

## TOWARDS A DYNAMIC APPROACH TO RECONVERSIONS

### *RUMO A UMA ABORDAGEM DINÂMICA PARA RECONVERSÕES<sup>1</sup>*

### *CAMINO A UN ABORDAJE DINÁMICO PARA LAS RECONVERSIONES*

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**ABSTRACT:** Although they are often analyzed as forms of reproduction, reconversions have been characterized as forms of mobility in a number of works. Both options are not strictly contradictory and can equally be justified. However, trying to better circumscribe this notion seems utterly necessary today. Although not pretending to offer a precise definition, the author mainly leans on research on the élite conducted in different geographical (France, Hungary, Russia) and historical contexts, and proposes a better-grounded and more heuristic approach to reconversions that would also permit them to be clearly distinguished from conversions.

**KEYWORDS:** Conversion. Deconversion. Mobility. Reconversion. Reproduction. Ruptures

**RESUMO:** Apesar de serem muitas vezes analisadas como formas de reprodução, as reconversões têm sido caracterizadas como formas de mobilidade em várias obras. Ambas opções não são estritamente contraditórias e podem ser igualmente justificadas. No entanto, parece absolutamente necessário tentar circunscrever melhor esta noção. Embora não pretenda oferecer uma definição, a autora se apoia principalmente em pesquisas sobre as elites conduzidas em diferentes contextos geográficos (França, Hungria, Rússia) e históricos, e propõe uma abordagem mais fundamentada e heurística para reconversões que também lhes permitiria ser claramente distinguidas das conversões.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Conversão. Desconversão. Mobilidade. Reconversão. Reprodução. Rupturas.

**RESUMEM:** A pesar de que a menudo se analizan como formas de reproducción, las reconversiones se han caracterizado como formas de movilidad en varios trabajos. Ambas opciones no son estrictamente contradictorias y pueden ser igualmente justificadas. Sin embargo, parece absolutamente necesario tratar de circunscribir más esta noción. Sin pretender ofrecer una definición, la autora se basa principalmente en investigaciones sobre las élites realizadas en diferentes contextos geográficos (Francia, Hungría, Rusia) e históricos, y propone un enfoque más fundamentado y heurístico de las reconversiones, que también permitiría distinguir las claramente de las conversiones.

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**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Conversión. Desconversión. Movilidad. Reconversión. Reproducción. Rupturas.*

## Introduction

The concept of reconversion, sometimes confused with that of conversion, has many forms and many meanings; at the moment it is used in social science studies and research in a variety of contexts and with very different meanings. Thus researchers use the term to describe the conversion or reconversion of a society, an institution, a profession, a group, a family, an individual, a ‘vocation’ or an identity. For example, this approach has been used to analyze the transition from a communist to a capitalist type of society, the ‘unlikely conversion’ of the *Ecole Nationale d’Administration* to Europe, the entry of professional soldiers to civilian life, the conversion of former sports champions to entrepreneurs, trade union militants to humanitarian work or posts as consultants, revolutionary students to docile administrators, to give only a few examples. There is a considerable risk of seeing – and analyzing as such – reconversions in all circumstances, at all times and at all levels and of the term becoming a *port-manteau* concept.

It is not our intention here to trace the genealogy, necessary as it is, of the concept of reconversion, or to present the area of research carried out in this domain. However, it should be borne in mind that studies and research on the conversion and reconversion of various groups, which began, in France in particular, during the 1970s, gathered momentum after the fall of the Berlin Wall, particularly in Eastern Europe and that the concept has become relatively commonplace. Since then interest has declined, but the research continues.

Reconversions have often tended to be analyzed either as forms of reproduction, or in other studies as forms of mobility. Moreover, these two alternatives are not diametrically opposed (SZELENYI; SZELENYI, 1995) and can be justified. However, today there is a need to be more explicit in limiting the bounds of the concept. Without claiming to give a precise definition, the intention in this article is to make some suggestions based mainly on research carried out on elites in different contexts (mainly in France, Hungary and Russia) and at different historical periods<sup>3</sup>, the aim being a well-grounded approach to reconversions which is more heuristic, thus enabling us to distinguish between conversions and reconversions.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, reconversions are not specific to elites, and are doubtless less frequent amongst elites than other social groups. One might even question whether firmly established or long-standing elites are capable of reconverting given that they often seem little inclined or open to change.

## Are reconversions forms of reproduction?

For the members of a class fraction, implementing a reconversion means carrying out ‘a change in strategy and in tools for reproduction aimed at reproducing or raising their position by abandoning their situation’, as we wrote in *Social Science Information* (BOURDIEU; BOLTANSKI; SAINT MARTIN, 1973, p. 101). Reconversion strategies were therefore an integral part of the set of strategies for reproduction, but were not strategies for reproduction as such insofar as their origin was the change in strategies. Shortly afterwards, Pierre Bourdieu specified that these strategies constituted:

[...] an aspect of the permanent actions and reactions whereby each group strives to maintain or change its position in the social structure, or, more precisely – at a stage in the evolution of class societies in which one can conserve only by changing – *to change so as to conserve*. (BOURDIEU, 1984, p. 157)

It was thus a question for each group concerned to maintain its position and not to concede any change unless this enabled the group to ensure its reproduction.

According to this approach, reconversions depend to a large extent on the state of the inheritance laws, the labour market, the educational system, etc., and on the state of the different types of capital or economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources at the disposal of the various groups and individuals and which they wish to reproduce. Reconversions also depend on the evaluation made of the likelihood of profit, of maintaining the position they occupy or of losing status, and have a considerable impact on attitudes with regard to the future. Reconversions frequently have recourse to schooling; thus in France in the 1970s, the capital or the economic resources of manufacturers/ industrialists, wholesale dealers, artisans, local shopkeepers and farmers was often converted into educational capital or resources<sup>4</sup>

This resort to reconversion to facilitate the reproduction of a group is particularly visible amongst the members or the families of economic elites and employers. Ernest-Antoine Seillière is an outstanding example; born in 1937 in Neuilly-sur-Seine, in 1997, he became the president of the *Conseil national du patronat français* (CNPF) (National Council of French Employers) which shortly afterwards became the *Mouvement des Entreprises de France* (MEDEF) (French Business Confederation). His life-story and trajectory can be interpreted as the history of his attempts at reconversion of the various resources which he possessed with varying degrees of success/achievement (SAINT MARTIN, 1999). Descended

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<sup>4</sup> The article focuses primarily on processes of reconversion of economic capital into qualified cultural capital or educational capital, subsequent in particular to transformations in the sphere of business and the rural world

on his mother's side from an important family of ironmasters and, on his father's side, from a family of bankers and entrepreneurs titled at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he began by endeavoring to reconvert economic and social resources into educational resources. He studied law, graduated from the *Institut d'études politiques* in Paris and then from ENA (*Ecole nationale d'administration*), investing in studies and accumulating degrees. We then witness his attempt to reconvert educational and administrative resources into economic resources. As a graduate of ENA, he became a member of several ministerial cabinets, a senior civil servant at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and, after nine years in the higher civil service and ministerial cabinets, gave up a career as a diplomat to become the director of a family financial group, the CGIP (*Compagnie générale d'industrie et de participations*), which was in difficulty at the time; he then became the chairman and managing director of this same group. Finally, there occurred either a diversification of investments or an attempt at reconversion of economic resources into political resources; as chairman and managing director of an important financial group, he became President of the CNPF and set out to play a political role at a time when this organization was going through a period of crisis and division<sup>5</sup>.

While it is possible to analyze the trajectory of Ernest-Antoine Seillière by revealing his various attempts at reconversion of social, educational or economic resources, we are obliged to admit that it is really a subtle and disguised form of reproduction of his position, and that of his family and his group, but one which is not presented as such. Furthermore, we observe that these reconversions have not in fact been completed; Seillière never relinquishes investments made or resources previously accumulated. A complete reconversion would, for example, have assumed that he renounce the symbolic and family inheritance to become a high-level civil servant, a servant of the State, or that he give up the CGIP to become president of the CNPF. Instead, what we see is a series of what we propose to call incomplete reconversions, or a reconverted form of conservatism which enables him to enlarge his field of action while avoiding clear ruptures and big risks.

Some forms or modes of leaving the civil service to work in the private sector (a practice known as '*pantouflage*' in French) which is more lucrative than the civil service – in particular in the case of high-level civil servants, mining engineers, employees in the general Inspection of Finances and other members of the great administrative corps of the State (*grands corps de l'Etat*), who take advantage of the various arrangements that enable civil servants to move out of public service, can be analyzed as incomplete attempts at

<sup>5</sup> What is striking in the case of Ernest-Antoine Seillière is the accumulation and sensible management of a considerable capital or network of diversified relations.

reconversion of a capital of a particular educational and administrative type into economic capital. Moving from the civil service to the private sector in mid-career is undoubtedly the form which best lends itself to these analyses (CHARLE, 1987), in particular when it is a question of a final move, occasioning a resignation from the civil service (such instances are extremely rare nonetheless). Such moves imply a career re-orientation and a form of rejection of the professional perspectives offered by the civil service, and are not a simple or one-way phenomenon. The significance has changed over the years, depending in particular on whether it concerns a fraction of the group or whether it is tending to become the norm, as has been the case for almost the past 20 years, for employees in the general Inspection of Finances and the *Corps des Mines*, the two groups most concerned (Joly, 2010). In the vast majority of moves from the public to the private sector (*'pantouflage'*) by high-level civil servants, it is undoubtedly a question of well-trodden paths, incomplete reconversion and a form of reproduction. The high-level civil servants who join the management of major private firms do not give up the administrative resources they have accumulated and do not always play strictly by the rules of private firms. Furthermore, most of the time, the administrative and economic elites involved in reconversions stop half-way, so to speak, and prefer to take up several positions or to be able to come and go between the starting point and the finishing line.

However, during periods of important political, social or economic changes the incentive to reconversion becomes stronger, including for members of the elites, who may attempt to ensure the reproduction of their own position in the first instance unless they prefer to distance themselves from the reproduction process and thus profit from being different from their peers and from following less well-trodden paths.

After *perestroika* and the Fall of the Berlin Wall, numerous cases of reconversion of educational resources into economic resources or of bureaucratic resources into economic resources were observed, for example in Russia, with the move, involving varying degrees of risk, of former members of the *nomenklatura* to major firms in a process of privatization. Some of these reconversions of former members of the *nomenklatura* into private entrepreneurs have been analyzed as a form of reproduction. The policy of economic reforms and the model of privatization implemented during the first stage in reforms effectively facilitated a process which has certain similarities with forms of reproduction of the *nomenklatura*. In Russia, priority was given to the reconversion of former members of the *nomenklatura* who became new entrepreneurs and of their bureaucratic resources into economic resources, thus putting the majority of 'newcomers' to the economic field at a

disadvantage. This is demonstrated in the research carried out in 1991 on the basis of an exploratory survey using in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs (CHMATKO; SAINT MARTIN, 1997).

While the Russian job market was drastically disrupted after 1989, there was no concomitant revolutionary change in the distribution of positions between those dominating and those dominated. At the time one could observe a process of reconstruction of the former elites and their self-reconversion into new post-Soviet elites. Many of the former elites went into business and privatized firms but they also went into politics. These reconversions of former members of the *nomenklatura* were frequently accompanied by the development of ‘intra-State trade’, which took the form of an almost open corruption (RADAEV, 1995).

After 1989 numerous surveys and research studies of former elites in different, formerly communist countries were carried out on the basis of large samples of political, economic and cultural elites. These often had a comparative dimension and focused on the origins and the destinies of these elites, revealing different forms of reproduction or mobility and enabling us to grasp the various forms and modes of reconversion and decision-making rationales. Georges Mink and Jean-Charles Szurek, on the basis of a large corpus of life-histories of members of the elites, have analyzed the ‘conversions’ of communists in Eastern Europe. They make a distinction between free-choice rationales (the Polish and Hungarian situation), necessity (Czech situation) or, again, intermediary situations ‘between choice, necessity and opportunity’ (the case of some Polish entrepreneurs) (Mink & Szurek, 1999). However, an overall evaluation of these surveys and research studies on the conversions and reconversions of post-communist elites,<sup>6</sup> including China, though undoubtedly necessary, is beyond the scope of this article.

### **Are reconversions forms of mobility?**

As we have seen, elites are no exception to the increasing destabilization of social and professional positions. The rise in the professional and geographical mobility of managers of major firms or international institutions, of downward social mobility, of the instability of careers and the risk of witnessing the creation, in their midst or externally, of de-structured borders, contributes to this relative instability. The displacement of elites is increasing in the social field and can be at the origin of reconversions; displacements may be triggered by major

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<sup>6</sup> A very useful synthesis has been made which is based mainly on sociological and political science research carried out in Poland (HEURTAUX, 2000).

political changes (Fall of the Berlin Wall, decolonization) or by more structural changes (in forms of ownership, modes of reproduction, breaking up of power structures) with the relinquishing of established positions and entry into new sectors. Pierre Bourdieu had observed the extent of these transfers in the social field and was particularly interested in the ‘transversal transfers’, implying a move from one field to another, which assumes the reconversion of one type or subtype of capital into another, and thus a change in the structure of (personal) assets. But in his opinion this did not constitute mobility, a concept of which he was deeply suspicious. According to him, the ‘social space’ had ‘nothing in common with the unreal and yet naively realistic space of so-called “social mobility” studies, guided by what he called “positivist naivety” confusing vertical – upward and downward – moves, in the same field – the schoolteacher becoming a professor, or the small businessman an important manager – and transversal moves, involving the move from one field to another, when schoolteachers or their children become small businessmen or captains of industry’ (BOURDIEU, 1984, p. 131).

Karady (1995) does not demonstrate the same reticence with regard to the concept of mobility; an analyst of situations of in-depth change, he sees the problem of the ‘class conversion of the elites’ as a ‘special form of social mobility which occurs when the groups in question – no longer able to assume their former functions or having no further interest therein – opt for new public roles, either in the economic sphere properly speaking or ... in the political, intellectual or professional sphere. Conversions of this sort in most cases do not concern the whole group but only certain of its most highly motivated fractions or those most interested in re-establishing themselves in new positions’ (KARADY, 1995, p. 87).<sup>7</sup>

Karady (1995) makes a distinction between circular mobility and structural mobility; circular mobility occurs when a dominant aggregate replaces another, for example the arrival in office of a new set of leaders after the former group has lost the elections (a permutation), or again when a reigning aristocracy of one religion is replaced by the aristocracy of another after a religious war, whereas structural mobility occurs when conversion is part of an overall change in the social structure. He also considers it appropriate to differentiate between ‘situations which have the effect of forcing or pushing elites in the direction of conversion – force is demonstrated when the social functions occupied by the groups in question become obsolete and their material base disintegrates or collapses’ – and ‘socio-economic circumstances which represent primarily new opportunities for the elites which tend to attract

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<sup>7</sup> Translated by Kristin Couper; hereafter designated by ‘tr. KC’.

them' (KARADY, 1995, p. 87-88) (tr. KC). The difference is not always obvious and very frequently the two effects combine, with the result that it may be difficult to pinpoint which has the upper hand. However, according to Karady (1995), the effect of attraction wins the day when new functions open up to some members of an elite guaranteeing them higher chances of success than in their previous position. It would appear to have been the case in the study carried out by Karady (1995), on the reconversion of the landed aristocracy into a political bureaucracy in Hungary at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Incapable of modernizing their economic behavior and habitually overspending, part of the aristocracy was ruined. At the time, the state represented a relatively attractive proposition subsequent to its modernization, which speeded up after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1897, and with the increase of paid jobs in the civil service.

The reconversion of several descendants of the Jewish commercial, industrial or financial (lower, middle and upper classes) bourgeoisie and also members of the liberal and professional professions, who survived the genocide, in the Stalinist state apparatus at various levels (1945–1956) is another case studied by Karady (1995). The attraction of communism, which appeared to be a liberating regime, combined with the opening up of the civil service, previously closed to them, and the effect of rejection or constraint occasioned by 'the state of frustration' of the few survivors, who had been deprived of their most elementary human rights (KARADY, 1995).

After 1989, research on the processes of post-communist transformation has often focused on the question of knowing who was upwardly socially mobile and who had lost status after leaving the former nomenklatura, thus stressing the mobility implied by reconversions. Thus, research carried out in the Czech Republic demonstrated that being

a member of the Communist Party and belonging to the group of officials (cadres) significantly increased the risks of downward social mobility and had little impact on the opportunity for upward social mobility. Despite this, it is these two groups, in particular the officials (cadres), who have the best chances of reconverting their accumulated political and social capital into economic power and of entering the world of entrepreneurs (MATEJU; REHAKOVA, 1994).

More generally, factors that may promote reconversions include the increase in structural mobility and migrations,<sup>8</sup> the globalization of the economy, the internationalization of foreign, economic, scientific and cultural exchanges, the transformation of the role and

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<sup>8</sup> Analyzing the socio-spatial trajectories of the commercial bourgeoisie in Marseille, Pierre- Paul Zalio analyses the links between social reconversions and residential patterns (ZALIO, 1999, p. 237).



functions of the central States, but also the increase in risk and uncertainty at several levels. The opportunities and the locations for reconversion also increase with the development of international and transnational organizations, the internet and information and communication technologies, and the increasing number of commissions and committees of experts, amongst others.

Diversity of resources seems to be an increasingly crucial asset in reconversions. What facilitates conversions is not so much the level of one's resources as their composition and variety, including the experience of having lived abroad, and an extensive network of contacts. Attendance at foreign institutions for periods of varying length during university education, either in the home country or more frequently abroad, particularly in the United States, is a rapidly expanding practice that promotes reconversions. The process of internationalization of the careers of political leaders and elites is often at the outset a chance for the rise or promotion of social actors who were not amongst the highly privileged; subsequently it promotes reconversions, including those of the former heads of major NGOs (non-governmental organizations) who become directors of multinationals (DEZALAY; GARTH, 2005). But these reconversions can be understood only if we take into consideration the reactions and, in the last resort, the counter-actions of other groups and classes, or even the counter-elites in the cases studied by Szelenyi (SZELENYI; SZELENYI, 1995).

### **Ruptures, mobilization of resources and processes of reconstruction**

However, reconversions cannot be understood uniquely as forms of reproduction, nor as forms of mobility or circulation associated with different constraints or the attraction exerted by the opening up of new possibilities. Nor are they a simple transfer in type of capital or resources from one space (economic, political, social) to another. Is it now time, as Wesolowski has suggested, to turn the page of the study of reconversions, at least as far as the transformations which have taken place in the Eastern European countries after 1989 are concerned (WESOLOWSKI, 1999)? Or should we instead attempt to improve our definition and give more explanatory force to the concept – not by precisely setting out absolute thresholds of reconversion, but instead by revealing the most relevant prospects, as the authors of the book *Reconversions militantes* (TISSOT; GAUBERT; LECHIEN, 2006) did recently?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This collective publication calls for a shift in the sociological viewpoint and for the observation of practices of 'transition' or of 'break-up' of a posture – be it political, economic, artistic, moral and professional – leading towards a new 'posture'



Reconversion movements are never linear and do not constitute the outcome of a single decision. They are usually presented as a series of events, circumstances, stages, meetings and sometimes ruptures, and the actors involved in these dynamic processes often feel themselves to be in a contradictory position, torn between several worlds which they attempt to reconcile by negotiating compromises.

Thus the process of reconversion of former members of the nomenklatura in Russian firms or in associations was not organized around a single rationale; instead we witnessed adaptations, compromises and reconfigurations (CHMATKO; SAINT MARTIN, 1997). The social actors often reconstructed or re-used old organizations and institutions (STARK, 1996),<sup>10</sup> participating in the implementation of a new type of economy which is neither a Socialist nor, properly speaking, a market economy, were taken up into contradictory positions and made use of the various possibilities open to them. While some created new positions or new activities to invest their various resources efficiently and to profit economically and symbolically from them, others merely endeavoured to maintain the same social position by making the necessary adaptations.

Reconversions imply a move of some sort in the social field, a feature which differentiates them from conversions; these are a process of radical and total change which is to some extent managed (LE PAPE, 2010). Reconversions also imply the relinquishing or loss of the former type of resource, a form of break with one's inheritance, the disappearance of former resources and their recompositing on different bases. Above all they imply a mobilization of resources, and a continual attention to these resources. The mobilization and the activity around these resources produce 'a new world' which is not pre-determined. One of the next considerations becomes that of the different modes of valorizing the resources (DOBRY, 1986).

In the most complete reconversions, reconstructions or recompositing of identities (changes affecting ways of thinking and being) also take place. The extent of these recompositing of identity is stressed in the analysis of 'militant reconversions' (TISSOT; GAUBERT; LECHIEN, 2006). Doubts are often expressed, including amongst those whom Mink & Szurek refer to as the converted, doubts which bear witness to the difficulty of moving suddenly from one world to another, particularly in the case of the former communists in Eastern Europe. The recompositing of one's identity may depend on 'the skill or the ideological agility with which one slips into the new trappings of social democracy'

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<sup>10</sup> David Stark analyses how in the post-socialist context the actors reconstruct organizations and institutions not 'on the ruins but with the ruins' of communism, which does not mean repetition (STARK, 1996).

(MINK; SZUREK, 1999, p. 217) (tr. KC).

Doubtless the concept of reconversion should only be used in situations where there is a complete break with the former inheritance, the resources formerly held and therefore a degree of unpredictability, the dissolution of former resources, then their recompositing on different bases and the reconstruction of an identity. In these instances, reconversions may seem to be fairly comparable to bifurcations (BESSIN; BIDART; GROSSETTI, 2010), insofar as the idea of a break – with a heritage, the past or former activities – is as central to the analysis of bifurcations as it is to the analysis of complete reconversions. However, the analysis of fully achieved reconversions takes more account of the processes and different resources possessed by the actors than does the analysis of bifurcations in which considerable attention is paid to the events which trigger things off and to the sequences of the action.

At the time of the Revolution in 1917 in the USSR the break with the past was undeniable, including amongst the former elites and a fraction of the former aristocracy. Research carried out on the trajectories of former aristocrats after the Revolution in 1917 in the USSR took this break into consideration; the life-histories collected and reconstructed by Sofia Tchouikina reveal sequences of events which are often unpredictable and difficult to imagine a priori (SAINT MARTIN; TCHOUIKINA, 2008). Almost all the '*ci-devant nobles*'<sup>11</sup> or former aristocrats, men and women, who remained in the USSR after 1917 attempted a reconversion at one point or another. These attempts were in fact made under threat and were widespread – which undoubtedly made them more difficult. All of a sudden, thousands of people found themselves expelled from their lands or their estates, faced with the obligation to find a regular job – something they had sometimes never previously envisaged – and had to become Soviet workers. The resources on which the aristocracy had relied until then, in particular their names, titles or recognition, were brutally discredited and could even be dangerous or a disadvantage, while others were no longer accessible to them, such as their properties from which they could no longer obtain anything.

Attempts at reconversion had to be made with very little knowledge of the possibilities; a new social structure was being worked out, change had an impact on all groups in Russian society and it was very difficult to have a precise, overall vision. Of course, these reconversions were not self-evident; the curbs and obstacles imposed from without were very numerous given the political changes, persecutions, purges and waves of arrests, and possible plans could never be worked out for any length of time; furthermore a considerable number of the former

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<sup>11</sup> David Stark analyses how in the post-socialist context the actors reconstruct organizations and institutions not 'on the ruins but with the ruins' of communism, which does not mean repetition (STARK, 1996).

aristocrats emigrated and many died.

For the former aristocrats who remained in the USSR, the eclecticism of their knowledge as amateurs and the range of their social relations and cultural capital were frequently mobilized resources. In particular, it was in cultural activities, in a few enclaves or niche professions, which enabled them to be as far outside State control as possible, that many of them succeeded in obtaining jobs for varying lengths of time; these included old schools, museums, theatres, the opera, orchestras, the press, the universities, various cultural institutions, the parks and the gardens where they were teachers, actors, singers, guardians, accountants, clerks or (for women) typists. What impelled former aristocrats who stayed in the USSR to seek a variety of jobs and to change jobs frequently if necessary was their representation of the present, and especially the past, inseparable from their representations of the group and the country. This was as important as – perhaps more important than – the resources or knowledge on which they could sometimes rely, and led them either to multiply their attempts at reconversion, or hindered them in their endeavors. Reconversion did indeed imply that the idea of the future as the continuity of the past had to be abandoned; there had to be acceptance of the idea that a return to the old order and the transmission of status was no longer possible, compromises had to be made and people learned to live a double life. It was almost impossible for the former aristocrats to retreat into the past; the family history, once glorious, its daily valorization serving to maintain networks, had become a stigma and had to be forgotten insofar as this was possible.

Some amongst these former aristocrats, probably most of them, did accomplish a professional reconversion but maintained the feeling of being different from other groups and their association with the past and were in a way, semi-reconverted; others, who could be referred to as ‘Soviet aristocrats’, made a complete break with the past and the circles of the former aristocracy, felt themselves to be wholly Soviet, and were integrated into the new Soviet world; yet others, attached to the past, expected nothing from the present, did not reconvert professionally and were often downwardly socially mobile.

What raises most questions from the sociological point of view is the situation of the ‘Soviet aristocrats’ who in various ways demonstrated their loyalty to the Soviet system, their faith in the future, and wished to be an integral part of the new Soviet system. The situation of these ‘Soviet aristocrats’, as well as that of the descendants of the Jewish bourgeoisie who survived the Shoah and who became part of Stalin’s state apparatus in Hungary between 1945 and 1956, and of others referred to above, does lead us to consider the process which is the reverse of reconversion, in particular deconversion.

Deconversion can be seen in ‘the appearance of random forms of conduct produced



by the simultaneous interplay of antagonistic processes' observes Castel (1995, p. 80-87)<sup>12</sup> who suggests this concept when analyzing 'the metamorphoses of the social question'. He recalls the transformations of feudal society in the 16th century, the opening of a 'zone of turbulence' following the Black Death, and the unregulated mobility of poor people coexisting with the rigidity of organizational structures (CASTEL,1995). The contemporary context is doubtless very different; however, in situations where trajectories become unpredictable, where the reproduction of former elites is no longer ensured, when the former elites hesitate to take the paths which they are offered and sometimes refuse these reconversions, is it not advisable to be on the look-out for the emergence of processes of deconversion, not so much of a society as a whole but of individuals and groups or fractions?

When a sudden and violent break in career paths occurs, and when former resources are so discredited and even counter-productive that they cannot be converted, processes may come to light which produce an effect of postponement, separation and lack of the very idea of a possible conversion. These processes could gain momentum in periods of violent economic, political and social crisis, when the State withdraws for an unknown period of time, and there is a loss of bearings and a rise in unpredictable and random forms of behavior. In these borderline situations, should we not explore the relevance of this concept of deconversion, which goes further than social downturn? Maurice Halbwachs describes social downturn as the fact of moving from a group one knows, among people who respect you, to another which does not know you and whose respect one has no reason to desire (cf. Halbwachs, 2002). If this is so, then deconversion after a very violent economic, political and social break with the past would be a move from a group or a place which one knows to a zone of turbulence, where there are hardly any indicators from which to recognize the group to which one belongs, former resources are to all intents and purposes no longer valid, the conflicts between several worlds are becoming intolerable and where the former projects for reconversion are no longer possible.

The problematic of reconversions is doubtless more creative when it is applied in a given situation to individuals and groups which are strictly limited; it may be less relevant when attempts are made to implement it to explain changes in the life of larger groups

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Castel observes that following the Black Death 'a zone of turbulence opened up which was no longer controlled by the traditional structures, without them actually losing their hold'. At that point one could see 'an accelerated circulation of lands, goods and men and a mode of structuring relations which endeavored to reinforce its traditional hold'. He also specifies that he has borrowed the term 'deconversion' from Philip Rieff (1968) who uses it to describe the move from systems of rigid regulation to social organizations in which the individual is no longer organically linked to norms and must contribute to the constitution of regulatory systems (CASTEL, 1995, p. 82-87).



(institutions, societies).<sup>13</sup> But the analysis cannot deal only with the successes of actors or small groups; it must also take into consideration those who are the ‘losers’ in periods of change, those who experience a social downturn or who are left by the way- side and those who do not participate in the process, excluded or self-excluded, as well as the reactions of members of other groups. Nor is it possible to content ourselves with absolute criteria or absolute thresholds of successful or fully achieved reconversions. It seems more appropriate to explore the large variety of career paths and trajectories<sup>14</sup> followed during reconversions, in particular the paths followed by those who are in an intermediary situation unless, however, there is an infinity of individual paths which defy any rule or regulation. Analysis of the modes of these reconversions, examining individual experiences and the possibilities of the appearance of processes of deconversion, is nonetheless necessary.

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<sup>13</sup> This conclusion concurs with one of Alain Dewerpe's conclusions when he examines the concept of strategy in Bourdieu (DEWERPE, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> For an example of a study of the variety of individual situations and career paths, see Svetlana Dimitrova's thesis on Bulgarian intellectuals (DIMITROVA, 2010). This includes an analysis of the career paths of Bulgarian intellectuals who entered politics after 1989; entering an arena which they consider to be theirs as of right, the latter did not wish to relinquish their intellectual capital. However, entering politics directly leads to losing intellectual capital. Fearing the loss of a capital which was committed at the outset, these intellectuals seem to have preferred to remain amateurs in politics.

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