell their story. For the majority of the interviewees, the career was rather “naturally” a highly relevant issue.

My analytical strategy by and large followed the grounded theory approach suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990)⁷. The analytical process begins with the open coding. Its aim is to fragment the text into its smallest components in order to discover and conceptualize the phenomena constituting it. Following this, the researcher tries to group and classify the found phenomenon into more abstract categories. The third stage consists of developing the categories. For this, their “characteristics” and the “dimensions” of these characteristics have to be determined. By *axial coding*, Corbin and Strauss mean the process by which the categories developed during the open coding are in a second step, brought in relation in order to develop an explanatory model (Strauss and Corbin 1990). In the present case, I attempted to elaborate a typology based on the importance of the crisis. It is built on the comparison of

several dimensions: “career stage”, “type of education” (engineer vs. business economist), “economic branch” (above all industry vs. service), “biographical representations” and “reaction strategies”.

3. Four Types of Concernment by the 1990s

A first glance at the interviews quickly revealed that, for the engineers and business economists on the career pathway, the crisis of 1974/75 (and also the one of 1982/83) was hardly relevant. Almost none of those who were occupationally active at the time perceived this threshold between the “trente glorieuse” and the “new capitalism” as a personal crisis or a particularly difficult time. It seems that it concerned rather peripheral occupational groups, in particular alien workers and women, only very slightly affecting the well educated, male, Swiss and ascending employees (Levy et al. 1997). In all of these respects, the 1990s were different. I have both statistical and discursive evidence that the Swiss career candidates were seriously shaken during this period. Unemployment increased sharply, the Swiss Banking system experienced an epochal earthquake, some of the very traditional and emblematic firms of Swiss industry were split up and sold and the economic growth seriously decreased (Mach, 2006). Not only blue-collar workers, but also top managers suddenly lived in uncertainty - all of the interviewees at least knew of one colleague or friend who had seriously stumbled, and a large portion of them even experienced their own crisis (Honegger et al. 2002). The following typology is therefore an attempt to understand the concernment of people pursuing an achievement career during this crisis in the 1990s.

The Threatened

Syndromes of personal biographical crisis, such as unemployment or hierarchical downgrading, did not affect the first group of interviewees. They, however, worked in a context where restructuring, mergers and acquisitions or “downsizing” were in the air. Certain of them reckoned that it was just a matter of time until their company or their unity would be affected by the changes, certain even narrowly escaping lay-offs. A 35 year old business economist describes such a situation in the following story:

Business Economist: In the beginning, a year after I started there, my boss had to reduce posts, to lay-off. But he told me that there were two scenarios. A bigger one where he would have to dismiss 8

or 9 and a smaller one, where it would be 3 or 4. If it would have been the bigger one, I would have been on the list and he told me this when I was in holiday in Italy. I was quite upset there. So in any case, there are anxieties. It ended up being the big scenario, but with one less dismissal and I was on the bottom of the list and did not have to go. I could stay, but it was quite a quake.

These interviewees are conscious that such a crisis could also hit them. If not crisis, then at least the thread and fear of it is ubiquitous. This group is typically somewhat young - between 30 and 40 - and mostly at the beginning of their ascension phase. This means that they have already found their “career anchor”, but still find themselves relatively low in the levels of hierarchy, for example as leader of a research-team or as head of staff in a large bank. This means that for this group, there is no real “before”. Their occupational period before the depression of the 1990s was too short for the life-style relevant status or privileges to have been lost during the depression. They are not yet in appropriate positions such that they may profit from crises as leaders and active protagonists of restructuring. What is threatened is their ability to make their career, long-term visions and their future security a reality. This threat concerns both engineers and economists and seems to be slightly more frequent in large-firm careers, which normally organize and support the careers of their employees.

Such general but latent threats of projects, even though they require no immediate action or re-orientation, lead to protective strategies. The concerned engineers and business economists think that they ought to protect themselves and their families against potential future rigors. They therefore retire, for instance, to a less competitive or demanding position with more regular schedules and a more comfortable work atmosphere. An engineer explained that he left his position as a team leader in a wire factory that recently merged with another, smaller company. Although he could maintain and even slightly improve his position, the merger meant for him a large amount of stress, overtime and insecurity. He therefore decided to change to a more traditional, family-owned firm without stock market listing. Here, even though the occasions for further upward mobility are limited, he has a less stressful job and more regular hours. A business economist, age 36, who has since ever been confronted with the highly volatile banking milieu, has recently accepted his “specialization” in the IT-sector of a traditional Private-Bank and at the same time has in a way given up his upwards ambitions. Even though he feels sometimes a little bit like a “public servant”, he states that he is proud to be part of an “old-school” bank offering their employees protection, stability and internal opportunities. Both interviewees search for a certain social cover, traded against the possibility to climb higher. Apparently, to aspire for a higher position also means to expose

oneself to a higher risk, while a retirement into functional specialization or a smaller family business is desired as a protection against the hardships of economical crisis.

The Broken

This group is severely affected by the economical depression of the 1990s. They find themselves in a biographical and organizational position that transforms this crisis into a serious threat to the personality and privileges accumulated throughout occupational life. It includes mainly engineers who are downgraded, assigned new tasks, forced to change companies or dismissed. In their eyes, these changes often occur abruptly and surprisingly. They shake a whole world of security and normality. However the concernment often transcends mere downgrading or unemployment. More generally, these people have the existential impression of being under pressure, to be socially devaluated or to no longer fit into the current world.

Engineer: I have the impression that there have been quite some shifts, yes. The esteem has decreased and there is surely a massive price pressure. And above all the question, especially if it is general enterprises, is this [his engineering expertise] really necessary? We don't really need a planner, do we? We can construct without a planner, can't we?

This engineer feels cheated and treated as “useless” and obsolete. The values, abilities and the knowledge he learned in a former period become useless and futile because new rules and mechanisms have been established in the meantime (Bourdieu 1979). This can lead to bitterness and the feeling that one's knowledge and abilities are no longer needed, both symbolically and monetarily. In reaction, these engineers switch between the hope that the dominant actors of the new-style capitalism will "recognize that they are on the wrong track" and insulting them as “penny-pinchers”, “hustlers” or “duffers”.

This type of concernment is narrowly restricted to a specific career phase and type: it involves elder engineers, ages 45 and up, working in the industry or in small technological firms. Based on both structural and dispositional reasons, their strategic alternatives are meager: they are bound to industry in general and the technical domain within industry in particular. Their technical knowledge is not very easily transferable to other domains and tasks. This is not in the least due to the biographical schemes they typically develop: early in their career, they have acquired a solid identity as technical engineers and slowly reduced ambitions to change

into more managerial or administrative functions. This is reinforced by their strong technical understanding of progress, according to which an outbreak of the technical domain almost equals a running over to the enemy. As a result, functional side steps or further vertical rises are hardly conceivable.

Their opportunity space being strongly constrained, it is no wonder that their strategies are defensive or even fatalist in nature. Some simply bitterly accept the downgrading or the functional transfers and sometimes - ironically – wait for the next restructuring, which might again bring an improvement of their situation. Others accept the downgrading or the functional transfer on a factual level, but re-interpret and embellish it at the same time, thanks to an un-orthodox use of cultural models of the transition to retirement.

Engineer: And within the firm X, I had nothing to say anymore, the others had the say (laughs). Then, yeah, I was almost 60, I said to myself: yeah, what do you still want? Grin and bear it. But indeed I still could collaborate a lot with my old colleagues at the firm Y, this was still possible.

This engineer tries to mask a “forced downgrading” as a “natural” and “normal” step back from the rat race, as it is practiced in the framework of voluntary and mutual “cooling-outs”, (i.e., agreements between the firm and the employee for a balmy transition to retirement). Another engineer, who lost his job in the higher management of telecommunication industry, chose to become independent just 10 years before his retirement. For those engineers who, across their trajectory, have simultaneously acquired engineering and managerial knowledge, to become self-employed late in life is a decent strategy in the face of crisis.

Engineer: if you would have asked me before if I wanted to become self-employed, I wouldn't have done it, never. I slid into self-employment. Retrospectively, it is clear that it is fun, with the success and all that, I could have done it at least 4 or 5 years earlier, that would might have even worked better.

The most treasured challenge of this industrial-management engineer, age 55, is to “show them” that he has been wrongfully dismissed. In this way, he has demonstrated (by the financial and general success of his newly founded company) that his model of value creation still is superior to the shortsighted management and finance-oriented conception of current industrial organization.

The Surfers

In the eye of the hurricane, the “surfers” are not “suffering”. The crisis turns out to be a major career opportunity for them. Exponents of a dynamic, fresh and unconsumed young generation are able to replace the managers of the “old school”. Others are even charged with conducting the restructuring of the firm. This function can be a major springboard for positions in similar processes of restructuring, but also for positions in companies who are looking for particularly “dynamic”, “flexible” and “ruthless” managers. In contrast to those who are threatened or rolled over by the restructuring, these people are “surfing the wave”, managing to seize the chances that are corollary to crises.

As opposed to the assumption that, in situations of economic crisis, it is always the young and upcoming who “win” and the older who “lose”, the surfers might most adequately be described as “neither too young and nor too old”. In terms of career-phases, they are advanced enough to be in positions of responsibility, but not too attached to “obsolete” management methods. These people are assigned the tasks to organize the restructuring, the dismissals, the recruiting of substitutes, or the dislocation of the firm or the merger with another company. One of the interviewees, now a human resource director of a large bank, was, at the time of a merger, an important middle-management agent of the "company-culture" in the dominant firm. In the course of the merger, he was therefore promoted in order to spread out this culture among the representatives of the subordinate firm. Another interviewee was a financial vice-director of a catering company. Because the merger was, to a large part, an operation that required creating a common accounting and controlling-system, he quickly became "Mister Merge", a kind of a staff-role with a special responsibility to bring the merge to a successful end. Both think it was important that at the moment of crisis they were still striving for a higher position in the organization. The aforementioned human resources director describes his personal experience of the merger in the middle of the 1990s as follows:

Business Economist: well I would say, I was almost 40, not even 40 and I still could convert that and adapt myself, I was energetic and I had my networks and career ambitions and others have been 50 and they had problems to adapt, this was a huge thing.

Surfers are spread across different career-types. The most predestined functions, however, seem to be financial and human resources-related tasks. The first of those, due to the increasing dominance of accountability as organizational principle, become one of the

vanishing points of a large number reorganization. As restructuring always means to dismiss, to recruit and to re-assign tasks human resources departments become another linchpin of restructuring activities. They therefore appear to be particularly promising starting positions to profit from crises (Buss-Notter 2006).

The surfers possess the resources to organize the restructuring or to profit from the reforms. Their functional skills fit particularly well with the needs of restructuring and they occupy positions that allow their superiors to believe that they are able and willing to take the chance offered. The expression of a continual striving (at an already advanced age) seems to be a further advantage. Yet, only in certain career-types, is a continual fidelity to the initial striving possible and widespread. Interviews show also that these actors perceive their opportunity structures as wide open, and adhere to a conception of progress and innovation. This favors regular and radical reorganization so that they may be constantly ahead of the competition. Their biographical strategies encourages them to take the “chances” that are offered to these people.

The Icaruses

For the groups I have presented up to now, the link between the structural changes of the 1990s and the personal concernment was evident. A series of cases from my sample, however, cannot be directly ascribed to the structural slump. Because of the conspicuous similarities among them, I chose to present them as a specific type. I will call them the "Icaruses", according to the mythological figure who wanted to fly too close to the gods and paid by falling into the sea because the sun melted his wings, which were made out of wax.

The Icaruses are affected by a sudden dismissal that is followed by a period of unemployment. Its cause, however, is not necessarily due to a restructuring or a downsizing of the company. The actors themselves interpret it as rather the consequence of a “personal conflict” or of their “too aggressive and boisterous” striving. One business economist, for example, joins the executive board of a middle-scale company in the tourism-sector and – as he says – because of his demanding and ambitious character, had difficulty from the first day on:

Business Economist: I joined them and then at the first management board reunion we had a dispute, because I asked why the computer-system broke down at this day, twice, and they told me it that it was none of my business and then I said: hey...but sorry, there we have a problem.

He retrospectively interprets these problems, which then very quickly accumulated into a major struggle that led to his departure, due to his behaviour:

Business Economist : I don't know yet, I did not have the impression that I- may be I came with the attitude that I still was the boss and then I reprimanded them or I don't know what- I didn't have the impression, but after that I did not have a very good feeling.

Even if this interpersonal struggle is triggered by structural tensions or problems, these people finally look for and find an explanation within their own behaviour. In contrast to other types of concernment, they have no concept of an enemy, such as engineers have in the form of “*penny-pinchers*” or “*international investors*”. They also do not feel threatened by an impersonal force, such as “globalisation” or “the market”. This kind of personal crisis is typical for people who pursue aggressive and individually-oriented careers across different firms and branches. They stay hardly loyal to a single firm and do not profit from internal traineeships, “promotional pools” or “high potential programs”. These careers are pursued *without* or even *against* organisational structures. This is most widespread among finance, accounting and controlling specialists. These skills, easily transformable and transposable, seem to be most appropriate to migrate across different firms and to aggressively aspire for ascension at the same time. Such a personal crisis occurs mainly in the rising phase when they already occupy positions in middle or higher management - positions in which “personal conflicts” quickly convert to a question of “all or nothing” and then lead to separation or dismissals. As these individuals scarcely rely on organisations, and therefore only marginally undergo institutionalised procedures of categorization and labelling, their perception of opportunity is rather open. Their pathway to date is characterised by erratic moves and abrupt changes, so that structural regularities have been hardly constraining their imagination. In addition, their financial or accounting knowledge does not restrain them to narrow career rhythms or normative sequential orders. Their biographical representations are characterised by the maintenance of a very vivid variety of striving and openness. A business economist describes his philosophy as follows:

Business Economist: I also asked myself why I always chose other branches. I just recognise, damn, life is too thrilling that I would want to stay always the same. Sure, I could imagine too to go to work to

Zurich, however there are enough people who want to make career and I recognise, this I would have to limit to 2 years and after 2 years I can quit again. Because, hey, I don't fit there, I would put people's back up finally.

Considering the fact that they conceptualise the crisis as a genuinely personal one, and blame themselves for having been too demanding, too ambitious and too aggressive, it is not surprising that their reaction strategies consist of *work on themselves*. An engineer, for example, explains that during his unemployment crisis, he thought intensively about himself and read “*more books than ever before in his life*”. On the question which type of book he had been reading, he answers:

Engineer: mainly biographies of personalities from the economic and political domain, economy and politics, such as Konrad Adenauer or Helmut Kohl or Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electrics and such stuff, yeah, yeah...

This psychologically-oriented search for inspiration among “successful personalities” is typical. A business economist with a similar agenda begins “psycho-therapy” and now consults from time to time a “Kinesiologist” in order “to open his knot”. In general, they give the impression of a de-contextualised skipjack who, following a personal conflict at work due to “overly ambitious behaviour”, becomes unemployed and then works intensively on his character and personality, finally finding a new job. The positions they often aim at after the crisis are slightly more modest. An engineer who has been CEO of a small telecommunication company finds a post as middle-manager in “the technical domain”. A business economist who has been director of a large NGO opts for a smaller and less media covered company in the same sector. In other terms, they look for a job which is closer to their initial education, a place where they feel more “*at home*” and “*know the rules*”.

4. Conclusions

Scholars postulate that from the 1970s on, the so-called new capitalism led to a structural and normative transformation in its core-institution, the large-scale bureaucratic firm. This, in turn, contributed to an erosion of the achievement career, one of the politically emblematic biographical trajectories of the post-war period. The aim of this paper was to examine this transformation process in situ, by investigating the structural crisis and their individual repercussions among those who aspire to make an achievement career. The Swiss case shows

that for these privileged social climbers, the golden years only ended in the 1990s. At this point in time their trajectories, representations and strategies began to be traversed by the effects of the economic slump. However, even within this relatively homogenous group, the concernments were certainly not uniform. Allow me to summarize the most relevant dimensions of differentiation:

According to a simple linear conception of biographical concernment, the older a person is, the more he or she has become conservative and attached to the status quo, and therefore is at odds with new tendencies. Conversely, the younger a person is, the more he or she is receptive to new ideas and therefore able to benefit from restructuring. Against these beliefs, the results show that age as such has no explicative value. *Biographical phases* must be taken into account to explain how people are affected. The positions typically occupied during these phases are associated with specific decision-powers in the firms. All of those who are not yet in the middle or upper management at the moment of restructuring hardly have the chance to soar into a surfing role, because they lack the required influence and power. The people in the middle of the ascension phase, in contrast, possess a combination of positional status and individual striving, necessary in order to profit from the slump. People who find themselves at later career phases are the most severely affected by the crisis: they have few chances to reinvent themselves and to radically change their concept of work and value creation. Second, they have privileges (material and statutory) and prestige to lose. They also, however, have career-phase-specific strategies at their disposal, enabling them to dampen the psychological effects of potential downgrading and dismissals. Specifically, they have the possibility to interpret these forced shifts as an almost "natural" cooling-off process.

In general, the effect of a crisis on a person depends on the structural position that person occupies at its outbreak, the resources at hand and the subjective interpretations the individual has of these two elements. In other words, the opportunity structure a person thinks to have and the biographical representations he or she has developed at the time the crisis emerges shape the individual concernment decisively. Technical engineers, for example, in cases of dismissal or a downgrading, structurally only have few possibilities to escape or detour around the situation. They seem to be bound to industry by their knowledge. They have also adopted a "technological identity", which is steadily developed and reinforced so that an abandon of the technological work is scarcely imaginable. At the same time, the long evolution within the same firm, and often around similar projects and products, also creates

ties with the firm and the profession that inhibits individualistic moves into another domain. Business economists with controlling expertise, to give a contrasting example, learn to jump from firm to firm, independent of the economic branch or the type of the firm. This is based on their abstract financial knowledge, which can be applied to a large number of different situations and companies. These trajectories then create a very personal career-habitus, and a certain openness to changes, which allows them to choose alternative pathways when they are dismissed or threatened by downgrading.

The reaction strategies the engineers and business economists develop in order to cope with crises depends on their structural situation, the resources at their disposal and the representations of potential solutions. Those who feel threatened by the crisis try to deal in a regular and secure career against the promise of a quicker and higher rise. They change into more traditional departments of the same firm, to a smaller firm with a more traditional and familiar structure or they just remain in their actual position instead of daring to make a risky, but potentially rewarding "side-step". In the eyes of these young economists and engineers, a shift to a more modest, but also more secure, position or firm is a protection against career disorder. The crisis in a career might dampen the willingness to take risks, and they may prefer security to success. Others who already have a certain experience, but at the same time think they no longer have structural opportunities within the large firms chose self-employment. For older engineers especially, in the eye of impending downgrading, the founding of their own firm can be a last resort. This strategy is occasionally the only possible way to go on without falling into long-term unemployment or having to take a hierarchically lower job. If downgrading seems inevitable and if there are no alternative structural possibilities available, the individual can still re-interpret his situation and transform it into "normality". Examples here are the engineers in their career autumn who use the possibilities put at their disposal by the traditional career norms of transitioning to retirement in order to re-establish a "decent" cooling-off. The individual and psychological work on the self, reading biographies or attending psychotherapies, are alternative strategies to protect oneself from the consequences of crisis, to re-establish one's self-image of a striving and ambitious personality and to prepare oneself to take up a career again. This can include the re-interpretation of unemployment as a "*sabbatical*" or a "*natural phase of personal re-orientation*", and even lead to a transformation of the crisis into a future resource: the passage through a major biographical crisis is sold to future employers as the ability to "ship through

the stormy wind” of contemporary capitalism, where restructuring and crisis are part of daily business.

¹ Translated by F.B.

² Translated by F.B.

³ Translated by F.B.

⁴ The Swiss education system is comparable to the German model, based on the dual apprenticeship. About two thirds attend an apprenticeship and less than 20% go to university. Under certain circumstances (complementary degrees, some years of occupational experience), the graduates of an apprenticeship have the opportunity to attend a “Higher Occupational School” (*Fachhochschule* or *Haute école spécialisée*). This educational path enables foremost commercial and technical employees to upgrade their apprenticeship by acquiring the diploma of an engineer or business economist, which is supposed to facilitate ascension to middle management.

⁵ Recent comparisons of the social background of University vs. Higher Occupational Schools students demonstrate that if we examine men, only 18% of the HOS-students have at least one parent with a university degree whereas it is 36% for university students. On the other side, 42% of the HOS-students have at least one parent with an apprenticeship (or another post-obligatory education) versus 33% for university students (Boegli et al., 2007).

⁶ The association „FH Schweiz“ has about 40'000 members, is issue of independent regional alumni groups, but today also operates as a political pressure group in order to defend the interests of HOS-degree holders. The survey is based on a collaboration with the committee and the director of FH Schweiz, Mr. Toni Schmid.

⁷ The qualitative analysis of the data was made by the help of the “Qualitative Data Analysis-Software” (QDA) Atlas.Ti.

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