Introducing the need to study young people in contemporary Italy

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EDITORIAL

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1. The idea of this Special Issue arises from reflections shared between the guest editors while participating in the Pool of European Youth Researchers, a group of researchers coordinated by the Youth Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, with whom we have collaborated over the past few years. Along with passionate discussions with colleagues studying youth in various European countries, it became evident to us that the need to shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced today by young people in Italy was particularly urgent. It was our feeling that when discussing the problems of youth in Italy we were also facing the challenge of understanding to what extent this group is distinctive or particular when compared to others in Europe, and if so in what ways. In other words, can we talk about an Italian case? How is the national societal landscape changing in relation to the factors that put youth in such hard conditions? Are existing categories useful for studying the specific conditions of young people in contemporary Italy? How are Italian young people coping with increasing diversity in terms of social and economic status, opportunities, support from the family of origin – among other factors – and how are they taking these as new challenges?

To stimulate discussion on this theme, we launched an open call for papers. Our starting point is the need to deconstruct misrepresentations of Italian youth and stimulate an articulated international scholarly debate. At the same time, it is vital to identify common grounds for and patterns in the plethora of social conditions faced by Italian youth, and to do so through investigation of the cultures and lifestyles that they embody and the choices they make, which in turn constitute a trait of Italian culture. In fact, considering the conditions of today's Italian youth as a barometer for the future of Italian society, their ability to cope with structural conditions determines how the country will be able to reproduce itself in the years to come. In this sense, a focus on young people is crucial to all those who want to obtain an in-depth and well-grounded understanding of contemporary Italy, and therefore to the wide readership of the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*.

What is the framework within which young people operate? They are continually confronted by the severe conditions of the labour market, conditions that have led to unprecedented youth unemployment rates and consequent brain drain, as well as a more general decrease in expectations regarding the full realization of their ambitions, dynamics that they share with their counterparts in some other EU countries (e.g. Spain and Greece). In comparison to other countries, however, in Italy this challenge has coexisted with the use and reproduction of stereotypes in political and

public discourses, which have portrayed Italian youth as selfish, '*mammoni*', 'choosy' and '*bamboccioni*'; as a demographic who are unwilling to make sacrifices and leave their parental homes to start an independent life. This discourse has obscured a more thoughtful analysis of the societal conditions that prevent them from reaching such autonomy. The interview with Carmen Leccardi, which opens this Special Issue, emphasizes among other things how young people have employed creativity to cope with uncertainties. But what are the structural conditions underneath?

2. The aim of this Special Issue is to try and address these issues, and to do so through an integrated interdisciplinary debate that interlinks with scholarly work done outside of Italy. Analysis of contemporary youth tends to be fragmented across a wide variety of journals and books, which focus on certain particular sub-sets of youth or on isolated aspects of their life, such as difficulties with planning a meaningful future (Leccardi 2005; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016), precariousness (Armano and Murgia 2013), mobility trajectories (Raffini 2014), specific relations with a geographical area (as in the work of Osservatorio Giovani of Federico II University in Naples, http://www.giovani.unina.it/), parental support (as in Nota et al. 2007; Saraceno 2000), deviant behaviour (as in the work of Eclectica) and barriers faced by second-generation Italians (Cole and Saitta 2011; Colombo, Domaneschi, and Marchetti 2011). In addition to this fragmentation, it has to be noted that another distinctive character of the study of youth in Italy is the way in which youth conditions – after the years of contestation – have traditionally been analysed through the lens of 'social temporality' as 'a transversal dimension that connected different levels of experience: in the labour market, in education, in the family, with peers' (as noted by Leccardi in this issue).

The resulting picture of youth in Italy that we offer in this Special Issue is a complex one. As they represent a smaller demographic group within an aging population (powerfully described in its effects by Caltabiano and Rosina, in this issue), they are easily oppressed by the gerontocratic society that surrounds them, as well as by a labour market marked by a very slow turnover. As a result, they struggle to make their way out of segregated and marginalized conditions to get established in the public sphere. More educated than their parents, although still less educated than their European counterparts (Istat 2016), they find few opportunities to locate themselves in line with their own aspirations, and keep on delaying – or sometimes reinventing – the transition to adulthood, a trend that is abundantly well known (Cavalli and Galland 1996). However, if it is true that they very rarely occupy top positions within organizations, it is also apparent that they are no longer politically dormant and invisible in public life and several forms of citizenship. In fact, Renzi's government (22 February 2014–7 December 2016) and the current parliament are the youngest ever.[1] However, as discussed in Genova's article in this issue, Italian youth still seem to have little trust in national political institutions and politicians and this trend seems to remain stable. More subtly, the presence of some 'young' politicians in key positions has not yet led to the adoption of measures that really benefit young people.

Looking at the actors mobilized against precarious work in Italy, Choi and Mattoni have emphasized distinctive strategies that lead to a variety of degrees of agency and subjectivity in the organization of precarious workers 'struggling to improve

their working and living conditions' (2010, 213). All in all, young people in Italy are deeply concerned with precariousness (Armano, Bove, and Murgia 2017), which is first and foremost a precariousness of working conditions (difficulties in finding a job, difficulties in securing for themselves acceptable contractual conditions) that makes the issue a generational one (Barbieri 2011). Yet this has, of course, important repercussions in other spheres of life too. Renzi's recent government introduced a series of reforms, including the Jobs Act of 2014, which was presented as a means to dismantle the dualism between protected and non-protected workers (often new entrants, i.e. younger workers, whether highly qualified or not), but there is wide scepticism about whether this will produce the advertised results. It has been noted, for example, that the lack of representation of precarious workers has important effects, whether on the private, public or political level (Rizza 2005).

In contrast to other European countries, high educational qualifications have little capacity to protect (or provide support for) young workers in the Italian labour market, a topic covered in the article authored by Sergi, Cefalo and Kazepov in this collection. These authors show that most of the policies implemented by Italian governments in the last few years have concentrated on those less qualified (see, for instance, the Youth Guarantee, which has those in a NEET [not in employment, education or training] situation as a target group), and with disputable results. Those who are, in fact, highly qualified are often left to elaborate their own strategies for facing the crisis, and therefore precariousness, as discussed in the article on young adults in Milan by Colombo, Leonini and Rebughini. The fact that they seem to be highly skilled in doing this perhaps underlines the need to counteract these conditions structurally and act towards creating a more just society. In fact, we are not simply talking about a matter of nostalgia for the security and predictability once ensured by Fordism or for paternalistic forms of welfare, a trend that has been generally noted in the literature (Strangleman 2007). Rather, by looking at these socio-economic mechanisms and how they may exacerbate social conflict, we are faced with a real paradigm shift where precariousness is inevitably something on which to construct a social equilibrium, a 'generational attitude', as Colombo and others argue.

This trend seems to be confirmed by Campofreda's article, which approaches the issue of youth in Italy from a very different angle. In her analysis of anthologies on youth as a literary genre, Campofreda accompanies the reader on a journey that starts with depictions of 'rotten individuals excluded from society without any hope of integration' (thereby identifying a specific group, characteristic of the 1980s) and finishes with a collection of stories by Sortino (2015), where 'mobility does not represent a negative aspect in the life of a young person, but stands as positive as long as it works as a challenge rather than as the only choice left in order to start a professional career'. Here, 'the new generation is sick of looking at reality as something objective, untouchable, something clerical and pseudo- political', and ends up revolving towards dystopia. This is a further perspective (and discipline) through which the precariousness of young people is tackled within this Special Issue, and serves to testify that no matter what specific focus is taken, the difficulty of being recognized as legitimate actors in the public arena is evident for young people in Italy.

3. Such analysis is inevitably linked to a discussion of structural conditions. The contributions that follow show a certain ambivalence towards family as an institution operating in the national domain. In recent decades, an extensive corpus of literature on familism as a distinctive trait of Italian culture has been published (Gribaudi 1999). Famously, the term dates back to Edward C. Banfield (1958). It was used in order to designate the lack of reaction to a perceived diffuse backwardness in Southern Italy, and was firstly termed 'amoral familism'. Originally, the term was used to refer to the incapacity of communities to act together when a situation was not related to family or the material needs of its members. As an institution, familism was intended to maximize the immediate advantage of the family, assuming that others would follow the same rule (Signorelli 2000). The idea of protection that such a mechanism entails is ambivalent, meaning that it can go in positive or negative directions; if, as Rolando and Beccaria stress in their article, it is within the family that young people learn to appreciate moderate drinking, contrary to their counterparts from Nordic countries, then such familiar protection seems to hold a positive value. Yet it is also true that even the public sphere *par excellence* is dominated by a similar kind of familistic social closure – to put it a là Weber – and this tends to be somewhat limiting, to say the least. As Caltabiano and Rosina point out in their analysis of the progressive 'dejuvenation' of the Italian population, there may in fact be some instances in which young people take on roles of responsibility, but even in those cases the path offered appears to be dictated by loyalty to a group or advisor rather than by individual merit. In this latter sense, familistic features expand outside the family and encapsulate youth within rigid boundaries, which are only disguised with apparent merit. The traditional category of familism is therefore reworked and redefined when looking at young people, and it shows us that it may still be useful, somehow, in the analysis of contemporary Italy.

Lastly, the contributions to this issue offer evidence that 'Italian youth' – which for the purposes of this publication includes anyone under the age of 40, close to the average age (38 years old) when young people in Italy reach autonomy (Fondazione Bruno Visentini 2017) – is a complex and heterogeneous category that can be better grasped by looking at young people's social locations shaped by such dimensions as gender, class and education (see the article by Colombo, Leonini and Rebughini). For the same reason, categories such as NEETs (a young person who is 'no longer in the education system and who is not working or being trained for work'), which lead to 'one size fits all' measures, hardly explain the process of exclusion of young people from the Italian labour market and education system. If it is true that problems due to the inefficacies of welfare states are troublesome for youth in several countries (Antonucci, Hamilton, and Roberts 2014), the articles in this issue suggest that in Italy it implies specific additional burdens.

This Special Issue aims to take further steps in two directions: firstly, it brings together in one volume contributions that analyse a variety of aspects of young people's lifestyles, imaginations and challenges in times of economic crisis and job precariousness, and representations of youth in literary works; secondly, it may suggest further research areas and topics, such as inquiring into how young people with less opportunity cope with precariousness and the crisis. As far as theoretical frameworks and methodology are concerned, we include traditional approaches to

youth from within Italian youth studies together, as well as other approaches to the topic developed within these articles such as intersectionality.

4. The issue opens with an interview with Carmen Leccardi, who offers a diachronic reflection on how youth has been studied in Italy over the last 30 years. Marcantonio Caltabiano and Alessandro Rosina then provide an analysis of the 'dejuvenation' of the Italian population and explain how this affects Italian society and economic growth. In this article, it emerges that a high percentage of Italian youth now exists both as an unexploited resource and at a social cost, a situation that serves to further reproduce social inequalities. Vittorio Sergi, Ruggero Cefalo and Yuri Kazepov delve into a particular aspect of youth disadvantage, focusing on their access to and time within the labour market. They problematize the NEET category and show the ambivalences this category perpetuates in terms of effectiveness of policy and coherence of the overall system (see also Cuzzocrea 2014).

Young people have been particularly challenged by the economic crisis, and the contribution of Enzo Colombo, Luisa Leonini and Paola Rebughini discusses its consequences. This article explains that precariousness and decreased job opportunities, with their consequences for social mobility, constitute just one example of the lived experience of young people in times of crisis, and that their impact very much depends on a number of different factors and the intersections among them. In addition, Carlo Genova explores the juvenile condition and collective identities that emerge from the sharing of social practices and lifestyles across four principal domains (sport, music, politics and religion), in order to identify transversal processes through which young people shape new socio-cultural forms. In doing so, it brings into the Special Issue a perspective grounded in the cultural studies tradition, which has done important work in exploring the lives of youth over the past 50 years.

Sara Rolando and Franca Beccaria focus on a specific aspect of youth lifestyle, examining alcohol consumption in a comparative perspective. The authors argue that, at least for now, social values connected to the family still play a positive key role in preventing excessive drinking, although this may change in the future due to increasingly individualistic values at a global level as well as growing hardship for youth, making the Italian case more similar to other non-Mediterranean countries. In concluding the issue, Olga Campofreda's contribution proposes a fresh look at the use of anthologies on youth as an instrument for the discussion of Italian society.

Obviously, it falls far outside the scope of this Special Issue to provide the reader with exhaustive answers to the compelling question of how youth in Italy can contribute to the flourishing of the country, or at least provide a small niche for themselves within the current socio-economic conditions. Nor does it aim to provide a complete portrait of Italian youth. Rather, our aim is to identify some trends and traits in the lives and experiences of Italian youth. In doing so, the selected contributions bring to the fore current knowledge of Italian youth, and ultimately open up directions for further research: the possibility of exploring different strategies adopted by young people to cope with precariousness, or to deconstruct and problematize current categories used to analyse youth and/or replace them with new ones, and to delve into transformations occurring within the family as an institution. The effort required to develop a project of this kind is necessarily a collective one. It would have been difficult to put together our intuitions and reflections had it not been

for the policy-oriented discussions within the Pool of European Youth Researchers, the encouragement and support of the editors of this journal, and the trust and enthusiasm of the authors of the single articles collected here, among others. We are grateful to everyone. Our hope is that this collection will be a first step in a series of collaborations, and will trigger others both internationally and nationally.

Note

1. Respectively 47.8 and 48 years on average. This last data is mainly due to the young age of the members of the Movimento 5 Stelle, i.e. 37 years on average.

Disclosure statement

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