

# Keeping it in the family: the absence of young Italians from the public piazza

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*The author analysed autobiographies written by university students, comparing his impressions with the results of studies on young people carried out by Italian sociologists. The picture that he pieced together of this generation “without fathers or teachers”, and of the related responsibilities of the previous generation, is far from encouraging. The modern generation of young Italians nurtures values pivoting on the family and on self-fulfilment, and acts within spheres of friendship and sentiment at short radius. The rest of the social world is mediated, experienced through films, internet and holidays. The universalist attitude has been supplanted by a widespread and rooted particularism. The collective dimension that transcends the experience of the individual and his reference group has lost relevance.*

## **Short leashes: from the universal to the particular**

In Italy it seems as if a potent nucleus of values, all referring to the immediate social environs of the person, is being progressively built up around the lodestone of the family. This nucleus pervades and conditions the entire value system of the young generations. Comparing the data of the six Iard<sup>1</sup> surveys for the subgroup of 15-24 year-olds<sup>2</sup>, we can clearly see how the value system has progressively clustered in the sphere of private life at the expense of collective commitment: young Italians are absent from the public piazza. Religious and social commitment followed a negative trend up to 2000 and

<sup>1</sup> The Iard is a research institute in Milan that periodically performs research on young people. See: Cavalli (1984); Cavalli and de Lillo (1988 and 1993); Buzzi, Cavalli and de Lillo (1997; 2002; 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Shown in brackets are the respective percentages for each value in the six surveys of 1983, 1987, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004: Family (82, 83, 86, 85, 86, 83); Work (68, 67, 60, 62, 61, 62); Boy/Girlfriend/Friends (58, 70, 71, 73, 75, 80); Leisure pastimes (44, 44, 54, 54, 52, 54); Study and cultural interests (34, 32, 36, 39, 34, 40); Sport (32, 32, 36, 34, 33, 38); Social commitment (22, 18, 23, 22, 18, 25); Religious commitment (12, 12, 13, 14, 11, 19); Political activity (4, 3, 4, 5, 4, 6).

then began to rise again in 2004 (indicating a possible inversion of the trend); the importance attributed to friendship and sentimental relations has shot up (increasing by over 20% since the 1996 survey). Work, which came second in the first two surveys, has dropped to third place since 1992, overtaken by love and friendship with a broad lead. Between the first survey of 1983 and that of 2004, the importance attributed to the family went up by 2%; friendship and sentimental relations went up by more than 21%. Work, on the other hand, dropped by 5 percentage points.

De Lillo (2002 and 2007) made a significant breakdown of the values into four main categories: 1) values connected with individual life: family, work, friendship, love, career, self-fulfilment, affluent and comfortable lifestyle; 2) values of a recreational kind: sport, leisure pastimes, entertainment and enjoying life; 3) values linked to personal commitment: political activity, religious commitment, social commitment, study and cultural interests; 4) values of collective life: solidarity, social equality, freedom and democracy, nation. Interestingly, the values linked to personal commitment actually have lower averages than those of “collective life”. However although the latter are considered important by young people, there is also a sort of proviso: important for them or the people close to them. In other words, these are not seen as generalised rights of the collectivity but as personal rights belonging to them and their short-radius circle, in a *particularisation of universal values*. Thus, even the values of collective life refer back to the personal social world: to their nearest and dearest, within the cosy web of primary relations that they have spun, and solidarity and freedom are harnessed to defence of that web. The values acquired in the name of all are bent to the demands of security and reassurance that only the very closest and most tranquillising social milieu can guarantee.

And so, the modern generation of young Italians nurtures values pivoting on the family and on self-fulfilment, and acts within spheres of friendship and sentiment at short radius. The rest of the social world is mediated, experienced through films, internet and holidays. The universalist attitude has been supplanted by a widespread and rooted particularism. The collective dimension that transcends the experience of the individual and his reference group has lost relevance. A society emerges, as distinct from a clan, when the individuals acknowledge their duties and responsibilities not only towards themselves, their families, friends or other members of their clan, or group, but to any unfamiliar and anonymous member of that society. As horizons open up further they come to perceive duties and responsibilities even towards foreigners, aliens, non-human animals and nature.

In the autobiographies I have studied<sup>3</sup> there is no trace of this sense of society, or even of a local sense of community. When a young person complains

<sup>3</sup> Between 2001 and 2004, working as an Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the University of Florence, I collected 60 autobiographies written by young Italian students aged 22-29 (22 females and 38 males). As a final research paper, I asked them to choose between writing an autobiography or an essay on a subject of their choice. They all chose the autobiography, reacting enthusiastically to the idea of writing about themselves. If anything, these young people had difficulty writing about the Other. On each course, I devoted two lessons to a discussion on what, according to the students, ought to be included in an autobiography. During these meetings – a sort of focus group – I encouraged students to talk freely about themselves and their experiences, starting from the perception of their identity. The biographical approach comprises the collection and analysis of the life stories (written and oral) of individuals who are particularly significant for the research topics. The heuristic capacity of the narration and of the language, understood as both vehicle and builder of meaning, are at the hub of this approach. Thomas and Znaniecki were the first to introduce biographies as a tool for analysis in sociology ([1918-1920] 1958). They saw them as the best means for understanding social reality: a person's biography reflects the social context he or she belongs to and points up the changes in the same. For an updated, comprehensive and extensive review of the biographical approach see Miller (2005). The narrative dimension of the Self is essential for the construction of individual identity. The story of the self is the general means proposed in this investigation for the continual construction and reconstruction of an identity: knowing oneself to acquire consistency, so as not to dissolve and to achieve not only the sense of one's own confines, but also of one's own continuity and discontinuity over time. On the other hand, I also noted how all the autobiographical accounts lend themselves to deception (or self-deception) introduced to convince others (or oneself) about the good reasons, the positivity and the logical consistency of one's life story (Brooks 1984). The principal means for achieving this is through the construction of false links: in other words, narrative versions that artificially smooth over the discontinuities in the personal history. These links are used to knit up coherent and rigid autobiographical fabrics that in effect violate the autobiographical pact that obliges the writer not to tamper with his or her own story (Lejeune 1975). Taking my cue from these reflections, I analysed the topics that emerged from the autobiographies collected. The material was wide-ranging and dense (the average length was 50 pages). The best way of extracting something without getting lost is the analytic induction approach: by reading and rereading the material the crucial elements related to the cognitive interests of the researcher eventually come to the surface. The educational itinerary and that of sentimental relations are the Cartesian axes that allow us to discern the biographical progress of these young people. For a minority, a sojourn away from the family and their hometown, or even abroad, offered an ulterior crucial opportunity for a redefinition and enhanced awareness of the Self. Pondering on all this, I arrived at the creation of a framework within which I could analyse the autobiographies; it was constructed on the basis of various concepts and theoretical propositions from sociological, anthropological, psychological and psychoanalytical literature. Another crucial source of inspiration were the various surveys about young people carried out over the last thirty years at both Italian and European level, such as Oecd, Eurostat, Eurobarometer. An extensive explanation of the method developed in this study is given in the first chapter "Mapping the Land of the Young: Developing a Method" of the book *The Passage from Youth to Adulthood: Narrative and Cultural Thresholds* (Birindelli 2014).

about the shortage of good jobs, he is not thinking of other young Italians: he means the lack of good jobs for himself.

The short-radius world is the collective benchmark of the young Italians: they play safe, falling back on the familiar relations that are a source of security. And they seem to swiftly draw the curtains on even the famous windows of the communication society open on the Other, as if the visions they reveal are a source of anxiety. The young Italians banish the heterogeneous from their living spaces. Above I referred to the family as a lodestone and as a cosy web (not the big one with the frightening windows!), and elsewhere I have used the word *coagulate* to indicate this tendency (2014). The image is effective in indicating how the young people appear to have tightened the strings, narrowed the mesh of what counts in life, around a wound. Both the wound and the cure continue to be the family, and they remain clinched to the latter because the big world outside is rife with insecurity. They are focused on themselves and on the present while the unfamiliar Other – the neighbour, the stranger – and the future are both repressed, or at best considered remote.

The results of my own research confirm de Lillo's vision, and place the young people I met firmly on the particularist side of the equation. Any Other beyond that short radius of primary and secondary affections is an absolutely vestigial presence in the biographies: the subjects of the research simply did not narrate any issues or experiences with a universalist significance. The experience of the other is an exercise in decentralisation, undermining the closure within ourselves. In reality, rather than meaning the end of the ego, the arrival of the others signifies the beginning of adult life. The centrality of the "other" stemmed from the conviction that there were two responses to the crisis of the "we": jumping onto the "ego-orgy" bandwagon, passionately embracing radical individualism, or instead a gradual reacquisition of an ethical dimension of experience (Cassano 1989: viii-xii).

### *Beyond the nest: the jungle, God and religion*

Nevertheless, some of the comments question the value centrality of the family for the young Italians. The family would be a real value if, from the aspect of social reproduction, we were to observe a sort of evolution in the meaning attributed to it by an adolescent and by a thirty year-old: from the family as a nest to the thought of building one of your own. Instead what emerges is an instrumental and egoistic vision of the family.

The value of the family seems to me to be purely that of the nest, totally unconnected with any future project and all the risks that brings with it. There

appears to be no change at all in what ‘family’ means to a 15-17 year-old or a 25-29 year-old. [Mario, M, age 25]

With a touch of cynicism, one is almost led to think of the centrality of the family as a sort of ennoblement or hallowing of what is actually a choice of convenience: that of remaining a child as long as possible rather than becoming the creator of another family nucleus. [Carla, F, age 23]

Another student, Sara, sees the self-absorption and the resulting lack of social commitment and the disengagement from public life as generated by a society that forces one to become hard: a jungle. The young people feel that they have to defend themselves to survive, and they see no way out. Only a generational change in the ruling classes could yield some positive effect.

Compared to previous generations, the world we live in is really tough, highly competitive; to do the simplest thing, we young people have to move mountains, far more than in the past. There’s a lot of talk about civilised and evolved societies; but down here, very often you feel like you’re in a jungle where only the strongest animal can win. We’re turning into animals that have to put feelings to one side if we want to achieve our ambitions, realise our dreams [...] We are simply adapting to survival as best we can in a society that’s been handed on to us in this condition by previous generations. We’ve grown up with the watchword of “success at all costs” without any consideration for others. Those who can’t survive in this jungle are marginalised and considered as misfits, and then they really do become misfits [...] I don’t think at this stage there’s any way of changing things until there’s a generational change at the top levels of the political scene [...] The world that has been built is one where to move forward you have to harden yourself. [Sara, F, age 25]

It seems that the few young people who do try to get beyond themselves turn to religion. In the Catholic ambit they succeed in forging strong and rich human relations with adults, something the autobiographies show to be extremely rare.

It was through the Church that I got to know older people that became my friends. Even though we don’t always understand each other, even though we each have our weaknesses and often make mistakes, the relationship between us is alive, and for me they represent a strong example of humanity. [Alessandro, M, age 23]

In a time of cultural relativism, and individualism taken to extremes, it appears that the religious institutions continue to provide a compelling

idea or ideal. The observant Catholic students tend to display more openness towards others along with greater trust in the institutions. At the same time they are more intransigent and more critical of craftiness, evidently being more conscious of the negative repercussions of such a talent (Cartocci 2002: 228). A full-blown existential crisis brought Lorenzo back to God: in a sort of reawakening, he independently rediscovered the faith previously experienced as an imposition of his family. It's the return to a soil sowed by his parents.

At that time I really had hit rock-bottom – in the sense that I was continually tormented by grief and anxiety – I had absolutely nothing left to cling to; I felt so lost and confused that I could see no way forward. I felt abandoned and I instinctively turned for help to something which, at the time, I didn't believe in the existence of. I started to pray fervently and read Christian books, and they gave me relief and comfort. Gradually I also started going to mass again. I had completely stopped going [...] except occasionally, and even then simply going through the motions for the sake of my family and of society rather than out of any real interest. Suddenly I found myself overwhelmed by a sense of peace and serenity: leaving doubts and fears behind me, I was transformed into someone who was always cheerful and full of initiative. I realised that I had received the gift of faith, which allowed me to understand and appreciate things I didn't even know existed. My priorities have changed, or rather completely reversed. I give less importance to material things; I'm always looking for the soul behind them. [Lorenzo, M, age 23]

Alessandro discerns considerable changes in values between his generation and that of the 1960s-70s. He believes in his family of origin, and also in the possibility of building one of his own.

When I hear people talking about my generation, sometimes I find it hard to immediately understand exactly what they're talking about, because I see it as devoid of identity. For us young people of today there's no common ground of identification, something we can unanimously believe in. Something started in the 60s and 70s that has led to the loss of certain very important values. I can't help noticing the hypocrisy of people who take up arms against the death sentence while being in favour of abortion. Abortion seems to be seen more as a convenience for couples than a form of suppression of a human life. Lots of girls even have more than one abortion; this makes me think that too much freedom, the achievement of too many rights, can actually damage the entire social fabric and future generations. I'm aware that such ideas run against the grain of current ideologies, but they're the values I believe in. Maybe they

don't identify a generation, but they do identify me. For me marriage still has a meaning, it's something I believe in, that I aspire to and hope to achieve. Moreover, I also think that to succeed in building a life and a family together with another person should be a source of satisfaction and pride, as it must have been for my parents. [Alessandro, M, age 23]

Alessandro's very clear ideas make him an exception to the majority of the other young people in the research. Whether or not one shares his convictions is beside the point: the point is that he actually has convictions that go beyond his personal life. His father, clearly another exception, has set him a good example, and Alessandro aims to try to follow in his footsteps. His father has taught him that in life you often have to make sacrifices to achieve something worthwhile. He has schooled him in the harsh facts of life, pointing out his privileged position and putting the candy-coated influence of the media into perspective. Behaving like a father rather than a friend, Alessandro's father talks to his son, and tells him about his own life. As we shall see later on, this is essential for the meaningful transmission of values and visions of the world, and as a consequence crucial for the young person's very identity.

I believe that we all have models and figures that we take inspiration from. I learnt – and am still learning – from my father that life is very hard: it's made up of sacrifices and it's not a bowl of cherries like they make out. I'm learning from him that the things closest to my heart are very hard to achieve, but that they give you enormous joy when you do attain them. I think that these are values more typical of his generation than of mine, maybe because, as my parents never tire of telling me, my generation got it all handed to them on a plate. [Alessandro, M, age 23]

### *Forays from the nest: crisis, love and friendship*

As also emerges clearly in the Iard surveys, sentimental life is central for Italian young people. The two biographical turning-points<sup>4</sup> found in their biographies are: 1) the passage between secondary school and university which is experienced in different ways and profoundly influences the transition to

<sup>4</sup> An effective approach to the analysis of the texts is to focus attention on the biographical turning-points (Strauss 1959), that is the moments that the subject sees as watersheds, where he or she glimpses a before and after in the itinerary.

adulthood. Although in Italy it is not publicly endorsed as such, it is the closest thing to a rite of passage that emerges in these stories; and 2) the end of a love affair, perceived as a moment of profound change and redefinition of the self.

In the lives of the young people I met, the end of a love story was the only time they felt they had their backs against a wall; the only test of the stability of their identity was in the sentimental sphere. It represents a watershed, a crossroads on the other side of which the individuals redefine their identity, change their lifestyle and sometimes completely revolutionise the way they are. They may adopt a new hairstyle and dress code as outward signs of this change; their cultural tastes may alter, they may go out more, with new groups of friends, or read more. But focusing all your efforts on yourself, or at most on the person or people you love, is not good news for the process of constructing a persona. The young people in the autobiographies do not reveal any form of social engagement. Often friendship makes up for the shortcomings of family, sentimental relations and even in the sphere of self-fulfilment. The important things are to do well in school, find a job (in actual fact, one would happily do without), find a partner. When this self-set itinerary bordering on solipsism throws up some disappointment (failed exam, difficulty in finding work, end of a love story), depression is just round the corner.

Before I started this research I was labouring under the misapprehension that the sentimental sphere was more important for young women than for their male counterparts. But as I found relationships are the most important turning-points in the biographies of the males too. “I think that being with someone, living the relationship to the full, is one of the best things that has ever happened to me” [Marco, M, age 23]. The differences that did emerge were, perhaps, the greater detail with which the females describe the relationships, and more importantly the fact that for them the correspondence of affection is projected more towards the future creation of a family<sup>5</sup>.

The end of one relationship casts Lorenzo into despair:

During my first semester I became completely depressed; even now the very thought of it ties my stomach in knots and paralyses me with fear. The last straw was the breakdown of a relationship with a girl I got to know during one of my courses, whom I'd been going out with for about four months. [Lorenzo, M, age 23]

<sup>5</sup> The sentimental sphere is the only domain where I recognized gender differences in the young people's life stories. For other identity dimensions, the “family imprinting” (within the Italian culture and social structure) supersedes by far any other possible interpretations.

Then the start of another brings him back to life, and also generates a more intense and altruistic social life, so that even engagement in public life appears to be a spin-off from the sentimental sphere.

One of the happiest times of my life was when, in Florence, I got to know a Mexican girl [...] She had a very feminine and charming way with her. At that time, I'd had quite a few girlfriends, always short affairs, and I'd gone out with girls that were physically more attractive than her; but never before had I experienced the feelings, emotions and excitement that she made me feel. In the five months that we went out together – after that she had to return to her parents in Mexico – I was happy and carefree, jolly and cheerful and overflowing with love for everyone. Nothing got on my nerves, nothing intimidated me. Everything paled by comparison with the interest I felt in her. At that time, I felt I was important and fortunate, I felt invulnerable and unassailable; at the same time there was so much love pouring out of me that I continued to be humble and altruistic, grateful to everyone and for everything, feeling a lack of interest in material things that I had never experienced before. I became altruistic and I began helping my neighbour. [Lorenzo, M, age 23]

The encounter with people of different values and lifestyles is an experience that is essential for focusing your own, but even these appear to be circumscribed to the realm of the sentiments. Initially disconcerting because they bring family values up for debate, the outcome of such encounters – at the end of the affair – is the usual return to the family and its security. The foray towards value growth starts from the nest and then, after just a few tentative steps, hairpins back to it again.

During the summer holidays, I got to know this guy. He was really nice and he said he was in love with me! He was very critical of the church and of the people who frequented it. The discussions we had made me look into myself and begin to question the things my parents believed in and what they had taught me. It wasn't about rejecting everything I knew, but maybe about rediscovering those values or, if necessary finding others. He too believed in solidarity and equality and saw the great injustices that there are in the world; but for him the only way to change things was to rebel against those who held power. I asked myself if my going to church was simply a habit, or if there was genuine faith behind it. Since I was a child I have been familiar with the Focolare, a movement of Catholic inspiration which is genuinely open to everyone, to people of all beliefs (religious and other), of all origins and cultures and of all ages. Naturally, during the crisis, I called all this into question too, since up to that time it was one of the many things that I'd inherited from my parents. What I

did realise, however, was that the friendships that had emerged in this context were all stronger, because they were underpinned by a sharing of what you could say were “transcendent” ideals. It seemed to me that this was already a good starting-point on the way to achieving that more united and just world that I could glimpse in the distance. [Irene, F, age 23]

### *The lack of real and autopoietic social engagement*

The Iard researches indicate that the associations most frequented by the young people are sports clubs, followed by the religious, cultural and voluntary associations. Only 5% of all the youngsters interviewed in 2004 declared that they actively participated in organisations engaged in voluntary and social work<sup>6</sup>. This is somewhat surprising in view of the notion, commonly found in sociological and politological literature, that young people reject classical political participation in favour of an individual engagement in voluntary work<sup>7</sup>. In reality it seems that they reject both in favour of sports. But even then, since the majority do sport purely for the purpose of physical fitness, there are actually very few occasions of group sport that can act as an authentic testing-ground.

No form of social engagement, either in politics or in social or voluntary work, surfaced in the autobiographies I analysed. There is no sign at all of action within civil society, as opposed to individualised behaviour. Only five out of the sixty youngsters writing the biographies had taken part in political, cultural or voluntary associations. Even in these cases it was a choice with family precedents: the civic commitment was “inherited”. Only Marco appeared to have embarked independently on a course of voluntary work, systematically devoting part of his free time to this activity.

Over a year ago I became a blood donor, and about the same time I became a member of *Ronda*, an association of volunteers that aims to help the homeless in this area, bringing them bare necessities such as food, clothes and moral

<sup>6</sup> This finding puts the apparent reversal of the trend of participation in social life captured in the value statements of 2004 into perspective. At European level, 16% of young people aged 15-30 are engaged in voluntary activities (Eurobarometer 2007). In another survey (Eurobarometer 2013) we find that 14% of young people from Finland and the Netherlands have participated in an organisation promoting human rights, while the percentage drops to 6% for the young Italians.

<sup>7</sup> For an extensive analysis of young people’s political participation, both at Italian and European level see: Bontempi and Pocaterra (2007); Pirni, Monti Bragadin and Bettin Lattes (2008).

support. It's a world I discovered on my own: I went looking for it. [Marco, M, age 23]

The non-involvement in associations of the young people in my study, like those of the national surveys, has cut them off completely from situations in which they put themselves on the line, relating to adults and the principles governing areas of life beyond the family.

As regards politics, the rejection of any form of participation becomes even more striking. To refer again to the Iard surveys, in 2000 the question on political attitudes recorded a huge leap in the most extreme answer – “politics makes me sick” –: the 26% share was more than double that of the first survey in 1983. Never before had the first two answers, indicative of political engagement or at least interest, reached such low levels – 40% as against the historic peak of 53% in 1996 (Ricolfi 2002: 261) –. The rare flicker of any political commitment to be found in the youngsters' biographies is essentially playful and almost festive in tone: demonstrations and sit-ins at school are seen as a break from the daily round. Means and ends are reversed and the important thing is to hang out together: the declared ends offer the opportunity to be together, act as aggregating factors; aggregation as a means continues to lose ground to aggregation as an end in itself. We get the impression that the young students' demonstrations are more of a performance than a rally in the accepted sense, bringing to the surface a dislocation between public action and the expediency of everyday strategies. At the same time that they're rallying in the square against private interference in the university, they're queuing up to sign on for internships so that they can benefit from a work-study experience.

In Italy ritual sit-ins are by now practically scheduled in the annual school calendar. Ostensibly spurred each year by increasingly vague and sometimes absurd and contradictory motives, they are proposed by marginal minorities and generally peter out lethargically without leaving behind any significant forms of political mobilisation or socialisation. With few exceptions, the only principles they appear to uphold are the legitimacy of interrupting a public service and, quite often, of damaging public property.

The beginning of the new school year was total chaos: as a result of the law that had just been passed, our school had to get rid of one of the third-year sections, and the choice fell on ours since it was the smallest, the idea being that we'd be divided over the other sections. What better pretext for a good old sit-in? And it certainly wasn't the first either, my school had always been in the vanguard for forms of protest: in the first year we organised a sit-in because of the poor quality of the loos; in the second to get the road leading to the school

entrance tarred. My first insalubrious experiences (getting drunk, smoking pot, acts of petty vandalism) all took place at school. Needless to say the two week sit-in, where I was there every night, in the end came to nothing except about 500 euros of damage; and so our class was broken up, and to tell the truth I wasn't really that pushed about it. [Nicola, M, age 25]

We are in any case dealing with evident contradictions between ideal statements and practical conduct: there's a gap between saying that you think something's right and actually thinking it's right, and then there's another gap between what you think is the right thing to do and actually doing it.

When it came to voting on the sit-in, I voted against. When I was asked why, I replied that I saw it as a farce, listing the reasons why it seemed totally ridiculous to me. No-one was able to come up with any response to my criticisms, but despite that the majority voted for the sit-in, and mine was the only vote against in my class. [Sandro, M, age 23]

What the young people proclaim in the collective demonstrations is negated in their everyday behaviour. "Me and a couple of mates of mine succeeded in organising demonstrations for the most futile reasons, with the sole purpose of avoiding school on the days we had tests or interrogations in class" [Giovanni, M, age 25].

The most exciting experience of all was definitely taking part in the World Youth Day that was held in Paris in 1997. The site of the rally was this huge field where an unbelievable number of young people had already ensconced themselves. We spent the entire night all together in that field without sleeping a wink; in fact there was no way it would have been possible to get any sleep in that situation: there were people dancing, others playing music, in short it was a *huge party*. Naturally we couldn't resist challenging a group of Spaniards to a game of football, using our flags as goalposts. Apart from the football match, the next day we were all totally zonked, and in fact some of us slept right through the Pope's mass. [Luca, M, age 24]

Further, the politicised image of youth in the media appears to be seriously out of kilter.

At this time of the year sit-ins are almost systematically organised in all the schools, a phenomenon that tends to be considered as a sort of extension to the Christmas holidays [...] *l'Unità* depicts the figure of the young person fighting for his ideals as a sort of mythical hero, making the student who demonstrates,

organises sit-ins and draws attention to himself a model to be followed. According to various articles that have appeared in *l'Unità*, this type of young person represents the birth of a new generation that claims its rights and fights for them. I don't think that this is a correct representation of young people at all: fundamentally, at the time of secondary school we're not even aware yet of what we want from life. It seems to me a rather idealised and exaggerated image. [Giovanni, M, age 23]

It seems that only when the parents are politically involved are their sons and daughters stimulated to some form of engagement. In her autobiography Laura explained that at home they had always talked about politics and discussed what was on the news:

The sit-in was a way of collectively addressing problems that I already had my own take on; being able to exchange notes and discuss these matters with older students stimulated me greatly and definitely enriched me [...] My family supported my political interests; at the parents' meeting called to discuss the form of protest we'd decided on, my mother was the only one to stand up for the students. [Laura, F, age 24]

Even when young people do congregate in places with a distinct political connotation, the choice appears to be incidental or expedient. In the final analysis they offer nothing in terms of social or cultural enrichment.

The reason for this new meeting point [an ARCI social club]<sup>8</sup> was essentially that in the winter you couldn't stay outdoors all day long. We'd always go out after five o'clock, when it was already dark and there was practically no lighting. Added to that, the passion some of us had for playing cards and for video poker led us to meet up in that place. I used to go there regularly for about four years until I finally decided to quit. It was so sordid that all my problems loomed larger inside those four walls. And the people who went there were even more sordid than the place itself. The subjects of discussion never veered beyond football, pussy (for which no more genteel synonyms were ever used), motorbikes and cars. [Matteo, M, age 25]

I collected a huge amount of material in my survey, and my analysis of it made it abundantly clear how far we had moved beyond the situation described by de Lillo in his Iard reports (2002 and 2007) and by other Italian

<sup>8</sup> The equivalent of a labour club in England.

sociologists<sup>9</sup>: in these youngsters' autobiographies the sphere of collective life was nowhere to be found. I was giving a series of lectures on the MA in Media and Communication at the University of Florence at the time, and my class consisted of 33 Italians and 6 foreign postgrad students aged between 25 and 30, all of whom had travelled a lot. In 2003 the imminent American invasion of Iraq was filling the newspapers and TV programmes, which also superficially addressed questions of international politics. So I decided to carry out an experiment: I asked the class to write a list of the ten most important things in life. Multiplying ten important things by 39 students you get 390 important things: of all 390 only one had anything to do with collective life (peace in the world) and was mentioned by one of the foreign students. Out of class, several of them told me that they intended to take part in peace rallies the next day in Rome, and claimed that they were ready to demonstrate for things beyond the narrow radius of family, sentimental relationships, friendship and self-fulfilment. Clearly there was a dislocation between taking part in demonstrations and the areas of life in which they located their biographical turning-points. The older brothers of the young people I had analysed over the three years of research under study were evidently in exactly the same boat.

The real breakthrough in the latest nationwide surveys is that the forecast shift in the participation of the young from the world of political parties to that of voluntary work was drastically wrong: the statistics show, as my research confirms, that young Italians play no part at all in the political, civil and social life of the country. There were, nevertheless, some acute observers who had already perceived this failure of engagement over twenty years before, and what's more in a region (Emilia Romagna) that had always been in the front line of political sensitivity.

Under various disguises and appearances we can discern a failure, a profound and recurrent lack, the substantial absence of any tangible or ideal form of solidarity among the young people of Emilia Romagna. Obviously, we are dealing with identities or subjective concepts that are fairly ephemeral, polycentric, experimental and relative, but despite this, compared to other situations, even within Europe, we are faced with a young person without any vocation to solidarity, politically, religiously and even socially secularised, that is suspicious and reluctant to go beyond his own opinions and move on to some form of participative commitment or belonging (Cipolla 1989: 10) [my translation].

<sup>9</sup> Among others, see two recent and interesting contributions on the topic: Gozzo (2010) and Pirni (2012).

As already stated, the general tendency is to see this as the result of political parties and associations that are old and stale in their approaches to topical issues and have totally failed to adapt to the personality of the young. To put it another way, the reason young people do not participate is because they don't identify with institutions and associations which were, so to speak, created by their parents. Another interpretation offered by sociologists sees today's young people as less inclined to join or subscribe to formal organisations, full stop. The youngsters move freely in an unrestricted space, experimenting different contexts and institutions, but only as visitors, without any permanent affiliation: zapping through the different ambits of society, they dwell inconsequentially within them for little more than a "click".

However, as Gianfranco Bettin Lattes (1997) has pointed out, we ought to remember that all sociological surveys in Italy prior to 1968 revealed young people's total lack of interest in politics; on the contrary, they expressed a strong interest in a "quiet life", levelling them out on the same positions as the adults. This was the famous "Three M" generation (*moglie/marito, mestiere, macchina* – wife/husband, job, car). The aspirations of this generation were perfectly attuned with the enhanced expectations of material wealth that characterised the climate of reconstruction in Italy. Today, these expectations of widespread prosperity are totally lacking, we need to draw the due consequences.

Coming to today, we can see the loss of historic memory that characterises most of the young people and their parents and teachers – meaning by historic memory one that embraces at least three generations (in other words, the memory of grandparents) –. The Now Generation is characterized by cultural traits typical of consumer-mediated societies. The concepts of "militancy", of "investment", of "deferral" lose their effectiveness when the future is crushed onto the present. Empirical studies on young Europeans promoted by the European Commission reveal that the values declared by most young people belong to the category of defensive values: peace, environmental protection, human rights, freedom of opinion, the war against poverty. A general feeling of insecurity pervades the younger generation in contemporary Europe; this sense of insecurity is deeply rooted and cannot be attributed solely to economic problems.

Still following Bettin's interpretations, an analytical reading of the Eurobarometer surveys (2007 and 2013) on young people allows us to identify six types of value orientation among the young: individualists; conformists; neo-conservatives; post-materialists; committed Christians; traditionalists. Suffice it to say that 4/5 of the young people interviewed in Europe fall into the first three types, namely the individualists, the conformists and the neo-conservatives. Then, on top of that we have the *familist syndrome*, perfectly illustrated by both the phenomenon of the extension of the juvenile phase, and

by the “scientific” overlapping between family and politics, work and social career. The surveys carried out so far tend to rule out that we are dealing with a generation oriented towards social participation and universalistic attitudes.

*Mistrust of institutions: the inter- and intra-generational shortfall*

The failure to take part in associative life, political or other, is connected with the young people’s mistrust of the institutions: however, such mistrust is not necessarily tantamount to a rejection of the status quo. Disillusion can go hand-in-hand with perfect integration into a culture. Nevertheless, while crucial to the functioning of society, trust in the political institutions and in the social leaders is a sentiment that appears to be in free-fall among the young people interviewed for the sixth Iard report (Buzzi, Cavalli and de Lillo 2007). This is nothing new: the trend has been in motion for several decades and has now simply intensified. Scientific institutions are the only ones that appear to command a significant degree of trust: 86% of the replies indicating “great” or “considerable” trust in scientists. On the opposite side, the politicians come off worst, with 87% of the young Italians interviewed declaring “little” or “no trust at all”.

The disenchantment of the young people I met in my research is total, and is harnessed to a marked lack of interest in the institutions. Only occasionally is it entangled with feelings of rage and indignation, since few of these youngsters venture beyond the grip of resignation. Giovanni is one of the exceptions; even so, since he sees no potential path of change, his attention turns inwards on himself. Since acting upon reality is not an option, the only way out is individual and intellectual.

I live in a country that’s politically in ruins, without any authority, all that flourishes are scandals, incompetence and power games. I’ve had enough of all this, but I don’t think that I can or must change the world. We can and must change only ourselves; everyone has to think in a different way. That’s our allotted role in the contemporary fiction. [Giovanni, M, age 24]

In the rare references they do make to society, the subjects of the research envisage an entirely individual relation. Both generational and inter-generational solidarity are absent: every experience of the Other is a private experience: the public piazza is deserted. Engagement in civil society (politics, voluntary work) is restricted to a tiny minority, and is always secondary. In short, there are no occasions for experiencing a relationship with adults while feeling like an adult oneself, or at least not too much of a kid. There’s a cognitive and

value gap between young Italians and their parents that generates disorientation and makes the young people incapable of planning their own future.

If you discard the interpretative categories, judgements and prejudices normally used to observe young people and attempt to understand what makes them tick, assessing them independently of society as a whole, they simply become invisible (Diamanti 1999). The only way to understand youngsters–adolescents is by adopting a relational perspective, considering them in relation to their older brothers/sisters, to adults and to old people, so that we can focus the differences in attitudes towards their life paths. Young people are never observed relationally, construed by the way they relate to other (older and younger) co-existent generations. If one had to define a shared element in the generational awareness of young people today, it would be the sensation that they're on the line as a generation required to make ethical choices in an everyday world limits no longer exist: in a society that is increasingly anomic (devoid of rules) and amoral (ethically indifferent) when not blatantly immoral (corrupt). The generational sense is embodied in the responses these young people make to the problems of living in a society that neither makes nor indicates ethical choices, but says to everyone: the choice of action is personal; you're on your own, since there are no shared social rules and the options are no longer comparable, or rather they no longer make any difference (Donati 1997: 12 and 25). For a lost and disoriented generation “without fathers or teachers” (Ricolfi and Sciolla 1980), the independent choice of a life path is cloaked in solitude. Still more solitary is the quest for criteria to guide the decision to go one way or the other, since the adults have dismally failed to construct a system of values that the youngsters could adopt, criticise or oppose.

Older Italians are extremely wary of these youngsters. And that's scarcely surprising since they bring them up against their own shortcomings, their own failures as adults, parents, mentors and teachers: the incapacity to propose ideas that can be accepted or fought against, to formulate models of authority that can, at least, be opposed. And so, they prefer them invisible: because when the young people do act, when they demonstrate, what come to the boil are not the novelties of the future but the issues and troubles of the present. Signs of a time in which teachers and parents, rather than giving good or bad examples, appear to be playing it by ear themselves (Diamanti 1999: 25-26).

The problem is not just a vertical, intergenerational one, but also extends to horizontal, intra-generational relations. It's hard to find any trace of a shared feeling or project among today's young people (Mannheim 1952 [1928]). As one of my interviewees said, the fact that young people take part in demonstrations should not be interpreted as a sign of engagement. These are simply occasions – with marked aesthetic and recreational overtones – in which the young person emerges from his or her egotistic isolation.

The impressions we get of young people – the way they speak, the way they dress, the way they communicate, relate to each other and express themselves – that’s not young people at all. What does the fact that thousands of youngsters went to the G8 in Genoa mean? Does that make us all pacifists? Does that mean we’re all anti-globalisation activists? Does it mean we were just all high and reading Gandhi? Or does it perhaps mean that we ourselves don’t know what we are, we don’t feel we belong to anything, we don’t identify with anything. But we really miss not having that label; we really miss not being called a “generation”. Because it would make us feel good to be a generation. Those few, instrumental pretexts, where all you need to take part is to be young, allow us for a moment to feel like a generation: the concert, G8, the university march, *Siddharta*, the VW Beetle, the PLO scarf. These are things that make us feel we belong to something. It’s not much, and it’s pretty superficial feeling you belong to a generation just because you attend something, or read something or wear something that lots of other people like you attend or read or wear. It’s just a sense of sharing that makes you feel less alone, less locked up in your individualism. [Filippo, M, age 24]

Having established that young people’s involvement in public life and formal associations is practically non-existent, we have to ask: so what are the young people up to? According to the Cospes study (Tonolo 1999) and the fifth (2002) and sixth (2007) Iard reports, the youngsters just hang out together. It’s time spent without a specific purpose, during which they communicate. For most young people, friendship doesn’t appear as an opportunity for intensive socialisation, for developing shared projects for the future, but more as a sort of everyday companionship, a distraction from the problems experienced in other social spheres where they cannot fully express their individuality.

In the 50s young people fought their battles within the family, taking up arms against their antiquated parents. In the 60s the conflict went public, and the young people saw themselves as a social movement. In the 70s consumer phenomena led them to identify with certain lifestyles and languages. In the 80s they became the generation of the void, of annihilation, the *Less Than Zero* generation (Ellis 1985). In the 90s and the early years of the new millennium maybe none of these hold for a generation without ideals, values or projects to inspire or anchor it. The “click on yourself” generation. The young are afflicted by uncertainty in a society increasingly short on love, increasingly risky, that fails to offer them a safe and symbolically significant image or plan. This explains the general feeling of having no solid benchmarks (Donati 1997: 24). No-one decides for them any more; everyone has to make their own choices, independently constructing values, criteria, directions. And since this construction takes place in a private sphere, inhabited by an emotional Self,

rather than boosting the acquisition of a social identity it instead tends the formation of an unbalanced emotional identity. And it's a fragile identity precisely because there is no *Wē*, the We being the germinal centre of any possible Me and of any possible You. The image of young people that emerges is of a generation wrapped up in the private dimension; where it does exist, the sense of belonging to a generation is bound up with issues that are existential/individual rather than political/social.

Addressing an ideology, a holistic and simplified vision of the world, gave yesterday's youngster the chance to get his or her bearings, and then to choose. Late-modern society has swept away the ideologies, and the ideals with them, thus depriving young people of the cogent guidance of ethical choice. Ethical choice simplifies reality, operating as a criterion that directs the decisive, final decision for or against, whereas relativist compromise and opportunism foster the notion of a reversible decision. Where there are no ethical foundations, every choice is temporary, revocable and renegotiable.

We find ourselves facing so many choices. In the past, the possibility of making choices was much more limited, partly because the family was much more authoritarian and partly because the offer from the market and from society generally was much less differentiated, added to the fact that the average family was less affluent. Our lives now are a continuous series of choices. Even as children we're already seen as consumers, customers and targets of the market. Having the chance to decide on the basis of our preferences is definitely a step forward compared to the past; it's very important and positive. But who teaches us to choose? And based on what criteria? And how can we be expected to choose if we don't even know ourselves? [Irene, F, age 23]

Ironically, the multiplication of the perceived possibilities of life risks morphing into a giddy range of potential options from which it is impossible to select and reject. In the face of this, the family is seen as the only clear and reassuring benchmark, so that the difficulty of leaving has more explanations than mere economic motives. The young live in an increasingly differentiated and complex reality in which life options – real or virtual, subjectively perceived or objectively existent – appear to multiply. The growing person has to construe and map the existing scenarios, identify his or her place within them, select, reject and move in one or more directions; at the same time, the criteria for making choices become increasingly elusive and individual. The absence of a *ubi consistam* is felt.

This expansion of the potential opportunities increases the anxiety of the young person, and the concern about not making the right investments in his

or her future. That's why young people now tend to put off the choice; they try to postpone the moment when they will have to face up to the adult world. [Roberto, M, age 25]

Meanwhile Italian adults marginalise the ethical dimension, ignoring it when not flagrantly denying it in their behaviour. According to one of the young people in my study, the cognitive difficulties adults have in getting their bearings in late-modern society is not what it's about. It's a moral issue: the adults wielding powers are egoists. This is a generation of only children, born to parents who have transmitted to them the delusion of the crushed hopes and passions of the 60s and 70s. 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin wall, brought the crisis of last century's dominant ideologies to the fore. In the fathers (and mothers) it triggered hope but also disorientation, since the distinction between what was just and unjust collapsed along with the wall. A generation without fathers or teachers, or older brothers.

The adults, especially those that have power, think only about themselves. They have no morals. Young people don't ask adults to be infallible, but to be credible and serious. There's a lot of talk about skills, about expertise to address the challenges of globalisation. But we young people know that adults don't reward our efforts, they don't consider the merit of people learning to do things. Italian adults, teachers especially, reward bootlicking and craftiness. And so we become crafty and crawlers. But it's sad. This way you learn nothing, except how to play up to the boss to get ahead. [Matteo, M, age 25]

Unable to find cogent yardsticks anywhere, the young people become individualistic, squeezed into a volatile Self. The Italian family culture encourages them to adopt such attitudes, while the collective dimension and values referring to the Other, have no place in their life experience. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the Other is not pivotal to the thoughts of their parents either, nor of the significant adults they meet. Exacerbating the semantic opacity generated by the multiplication of informative and formative agencies are profound cultural processes inherent to ancient and recent Italian history. These deeply-rooted anthropological attitudes are moulded by a communication that develops through mutual influence into a sort of vicious circle. In such a circle the young person may go astray unless he or she rapidly learns the rules of the game, hinging primarily on the ability to cut a path through the jungle of life – the Italian art of getting by – heedless of everything and everyone: *Self at all costs, regardless of the Other*. It's the culture of craftiness and malpractice that is instilled early on into the relational baggage of the young: far from being blameworthy, duping a teacher by copying in class proves that you're smart enough to get away with it.

According to Cavalli (1999), some adults feel an obscure sense of guilt because they realise they haven't done the right thing by young people. Rather than looking in the mirror, the adults invent these images that supposedly represent young people, whereas they are really just sketchy self-portraits. This seems to be a way of sweeping under the carpet something that makes the older generation edgy and that it refuses to recognise as its own, and appears to be particularly true when negative characteristics are attributed to young people. It happens because many adults have mislaid the capacity to counsel and listen to young people. They're afraid of exposing themselves, of setting themselves up as models to be followed or rejected, of engaging the young in long-term, wide-ranging projects, of clearly stating what values they believe in (because they're not sure): in a word, the older generation is afraid of clashing with the younger. And perhaps even more they're afraid of being judged, of hearing what they don't want to know, namely what the young think about their parents' generation: "We're dimly aware that we haven't done right by them" (Cavalli 1999: 254).

When the feeling of trust and loyal cooperation with one's neighbour is systematically violated, the young person risks entering a dangerous spiral of isolation and unease. The lack of meaningful and trustful dialogue with significant Others (Sullivan 1953) renders the construction of the youthful Self fragile.

In a social context in which honesty, sense of duty and responsibility are things that hardly anyone cares about any more, quite a lot of young people – partly as a sort of reaction against rampant corruption – suffer from deep loneliness. They live closed up in a separate world where they have no dialogue with their families, with the school or the rest of society, but only with their peers. Then, to break out of this isolation, they resort to strong emotions, often beyond what's legally permitted. Many young people start taking drugs, even hard stuff. [Eleonora, F, age 24]

### *The culture of dependency and the lack of a collective narrative*

In the communication society, TV in its various forms, social media on the web (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and even apps for Smartphones and Tablets have supplemented the traditional sites of socialisation to generate a phenomenon of polyphonic socialisation. How do the young communicate in such a society? And how do they recognise each other in their encounter with the adult world? While formulating pertinent questions, we can also explode a few myths about young people and their relations with adults. One is the

belief that young people are naturally creative and unconventional bearers of change, whereas the young people I met in my research were quite conformist and aligned with the prevailing adult culture. It is almost as if there is a sort of connivance between fathers and sons, one that fans the flames of certain dysfunctional mechanisms within Italian society.

As well as excluding the collective dimension – local, national or international – closing-in upon the Self and failure to open up towards the Other undermines young people's self-awareness. To grasp what is happening around us, to dialogue with the Other and with ourselves, we have to know where we stand, representing who we are as social actors in time and space, taking a range of dimensions into consideration (location, economy, culture etc.). The revisitation of personal biography and collective history is what allows the individual to reconstruct his narrative identity, and see his point of view of society as *a* point of view. In traditional societies self-narration was almost automatic. Past, present and future were linked through the stability of tradition, nature, destiny and religion. There was little mediated experience, since daily life was regulated by the situations, objects and people present in the community. But the narration of the self has become increasingly important for all social actors, public and not, in modern and late-modern societies, while at the same time the sense of individual identity can no longer be inherited or given:

Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent [...] To be a 'person' is not just to be reflexive actor, but to have a concept of a person (as applied both to the self and others) [...] A person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to other people (Giddens 1991: 53-54).

The hardest part of communicating with individuals from different social groups or cultures – and even with different age brackets within the same group – is being able to think and act with a view to recognition of the Other. Without this gradual other and self-recognition, the communication can become a minefield. There is the risk of perpetrating a *false recognition* that can lead to an egoistic type of relation (inter- and intra-generational) the *Other for Self* or, alternatively, *Self for Other*: a dialogue characterised by the annihilation of subjectivity. For recognition and dialogue, the mechanisms controlling feelings of reciprocal dependency and control have to be deactivated. Dignity must be given to both oneself and the Other through knowledge and trust,

by accepting personal and collective history, so that those with critical spirit and courage can glimpse the other that is in us and think of *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur 1992).

This didn't happen with my subjects. The original interpretative key for this essay was: "Self without the Other: young Italians and the culture of dependency". I abandoned that because it could be misconstrued, because it is only by relating to the Other that we acquire identity, and we cannot be dependent in the absence of the Other. In the *Bel Paese*, in this very void filled with egotistic relations dependency has gone viral: the Other in the young people's stories is a ghost, a simulacrum, an Other moulded to serve one's own ends, desires, needs, fears. The world that the young people invest in is of short radius, with the centre in the family nest and the outer circle enclosing friends and sentimental relations just a short way beyond. Everything beyond this limited compass is experienced in a rapid and risk-free manner, through the media or on short holidays: zapping and clicking while remaining safely ensconced in the parental home – a place both physical and mental –.

In the book *Sources of the Self* (1989), Charles Taylor focuses the "culture of authenticity" widespread in modern societies. This requires everyone to be themselves while choosing between horizons that appear as given and transcending the Self, creating a sort of oscillatory movement between the egoistic ideal of self-realisation and the altruistic commitment to causes that can be pursued through engagement and action. On the contrary, the young people/children and adults/parents emerging from my research – equally responsible, each according to the respective role – are engaged in the construction of false identities, in other words identities with meanings drawn exclusively from within a culture of reciprocal dependency. This dependency starts from the family and ripples out to the main sites of socialisation (school and work) to become a crucial feature of Italian culture. Such attitudes might well be described within a "culture of narcissism" (Lasch 1979) or indeed of hedonism, individualism or particularism. I decided to refer to it as "dependency", because in the meshing of objective and subjective, structural and cultural aspects, it seemed the term best fitted to the young Italians of the third millennium in their relations with adults.

The last decade has witnessed many devastating events: natural catastrophes, wars, terrorist attacks and economic crises. Such events can trigger a learning curve (Boltanski 1999), but they have failed to jolt the younger generations out of an immobility that inevitably leads to the construction of individual and group identities crammed within the private world. Lacking the lifeblood of any society nourished by the sharing and internalisation of the values underpinning collective life, these private worlds are closed and anaemic. And all the most recent forms of collective action appear to adopt

that same “already felt” (Perniola 2012)<sup>10</sup> nuance of other rituals – cultural or consumerist to a greater or lesser degree – ubiquitous in the autobiographies of so many of the youngsters encountered during this research and elsewhere.

The lack of an adequate and plausible narrative that is capable of encompassing the social performances of individual and collective actors on the stage of Italian public life – each one with his/her role and responsibility – seems to impede an active awareness of the ongoing cultural crisis and traumas, in young people and adults alike<sup>11</sup>. Leaving to the Italian family alone the abnormal task of being the only institution that creates meaning simply leads to the production of hyper-particular scripts that cannot absolve the function of fostering the sense of belonging to a collectivity, or to a group, or in the long run even to the family itself.

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<sup>10</sup> The Italian philosopher argues that, since the 60s, we live a second-hand “sensology,” produced by the media and underlying consumer attitudes. According to Perniola, the aesthetisation of experience, typical of a society guided by “sensological” rather than ideological criteria, requires an impersonal emotional universe, characterised by anonymous experience, in which everything renders itself as “already felt.”

<sup>11</sup> See Alexander (2006 and 2012) for a holistic and sophisticated analysis of social performance and cultural trauma.

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