Searching for adulthood:
young people, citizenship and participation

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Focusing on the relation between youth and citizenship and between youth and adulthood, the article investigates youth paths of civic and political engagement by presenting the results of a qualitative research conducted in Bologna in 2012 which has involved a sample of young people and a sample of "significant adults" through semi-structured interviews. The intergenerational analysis shows that youth civic and political engagement, still influenced by social and economic factors, can be interpreted as a multiform expression of agency towards an environment perceived as not welcoming for the younger generations.

Young people between citizenship and adulthood

The recent debate on youth has extensively covered issues concerning the degrees of autonomy and the possibilities of social and political inclusion young people can experience during their transition to adulthood, in particular with respect to the recent economic crisis, which has harshly beaten on a condition historically thought of as weak, even before the crisis began. Young people's unemployment rate testifies their difficulties and stands as a serious warning for the growth of adult society's future members.

Youth condition, with its transformation and prerogatives, is undoubtedly influenced by the social circumstances surrounding it. While this is not the appropriate context for an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of today's society, it is opportune to mention, in a somewhat impressionistic way, a list of keywords that are used in authoritative literature to describe a world where young people's trajectories take form: unstable, risky, individualised, pluralistic and accelerated[1]. This is a socio-cultural environment where the de-

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[1] This is an extensive literature, with some highly significant contributions worth mentioning, both on a general level (Beck 1992; Melucci 1996; Giddens 1999; Castel 2003; Eisenstadt 2003; Sennett 2005; Berger and Luckman 1995) and specifically about young people (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Blossfeld *et al.* 2005; Leccardi 2009).

traditionalisation and de-standardisation of biographies (Beck 1992) are particularly reflected in the paths into adulthood (Leccardi and Ruspini 2006; Walther 2006; Furlong 2009), without diminishing the long lasting influence of classic variables such as family status, gender and ethnic origins.

Although mainly perceived as a problem rather than a resource (Iard 2001), youth condition has, for a number of years, been part of the European political and social agenda as a phase of life that needs to be closely monitored in relation to its progression over time, and because it reflects the current vulnerabilities and future destinies of social and cultural integration. Being highly sensitive to social change, youth frequently reflects and anticipates its forms and content.

The ways of transition to adult life, seen as overcoming cumulative social stages (Modell *et al.* 1976), still represent the mainstream tools of studying young people in their functional transformation and maturity. Youth condition presents great complexities in relation to the analysis and planning of interventions and services, both adopting the perspective of the social stages, and extending the viewpoint to issues of identity and expectations. Youth is expressed within a rather wide age range that goes from 15 to 34, with the obvious differences from country to country, and therefore includes a plurality of youths (Cavalli and Galland 1993; Côté 2000)[2]. It develops around several spheres (education, work, sentimental relationships, parenthood, values, leisure, and participation) and varies according to the different ages within youth as well as to national characteristics (Bazzanella 2010). Nonetheless, some aspects seem to be common among contemporary western youth: the delay in entering adulthood, the problematic idea of future in both occupational and cognitive terms, a significant distance from adults in relation to cultural taste and private life (Cicchelli and Galland 2009). Youth condition cannot thus be analysed as an undifferentiated whole and comprehended without being placed in relation both to country-related socio-economic trends and to public policies that regulate, either directly or indirectly, individual and collective trajectories. Within this dense and complex tangle of factors, actors and processes pertaining to the characteristics of youth condition, this article focuses on the relevance of the relation between youth and adulthood and between youth and citizenship (Martelli 2013).

These two aspects could be merged into a general question frequently associated to young people's conducts: their "invisibility" (Gauthier 1994; Dia-

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[2] To exemplify the evolving peculiarities inherent to youth, we could refer on the one hand to the changes inside and around adolescence (Galland 1990 and 2008), and on the other hand to the appearance of individuals who are older than 35 and can be defined, for their way of life and orientation, as "adult-young people" (Cesareo 2005).

manti 1999) or, in other words, their escape from traditional roles and responsibilities connected to personal growth and to participation to collective aims and practices. This invisibility seems to be strictly connected both to a demographic factor – that is to the decrease of weight in comparison to that of the adults and of the elderly – and to the behaviour of adult people, who have a persisting power of evaluating young people attitudes and at the same time frequently blur the boundaries, adopting a life-style more and more curved towards choices and consumption conventionally characteristic of younger individuals. On their side, young people are not passive actors, and play a camouflage game, mixing adjustment and innovation both in the private and in the public sphere.

Against this background, youth condition could be observed in terms of owned amount of citizenship by looking at the relation young people have with the public sphere for what concerns rights, duties and civicness.

Citizenship certainly is a fundamental engine of modern democracy, and its semantics recalls both aspects of redistribution and elements pertaining to the sense of belonging to a community and to the concept of identity (Barbalet 1988; Procacci 1998; Isin and Turner 2002).

In this perspective we could observe how citizenship on the one side corresponds to a set of rights and a level of protection descending from a status, on the other side takes form through concrete practices (of participation, cooperation, solidarity, consumption), according to conducts and responsibilities as they are perceived by subjects in relation to their sense of belonging (Turner 1990; Smith *et al.* 2005). When we direct our attention on young people, both sides play a relevant role in influencing their interpretation of citizenship, even if issues of belonging and identity seem to have gained more and more importance in the last decades, for young people themselves and also for the adults looking at youth: there have been increasing worries and expectations towards the inclination of young people in terms of active citizenship, that is to what extent they show and combine loyalty, identification and participation (Barbalet 1998; Procacci 1998). The high significance of the subjective dimension of citizenship, together with the incontrovertible weight of social and economic factors (according to which citizenship as an institution produces entitlements and provisions), allow to frame the question in terms of "participatory citizenship" (Martelli 2013).

With regard to the orientation of contemporary youth, we can refer to two interesting and useful conceptualisations. A first one is by Martuccelli (2007), who – echoing and developing the question of "Shifting Involvements" raised by Hirschman 1982 – has proposed the idea of a "conditional participation" as a peculiar way of engagement in which activism and disaffection are strictly and simultaneously combined, which is not only typical of young

people, but seems to be particularly suitable for the representation of a widespread attitude among them. A second one underlines the emergence of a "democratic individualism" among young people (Bontempi and Pocaterra 2007; Spannring *et al.* 2008), where ideas of freedom and democracy are still attractive, but could be quite detached from a solid capacity to include them in a collective framework of action and mobilization. These two suggestions acquire further meaning if we direct our glance to the institutional side, where we find a decreasing ability to attract people under traditional patterns of participation and to maintain Marshall's idea of citizenship (1950) as a project of progressive reduction of inequalities.

In such a context, young people show new ways and styles of involvement, with a high degree of unconventional actions and orientations, that even when apparently seem to be far from any commitment (abstention from voting, street parades, youth riots, skating in public spaces), express new meanings and new issues whose contents and deep components have to do with the collective dimension (Walther 2012).

Furthermore, forms and degrees of participation and active citizenship are still strictly influenced by social and structural factors, confirming the intertwining relation between cultural and material elements of the participatory citizenship.

Nonetheless, the extended relevance of subjective identity among young people within the debate on citizenship and its tensions and promises could lead to a particularistic drift, where the increased value of cultural differences could cloud the vision towards the reduction of inequalities and the enforcement of a universalistic solidarity (Soysal 1994; Procacci 1998). In other words, one of the main risks appearing on the contemporary scene is that of a youth characterized by individualization without a (or with a weak) public sphere. This would imply strong difficulties in participating in processes of institutionalization, due to the complex combination of the need for individuality and the perceived value of identity on the one side, and collective objectives and projects of equality on the other side, which in a sense need impersonality and uniformity.

While framing and analyzing youth participation and civicness, as mentioned in the premises, we can't miss the set of factors and actors intervening, and in particular, we have to focus with more attention on the importance of an inter-generational perspective.

Despite the long tradition of sociological studies on youth engagement, the analysis still needs to be improved in its capability to "think youth in a generational way", that is to understand young people "as subjects who are defined by the relations they have (or do not have) with other generations" (Donati 1997: 7). This appears to be more and more urgent because of the deep changes occurred and occurring in the profile of both young people and

adults, which affect the redefinition of intergenerational relationships.

Although youth, during the last decades, has continuously modified its own characteristics and boundaries, it has also always been seen as a transition to adulthood, taking this *terminus ad quem* as a quite stable and, in a sense, self-evident condition.

Actually, adult people seem to have firmly maintained their power in establishing the rules of the game, still being in charge of the key roles and functions in economy and society (Ambrosi and Rosina 2009), and – with specific respect to their relation with young people – in defining the situation in terms of identity and deservingness along the process of becoming adult.

Nevertheless, pertaining to "who" the adults are, we are seeing deep changes related to their lifestyles, expectations, identity and also – which is noteworthy for the focus of this article – to their capacity of representing a model for the transition to adulthood (Saraceno 1984; Santambrogio 2002; Blatterer 2010; Burnett 2010; Recalcati 2013). This is the reason why, in the framework of a stronger orientation toward adopting an intergenerational perspective when studying youth, in our investigation we have to "search for adults" (Pole *et al.* 2005).

Young people, citizenship and participation: a case study on intergenerational relationships

This section presents some of the main results of a research dealing with the contemporary characteristics of youth civic and political involvement. The work has been inspired by the observation that, as previously said, the long tradition of sociological studies on youth engagement has often paid little attention to the relevance of inter-generational relationships in defining young people and their involvement (Donati 1997).

The research aimed to contribute to this perspective by studying how two generations – the one of today's young people and the one of today's adults – relate to each other with respect to civic and political participation, and what are the effects these relationships have on youth civic and political engagement.

In 2012, starting from this frame of reference, we carried out a qualitative study inspired to the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2005) within a district of the city of Bologna (Italy). The research involved a sample of young people between 18 and 24 years old and a sample of "significant adults"[3] identified by the young people themselves.

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[3] The concept of "significant adults" recalls the traditional sociological construct of the "Significant Other". According to Sullivan (1940) and Mead (1967), significant others are those

The youth sample was composed of 32 young people, selected according to the relevance of some key variables: gender (16 males and 16 females); national origins (6 young people were of foreign origins); educational level and employment status (20 young people were still high school or university students while 12 already completed their studies; of the latter, 10 were working and 2 were unemployed), presence or absence of the families in Bologna (12 young people moved to Bologna for educational or work reasons and lived outside the family of origins), and political ideas (9 right-wing and 23 left-wing interviewees[4]).

The adult sample consisted of 18 adults[5] aged between 40 and 60 years old (born between 1952 and 1972). Males were slightly more than females (11 men *vs.* 7 women) and the adult interviewees were generally bound by a parental relationship to the correspondent young interviewees[6].

In order to involve both formally and informally engaged[7] young people (Ekman and Amnå 2009), we decide to get in touch with the interviewees

people who are of sufficient importance in an individual's life to affect his/her identity, sense of self, emotions and behaviours. In this research, by using the expression "significant adults" we make therefore reference to those adults who occupy an adequate central role in the young individual's biography to affect their identity, e and conducts; especially in relation to civic and political involvement.

[4] By proposing this net distinction between right and left wing interviewees we want to give account of a certain polarization that has been observed within the youth sample. Answering to a question about their political location on the traditional right-left scheme, our interviewees have mainly opted for a clear ideological alignment with one of the two polar positions. Moreover, also those who have defined their political location as "moderate" have spontaneously expressed their preference for a more conservative or a more liberal interpretation of this "central" political position.

[5] The 12 young interviewees who did not have their families in Bologna have chosen their parents or other people residing in the area of origin as significant adults. Due to the geographical distance, it was impossible to involve these adults in the research. The choice of this youth group, differently from the "autochthonous", reveals a relational world consisting only of peers, in which adults occupy a very marginal position.

[6] In 13 cases, the significant adult was the father or the mother of the young interviewees; in the other 5 cases, the significant adult was another relative, a teacher or a sports coach. Considering the entire youth sample, the vast majority of the interviewees (26) indicated one of the parents as significant adults. This seems to confirm the rise of a "socialità ristretta" (restricted sociability) among young people noticed by de Lillo (2002) in his studies on youth condition. In line with de Lillo's perspective the interviewees' choices show how young people interface with the civic and political dimension more and more through very intimate ties: among our interviewees parents represent the main "intermediaries" between youth and the participatory sphere of society.

[7] We tried to involve in the study also those young people who were not engaged through manifest practices of participation (e.g. formalised associations and parties), and who could apparently look like inactive and disinterested in civic and political engagement.

through various youth meeting places within the Navile district which have been selected through a preliminary mapping. The young interviewees have been initially contacted through cultural association, youth centres, sports associations, parishes, parks, libraries, shopping centres, cafés and pubs. In a second phase, we got in touch with other young people through voluntary and civic associations, charities, NGOs, political parties and associations.

As previously stated, the significant adults sample was built on the basis of the young interviewees' indication. During the interview, all the young people were asked to suggest an adult they considered particularly important to them in relation to their political and civic formation[8].

As for the youth sample, the decision to focus on this specific age group raised from two emerging issues that came to light after an analysis of the sociological literature on youth, as well as from the awareness that several youths can be distinguished within the youth as a whole.

Firstly, drawing a clear and explicit inspiration from Erikson' studies on youth identity[9] (Erikson 1968), Arnett (2000) has recently elaborated the concept of "emerging adulthood" which aim at highlighting the various characteristics that distinguish the period of life comprised between 18 and 24 within youth transitions to the adult status. According to Arnett, emerging adulthood is an age of identity explorations where young people are called to decide who they are and who they want to become; an age of instability marked by frequent forward and backward steps on adulthood's paths (Walther 2006); an age of personal reflexivity in which young people should reflect on themselves and on the world around them with planning attitude; an age "in between", characterized by the transition from one status to another, where the perception of oneself as adults comes and goes; an age of *chances* in which the future is still to be determined. Therefore the choice of this specific age limits reflects the desire to investigate the process of youth transition to adulthood by looking at the "central point" of the journey.

Secondly, the focus on this age segment allows us to deepen the sociological understanding of Generation Y's[10] relationship with active citizenship.

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[8] The exact question was: "can you tell me the name of an adult you consider important in your life, especially for what concerns civic and political participation?".

[9] Arnett's concept of "emerging adulthood" aim to update Erikson's theories on the developmental stages of the life cycle and, in particular, Erikson's idea that between adolescence and adulthood young people experience a "psychosocial moratorium" in which they're socially called to explore various possible futures in love and work.

[10] Among the various classic and contemporary contributions that have focused their attention on the concept of "generation", our frame of reference specifically recalls Mannheim's works (1928) and conceives generation primarily in a socio-historical perspective, that is as a group of

Among the many studies that have documented the peculiarity of this relation, Dalton (2008) has, for example, underlined the growing of a "new citizenship norms" within this youth group, whose engagement is considered to be more individualised, issue-oriented, and "glocal" (Norris 2003), as well as more connected to the private sphere of life, in comparison with the involvement practices of the previous generations.

The research materials were mainly collected through semi-structured interviews[11] and later integrated with various types of documentary materials such as leaflets, posters, books, posts on forums and social media.

These documents were obtained through the analysis of associations' websites and interviewees' personal profiles on Facebook, Twitter and other social media, but also by taking part to youth participatory events – such as meetings, manifestation and volunteering activities – organised by and for the young people within the district. The collected empirical data was managed using the NVivo software for qualitative data analysis.

Young people, adults, youth participation and citizenship: a restricted welcome?

In order to understand the influence intergenerational relationships have on youth engagement, we must first look at how young people understand the meaning of being citizens through their practices and representations of civic and political commitment.

The analysis of research materials has confirmed how youth engagement is framed by a strong pessimism concerning the contemporary conditions of young generations and by a clear scepticism towards politics and institutions as possible answer to youth problems.

people who were born and lived in a given socio-historical period and who have then been exposed to a limited set of accessible experiences (generational location) which can, in some specific circumstances, foster their awareness of sharing of a common destiny (generation as actuality). According to a commonly accepted definition, Generation Y comprises all the people born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s (our young interviewees were born between 1988 and 1994). Sometimes named also "Millennials", these young people are usually distinguished from the previous generation (Generation Y) for being the first generation of "digital natives", as well as for their more evident multi-cultural identity (Pew Research Center 2014).

[11] The interviews have been conducted between September and December 2012. We elaborated two different interviews' outlines: one for the youth sample and one for the adult sample. Both the interviews' outlines were composed of almost 40 questions and each individual encounters has had an average duration of 2 hours. In line with the grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2005), we kept our questions as broad as possible in order to let the interviewees free to express themselves and to actively guide the conversation flow.

Interestingly, this negative interpretation of the present situation seems to represent a constant element within the entire sample, which can create a sort of "generational solidarity" beyond the differences of origins. However, the pessimism also acquires different shades depending on the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the interviewee: among those young people who come from advantaged origins the current difficult socio-economic situation is more often perceived as transient and a sense of hope is usually ascribed to the future, while those young people with a more disadvantaged background usually share a negative idea about the future, thinking that no major positive evolutions will arrive soon.

In both case, pessimism and disillusionment seem to represent a conscious political horizon that feeds the engagement rather than prevent it (Bettin Lattes 2001; Bontempi and Pocaterra 2007). With regard to this aspect, research findings show a substantial coexistence between disaffection and activation, which shapes the participation of young interviewees in terms of a "suspicious commitment" or, according to Martucelli (2007), of a "conditional participation", where active participation goes hand in hand with an active distrust.

Looking at the relationship between young people and the more formal spheres of active participation (e.g. elections, political parties, trade unions or other formal political organizations) it has been possible to distinguish different profiles within the conditional engagement of our interviewees. More specifically, it seems possible to talk about a "reformist", a controlling and a rebellious way of being "conditionally engaged"[12].

For the definition of these three manners of involvement within politics, we looked at the youth's choice to participate or not through the more conventional tools of political engagement (e.g. voting and involvement in parties, trade unions and institutional-led activities) as well as to the meanings young people assign to their decision.

Both the reformers' and the controllers' groups consist of young people who have chosen to participate through official and institutional political

[12] These three positions represent different qualities of participatory behaviours. In line with Ekman e Amnå's studies (2009), we opted for a rather broad definition of participation. Just "passive disengagement" – that is the attitude of those who do not participate because they do not perceive participation as important for themselves or for the society, and who do not accord a strategic meaning to their withdrawal – has been considered as a non participatory behaviour. The choice of this perspective has significantly reduced the possibility of defining some interviewees as "disengaged", even if very different participatory practices (in terms of frequency, perseverance and forms of commitment) can be recorded within the youth sample. Moreover, the research explicitly deals with participation and this has certainly attracted those young people who were more interested in this issue, as well as probably promoted a "proactive" interpretation of their disengagement.

practices, but their ways of involvement are strongly differentiated by the meanings they attribute to their political behaviours.

Those young people who chase a goal of reform through their involvement in the more traditional forms of political participation have been included in the reformers' group: facing a political scenario perceived as not encouraging, these individuals decide to stay and work on its renewal.

> Perfection does not exist and politics is certainly not perfect. […] However it is too easy to say they are all the same, it's all a mess, they should all go home and then do nothing: that is a defeat! People don't have the courage to admit it is not all the same thing, and it is also up to us to protect what is different and good. [F, age 19]

Also, among the controllers it has been possible to register a participatory activation within the formal political sphere, but the choice of being engaged in voting and in parties' activities was explained by the interviewees as a necessity that primarily stems from a lack of confidence toward politics. Although these young people decide to be involved in formalised political activities, they are not fighting for politics reforms: they are just trying to "control" politics or to "defend" themselves from politics[13]. In the passage from the position of the reformer to that of the controller, we can notice a reduction of youth expectations toward politics and politicians, but also a reshaping of their hopes with regards to their own abilities - as individuals and as young people - to do something to change the current political scenario.

> I do not know what we can really do. Rationally, I think we can not do big things. I mean, I participate, but I'm just trying to limit the damages, I am not really hoping in a change, I have no more illusions. [F, age 23]

A third group, consisting of those young interviewees who have chosen to completely abandon the institutional tools of political participation, believing that they are "totally unrecoverable" [M, age 22][14], completes the pro-

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[13] The terms "control" and "defence" refer to two different level of individual agency that can be recorded within this group of young interviewees. To describe these young people within the Italian research, we opted for the label "resistenti", which express both the dimension of the control and that of the defence. Since it was impossible to find a good translation for that term, we opted for the label "controllers", giving more emphasis to the youth active attitude toward politics. However, slightly passive attitude of defence is still present.

[14] "There is not so much to say. Politics, or at least the politics that is done by our politicians, is totally unrecoverable and we have already a bunch of evidences! I can't understand why we didn't have yet a revolution! Aren't people tired?" [M, age 22].

file of youth attitudes towards formal political commitment. This group is composed of those interviewees who have been named as "rebels". Among these young people the adoption of a participatory practice that can mainly be referred to an anti-political attitude is common: these individuals share a rejection of everything concerning institutional and formal politics, which finds its main expression in the complete avoidance of elections as well as of those activities organised and proposed by trade unions and parties. Within this group, the hopes for change are completely oriented towards (legal and illegal) extra-parliamentary engagement practices from public manifestations to riots, squatting, graffiti drawing and even vandalism.

> A change is still possible, but not in this system. We must think and act big, start from scratch, inventing a new way of doing politics... Who said that parties must necessarily exist? Are we sure we can't live without them? [M, age 24]

As stated, the socio-economic and cultural origins of the interviewees seem to have a central role in shaping their attitude toward formal politics. Those young people who have a stronger family background on an economic and cultural side seems to opt for a more proactive ("reformist" or "rebellious") attitude in relating with formal participation, while a more passive and defensive approach grows among the less advantaged ones and, in particular, among those who come from a lower cultural background.

Moreover, it has been possible to notice that the young people with higher levels of education are mainly located into the "reform" or the "rebellion" positions, while those who invested fewer – emotional and material – resources and show fewer expectation in education usually adopt an attitude of control/ defence in dealing with political participation.

The difficulties met on their paths of transition from school to work have also a certain importance in distinguishing the young interviewees into the three positions and this variable seems especially to differentiate the reformers from the rebels. The latter is, indeed, formed by young people who are experiencing more difficulties in finding a place into the job market after completing their education or who are more worried about their job opportunities in the forthcoming future. The idea of being "betrayed" by a society, which had taught them that by studying they would have had access to great opportunities, leads this group of young people to develop anger toward politics.

Beyond the differences in relation to their attitude toward formal political activities, the members of the three groups have something in common: the

activation through unconventional and non formal practices of engagement[15] is a constant element throughout the sample. Each of the young people interviewed is involved at least in one unconventional activity of commitment and, once again, it is interesting to highlight the meanings that are assigned to these ways of engagement.

The value young respondents attribute to all the activities located outside of the formal political sphere dwells exactly in their being "something different" from politics. In other words, the "goodness" of these practices of involvement emerges from a process of differentiation from the "badness" of politics: "politics is one thing and everything else is another" [M, age 22]. In youth point of view, social involvement, civic engagement and the different forms of extra-parliamentary activism (della Porta and Diani 2006; Sciolla 2012) are understood always in relation to politics, which still represents the actual horizon of meaning. These forms of participation appear to be the main reflection of the aforementioned typical "disaffection without disengagement" logic of youth's conditional activation, a pro-active reaction which is however also a more or less marked escape.

> I distinguish between the politics of the parties, the trade unions and the elections, and a new type of politics that is done in other ways and in other places. Politics and volunteering, for example. They are two completely different things: one is rigid and the other is not, one is closed and the other is not, one is dirty and the other is not. [F, age 24]

Within this distinction between politics and unconventional forms of activation within youth representations and practices of involvement, it is possible to identify one of the main aspects onto which intergenerational relationships between young people and adults display their influence.

Young people see the institutional political participation as an "adult territory": a participatory space where adults are the real and only holders of power. In these forms and spaces of involvement, the young interviewees state to benefit only from a "restricted welcoming" [M, age 22] because the access is difficult, and the dialogue with the older generation is founded on unfair bases.

> I mean, I'm good in the party, but the welcome is restricted: like, ok, stay here, talk, but do not bother us! I always feel like a guest. [F, age 19]

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[15] Drawing inspiration from Ekman and Amna's work, we considered unconventional practices of participation all those forms of civic, social and political involvement who not fit under the "formal political participation" label: social involvement (e.g. being vegan; recycling), civic engagement (e.g. volunteering) and activism (e.g. political consumerism and boycotting).

The common feeling among youth is that in these spaces of participation, the real offers of listening, dialogue and action are rare and purely formal. In the institutional practices of active citizenship, young people feel to be not fully recognised as "legitimated actors" (Fraser 2000: 118) of the political, social and civic system.

> Activities organised by the institutions are like many beautiful fences. You can jump, you can walk, but you must stay there, where they tell you to stay. [M, age 22]

> Into the party you don't fight with the same weapons of those who are above you, who are usually adults. They are always more important than you and they tell you that you can not understand because you're too young. I want a place where I can compete on an even footing. [M, age 18]

Practices of non-conventional participation are perceived, in reverse, as "youth areas" or places where the dialogue with adults – if present – is fairer. However, youth's perception of the unconventional forms of activations as "adult-free zones" seems to correspond to what they effectively are: in most cases, within the participatory experiences other than formal politics in which the interviewees are involved, adults are completely absent. Indeed, young people participate mainly through youth-led associations (e.g. cultural and volunteering associations founded and/or managed exclusively by young people, juvenile sections of some civic associations) where the issue of negotiating spaces, ideas, and perspectives with the adult world is rare.

Shifting our attention on the adult interviewees' ideas of youth participation and of young people as active citizens, it possible to observe that the legitimacy they grant to youth involvement is effectively characterized for being a "partial legitimacy".

On a first moment, the interviewed adults usually talk about young people as citizens in a rather apologetic way, claiming to put great hopes on the new generations and on what they can do for society and politics. From this point of view, they seem to give legitimacy to the youth participatory expressions and, indeed, to ascribe a "redeeming power" to youth.

> I think they will make a difference. Maybe not everyone, but I see them motivated, strong, even stronger than us. They know it is like that, they are not waiting for the manna from heaven as we have done for years. [M, age 42]

However, the concept of "partial legitimacy" has not been casually chosen: adults' recognition of youth involvement is actually less full than it may

initially look and this is clearly visible by considering the ways in which adults manage intergenerational conflicts on civic and political issues.

According to the young and adult interviewees' reconstruction of their intergenerational relationships on participatory themes, conflict seems indeed to be an ubiquitous element, and even if the relevance of this dimension is not new to family studies (Corbetta *et al.* 2012), the reactive modality commonly adopted by the interviewed adults is undoubtedly worthy of attention. When differences emerge between young people's and adults' interpretation of a political or civic issue, adults usually try to overcome the problem by calling into question the presumed immaturity of the young one who is always "too young" to understand.

> She is really active. She does a lot, she is a volunteer in an association, she also used to teach Italian to foreign children and she pays a lot of attention to politics […] always talking, always mumbling…but she doesn't vote. […] I wonder what does she thinks to obtain. According to me this not the right way to obtain something and I told her that she needs to keep in mind there is a difference between the real politics and all that is around it. She's too young to understand that her volunteering will not really change the world. [M, age 50]

Adults try to minimize intergenerational conflicts by stating they are due to the different levels of experience. According to them, young people don't have adequate means to understand the "truthfulness" of the worldview proposed by adults because of their lack of experience.

> If he was an adult! But he is young and he can't understand. I mean, even me, when I was young I did not understand, but then we grow, we become adults, we deal with many problems as adults do, and eventually our parents' opinions do not seem so weird anymore. [F, age 45]

The same dynamic can be identified also when adults talk about young generations as actors of participation: in this case, too, adults recognise the diffusion of a strong civic attitude among young people, but they contend new generations are not showing their interest "in the most appropriate way" [M, age 45].

> It does not take much to figure out they are not as disinterested as they seem. [...] Do you remember the protests in the Arab countries a few months ago? They knew more than me! The same about the things that one should buy or not. But it's weird: all this interest goes, I would not say it is wasted, but I do think it's not fully capitalised. [F, age 59]

Therefore, adults' positions on youth participation is rather ambiguous: on the one hand, they invest high hopes on the new generations, on the other they relegate them in a subordinate position of those who are not yet sufficiently ready; on the one hand they introduce young people as "potential heroes" able to "rewrite the world" [F, 46], on the other they promote an image of youth akin to an "endangered species" – precious, weak and dangerous at the same time – which must be kept in a sort of "ecological zone" fully managed by adults (Maurizio 2011).

These contradictory positions seem to be based on two conceptual distinctions that lie beneath the broader relationships adults have with youth.

The first refers to a temporal distinction between the present and the future (Leccardi 2009) that allows a postponement of youth recognition. In other words, the two opposite images of youth can coexist because they do not live on the same temporal context. The idolisation of young people as active citizens does not refer to the present, but to the future, and the hope adults invest on new generations are not declined into the present time. It's a "postponed hope" which does not make reference to what young people can do today, but to what they could do in a "tomorrow" not yet clearly defined. By stating that young people will save us in the future, the adult generation actually reaffirms its authority in the present, justifies a marginalization of young people as actors in society, adopts an authoritative style in reference to youth participation and, at the same time, locates itself in a passive position, letting things run their course naturally. It seems therefore clear that adults' confidence in young people is actually subordinated to the acquisition of the "adult status" and to a growth process that should lead the younger generations to become more and more similar to the adults, to share their ideas and behaviours. Confidence in young people as citizens and, more generally, as social actors, is therefore not only delayed, but also connected to an "abandonment" of their youth identity and of the related ideas on understanding and practicing participation.

The second distinction, which is closely related to the aforementioned, refers to the concepts of youth – as abstract symbol – and of young people – as real subject. Adults' coexisting optimism and pessimism toward young people as active citizens refer not only to two different temporal levels, but also to two distinct objects. During the last two decades, a number of studies have focused on adults' infatuation towards youth, which has been turned into a real contemporary myth (Dal Lago and Molinari 2002; Galimberti 2009; Recalcati 2013). Looking at participation, youth idolization allows a projection on the present of a standard of "youth participatory behaviour" which is more or less explicitly gathered from the 60s' and 70s' experiences of mobilization. Adults place deep confidence into youth, which is described

as custodian of a revolutionary power of civic and political change, but their love for the youth status does not imply the development of a similar feeling towards young people, who are instead frequently described with deep pessimism, especially with regard to their real capabilities of social commitment and involvement (James 2011). Such pessimism is usually expressed by adults through a continuous comparison between their own generation ("we, when we were young") and today's youth that nourishes both a "negative conceptualisation" – contemporary young people are not what they should be – and an "anachronistic conceptualisation" – contemporary young people are no longer what they were (Mazzoleni 2003: 17-18). This adults' attitude undoubtedly testifies their *nostalgia* for something they have lost, but also their difficulties in objectively understanding contemporary youth and the different historical and social conditions in which young people are now living (Schizzerotto *et al.* 2011).

Conclusions

Even if challenged by several transforming dynamics and tensions, contemporary citizenship still maintains its fundamental characteristics, which have to be looked after: it is centred on the coexistence of rights and responsibilities, it engages simultaneously both individual and collective elements, it recalls processes of identification that are strictly combined with mechanisms of redistribution and protection, integration and possibility of action.

Citizenship is mainly developed and debated within the political sphere, grounded on participation and civicness as fundamental pillars of the democratic societies.

With regard to young people's attitudes and behaviours toward these cornerstones of active citizenship, a double movement can be identified: on the one side, they share the rest of the population's same difficulties in accessing and producing universal meanings and goals of participation, on the other side they largely prefer unconventional forms of participation as a peculiar (generational?) position where protest, adjustment and innovation converge and mix. Nonetheless, their unconventional involvement still reveals deep political meaning. If participation and civicness are frequently associated to dynamics of identification and to a dimension where cultural orientation and sense of belonging prevail, research warns not to ignore the persisting relevance of social and structural factors on young people's biographies and on the level of freedom they can experience.

Youth's styles and degrees of active citizenship have to be analysed in the light of intergenerational relationships, that is, looking at the interaction be-

tween young people and adults, conceiving the latter as generation and as social institutions.

Highlighting the rise of a "conditional participation" expressed through proactive attitudes towards formal politics – based on a varying logic of "reform", "control" or "rebellion" – and the wide diffusion of unconventional practices of engagement within the youth sample, the research findings testify the persistence of a deep sense of civicness among the younger generations.

However, if institutions seem to be largely inadequate to attract young people to the democratic process, adults' words, as collected through the interviews, highlight a dual "narrative" that supports the asymmetric distribution of power widely explored by sociological studies on youth conditions. Adults themselves weaken young people's paths toward autonomy by refusing to recognise and legitimise the latter as full actors in the present.

Indeed, this asymmetry does continue in times of increasing crisis of adulthood itself: while a certain rhetoric of adulthood seems to persist among both adults and young people without big dissimilarities, adulthood "in practice" results to be much more problematic and blurred than in the past. Therefore, parallel to the investigation on youth there is an urgent need to (re)search for adulthood.

In this perspective, it seems reasonable to question the traditional representation of youth as a transition to adulthood. Given the changing (slightly disappearing?) status of adulthood and young people's persisting lack of autonomy, substituting the concept of adulthood with that of citizenship could be a promising operation, both for researchers and decision makers. Considering the persisting influence of social and economic conditions (age, gender, socio-economic status, origin, and life context) on young people's trajectories, their welfare and their attitude in participating to the public sphere (Pole *et al.* 2005; France 2007; Walther 2006 and 2012; Heinz 2009, Checkoway 2011; Eurobarometer 2011), the adoption of citizenship as *terminus ad quem* could allow to reduce the dependence of the process leading to youth autonomy on an elusive and uncertain adult figure, and at the same time could overcome the low sensitivity of the concept of adulthood to questions of redistribution and recognition.

In the perspective of future studies about the relation between young people, citizenship and participation, our research joins other investigations in recommending a particular attention towards the intergenerational dimension and the changing features of adulthood, saving the importance to combine the focus on belonging, identity and participation as subjective attitudes with that on social and economic factors preceding and/or conditioning possibilities and extents of practicing an active citizenship.

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