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Gender in Youth Participation:
Practices and Cultures

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RIVISTA ITALIANA DI SOCIOLOGIA

**Gender in Youth Participation:
Practices and Cultures**



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Gender in Youth Participation: Practices and Cultures

ILARIA PITTI, YAĞMUR MENGILLI

1. GENDER (IN)VISIBILITIES IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND YOUTH STUDIES

The phenomenon of youth participation has come to occupy a central place in contemporary sociological, political and cultural inquiry. In both scholarly and policy discourses, youth are frequently portrayed as pivotal agents of democratic renewal, social innovation, and cultural transformation. However, this pervasive focus has frequently entailed an unmarked and ostensibly neutral subject – “the youth” – whose identity remains implicitly male, heteronormative, cisgendered, and often white (Corrigan 1979; Willis 1979). Consequently, youth studies have exhibited a form of gender-blindness, either overlooking the role of gender altogether or addressing it narrowly through the lens of young women’s experiences, often without intersectional or relational depth.

Gender-blindness has for long characterised also studies on youth participation, where the recognition of gender as a key axis of stratification has emerged only recently. In this regard, feminist sociologists have demonstrated that participatory opportunities are not evenly distributed and that young people’s capacity to “take part” is deeply gendered (Skelton 2001; McRobbie 2009; Pitti *et al.* 2024). Sociology and political science have contributed to our understanding of the institutional and discursive frameworks that shape youth engagement by asking how gendered norms and power relations inform political behaviour and representation (Celis and Lovenduski 2018). Meanwhile, cultural studies provide insight into the symbolic, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of youth participation, highlighting how young people construct, perform, and contest gender identities through activism, subcultures, digital practices, and everyday life (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Nayak and Kehily 2006).

In this light, participation emerges as a gendered process. Civic spaces, activist collectives, educational forums, and online platforms all carry embedded expectations around expression, leadership, and legitimacy – expectations that privilege certain gender performances while marginalizing others. In general, young women and queer youth frequently report experiences of silencing and tokenization in both institutionalised and non-institutionalised settings (Taft 2011; Lopez-Fogues and Melis Cin 2017), but the concept of masculinity

is not monolithic and young men as well encounter divergent pressures to adhere to prevailing gender norms, with some gravitating towards illiberal or anti-gender movements as a means of reclaiming a perceived lost status (Connell 2005; Kováts and Põim 2015). These dynamics are not incidental but constitutive of how youth participation is structured, experienced, and evaluated.

The way participatory practices are shaped by unequal access to recognition, space, and legitimacy is highlighted in two studies on Young People and the Struggle for Participation (Walther *et al.* 2020) and Youth Participation and Learning (Bečević and Andersson 2022). While not always explicitly centred on gender, both works expose how formal structures like youth councils often marginalise non-normative forms of expression – such as emotional, embodied, or dissenting voices – frequently associated with young women, queer youth, or racialized masculinities (Pais 2022; Percy-Smith *et al.* 2020). Informal spaces, such as activist groups or sub-cultural practices (Mengilli *et al.* 2020; Pitti *et al.* 2024), reveal alternative modes of gendered participation, though these too reproduce hierarchies.

These examples underscore the importance of considering epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) as central to youth participation. Participation is not only stratified by social location but also regulated by normative expectations that determine whose voices are recognised as legitimate. For a significant proportion of young individuals who happen to be at the nexus of multiple marginalisations, the act of participating becomes a strenuous endeavor to attain epistemic legitimacy, which implies not only being present but also being recognised as credible knowers. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in contexts where young people are expected to adhere to prevailing norms of rationality, civility, or coherence to be heard. The recognition of this epistemic injustice necessitates a shift in focus from questions of inclusion alone to the broader political dynamics of knowledge, intelligibility, and recognition.

Intersectionality is indispensable for the comprehension of these complex realities. As argued by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), gender cannot be comprehended in isolation from other axes of social differentiation. Racialized youth, those from working-class backgrounds, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those without documentation encounter distinct barriers and possibilities within participatory fields. Their experiences frequently diverge from dominant narratives and are at risk of exclusion from frameworks that treat youth engagement as a universal good. An intersectional approach demands the interrogation of whose participation is recognised and on what terms.

2. AGE-BLINDNESS IN FEMINIST AND GENDER STUDIES

Feminist and gender studies have long been at the forefront of analysing power, identity, and social justice. However, one significant blind spot within these fields have for long been characterised by a lack of attention to age as a critical category of analysis. In relation to the topic of this special issue, this phenomenon, often referred to as age-blindness (Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Sandberg and Marshall 2017), limits our understanding of gendered experiences across the life course and obscures the ways in which generational positioning shapes feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, identity formation, and political objectives. Moreover, age-blindness diminishes attention to intergenerational dynamics and generational change, aspects that are fundamental to the sustainability and evolution of these activist spaces (Krekula 2007).

One of the main consequences of age-blindness in gender studies is the tendency to present feminist and LGBTQ+ movements as homogeneous entities, overlooking the ways in which age structures political priorities and activist strategies. For instance, youth-led feminist and queer activism often prioritizes digital mobilization, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), and fluid identity politics, whereas older generations may emphasize institutional engagement (Fraser 1997). Without an age-conscious perspective, analyses risk flattening these distinctions, leading to an incomplete portrayal of activist landscapes and of the tensions existing within it. Research by Harris (2004) highlights how young feminists often navigate between online activism and street protests, crafting new modes of engagement that differ from older feminists' practices. Similarly, Ghaziani *et al.* (2016) explores how contemporary LGBTQ+ youth activism embraces a more expansive understanding of gender and sexuality compared to previous generations.

Furthermore, the lack of attention to age dynamics within feminist and LGBTQ+ movements obscures crucial tensions and solidarities between generations. Generational shifts influence debates on strategy, inclusivity, and historical memory, shaping how movements evolve over time. The feminist movement, for example, has seen frictions between older and younger activists regarding approaches to gender identity, sex work, and reproductive rights (Rottenberg 2018; Arruzza *et al.* 2019). Generational tensions within feminism are evident in debates over the #MeToo movement, where some older feminists critique aspects of the campaign as overly punitive, while younger activists emphasize the necessity of radical accountability (Mendes *et al.* 2018). Similarly, within LGBTQ+ activism, generational differences affect the

prioritization of issues such as marriage equality versus anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles (Gould 2009). Studies by Weston (1998) and Halberstam (2005) illustrate how queer activism has historically been shaped by generational shifts in priorities, from the AIDS crisis to contemporary trans rights struggles.

Age-blindness also affects policy and institutional recognition of activism. Research shows that older feminist activists often find themselves marginalized in contemporary movement spaces, despite their historical contributions (McIntosh Sundstrom and McMahon 2024). Conversely, young activists may struggle for legitimacy within institutionalized feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations that prioritize hierarchical leadership structures over horizontal, digital-driven forms of activism (Stoltz et al. 2020). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering intergenerational solidarity and ensuring that feminist and LGBTQ+ civic and political spaces remain inclusive across different life stages.

Incorporating an age-sensitive framework can thus deepen the analysis of contemporary activism, shedding light on the ways age intersects with other social categories to shape participation, goals, and intra-movement relations. Theoretical frameworks such as life-course perspectives (Elder 1994) and feminist aging studies (Calasanti 2004) can offer valuable insights into how activists' experiences and priorities shift over time. Methodological approaches that account for generational perspectives, such as ethnographic studies of activist communities (Rupp and Taylor 2011) and oral histories that capture activist trajectories over time (Enke 2007), are essential. Intersectional frameworks that integrate age alongside gender, race, and class (McCall 2005) can further enhance our understanding of these dynamics. Without such considerations, the field risks reinforcing a partial and ahistorical view of gender-based participation.

3. EXPLORING GENDER IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

This thematic issue of *Società Mutamento Politica* addresses critical gaps in scholarship on youth participation through a twofold approach. First, the contributions in this special issue place gender – and its intersections with class, race, and sexuality – at the center of the analysis of youth engagement. Drawing from sociology, political and educational science, and cultural studies, this issue explores how gender functions as a structuring force in youth participation, shaping how young people become political subjects, express agency, and negotiate visibility and recognition. It examines the ways in which gendered power relations influence political socializa-

tion, shape access to activist spaces, and determine the legitimacy of youth voices in public debates. Second, this special issue foregrounds age as a critical, yet often overlooked, factor in gender-based participation. By emphasizing age as an analytical category, this issue seeks to foster a more comprehensive understanding of participation as a dynamic, multi-generational process shaped by evolving political, social, and cultural conditions. It challenges the persistent tendency to frame youth activism as a homogeneous or transitory phenomenon, instead illustrating how generational position intersects with gender to influence strategies of mobilisation, the articulation of political demands, and the sustainability of activist participation over time.

The objective of this issue is not merely to document exclusion or critique existing scholarship, but to propose an alternative framework for understanding the intersection of age and gender in the context of youth participation. The articles included in this collection employ diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, yet they share a common commitment to interrogating the gendered logics that underpin youth engagement and challenging the age-blindness that has long characterized studies on gender-based participation. By bringing attention to the generational and gendered dynamics at play in a variety of participatory settings, this issue contributes to a more nuanced and inclusive analysis of youth participation.

Rossella Ghigi, Martina Rolandi and Dario Tuorto's article considers feminism and LGBTQ+ rights within Catholic scout youth movements, exploring how young members navigate identities amid anti-gender propaganda. It highlights the growing acceptance of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights among younger generations, particularly women, despite religious constraints. In doing so, it investigates the tensions between tradition and progressive values in youth organizations contributing to broader debates on gender and sexuality in faith-based communities.

The article authored by Lidia Lo Schiavo and Paola Rebughini draws on qualitative interviews and ethnographic research to explore how gender identity shapes youth activism in Italy, especially in the post-pandemic context. The authors discuss how the pandemic intensified the integration of care, inclusion, and gender issues into youth mobilizations. Focusing on mutual care as a key participatory value, the article traces the legacy of feminisms in contemporary youth activism.

In their analysis, Marie-Anaïs Le Breton, Thelma Beaulieu, Maxime Lecoq, Patricia Loncle, Maryam Mahamat and Matthieu Rault explore the emergence of gender as a salient concern within the context of local youth policies in France, drawing upon the insights

derived from the RAJE project. Involving youth, professionals, and policymakers, the study explores how gender emerges on local policy agendas. While gender was not initially central to the discourse, it surfaced through the everyday practices of youth workers and local dynamics. The article highlights the discrepancy between the formal agendas of institutions and the experiences of individuals, advocating for a more deliberate integration of gender-related considerations within the frameworks of youth policy.

Sina-Mareen Köhler and Anna Lena Winkler focus on the ways in which 12-to-16-year-olds engage with gender-related topics in their peer interactions in- and outside school. Drawing on longitudinal data and a broad concept of participation, they emphasise the need for empirical research beyond formal political contexts. The findings show how young people assert and defend gender-related claims central to their social participation, with peer support playing a vital role in navigating gender struggles. Ultimately, the article illustrates how peer groups offer emotional and discursive support as adolescents explore their gender identities across different settings.

Simona Guglielmi, Veronica Riniolo, Nicola Maggini, Marta Visioli and Alice Sanarico examine how gender socialisation and ethnic background shape the political engagement of young people in Italy. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, the study explores how intersecting inequalities affect access to political spaces, particularly for young women with migrant backgrounds. The findings illuminate the manner in which gendered norms, perceived self-efficacy, and systemic exclusion contribute to the marginalisation of these individuals, as well as young women's alternative political practices challenging the prevailing barriers.

Stefania Leone and Andrea Orio's article investigates how young women in rural Southern Italy navigate gender norms in conservative, often change-resistant communities. Drawing on interviews and case studies of youth associations, it highlights both the constraints of entrenched gender roles and the emergence of participatory practices that challenge them. These initiatives create spaces where new, more inclusive social models can take shape and participation becomes a key driver of both personal and collective change. Through an intersectional lens, the study shows how gender, place, and culture intersect in shaping youth experiences and transformative potentials.

The article authored by Mariaeugenia Parito e Fabrizia Pasciuto examines gender issues in Italian public debates on the European Union, emphasizing gender equality as a core EU value. It explores how gender mainstreaming has shaped policies and public discourse,

highlighting economic and cultural challenges. Through analysis of youth networks and debates, it investigates how young people engage with gender issues in EU policy making. The study underscores the role of youth in promoting gender justice and advocating for inclusive reforms within European institutions.

Michel Sterbini Perticarà's article investigates how young trans* and non-binary individuals in Italy confront everyday and structural discrimination through activism. Challenging the constraints of the gender binary, the article shows how they cultivate networks of care and resistance in both digital and physical spaces. Through interviews and desk analysis, the study reveals how these practices reclaim autonomy, counter isolation, and promote mutual aid. In this light, activism emerges not just as protest, but as a vital practice of collective care and social transformation.

Patrick Leinhos' article explores the impact of queer volunteering on the biographies of young adults in Germany. The study examines how engagement in queer activism influences identity, agency, and self-understanding. Queer spaces are shown to support reflection on personal experiences of marginalisation and negotiating belonging beyond hetero and cis-normative norms. The study emphasises that queer volunteering fosters biographical work, offering young people resources to process difference, claim visibility, and participate in the reshaping of social norms.

The special issue concludes with an interview with Judith Bessant, Professor at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, a prominent scholar in youth activism research. Known for her advocacy in youth studies and social justice, Bessant's work critically examines inequalities in youth participation. The interview explores her thoughts on the role of gender in shaping the dynamics of youth activism and participatory practices.

All together, the articles presented in this special issue show how gender intervenes in shaping a variety of different forms of participation, including both institutionalised and non-institutionalised spaces and practices of engagement. The aim is to promote a more integrated and reflexive field of youth studies by showing that gender is not a subsidiary or specialized concern but a fundamental dimension of youth subjectivity, agency, and political life. Rather than treating gender or age as isolated variables, the contributions in this issue demonstrate that a comprehensive analysis of gender-age dynamics is essential for understanding the contemporary landscapes of youth participation. It is our hope that these contributions not only enrich academic debates but also resonate with broader struggles for recognition, equity, and transformation among young people themselves.

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Feminism and LGBTQI+ Rights in Catholic Scout Youth Movement: Navigating among Identities

ROSSELLA GHIGI, MARTINA ROLANDI, DARIO TUORTO

Abstract. In this paper we examine the advancement of feminist and pro-LGBTQI+ ideals within the Italian Scout movement. This context provides a unique lens to test the interplay between traditional religious frameworks and progressive gender and sexuality discourses, particularly among youth, so contributing to the ongoing exploration of how spaces of youth participation are shaped by gender cultures, and how feminist and LGBTQI+ perspectives can coexist or challenge religious activism. We present data from an original study conducted on four hundreds of scout leaders during a national gathering. Our questionnaire investigates how feminist values and attitudes toward LGBTQI+ rights are embraced by the movement and how these views translate into a distancing from the highly binary rules of scouting and the willingness to change them. We then present a four categories typology of catholic young activists based on their attitudes toward feminism and LGBTQI+ and their religious participation. While girls are more open to addressing these topics, boys feel less comfortable challenging longstanding norms around gender segregation and sexuality. In other words, girls are more likely to show a *Secularized* or *Devoted resistant* profile than their male counterparts, who are more likely to be *Traditionalist* or *Detached*. Our multivariate models on the likelihood to embrace feminist and LGBTQI+ values emphasize the intersectional nature of factors influencing openness to feminism and LGBTQI+ rights, especially gender and age.

Keywords: Scout movement, Feminism, LGBTQI+, Religiosity, Youth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite a lively presence of anti-gender propaganda in the European public debate in recent years (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), feminist and pro-LGBTQI+ values have been increasingly embraced by younger generations: international surveys show a growing acceptance of gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights among younger cohorts, especially women (Halman and van Ingen 2015; Kuntz *et al.* 2015; Eurobarometer 2023), as well as the challenge of traditional gender and sexual norms and more progressive attitudes among young adults and adolescents (Inglehart and Norris 2003; 2009; Halman and van Ingen 2015; Lyons, Bauman and Kivisto 2017 for Italy as a paradigmatic case study, see Prearo 2024). Such trends have long been discussed by sociologists and other social scientists, especially in relation to long-durée social

processes. Notably, religion, family, and social collectives – often seen as constraints on individual emancipation – are at the base of the *individualization* thesis (Lash 1993; Beck 1992), which stresses the importance of reflexivity as new expression of behaviour driven by deliberate human actions and choices. This holds true especially for women who, more than in the past, are permitted and expected to shape their biographies according to their personal values and desires (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). According to individualization theorists, traditions and groups continue to play a role in individual experience, but the meaning of tradition and group membership has shifted from an external imposition to something done consciously by individuals to inform self-identity and personal biography (Howard 2007).

Indeed, this process is also connected to *secularization* and the decline of the influence of religious institutions on societal values and laws, as well as to the popularization of feminist and LGBTQI+ claims. A vast body of literature has documented the generational shift towards secularization, with studies highlighting the decline of religious affiliation and practice among younger cohorts (Kasselstrand, Zuckerman and Cragun 2023; Voas and Chaves 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2011), and the growing trend toward personalizing the relationship with religiosity, thus resulting in a diversification of religious experience, particularly among younger generations. At the same time, a large body of research has shown the young people's increasing openness to sexual liberation, the transformation of intimacies and their deconstruction and elaboration of gender binaries (Giddens 1992; Scott 2018). Younger generations tend to be more open and supportive of feminist and LGBTQI+ issues compared to older cohorts (Halman and Ingen 2015a; 2015b), reflecting a broader societal shift towards progressive values on gender and sexual equality, partly due to the influence of social media (Banet-Weiser 2018) to the extent that, according to some scholars, feminist and LGBTQI+ claims have been co-opted within neoliberal logics, leading to their commodification and depoliticization (Rottenberg 2018; Fraser 2020). How do the processes of individualization, secularization, and particularly the spread of feminist and pro-LGBTQI+ values – which are so influential among young people – interact with religion-oriented identities, such as those of young Catholic activists? How do young Catholics reconcile a generational sensitivity that is generally open to elements of social justice, yet are contested by the very religious institutions to which they actively adhere?

In this paper we aim to examine secular, feminist and pro-LGBTQI+ ideals within a specific context, the Catholic branch of the Italian Scout movement

(AGESCI)¹. Such context provides a unique lens to test the interplay between the official position of the Catholic Church on gender issues and more innovative and inclusive gender and sexuality discourses, particularly among young adults, so contributing to understand how gender cultures shape spaces of youth participation and how feminist and LGBTQI+ perspectives can either coexist with or challenge religious activism.

More in detail, we will present data from an original study conducted on a sample of 413 AGESCI Scout leaders during a national gathering of scout leaders held in August 2024 in the city of Verona (Italy). AGESCI is the main component in the Scout movement, and it is situated within the broader and diverse spectrum of Catholic activism. Our questionnaire investigates, on one hand, how feminist values and attitudes toward LGBTQI+ rights are embraced by leaders within the movement. On the other hand, it explores how these views translate into a distancing from not only the official teachings of the Catholic Church but also from the highly binary rules of scouting, and, more broadly, into a desire to reform scouting practices. We then present a typology of adherents and a multivariate analysis of the impact of individual and contextual variables influencing adherence to feminist and LGBTQI+ values.

2. GENERATIONAL SHIFTS IN RELIGIOSITY, FEMINIST AND LGBTQI+ VALUES

A growing body of research shows that the attitudes towards feminism, gender equality, and LGBTQI+ rights tend to align, meaning that individuals who endorse one of these causes are often supportive of the others as well. These issues can therefore be examined collectively, as they are increasingly addressed together in public debate and commonly positioned within the same progressive or conservative ideological framework.

Beyond reasons of internal coherence regarding the theme of social justice, two factors explain such alignment. On the one hand, in the last fifteen years, this kind of alignment has been reinforced by anti-gender movements, which have grouped issues such as women's rights, gender identity, LGBTQI+ rights, and abortion under the broad umbrella of "gender ideology". The concept of "symbolic glue", discussed by scholars such as Pető, Kováts and Grzebalska (2017; Kováts *et al.* 2015), highlights how anti-gender actors (including the Catholic Church) strategically link feminism, LGBTQI+ rights,

¹ The Scout Movement is also composed by the non-religious section (CNGEI); however, for simplicity in the paper, we use the term "scout" to refer only to the AGESCI.

and gender equality into a single ideological enemy (see also: Butler 2024). On the other hand, in a social justice perspective, feminism, gender equality, and LGBTQI+ rights cannot be neatly separated because they are all concerned with structural inequalities related to gender and sexuality (Butler 2004): addressing LGBT issues and feminism together can play a crucial role in achieving full sexual citizenship (Richardson 2017).

Some authors today suggest a more nuanced view of the fault lines between the two fronts (anti-gender movements, and those who are for women's and LGBTQI+ rights), suggesting that in current populist and authoritarian contexts the boundaries between the discourses and politics of those who campaign *against* and those who campaign *for* gender and sexual equality are blurring (Beck, Habed and Henninger 2024). But it is still noteworthy that the Vatican and many Catholic institutions have played a crucial role in supporting anti-gender movements and their construction of "gender ideology" as a dangerous drift toward individualism, relativism, totalitarianism, and neoliberalism.

As a matter of fact, religiosity, civic values, and attitudes can be interconnected in a complex and not always linear manner, especially among young generations. Dugan (2017), for instance, shows how millennial Catholics internalize traditional gender roles through religious practices and, despite this, they often experience tension between these prescribed roles and modern societal expectations. This echoes Lavizzari (2016), where Catholic people, especially women, navigate the balance between feminist ideals and traditional religious teachings, often leading to internal conflicts as they seek to harmonize their beliefs with modern values of gender equality. Worthen, Lingardi and Caristo (2017) highlight how younger generations, particularly in religious settings, are more open to non-traditional family structures and more supportive of LGBTQI+ rights compared to older, more conservative family members and religious leaders. This is also observed in Giorgi and Palmisano (2020), where they discuss how younger Catholics are increasingly distancing themselves from the strict traditional views upheld by their Church, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. These generational differences are also explained by Price (2023), who discusses how GenZ (people born between 1997 and 2012), especially girls, are heavily influenced by social media and global pop culture, platforms that often promote individualism, gender equality, and support for LGBTQI+ rights. From Kosar *et al.* (2023) and Savage (2021), we see a pattern where young people, particularly women of the Generation Z, are engaging with feminism through various platforms like social media and celeb-

rity endorsements (Banet-Weiser 2018), despite of course, the emergence of many forms of critical engagement with social media as well. The existing literature also highlights a difference in attitudes between boys and girls, with boys generally holding more traditional views in feminist and LGBTQ values: Banaszak *et al.* (2023)'s work shows that women's protests are shown to influence youth attitudes, but boys tend to adopt progressive views at a slower pace. Indeed, feminist issues may resonate more strongly with young women, as they recognize in feminism a movement that represents their interests and affirms their aspirations. In contexts where gender equality is not yet fully normalized, such as religious or more traditional environments, boys may hold onto conventional ideas longer, reflecting the patterns we observe among the male scouts. Frisinger (2022)'s study on the commodification of feminism also helps explain why some young people, particularly boys, may be resistant to or sceptical of feminist ideals. As feminism becomes more commodified, with its messages diluted in consumer culture, boys may see feminism as a trend rather than a political movement aimed at systemic change. This commodified version of feminism might also be perceived as less relevant to their lived experiences, leading to a gender gap. However, girls, exposed to both popular and radical forms of feminism through social media, as well as forms of feminist protest and activism, might resonate more with its empowerment messages, as seen in Frisinger (2022) and Savage (2021). In general, women often exhibit stronger affinity for feminist values and acceptance of LGBTQI+ rights compared to men (Lyons, Bauman and Kivisto 2017).

In Mather (2018) and de Vries *et al.* (2021), we see how religious environments, particularly Christian and Catholic institutions, tend to reinforce traditional gender roles. Religious teachings often uphold conservative gender norms, and parents, particularly fathers, may continue to impart these values to their children. Nevertheless, Romagnoli *et al.* (2011) and Riley (2019) show that young people are becoming more aware of gender-based violence and inequality, despite traditional views around family and intimate relationships.

Such results align with a long-durée sociological explanation. Studies by Inglehart and Norris (2003) and Halman and van Ingen (2015a; 2015b) indicate that younger individuals, influenced by evolving social and cultural contexts, are generally more supportive of gender equality and minority rights. This literature shows, on the one hand, that individuals who are more religious tend to prioritize stability and social order over individualistic and self-enhancing values. On the other hand, it highlights that older individuals generally adhere more strongly

ly to conservation values (e.g., tradition and conformity), whereas younger generations are more inclined towards values promoting openness to change and self-direction.

Some works tried to explore such conflicting religious identities and attitudes toward feminism and gender issues. Our analysis will draw particularly on the categories introduced by Elaine Howard Ecklund and Tanya Zion-Waldocks. Ecklund's (2003) study explores how Catholic women reconcile their dual identities as committed Catholics and feminists. Focusing on the diverse strategies that women use to remain committed to their religious institutions while advocating for gender equality, the Author identifies three primary approaches: reinterpreting feminism through the lens of Catholicism; reinterpreting Catholicism through the lens of feminism; individualizing identities². Zion-Waldocks (2018)'s research on Agunah activists, who struggle against restrictive practices within their religious community while still seeing themselves as part of that community, suggests the notion of "devoted resistance" to understand an activism aimed at reforming unjust aspects from within, while still committed to tradition.

As for Italy, which serves as the context of this study, many authors have suggested that the adherence to institutional religious doctrines is uncertain among young cohorts, where religious sentiments are still present but responses to existential questions are personal and sometimes contradictory (Garelli 2020). Here, studies have registered an increasing trend towards individualized and plural forms of religious involvement, in the context of a growing personalization of practices and a far-from-linear intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs (Crespi and Ricucci 2021) sometimes intersecting new forms of spirituality (Palmisano and Pannofino 2021). But Catholic activists should be, within the same age group, among those least affected by these changes and more resistant to the personalization of religious messages and the secularization of values – particularly regarding feminist and LGBTQI+ issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage or rights of trans people on which Catholic institutions have expressed criticism in their official documents. So, it is particularly interesting to see to what extent these values are spread among young religious activists and how they reconcile their values with

the Catholic Church doctrines. The challenge lies in how these young individuals can maintain their commitment to the values of their faith community while also embracing the progressive ideals prevalent among their peers.

For all these reasons, the Scout movement, as a young population that identifies as practicing Catholics and actively engages in religious associations, represents a particularly intriguing case study.

3. GENDER AND LGBTQI+ ISSUES IN THE SCOUT MOVEMENT

The Scout movement is the largest youth organization in the world, with over 38 million participants. The movement primarily engages individuals aged 6 to 21, although older youth also actively participate as guides for younger cohorts. Founded in 1907 by Robert Baden-Powell, the Scout movement is now structured into two principal organizations: the World Organization of the Scout Movement and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts.

Originally, the Scout movement was not intended for women in the UK. Baden-Powell envisioned a community where men and boys could connect with others from diverse backgrounds, united by shared values such as patriotism, patriarchy, and empire (Mills 2016). In its early days, the term "others" referred not only to foreigners (those outside the UK) but also to young women who were excluded from the movement and its activities. Despite the program being designed for boys, it quickly began to attract young women, whose desire to become "scouts" grew significantly. By 1912, Girl Scout groups, known as Guides, were already active in ten countries, including Italy. These Girl Scouts organized themselves into small groups; in some cases, boys and girls gathered together, while in others, they were separated. For a considerable time, however, females were not allowed to participate in official spaces, and when they did, the division between boys and girls was pronounced (*ibidem*). For more than a century, participants have strongly endorsed the necessity of maintaining two separate and independent sections, emphasizing feminine personality, such as domestic ones, and refusing the tendency to masculinize girls. From the 1990s onward, the organization undertook a profound reflection on sexual identity and the differences between women and men, a dialogue that continues to this day (Vescovi 2012) and women's increasing involvement in the Scout movement was an integral part of the broader struggle for women's emancipation, self-fulfilment, and political equality. In 2023 the Italian Scout Movement, for the first time, established a

² In particular, Ecklund's categories included: (1) Reinterpreting Feminism in Light of Catholicism, where women align their feminist values with their religious beliefs, making feminism part of their spiritual identity; (2) Reinterpreting Catholicism in Light of Feminism, where women apply feminist ideals, such as gender equality, to their understanding of Catholicism, even if this challenges Church doctrines; and (3) Individualized Identities, where women selectively choose aspects of both Catholicism and feminism, maintaining both identities but without necessarily seeking consistency between them.

special commission on gender and sexual identity. This commission aims to gather testimonies and stories from LGBTQI+ scouts of all ages to open a broader debate and implement specific actions. We could say that for the first time, the official debate overcame binarism by opening up for something that, in two binaries, did not fit.

In Italy, by the 1990s, the movement demonstrated a strong awareness of evolving models of femininity and masculinity (Fasoli 1994): the pedagogy of difference has been central to the educational method of both Girl and Boy Scouts, as children and adolescents are taught to recognize and appreciate gender differences (Di Nicola 1994). Co-education, in this context, is not understood as complementarity, as traditionally posited by the Church, but rather as reciprocity: each individual, with their limitations, contributes to the collective whole (Lucchelli and Patriarca 1994). According to Halls *et al.* (2018), guiding attracts young girls due to its ability to flexibly and meaningfully adapt to social change, particularly regarding gender norms across different times and places. But, especially at the top level of organizations, there is scepticism towards the third feminist wave's concepts of fluidity and no-binarism, emphasizing, on the contrary, the women's identity within a hetero and binary normative frame (*ibidem*). Indeed, using the words of Tilstra *et al.* (2022: 183), it is still a matter of interest to understand how Scouts' «presence in the space is conceptualized or affected by gender».

4. DATA AND METHODS

This research is drawn from data gathered through a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed mainly of closed questions, with only two open questions. It was created using Qualtrics, a web-based software that makes surveys and generates reports. The questionnaire was structured into nine main sections: demographic information about the respondent and their family; the size and composition of their scout group; attitudes towards various gender-related issues; the opinions of the participants' mothers, fathers, scout group members, and priests on these topics; perceptions of the inclusiveness within their groups; their perceived readiness to handle specific sensitive situations; opinions regarding the Commission on Gender Identity; agreement with the binary division of activities and spaces; views on sexuality; and, finally, opinions on Catholic norms and the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Scout movement. We included two open questions about the gender division in the scout rules and episodes regarding gender, sexuality, or LGBTQI+ rights in the Scout movement.

The questionnaire was disseminated in two waves: first, it was sent to some personal contacts within the movement of those writing, who sent it to other scout leaders³. Through WhatsApp, we sent a message with the link and QR code. Secondly, one of the authors went to the “National Route” organized in Verona from the 22nd to the 24th of August 2024, which gathered around 17.000 scout leaders from all Italian regions. In Villa Bruni's location, she distributed the questionnaire among the participants. Furthermore, each person who proposed the questionnaire was asked to send it to his or her CoCa⁴. An initial observation was that the proposed topic was considered attractive by almost all the people who were proposed to. They tell us that over the last five years, the gender issue started to be questioned and discussed within their scout groups. The sensation was that they were pleased that someone was treating such a theme in such an environment.

Participation in the National meeting was not individual; most people went with their CoCa. This means that loco recruitment has been a group rather than an individual one. We stopped groups of people from the same CoCa and the same city and region. Moreover, we should consider that all questionnaires sent by WhatsApp might be biased because only people interested in such issues are willing to fill out a 15/20-minute survey. This problem has been partially overcome by distributing surveys in person, even though we did not have complete control of the filling process in that case. However, the fact that the questionnaires were distributed at an event that was not specifically centred around this topic (the National Leaders' Gathering) and in contexts where gender issues were not particularly relevant (for example, on trains while people were traveling to the gathering) helped to limit the self-selection bias.

Indeed, one of the limitations of our survey is that it focuses on the experiences and opinions of scout leaders, without considering the voices of younger movement members. This lack of inclusivity could result in a partial perspective on the situation. Moreover, self-selection bias and the numerosity of the sample are limitations to the generalizability of our results.

The survey was completed by 421 scout leaders currently active in the movement. The average age was 26, the range went from 20 to 69 and most of our respondents are part of the GenZ (12-27 years old). 51% identified themselves as female; 8 people (1.9%) responded

³ We chose to focus on Scout leaders because they have a central role in the educational method and are the younger generations' guides.

⁴ CoCa (which stands for Comunità dei Capi, leaders' community) is a group of adult scout leaders responsible for the management, organization, and educational direction of the various scouting units.

Table 1. Sociodemographic profiles of males and females.

	Male	Female	Tot
<i>Age</i>			
<25	30.6	43.7	37.5
25-28	27.0	30.2	28.7
>28	42.3	26.0	33.8
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Education</i>			
High school or less (excluding university students)	23.3	8.8	15.7
University students	14.2	30.9	22.9
University degree or more	62.4	60.4	61.4
Totals	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Parents' education</i>			
No graduate parent	51.4	46.6	48.8
At least one parent with university degree	48.6	53.4	51.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Area of residence</i>			
North	60.9	61.9	61.4
Centre-South	39.1	38.1	38.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	197	216	413

Source: Authors' elaboration.

“other”. The sample was mainly composed of Italian people. We have responses from all the regions (except for Molise and Aosta Valley). Despite the expected overrepresentation of some geographical contexts, our sample is not limited to a single area. Northern scouts account for 61.9% of the total (260 cases), of whom 27.1% in the North-West and 34.8% in the Nord-East. Scouts from the Centre-Italy regions are 18.1% (76 cases; Tuscany: 7.1%) and those from the South 20.0% (85 cases; Sicily: 9.3%). In terms of education, 6 out of 10 respondents have a university degree, and more than 20% are university students, mainly women (30.9% compared to 14.2%). Only 16% have completed their education at the high school level or below, without pursuing further studies (men: 23.3%). Parental education is equally divided between families with at least one parent with tertiary education and families with no parent with such a higher education level.

5. ATTITUDES TOWARD AGESCI'S BINARISM, FEMINIST AND LGBTQI+ ISSUES

The history of the Scout movement reveals that it initially operated as a binary organization in both structure and operation (Mills 2016; Vescovi 2012). This binary nature was evident in various aspects – from the

segregation of spaces and clothing distinctions – to gender-specific workshops and an educational model based on gender roles (Smith 2006; Lundberg 2022). While much of that legacy has been overcome, its influence is still present in the activities offered in scout groups of all ages, from the gender division of tents to the organization of groups and activities.

Examining the frequency distribution of questionnaire responses related to the binary gender distinction, we observe, on the one hand, how much of the rigidity from earlier times has been overcome. On the other hand, gender distinctions still serve as a starting point for developing effective educational methods. Concerning the attitude toward the “division of workshop activities for females vs. scoutball for males” the position is clear: nearly the entire sample disagrees, with no significant differences between male and female scout leaders. However, opinions are less clear when it comes to gender-based divisions within the reparto and squadriglia⁵. About 38% of male respondents strongly agree with this distinction, compared to 29% of females who think such a division benefits children and adolescents' development. Regarding space separation – specifically toilets and sleeping arrangements at night – responses are more varied. Here, male scout leaders (29.1%) are more likely to support the separation of bathrooms than female leaders (20.3%). However, some respondents' answers may be influenced by hygiene concerns rather than gender issues. The strongest agreement on binary divisions in both genders appears in the question about separating males and females during sleep, with 47% of males and 35.2% of females in favor. In the quote below, taken from the answers to the open questions, the perceptions of living in a still cisnormative and binary environment is clear:

It happens quite often, especially regarding gender roles. In my scout leader group, there is still the belief that it's essential to have male figures, particularly in the scout troop, otherwise, it seems like it's not done properly. Here's an example: in the clan, there is only one male scout, and for an activity, we had to find biographies of significant people. I had only found stories of women. My fellow leader insisted on introducing a man's biography because she was concerned the only boy would feel excluded.

⁵ A *Reparto* is the larger unit within the Scouts, typically made up of several smaller groups called *Squadriglie*. A reparto is usually composed of scouts in the age range of 11 to 16 years old and includes both boys and girls in coeducational groups. The *Reparto* functions as a community where scouts participate in larger-scale activities, such as group games, ceremonies, and camps. It is led by adult leaders and sometimes older scouts. Any *Squadriglia* consists of 6 to 8 scouts of the same gender or mixed, depending on the organization. This group is more intimate and self-organized, often led by one of the older scouts.

Table 2. Attitudes toward binary division of spaces and activities (% agree and very agree)

	<i>Man</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>All respondents</i>	<i>Measure of ass. (Cramer's V)</i>	<i>Sign.</i>
Tents divided by gender at night	47.0	35.2	45.8	.252	.000
Division of lab activities for females vs. scoutball for males	1.4	1.3	1.4	.098	.655
Gender-segregated patrols and troops during adolescence	38.9	29.2	33.2	.216	.000
Separate bathrooms for males and females	29.1	20.3	23.1	.168	.027

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Table 3. Attitudes toward AGESCI and some gender issues

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>All respondents</i>
I wish AGESCI were more open about contraception	72.9	88.4	80.0
I wish AGESCI were more open about cohabitation outside marriage	79.1	89.6	84.6
I wish AGESCI were more open about LGBT rights	78.5	89.5	83.5
AGESCI, as a Catholic organization, should adhere to Church dogmas	38.2	21.8	28.9
I wish AGESCI included sexual education	66.9	67.4	67.1

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Although the Scout Movement continues to attract young people due to its ability to flexibly and meaningfully adapt to social change, particularly regarding gender norms, at the top level of organizations, there is scepticism towards the third feminist wave's concepts of fluidity and no-binarity, emphasizing, on the contrary, the women's identity within a hetero and binary normative frame (Halls *et al.* 2018). This ambivalent position does not attract the favour of many young scouts, who would desire a more progressive and clear position on gender-related issues. This is evident in the responses to the questionnaire, which included the respondents' opinions on the position of AGESCI. Both women and men wish for more openness of the AGESCI on the issues of sexuality, contraception, cohabitation outside marriage, and LGBTQI+ rights. However, girls appear more progressive in each of the items we have considered. The percentage of girls who answered, "very agree" and "very much agree" is at least 10% higher in three items. Moreover, girls are also more in disagreement with the fact that AGESCI, as a Catholic association, should adhere to the Church's dogmas compared to the males. Only in the topic of sexual education, males and females have almost the same average percentage of people who responded "agree" or "very much agree" to the introduction of sexual education for Scouts.

Our data on attitudes toward sexuality, feminist, and LGBTQI+ issues reveal a clear gender difference in the

degree of progressive views expressed. Women consistently score higher than men across all categories, indicating more progressive attitudes. For example, women's scores are notably higher on issues such as rights for trans people (0.85 vs. 0.75 for men), sex outside of marriage (0.90 vs. 0.83), and feminism (0.89 vs. 0.78), same-sex couples, (0.89 vs. 0.76 for men). The largest gap is seen in the category of traditional gender roles in the family, where women score 0.93, the highest of any item, while men score 0.83. In contrast, men, while generally progressive, show more conservative attitudes relative to women, especially on issues such as abortion and the education of gender and sexuality from primary school, where the differences are 0.74 vs. 0.85 and 0.77 vs. 0.87, respectively. On average, all respondents exhibit progressive attitudes, with scores ranging from 0.80 to 0.89, reflecting a relatively high level of openness across the sample. These findings suggest that women are leading the way in embracing more progressive views on sexuality, feminism, and LGBTQI+ rights, but men are also moving in that direction, though at a slightly slower pace. As one respondent wrote:

Several years ago, I collaborated with a regional scout magazine. We produced an issue about love, in which I wrote an article dedicated to Catholic homosexual couples. Although the article was initially accepted, authorized, and therefore written, when it came time for printing, it was almost censored. We resolved the issue by including a disclaimer stating that the article did not represent the views of the associ-

Table 4. Attitudes toward sexuality, feminist and LGBTQI+ issues, average score (scale 0-1, 0 max conservative, 1 max progressive). Respondents and (respondents' perceptions) of their parents' placement on the scale.

	<i>All respondents</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Fathers</i>	<i>Mothers</i>
Rights for trans people (3)	.80	.75	.85	.43	.49
Sex outside of marriage (1)	.87	.83	.90	.67	.64
Abortion (1)	.80	.74	.85	.56	.56
Feminism (2)	.84	.78	.89	.58	.69
Adoption for same-sex couples (3)	.83	.76	.89	.44	.51
Traditional division of gender roles in the family (2)	.89	.83	.93	.59	.69
Education, gender and sexuality from primary school (2)	.82	.77	.87	.54	.59
N	413	197	216	413	413

Note: (1)=sexuality; (2)=feminism; (3)=LGBTQI+ issues.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

ation. I had to personally inform the two boys I interviewed about this stance, which was quite unfair and humiliating, especially since the article had been reviewed at various levels. All of this happened because, when asked, 'What advice would you give to scout leaders?' their answer was, 'Never assume they are heterosexual.'

6. ADHERENCE TO FEMINISM AND RELIGION: A TYPOLOGY

Building on the insights from Ecklund (2003) and Zion-Waldocks (2018) previously discussed, we constructed a typology that includes four distinct profiles, representing different ways individuals navigate the pressures of religious expectations and progressive values⁶:

The Detached: Those in this category feel only weakly connected to both religious and feminist/LGBTQI+ pressures. They are neither strongly influenced by traditional religious expectations nor actively engaged in feminist or LGBTQI+ advocacy, leading to a more disengaged stance.

The Secularized: Individuals in this category distance themselves from traditional religious norms and are open to themes of feminism and LGBTQI+ rights. They embrace strongly progressive values and challenge the traditional roles imposed by religious institutions.

The Doctrinal: This profile represents individuals who adhere closely to religious impositions and resist feminist and LGBTQI+ ideas. They uphold traditional beliefs and are less inclined to support social changes that diverge from established religious doctrines.

The Devoted Resistant: Similar to the concept outlined by Zion-Waldocks, these individuals feel the tension of both religious expectations and strong progressive feminist and LGBTQI+ ideals. They are committed to their faith while also engaging in resistance, attempting to reconcile and balance both influences.

By integrating the theoretical patterns of both Ecklund (2003) and Zion-Waldocks (2018), we suggest a comprehensive framework for analysing our data and capturing the complex ways in which individuals negotiate multiple, and often conflicting, influences on their social identities. In doing so, we can see that the Secularized profile is the most prevalent in our sample, representing 33.2% of respondents, while the Detached group is the least common at 14.4%. This suggests that many participants have either adopted progressive views or are

⁶ Our typology combines the dimension of gender and religiosity. As regards the former, we use a single battery of items on attitudes (conservative vs progressive: 1-7 scale) towards gender equality, feminism, sexuality, rights for homosexual and trans people. The index is dichotomized into 0 (below median) and 1 (above median). The dimension of religiosity includes four variables: a) importance of religion in respondent's life (0=low, little; 1=enough, rather much, very much); b) parents' religious belief/belonging (0= both parents non-religious/other religion than Catholic/Catholic but not attending Church or attending less than once a week; 1=at least one parent Catholic and attending church once a week or more); c) religious activism (0=no participation in religious groups; 1=participation in religious groups); d) position on issue: "The Church should be faithful to its dogmatism without being influenced by modernity" (0=strongly disagree, disagree; 1= enough agree, agree, strongly agree). The religiosity index ranges from 0 to 4 and is dichotomized into 0-1 (0=score 0 and 1; 1=score 2 to 4).

Table 5. Typology of Respondents according to attitudes toward Feminist and LGBTQ issues and attitudes toward religious norms.

		<i>Feminism and LGBTQ Issues</i>	
		-	+
Religious norms	-	Detached	Secularized
	+	Doctrinal	Devoted Resistant

Source: Authors' elaboration.

actively balancing both traditional and progressive influences, while a smaller portion remains disengaged from both. When examining gender differences, it becomes clear that Doctrinals are more likely to be male, while Secularized individuals are predominantly female. This indicates that men are more inclined to adhere to traditional values, whereas women show greater openness to feminist and LGBTQI+ themes. The Devoted Resistant group is more evenly distributed between genders, highlighting the tension of navigating both influences among both men and women. The Detached category, however, shows a higher representation among males, suggesting that men may be more prone to adopt a disengaged stance from both sets of pressures.

Age plays an important role in determining the distribution of profiles. The Secularized profile is more common among younger participants, particularly those under 25, suggesting a generational shift towards more progressive values. Conversely, Doctrinals are more prevalent in the over-30 age group, reflecting a stronger adherence to traditional values among older respondents. The Devoted Resistant group spans all age categories, with no significant age-related trend, while the Detached group is distributed relatively evenly, indicating weak correlations with age.

The analysis shows clear educational differences among the profiles. Doctrinals span all education levels, while the Secularized and Devoted Resistant groups are more common among university-educated individuals. The Detached group, however, is more prevalent among those with only middle or high school diplomas.

Parental education also appears to influence the distribution of profiles. Secularized individuals are more common among those with at least one parent holding a university degree, suggesting the influence of parental education on the adoption of progressive values. Doctrinals and Detached profiles, by contrast, are more prevalent among those with less educated parents. The Devoted Resistant profile is distributed across both groups, reflecting the complex interplay between parental education and the negotiation of competing identities.

The analysis of regional distribution reveals that Doctrinals are more common in the northern regions, while Secularized individuals are particularly prevalent in the central and southern regions. Interestingly, the Devoted Resistant group is more prevalent in the central and southern areas, while Detached individuals are more represented in the north, further indicating a nuanced regional distinction.

Lastly, attitudes toward gendered scout rules provide further insight into these profiles. Doctrinals tend to support scout rules, with a majority favouring their

retention, while Secularized individuals are more likely to be anti-rule and support changing the existing regulations. The Devoted Resistant profile is almost evenly split between pro- and anti-rule attitudes, reflecting the internal conflict between upholding tradition and advocating for change. The Detached group also shows a more supportive stance toward scout rules but exhibits a weaker alignment with either position.

7. THE LIKELIHOOD TO BE FEMINIST AND PRO-LGBTQ: A REGRESSION ANALYSIS

We ran a logistic regression to test the impact of sociodemographic determinants on respondents' likelihood of being open to feminism and LGBTQI+ rights versus not being open to these values. As a dependent variable we used the abovementioned dichotomized scale of progressivism on gender issues (0=low pro-feminist view; 1=high pro-feminist view). Other variables in the regression are: gender (male, ref. cat., female); age (under 25; 25-28; >28, ref. cat.); education (less than degree, ref. cat.; degree); region (Centre and South, ref. cat.; North); parents' religiosity (low, ref. cat.; high). Model 1 reports the effect of sociodemographic background without any other specification. In Model 2 we added two different dimensions concerning the social context in which our respondents are embedded: parish priest's and scout group's views on feminism (the same battery used for the dependent variable). For both variables we created a dichotomy (below vs. above median value of progressive).

The regression analysis shows that gender plays a significant role in determining openness to feminism and LGBTQI+ rights, as indicated by a consistently high positive coefficient across both models. Gender is a significant predictor in both models, with women being much more likely than men to hold pro-feminist views. In Model 1, the coefficient for gender ($\text{Exp}(B) = 4.196$) indicates that women are over four times more likely to have a high pro-feminist view compared to men, and this effect strengthens slightly in Model 2 ($\text{Exp}(B) = 4.789$). This finding remains statistically significant throughout. Age also plays a role in shaping attitudes. The age group under 25 shows a significantly higher likelihood of holding pro-feminist views compared to the reference group (>28 years), with an $\text{Exp}(B)$ of approximately 4.1 in both models. Education does not emerge as a statistically significant predictor in either model, with $\text{Exp}(B)$ values of 1.892 in Model 1 and 1.535 in Model 2. This suggests that holding a university degree, compared to having less education, does not significantly affect the likelihood of supporting feminist

Table 6. Regression analysis on the likelihood to have pro-feminist and pro-LGBTQI+ attitudes.

	Model 1				Model 2			
	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender: female (ref. male)	1.434	.467	.002	4.196	1.566	.490	.001	4.789
Age (ref.>28)			.021				.030	
Age (<25)	1.425	.622	.022	4.158	1.402	.635	.027	4.064
Age (25-28)	-.305	.521	.559	.737	-.276	.540	.610	.759
Education: degree (ref. less than degree)	.638	.544	.241	1.892	.429	.562	.446	1.535
Region: north (ref. centre-south)	.159	.458	.728	1.173	-.015	.484	.976	.985
Parents religiosity: high	.144	.462	.755	1.155	.099	.473	.834	1.104
Parish					.577	.452	.202	1.781
Scout group					.737	.472	.119	2.089
Constant	-1.078	.656	.100	.340	-2.966	1.116	.008	.052

Source: Authors' elaboration.

and LGBTQI+ values in this sample. The region variable (North vs. Centre and South) also does not show a significant effect in either model, with Exp(B) values close to 1 in the second model. Parental religiosity similarly lacks a significant impact on respondents' attitudes, with Exp(B) values of 1.155 in Model 1 and 1.104 in Model 2.

In Model 2, two new variables are introduced to capture the influence of the social context—the parish priest's and scout group's views on feminism. The parish priest's view shows a positive but not statistically significant effect (Exp(B) = 1.781), while the scout group's view (Exp(B) = 2.089), suggests that being embedded in a more progressive scout group might foster more supportive attitudes towards feminist and LGBTQI+ issues, but again, this effect does not reach statistical significance.

Overall, the regression analysis underscores that gender and age are the most significant predictors of openness to feminist and LGBTQI+ rights, with younger individuals and women more likely to hold progressive views. The expected influence of education, region, and parental religiosity appears less pronounced, suggesting that individual sociodemographic characteristics alone may not fully capture the complexity of attitudes towards gender issues.

8. DISCUSSION

One of the most important results in our findings is the openness to feminist and LGBTQI+ values among Scout young activists in the sample as compared to the official positions of the Church and the persistence of a strong gender difference in such change. Banaszak *et al.* (2023) demonstrate that exposure to feminist and egalitarian movements can cause a shift in gender attitudes

among young adults. However, boys may experience this shift more slowly, particularly when their community or upbringing reinforces traditional views. In the Scout context, the tension between maintaining traditions, such as separate living spaces, and embracing progressive values creates a conflict for boys, who may feel pressure to conform to traditional masculinity. This could also explain why they are less open to the idea of cohabitation without community approval, as these structures reinforce traditional notions of family and marriage. The findings that boys feel less prepared than girls to discuss with children's topics like sex changes and sexuality, and that they are less likely to agree with the community on issues such as separate tents, gender-based activities, and the need for leadership approval for cohabitation, highlight again significant gender-based differences in attitudes toward sexuality and traditional roles, which confirm the literature. This echoes Romagnoli *et al.* (2011) when they discuss how boys tend to uphold conservative views in intimate and social relationships. De Vries *et al.* (2021), Mather (2018) and Riley (2019) as well, discuss how boys, particularly in religious environments, are more influenced by traditional gender norms perpetuated by their parents, especially their fathers, than girls, who may be more encouraged by progressive educational environments to question gender roles.

By applying the lenses of our typology to analyse our sample, we found many of the patterns described in the literature on feminism and religion discussed earlier. The Secularized profile, the most prevalent in our sample, aligns with the findings from Mori *et al.* (2023) and Savage (2021), which show that younger generations, particularly Generation Z, are more engaged with feminist values, often influenced by social media and celebrity endorsements of feminism. This openness is

reflected in our data, where a significant proportion of women, especially those younger and more educated, fall into this category. In contrast, the Doctrinal profile remains more common among men and older individuals, which is consistent with findings from de Vries *et al.* (2021) and Riley (2019). These studies show that traditional religious teachings often reinforce conservative views on gender roles, particularly among men and older generations. The Doctrinals in our sample tend to resist feminist ideals and maintain adherence to religious doctrines that emphasize traditional gender roles. This also echoes Mather (2018), which found that some religious settings still tend to promote more conservative attitudes, especially among students from more traditional backgrounds. The Detached profile, which is less common in our sample, represents individuals who feel only weakly connected to both religious and feminist influences. This aligns with Frisinger (2022), who discusses the commodification of feminism and the resulting disengagement that some individuals feel towards the movement. The Detached individuals in our study, more often men with lower levels of education, appear to be disengaged from both progressive and traditional pressures, reflecting a lack of identification with either side of the debate. This detachment may be a response to the perceived complexity or irrelevance of both feminist and religious narratives in their lives. The most interesting profile, the Devoted Resistant, feels torn between religious adherence and progressive values, aligns with the characteristics of the religious reformers and visionaries in the devoted resistant group described by Zion-Waldocks (2018). These individuals embody a dual commitment: they challenge unjust aspects of their religious community while remaining deeply connected to it. Our findings indicate that such a profile is distributed across different age groups and educational backgrounds, suggesting that this internal conflict is experienced by a wide range of individuals, who strive to reconcile their faith with their desire for social change, highlighting the tension between tradition and progress that many religious feminists face.

Gender differences across these profiles, with girls more likely to be Secularized or Devoted Resistant, are consistent with Worthen, Lingardi and Caristo (2017), who found that younger women are more open to progressive social changes and to engage with feminist values compared to their male counterparts. On the other hand, men are more likely to fall into the Doctrinal or Detached categories, suggesting a stronger adherence to conventional norms or a general disengagement from the debates surrounding gender and religion. Higher education is strongly associated with the Secularized and Devoted Resistant profiles, and it confirms findings

by Kosar *et al.* (2023) and Banaszak *et al.* (2023), highlighting the influence of education in fostering more egalitarian views and encouraging critical engagement with both religious and social issues. Lastly, the influence of community context, such as the progressiveness of the scout group or the parish priest, also affects the likelihood of adopting a particular profile. As suggested by Giorgi and Palmisano (2020), community influences play a crucial role in shaping individual attitudes towards gender and religion. Our data show that individuals with a progressive parish priest or a progressive scout group are more likely to be Secularized or Devoted Resistant, reflecting the importance of community leadership in fostering openness to change.

Our regression models confirm that women of our Catholic young adults' sample are four times more likely to have a progressive attitude towards feminism and LGBTQI+ than their male peers, who could embrace general progressive views due to their age, but at the same time feel feminism and LGBTQI+ issues as alienating or overly critical of men. This aligns with other studies about a persistent diversification of experiences and beliefs between men and women in young Millennials (Crespi 2019). Also, age plays a significant role, with younger respondents more open to progressive gender values, which resonates with findings from Generation Z and younger millennials, particularly in countries where progressive values are increasingly normalized through social media (Price 2023). Indeed, this point needs further investigation through data about social media consumption. In any case, a generational shift is evident in the regression results, where younger respondents are significantly more likely to be open to feminism compared to older individuals. Education has no significant effect in our models, and this is somewhat surprising, as previous literature such as Mather (2018) and Frisinger (2022) often indicates a positive correlation between higher education and progressive views. However, our result may be due to the fact that many respondents do not hold a degree but are currently university students, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the impact of educational attainment. Similarly, the region has no significant role in our models and this result contrasts with findings from Romagnoli *et al.* (2011), which indicated regional differences in gender attitudes in Italy, with the North generally being more progressive. It is possible that in the context of this specific sample, regional influences are less pronounced, or that the attitudes have converged across regions due to broader societal changes in the past decade or so. Having highly religious parents does not necessarily reduce the likelihood of holding progressive views in this con-

text, which contrasts with Caltabiano and Dalla Zuanna (2021) and de Vries *et al.* (2021), who found that strong parental religiosity tends to reinforce traditional gender norms. This finding might reflect a broader generational gap where younger individuals increasingly diverge from their parents' beliefs, even in religious contexts. The parish priest's view shows a positive effect, and this aligns with Giorgi and Palmisano (2020), which discusses the role of religious leaders in either reinforcing or challenging traditional views, while being in a progressive scout group seems to foster a more supportive attitudes towards feminist and LGBTQI+ issues, but again, both effects do not reach statistical significance.

In general, the lack of statistical significance may be due to the small sample size, which limits the power of the analysis to detect meaningful effects. Nevertheless, the concept of «devoted resistance» from Zion-Waldocks (2018) seems useful to explain these findings, as individuals in these contexts may still navigate the tension between progressive group influences and traditional community values, leading to mixed outcomes.

9. CONCLUSIONS

In an increasingly secularized society, younger generations navigate their identities, ever more prioritizing progressive values and striving to create environments that foster equality and acceptance. This leads them to often reject conservative norms and advocate for equality, reflecting their commitment to social justice and inclusivity. Our research demonstrates the Scout movement is no exception to this regard. Our respondents express more progressive views on feminist and LGBTQI+ issues compared to their parents and the broader societal context. This generational shift highlights a growing intolerance toward rigid gender norms and traditional expectations. Indeed, such finding is even more interesting as it refers to a Catholic activist group, whose adherence to the Catholic doctrine (officially against adoption, same-sex marriage and other LGBTQI+ movements' claims; Garbagnoli and Prearo 2018) would be expected to be stronger than that of the broader «cultural catholic» young population (Garelli and Ricucci 2023) and whose education tends to reinforce traditional gender roles (Caltabiano and Dalla Zuanna 2021). Some interesting trends emerge. While girls, influenced by online feminism and more inclusive discourses, are more open to addressing these topics, boys feel less comfortable challenging longstanding norms around gender segregation and sexuality. In a four categories typology of catholic young activists

based on their attitudes toward feminism and LGBTQI+ rights, girls are more likely to be classified as Secularized or Devoted resistant than their male counterparts, who are more likely to be Doctrinal or Detached. Our analysis, on the likelihood to embrace feminist and LGBTQI+ values, emphasizes some important factors influencing openness to these positions. Gender remains a significant predictor, with women more likely to support these values, reflecting broader trends of engagement with feminist ideals seen in the literature. The role of contextual influences, such as the views of the parish priest and scout group shows a positive trend, and this result serves as an example of how community-based organizations can foster or hinder progressive attitudes, depending on the cultural schema they promote; nonetheless, their full impact requires further exploration to be determined.

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Gender Potential in Italian Youth Activism: The Intersectional Assimilation of Gender Cultures After the Pandemic

LIDIA LO SCHIAVO, PAOLA REBUGHINI

Abstract. The article focuses on the intersection of youth and gender studies, analysing the complex relationships between gender and youth identity as experienced both in individual biographies, and within the context of participatory practices. Thus, the focus is on the legacy of feminisms in current mobilization practices. In the article, we refer to empirical material collected in Italy from 2017 to the present. What emerges from our empirical material is that the pandemic accelerated the inclusion of gender issues in many youth mobilizations and in local youth activism generally, by highlighting the themes of care, inclusion and sharing. The paper is based on 150 qualitative interviews, and a number of ethnographic moments conducted in several Italian towns between 2017 and 2024, and therefore includes a period spanning the pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic phases; however, for this article we will focus primarily on the interviews conducted immediately after the Covid emergency, which best highlight the assimilation of the gender culture of care in activism practices. Interviews were conducted with young women activists, but also with young men, including representatives from national student organisations. The empirical findings collected testify to the manifold nature of young people's participatory practices, which range from climate issues to gender identity, from student claims to antiracism. In this article we focus on the relationship between gender identity and participatory practices based on mutual care.

Keywords: young people, gender, intersectionality, care, participatory practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to explore how gender cultures, fundamental elements of feminist theory and the intersectionality approach have been fully integrated and assimilated into practices of civic and political activism among youth, also beyond feminist youth mobilizations. The article focuses on the intersection of youth and gender studies, analysing the complex relationships between gender and youth identity as experienced both in individual biographies, and within the context of participatory practices (Pickard and Bessant 2018; Pitti and Tuorto 2021; Lo Schiavo and Rebughini 2023, 2024; Colombo *et al.* 2024).

In the article, we refer to empirical material collected in Italy from 2017 to the present, thus, at a time when youth participation was having to contend with different crises and changes, including the Covid pandemic, with the related problems of isolation and the need to mobilise local resources, experimenting with new organizational practices and gender politicization. What emerges from our empirical material is that the pandemic accelerated the inclusion of gender issues in many youth mobilizations and in local youth activism generally, by highlighting the themes of care, inclusion and sharing. The paper is based on 150 qualitative interviews, and a number of ethnographic moments conducted in several Italian towns between 2017 and 2024, and therefore includes a period spanning the pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic phases; however, for this article we will focus primarily on the interviews conducted immediately after the Covid emergency, which best highlight the assimilation of the gender culture of care. Interviews were conducted with young women activists, but also with young men, including representatives from national student organisations. The empirical findings collected testify to the manifold nature of young people's participatory practices, which range from climate issues to gender identity, from student claims to antiracism. In this article we focus on the relationship between gender identity and participatory practices based on mutual care¹.

Our investigation begins with the acknowledgement that, over the last decade, the growing interest in feminist solidarity and the culture of care has expanded into different forms of youth social movements. Youth mobilizations have been characterized by politics reinvention

practices in response to the crisis of representative politics, in fields ranging from workers' rights to environmental protection, contributing to the transformation of protest practices and repertoires at the intersection of these different issues. They have taken to the streets as part of transnational movements as well as in a generational shift that is particularly evident in feminist, trans-feminist and queer mobilizations (della Porta *et al.* 2020; Lo Schiavo 2023; Lo Schiavo and Rebughini 2024; Pickard and Bessant 2018).

A common framework within these youth mobilizations is the assimilation of the *care* paradigm as an immanent criticism, beginning with everyday practices and prefiguring alternative social and political models (Fraguito and Tola 2021; Pulcini 2020; Tronto 2023). As a concept, *care* evokes the idea of mutual support in everyday life, as well as a kind of ethical orientation and an emotional and affective bond with the other (Littler and Rottenberg 2021). This feminist reference to care is not merely an offer of help, but an "acting in concert" – as Arendt already suggested – a reflexive recognition of mutual interconnections in an environment of social and identity differences. In addition to the neoliberal impoverishment of many sections of the population, a phenomenon which emerged strongly in most western countries (especially after the "Great recession" of 2008), the emphasis on care can be traced back to more recent mobilizations by women in opposition to the rising tide of sexism and misogyny that are often associated with nationalism and racism (Farris 2017; Brown 2019). After a period of activism primarily consisting of demands for rights and identity assertions, young women have been behind the most recent phase of feminist mobilizations. This new focus on care and the recognition of differences is now often known as the 'fourth wave' of feminism and is also characterized by digital activism. As Jo Littler and Catherine Rottenberg claim (2021: 865): «Solidarity invoked in a feminist context is often thought to cut across different identity categories – such as race, class, sexuality or nation – without assuming sameness among women or falling back into gender essentialism».

The culture of care fostered by young women in youth-led social movements bridges the gap between care in the intimate personal and interpersonal spheres, and care as an institutional duty. In contrast to the neoliberal emphasis on individualization and the individualistic culture, that often disregards both others and the environment, the culture of care serves as a mechanism for preserving social cohesion (Chatzidakis *et al.* 2020; The care manifesto 2020; Tronto 2013). Our fieldwork reveals that the broad reference to care has expanded beyond feminism to encompass a diverse range of move-

¹ Interviews were conducted in the cities of Milan, Bologna, Rome, Messina and Palermo, using snowball sampling. The research has a longitudinal approach in that the same groups, associations and networks were followed over time, although only in a few cases were the same people re-interviewed. Among the 150 interviews, 53% of respondents were women, 47% men, 4 interviewees without declared gender or in transition. All our interviewees have a high level of education and are either graduates or university students. None are unemployed, but most of them are precarious workers or occasional co-workers. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed jointly by the authors, along with an analysis of documents produced by the activists and the ethnographic material. All the names reported are fictitious and identities have been anonymized. In the excerpts, we refer to the city where the interview was realized, for example during an event (such as students camps, assemblies, demonstrations) or in the place where the interviewees carry out their everyday activism. In particular, we refer to interviews carried out with student activists in different Italian secondary schools and universities and especially in organizations such as The Student Union, Link University coordination and The Knowledge Network, but also with young people who are active in transfeminist collectives such as Non una di meno, and in trans and queer communities. The panel also includes volunteers working in NGOs, and young people who are active in local and neighbourhood civic initiatives or student squat centres.

ments, including youth social mobilizations, student activism, environmental advocacy and local mutualistic initiatives. In the aftermath of the pandemic – during which many activists implemented new forms of “care work” – the call for a “caring democracy” and “radical care” based on the acknowledgement of mutual interdependence and vulnerability has gained prominence within youth movements. This progression highlights one of the key contributions of the feminist culture and of the numerous young women taking part in contemporary youth mobilizations, especially those related to climate change and those involving students’ organizations. This has brought attention to a cultural struggle against individualistic power politics, by recognising personal fragility as an ethical resource (Butler 2020; Ahmed 2017; Fraser 2016).

In addition to emphasizing care, youth movements have also recognised the importance of gender identity issues, which is another theme that clearly emerges in our empirical material. In Italy, as in many other countries, we can observe how contemporary youth generations, Millennials and Gen Z, are identifying as queer and LGBTQ+ in significantly higher numbers than previous generations (Istituto Toniolo 2019; IPSOS 2024; Rinaldi *et al.* 2022; Stati Generali LGBTQIAP+ & Disability 2023; Guerzoni *et al.* 2024). Challenging gender norms within queer and transfeminist youth communities, in a social environment in which there is a growing politicization of gender identities, represents a crucial element at the intersection between youth movements and feminist cultures (Sulberg 2017). The participatory practices that express and politicize gender within LGBTQIA+ communities, particularly among student transfeminist collectives, can be recognised as both a means of individual gender affirmation through self-determination, and as integral components of wider youth mobilization efforts centred on support and care (Fragnito and Tola 2021; The Care collective 2021). In the research, we focused on these practices as they are at the intersection of themes such as gender identity, personal vulnerability, the culture of care, the need for inclusivity and solidarity. While youth mobilization practices are also the result of distinct organizations and a specific agenda, it is evident that the assimilation of a feminist culture of care and the inclusion of diversity has encouraged the intersection of this more specific topic with the wider ones of youth movements and student movements.

In our observations of youth mobilization, we found that gender subjectivation practices are embedded in everyday life and are linked to the politicization of gender and range from informal settings such as friendships and shared leisure activities, to the public sphere,

where artistic and performance practices are showcased, including more structured forms of protest and political action. This continuum can be analysed through the concepts of liminality or in-between forms of participation, which distinguish deviance on the one hand, and conformism on the other, both in individual and collective contexts (cfr. Pitti *et al.* 2021; Pitti and Tuorto 2021).

2. THE INFLUENCE OF FEMINIST ETHICAL CULTURES ON YOUTH MOBILIZATIONS

The overall trend in our research material reveals significant alignment with themes and languages present in feminist debates over recent decades. This includes an intersectional epistemic perspective that remains attentive to the situatedness and embodied experience of those speaking, where knowledge-making is seen as a way to make a difference. Most of this innovative debate, which strongly resonates in our interviews, is focused on challenging the dominance of the Western, male, sovereign subject, rejecting the Hobbesian vision of social and political relationships, (Brown 2019; Bell 2007), and the idea of power based on violence (Butler 2020; Braidotti 2019), while on the contrary, emphasising the extensive nature of social and ontological interdependence, highlighting the need for a society centred on mutual care, both among humans and between humans and nature. The feminist culture embraced by youth social movements is one that values the art of uniting differences, marginalities (hooks 1984), sexual differences (Butler 1993; de Lauretis 1991), vulnerabilities (Butler 2020), and material and symbolic dependencies (Haraway 2016), thus producing affirmative action as a way to generate power, rather than perpetuating control or repression (Braidotti 2019).

On this basis, the need to intersect criticism of androcentrism, eurocentrism and anthropocentrism has been advanced by leading feminist scholars, who converge around a redefined idea of political agency. In this framework, the more established work of self-reflection is integrated with an ethical approach to otherness. This shift has been made possible through both theoretical and also practical engagement within movements, drawing on perspectives from constructivist feminism (Butler 1993), postcolonial ideas of cultural interconnections (Spivak 1999) and colonality of gender (Lugones 2010), the dismantling of traditional assumptions about gender and sexual identities. The emergence of an affirmative feminist approach has linked the cultural and epistemological aspects of feminist thought with the more ontological insights drawn from STS approaches (Braidotti

2013). This theoretical heritage, developed over the last 25 years, has profoundly influenced how youth engage in active politics within social movements. This highlights the different ways in which youth mobilizations can challenge the power structures of neoliberalism, individualism and the culture of dominance.

The resurgence of interest in care politics, gender issues, feminist solidarity, which is sensitive to differences and social categorizations, aligns with the growing reference to *intersectionality* as a cultural, heuristic and methodological tool. This approach helps us to understand how different elements such as gender, social class, education, health, sexuality, environment and the material connections between human and non-human, intersect. Indeed, intersectionality has served as the key heuristic tool that bridges feminist theoretical discussion with the practices of youth social movements.

From its inception, intersectionality has been deeply connected to the issues addressed by emancipative social movements, extending beyond just feminist movements. Although intersectionality is usually discussed in more specific areas of study related to gender issues, its ethical purpose lies in exposing power relations and social inequalities (Bilge and Denis 2010). In the analysis of social movements, one of the more promising applications of intersectionality is its use to study how social actors construct their agency in specific contexts, to address forms of domination – such as essentialized social categories – and to develop a creative and autonomous approach to these social categorizations (Hancock 2016; Rebughini 2021).

While intersectionality emerged during a historical period where categorisation as a form of identification – such as gender or class – was central, today, intersectionality has evolved within social movements into a heuristic framework that helps unify diverse issues, such as gender differences, climate change, social equality and a critique of neoliberalism, within the same practices. The ability to analyse how these issues intersect, rather than treating them as separate and independent forms of power relations, lies at the core of intersectionality as an epistemological approach to domination. In activism, an intersectional perspective can highlight how power relations are intertwined and mutually constitutive, cutting across issues like gender, climate and social stratification. Moreover, the intersectional approach emphasizes that the social categories we inhabit are not interchangeable but are historically and contextually constructed. Consequently, each subject can challenge reality as it is given, resisting individualism and valorising forms of care. Indeed, «intersectionality provides a critical lens to analyse articulations of power and subjectivity in different instances of social formations» (Bilge 2010: 23).

In the next section, we will use our empirical material to explore how these gender cultures have been integrated, both explicitly and sometimes indirectly, into the practices of contemporary youth social movements in Italy.

3. THE INTERSECTIONAL VOICES OF YOUNG ACTIVISTS

Our research material shows that, over the past ten years or so, youth movements in Italy have integrated discussions from gender studies into their practices, exploring the multiple relationships between gender and youth identity as experienced in the biographical dimension. The introduction and interpretation of concepts such as *caring democracy* and *queer youth*, reflect the liveliness of these references in contemporary youth movement debates, as well as framing concepts to help intercept and intersect various issues.

The empirical context we draw upon to analyse this process is extensive, both in terms of geographical scope within Italy and across different time periods, spanning before and after the Covid pandemic. Our primary focus is on highlighting how the increasing intersectionality of various themes emerges clearly in the empirical material, with clear connections to some of the core feminist principles such as care, inclusivity, queer theory, and the recognition of differences. Particularly in interviews conducted during and after the pandemic, there is a notable emphasis on viewing youth political activism as the generational foundation for the development of a caring democracy. Among these activist movements, transfeminist and transgender groups most prominently highlight the theme of care. Overall, the pandemic has profoundly affected social ties and networks within territorial contexts, and during this time, the demand for care, understood broadly as a mean to strengthen solidarity and collective action, has become especially prominent. Additionally, this period has fostered connections between issues like transfeminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, anti-racism, anti-fascism, solidarity, social justice, environmental protection, and anti-speciesism, thereby strengthening community bonds, mutualistic practices, and alternative societal models focused on care.

3.1 *In search of a caring democracy*

The reference to a caring democracy, and its origin in feminist cultures, clearly emerges among the student activists as well as among the young people involved in squat social centres or local voluntary organisations, which often serve as spaces for care and healing from

personal and social trauma. Politicizing care means bringing it into the light, away from the invisibility created by male-patriarchal and capitalist hegemony, while drawing on the intersubjective nature of the human condition (Barca 2024; Pulcini 2020). In this way, the ecology of care emerges as an intersectional societal framework which transcends the nature-culture dualism, forming the basis of an immanent social critique that spans ecofeminism, decolonial critique, and political ecology. While contemporary theoretical debate recognises the risk of essentializing the paradigm, such as in the case of “global chains of care” (Fragnito and Tola 2021), there is also an awareness that the “politicization of care” is a foundational element within the caring democracy paradigm.

In our interviews, while the concept of care emerges more explicitly in the narratives of young women – typically in terms of self-care, care for their environment, and broader care for the world – it is also notably present among young men. The need for ‘deep care’ – as one interviewee described it – is often evoked in contrast to the culture of individualism and the exploitation of resources, whether intellectual, labour or environmental. Many interviewees recognise that this heightened awareness of the need for care emerged during the pandemic, a period marked by uncertainty and a greater recognition of vulnerability and mutual interdependence.

Indeed, many elements of feminist culture, such as attention to others and to differences, listening, deep self-knowledge, awareness of one's limits and vulnerabilities, and acknowledging that we are not omnipotent... have become integral to today's movements, for example, I'm thinking of the environmental movements where people are actively engaging in caring for parts of nature... whether animals or plants... with an emphasis on caring, taking into consideration, and avoiding exploitation to the point of destruction and then disposal [...] I see that [also] in everyday life, among many young people, there is a focus on self-care, that is, care for one's own intimate space, one's own health, but as something that connects individuals, also to the environment. It's not about doing this to be more efficient or to produce more, rather it reflects a deeper understanding of care. (Caterina, 26, recently graduated, volunteer for a local association, Milan, 2023)

Unsurprisingly, the issue of care is frequently mentioned by young people involved in activities that focus on caring for others or for the environment. However, the idea of renewing democracy through care stands at the core of discourses, speeches, manifestos and the working materials of many organised student groups or activist networks that have emerged from the various waves of student movements. This theme was strongly

emphasised during the pandemic and the lockdowns, which also highlighted the issues of isolation and individualization. In this case, the activists emphasised the shortcomings of an individualistic culture, which failed in the face of emergencies such as the pandemic, promoting instead, locally self-organized politics of care as a response.

There is also an analysis of feminism, of environmentalism that places all our practices in a precise frame of reference with defined coordinates that are those of the problems of our time. Care! The pandemic has taught us this. It is not a horizontal relationship but a circular one... and it means precisely that everyone does a bit of caring [...] during the pandemic the work of the Consultoria continued but it was transferred online (Elisa, 26, Mala Education, Bologna, 2021).

The suffering caused by isolation during the pandemic in 2020 prompted a deep reflection on the concept of care which does not mean maternal or paternalistic care towards younger comrades, but rather a collective responsibility shared by everyone in the assembly or within the discussion spaces or physical environments in which organizations operate, emphasising inclusivity, understanding and active listening. [...]. And then care, especially in local territories, is perceived as a reappropriation of one's own life-time... I see it very much as a generational factor, a paradigm shift, a slowdown (Emanuela, 26, Link University coordination, Bologna 2022).

We live in an individualistic society, amid polarized dynamics of blackmail... that's why we need to create a dynamic of care... because if you live in an individualistic society, you have to think only about your own survival, but you also realize that you are in this situation together with others... that's why we need an alternative relationship model (Aldo 20, Student Union, Torino, 2022).

The theme of care consistently emerges in the interviews and is viewed both as a legacy of feminist movements, and as a necessity stemming from environmental awareness, and as an intersection of generational, feminist and environmental concerns. For many interviewees, the pandemic was an opportunity for politicization, driven not by utopian ideals but by the need for safe spaces to gather, to avoid desegregation, isolation, and to ensure the preservation of spaces for open discussion, safe spaces where the prefiguration of a caring society is possible. This reference is particularly evident among interviewees involved in gender and LGBTQIA+ activism.

Drag, as an artistic form, is deeply rooted in revolutionary practices. The concept of a society of care has always been integral throughout the history of drag queens, who put the

queerness of their art at the forefront [...] this way of performing gender creates alternatives, fosters new possibilities, and builds communities centred on care and self-protection [...]. The underlying reasoning behind this is systemic, it aims to create a society of care in order to overcome the current situation which is based on violence, profit, and the exploitation of bodies (Savvy, 20 y.o, The Knowledge Network, Bologna, 2024).

The paradigm of caring democracy can be regarded as an open-ended political project which includes different empirical manifestations, and our interviewees believe that without forms of “caring participation” democratic societies will struggle to overcome the multiple crises they are facing, which threaten their very survival. Faced with the effects of the “systemic carelessness” produced by the neoliberal exploitation of the “forces of reproduction” (Barca 2024; The Care Collective 2021), there are no viable alternatives for emancipation other than the politics of care.

3.2 Queering youth

The construction of gender identity emerges strongly in the fieldwork and intersects in multiple ways with the concept of care democracy. This is experienced through stances of context-specific critique by young transfeminist and queer activists, who engage in artistic and performative practices that not only advocate for political change but also challenge and deconstruct binary and hetero-cis-patriarchal models (Pitti and Tuorto 2021).

In this context, rather than observing a broad influence of feminism on youth movements, we see a more autonomous and generational development of gender issues, focused on identity positioning and the pursuit of a caring democracy. Young activists engage in the “doing and undoing” of gender, embracing a fluid and plural subjective experience that shapes both their daily lives and their mobilizations. This experience is tied to individual processes of subjectivation within a continuum of structured political participation. As a result, gender identity becomes a central element of youth life, influencing both personal experiences and the formation of social, supportive and caring relationships – such as those found within transfeminist, trans and queer communities – as well as within more formal participatory practices in student organizations (Pitti *et al.* 2021).

On the one hand, the interviews highlight the structural link between the personal and the political, experienced through the individualization and politicization of everyday life and in the prefigurative vision of a society of care. On the other hand, the reference to intersection-

ality goes beyond the abstract notion of interconnected themes – such as feminism, environmentalism, social justice, capitalist extractivism – and is instead something subjectively experienced, and related to the critique of forms of domination. This is clearly illustrated in these two excerpts from interviews with two young activists in transition, who are involved in transgender organizations.

I believe that the politicization of this issue [the diagnosis of gender dysphoria disorder] arises from our very existence, [because] our existence itself is political, let's say by definition, because that's the way it is. When a subjectivity is isolated or when access to care is also isolated, it can lead to great loneliness, and even the fear of exposing oneself, so when you go to form a trans group, a consolidated trans area, you have to be very grateful for it, because it cannot be taken for granted [...]. I have promised myself one thing, that I will only engage in activism in groups where I feel a sense of team spirit. Because activism cannot be done among strangers, but only among friends, let's say between people who know each other, where a genuine bond is created (Will, 20, Messina, 2024).

Identity is a question of social and political positioning [...]. The same dynamics of power and acts of violence on subjectivities and on the environment, alongside the economic hierarchy of capitalization, that is, I think the coexistence of environmental issues is intrinsic to this kind of violence, because they always lead back to capitalist patriarchy. [...]. I think that this also reflects a distancing from individualism, where everyone must fend for themselves or must view otherness as the enemy; care [instead] means coming together and sharing responsibility for one another and for the community (Maze, 20, Messina, 2024).

In addition to groups more directly associated with LGBTQIA+, or feminist movements, such as Non una di meno, the interviews highlight the importance of queer identities in contemporary youth social movements, as a political focal point that intersects the cultural and epistemological issues, particularly in the effort to overcome binarism, especially in education. Other interesting discussions emerge from a generational articulation of gender activism. For example, some young activists criticized the consumerist approach, linked to the market and sponsors of Pride events organized by coordinated platforms, where the more established LGBT organizations in Italy showed a less critical stance toward the commercialization of Pride events. Another key point of generational differences involves the contrast between transfeminist positions, which include trans and queer subjectivities in feminist movements, and more exclusionary feminist views that are less accepting of transgender and queer individuals, as well as other

racialized groups or those not interested in anti-capitalist and postcolonial ecological critique.

Feminism or trans feminism has always been a theoretical movement, but also a set of practices [...]. Let's say that these battles are based on an ideal, but they are also deeply pragmatic. And there are also difficulties in finding a safe space to create them, to deconstruct languages that are still heavily charged, especially when you are forced to engage with administrations [...]. As for the transfeminist frame, the younger generations are often able to embrace it without too many, let's say, identity dramas. And this particular intergenerational question sometimes leads to communication barriers... what I've noticed is that there can sometimes be a difference in the ways people speak because maybe the older feminists often use a more binary language that we no longer use. (Elena, 27, Non Una di Meno, Messina, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the empirical data clearly reveals the willingness of young activists to reframe issues of gender, class, race, the environment, pacifism, anti-militarism, anti-speciesism, and decolonialism through an intersectional lens. This highlights a distinct generational perspective on contemporary political challenges. Once again, the vision of a society centered on care appears to serve as a foundational paradigm for young activists, those who have grown up in an era marked by disillusionment and polycrisis. Their struggles unfold both “within” and “in opposition to” the power structures of modern societies. As one of our interviewees succinctly puts it:

At the moment, the hottest issues are transfem issues, which fall within the wave that also 'Non una di meno' has shaped and that has exceeded any expectations... and the whole issue of Palestine with all the complexities that it brings with it and the intersectionality of the antimilitarist struggle [...] These issues have really made us reflect on the relevance of advocating for a society of care, because they highlight the intersections and connections that exist between these forms of oppression, of violence, the implications that this model of society presents at this moment [...]. There is a strong need to demonstrate that an alternative is possible and to do it, as it were, from the ground up, starting from the local neighbourhood or from your university classroom (Fort, 25, The Knowledge Network, Milan, 2024).

Following the traumatic experience of the pandemic, care has emerged as an overarching reference, ranging from LGBTQIA+ rights to environmental protection, from student mobilizations to neighbourhood solidarity. While our focus is specifically on activism and not meant

to be understood as a broad generational trend, it undeniably marks a significant cultural turning point within Italian youth mobilizations, where the complex legacy of feminist struggles has fostered the intersection of previously separate issues, expressed through the bodies, emotions, imaginaries, practices and knowledge production of young women, men and transgender subjects. After a period of fragmented protests, mobilizations and critical cultures, this generation of activists is now seeking to reconnect and rebuild, relying on the heuristic plasticity of references such as intersectionality and a society of care, that also intersect in their everyday practices.

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Do French Local Youth Policies Still Fail to Address Gender Issues? Lessons From the RAJE Project

MARIE-ANAÏS LE BRETON, THELMA BEAULIEU, MAXIME LECOQ, PATRICIA LONCLE, MARYAM MAHAMAT, MATTHIEU RAULT¹

Abstract. This article analyses the way in which gender issues are taken into account in the development of youth policies at a local level in France, and more specifically in three rural areas of Brittany. The study is being conducted through the “*Recherche-Action, Jeunes et Engagements*” (RAJE) project, which has been running since January 2024. Involving decision-makers, youth workers and young people, it is an interesting field for understanding how gender issues emerge and are integrated on the youth policy agenda. Based on a collective narrative, this article both sheds light and questions the ways in which gendered subjectivities are interwoven with the engagement dynamics studied and experimented within the action-research. We analyze local situations in a reflexive and qualitative way, which allow us to formulate several hypotheses on the brakes and levers on putting gender issues on local policies’ agenda. Our work suggests that the gendered distribution of power in social contexts (both political and professional), the mechanisms of gender assignment, and the reproduction of heteronormative stereotypes are not only avenues of inquiry for our action-research, but also main ethical and political issues.

Keywords: youth, local policy, gender, action-research, rural.

1. INTRODUCTION

In France, local youth policies have traditionally focused on organizing leisure and sports activities for young people. Over the last few decades, their scope has widened so as to include other priorities, such as cultural issues, access to employment and health, with significant variations from one territory to another (Loncle and Maunay 2022). Though they do not have to meet many requirements, these local policies nevertheless organize and structure an important part of the social system in which children, teenagers and young adults evolve, outside family and school time. Considering how

¹ Each academic and extra-academic author listed here contributed to the present paper. Discussions and collaborative writing, as well as a division of tasks, enabled the academic team to support the extra-academic team. The team’s research engineer provided all the writers with a table summarizing the various interviews and documents available for analysis, as well as a shared Zotero group for accessing bibliographic resources supporting the article’s purpose. She coordinated this article in agreement with all the co-authors.

they influence the way young people are perceived, the activities they are offered, the way they organize and define roles between youth workers, and how they promote certain ways of occupying and sharing space (in particular through public facilities and infrastructures), the question of their role in shaping gender identities is worth asking.

However, gender issues are seldom addressed in the written documentation produced by local authorities, whether these be binding or simply declarative. When they are mentioned, it is merely in terms of parity between girls and boys, in order to address the issue of young girls disappearing from public spaces during their teenage years (Marujéouls 2011). Little consideration seems to be given to the management of girls and boys' equity and what allows or encourages it, despite the evidence that it is an essential condition for challenging gender stereotypes and assignments, albeit not sufficient in itself (*ibidem*). This paradox seems to be an interesting angle from which to examine the way local youth policies are organized and implemented, and how they deal with gender issues. By analysing the patterns of the actions led with young people within local social spaces (Bruneau *et al.* 2018), our aim is to uncover the processes by which gender is placed on the youth policy agenda.

In this article, we draw on the observation and analysis of local dynamics in three inter-municipal areas² in Brittany, all three of which are involved in a same action research project on youth participation (Caraballo *et al.* 2017). Launched in January 2024, the RAJE project³ examines how local public action on youth issues can be developed with the participation of those primarily concerned. The action research project's aim is to improve young people's participation in the making of public policies that concern them by focusing on how professionals operate. It explores and experiments with new ways of spurring youth into action, while rethinking methods of cooperation between local stakeholders. The methodologies are founded upon a qualitative approach, singular to each geographical context. An initial semi-directive interview survey enabled the collection of approximately fifteen interviews from each area. The analysis of these interviews resulted in the researchers supporting the implementation of local and unique actions and experi-

mentations, which were documented in the form of log-books.

Although RAJE was not initially designed to examine gender issues specifically, it soon became clear that gendered subjectivities were fundamentally interwoven with the dynamics of participation studied and experimented in the context of the action research project. In each of the three rural areas the study focuses on, young women and men (aged 14 to 25) experience very different realities. This can be explained in part by the historical, geographical and socio-economic characteristics specific to each territory. While it is not possible to detail them all here, some of their specific characteristics can be examined from a gender perspective. Loudéac Communauté, which is the action research inter-municipality farthest from major conurbations, counts only a quarter of municipalities with a positive ratio of women to men for the 18-24 age group, while this ratio is relatively balanced for the 11-17 age group (Insee 2020). This asymmetry can be explained by student migration, which affects young women more than their masculine counterparts (Guéaut *et al.* 2021). Greater gender diversity can be observed in the more Western and Eastern areas included in the study. These are under the urban influence of the Brest and Rennes conurbations, which offer young people relative proximity to higher-level services. Lastly, all three areas benefit from a dense network of clubs and organisations, a factor which should have a favourable effect on youth participation in general. However, the tendency at all levels is to focus on boy's activities (Amsellem-Mainguy and Coquard 2023). Therefore, the opportunities offered in terms of education (Danic *et al.* 2021) and economic integration (Arrighi 2004; Kula and Gueguen 2018) are generally more favorable to young men than to young women, especially in the municipalities located in the center of the Brittany Region, which are defined as rural areas free from urban attraction, with low or very low population density (Insee 2021).

The questions this article sets out to answer are the following: how do stakeholders (both elected representatives and youth workers) perceive these inequalities? Are these inequalities the object of specific consideration? How are they placed on the youth policy agenda? To answer these questions, the article will be based on a collective narrative written by six of the eleven members of the RAJE team⁴. The production of this narra-

² In France, there are three levels of local government: municipalities, departments and regions. Inter-municipal areas are a form of cooperative arrangement between several municipalities grouped together.

³ «RAJE» stands for *Recherche-action Jeunes et Engagements* (which could be translated into «Action Research, Youth and Participation»). It is funded by several institutions: a national public institution (*Agence Nationale de la Recherche*), the Region of Brittany, and Erasmus+. In the following article, the project will be referred to by its acronym, RAJE.

⁴ When the call for proposals was sent to us, we consulted all the team members about their interest in gender issues and their availability to produce the article. Discussions and collaborative writing, as well as task allocation, enabled the academic team to assist the extra-academic one. For example, the team's research engineer provided all the writers

tive was informed by a comprehensive set of qualitative data, which was meticulously gathered during the first year of the research. This data set encompassed participant observations of local meetings and semi-structured interviews conducted with youth workers and elected representatives. Among the six writers, four are women and two are men, two of which are academics (one occupying a senior academic position and not the other) and four extra-academic members of *Coop'Eschemm*. To avoid giving too much importance to status, we have chosen to present the authors in alphabetical order.

2. GENDER ISSUES ARE GRADUALLY MADE EXPLICIT IN THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

The reflexive framework provided by the process of writing this article allows us to observe the gradual integration of gender issues in *RAJE*, by questioning the funding schemes and the composition of the teams involved in the action research project.

2.1 A theoretical entry point: gender as an ethical and deontological issue in the project

In contrast to other European countries, French public research was relatively slow in embracing project-based funding (Hubert and Louvel 2012). The policy of formalizing research funding through contracts, which began to develop strongly in Europe in the 1980s (Lepori *et al.* 2007), did not appear in France until the mid-2000s, in particular under the impetus of the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche*⁵ (ANR). In addition to this process, funding sources became more diversified, local authorities and the State, asculine competitive calls for proposals. Funds for action research were introduced even more recently (2022 for State fundings via the *Agence Nationale de la Recherche*, and 2021 for fundings by the Region of Brittany for example). Since they are competitive, these calls are based on evaluation criteria, among which gender plays a minor role. Recommendations to integrate gender in research are multiplying and translated into concrete measures to limit gender bias in the allocation of research funds (Guyard *et al.* 2024). However, there seems to be little effort to take gender into account in the way the projects are actually conducted. At this stage, there is insufficient academic work on the subject in France to shed full light on this

intuition. We therefore propose to study in more detail two of the call forms completed for *RAJE* project funding: that of the ANR call for proposals and that of the Region of Brittany's call for proposals, both of which were published in 2023.

Both calls are structured along thematic entry fields that invite project leaders to explain, among other things and in a limited number of characters and lines, the scientific, methodological, and organizational biases of their research. While neither of these two forms invited respondents to take a clear stance on gender issues, the «ethical and deontological dimension of the project» entry in the Region of Brittany's call for proposals provided the *RAJE* project team with a way of confirming its commitment to the issue:

Another essential ethical issue for the project team lies in the attention paid to gender issues and, more specifically, to preventing possible reproductions of gender inequalities. With this in mind, we have taken care to ensure a balanced representation of men and women on the team, and we will make sure to identify manifestations of inequality within the project in order to actively correct them (project RAJE, submitted in 2023, p. 8).

The attention paid to this subject is a habit inherited from *Coop'Eschemm*'s past experiences in integrating gender in the design of their research projects. It finds part of its roots in responses to European calls for project proposals, in particular in the *Dialogue pour la Jeunesse* scheme of the Erasmus+ program, which funded the «Tiers Espaces, Lieux et Appropriation» (TELA)⁶ project in June 2021. The call for project proposals requested to «provide general information on the age of participants and describe how you will ensure gender balance in the main activities carried out in [the] project».

This research ethic was not set out in the response to the ANR call for proposals, which did not question the integration of gender in any way. Gender issues were actually raised when the scientific research question was expounded, through the asymmetry observed in youth participation:

Since the physical and symbolic presence of young people differs according to their age, their sex, and their social background, we wish to question public space in its double sense, material and symbolic (political), and to develop an intersectional approach to different kinds of public through the analysis of realities experienced in the context of participation (project RAJE, submitted in 2023, p. 3).

with a table listing the various interviews and documents available for analysis, as well as a shared Zotero group for accessing bibliographic resources that expound on the article's subject.

⁵ This could be translated as «National Agency for Research».

⁶ The name of this project could be translated as «Third Spaces, Places and Appropriation».

Given the inductive approach of our action research methodology, gender issues were seen more as potential lines of inquiry than as a research focus.

2.2 A practical application through inclusive methods for cooperative work

To understand how the *RAJE* project operates and how gender issues are addressed within the team of researchers, let us examine its composition from this angle, as well as from that of the status of each participant and working time devoted by each of them to the project. This should shed light on how interactions are actually organized within the team, which is made up of eleven people from two circles that intermingle and partially intersect.

The first circle is made up of the five *Coop'Eskemm* researchers. Four of these people (three men and one woman) are employee-partners at the cooperative. Without going into the details of how *Coop'Eskemm* operates, it should be noted that these jobs are funded by the budgets allocated to various projects (including, but not exclusively, *RAJE*). These four people have been working together since the cooperative was founded in 2019, and therefore benefit from knowing one another extremely well. The fifth researcher, a woman, is a work-study student currently enrolled in a master's program in Rennes, after completing a master's degree in gender studies and political science at the *Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne*. From a gender point of view, this circle is predominantly made up of men, which is a subject of internal discussion. The team's composition is based more on friendships and shared experience than on any intentional move towards parity. However, hiring a work-study student who is also a specialist in gender issues, reflects a desire to take account of the potential difficulties created by this asymmetry. Considering status, we should underline that a certain precariousness characterizes the positions of the members of this circle, who are submitted to competitive calls for project proposals (Breton 2014). We should also point out that they do not devote the same amount of time to *RAJE* : two of them work more than half-time on the project, and the other two a third of their time, and then there is work-study student.

The second circle is made up of six "academic" researchers, with a significant representation of women (four women and two men), which is not indicative of the overall distribution of university positions in France⁷. Four people work at the University (two woman

university professors, one woman lecturer and one man lecturer), one man is based at *Askoria*, a regional school of social work, and one woman is a contractual researcher. The statuses of these people are therefore quite heterogeneous, since four of them are civil servants, one is employed by a non-profit, and the last is employed on a fixed-term contract for the *RAJE* project. In terms of time devoted to the project, the situation is also highly diversified, and stems from the multiple constraints currently weighing on academics (Musselin 2008): the research engineer has been working full-time on the *RAJE* project since September 2024, one of the university professors devotes around 30% of her working time to the project, the *Askoria* employee a limited time too, and the three other academics are mainly involved in scientific team consultations and in regional meetings attended by local stakeholders and researchers. In addition, the ties that bind these people together are much looser than those of the first circle.

These two circles are not entirely mutually exclusive. The research engineer, whose time is dedicated to the project, acts as a kind of intermediary between the two sub-groups. One of the university professors, which has long-standing friendships with members of the cooperative and with two of the members of the academic circle, acts as a bridge between the two worlds (Loncle 2024).

As a result of these three dimensions (gendered distribution, status and work time devoted to the project), we observe the coexistence of several phenomena leading to discordant repercussions on team work. On the one hand, and this is a classical phenomenon (Hall and MacPherson 2011), the effects of hierarchy are, to all appearances, rather favorable to women in how the team overall operates. This is all the more true that *Coop'Eskemm* members offer facilitation techniques that encourage speech to circulate in order to promote horizontality despite status (Bessaoud-Alonso 2017). As a result, during meetings, the women express themselves widely and can formulate numerous suggestions and participate in decision-making. On the other hand, the amount of time devoted to *RAJE* favors the men of the group, who dedicate a significant proportion of their time to field work and therefore have a much more in-depth knowledge of the territories and stakeholders than the women, especially those occupying senior academic positions. This situation has led some of them to express difficulties in finding their place in the team.

Higher Education and Research in 2021 [URL : https://publication.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/eesr/FR/T493/la_parite_dans_la_recherche/#ILL_EESR17_R_36_01, last consultation on 12 December 2024]

⁷ According to a set of data produced by the French Ministry of

Taking this into account, *Coop'Eskemm's* members have been working throughout the project to rebalance the dynamics. They set up tools that enable everyone to get involved to the extent of their availability, drawing on everyone's skills. For example, "co-development" sessions have been introduced to enable those doing field work to share problem situations with the other researchers, and regional meetings have been organized to enable those members occupying senior academic positions to analyze situations they have not directly investigated. During the remaining year of the project, we will have to see what effects these attempts to rebalance power within the project have had and draw conclusions on the way women found a suitable place in the team or not.

2.3 Examining gender of local action research partners

The local stakeholders involved in the action research project can be divided into two categories, according to their degree of power in local public policy making: decision-makers on the one hand, all of whom are elected representatives (mayors, presidents, town councillors) or heads of departments within local government administrations; and youth workers on the other hand, who work with young people on a day-to-day basis (tab. 1).

In terms of overall numbers, the proportion of men and women partners is relatively balanced. Gender inequalities can be observed within either group, and are particularly pronounced among decision-makers. A majority of men are community leaders, while a minority are town councillors for youth affairs. These observations are relatively classic considering the composition of political groups at a local level: women are mostly placed in charge of social issues (Della Sudda and Marneur 2021), and despite their growing numbers within local government, parity is far from achieved (Délégation aux droits des femmes 2021). As far as heads of youth services are concerned, *i.e.* men and women in charge of coordinating youth policies within a local government

administration, the apparent gender balance would need to be further discussed and qualified. In fact, our observations show that not all of them can devote the same amount of time to youth issues specifically (some are in charge of both youth affairs and leisure). The possibility of drawing on other stakeholders and structures (in the fields of sports, culture, clubs and organisations) also varies from one territory to the other. Lastly, they do not have the same seniority either in their position or in their territory. We should also point out that very few of them have devoted time to the action research project.

As far as youth professionals involved in *RAJE* are concerned, it should be pointed out that their working conditions vary greatly from one area to another: some work in pairs in the same youth center, sharing coordination and facilitation tasks; some combine the duties of manager of after-school activities, manager of the youth center, and deputy manager of the activity center; others, finally, are employed by a social services nonprofit. What is relatively common to all the action research territories, and partly due to the rural nature of the municipalities studied, is the low number of youth professionals employed per area (two or three at most) and the precariousness of their status. In terms of gender, the majority of *RAJE's* youth workers are men (only three are women). However, experimentation on a local scale is leading the research team to progressively extend its network so as to include workers from the fields of sports and culture, as well as independent youth collectives, thus ensuring gender, status and age diversity at various stages of the project.

3. AT A LOCAL SCALE, GENDER ISSUES ARE SLOWLY YET UNEVENLY BEING INTEGRATED

Owing to its framework, the *RAJE* research action project, which involves decision-makers, youth workers and young people, is in itself an interesting field for understanding the circumstances in which gender issues emerge and are placed on the youth policy agenda. In this part of the article, we shall study them through the

Table 1. Composition of stakeholder groups in action-research territories.

Stakeholder category	Type	Number of women	Number of men	Total
Decision-maker	Mayor (municipality) or President (inter-municipality)	2	5	7
	Town councillor or deputy mayor for youth affairs	5	2	7
	Head of youth services in a local government administration	4	3	7
Youth workers		3	6	9
Total		14	16	30

Source: *RAJE*, Research data, 2024.

funding mechanisms of youth policies and the initiatives of stakeholders at a local scale.

3.1 A tardy arrival on the political agenda, unevenly encouraged by youth policy funding schemes

In 2017, in a study on *The place of young people in rural territories*, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council⁸ aligned with the recommendations of international organizations (such as the Council of Europe and UN Women), thus urging «attention be paid in each of the programs, schemes or projects to gender, by integrating it on a budgetary level» (Even and Coly 2017). If this recommendation seems to arrive belatedly on the French political scene, it is because youth policies have long ignored gender issues. A retrospective assessment helps us understand how boys have been favored by youth policies since the latter gradually made their appearance at the end of the 19th century. Actually, these public policies have, from the outset, targeted “young people” in their interactions with the public sphere and the army (out of fear of their delinquent behavior and the need to shape an enlightened workforce on the one hand and the need to count them as a population capable of defending the country in armed conflicts on the other). Hence, for a great many decades, “young people” implicitly meant “young boys” decades.

Only in the past twenty years did the focus shift somewhat, and public authorities – first and foremost the European institutions, based on the notion of *gender mainstreaming* (Dauphin and Senac 2008) – begin to take a more specific interest in girls (European Commission 2001). There has been an at least partially growing awareness that girls are less present in community facilities (in sport facilities or youth clubs for instance) (Maruéjols 2011). Today, a number of local authorities are taking initiatives to dedicate spaces for girls and to work towards gender-sensitive public budgets. We hypothesize that these initiatives depend essentially on the willingness of stakeholders to take up gender issues themselves.

3.2 Professionally-led initiatives that vary greatly from one area to another

The municipalities studied and involved in *RAJE* are influenced by the legacy of a national youth policy, essentially focused on developing sports and, to a lesser extent, cultural facilities. Services for young people are

still designed in this way today. This is justified by the need to offer them places to gather:

In the history of all young people and at all times, they [young people] need to gather in one place or another. So we've built a municipal stadium, we've built places where they can see each other, and now we've just renovated an entire skate park... I think that is what they need, so we have to give them the opportunity. We've also opened a sports field [...] where there's a basketball hoop, [and] something where you can do a bit of running (Interview with the Mayor of a rural municipality 2024).

While this policy of open-access facilities partly meets young people's need for informal and unsupervised get-togethers (Zaffran 2011), it runs the risk of perpetuating gender inequalities. By creating ever more spaces favorable to masculine leisure activities (Renahy 2005), this tends to chase young girls away from public spaces. They are in fact places where informal, single-sex boy's activities are generally more important than single-sex girls' activities (Maruéjols 2011; Bellavoine *et al.* 2021). They also are conducive to activities with modes of socialization that clearly reinforce gender stereotypes (Mennesson and Neyrand 2010). This gendered segregation of activities (Mennesson *et al.* 2006) can also be observed in supervised leisure and after-school activities. In rural areas, facilities dedicated to young people have few users in general (David 2014), but they are even less frequented by teenage girls (Maruéjols and Raibaud 2012), who prefer the domestic sphere (Amsellem-Mainguy 2021). Based on these observations, youth workers and decision-makers raise the question of gender in terms of invisibility and absence of young girls: how can their occupation of public spaces be encouraged? How can their absence from places dedicated to youth be solved?

In the areas covered by the study, three solutions are being experimented in an original way, on the youth workers' initiative. They consist in designing places that welcome young people, programming supervised activities, and feminizing the teams of youth workers.

In one of the municipalities involved in *RAJE* (located to the north of Rennes' metropolitan area), two youth workers decided to initiate a remodeling of the youth center, based on the observation that girls came in fewer numbers than boys. Based on a participatory approach, the initiative had a two-fold aim: to mobilize teenage girls by helping them to «take that step into the youth center» (word of a youth worker), while enabling them to get involved in its transformations:

⁸ The Economic, Social and Environmental Council (for *Conseil Economique, Social et Environnemental* in French - CESE) is a consultative assembly.

We realized that we had a very masculin customer base, and we said to ourselves we are going to work on mixing genders in our youth center. [...] And so we worked for 4-5 months, with them, we got them involved in the complete reorganization of the youth center [...] we refreshed the cushions, we refreshed the plaids [...] we refreshed the paintwork, we refurbished the spaces, we redefined the spaces as... Well, like when you rearrange your house, in fact, when you move in (Interview with a youth worker 2024).

This experience changed the professional's perceptions of what may interest girls and boys: «We had 70% boys doing the sewing workshop. The girls [sai'] I'm not at all interested in sewing, I want to pañt', you see [laughs] [...] we were surprised by that» (Interview with a men youth worker 2024). Collectively, and through a program of mixed activities, teenagers and youth workers experimented alternatives to the predominant gender stereotypes: «We've broadened our choice of activities a little, and today we've got a good mix, with, as a matter of fact, groups of girls who encourage other young people to drop in» (Interview with a men youth worker 2024).

This experience underlines the importance of youth workers' attitudes towards young people (Maruéjols 2024): the models they convey, whether consciously or not, influence boys' and girls' practices, their relationship to the activities, and their gender behavior (Guérandel 2011). In this case, the activities that conformed to gender stereotypes weren't those that mobilized teenage girls the most – since, as the interviewee points out, they were more involved in activities branded as “masculine”. This experience, while original, leads us to question the ideology of gender complementarity (Raibaud 2007) according to which women should be in charge of care work, while men should be in charge of physical and sports activities and authority (Herman 2007).

At the beginning, we asked ourselves a lot of questions [...] we are two boys, does the fact that we are two boys ultimately holds the girls back? Well, not at all, because we actually have, uh... intimate conversations with the girls. And on the contrary, they don't find it awkward, [they find it] even reassuring in a way, well that is their vision... [they say] “no, I don't mind talking about waxing with you, or periods or all that, but it's true that with a girl [woman worker], I don't know if I'd dare... I don't know”. I don't know, after all, we are all they have got, so uh... Maybe it would certainly go well, but I'm just giving feedback [laughs] (Interview with a man youth worker 2024)

Having more women in a team of youth workers is often put forward as a solution to the low participation of girls (Bacou 2004), as they are considered as identity role models in the process of gender construction dur-

ing teenage years (Raibaud 2007). This interview extract, however, shows that the gender of the youth workers is not the only determinant in building a trusting relationship with teenage girls. And yet, on these same assumptions, organisations will, still today, diversify their leisure activities in order to balance the proportion of girls and boys: «See, in dance, there are only chicks, what can I say... we have like two or three [boys] dancers. We're going to try to create a hip-hop class next year [...] and try to create a theater class [...] it's much less gendered, in theater there are more boys» (Interview with a woman youth worker 2024).

Our observations tend to indicate that these strategies are only partial responses to gender inequalities. They are not conducive to active co-education (Raibaud and Bacou 2011) in terms of parity and social interactions between girls and boys and run the risk of perpetuating the mechanisms of gender assignment.

To this end, youth workers from an information service and of a delinquency-prevention center have developed teaching kits to raise awareness both on gender issues and sexist and sexual violence. These kits are used when working with high-school students and youth workers. They enable professionals to identify situations in which gender stereotypes are reproduced, and to work on them with the young people who are in their care (Guérandel 2016). For instance, the phenomenon of verbal and non-verbal domination of girls by boys is referred to.

Despite the positive effects of these experiments in deconstructing gender stereotypes and promoting gender diversity, they seem not to last and have trouble transforming local institutions and policies. For example, the communication media for the schemes and tools coordinated by youth services to support youth participation (such as youth project grants) still fail to explicitly include gender issues. No parity goals are mentioned, even though youth workers report on the importance of gender issues based on their hands-on daily experience. The place of gender issues within inter-professional networks, and more specifically in the dialogue between youth workers and elected representatives, will be an area of investigation for RAJE in the future.

3.3 Is the presence of women likely to help putting gender issues on the agenda?

Youth workers draw on their hands-on, day-to-day experience of working with young people to adapt their responses. For example, one of the woman youth workers involved in RAJE trained in gender issues after identifying a need among young people to discuss trans-

identity issues. This enabled her to use tools and organize discussion forums in the form of workshops. In the same inter-municipality, other youth workers led a group of schoolchildren into developing peer prevention initiatives on gender inequality issues. This initiative received institutional recognition when the school was awarded the “equality label”⁹. These two examples illustrate the importance of close links between youth workers, regardless of the structure they work for or their status. Implicitly, they also raise a conundrum: indeed, as gender issues are rarely placed on the youth policy agenda, youth workers often have to take the initiative of signing up themselves for the training schemes that will enable them to develop their skills on the subject (Bayer and Rollin 2015), but only once they have been confronted with it. They are increasingly involved in gender issues and are developing expertise on the subject through specific actions on gender equality, fighting against gender stereotypes, or supporting gender minorities. However, these initiatives seem to meet with little response from local political institutions. We formulate the hypothesis that the absence of gender equality specialists at municipal and inter-municipal levels, and the persistence of gender stereotypes in the political sphere, are an impediment to a comprehensive analysis of gender issues.

In addition to the notable absence of equality specialists or elected representatives dedicated to the matter, we found that those who initiated discussions on gender issues were mainly women. During a workshop led by the research team in a rural municipality and attended by elected representatives and youth workers, it was the (woman) elected deputy mayor for children and youth policies who explicitly brought the subject up:

Woman deputy mayor: there's one thing that doesn't appear here at all, and that's the question of gender. Among those who are invisible, there are the girls. Just now, it was blatantly obvious.

Woman youth worker: if you went to the municipal stadium, it figures.

Man town councilor: there were three girls on a bench, colouring, if we hadn't gone and fetched them...

Woman deputy mayor: and even though we went to fetch them, we didn't hear them. When you hand them a microphone, they don't speak.

Man town councilor: yes, they remain completely in the shadows... (excerpt from workshop minutes, April 2024)

During a similar workshop in another municipality, gender was also raised by a woman elected representa-

tive (not specialized in youth but in communications and public affairs this time). When she spoke, none of the other participants (among whom the mayor, the deputy mayor for children, youth and education policies, and the head of youth services) expressed their opinion on the subject.

The elected representative in charge of communications reacts, suggesting various actions to spur youth involvement, including the organization of a mini-concert. She points out that futsal is a gendered, masculine sport. She asks that something be imagined and submitted for young women. The deputy mayor sidesteps this specific point by talking about how to spur “youth” participation and involvement (in a non-gendered way):

Elected official: “How can we involve young people in the preparation of the event, so as to create a snowball effect?” (excerpt from field diary, October 2024)

It's worth noting that in the first example, most women are decision makers, but not in the second. The absence of parity in both cases is all the more noteworthy as it is intrinsically linked to the question of power (Della Sudda and Marneur 2021). The report written by the *Délégation aux droits des femmes* (2021) highlights the difficulties and discrimination experienced by women elected to positions in local government. In our action research project, these women, despite having no training in gender issues, seem to be particularly sensitive to them and, through their own words, try to put them up for discussion. Without going so far as to presume that men would be less likely to do so, this observation should nevertheless act as a warning signal, especially as it has been shown that elected women «must, more than men, justify their skills and struggle to make themselves heard» (Délégation aux droits des femmes 2021).

While we cannot, at this stage, answer the question formulated in the section title, i.e. *does placing gender on the agenda have a sex?*, the recounting and analysis of these experiences encourages us to pay closer attention to interactions in the future (through closer observation and analysis of social behaviour and dynamics) in order to uncover the obstacles to placing gender issues on the local youth policy agenda. This could be one of the directions to be explored collectively in the follow-up of the action research project.

4. PROMOTING GENDER INTEGRATION IN OUR RESEARCH: MIDCOURSE KEY QUESTIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION

One of the remaining questions is how to adjust the way we support youth workers in addressing gender

⁹ This label is an institutional initiative designed to highlight and reward initiatives that promote equality (especially between girls and boys) within schools.

issues? But we can also wonder what would have happened if we had taken this into account upstream of the project, both in the way our team operated, and in the way we formulated our main research questions.

4.1 Highlighting inequalities in order to formulate research questions and design experiments

Although writing this article is a cooperative exercise that does not involve all RAJE members, it is not conducted behind closed doors, and already seems to be transforming the action research process. These transformations will here be examined in the way gender issues are raised at a local scale, and the effects induced by the gradual development of expertise on the subject (as knowledge is acquired and a work-study student specialized in these issues is hired).

To illustrate how gender issues have been placed on the agenda in the inter-municipalities involved in the RAJE project, we propose to discuss two situations: one which occurred prior to writing this article (March 2024), and the other more recently (January 2025). The first concerns a participatory workshop led by a researcher and which brought together four youth workers from the same area. Invited to react to excerpts from interviews, the participants expressed their perceptions of the needs, experiences and expectations of young people in their municipality. One extract in particular shed light on gender issues: «Our older girls are less present [...] I don't see them too much anymore. We lose them in high school» (anonymized excerpt from an interview).

The youth worker who selected this excerpt explained that it shed light on how young people at the age of 16 tend to a certain extent to abandon local places (regardless of their gender). It was the researcher who intervened to steer the discussion towards the absence of young girls in public spaces. As this participant works in a public center that provides care for a public ranging from childhood to adolescence, she did not perceive this situation through a gender lens. Another youth worker, who also lives in the municipality, testified: «I agree with the statement 'girls, we don't see them'. [...] I walk around a lot. Every time, it's the guys you see» (youth worker).

In the process of identifying issues collectively through action research, the gender issues are unevenly brought to light. Often, as in the previous testimonies, it is through the invisibility of girls in public spaces and the gendered mechanisms of participation that they are brought to light (by the stakeholders and, less frequently, by the researchers). It should be noted that Coop'Eskemm's researchers are able to identify problematic situations and put them up for discussion, thanks

to their expertise in working cooperatively with youth groups and producing knowledge about the issues at stake. When questions addressing gender specifically are raised in formal settings, they encourage participants to express themselves freely, acting as facilitators and helping them reach an objective analysis of youth-related issues, thus contributing to the process of training youth workers and decision-makers. In less formal situations, it is more difficult for them to maintain this posture, and exchanges tend to revolve around the sharing of personal points of view. Since the arrival of a work-study student trained in this area, a turning point has been reached in the way the subject is apprehended with local stakeholders, leading more quickly to shared analyses of situations.

Later and in a different formal context, i.e. in January 2025 at a regional meeting of youth workers involved in the project, one of the researchers mentioned the present article and asked the group about gender inequalities in the areas covered by the study:

Researcher: we didn't ask the question of women/men or girls/boys... in the areas you are in, are there gender differences? Do some people find it difficult to express themselves? These are questions we ask ourselves at RAJE. Is there a place for everyone in terms of gender?

Respondent 1: Sometimes these questions come from the young people.

Respondent 2: We have been alerted by an education adviser, girls are speaking up less and less in class groups.

Researcher: At all levels. In one Masters' degree there are 3 boys out of 20 students: they're the only ones we hear.

Respondent 3: Guys talk more easily

Respondent 2: we organised a single-gender workshop in an "adapted general and vocational education section"¹⁰, and the girls were happy, but the teacher had mixed feelings about it. In her opinion, the girls participated because they had no choice, whereas when there are boys, they don't speak up (excerpt from a plenary discussion between researchers and professionals, January 10 2025)

Although the subject had not yet emerged during the workshops preceding this talk, the question nevertheless enabled the expression and sharing of experiences, thus highlighting the existence of problems shared by all the youth workers, regardless of the specificities of the areas in which they intervene. The way researchers place certain issues on the agenda in action research encourages us to question more openly the way we assist stakeholders, but also, and more generally, the transformative dimension of our interventions.

¹⁰ A special class for secondary school students with important educational needs

4.2 Deconstructing gender?

The numerous talks within our collective, prompted by the drafting of this article, have also led us to question the relevance of measuring parity between girls and boys in our social systems according to binary criteria. First, because our observations demonstrate the inadequacy of a binary approach to fully grasp gender issues; and second, because these approaches tend to establish a heteronormative gender order and, ultimately, to define a specific place and role for (young) men and (young) women in society. Therefore, the space left by the absence of gender issues on the youth policy agenda seems to be an interesting opportunity to work collectively on these issues and, at the same time, involve those primarily concerned.

One way of assisting stakeholders could also be to get them to think more broadly about the issue of gendered participation and the invisibility of girls while simultaneously questioning the constraints and expectations that weigh on them, particularly those linked to the role of caregiver, which is more strongly attributed to women (Orange and Renard 2023). The aim would be to make them aware of the need for an integrated gender policy, following the example of integrated youth policies (Kalala Mabuluki and Siurala 2019).

It would also mean taking better account of and recognizing the situations of young people who do not identify with any particular gender. This approach requires a major mobilization effort, based on abandoning the binary boys vs. girls logic and recognizing the existence of multiple gender identities. The action research method used by *RAJE* aims at enabling young people to investigate their own situations in order to politicize the issues they encounter and identify solutions and avenues for improvement. We believe this method to be a way of taking better account of the situations experienced by young people themselves and moving beyond a binary treatment of gender in public policies.

4.3 Adjusting our research strategy

At first glance, the exercise of writing this article has had beneficial effects: it has enabled us to cross our perspectives and knowledge, to learn from each other and to uncover a shared object that has strengthened our ability to carry out research together. Observing this transformation prompts us to question our methods. What would have happened if we had taken the gender dimension into account upstream of the project, both in the way our team operated and in the way we formulated our research questions? This analysis will enable us to

readjust our research strategy for the remaining year of the project.

First of all, with regard to the way our team operates, a more systematic consideration of gender (as well as the influence of status and time spent on fieldwork) would have clarified our respective positions. In this way, the fact would have been made explicit, that the team was in fact structured by positions of power rather favourable to the women occupying senior academic positions and we would have seen what could be done to reduce them. Admittedly, the organizational suggestions currently being made by non-academic researchers to enable everyone to find their place in the project go some way towards reversing these positions. However, they do not come from the women occupying senior academic positions (or at least not from all of them), and they leave power relationships unexplained, which is always damaging in the long run. For example, we still don't know how the research publications will be signed. Will we opt for alphabetical order, regardless of the time commitment and actual fieldwork, or for the project acronym? Another potentially problematic question is: how will we take into account the fact that the junior academics making up the rest of the team will have to move on to other projects at the end of *RAJE*, because of how their jobs are funded, while those occupying senior academic positions will be able to continue working on it, even if they are not the ones who have invested the most time and energy in it?

Secondly, as regard to the research questions, a more systematic integration of gender when writing the project could have enabled it to unfold differently. When responding to the various calls for project proposals, we could have insisted on two particularly structuring dimensions. First, the fact that, in national and local youth policies, men and women are taken very differently into account, with a historical focus on men. We could have pointed out, for example, that a very large percentage of public funding is in fact aimed at men - in terms of equipment and dedicated human resources (Maruéjols-Benoit 2014). Next, we could have brought up the fact that men are generally more present than women in spaces dedicated to supporting youth initiatives, that they tend, in mixed groups, to take over the most prestigious positions (Porte and Poisson 2015), that, more than women, they develop strategies that enable them to enhance their self-esteem over the long term and take advantage of their participation in order to consider careers as political leaders (Walther and Lüküslü 2021). Formulating these reminders would have led us to express these issues in the same way with the stakeholders and young people in the areas covered by the study,

and to lay out the situations as they arose. In doing so, we would have paid specific and systematic attention to pre-existing approaches in the areas included in the study and we would have been able to take into account the difficulties linked to gender issues when structuring new actions by.

Now that these observations have been made, it's up to us to share them with all those involved in the action research project (both our team and the local stakeholders) and, having done so, to draw lessons both in terms of knowledge production and research implementation.

5. CONCLUSION

Studying the way in which gender is integrated in local youth policies in France is challenging for several reasons. Firstly, the commitment of local stakeholders to youth policies and their interest in the matter are uneven. Besides, the implementation of youth policies is increasingly subject to fund raising through competitive calls for proposals. Secondly, gender issues, which these policies have, for a long time, failed to address, still very rarely are. European institutions embraced the notion of gender mainstreaming twenty years ago and France seems to be lagging behind. Finally, the intersection of gender, youth and rural issues is still relatively undocumented, especially as regard to the precariousness of (young) women in academic literature, and the invisibility of adolescent girls in public policy.

Conducting this study through an action research project focused on local youth policies allows us to explore this blind spot, even though RAJE was not initially designed to specifically examine gender issues. Writing this article has enabled us to address them in a reflexive and qualitative way and, simultaneously, led us to formulate several hypotheses on the barriers and facilitators to placing gender issues on the agenda. While we have revealed that calls for projects and funding mechanisms for youth policies are less likely to include considerations on gender, we have yet to identify the factors that encourage or, on the contrary, limit the initiatives of stakeholders in the fight against gender inequalities. The gendered distribution of power in local government, the mechanisms of gender assignment, and the reproduction of stereotypes are all avenues of inquiry for action research. The dialogue between young people, decision-makers and youth professionals seems to us to be a particularly adequate forum for collectively exploring these lines of research, with the prospect of raising awareness and empowering each participant.

In view of the low level of gender awareness among local authorities and youth professionals and of the persisting inequalities in this field, adopting this focus would appear to be a major ethical and political challenge for the follow-up to RAJE.

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Caring for and Protecting each Other: Peers and Gender-related Participation in and outside School

SINA-MAREEN KÖHLER, ANNA LENA WINKLER

Abstract. This article explores the participation experiences of 12- to 16-year-olds both in and outside of school, with a focus on how young people engage with gender-related topics in peer interactions. We present data from our longitudinal study which investigates peer relationships and participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, working with qualitative interviews, which are analyzed using the documentary method. By adopting a broad understanding of participation the study emphasizes the importance of empirical research on youth participation beyond formal political contexts. This framework enables a detailed analysis of the contexts, actors, and practices of youth participation, highlighting the role of peer relationships in gender discussions. In the school setting, the article examines practices such as student representation, complaints, and the expression of opinions on gender and LGBTQ* topics. Outside of school, it focuses on extracurricular activities and the negotiation of gender identity within personal contexts, such as family and romantic relationships. The findings demonstrate how young people assert and defend gender-related claims relevant to their social participation, showing the crucial role of peer support in navigating gender struggles both privately and publicly. Ultimately, the article illustrates how peer groups provide emotional and discursive support as adolescents navigate their gender identities across different environments.

Keywords: Peers, Youth, Participation, LGBTQ*, Care.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the experiences and practices of participation among 12- to 16-year-olds in and outside of school, focusing on how respondents grapple with gender-related topics with their peers. Drawing on a broad concept (Pitti *et al.* 2023: 145; McMahon *et al.* 2019: 161; Walther *et al.* 2019: 15), the article addresses the need for empirical studies exploring youth participation beyond political institutions. This broad understanding of participation allows for a detailed examination of with whom, in what, and how young adolescents participate (Köhler and Zschach 2025), emphasizing the significance of peer relationships in the context of gender.

In the school context, this includes participation practices such as student representation, complaints, and the desire to express opinions and dis-

cuss gender and LGBTQ* topics in class. Outside school, the focus is on extracurricular activities and how young people negotiate gender identity in personal contexts like family and partnerships. Young people assert and defend personal gender-related claims relevant to social participation in these settings. This article illustrates how gender-related struggles in the private sphere are significant for social participation and supported by peers. Ultimately, it illuminates how peers discursively and emotionally support young people as they navigate their gender identities in different contexts.

This article begins with an overview of research on youth participation practices and how young people navigate gender in school and everyday life. This overview focuses on qualitative studies of youth, participation, and peers, particularly those addressing the importance of helping, caring, and worrying in peer relationships, such as friendships, and the role of friends in dealing with gender and sexuality. After outlining related research and desiderata, the third section introduces the study's research design. The following section presents early empirical findings, spotlighting five cases that differ in peer integration and engagement with gender and sexuality. This section reconstructs how participation is practiced in school and out-of-school contexts and the importance of peer relationships in both settings. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings in reference to existing research on peers, participation, and gender.

2. PEERS, PARTICIPATION AND CONCERNS – A RESEARCH OVERVIEW

What, where, and how young people deal with the meaning of sexuality and gender in their everyday lives is relevant for social participation and is linked to explicit political socialization. However, little is known about the interactions in and between various settings and forms of peer relationships in and outside of school, especially for younger adolescents under 16 years of age who have been largely neglected in participation research (Bock and Braches-Chyrek 2021: 25). For this research, we follow studies that use the term “peers” as a generic term (Krüger *et al.* 2022, 2010) for various relationship forms (Köhler, Krüger and Pfaff 2016), including constructive and friendly relationships alongside more destructively violent ones, such as cliques (Adler and Adler 2003). Additionally, it recognizes that school and out-of-school peer relationships are not necessarily mutually exclusive but often overlap, with school peers often being close in age and externally determined to

be “peers.” As Parsons (2012/1981) describes in detail and Adler and Adler (2003) empirically examine, young people encounter an inescapable peer public at school. Accordingly, a school provides a continuously reliable context for meeting friends but also for conflicts, such as bullying. In contrast to youth recreation centers and public spaces, young people cannot simply stay away. Similarly, Helsper *et al.* (2006) show that co-determined participation forms can be established and implemented in school settings. In addition to classic forms of student participation, such as student representation, students feel their views are considered when they can exchange ideas in class and express their opinions on various topics, including gender-based discrimination (Köhler and Mengilli 2024; Calmbach *et al.* 2024). By contrast, activities outside of school depend on a young person's voluntary commitment.

Qualitative studies by Pitti *et al.* (2023) and McMahon *et al.* (2019) provide valuable insights into participation spaces and practices, underscoring the fundamental importance of latent political socialization in the overall biographical experience of collective negotiation and decision-making processes. Studies on digital participation practices also adopt a broad concept of participation, distinguishing obtaining and procuring information online as a low-threshold form of participation (Grunert 2022; Ekström and Shehata 2018). In this context, peers can be important sources of inspiration for engaging with political and social issues around sexuality (Zschach and Sauermann 2024: 139; Krüger *et al.* 2023: 66; Hillebrandt *et al.* 2015: 130) or even in casual digital exchanges via social media (Kheredmand 2022: 8), which can also increase young people's exposure to hate speech and disinformation on the internet (*Ibidem*). Importantly, research finds that friends are more likely to act as a point of contact for the stress caused by hate speech than parents or teachers (Ivi: 35). Furthermore, fake news is a recurring theme in peer conversations, especially in the context of its steady increase. Individual studies that survey transgender and queer individuals reconstruct the essential role that bullying and destructive online communication or hate speech have as hurtful facets of peer worlds (Angoff and Barnhart 2021), while also underscoring that the support close friends provide in such contexts should not be underestimated (Rivas-Koehl *et al.* 2021).

To reconstruct the state of research on experiences and practices of helping, caring, and worrying among peers in the context of participation, it is important to first look at how scholars have approached care as a research object. Drawing on the fruitful field of care ethics research (Stützel and Scholz 2022; Tronto 1993;

Noddings 2010), we understand care as a reciprocal relationship practice that reinforces the social fabric. Tronto (1993) proposes a particularly broad understanding: «[I]n the most general sense, care is a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web» (*Ibidem*: 103). In such an understanding, care takes place in the context of relational relationships and is associated with moral responsibility. People relate to themselves, to others, and to the world. As such, social coexistence is «only possible against the background of fundamental mutual reliance and dependency in human relationships» (Korn and Scholz 2022: 14)¹. This understanding is captured by the German concept of *Sorge*, which can be further differentiated by distinctions between *caring about*, *caring for*, *caregiving*, and *care receiving* (see Tronto 1993: 106-107). Caring about denotes the attitude of recognizing another person's needs while caring for encompasses the assumption of responsibility for addressing these identified needs. Caregiving describes the practical implementation of caring for another person, while care receiving refers to how another person's needs are being addressed. In this context, the generalized term "care" is appropriate because it refers to specific practices.

The present article recognizes the embeddedness of concern and caring practices as they represent two sides of the same coin. Similarly, Noddings (2010) also distinguishes caring-for and caring-about: Caring-for is the direct, face-to-face encounter that establishes and sustains caring relations. It is a form of caring in which a carer listens, attends to expressed needs, and responds as positively as she can. In caring-about, we are moved by the needs of people (*Ibidem*: 22). A distinction is made here between direct caring (caring-for) and caring behaviour (caring-about). Recognizing the needs of others (caring about) can be the starting point for practices (caring for) realized through participation. Participatory processes reposition needs as a shared responsibility, thereby rendering them visible. In this article, we understand care as a «relational and interactive mode of relating» (Korn and Scholz 2022: 14), which recognizes the needs of other persons or groups and also includes practical or caring actions.

Research on adolescent peer relationships reconstructs caring practices (Mengilli 2022; Mengilli and Lütgens 2024; Korn and Scholz 2022; Leja and

Schwarzenbacher 2022; Lütgens 2021) in peer groups' youth cultural practices, birthday parties, and everyday life exchanges (see Mengilli 2022). Young people discuss and work through overwhelming situations; such experiences bring them relief and are seen as caring. Among friends in particular, young people are able to carefully address their struggles and vulnerabilities (see Mengilli and Lütgens 2024). Drawing on such research, we reconstruct caring interactions and processes as part of young people's everyday peer practices and see the «possibility of dealing with matters of concern» (Mengilli 2022: 159) as a central role of the peer group, which shows that the group cares. Importantly, supposedly «shameful topics of sexuality» (*Ibidem*) are discussed with friends, meaning that gender diversity and sexual orientation also emerge as spaces of caring.

This article addresses the central need for all aspects of young people's lives to be open for discussion. Accordingly, peers are an important resource that young people can draw on to deal with and discuss questions of gender and sexuality. Thus, such issues must also be seen as supporting and caring for participatory practices. Caring relationships also enable practices of participation as they draw on activist communities to recognize the issues that peers face and establish caring relationships in the first place (Lütgens 2021). In this understanding, care practices are linked to processes of community-building that create intimacy and trust through shared interactions (see Mengilli and Lütgens 2024).

Additionally, research on friendship is relevant for this article, including the longstanding line of research that focuses on dyadic friendships, primarily same-sex friendships between girls and boys (Breitenbach 2000; Jösting 2005). At the same time, studies on boys rarely analyze their worries, how they seek help, and the role caring plays in their lives (Leja and Schwarzenbacher 2022; Korn and Scholz 2022). Nonetheless, research to date has largely overlooked the topics of peers and care in relation to mixed-gender friendships. Building on Mengilli's (2022) study, a pronounced caring attitude is associated with increased intimacy in friendships, and this exists in relationships between boys and girls as well as dyadic friendships.

In sum, the literature shows that although caring practices can be clearly traced in adolescent peer relationships (Leja and Schwarzenbacher 2022; Korn and Scholz 2022), care remains marginalized as a research topic, especially in the context of participation. This article addresses this desideratum by reconstructing how peers provide discursive support for the process of coming to terms with gender identity and the provision of emotional support.

¹ Own translation. German original: «nur vor dem Hintergrund einer grundsätzlichen gegenseitigen Angewiesenheit und Abhängigkeit in menschlichen Beziehungen möglich».

3. THE PEERPARTICO LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Thematically, this article is situated at the interface of youth, participation, and peer research. Socialization theory is closely linked to studies examining experiences and practices of helping, caring, and worrying among peers, with a focus on gender and sexuality. Moreover, the article depicts the extent to which young people practice various forms of participation beyond conventional political spheres.

The empirical findings presented here were obtained by the research project Peer Relationships and Participation in Transition during the Covid-19 Pandemic (PeerPartiCo)². This project investigates the significance of close peer groups and friendships for how young people deal with participation in and outside of school. Open interviews and group discussions were used to collect young adolescents' narratives, which were then evaluated using the documentary method (Bohnsack *et al.* 2010; Nohl 2010). The study focuses on 20 cases of young adolescents aged 12 to 16, with narrative biographical interviews conducted at two time points (t1: 2021; t2: 2022). The broad sample includes adolescents with many and diverse close peer relationships and those with few or no peers. It also includes young people with different participation practices and political interests, as well as those who face social barriers and must navigate exclusion mechanisms related to disability, gender, and inequitable educational opportunities. Geographically, the sample is diverse, assuming that urban and rural areas offer different opportunities for participation and stimulate political interest in various ways. Seven respondents live in large cities, eleven in medium-sized towns, and two in rural areas. Group discussions were conducted with the young adolescents' peers to obtain more specific information about their relationships and participation practices. Background information was collected through a standardized sociometric survey completed by the participants and a standardized sociodemographic survey completed by their parents.

From a socialization theory perspective, a broad understanding of participation is connected to experiences and practices (Pitti *et al.* 2023; McMahon *et al.* 2019). Similarly, the project works with a broad understanding of politics. In line with the premises of praxeological sociology of knowledge, interviews and group discussions, as communicatively generated data, can be used to reconstruct practices as well as explicit and implicit knowledge. Our broad understanding of politics mirrors Nassehi's (2003) concept of political com-

munication. The wide-ranging political is understood as political communication, which, through the production of collectively binding decisions based on power, as well as the production of collectives and the public, gives the political its form (*Ibidem*: 164). Drawing on this, political socialization can be defined in the sense of the documentary method with a particular focus on participation: «All aspects of socialization in which interactions, shared spaces of experience, and role orientations are connected to decisions that are binding on a collective level and enforceable by power should be understood as political»³ (Nohl 2022: 47). Taken together, the political consists of actions (thinking, communication, agency) that refer to binding regulations in a public context. The public sphere exists whenever it is possible for members of society (generalized others) to communicate, whether indirectly (via the media) or directly (via political actors). The documentary method is then used to reconstruct implicit and explicit knowledge and conjunctive realms of experience, focusing on young people's experiences with their peers and common participation practices inside and outside school. This process involves the steps of formulating and reflective interpretation. Through continuous comparative analysis and the sequential reconstruction of the transcribed data, the orientation frameworks are worked out as habitus: «Orientation frameworks that result from the collective socialization history of the actors, more precisely: in the context of conjunctive experiential spaces» (Bohnsack 2018: 183). Thus, the study examines the orientations that have emerged in the socialization process, which meaningfully structure current actions and, consequently, the approach to gender topics.

This article details the findings about gender, reconstructed from data obtained during the interviews and group discussions. For illustrative purposes, it provides an in-depth exploration of five cases where the topic of gender emerged⁴. We selected these five cases because the young people independently brought up the topic of gender in their interviews and group discussions, marking it as a relevant issue for themselves. The analysis is conducted at the level of contrastive comparison and is not yet complete.

³ Own translation. German original: «Als politisch sollen all jene Komponenten von Sozialisation verstanden werden, bei denen Interaktionen, konjunktive Erfahrungsräume und Rollenorientierungen einen Bezug zu ein Kollektiv bindenden, durch Macht durchsetzbaren Entscheidungen haben»

⁴ The young people's relationships with participation experiences and practices are quite diverse overall and, in addition to topics related to sexuality, also relate to current political events, how to deal with the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, and other global crises.

² The PeerPartiCo project is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation).

4. YOUTH PERSPECTIVES OF PEER PARTICIPATION AND GENDER IN SCHOOL AND NON-SCHOOL LIFE CONTEXTS

4.1 *The case of John – The concerned and caring student council president*

John was 16 years old at the time of the interview. His case shows how young people at school, especially those who take on the role of student council representative, can actively advocate for the acceptance of diverse gender identities:

Well, I personally, um, very much support, um, yes, the, um, LGBTQ community (Y: mhm) um, that's something that I also, um, very clearly, um, stand up for at school (Y: mhm) um, and I also clearly express at school that it just is that way and you just have to accept it [...] you have to at least accept the people who stand for this and represent this orientation, I'll put it that way, um, like that (842-848).

John describes his personal attitude towards the topic as fundamentally supportive, although he communicates this particularly clearly in a school setting. The imperative he formulates, that it is necessary to accept people who feel connected to this topic, implies an orientation towards openness and acceptance of different sexual orientations and gender identities.

His in-school commitment and participation are also framed by his own personal gender identity, which he does not share in public and keeps hidden: «Yes exactly, so that's the classmate I just mentioned, um, he's against everything that deviates from his ideas, um, it's :@totally terrifying:@, well, I'll put it like this, if he knew me better, he would know this thing about me (Y: mhm), and then he probably wouldn't like me anymore either» (863-867). In his reference to how his classmate does not know “this thing” about him, John indicates a particular tension between his gender identity and his social environment. This reveals an implicit secrecy logic and a desire to protect his own identity, as John fears he will be rejected or disliked because of his views or his own possible personal identification with LGBTQ* issues.

During the interviews, John expressed a basic orientation towards social inclusion, especially in terms of peer rejection and degradation. John feels that such repercussions must be avoided.

However, John finds the acceptance of the LGBTQ* community so important that he enters into a direct discussion with his classmate: «I discussed it with him, I said why don't you just accept it, you don't have to like it, but you can just accept it and don't say insulting things to such people, and he always insults such people right

away and it's just stupid to them, to people like that» (867-871). This passage illustrates John's proactive efforts to encourage his classmate to at least provide minimal recognition and acceptance of LGBTQ* people. Instead of just taking a passive attitude toward his intolerance, John actively joins the discussion and promotes a dialogue based on the value of acceptance.

However, John considers his fight with his classmate hopeless and thus a failure: «You can't talk to him. That's just how it is. It's like you are talking to a brick wall» (871-872). For his orientation towards inclusion, John's commitment to the LGBTQ* community's recognition also reveals itself to be a separate arena in which he no longer has to keep his personal gender identity secret. Accordingly, school presents itself as a discursive space in which John, in his role as a student representative in school politics, is allowed to introduce and defend topics of socio-political relevance – in particular, gender- and sexuality-based discrimination – and thus to participate.

He only discusses his gender identity with his closest friend Marie and together they support the LGBTQ* community: «And also, um, my best friend Marie is extremely committed to the issue and she's also involved in the CSD and stuff like that, and she thinks it's totally awesome, of course» (872-875). John emphasizes how Marie is not only engaged with the issue but is actively involved, particularly through her participation in Christopher Street Day (CSD). The expression «is extremely committed to the issue» indicates a strong personal conviction and a high level of engagement. With Marie, John can work on issues that are important to him, develop resilience, and participate in this context at school and in society. Marie helps him deal with gender-related vulnerability in a caring and supportive way. This includes doing things together, such as attending the CSD, enabling John to experience his own gender-related orientation with support from a friend, far removed from the discrimination he has experienced at school.

However, peers were not the only ones responsible for John's experiences of gender-related discrimination at school. He also discusses how teachers engage in gender-based discrimination:

There are also many schools where you get bullied [for your gender identity]. You can see that at my school, too. There's a girl or a – well now a boy – who is um, transgender, so, um, from woman to man (Y: mhm) wants to become a man and, um, for four years now, and the teachers haven't accepted him. Really, some teachers still deliberately call him by his female name (926-930).

John notes how the teacher's intentional use of the student's dead name is not only highly offensive but also

deliberately discriminatory. He uses his position as student representative to advocate for the student body's concerns, particularly those of the trans student who was directly being discriminated against: «I've been thinking about that, but unfortunately the student is not here right now (Y: okay), because I would still like to talk to the student, uh, A, and then maybe we could do something together, a project» (937-939).

John's position as a student representative implies that he is responsible for recognizing grievances, addressing them in his official role, and potentially intervening. By acting as an advocate, he can implicitly establish and demand a protected space without having to reveal his own gender identity.

John's search for social integration is rooted in his biographical experience of being an outsider. Even as a kindergartener and elementary school student, John constantly experienced rejection and exclusion. Marie is his first real friend, and this helps him feel socially integrated and accepted. Being elected student representative also allows him to be included and accepted. His friendship with Marie and his role as student representative give John the strength, recognition, and care he needs to stand up for his beliefs, defend himself, and participate.

4.2 The case of Bianca – between seeking protection and self-empowerment in peer conflicts at school

At the time of the interview, Bianca is 15 years old. Her case also depicts how young people address gender-related injustices in the school context: «Well, physical education was often sexist or so, um (.) where whenever any (.) of the girls (.) wanted to do exercises it wasn't so good» (218-220). While Bianca's description is vague, it nonetheless suggests that she has experienced actions she perceives as sexist and problematic. Like John, Bianca is sensitive to problematic gendered statements and actions at school: «Of course, we complained about that too» (224-225). The use of "we" indicates that Bianca and her peers complained to the school together.

She describes in detail a situation when students insulted her friend sexually because of the clothes she wore. She considers the actions highly discriminatory. Most of all, she found the teachers' lack of intervention emotionally distressing:

And the teachers didn't intervene at all – they couldn't care less if the boys from a different grade are just awfully (.) sexist, or a friend of mine, she just wore a normal skirt and some boys from the ninth grade came up to her and said, 'You're really walking around like a slut,' and she had just worn a skirt, just a skirt, and the boys didn't even know

her, and since then she doesn't dare to wear skirts anymore because she doesn't want to be called that anymore (.) Hello, (.) what's going on there? And oh what a shock, the teacher says :: oh, they probably didn't mean it that way:: (.) I said, °Wait° (.) obviously they did when you say it like that: yes, I don't know, this sort of thing really upsets me (1040-1049).

Bianca uses emotional formulations which document her distress and emotional investment, while also labelling the boys as being actively engaged in practicing sexist "slut-shaming" behaviour, which means that other people have to engage in (self-)restraint. Bianca appears caring and outraged by describing how her friend no longer dares to wear skirts because she is worried it will lead to more sexist comments.

Bianca's protective orientation is evident here, which can be reconstructed from the teachers' non-intervention and Bianca's associated outrage and emotional language. Bianca positions herself as a critical observer who questions the teachers' dismissive attitude. At the same time, however, she also expresses her resignation regarding the effectiveness of her criticism. Bianca is outraged and worried but has yet to find a way to protest. While John can use his position as a student representative, Bianca remains an observer and struggles for self-empowerment. She can recognize and clearly name discrimination and thus raises the topic in the school context in the sense of very low-threshold participation. However, it is not taken up further. This puts her under a great deal of emotional strain. Feelings of a lack of protection and the struggle for self-empowerment can activate the search for agency, change and thus participation practices.

4.3 The case of Hugo – drawing inspiration from a supportive class

Hugo is 16 years old at the time of the interview. In terms of school participation and his education in general, he offers an interesting contrast to John and Bianca. Like John, his primary school years were marked by difficulties with classmates and arguments with teachers, which he attributes to a lack of understanding of what it means to be on the autism spectrum. However, he recounts a positive experience with school support during his primary schooling. His academic performance improved when he went to high school, and he only reports conflicts with individual teachers. As he got to know his classmates better, he received more support from his friends, and his school support was discontinued.

In general, Hugo's peers seem to have influenced his increased participation. Unlike John and Bianca, poli-

tics is one of Hugo's central biographical topics. This is evident in his interviews, which include long, self-contained passages on foreign policy and individual politicians. Moreover, he has already joined a party and wants to become a politician. Although conventional politics is highly relevant to his biography, he does not reference political action and decision-making at school or other formal forms of school participation in the interviews. He does, however, recall how being able to discuss political topics in class is very important to him. He criticizes teachers who do not provide space for political discussions in their teaching. In this context, one teacher stands out as his so-called «archnemesis» (GD: 128), which he justifies with references to the teacher's behaviour: «Hugo: [there have been] a few scandals because his chauvinistic comments on abortions make no sense at all, and he just tries to divide us» (GD: 134-136).

Hugo's fundamental orientation towards exchange and creativity is also influenced by some of his classmates who encourage him to participate in artistic and aesthetic endeavours: «Hugo: she raised her feminist voice for the first time when she joined our class and she also inspired me somewhat at the time. I wrote a poem that spoke out against our teacher» (I: 302-304). The high importance Hugo places on his class community for participation is dramatized in his interviews, especially in how he rejects the chauvinistic teacher and discusses socio-political topics, which he describes as gender-related discrimination.

As the previous cases show, young people spend time together at school daily, which offers a space for developing caring friendships and support. At the same time, it is also a space where young people encounter harmful interactions and must navigate tough disputes. This is particularly the case when it comes to gendered grievances, which young people must defend themselves against as much as they can. Anna and Melina's case reconstructions depict how different peers are relevant in out-of-school contexts and how young people negotiate gender and make claims to participation outside the school setting.

4.4 The case of Anna – self-empowerment and social connectedness through demonstration

Anna is twelve years old. She is close friends with 18-year-old Tina, whom she meets after school. Together, they regularly visit a youth center, go to the city center, or spend time with their best friends and/or partners. Anna represents a case where her closest friend experiences gender-based discrimination and defends herself against it. A large part of Anna's interview and the group

discussion with Anna and Tina focused on experiences with boys. This is particularly true for Tina:

Anna: he's always taking the piss out of you" (GD: 295). Tina is emotionally attached to a boy she cannot detach from: "Anna: up to now she loves him, she knows it's a mistake (.) but she still carries on and fights for him, although that doesn't really help" (I: 65-66). Anna comforts her love-sick friend and hopes she herself will not be hurt in such a way: "Anna: I hope that I don't get involved with a guy like that, that I'll wait for the right one" (I: 357-358).

The construction of a male-dominant relationship is clearly documented here. This can even be reconstructed on a linguistically performative level. When Anna speaks of her friend Tina, she expresses her amazement related to masculinity: «Anna: then she tells me everything. I think, brother, why are you doing that?» (GD: 259). This is echoed throughout the interview. However, the girls' resistance and a fundamental orientation towards assertion and autonomy can also be reconstructed. In case of doubt, Anna, in particular, goes on the offensive: «Anna: she gave me a look and nothing more, and then the guy got really aggressive, like, 'Why are you looking at me like that?' So I argued with him, like, 'Hey, what's your problem?' 'Why are you being so rude?' I didn't even care how old he was» (GD: 490-493). She is also protective of Tina in a way she describes as «cheeky» (GD: 492).

Overall, Anna's case is characterized by an oscillating relationship between male domination and female assertion. On the one hand, she expresses her opposition and engages in discussions, but on the other hand, she also describes experiences of emotional dependency and the need for protection: «Anna: then I shouted at him and she was like, hey that's not right, we are here alone with you, we are girls, you should actually want to be here with us» (552-554).

In sum, Anna and Tina are constantly preoccupied with their relationships with boys and the need to stand up for themselves. Accordingly, the youth center already has real-life resonance as it offers are geared towards girls, including a demonstration for women's rights on Girls' Day: «Tina: Women also have rights and not just men, and women can also do everything that men do and just (.) we are all the same» (GD: 384-386). Prompted by Tina's reference to democratic universalism and the claim to equality, Anna brings up the topics of sexuality and diversity:

Anna: Of course, men can become like women, so if a man somehow dresses like a woman, I mean, if he dresses like a woman or something, I don't have a problem with it, or if a woman becomes like a man, it's just stuff like that, like, I don't know, I don't know, uh (.) sexuality or how you look,

it's not really important to me now, so if Tina somehow becomes a man in the future, @().@ I wouldn't really care, as long as she feels comfortable with it, then that's the way it is, and she's still the same person anyway (GD: 387-394).

Her reference that she «wouldn't have a problem with it» indicates that there would be people for whom this would be problematic since she takes a clear position here. Anna and Tina use the youth center offers aimed at girls so that they can participate unconventionally through demonstration, and, although it is rather implicit, they thematically connect their participation to the LGBTQ* movement.

In Anna's case, her ability to stand up for herself and resist her immediate environment is important for her participation. However, she does not construct a generalized abstract Other responsible for the abolition of gender-based discrimination in the sense of established politics. She admits that she has a lack of knowledge and interest in politics when it is mentioned during the group discussion. Nevertheless, Anna sees herself in a dependent relationship with politics while she has no opportunities for participation: «Anna: [I have] no idea about these people, who are there [in politics], our lives are like that, our lives are in their hands» (I: 419-420).

4.5 The case of Melina – between self-assertion and family tradition

At the time of the interview, Melina is 14 years old. She represents a case where the family deals with LGBTQ* issues and discusses them, sometimes to the point of arguing: «But when we're all at grandma's on Sundays and we all eat together at the table and discuss things, it's usually the case that my sister and my father don't agree with me, so it's kind of like nobody agrees with me and that's sometimes pretty awful because I just would say that I am a pretty open person, yeah (.)» (626-630). Melina documents eating together at grandma's on Sundays as a ritualized family practice. At the same time, eating together provides a setting for discussions and conflicts, especially between Melina and her other family members. The statement «nobody agrees with me» emphasizes how she feels excluded within her family's discussion culture, an experience she describes as «awful». Melina takes on an outsider position by describing herself as an open person and marking her family as different from her. She expresses both a sense of connection to her family's Sunday tradition and frustration with the recurring discussions and her family's convictions. In particular, she references racism and LGBTQ* issues as key discourses: «so something like

racism and LGBTQ* and it's mostly critical, it's actually a shame, it's rather critical» (635-636).

Melina is oriented towards familial connectedness as well as autonomy and self-assertion. It is important for Melina to represent her values and beliefs independently of her family's beliefs, even if this means being an outsider and causing conflict. In this way, racism and LGBTQ* issues are introduced as central and contentious points of discussion that make familial conflicts visible. Melina cares about these issues, and her orientation towards autonomy and self-assertion activates participation practices that can unfold both within and outside of family contexts.

4.6 Comparisons and conclusions

The reconstructed cases of John, Bianca, and Hugo underscore how different opportunities for participation present themselves at school. At the same time, they also experience limitations. As a student representative, John can introduce and defend topics of socio-political relevance, thus participating and perceiving school as a discursive place. Conversely, Hugo participates through art, writing a poem that critically engages with a teacher. Bianca holds teachers strongly accountable and therefore sees her opportunities for participation as limited. However, her recognition of how sexist discrimination emerges at school can activate the search for agency and change, leading to participation practices.

Furthermore, this article depicts how family contexts, not usually understood as part of the classical concept of political participation, are also relevant for political socialization. This becomes particularly clear in Melina's case. She stands up for her convictions within her family, even if this means taking on an outsider position. Racism and LGBTQ* issues emerge as relevant fields of discourse that Melina consistently defends.

Participation also takes place in the immediate social environment. Anna's case illustrates this, as she actively advocates for her concerns, resists, and stands her ground in discussions. By going on the offensive, she actively influences her environment, illustrating how closely participation is linked to standing up for personal convictions.

The young people described in this article participate in various ways, underscoring the different possibilities for opening up and dealing with gender identity in the peer public and in close friendships. Close friendships offer support, including in the sense of concern. In John's case, for example, his best friend mirrors and reinforces his values. Together, they deal with gender-related vulnerabilities through practices of care,

opening up opportunities for joint participation. Anna and Tina also stand up for themselves in their immediate environment and join forces. Support from close friends proves to be a trailblazer and an important source of encouragement for gender-related participation in and outside of school. A close-knit class community can also encourage young people to participate, and, as Hugo's case shows, inspire them to participate artistically and aesthetically.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

To address the research desiderata, studies that broadly examine participation as a research object and adopt a differentiated concept of participation to show the complex interactions of different socialization contexts (Walther 2024; Nohl 2022) offer good opportunities for follow-up. It could be especially fruitful, e.g., to examine gender identity in the context of school (Dietrich and Budde 2022), participation in public debates and social movements around sexuality (Hunklinger 2024), or low-threshold digital participation as «connective action» (Grunert 2022: 78) or possible variants of wild and liminal participation (Pitti *et al.* 2021: 16).

In addition to these compelling studies, related research also reconstructs the (in)appropriateness of various socio-political arenas as spaces for participation, drawing on habitus theory (Calmbach *et al.* 2024; Bock and Braches-Chyrek 2021; Helsper *et al.* 2006). Praxeologically, it is possible to reconstruct how experiences in the school system, for example, are linked to participation practices at the level of tacit knowledge and how they are interwoven with recognition issues and experiences of difference (Zschach and Sauermann 2024, Krüger *et al.* 2023; Nohl 2022; Köhler 2023; Helsper *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, according to the current SINUS Youth Study, how young people experience integration through the cultural scene together with their peers is particularly relevant as connected spaces of experience for social participation, especially volunteering (Calmbach *et al.* 2024: 266; Pfaff 2006). According to the SINUS youth study, participation opportunities at school are considered marginal (Calmbach *et al.* 2024: 351,414). Even opportunities for participation and school discussions are seen as participation and are considered very important for young people (*Ibidem*: 352).

This article shows that many young people become involved in gender-related topics in particular when they find like-minded friends who support, encourage, and care for them, thus encouraging them to participate. However, peers not only act as supportive gateways into

participation, but also as challenging opponents who initiate processes of self-assertion and active engagement. Fellow students or family members' discriminatory and sexist behaviour, in particular, can act as catalysts for gender-related participation by motivating affected young people to take a stand against inequalities and disadvantages. Accordingly, the article shows that peer relationships in and out of school can serve a dual function – as both a supportive, protective, and caring influence and as an occasion for critical reflection and resistance. As such, empirical findings that provide differentiated insights into the various forms of peer relationships like those depicted in this article are essential for reconstructing the specific relevance of constructive as well as destructive peers.

Social dynamics within peer relationships significantly shape young people's gender-related participation in and outside school. Such dynamics can be supportive, caring as well as challenging, opening a wide range of opportunities for self-assertion, care, and shared engagement. The article thus illustrates how central peers are for promoting gender-sensitive participation – whether through mutual support, practices of solidarity or confrontation with discriminatory structures that mobilize resistance and engagement.

This article also depicts how boys fear their vulnerability to harm, which can present itself as a barrier to caregiving practices (Leja and Schwarzenbacher 2022). Practices that are close to the body, such as hugs, are thus excluded from caring practices because they are not read as masculine (*Ibidem*: 10). By contrast, Dietrich and Budde (2022) find a wide range of physical contact among boys in their ethnographic study on boys and school education, which they interpret as being caring, close, and affectionate and thus as caring practices. Young people's personal gender-related demands, which are the focus of this article, can be understood as intimate and potentially harmful and could thus hinder boys, particularly when it comes to caring practices. Following Köhler, Winkler and Autenrieth (2023) it can also be examined how (or if) young people use media to publicly engage with the topic of gender, defend it, form communities, and thereby develop resilience.

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"The Girl Must Stay Quiet": Marginalisation of Young Women in Political Spaces and the Impact of Gender Socialization and Ethnic Background¹

SIMONA GUGLIELMI, VERONICA RINIOLO, NICOLA MAGGINI, MARTA VISIOLI, ALICE SANARICO

Abstract. Studies on youth political participation reveal how engagement levels and forms differ due to gender, socioeconomic resources, and cultural backgrounds. Three key aspects are highlighted: first, political inequalities originate in adolescence, shaped by family political socialization, influencing gender differences, ideology, and ethnic disparities. Second, youth political engagement is affected by intersectional power dynamics, including gender and ethnicity. Third, young people face political institutions that are systematically gendered, with rules that have "gendered effects," and must navigate male-dominated cultures. This article contributes empirical evidence on the relationship between political socialization, gender norms, and participation among late adolescents and young adults, using an intersectional framework. It employs an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design. The quantitative phase draws on Eurobarometer Youth survey and the MAYBE project (a multilevel survey with 2,756 Lombardy students, aged 18-20, from 81 schools and 165 classes). The qualitative phase consists of 3 focus groups (participants: 7 men, 14 women, 7 with migrant backgrounds, aged 18-35 in Lombardy), collected by YEP! Youth Equality Participation. The article emphasizes the need to address gender biases in socialization and political practices to foster inclusivity, while highlighting the additional challenges faced by young women from migratory family backgrounds.

Keywords: political participation, youth, gender norms, political socialisation, second generation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on youth political participation showed how the levels and forms of youth engagement differ internally and are shaped by social stratification.

¹ This article is the result of a collaborative effort among all the authors. The sections were written as follows: Simona Guglielmi: paragraphs 1, 2.2, 2.3, and 4.2; Veronica Riniolo: paragraph 4.3, the Conclusions (paragraph 5), and the qualitative phase of paragraph 3 (Data and Methods); Nicola Maggini: paragraph 4.2.1; Marta Visioli: paragraphs 2.1 and 2.4; Alice Sanarico: paragraph 4.1 and the quantitative phase of paragraph 3.

Variations in individual experiences, access to socio-economic resources, and cultural backgrounds contribute to disparities in political participation (Giugni and Grasso 2021; Janmaat and Hoskins 2022; Lello and Bazzoli 2023). Within this framework, scholars highlighted three main aspects. Firstly, since influential studies by Jennings and Niemi (1968) it is well known that inequalities have deep-rooted origins, extending back to the formative years of adolescence when the foundations for long-term beliefs about politics are established. Family political socialization affects gender differences in youth political engagement (Cicognani *et al.* 2012), political ideology (van Ditmars 2023), and ethnic disparities (Guglielmi and Maggini 2025; Janmaat and Hoskins 2022; Ortensi and Riniolo 2020) through a complex process of intergenerational transmission (Boonen 2017; Durmuşoğlu *et al.* 2023; Mayer *et al.* 2024; van Ditmars 2023) and in interaction with different socializing agents (Ortensi and Riniolo 2020; Quintelier 2015). Secondly, youth political engagement is largely influenced by intersectional power dynamics embedded within social hierarchies, including gender and ethnic belonging (Collins 2021; Gatti *et al.* 2024; Harris and Roose 2014; Pfanzelt and Spies 2019). Third, young people who choose to engage in politics encounter political institutions that are systematically gendered: «Political opportunities and outcomes are shaped not only by rules “about gender” but also by seemingly neutral rules that have “gendered effects”, due to their interaction with institutions outside the realm of formal politics» (Lowndes 2020). In addition, young generations must navigate a prevailing culture that is often male-dominated and patriarchal, even in old democracies (Dahlerup and Leijenaar 2013).

Against this background, this article aims to contribute to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between gender socialization, gender political norms, ethnic background, and political participation among young individuals. To better investigate challenges related to interactions between age, gender and ethnic background an intersectional framework is adopted. The study employs a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, combining survey data with high school students (aged 18 to 19) and focus groups with young people (aged 18 to 30) with different levels of political engagement. Original survey data were collected in Lombardy (Italy), while gender differences in youth political participation in Italy are described using secondary analysis of Eurobarometer data. Lombardy serves as a strategic case study in Europe, being the EU's second most populous region and high in GDP. Young people in Lombardy enjoy better educational and employment opportunities than in the rest of Italy, and

the region boasts a high female labour force participation rate of around 60%. Social and civic engagement levels are also above the national average, especially for women (Della Bella 2023). Additionally, Lombardy has a significant foreign resident population (Maiorino and Terzera 2024), with 1,176,169 foreign citizens making up 11.8% of the total population. It also hosts the largest number of students with migrant backgrounds in Italy, accounting for 24% of such students nationwide (MIM, Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito 2024). However, challenges persist, including high youth unemployment, job insecurity, and limited social mobility, reflecting Italy's overall “youth-unfriendly” environment (Colombo and Rebughini 2024). The restrictive citizenship law based on *jus sanguinis* further complicates matters for young immigrant descendants. To address these issues, Lombardy has enacted Regional Law No. 4, a comprehensive framework law focused on youth, which allocates 10 million euros over three years to promote social and political inclusion, in line with the Youth Strategy 2019-2027.

The article is structured as follows: the next section presents the theoretical framework underpinning the mixed-methods research design and its arguments. Section 3 outlines the data and methodology employed in the study. Section 4 focuses on the empirical analysis, beginning with quantitative data followed by qualitative insights. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the main findings, highlighting the importance of addressing gender biases in socialisation processes, schools and everyday political practices to foster a more inclusive political environment. By adopting an intersectional approach, the study also emphasises the additional challenges faced by young women from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gender and ethnic inequalities in youth political participation show specific patterns of opportunities and obstacles. Furthermore, understanding sources and mechanisms of discrimination in political participation becomes more complex when the factors of age, gender and migrant background intersect (Matos *et al.* 2023).

2.1 Ethnic and Gender discrimination in political spaces

Regarding ethnic background, several studies have illustrated the exclusion of subjects with a migrant origin in political spaces: for example, Verba and colleagues (Verba *et al.* 1995) show in their seminal research that both Latinos and Black people usually participate less in politics than white people. More in-depth, Crowley

(2001) highlights the existence of an ethnic problem within Western democracies due to marginalization of people with a migrant background; but, even if the term “ethnic minority” is commonly used, in each state it implies a different history about political debate and consequently participation. Moreover, as some scholars have proved, the level of exclusion depends both on the type of political participation and the age cohort (Quintelier 2009). In Italy, specifically, many children of migrants are excluded from formal political spaces due to the lack of citizenship, even if they can make their own political choices (Daher and Nicolosi 2023): this leads them to feel underrepresented and to develop alternative forms of activism (Farini 2019; Riniolo 2023).

Regarding gender inequalities, among others Belluati (2021) sheds light on women’s under-representation within the political sphere, which is mainly caused by the permanence of a masculinist culture, power imbalances, and the reproduction of unequal cultural models in the media. Another recent study by Grasso and Smith (2022) analyzed the political participation of young men and women in eight EU countries, showing that young women are less active than young men in traditional politics, but they are more engaged in other kinds of activism. Therefore, it is necessary to also consider unconventional political participation when studying youth engagement in political spaces (Lavizzari and Portos 2021). Here too, however, there are distinctions. Exclusion from political spaces based on gender and ethnic background is affected by additional elements, including the political interest of individuals, opportunities, education and family resources.

2.2 The key role of political socialisation

Since influential studies by Jennings and Niemi (1968), the literature consistently shows that people tend to form predispositions towards politics during adolescence and early adulthood. These formative years, often called the «impressionable years» (Dinas 2010), are characterized by increased cognitive openness and receptiveness to social influences, making it a crucial period for developing long-lasting political attitudes and inequalities. Social class, gender, and migratory background still impact youth political socialisation, despite it becoming more individualized, and influenced by a broader range of agents beyond family, including schools, peers, media, and digital platforms (Dalton 2016). Peer/classroom climate can influence political attitudes through shared discussions, habits and practices (Barber *et al.* 2021; Hoskins and Janmaat 2019). More in general, schools and educational institutions significantly contribute by

providing civic education and opportunities for political engagement (Campbell 2008; 2019), often offering a “compensation effect” (Deimel *et al.* 2021; Hoskins and Janmaat 2019; Neundorf *et al.* 2016) for missing or poor parental political socialisation. Young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds typically have greater access to socialisation agents, such as high-quality educational institutions, extracurricular activities, and digital resources impacting civic and political development (Giugni and Grasso 2021; Janmaat and Hoskins 2022; Jungkunz and Marx 2024). Children of immigrants often face the dual challenges of having both a foreign (Gatti *et al.* 2024 for the Italian case; Stefani *et al.* 2021) and lower socio-economic background. In addition, the lower levels of political engagement among immigrant parents (Ortensi and Riniolo 2021; Terriquez and Kwon 2015; Dinesen and Andersen 2022) can have a detrimental effect on their political engagement (Guglielmi and Maggini 2025). Regarding gender inequalities, boys and girls are often exposed to different expectations and opportunities for political engagement. Both family and educational institutions play significant roles in perpetuating this gendered socialisation process. For example, some studies indicate that parents are more likely to discuss politics or legitimate political ambition with their sons than with their daughters, and schools frequently fail to address gender biases in political education (Cicognani *et al.* 2012; Fox and Lawless 2014; Pensiero and Janmaat 2024).

2.3 How masculine norms shape political spaces and representation

In this context, scholars emphasize the need to shift the focus away from women’s disadvantages and instead examine the advantages men hold in politics, particularly how norms of masculinity shape gendered political representation (Bjarnegård and Murray 2018; Galea and Gaweda 2018). Despite the resilience of patriarchal structures, emerging forms of “softer” political masculinities appear to challenge traditional notions of male dominance (Myrntinen 2019).

Additionally, numerous studies have uncovered specific micro-mechanisms embedded in everyday political practices that perpetuate male dominance while discouraging female participation. These include practices such as unequal turn-taking/imbalance speaking time, role assignment, and gendered perceptions of competence and experience. In political meetings and debates, men frequently dominate discussions, speaking for longer periods and interrupting women more often, thereby controlling the flow of conversation. This

dynamic – often labelled as «the silent sex» (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014) – not only sidelines women's contributions but also reinforces the perception that men are inherently more knowledgeable and authoritative in political contexts, both online and offline (Chen and Han 2024). Women in political organizations are often relegated to roles that align with stereotypical gender expectations, such as administrative duties, note-taking, or event planning, rather than positions of influence or decision-making. In addition, they tend/are asked to specialize in issues perceived as more suitable for females, e.g., education, social policies (Blumenau 2021; Curini *et al.* 2023). Such role allocations limit women's opportunities and ambition to gain leadership experience and visibility in the political competition, often interpreted as women's election aversion (Kanthak and Woon 2015). Moreover, women face a higher threshold for proving their competence and experience. Research shows that voters are more likely to scrutinize female candidates harshly, whereas men are less affected by such concerns (Cella and Manzoni 2023; Ditonto 2017). The perception that women lack experience or knowledge in politics can deter them from pursuing leadership positions or taking initiative. This belief is often internalized, especially by younger women, leading them to undervalue their abilities and opt out of political participation (Fox and Lawless 2011).

2.4 Age, gender and ethnic political discrimination: an intersectional approach

As mentioned earlier, numerous factors contribute to explaining the barriers and obstacles young women face in accessing and participating in political spaces. Understanding the interaction of these factors through an intersectional lens may provide deeper insights. The theoretical approach of intersectionality was developed in the field of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which analysed gender, sexuality, colourism, race and class concerning migrants' experiences (Delgado *et al.* 2023). Within this frame, in 1989 Kimberlé W. Crenshaw coined the theory of intersectionality in the legal field, as she realized that Black women in the United States suffered intersectional discriminations due to the intersection of multiple factors, in this case, gender and race as a social construction (Crenshaw 1991). This theory was central to social justice projects: A. J. Cooper (1892), bell hooks (1981), A. Davis (1982), N. Yuval-Davis (2006) and F. Anthias (2020) further elaborated intersectional knowledge projects able to fight both sexism and racism. As P. H. Collins (2015) clarifies, intersectionality consists of three interdependent dimensions: it is a field of study; an ana-

lytical strategy to better understand social phenomena; and a critical praxis guiding social justice projects.

From the analytical perspective, intersectional frameworks allow us to better understand social movements, and individual activism, as well as to rethink exclusion and other problems. Related to this, I. Wells-Barnett (1982) produced intersectional analyses of lynching starting from her activism, which was based on the experiences of exclusion suffered by Afro-American women (Collins 2022). Some studies have shown how the intersection of structural factors causes the exclusion of certain individuals, including women, LGBTQ+ people, etc., from social and political spaces. For example, N. E. Brown (2014) analysed how gender and race influence the participation of minority women in American politics, compared to white women. Additionally, T. Chiappelli (2016) explored the situation of women with a migrant background in Italy between exclusion and active participation in different fields, including the political domain. This research revealed that Italian policy lacks a framework that considers gender and migrant background factors in the promotion of subjects' participation. Moreover, both laws and practices sensitive to gender and migrant background are lacking in politics, with the consequence that they often contribute to the reiteration of inequalities and the stigmatization of these women (*Ibidem*). Finally, intersectionality as a critical praxis refers to how social actors, such as activists, adopt intersectionality to realize effective social justice projects. Indeed, the marginalized status of black and migrant women can become a "strength" when they make it the focus of their activism for greater equity (Broad 2017).

Intersectionality holds dual value as an interpretative lens in our research: it enables us to examine how the intersection of gender and migrant background functions as a mechanism of both women's activation and exclusion from political spaces.

3. DATA AND METHOD

Our research employs Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design (Amaturo and Punziano 2016; Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) combining diverse techniques. It begins with the analysis of survey data to investigate gender and ethnic differences in youth political participation and assess the impact of gender political norms, as well as the role of educational institutions and family. This quantitative analysis informed and was subsequently complemented by three focus groups designed to explore specific aspects of how gender and migration

background may hinder access to, or influence forms of, political participation. This mixed methods approach aims to integrate numerical data with personal narratives, thereby enhancing the understanding of young women's engagement in politics and exploring specific aspects of how gender and migration background can shape or limit access to political participation, as well as influence the ways individuals engage politically. The first quantitative phase is based on two sources of data: data from the Flash Eurobarometer n. 2574 (European Youth Survey 2021) and original survey data taken from the MAYBE – Moving into Adulthood in uncertain times: Youth Beliefs, future Expectations, and life choices between changing social values and local policy initiatives (University of Milan, financed by the Cariplo Foundation). European Youth Survey 2021 interviewed a sample of 17953 young people aged 18 to 30 residents in each of the 27 Member States (age mean=23.8; 50.3% females) of which 1498 were from Italy. Among others, these data shed light on the various forms of youth political and social participation, revealing interesting gender dynamics across Europe and within Italy. The MAYBE project interviewed 2,756 fifth-year students aged 18-20 in Lombardy between February 2023 and March 2024, employing a probabilistic multistage sampling design (81 schools, 165 classes). The survey was self-administered during school hours in schools' computer labs. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan. The survey measures, among other topics, political engagement, participation, and attitudes towards gender roles in politics. Data are analysed using an intersectional framework to examine the interactions between gender and ethnic background.

To deepen the understanding of the interplay between youth, gender, and ethnic background in political spaces, three focus groups (FGs) were conducted as part of the YEP! (Youth Equality Participation) project. YEP! was financed by Cariplo Foundation². More specifically, the focus groups aimed to examine the internalization of gender and ethnic stereotypes, the barriers these groups face in the political arena, and potential strategies for overcoming these challenges. In total, 21 young people aged 18-30 participated in the focus groups, which were conducted both in person (2 focus groups) and online (1 focus group), based on the following criteria. The first focus group consisted of young people

aged 18-30, selected based on their predominant mode of political participation – whether online (e.g., through social media or other platforms) or in person (e.g., through political parties, trade unions, or institutional roles). The second focus group was organized by age, with very young participants aged 18-23 who had varying levels of political engagement or interest. Their activities ranged from membership in student associations and participation in public demonstrations to founding civic lists, membership in political parties, and serving as city council members or policy advisors for municipalities. The third focus group included young women activists aged 18-30 (criteria: gender) who were actively engaged in diverse political activities. The focus here was on the role of gender in political engagement, both in institutionalized and informal forms of participation. In total, 7 young men and 14 young women participated. The groups included young people with or without migrant backgrounds (7 with migrant backgrounds and 14 without). The majority were university students, one was attending a vocational school, and a minority were balancing studies with work. Only a few were solely employed. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the research.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Gender and age differences in youth political participation in Italy: Evidence from the European Youth Survey

The European Parliament Youth Survey (2021) sheds light on interesting gender dynamics across Europe and within Italy. These data, based on large youth samples³ that allow for comparisons across age groups, provide valuable context for interpreting the findings from the original survey on students in Lombardy. Given the non-probabilistic nature of the sample, the findings should be interpreted with caution. However, they provide valuable insights into various forms of political participation and activism, as well as the frequency of political discussions within families and peer groups. Regarding traditional forms of political participation, such as voting in local, national, or European elections, young women are more

² The YEP project was conceived as a continuation of the MAYBE initiative, with a specific focus on inequalities in youth political participation. The YEP project is implemented by a consortium made up of academia (University of Milan - lead partner, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore), civil society (CoNNGI, Coordinamento Nazionale Nuove Generazioni di Italiani) and social enterprises (Consorzio Comunità Brianza).

³ All interviews were carried via Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI), using Ipsos online panels and their partner network. Respondents were selected from online access panels, groups of pre-recruited individuals who have agreed to take part in research. Sampling quotas were set based on age (16-18 year-olds, 19-24 year-olds, 25-30 year-olds), gender and geographic region (NUTS1, NUTS2 or NUTS 3, depending on the size of the country and the number of NUTS regions). (European Parliament Youth Survey 2021: 66)

active than young men. This is particularly evident in Italy, where 61.1% of young women reported voting at least once, compared to 47.0% of young men – a more significant gender gap than the European average (54.0% of women vs. 45.3% of men). Beyond voting, young women are also more engaged in certain forms of activism, such as signing petitions, whether online or offline, with 50.7% of European women and 41.2% of Italian women participating, compared to 36.1% of European men and 29.8% of Italian men⁴. In Italy, young women are more likely than men to participate in street protests or demonstrations (29.7% vs. 24.6% of men) and, to a lesser extent, in Europe as well (23% vs. 20.4% of men). However, it is worth noting that participation in street protests among Italian women decreases with age: 39.7% of women aged 15 to 20 participated, compared to 30.6% of those aged 21 to 25, and 24.1% in the 26-30 age group, where the dual burden of work and family life is a particular constraint. In contrast, men's participation in street protests is lower overall and remains relatively stable across age groups (26.4% for ages 15-20; 23.3% for ages 21-25; 24.3% for ages 26-30). Young women are also more somewhat likely to express their political and social views online or on social media, both in Europe (27.3% of women vs. 25.6% of men) and particularly in Italy (34.3% of women vs. 29.7% of men). This trend extends to using hashtags or changing profile pictures to show support for political or social issues (25.2% of women vs. 18.9% of men in Italy, and 23.5% vs. 18.5% of men in Europe). Regarding age differences in online participation, young Italian women aged 15 to 20 reported posting opinions online at a rate of 36.5%, which remains stable in the 21 to 25 age group (36.6%) but decreases to 30.6% in the 26 to 30 age group. In contrast, men show an increasing trend in online posting with age: 23.2% for ages 15 to 20, 30.1% for ages 21 to 25, and 34.4% for ages 26 to 30. Finally, data highlights the gender gap in one of the most important political socialisation mechanisms, discussing political and social issues with family and friends. Notably, in the 15 to 20 age group in Italy, a higher percentage of females never engage in these discussions compared to males (19.0% of women vs. 9.1% of men), and this trend persists in the 26 to 30 group (8.6% vs. 4.8%). However, in the 21 to 25 age group, gender differences tend to disappear and a slightly higher percentage of males avoid these discussions (10.8% vs. 12.5%).

⁴ A multivariate analysis done on the pooled European sample confirm the gender gap, even controlling for other variables such as age, parents' and respondents' education, political discussion, social class (available on request).

4.2 Gender norms, socialization and political engagement: evidence from a student survey in Lombardy

Building on this general framework, we can now turn to the Lombardy context, focusing specifically on mechanisms underlying gender and ethnic differences in political participation among students in their final year of secondary school. First, it is worth stressing that data collected among high school students in Lombardy reflect both entrenched gender norms and the strong opposition among female respondents. This suggests a potential shift in perceptions among younger generations and challenges traditional views of political leadership. Indeed, gender differences in opinions on the statement "Men make better politicians than women" are consistent across all family background groups (Fig.1). A large majority of female respondents – Italian (79.7%), Mixed (72.5%), and Foreign (71.1%) – strongly disagreed with the statement. By contrast, this high level of disagreement is shared by significantly fewer male respondents, especially among students with a foreign background, Italians (25.6%), Mixed (28.7%), and Foreign (14.3%).

Building on this general picture and aiming to better understand the relationships between gender, ethnic/migratory background, gender political norms, political socialisation and youth political attitudes and participation, we employed a multilevel model. This model accounts for individual-level and group-level variations, which is crucial when dealing with hierarchical data structures such as individuals nested within schools and, in turn, nested within municipalities.

The dependent variables are two additive indices, based on previous factor analysis:

- Political Engagement Index: level of political interest (1-4 scale), party closeness (0= close to no party; 1= close to a party) and left-right self-placement (0= not self-placed on the left-right scale; 1= self-placed on the same scale).
- Non-Electoral Political Participation Index: this index is operationalized through the frequency of posts or comments, news, or videos related to politics on online social networks (never, rarely, sometimes, often) and by the question: "In the last 12 months, have you participated in a demonstration/protest?" (multiple times, once or twice at most, never happened).

Gender and Family migratory background were operationalized as follows:

- Gender: categorized as male (1510) or female (1226); 30 students who categorized themselves as "other" were not included in the analysis.

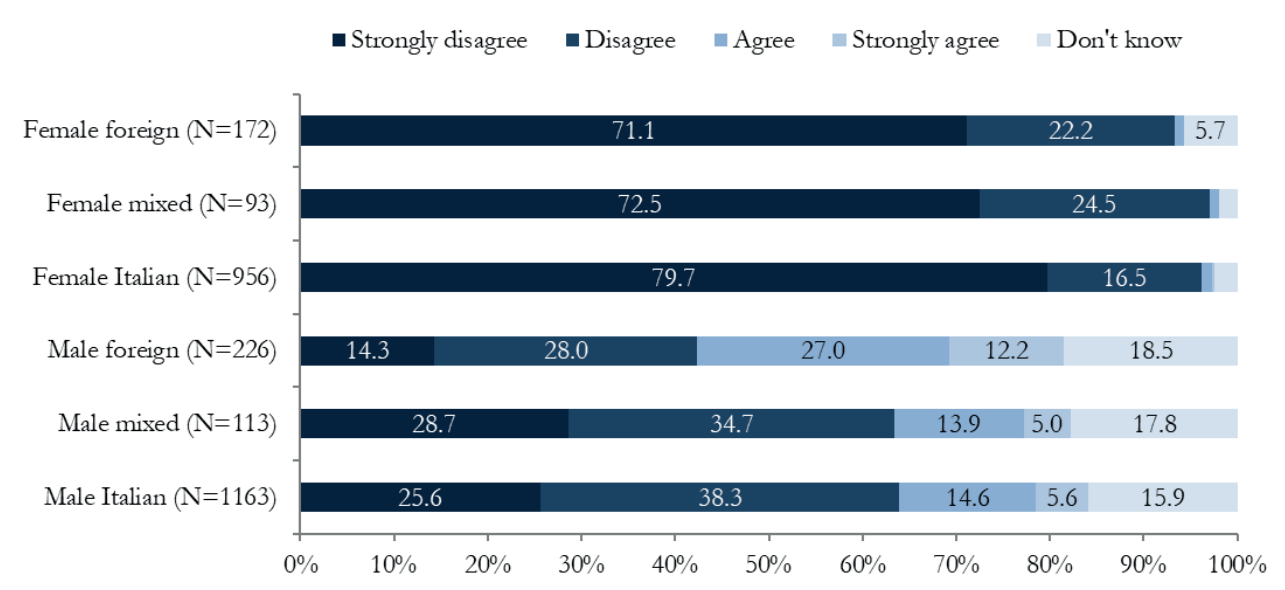


Figure 1. Agreement on the statement “Men make better politicians than women” by gender and family background. *Source:* Original authors’ elaboration based on the MAYBE dataset.

- **Migratory Background:** indicates whether the individual has an immigrant background (foreign birth of both parents, 401), a mixed background (one of the two parents is born in Italy, 208) or an Italian background (both parents are Italian, 2135).

To measure the effect of gender political norms, we considered both individual and classroom levels:

- **Students’ Gender Political Norms:** The original 1-4 scale measuring agreement with the statement “Men make better politicians than women” was recorded as a dummy variable (where 1 = strongly disagree; 0 = all other responses).
- **Classroom Gender Political Norms:** The average score of Gender Political Norms within each respondent’s class.

Regarding early political socialisation measures, we included family and classmate levels:

- **Family Political Discussion:** how frequently political topics are discussed within the family setting (measured on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “There are never arguments/discussions about political issues” and 10 means “We very often have arguments/discussions about political issues”).
- **Classroom Political Climate:** The mean of the political engagement and non-electoral participation indexes within the respondent’s class.

Finally, the control variables are:

- **Individual Level:** a) Subjective economic well-being of the family (“Considering all available incomes, is it easy or difficult for your family to make ends meet at the end of the month? Very difficult; Difficult; Easy; Very Easy”); b) Education level of parents, with the following categories: “low” (both parents have low education, or one has low education and the other has upper secondary education), “medium” (both parents have upper secondary education), and “high” (both parents have tertiary education, or one has tertiary education and the other has upper secondary education).
- **School Level:** Type of school (Lyceum; Technical; Vocational).

All non-categorical binary variables have been normalized by adjusting values measured on different scales to a common scale between 0 and 1 according to the formula: $X' = (X - X_{min}) / (X_{max} - X_{min})$. In this way, variables can be analysed on a comparable basis.

4.2.1 Insights from the multi-level model: the pivotal role of family and classmates

Table 1 presents the results of the final model we tested (other models, both with and without interactions, are available upon request).

The findings presented in Table 1 reveal significant insights into the factors influencing political engagement and participation among youth. First, women exhibit a

lower level of political engagement compared to men, with a coefficient of -0.125 , while there is no significant impact on political participation. In terms of family background, individuals with a “foreign” background show a significant decrease in political engagement (-0.076) but an increase in political participation ($+0.054$) compared to their “Italian” counterparts. Interestingly, the interaction between gender and foreign background indicates that women from this group experience a significant boost in political engagement ($+0.068$), as also shown in Fig. 2. As result, the level of political engagement of females with foreign background does not differ neither from that of female natives Italians and from men with foreign background. By contrast, as far as political participation, the interaction terms between gender and family background categories are not statistically significant, with only a minimal difference in participation levels between Italian males and females (Fig. 3).

Consistent with the literature on the key role of early political socialisation by family and peers, the data show that active political discussions within the family correlate strongly with both political engagement ($+0.255$) and participation ($+0.165$). Simultaneously, high levels of political involvement in the classroom are associated with substantial increases in both students’ political engagement ($+0.391$) and participation ($+0.201$). Furthermore, the stereotype that “Men are better politicians than women” positively influences political engagement for those who strongly disagree with it ($+0.031$). Additionally, the Class Gender Political Norms variable, which reflects the average number of students in a class who strongly disagree with the notion that men are better politicians than women, positively influences political engagement ($+0.069$) but not political participation. While both effects are modest, the sustained statistical significance of political gender norms at both individual and group levels – even after controlling for other key factors influencing youth political engagement – suggests that an environment challenging traditional gender norms can enhance political engagement among students.

As regards random effects of the multilevel models, the results suggest that there is no significant variability in political engagement across schools, indicating that school characteristics do not substantially influence students’ political attitudes/behaviour, once the type of school is considered. Similarly, there is no significant variability at the municipal level.

To conclude, it is worth pointing out that all tested interactions between gender, family migratory background and key variables of interest – such as gender political norms, family political socialisation, and class political involvement – are not significant (analysis available on request), indicating that at this stage of life, the

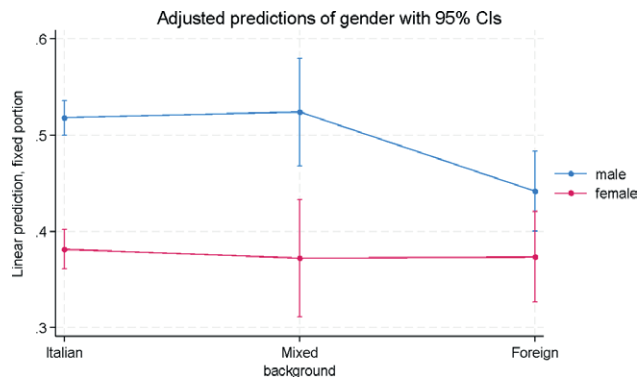


Figure 2. Political engagement: adjusted predictions of gender by migratory background. *Source:* Original authors’ elaboration based on the MAYBE dataset (University of Milan).

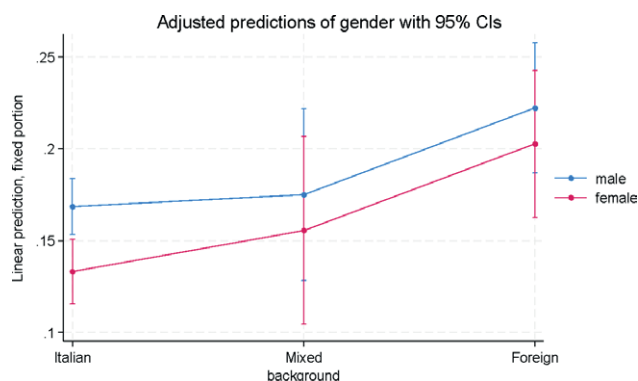


Figure 3. Political participation: adjusted predictions of gender by migratory background. *Source:* Original authors’ elaboration based on the MAYBE dataset (University of Milan).

family and school context plays a pivotal role in encouraging or discouraging political participation for both males and females and regardless of ethnic background. However, this occurs in a polarised environment where young women strongly reject the notion that “men make better politicians”, while young men, especially those with foreign backgrounds, tend to not contrast it.

But what happens when young people – men or women, with and without migrant backgrounds – drawing on this background of beliefs and experiences, actively seek to engage with politics by connecting with parties or organisations?

4.3 Marginalization of Young Women with and without Migrant Backgrounds in Political Spaces: Qualitative Insights

During the three focus groups (FGs), young participants, men and women, reported encountering vari-

Table 1. Multilevel models for political engagement and political participation.

	Political Engagement		Political Participation	
Fixed Effects:				
Gender (ref: male)				
female	-0.125 (0.028)	***	-0.023 (0.023)	
Family background (ref. Italian)				
Mixed	0.006 (0.029)		0.007 (0.025)	
Foreign	-0.076 (0.022)	***	0.054 (0.019)	**
Gender (ref: male) # Family background (ref. Italian)				
female # Mixed	-0.015 (0.043)		0.016 (0.036)	
female # Foreign	0.068 (0.034)	*	0.016 (0.028)	
Men better politicians than women (strongly disagree)	0.031 (0.013)	*	0.014 (0.011)	
Political discussion at home	0.255 (0.022)	***	0.165 (0.018)	***
Class Gender Political Norms	0.069 (0.030)	*	0.022 (0.026)	
Family wellbeing	0.104 (0.028)	***	-0.024 (0.024)	
Family Education				
Medium	0.019 (0.013)		-0.005 (0.011)	
High	0.037 (0.014)	*	-0.021 (0.012)	
Classroom Political Climate	0.391 (0.038)	***	0.201 (0.033)	***
Gender (ref: male) # Classroom Political Climate				
female	-0.028 (0.054)		-0.028 (0.046)	
School (ref: Lyceum)				
Technical	0.025 (0.015)		-0.019 (0.013)	
Vocational	0.046 (0.020)	*	0.011 (0.017)	
Intercept	0.138 (0.033)	***	0.059 (0.028)	*
Random effects:				
School: SD(intercept)	0.000 (0.000)		0.006 (0.023)	
Municipality: SD(intercept)	0.000 (0.0040004)		0.000 (0.0030003)	
Number of observations	1965		2101	
AIC	47.66		-496.4946.59	
BIC	148.16		-394.89-38794.2489	
Log likelihood	-5.83		266.30	

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05.

Source: Original authors' elaboration based on the MAYBEDataset (University of Milan).

ous stereotypes related to their political engagement. They are often perceived as disinterested in politics and apathetic (FG1, FG2). However, when they do participate, they are seen as needing guidance from older generations (FG2, FG3). They are also viewed as lacking competence (FG2, FG3) and are frequently told that the challenges they face today are less significant than those confronted by previous generations (FG2). Additionally, young people are criticized for both the topics they advocate for and the methods they use to make their voices heard. They are often told that «the methods they are using are wrong» (FG2). This highlights a broader context of delegitimization, where their ideas are frequently dismissed as unworthy or inherently flawed, coupled with negative rhetoric and narratives about young people in politics, and a lack of space for their engagement.

What comes to mind is the classic phrase like, 'When you grow up, you'll change your mind,' for example. As if what I believe in right now, meaning me and other young people, is wrong. Wrong based on what, I don't really understand. But often, I think, I don't know, they interpret us [young people] as too radical, [...] let's say, not grounded enough. Maybe too detached from the reality of things, so they tell us, like, you're talking about things you don't know, you're talking about nothing when in reality, I think it's quite the opposite (FG2).

In these discussions, gender and ethnic background emerged as intersecting factors that create additional barriers both from “inside” – stemming from socialization processes and internalised societal pressures – and from “outside”, manifesting as subtle or overt forms of exclusion and the undermining of young women’s roles, competencies, and expertise, in particular when they have an ethnic background.

Our analysis shows that women often feel uncomfortable when assuming a political role, questioning their competence and capability for the position. In contrast, according to many young female participants, their male peers generally exhibit a strong sense of self-confidence and rarely question their own ability to hold a specific political position.

As women, there is also the issue of the underestimation of ourselves... For example, when I was appointed as vice president, the first question I asked myself was 'Will I be up to the task?' I mean, I have never seen a male colleague of mine, none of my male colleagues ever said, 'Will I be up to the task?' And there were young guys like me [...]. If I had had a week, maybe I would have even consulted a passerby [asking them] if, in their opinion, I was capable or not!

Men, I'm sorry, but on average, they don't ask themselves all these things. (FG3)

This tendency shared by women to perceive lower self-efficacy compared to their male peers may be attributed to socialization processes that generate and perpetuate gender biases, leading to an internalisation of perceived incompetence in leadership roles and contributing to reduced political participation. As one focus group participant aptly stated:

There is also the matter that your voice, in the beginning, is worthless, or you choose for your voice to be worthless. When in assemblies or similar situations, you hear men speaking on topics they may not be extremely knowledgeable about, but you, who are aware [of not knowing enough about certain topics], say 'well, I am not very knowledgeable on this subject, I will stay quiet and listen.' But then you ask yourself: 'why did I stay quiet and listen when the men, on the other hand, spoke nonsense? They were free to do so and, in fact, were applauded on topics that perhaps weren't even within their competence!' (FG3)

As this quotation shows, limitations primarily stem from the perception of not being sufficiently competent on a specific topic or issue to take a stance. As highlighted above young people, regardless of gender, are often criticised for their lack of political engagement. However, when they become interested and active, they are frequently dismissed as inexperienced. This dynamic is particularly pronounced for young women, who often encounter additional barriers and forms of exclusion imposed by men, which often manifest as condescending attitudes towards young women.

I see very patriarchal and paternalistic dynamics in my area because when you go to talk to your mayor or your councillor, that's the attitude. Even if you are 30 years old, you are approached as if you were a little girl. I think every girl, every person like us, in this age range, experiences the same thing. (FG3)

Exclusionary practices are not only perpetuated by dismissive attitudes but also through the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in everyday interactions. These stereotypes are often reproduced in subtle, seemingly innocuous ways, yet they contribute to a broader pattern of exclusion, as illustrated by the experience shared by this participant:

I clearly remember when I was first elected. The first thing they told me was: 'Look, the library is down to the left.' And on the second day, a colleague asked me: 'Are you the new secretary?' I mean, two different people in two different contexts. (FG3)

These overt or subtle forms of exclusion are particularly relevant in institutionalized forms of political participation, such as political parties, where men often predominate, and the environment is perceived as highly competitive. This situation risks widening the gap between women and political parties, unless women perceive a support or more women become involved.

When I joined my political group, there was one woman – me – and sixteen men. I would never have stayed if one of those sixteen hadn't been my neighbour, whom I knew well, and he was the one who, when it came time to choose between him and me, said, 'She should go ahead because she's better than me.' [...] I mean, when I said 'okay,' I'll stay, it was partly because I knew him, but also because other women joined. Otherwise, after two weeks, I probably would have said, 'I'll go do something else,' because in the end, I like politics, but I can also engage in other ways, like being part of associations [...] I wouldn't have stayed in that environment, which is very competitive [...] But, let's say, for us, objectively, it's much harder: it's hard to find a group to join where you feel equal to others. It's not easy at all. (FG3)

In the political scene, young women are often undervalued and perceived as having little to contribute. They are considered too inexperienced, not only by older men but also by their male peers.

What surprises me is that it's not the old men, the councillor, or the mayor who treat you like a child. [...] It was the young men themselves who treated me and told me, 'the little girl should stay quiet,' as if they were old men. (FG3)

Italy, as highlighted in the theoretical section, is considered an unfriendly country for both young and women, ranking among the least progressive countries in Europe regarding the gender gap in total working hours (both paid and unpaid) (Matteazzi and Scherer 2021). Additionally, Italy has a significantly lower female employment rate compared to the male employment rate (Istat 2024). This reflects not only the burden of gender stereotypes, but also systemic gender inequalities (Archard 2013; Carli 2001; Taft 2017) that hinder women's access to the political field. For instance, familial responsibilities⁵ often limit women's ability to engage in political activities, and their life trajectories can pose barriers to sustained political commitment as an interviewee clearly pointed out:

Because a woman can generally do politics very actively until she is 30, until she generally dedicates her life to something else, because she chooses children because she chooses to dedicate more of her time to this and everything that it entails, only to usually resume it later when the children grow older. So when [the children] start to become independent, that is from 50 years old to 80. There is this gap of 20 years/15 years in which [the woman] is not politically active, or at least not as much as before. And obviously, the space that she used to occupy is then occupied by a man, who instead never stopped and whose career continued to grow. So, this is what I have seen in my personal experience: the fact that there are either women who do politics from a very young age or women who do politics when they are older. There is a gap in the middle that cannot be filled. (FG3)

In addition to this, when women, particularly young women, enter the political arena, they are often assigned roles and positions traditionally associated with feminine competencies. This practice reinforces gender stereotypes, limiting women to specific topics and granting them less power than their male counterparts. Such patterns are indicative of "thematic segregation" based on gender.

Sometimes we tend to limit ourselves, partly due to external reasons and partly to self-limit ourselves. They tend to limit us, and we self-limit ourselves to topics more related to care. We certainly have a central role, historically both in family care and in the community, but we tend to limit ourselves a bit. Instead, we should open our horizons a little, to have the opportunity to speak our minds and bring our contribution not only to certain specific areas of these topics, but in general also to everything else. (FG3)

Thematic segregation can sometimes arise not only from being a young woman but also from one's ethnic background. Young women with migrant backgrounds reported a perception that their ethnic diversity is sometimes utilised by progressive parties to demonstrate inclusivity. However, they also described experiences in which their ethnic origin explicitly defined their responsibilities, relegating them to specific roles and positions.

For a progressive party, it is certainly the perfect profile to showcase. [...] When I was elected, I was given the responsibility for relations with [immigrant] communities, but why? [...] On one hand, I bring added value to this, I mean, who if not me can do this stuff? Because it's true that I understand better – I was born and raised here, but I can have more empathy with a whole range of people and communities, and that is the added value I bring. But on the other hand, doesn't this thing ghettoize you even more? I mean, there's the dilemma between being put in a box even more and thus being further ghettoized. [...] At first, it was fine,

⁵ In Italy, the inequality between men and women is particularly pronounced. Italy is the country in Europe with the largest gender gap in unpaid work, considering the time devoted to unpaid labor by both women and men (Istat 2019).

but if I had to do another term, I don't know if I would accept it. (FG3)

Having a migrant background sometimes equates to not having Italian citizenship, which can hinder access to the political arena. The process of obtaining citizenship for immigrant descendants is quite long and difficult in Italy (Solano and Huddleston, 2020). Many children of immigrants – without Italian citizenship – are consequently excluded from some forms of participation, such as voting. Engaging in politics, therefore, becomes a “privilege”, as stated by participants in all focus groups (FG1, FG2, FG3). A young woman without Italian citizenship shared her experience of feeling distanced from politics, as the lack of this right effectively closes off access to the political sphere (FG1). The notion of politics as a privilege also emerged during a discussion in FG2. An 18-year-old participant with a migrant background attending a vocational school highlighted the intersection of factors, such as the low socio-economic status of young immigrant descendants, limited knowledge of the Italian language in some cases, living in peripheral areas, and being uninformed about politics. These intersecting factors create a unique condition of exclusion from the political scene. According to his experience, schools are not promoting their development as active citizens in the society in which they live, risking leaving them at the margins. The key role of the school environment resonates with the findings from our survey, pointing out that students are more politically involved and active when they attend classes where classmates, on average, are more politically engaged.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article aimed to explore the complex interplay between gender socialization, ethnic background, and political participation among young people aged 18-30 in the Lombardy Region (Italy) through an intersectional lens and a mixed-method approach. Consistent with previous research, research findings highlighted that youth political engagement and participation are strongly influenced by political socialization from family and peers, with classroom/school also playing a crucial role. However, when considering the intersections of age, gender and ethnic background, numerous barriers to both access and inclusion within political spaces become apparent. The intersectional lens (Anthias 2013) is thus crucial to explore the role of young people's multiple social identities in influencing their opportunities to participate.

Overall, our findings highlighted a wider pattern of delegitimization, where young people's ideas are often regarded as unworthy. Moreover, in line with earlier studies (Pitti *et al.* 2023), the dominant narrative shapes which forms of political engagement are deemed appropriate and “right”, often framing the content and modes of youth participation as ‘inappropriate’ or ‘incorrect’. This issue is exacerbated by negative rhetoric and narratives surrounding youth in politics, alongside a scarcity of opportunities and spaces for their participation. Analysis of European Parliament Youth Survey (2021) data indicated higher representation of women in Italy across both traditional forms of political participation (such as voting) and other forms of activism but also that the level of engagement of young women decreases with age, from adolescence to young adulthood. Furthermore, in the 15 to 20 age group in Italy, a higher percentage of females never engage in these discussions compared to males. Considering the key role of political family discussion in youth political engagement, this gender gap could be problematic. Not surprisingly, the analysis of the political engagement of last year's high school students in Lombardy showed a clear gender gap in both political engagement and active participation, once all other (micro, meso and macro) factors are considered. These findings suggest that, at least in the specific cohort and regional context under investigation consistently with the literature discussed before, the gender political gap is often masked by other factors, making it less visible but still significant.

Moreover, analysis revealed that, despite male and female students in Lombardy having opposite views about traditional male centrality in politics, this kind of political gendered norms does not impact on political engagement or participation. However, our qualitative analysis revealed that young women, despite participating, report lower levels of perceived internal self-efficacy compared to their male peers. This finding aligns with previous research, as discussed in the theoretical section. Furthermore, gender stereotypes and systemic gender inequalities continue to hinder women's access to political spaces. Even when women manage to enter these spaces, they often face “thematic segregation” based on gender, where they are confined to roles traditionally associated with women. This segregation is particularly pronounced for young women with migrant backgrounds, whose perceived competencies are often limited to matters related to immigrant communities, further constraining their political opportunities.

Ethnic background is often associated with the lack of Italian citizenship and lower socio-economic condi-

tions, creating an intersection of factors that push many young descendants of immigrants to the margins of the political scene. In certain cases, and under specific conditions, awareness of this marginalization can serve as a catalyst for action, counteracting the feelings of resentment typically associated with experiencing discrimination (Pinedo *et al.* 2024). The findings of this research suggest that the interplay of factors contributing to potential disadvantage (e.g., being young, gender or ethnic background) can give rise to «intersectional agency» (Lutz 2014; Rebughini 2021), term that refers to the modes of activation and reaction to exclusion that are directly enacted by those experiencing the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination. This is in line with recent research conducted in Italy (Bichi *et al.* 2025) which shows that the interactions among different factors of vulnerability among young people not only lead to exclusion but also give rise to processes of intersectional activation (Collins 2013). In this regard, our research on Lombardy high schools confirmed that young students with migratory backgrounds – both males and females – tend to be less interested in traditional politics, centered around parties and left-right ideologies. Nevertheless, they are more actively involved than their native peers in other forms of political engagement, like in street protests and online activities. This pattern persists even when controlling cultural and socioeconomic capital.

Our research also highlights examples of strategies that can break down both gender and ethnic barriers. The growing presence of women in high political roles, such as party leadership, is reshaping political spaces and creating new opportunities for women's engagement. Initiatives like equal speaking time during discussions have also been effective in promoting greater female participation and leadership in political debates. While these findings show progress, more needs to be done. School' environment too seems to play a pivotal role in fostering political engagement. Our research indicates that high levels of political involvement within the classroom are strongly correlated with significant increases in both engagement and political participation. Consequently, peer groups within schools can function as "incubators" of active citizenship, fostering young people's interest and engagement. However, due to its unique socio-economic and political context, the focus on Lombardy may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future studies are needed to compare these findings with those from other regions or countries to better understand the wider implications of gender and ethnic inequalities on the political participation of young people.

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Giovani, genere e partecipazione nelle aree marginali meridionali

STEFANIA LEONE, ANDREA ORIO

Abstract. The article explores the gender condition in inner and rural contexts of some regions of Southern Italy and the responses coming from participatory practices and social projects against inequalities and forms of discrimination. Through interviews with young women living in these areas and case studies of youth associations, on the one hand the obstacles and the limits of traditional models rooted in fixed roles and stereotyped behaviors are revealed; on the other hand, transformative practices and spaces emerge in which young people redefine gender-related expectations and imagine alternative social models. The results are discussed through an intersectional lens, highlighting how gender interacts with the spatial and cultural dimensions of internal areas in shaping youth experiences. Participatory forms follow individual and collective paths based respectively on the value of example and sharing. The paper aims to enrich the debate on how gender and the youth component produce specific challenges and opportunities related to the transformative potential of participation in promoting egalitarian and inclusive conditions, relationships and dynamics in conservative contexts refractory to change and innovation.

Keywords: young people, gender, participation, inner areas, south Italy.

1. INTRODUZIONE

Gli studi italiani sulla partecipazione in una prospettiva di genere tendono a privilegiare l'osservazione di forme di attivismo e azioni di contrasto alle discriminazioni concentrandosi prevalentemente su realtà e fenomeni urbani o su casi che non assumono la base territoriale come dimensione di analisi centrale. Spesso sono trascurate le differenze che emergono quando dai contesti urbani si muove lo sguardo verso le aree interne, ovvero quell'Italia lontana (Lucatelli *et al.* 2022) o estrema (Cersosimo e Licursi 2023) più difficile da abitare non solo per la distanza dai servizi essenziali, e dunque dai diritti di cittadinanza fondamentali, ma anche per un cumularsi di disuguaglianze su cui – particolarmente sui temi di genere – insistono in modo rilevante cultura e modelli sociali locali. Di contro, proprio negli studi sui giovani pare possibile ricercare forze che si oppongono alle condizioni di marginalità con finalità di cambiamento dei modelli culturali che riproducono disuguaglianze (Leone e Orio, *forthcoming*). In questo quadro, lo studio dell'attivismo giovanile nelle aree interne assume una rilevanza particolare

soprattutto guardando alle giovani donne, le quali si trovano a operare in un contesto spesso limitato da stereotipi e norme consolidate, ma al contempo ricco di potenzialità trasformativa.

Nel contesto delle crisi multiple attraversate negli ultimi anni, la nozione di marginalità è stata caratterizzata da un interesse scientifico crescente nell'ambito di diverse prospettive disciplinari e con riferimento a diverse definizioni e unità d'analisi (Amato 2014). Guardando ai territori, la marginalità spaziale inquadra luoghi connotati dalla lontananza dai principali centri sociali e economici, difficilmente raggiungibili in assenza di adeguate infrastrutture e esclusi dai meccanismi di sviluppo *mainstream* (Gurung e Kollmair 2005). Nel nostro contesto nazionale sono stati definiti indicatori di marginalità dei territori nell'ambito della Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne a partire dal 2012 e nel successivo rinnovamento della Strategia per la programmazione europea. In questo framework le 'aree interne' costituiscono un insieme eterogeneo di comuni caratterizzati dalla distanza dai centri d'offerta di servizi di mobilità, sanità e istruzione disponibili presso i poli urbani più vicini (De Rossi 2018; Carrosio e Barca 2020).

Nell'ultimo decennio le aree interne hanno rappresentato un campo d'indagine di nuovo interesse per la comprensione della condizione giovanile in contesti dove è crescente la vulnerabilità socio-economica dei territori e lo spopolamento (Membretti *et al.* 2023).

Contestualmente si vanno rilevando tracce di radicamento e volontà di "restanza" (Teti 2022), estimoniate da esperienze di protagonismo giovanile legate a progetti rurali e dal desiderio di non lasciare il proprio territorio manifestato da una maggioranza pari ai due terzi dei giovani attualmente abitanti nei comuni interni italiani (Leone *et al.* 2023).

Il presente articolo si propone di esplorare il coinvolgimento dei giovani, in particolare delle donne, in attività e iniziative impegnate su tematiche di rilevanza sociale volte a ridefinire i modelli e le relazioni di genere nelle aree interne e rurali del Sud Italia.

L'analisi delle interviste e gli approfondimenti compiuti attraverso gli studi di caso si concentrano su visioni e esperienze di donne attive in luoghi esposti alla marginalità territoriale e sull'identificazione di pratiche partecipative volte a contrastare le disuguaglianze di genere e promuovere dinamiche inclusive e egualitarie. Attraverso una prospettiva intersezionale, si intende esaminare come il genere interagisca con le dimensioni culturali e spaziali delle aree interne, plasmando percorsi individuali e esperienze nella comunità.

Le domande di ricerca sono volte a comprendere: in quale modo il genere e le sue rappresentazioni influen-

zano le esperienze giovanili nelle aree interne del Sud Italia? quali pratiche partecipative e spazi sociali emergono come strumenti per contrastare le disuguaglianze di genere? come i giovani, attraverso le loro azioni e narrazioni, reinterpretano e sfidano le strutture tradizionali legate al genere?

Questo lavoro intende inserirsi nel dibattito sulle intersezioni tra aree interne, genere e gioventù, per una comprensione più approfondita delle condizioni, delle sfide e delle opportunità che interessano le aree remote. L'attenzione al potenziale trasformativo della partecipazione giovanile consente di mettere in luce il ruolo cruciale delle nuove generazioni nel promuovere spazi e sostenere processi di cambiamento sociale e culturale.

2. COORDINATE TEORICHE E INTERSEZIONALITÀ TRA CONDIZIONE DI GENERE, AREE REMOTE E AGENTIVITÀ DEI GIOVANI

Il dibattito pubblico e scientifico ha spesso trascurato o sottostimato le esperienze delle donne ai margini (Kendall 2020). La condizione delle donne nelle aree interne può rappresentare un campo d'indagine utile per comprendere come l'intersezione tra genere e luogo plasmi le esperienze e le possibilità di emancipazione. Da una prospettiva femminista intersezionale (Crenshaw 1989) è riconosciuto che dinamiche di tipo patriarcale non operano in isolamento, ma si intrecciano con altre forme di esclusione, rifiutando visioni essenzialiste sul genere come fisse e immutabili. Quest'ottica permette di osservare come il genere conti nell'esperienza di vita delle giovani che abitano in contesti distanti dagli ambienti urbani, considerando la sua importanza senza eclissare il significato di altre categorie sociali (Donkersloot 2012).

Guardando alle aree interne italiane come ambito socio-territoriale di nostro interesse, è possibile scorgere rappresentazioni ancora tradizionali delle relazioni e dell'identità di genere in contesti di dominio maschile (Little e Panelli 2003). Queste attraversano le principali sfere di vita pubblica – lavoro, politica, attività ricreative – e si confermano nello spazio domestico: da un lato, gli uomini agiscono come leader e autorità di riferimento; dall'altro, le donne sono impegnate nel lavoro non retribuito e nella cura della famiglia (Little e Austin 1996; Craig e Churchill 2021).

Questo squilibrio si riflette sui divari associati alla migrazione in uscita dentro un quadro teorico intersezionale (Nocenzi e Corbisiero 2023) dalle aree più periferiche, caratterizzate da un alto tasso di *remoteness*¹

¹ Il termine *remotness* esprime un concetto di distanza dai luoghi centrali urbani comprendendo sia la misura della lontananza geografica

(Ardener 2012). L'analisi di migrazione e relazioni di genere tiene insieme sia le dimensioni micro, relative ai vissuti quotidiani dei soggetti migranti, sia le strutture macro di potere e di sistema in cui si inseriscono le esperienze migratorie (Lutz 2010; Oso e Ribas-Mateos 2013; Lamas-Abraira 2022). Tra le motivazioni a lasciare il luogo d'origine ci sono per le giovani donne condizioni di vita inadeguate sia per gli alti tassi di controllo sociale e per la mancanza di opportunità sia per la loro adesione a repertori culturali e valoriali che sostengono e incoraggiano lo sviluppo di identità di genere moderne e stili di vita basati sull'uguaglianza di genere (Bock 2015). Tuttavia, il potenziale trasformativo dell'esperienza migratoria può disattendere le aspettative di queste giovani donne, non risultando automaticamente emancipatoria o esponendole a nuove forme di sfruttamento e vulnerabilità (Garofalo-Geymonat e Marchetti 2019).

In questo scenario, guardando alla costruzione sociale della mascolinità all'interno di sistemi simbolici e culturali dominati dal maschile (Bourdieu 1998), le norme e le relazioni di genere nei paesi interni sono a tutt'oggi basate su gerarchie e su rappresentazioni della mascolinità associate al potere e alla leadership. In linea con re-interpretazioni della "mascolinità egemonica" in intersezione con le specificità dei contesti socio-spaziali (Messerschmidt 2019), la mascolinità e le dinamiche di genere vengono praticate, performati e costruite in relazione agli spazi e alle dinamiche sociali delle aree interne e rurali (Carter *et al.* 2016; Silva 2021; Hopkins e Giazitzoglu 2024). Esempi sono la costruzione dell'identità maschile attraverso lo svolgimento di attività fisicamente impegnative, che consolidano una mascolinità basata su tratti di forza e dominio (Bye 2003; Leap 2020) o il processo storico di "mascolinizzazione" dell'agricoltura come settore produttivo e sociale prevalentemente governato e gestito dagli uomini (Brandth 2002). Questi fenomeni rappresentano una parte integrante dell'immagine stereotipata delle aree interne come "idillio rurale" (Halfacree 1993) in quanto rafforzano una visione idealizzata e romantica di una società rurale stabile, armoniosa, dai paesaggi ameni e legata a valori tradizionali (Rye 2006), con il rischio di oscurare e sottovalutare le criticità strutturali e simboliche dei territori (Halfacree e Riviera 2011) e soprattutto il non riconoscimento e l'insoddisfazione delle parti escluse.

Considerando il patrimonio ambientale e naturale delle aree interne come dotazione primaria del capitale territoriale di questi luoghi (De Matteis e Governa 2005; Leone *et al.* 2023), la prospettiva che riconosce

prevalentemente profili maschili come controllori di queste risorse alimenta le differenze di genere e perpetua visioni che limitano il ruolo delle donne nella gestione del territorio. A riguardo, nel nostro contesto nazionale, emergono alcuni fenomeni che sfidano questa narrazione e mettono in evidenza l'*empowerment* e il potenziale di attivismo di giovani donne impegnate sul territorio, in particolar modo nel settore primario. Sebbene persistano fattori di vulnerabilità socio-economica e resistenze culturali sulle donne in "agricoltura" nelle aree interne italiane (Cresta 2008), non mancano dati che attestano interesse e predisposizione da parte delle donne verso il lavoro a contatto con la natura e nei diversi ambiti del settore agrosilvopastorale (Storti, Bochicchio e Mazzocchi 2023) e testimonianze virtuose di donne che, grazie al loro operato, hanno ottenuto il riconoscimento della comunità locale, distinguendosi per un approccio imprenditoriale o di attivismo civico innovativo e sostenibile (Cois e Barbieri 2020; Leone e Orio 2023).

L'osservazione di queste esperienze apre la riflessione sul potenziale che le giovani donne rappresentano come espressione qualitativa di capitale umano e come potenziale nel contributo a ruoli di leadership. Sul punto, l'attenzione è sul ruolo della cittadinanza attiva nell'*empowerment* di soggetti in condizioni di debolezza o di subalternità, al fine di contribuire alla loro emancipazione e autonomia nell'esercizio dei propri diritti (Moro 2013), aspetto che assume se possibile ancora più rilevanza nel contesto delle aree interne italiane (Leone, Orio e Della Mura 2025; Carrosio, Moro e Zabatin 2018). La capacità delle giovani donne di fungere da agenti propulsori di cambiamento sociale nei territori grazie a forme di attivismo volte a sostenere l'*empowerment* femminile può costituire un elemento chiave per il superamento di stereotipi nelle società rurali e per l'emancipazione delle figure femminili marginalizzate presenti nelle comunità locali (Baylina e Rodo-Zarate 2020).

In questa prospettiva, l'attivismo femminile e femminista nelle aree interne meridionali può rappresentare una risorsa capace di generare dinamiche di autodeterminazione che rompono con le logiche di marginalità, in linea sia con quelle che Cassano (2009) nei suoi modi di leggere la nuova questione meridionale chiama «teoria dell'autonomia», basata sulla valorizzazione delle risorse specifiche delle comunità locali per la riattivazione dei territori, sia con gli orientamenti di policy di tipo *place-based* basati su interventi personalizzati che tengono conto delle risorse specifiche e localizzate di un luogo (Carrosio e Barca 2020).

sia una condizione di distanziamento o di presa di distanza sul piano di uno spazio simbolico più vasto, a beneficio del riconoscimento del valore e dei significati diversi e specifici dei luoghi remoti.

3. IL PIANO METODOLOGICO. PERCORSI DI INDAGINE SULLA PERCEZIONE DEL GENERE NELLE AREE INTERNE DEL SUD E SULLA PARTECIPAZIONE ATTIVA PER L'EMPOWERMENT FEMMINILE

Nel presente lavoro, per comprendere il ruolo che gioca il genere nelle esperienze dei giovani che vivono in contesti interni e rurali e, insieme, indagare le strategie partecipative utili a ridurre le disuguaglianze di genere, si è adottato un approccio di ricerca di tipo non standard. Il percorso metodologico è articolato su due piani d'indagine: il primo è basato su interviste ermeneutiche a giovani impegnati in pratiche di attivismo civico sul territorio; il secondo riguarda 4 casi studio di organizzazioni attive nel sostegno alle donne e nella lotta alle discriminazioni di genere, con l'obiettivo di approfondire finalità, pratiche e processi portati avanti da giovani donne del Sud e riflettere sulla reinterpretazione dei ruoli e delle relazioni di genere tra i giovani.

La prima base empirica è stata mutuata da un progetto di ricerca condotto dall'Osservatorio Giovani OCPG del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e della Comunicazione dell'Università di Salerno, finalizzato a indagare condizioni, percezioni, aspirazioni e progetti dei giovani, uomini e donne, che vivono nelle aree interne, rurali e montane del Paese, che ad oggi ha raccolto 74 interviste in totale, in due regioni meridionali Puglia e Campania. Questa disponibilità ha permesso di usare le 35 interviste ermeneutiche effettuate con le sole donne, 24 giovani pugliesi e 11 giovani campane. L'indagine, attraverso una procedura di campionamento misto a valanga e di convenienza, ha preso in considerazione intervistati con le seguenti caratteristiche: età compresa tra 18 e 39 anni²; residenza in un comune delle 2 regioni del Sud interessate dallo studio; coinvolgimento in progetti di attivismo o cittadinanza ascrivibili a una prospettiva di «restanza attiva» (Teti 2022) sotto forma di partecipazione giovanile, mediante associazione, forum o pro loco, o anche attraverso progetti di radicamento sul territorio in chiave neo-rurale o di sviluppo locale, inerenti ambiti quali ad esempio l'agricoltura sostenibile, la promozione di attività artigianali e artistiche, la tutela del patrimonio ambientale e culturale, etc.

Le interviste sono state condotte tra il 2022 e il 2024, in videocall e face to face, con un livello di direttività e strutturazione medio-basso (Bichi 2002). La scelta

di ricorrere a interviste con un basso grado di direttività ha favorito l'emersione spontanea di discorsi e testimonianze riflessive sulla propria condizione di donne attive sul territorio e delle relative criticità, nonché sulle modalità di costruzione e decostruzione delle norme di genere tradizionali nelle aree interne.

Il secondo piano d'indagine è stato invece uno studio condotto su 4 realtà di attivismo locale promosse prevalentemente da giovani donne nelle aree interne delle 2 regioni interessate. Le dimensioni indagate hanno riguardato: ambiti di riferimento dell'organizzazione, temi d'interesse, visioni e istanze rappresentate in quanto espresse dalle donne locali e pratiche partecipative attive per l'inclusione sociale sui territori interni da una prospettiva di genere. Nell'ambito dello studio dei casi sono state intercettate le seguenti organizzazioni: Gramigna (Noci, Bari), Officina San Domenico (Andria, BAT), Artemide (Pago Veiano, Benevento) e Ipazia (Sala Consilina, Salerno).

La base empirica è stata raccolta tramite attività di contatto diretto con altre associazioni giovanili locali e ricerche in rete, classificando il materiale documentale relativo a ciascuna realtà, come articoli e comunicazione eteroprodotta e autoprodotta online, brochure, documenti interni, report di attività e eventi delle realtà intervistate, etc. Parallelamente, per ogni organizzazione, è stata intervistata la presidentessa o una socia in posizione di responsabilità, ottenendo una base empirica primaria e un punto di vista esperto – trattandosi delle giovani attive quindi di leaders locali – per l'analisi della percezione del territorio e della comunità di riferimento in relazione ai principali problemi e sfide di genere nelle aree interne e dell'impegno attivo su questi temi.

4. I TEMI DI GENERE EMERGENTI DA GIOVANI DONNE IMPEGNATE IN PROGETTI TERRITORIALI

Le intervistate coinvolte nella ricerca sui giovani attivi delle aree interne (par. 3) riportano uno spaccato difficile delle criticità a cui sono esposte le donne che vivono in luoghi remoti meridionali lungo il loro percorso di autorealizzazione e nella partecipazione a progetti per il territorio.

Sul tema del ruolo che le intervistate svolgono nella comunità di riferimento emergono testimonianze – personali, ma anche riferite a altre donne o in generale – di discriminazioni e esposizione a stereotipi di genere in contesti familiari, lavorativi e relazionali, tra cui l'aspettativa che la donna si adatti a ruoli subordinati o riconducibili principalmente alle dimensioni della casa, del lavoro di cura e della responsabilità familiare:

² La scelta di un *range* di età giovanile con l'estremo finale così alto, rispetto a parametri più diffusi che non superano i 35 anni, trova giustificazione negli studi empirici che considerano fasce anagrafiche giovanili ampie nelle aree interne italiane per riferirsi ad una condizione in cui si diventa socialmente adulti più tardi (Membretti *et al.* 2023).

noi veniamo da famiglie dove proprio è evidente che c'è una preferenza per il maschio rispetto alla femmina, ho sentito discorsi che non possono esistere [...] qui sto vedendo, conoscendo, le mamme all'asilo così, tantissime non lavorano, ma non perché magari hanno avuto difficoltà a inserire il bimbo, perché c'è una mentalità che porta a dare per scontato che la donna si deve occupare di quelle cose (34 anni, pugliese).

I retaggi di una cultura patriarcale nell'esperienza quotidiana delle intervistate pongono sfide al riconoscimento delle donne e del loro impegno nelle aree interne. Nel merito, uno degli stigmi maggiormente avvertiti dalle intervistate è la sottovalutazione del proprio ruolo sociale e professionale, trovandosi nella condizione di dover dimostrare valore e competenze all'interno di ambiti propriamente percepiti ancora come maschio-centrici.

Anche nei casi in cui i progetti di restanza attiva perseguono finalità di sostenibilità o inclusione sociale l'autorità e le competenze delle donne vengono messe in discussione. Gli scetticismi o, in casi più radicali, le mancanze di rispetto da parte di colleghi maschi, concittadini e figure autorevoli del territorio costringono le donne a lavorare più duramente per superare barriere culturali ancora radicate sul territorio, al fine di essere prese sul serio e ottenere condizioni di rispetto, fiducia e considerazione che la loro controparte maschile acquisisce più facilmente. Una ragazza impegnata nell'ambito della vinificazione naturale lamenta ad esempio il fatto di essere stata percepita in alcune circostanze con un ruolo vicario o secondario rispetto a quello del compagno o di altra figura maschile di riferimento:

nell'agricoltura all'inizio io mi son trovata proprio di fronte a una situazione in cui, cioè tipo io andavo in giro con [nome del compagno] per fare qualcosa e loro parlavano al singolare, si rivolgevano solo a lui le persone che incontravamo, oppure ovviamente automaticamente pensavano che lui fosse l'imprenditore e io fossi la compagna, la moglie no, cioè nessuno, poi io piano piano mi sono conquistata la fiducia delle persone (36 anni, pugliese).

Esperienza simile viene riportata da una partecipante specializzata in tecniche permaculturali, tornata nelle aree interne pugliesi dopo l'esperienza di studi universitari:

all'inizio non sapevo proprio come relazionarmi, cioè avevo sempre a che fare con persone più grandi di me, uomini, che chiedevano, e questa cosa mi è capitata e mi capita spesso, spessissimo, che chiedevano chi fosse il proprietario del terreno, chiedevano di mio padre, magari c'era qualcosa da fare, qualche questione da risolvere, e io puntualmente chiedevo a loro di rivolgersi a me, che era con me che dove-

vano parlare, cioè questa è la cosa che mi è capitata più spesso, ovviamente ci sono tanti momenti in cui c'è proprio una mancanza di rispetto, di attenzione, anche di tatto, da noi si sente tantissimo il fatto che ovviamente ci sia una considerazione della donna sempre come inferiore rispetto all'uomo, soprattutto da un punto di vista tecnico, quindi è stato molto difficile per me lavorare con persone che avevano una loro idea di agricoltura magari convenzionale, e dovevano invece fare un lavoro per me, non riuscivo a convincerli o comunque non si convincevano del fatto che la mia alternativa fosse innanzi tutto una mia visione (27 anni, pugliese).

Come si evince dagli stralci, nel merito specifico dei progetti a carattere neo-rurale, la riflessione si focalizza sui legami tra genere e attività come l'agricoltura, la pastorizia e la silvicoltura. In particolar modo, la transizione verso un'agricoltura naturale e sostenibile che caratterizza il neo-ruralismo, distante dai metodi intensivi d'intervento sulle risorse naturali, apre a nuovi spazi per la partecipazione femminile meno basati sulla forza fisica e più sulla cura e il senso di comunità, valorizzando aspetti maggiormente in sintonia con punti di forza e valori femminili.

Come gruppo promuoviamo l'agricoltura naturale, [...] e l'agricoltura naturale si basa su tutt'altri principi, altre pratiche soprattutto, che sono molto più alla portata di una donna. È un'agricoltura di cura, è molto meno di lavorazione della terra in una maniera aggressiva, quindi si preserva il substrato e lo si manomette il meno possibile (34 anni, pugliese).

Il coinvolgimento attivo delle intervistate evidenzia pertanto una possibile trasformazione in grado di riflettere l'interazione tra resilienza personale e cambiamento culturale in contesti marginali. Gli elementi di criticità succitati spingono le donne a una riflessione critica e a una maggiore consapevolezza che le porta a ridefinire il proprio spazio personale e di attivismo civico nelle aree interne. I profili che emergono dalle interviste sono infatti principalmente donne che rivendicano con orgoglio la propria identità e autonomia, aprendo a spazi di empowerment femminile in contesti sfidanti.

Altro elemento che emerge dal vissuto delle diverse intervistate è il valore dell'esempio ovvero il contributo di figure femminili di riferimento come fonte d'ispirazione, simboli di lotta e emancipazione in contesti rurali e non solo. Trattasi di figure storiche con un ruolo e un'identità riconosciuta sul territorio, o in alternativa di figure appartenenti alla propria famiglia, le quali hanno trasmesso direttamente valori e esperienze, superando gli ostacoli posti da contesti patriarcali o maschilisti. Questo approccio sottolinea il potenziale trasformativo

di narrazione e figure simboliche nei percorsi di vita delle giovani donne. Esempi sono quello di un'intervistata che gestisce un'associazione a tutela dei diritti umani e dei diritti della popolazione immigrata, la quale ricorda l'esempio della propria nonna come simbolo di tenacia nel suo ambiente familiare:

mia nonna è rimasta vedova molto giovane, e si è dovuta rafforzare parecchio, soprattutto perché comunque veniva da una famiglia molto patriarcale, tantissimo, i suoi fratelli tuttora provano a schiacciarla, quindi lei gli ha sempre tenuto testa, è sempre riuscita a gestirli, è sempre andata oltre, li ha sempre sfidati, una cosa che può sembrare banale ma è veramente difficile da fare, per una donna di 60-65 anni vedova, perché ti vedono sola, non hai il marito a fianco, cercano sempre di sovrastarti, anche i parenti, anche gli sconosciuti, invece mia nonna gli ha sempre tenuto testa, è sempre stata super forte (35 anni, pugliese).

Un'altra intervistata che fa parte di un'associazione che si occupa del recupero di orti sociali nel Salento richiama il concetto di "contadinanza femminile", evidenziando il ruolo storico che figure femminili hanno avuto nel mondo contadino – in controtendenza con una narrazione egemone che vede il lavoro della terra principalmente ad appannaggio maschile – e cercando di valorizzare delle connessioni intergenerazionali:

il nostro obiettivo, vista anche la tradizione contadina e l'importanza che hanno avuto le contadine, mai riconosciute, cioè, sono state delle custodi silenziose di queste conoscenze, la cui importanza a livello sociale non è mai stata riconosciuta, pensiamo anche alla storia delle tabacchine che comunque segna un pò la storia del Salento, quindi far incontrare queste donne, che non sempre per scelta hanno fatto le contadine, e farle dialogare con le contadine di oggi, che molto spesso invece per scelta consapevoli e ponderata decidono di ritornare alla terra, e lo fanno valorizzando il territorio, valorizzando le colture locali, in modo sostenibile (28 anni, pugliese).

Rispetto alle questioni emerse, il radicamento con il territorio gioca un ruolo fondamentale. Il profilo delle intervistate è quello principalmente di giovani ritornanti nel Sud Italia o nelle aree interne a seguito di esperienze di mobilità e trasferimento transitorie. La scelta di tornare e restare attivamente con un progetto di vita spinge a trovare valore distintivo nel territorio e nella comunità delle aree interne. Questi aspetti sono intrecciati con elementi di *place identity* (Proshanky 1978), dove l'appartenenza alle aree interne nella definizione di sé e della propria identità, e di *sense of community* (McMillan e Chavis 1986) come senso di appartenenza a una comunità che si sostiene e si riconosce nel legame con la terra.

e rispetto anche al discorso del femminile io sento molto questo legame con la terra, anche legato un pò alla cultura e all'essere donna qui, e diciamo, a essere donna che in qualche modo rivendica la propria identità qui, per me è forte e sento che in qualche modo quello che ho fatto, quello che sto facendo e quello che stanno facendo tante altre donne qua è potente, perché è proprio un segno di rivendicazione forte, al di là poi se comunque sia c'è la fine del mondo, cioè quella comunque non la possiamo prevedere, però il fatto comunque di metterci le mani nella terra, o comunque proprio nel decidere di stare qua e di fare quello che fa bene a te stesso secondo me è l'atto più rivoluzionario in questo momento, e il fatto di aver trovato qui più che in altri posti donne veramente forti, cioè, più che altro, come dire, questo legame con la terra e con gli elementi che non riuscivo a sentire in altri posti (29 anni, pugliese).

Nello stralcio precedente si concentrano, infine, una serie di elementi rilevanti per gli obiettivi cognitivi di questo percorso quali – insieme alla spinta che ha origine dal riconoscimento di figure femminili importanti – la necessità e le opportunità che si ricercano nelle occasioni di dialogo e cooperazione tra le donne. I riferimenti delle intervistate a quanto sia potente nei luoghi marginali l'azione che stanno portando avanti altre donne attive sul territorio e all'aver trovato proprio in quei luoghi estremi segni importanti di rivendicazione di parità e uguaglianza maggiori che in altri contesti apre ad una lettura ulteriore: nella chiave dell'agency intersezionale proprio in condizioni di marginalità, come quelle rilevate, si sviluppano esperienze di resistenza dal basso capaci di ridefinire, modificandole, le traiettorie individuali e collettive (Lutz 2014; Rebughini 2021; Leone e Orio, *forthcoming*).

5. STUDIO DI CASI. TEMATIZZAZIONE E IMPEGNO ATTIVO PER IL CAMBIAMENTO DI MODELLI BASATI SULLA DISUGUAGLIANZA DI GENERE

Nell'ambito del secondo percorso di ricerca, dedicato ai casi studio, la prima fase di lavoro è stata finalizzata alla ricostruzione del profilo istituzionale e della natura sociale delle 4 realtà esaminate. Le dimensioni di analisi messe a fuoco nella mappa concettuale sono state: a) visione e finalità: definizione degli orientamenti strategici e dei valori di riferimento che guidano le associazioni; b) istanze: esigenze che hanno portato alla nascita dell'associazione; c) ambiti d'intervento: settori e aree di attività in cui le realtà intervistate operano; d) contesto: caratteristiche del contesto in cui le realtà operano considerando fattori sociali, territoriali, politici e culturali; e) relazioni e capitale sociale: reti di collaborazione e il

livello di integrazione con altri attori del territorio, come istituzioni, associazioni, imprese e comunità locali.

I 4 casi osservati condividono l'adesione a valori comuni e istanze connesse a finalità di *empowerment* femminile, in alcuni casi anche richiamate da una prospettiva femminista o transfemminista e spesso in interconnessione con altri valori espressamente dichiarati quali l'antifascismo (es. Ipazia) o l'ecologismo nella prospettiva dell'ecofemminismo (es. Gramigna). L'impegno volto a promuovere l'inclusione sociale si concentra su donne e altri soggetti marginalizzati quali persone non conformi alle tradizionali categorizzazioni di genere e minoranze, attraverso la decostruzione di strutture e modelli d'impostazione patriarcale e/o capitalista.

Anche su questo secondo piano di indagine si osservano modi di fare attivismo in aree interne periferiche caratterizzati da un'impostazione intersezionale, come nel caso di Gramigna dove l'incrocio tra genere, migrazione e accesso ai servizi emerge mediante l'esperienza di donne migranti che trovano nel lavoro agricolo uno spazio di inclusione, autodeterminazione e superamento di barriere linguistiche e culturali con altre donne per via della comune appartenenza a uno spazio condiviso:

Ci sono le donne che stanno in accoglienza abitativa al centro antiviolenza, quindi stanno nel co-housing e quindi stanno temporaneamente lì e per il tempo che stanno lì vengono da noi. Bello perché poi ci sono donne straniere, spesso lì, migranti che non parlano italiano e quindi è una delle poche attività che possono fare, la nostra, perché le altre attività magari sono finalizzate più al stare in cerchio, parlare, fare cose, però con delle indicazioni verbali che vanno comprese. Invece abbiamo sperimentato alcune volte che con le migranti è stato bello perché, a parte che anche quello è un linguaggio universale, quello dell'agricoltura e del corpo, che suda, che trova piacere nel fare uno sforzo, nel mangiare qualcosa dopo aver fatto lo sforzo, nel riposarsi dopo aver fatto lo sforzo, quindi chine sull'orto sorridendoci e indicandoci le cose, riuscivamo benissimo a comunicare e stare insieme senza usare il canale verbale che esclude poi alcune volte (Gramigna, Puglia).

Il contrasto alle oppressioni di genere resta un punto fermo che nelle sue diverse manifestazioni – prevenzione, sensibilizzazione, supporto – mira a trasformare il contesto sociale circostante. Pertanto emerge una visione e un'ambizione di tipo trasformativo che non si limita alla denuncia di ciò che è riconosciuto come ingiustizia, ma che promuove pratiche di cambiamento e partecipazione attiva sul territorio.

La visione e gli obiettivi vengono declinati attraverso strategie diverse. Gramigna, ad esempio, propone un modello di agricoltura sociale che offre opportunità lavorative alle donne vittime di violenza e che si pone

come spazio di cura e resistenza al patriarcato, in linea con la vocazione sociale di progetti neo-rurali sorti negli ultimi anni nelle aree interne italiane (Leone e Orio 2023). Artemide e Officina San Domenico – quest'ultima mediante un collettivo apposito – agiscono come associazioni sociali e culturali dove si tematizza la violenza di genere integrando la riflessione teorica con azioni concrete sul territorio principalmente riconducibili a pratiche di volontariato formale o informale. Con un approccio altrettanto riflessivo, il lavoro di Ipazia – sia come associazione femminista che come punto di riferimento politico sul territorio – investe sulla cultura e su spazi di confronto e si distingue per un'attenzione particolare alla decostruzione dei meccanismi linguistici che perpetuano stereotipi e disuguaglianze di genere.

Rispetto ai bisogni che hanno spinto alla nascita delle realtà osservate, emerge in prima istanza l'esigenza di creare spazi di aggregazione sul territorio dove discutere e far maturare consapevolezza sulle disuguaglianze. La matrice di attivazione delle associazioni risulta essere in risposta a bisogni profondamente radicati nelle dinamiche sociali ed economiche dei loro territori e mostra una riflessione critica che va oltre la semplice necessità di aggregazione. Gramigna, nata in piena emergenza Covid-19, ha colto nell'emergenza pandemica il riflesso di una vulnerabilità sistemica che colpiva in particolare le donne. Artemide ha invece risposto all'assenza di spazi pubblici per le donne, trasformando un'intuizione legata alla vita quotidiana – la mancanza di luoghi di incontro al di fuori della dimensione domestica per le donne – in un progetto strutturato. Un'esigenza simile ha guidato Ipazia, che si è formata come reazione a un episodio di sessismo istituzionale³, avvertendo il bisogno di decostruire narrazioni che collocavano le donne in una posizione subordinata. Anche Officina San Domenico ha visto nell'azione collettiva una necessità impellente, reagendo a episodi di violenza di genere e aggressioni alla comunità LGBT+ con la costruzione di uno spazio di lotta e autodeterminazione. In tutti i casi, il bisogno iniziale non si è limitato a una richiesta di assistenza o supporto, ma ha rappresentato un punto di partenza per una riflessione più ampia sulla struttura sociale e sui meccanismi di marginalizzazione nelle aree interne.

Le attività di cui le associazioni sono promotrici costituiscono un insieme vario e diversificato per ciascuna realtà coinvolta, con un interesse primario sui temi di genere

³ L'episodio che l'intervistata riporta come base che ha dato origine alla riflessione – con un convegno organizzato a seguire e poi con la costituzione dell'associazione – riguarda il discorso fatto da un vescovo della zona nel quale veniva fatto un riferimento all'essere femminile e agli animali, raccontando le donne come esseri del creato, come creature quasi con uno statuto di "viventi" assimilato ad altre specie e distinto dalla categoria degli uomini, intesi come maschi.

ma anche con un'apertura più ampia e una disponibilità a contribuire su altri temi e bisogni avvertiti dal territorio.

L'empowerment e il supporto a soggetti marginalizzati attraverso gruppi di autocoscienza (Officina San Domenico) o attività di formazione professionale per donne che hanno subito violenza (Gramigna) viene coniugato con un investimento negli ambiti della cultura e dell'educazione. Dall'analisi emerge un coinvolgimento trasversale da parte delle socie e i soci delle associazioni nell'organizzazione di convegni, presentazioni di libri, seminari e laboratori didattici su questioni di genere nelle scuole, attività di doposcuola in sede per ragazze e ragazzi più giovani, murales e pratiche di street art (Gramigna) o anche la promozione di laboratori musicali, di lettura, ricamo o di teatro (es. Artemide, Officina San Domenico). Parte significativa delle attività è anche la promozione di eventi che fungano da spazi di espressione artistica e politica sul territorio, come ad esempio il festival queer Svergognat* promosso da Officina San Domenico, la parata eco-femminista di Noci organizzata da Gramigna o eventi di riattivazione delle tradizioni locali come nel caso di Artemide. Attività più legate alla sostenibilità ambientale dei territori si riscontrano principalmente nel caso di Gramigna, coerentemente con i suoi obiettivi e valori legati all'agricoltura sociale.

Nella descrizione del contesto di riferimento le direttrici delle associazioni mettono in evidenza le criticità strutturali tipiche delle aree marginali, come la già citata mancanza di spazi, la distanza dai servizi essenziali, un tessuto economico fragile e con scarse opportunità di inserimento. A emergere con maggiore salienza sono soprattutto i problemi che l'emorragia demografica pone al mutamento e al dinamismo sociale dei luoghi marginali, nella misura in cui l'emigrazione giovanile verso le aree urbane e l'invecchiamento della popolazione lasciano spazio a modelli conservatori che faticano a recepire istanze di cambiamento. Persistono infatti schemi di pensiero tradizionali, basati su modelli familisti e patriarcali, soprattutto tra le fasce più anziane della popolazione residenti nei territori, le quali mostrano diffidenza nei confronti di iniziative sociali e culturali legate al genere o ai diritti civili. Ciò nonostante, la percezione della comunità verso le associazioni sembra essere ricondotta a una doppia traiettoria nel tempo: a uno scetticismo iniziale nei confronti di un'esperienza inedita segue successivamente un interesse e una partecipazione maggiore.

In linea con quanto già emerso dalle interviste del paragrafo 3, vengono descritti una serie di stereotipi e problemi di genere radicati nelle aree interne che toccano vari aspetti della vita quotidiana, dalla dipendenza economica all'invisibilità delle donne nei processi deci-

sionali, fino alla difficoltà di riconoscere e denunciare la violenza di genere. Le testimonianze di Ipazia mostrano il peso del controllo maschile nelle relazioni sentimentali e l'influenza dell'ambiente scolastico nel rafforzare dinamiche di genere squilibrate, come il *dress code* imposto alle studentesse per evitare "sguardi sconvenienti".

io e [nome socia] siamo andate in classe insieme alle superiori e penso che anche lei ricordi bene quando le nostre compagne di classe ci dicevano che i fidanzati non gli permettevano di truccarsi perché non andava bene o comunque si trovavano fidanzati particolarmente gelosi. Queste cose sono reali [...] Per quanto riguarda l'istituzione scolastica, penso che la tendenza, soprattutto nel liceo che abbiamo frequentato, sia quella di nascondere tutto ciò che non va. Tant'è che la nostra preside a un certo punto minacciò di mettere una nota che si sarebbe presentata con una maglia troppo scollata, con una maglia corta, con dei pantaloni strappati, cose che non penso debbano accadere, soprattutto nel 2024. Non credo siano proprio consone a quello che è la nostra società, anche perché un discorso è appunto pensare a quello che è l'abbigliamento consone all'ambiente scolastico, e una questione invece è che proprio il concetto che è sbagliato, come sappiamo, cioè il fatto che il professore ti potrebbe guardare o un ragazzo in realtà ti potrebbe guardare. (IPAZIA, Campania)

Infine, la sedimentazione di questa mentalità si cumula non solo sulle donne ma anche sulla comunità LGBTQI+ – aspetto evidenziato da Officina San Domenico – che incontrano difficoltà di accettazione e mancanza di spazi sicuri.

In ultimo, per quanto riguarda la sfera delle relazioni con attori del territorio, i 4 casi analizzati dispongono di un capitale sociale riconducibile principalmente a 3 ambiti: attori della comunità educante (per lo più scuole superiori di II grado), organizzazioni e soggetti del terzo settore, attori politico-istituzionali. Sul punto, le scuole rappresentano spesso un interlocutore di riferimento per le realtà intervistate, diventando uno spazio privilegiato per sensibilizzare le giovani generazioni e costruire una cultura della partecipazione. Tuttavia, mentre alcune associazioni intrattengono rapporti sistematici con gli istituti scolastici (Gramigna e Artemide), altre faticano a strutturare collaborazioni stabili (Ipazia e Officina San Domenico).

a volte che nelle scuole tu cerchi di fare dei lavori diversi anche di gruppo, anche di apprendimento appunto non formale eccetera, ma sono a volte gli stessi docenti, l'ordine trimestrale dei programmi che devi seguire, che ti vanno contro. (Officina San Domenico, Puglia)

Anche il terzo settore emerge come un ambito centrale: le associazioni lavorano in sinergia con altre real-

tà locali e nazionali, condividendo risorse e competenze per rafforzare le proprie battaglie. Spiccano nel merito i rapporti sinergici con centri anti-violenza diffusi sul territorio per tutte e 4 le associazioni, con Centri Servizi per il Volontariato (Artemide fa parte del CSV Irpinia-Sannio) e anche movimenti e associazioni nazionali come, rispettivamente, Non Una di Meno o Arcigay nel caso di Officina San Domenico.

La relazione con le istituzioni e con la politica locale è invece più sfumata e spesso ambivalente. Se da un lato enti locali e corpi intermedi partecipano alle iniziative associative e offrono supporto logistico, dall'altro non mancano testimonianze di distanza ideologica, in particolare su temi legati ai diritti delle donne e delle comunità LGBTQI+. In alcuni contesti (Gramigna e Ipazia), le istituzioni sono percepite come un freno al cambiamento, mantenendo quella visione tradizionale e oppressiva più volte citata.

Ciò nonostante, la posizione di soggetti marginali o in conflitto con altre istituzioni o con amministrazioni comunali presenti nello spazio pubblico del proprio territorio può determinare scelte consapevoli di discontinuità rispetto all'esistente e una posizione contro-egemonica rispetto al pensiero dominante. In questa testimonianza di Ipazia viene rivendicato l'antagonismo come scelta identitaria, in termini di orgoglio militante, e configurata la funzione di rappresentanza delle minoranze come spazio politica "alternativo" nelle aree interne

Quando dico nel nostro territorio, soprattutto su questo aspetto, io mi riferisco al fatto che la maggior parte delle associazioni che sono presenti, o comunque anche le varie amministrazioni comunali, come sappiamo, come ogni volta analizziamo anche in ambito assembleare [...] ci troviamo anche nella condizione in cui discutiamo se le iniziative che vogliamo portare avanti saranno accettate oppure no, e per me questa è davvero una cosa assurda da credere, perché è pesante. Io sono contentissima di far parte di questa associazione perché mi ha dato la possibilità di poter seguire quella che è la mia passione della politica e sono fiera che questa realtà stia iniziando a esistere nuovamente sul territorio, proprio anche come opposizione a questo modo di fare, perché non è detto che quello che facciamo debba essere accettato dalle altre associazioni o dall'amministrazione comunale. Dobbiamo essere anche un punto di riferimento per tutti gli altri che non seguono quella linea di pensiero. (IPAZIA, Campania)

6. CONCLUSIONI

Uno sguardo d'insieme sui tratti emersi può trovare una forma di sintesi in alcune coppie concettuali utili alla lettura delle forme partecipative giovanili osservate in una prospettiva di genere nelle aree interne.

Individuale-collettivo. L'attenzione sui temi di genere nelle aree remote può passare, come osservato, attraverso forme individuali di agentività legate a vissuti biografici e a progettualità territoriali con una rilevanza per la comunità o attraverso realtà associative o altre forme collettive attive nel contrasto alle discriminazioni di genere. Mentre le seconde riflettono modi collettivi classici di condivisione e attuazione di obiettivi e pratiche basati su relazioni e risorse comuni a un gruppo, dal quale traggono quindi forza e senso di identificazione, le prime sono spesso stimulate dal valore dell'esempio di altre donne in famiglia e divengono esempio a loro volta, alimentando processi di cambiamento culturale lungo assi generazionali.

Agentività-intersezionalità. Lo studio ha evidenziato la chiave, già richiamata, dell'agency intersezionale secondo la quale riflessioni e pratiche impegnate maturano proprio in quei luoghi, come quelli periferici osservati, nei quali più che altrove si soffrono privazioni di diritti e condizioni di esclusione. Gli spaccati esaminati hanno riportato livelli di svantaggio multipli che cumulano disuguaglianze di genere a differenze generazionali e marginalità territoriali, in vari casi con l'aggiunta di ulteriori fattori intersezionali quali il background migratorio o contesti socio-economici di disagio. Come emerso anche in altri studi (Pitti *forthcoming*), la prospettiva di genere mostra piena centralità nelle letture intersezionali e rivela altrettanta capacità di contrapporre importanti risposte in termini agentivi proprio nelle condizioni più gravi.

Continuità-innovazione. Adottando una prospettiva di genere di tipo storico si può osservare un cambiamento interessante anche riguardo al posizionamento delle donne sulle dimensioni tradizione-innovazione: in riferimento alla società rurale antica il ruolo delle donne viene riconosciuto come rilevante in termini di "contadinanza femminile" mentre gli attuali percorsi di ricerca evidenziano un particolare orientamento delle donne all'innovazione in agricoltura e a visioni e progettualità territoriali rurali di sostenibilità ambientale, sociale ed economica incentrate su soluzioni innovative (es. permacultura, tra vari altri). Questa propensione all'innovazione muove un'ulteriore riflessione sugli ostacoli che popolano i percorsi di autorealizzazione e riconoscimento delle donne in quanto non rappresenta un tratto qualificativo neutrale. Sul punto si potrebbe parlare di un "doppio scetticismo" ovvero di due effetti respingenti subiti nei luoghi professionali attraversati dalle donne in questi contesti: il primo, ben evidenziato dai risultati, di sottovalutazione delle capacità in professioni e ruoli "maschilizzati"; il secondo, di scetticismo da parte della cultura conservatrice prevalente nei contesti rurali e

interni verso l'orientamento all'innovazione ancor più se associato a proposte promosse dalle donne.

E infine, a livelli incrementali, si aggiungono atteggiamenti discriminatori e di sfiducia quando si allarga il campo a ulteriori temi sociali e istanze che si accompagnano alle rivendicazioni per le pari opportunità portate avanti dalle donne e dalle organizzazioni giovanili che tematizzano il contrasto alle disuguaglianze.

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The Youth Generation's Lens: Exploring Gender Issues in Italian Networks of Public Debates on the European Union¹

MARIAEUGENIA PARITO, FABRIZIA PASCIUTO

Abstract. The paper aims to analyse if gender equality is a relevant issue for young Italians involved in European networks of debates, enhanced by social media, and committed in participatory practices to mobilise others to raise awareness towards European integration, policies and values. An exploratory qualitative research was carried out in the light of the 2024 European election, using in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between March and May 2024. Some interesting results emerge. Young activists recognise gender equality as value and a human right at the core of the EU democracy and they perceive efforts to address gender equality as a challenge essential for shaping an European society characterised by social justice, inclusivity and human dignity. Nevertheless, the interviewees show a pragmatic stance, evaluating the importance for tackling gender disparities but questioning the effectiveness of the European strategies, in particular their ability to effectively influence national-level decision-making. Some limitations should be noted, in particular further research should explore the relationship between political perspective, education and values orientations.

Keywords: youth participation, gender equality, european public sphere, hybrid media ecosystem.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is a cornerstone in the ongoing process of European integration. Equality between men and women was stated into the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights and affirmed as a common value in the Lisbon Treaty. In the EU treaties and policies, gender equality is also considered a condition for the achievement of the objectives of growth, employment and social cohesion. The relevance is also evident in prioritising gender mainstreaming, since 1994, as an approach which demands gender equality as a perspective to consider within all areas of the EU policy making. Addressing gender disparities requires tackling both economic inequalities and cultural biases, achieving social justice and cohesion, necessitating comprehen-

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sive reforms that span multiple sectors at transnational and national level (Fraser 1999). The commitment of the EU to gender equality is part of a broader effort to foster a socially just and inclusive society that values diversity, indeed Gender Equality Plan 2020-25 includes intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) as a cross-cutting principle.

By focusing on gender equality, the EU not only addresses disparities, but also contributes to the shaping of a European society that respects and integrates various cultural perspectives. In this light, gender equality is a central right, value and aim involved in the social construction of European integration, challenging and transforming the patriarchal norms that permeate various aspects of society, including economic and cultural domains. We assume gender equality a central feature in shaping an European collective identity, considered as a “project identity” evolving through a process, continually transformed by ongoing institutional and societal changes (Castells 1997; 2018). According to Castells, “project identities” are defined by their aim to effect societal transformation by introducing new sets of values. These identities emerge when specific social actors build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, in doing so, advocate the transformation of overall social structure. It is also a communicative construction, indeed, the communication processes allow the sharing of meanings and the shaping of a symbolic common space (Barisione and Michailidou 2017; Hepp *et al.* 2016). Using this concept, we consider European identity and women’s identity in relation to their shared inclination to promote a comprehensive transformation of society (Parito 2016).

The support for gender equality in the EU institutional discourse, thus, assumes particular significance intersecting with the question of the type of society being built, it fuels public debate and sustains the shaping of the European public spheres, as emerging through process which people debate controversial issues (Risse 2011, Belluati and Marini 2019, Trenz 2023). In the public debate that involves national political-institutional actors, legacy media and social media platforms, citizens and civil society organisations, we assume, on the one hand, that European institutions prioritising gender issues, have a relevant and proactive role, on the other hand, that young people are significant agents in the European public sphere reshaped through discursive and horizontal processes encouraged by digital media (D’Ambrosi and Parito 2022).

Although the achievement of equality between women and men is one of the main objectives of the “paper EU” (Giddens 2014), the actual development in practices of the declared principles is a complex process with differences among the member states. In Italy there are still

considerable weaknesses. The 2024 Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum) shows that Europe continues to lead, with 7 of the top 10 positions held by countries from this region, including Spain (10th), a country culturally similar to Italy. Instead, Italy has worsened its position with a slowdown in the reduction of the gender gap. Italy has achieved an 87th out of 146 countries globally, while it was ranked 79th the previous year. In Europe, Italy is ranked 37th out of 40, followed by Hungary, the Czech Republic and Turkey. This placement highlights significant room for improvement, particularly in economic participation and political empowerment in which Italy loses score. Participation of women in the labour market and leadership roles remains limited, reflecting a significant gender gap, despite notable progress in educational attainment.

Even if the Global Gender Gap Report shows that the speed of progress is insufficient and highlights that further efforts are crucial to avoid the rollback of hard-earned progress, gender equality is a central element within the “silent revolutions” bringing a gradual rise of post-materialist values prioritising individual free choices and self expression, tolerance of diverse lifestyles, gender fluid identities and other aspects regarding the recognition and respect for diversity. Nevertheless, this process prompted a cultural backlash that emphasises supposed traditional moral beliefs and fixed social identities founded on faith, family, and nation-state, animating a public debate in which a cultural divide emerges (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

It is interesting to highlight that the cultural divide is also a generational divide (*Ibidem*). European society has shifted in a socially liberal direction, with younger and university educated people being far more open-minded than older and less educated groups on a wide range of issues (e.g. same-sex marriage, abortion). So, when the advance of liberal values is arrested, it triggers widespread protests and mobilised resistance, especially among the younger people and women (Heaney 2018).

The new generations are leading actors in a reconfiguration of social practices across borders, which is a central piece of a broader ‘reinvention of the social’ (Pirini and Raffini 2022). In this process, the mediatisation of society has a relevant role, indeed, the experience of the young people are socially constructed, supported and solicited by social media, in a mediated environment that is included in everyday interaction (Parito, Pérez-Calle and D’Ambrosi 2022).

In this context, the article explores whether gender equality is perceived as a right, a value and a goal to be achieved to shape the European society for young Italians involved in formal or informal participatory practices

and communication flows of debate regarding European integration. It will explore how these young activists – involved in European networks of debate, enhanced by social media and engaged in collective actions to mobilise others to raise awareness towards European policies and rights – interpret the effectiveness of European policies on gender issues. Section 2 will introduce the concept of gender, alongside various socio-demographic factors related to sexism; section 3 will discuss the notion of gender equality as both a fundamental value and right in the context of European integration; section 4 highlights the characteristics of younger Europeans. Finally, the design of our exploratory research will be presented, followed by an analysis of the key findings.

2. SEXISM, AGE, AND IDEOLOGY

The distinction between *gender* and *sex* was introduced during the 1970s, deeply rooted in *women's studies* and emerging from feminist theories (Baccolini 2005). Scholars sought to differentiate between the biological aspects of sex and the social and cultural constructions of gender, which encompass the roles, behaviours, and identities assigned to individuals based on their sex (Rubin 1975; West and Zimmerman 1987; Lorber 1994). This conceptual separation was crucial in highlighting how societal norms and expectations shape experiences and opportunities differently for men and women (Butler 1990). Gender differences, therefore, are not something natural but are actually the result of conditions imposed from the outside, shaped by societal norms and authority (Oakley 1972; Connell 2006). Gender is often associated with stereotypical and rigid expectations that dictate how women and men should ideally behave, as well as which activities are deemed appropriate based on their gender. Such gender-based inequalities perpetuate sexism, systemic biases and hinder progress towards gender equality in broader societal contexts.

Traditionally, sexism assumes that women are inferior to men. This can result in discrimination, in the limitation of opportunities or rights, or unfair and unequal treatment based on gender (Doob 2015; Manne 2017). The concept of *ambivalent sexism* (Glick and Fiske 1996) highlights that sexism is a multidimensional construct that manifests itself not only in the form of hatred or hostility towards women, but also in more subtle and seemingly positive but equally harmful forms. Based on these premises, researchers have distinguished between *hostile sexism* and *benevolent sexism*. The first, which is immediately recognisable, manifests itself through discrimination in the workplace, sexual harassment and

physical or verbal violence. Benevolent sexism manifests itself through attitudes or beliefs that appear to be positive and empowering towards women. For example, a common form of benevolent sexism is the belief that women are naturally more nurturing and empathetic than men. This can lead to dynamics where women are expected to take on caregiving roles, such as mediating conflicts, offering emotional support, or handling administrative tasks, even when these responsibilities are not part of their job. However, these attitudes tend to place women in a position of inferiority or dependence compared to men. In this way, it contributes to reinforcing gender inequality. It is also important to note that women themselves can exhibit – usually benevolent – sexism, both towards themselves and towards other women. Indeed, the internalisation of traditional gender roles and stereotypes can lead women to adopt attitudes that aim to devalue women and emphasise stereotypical aspects of femininity (Hammond, Sibley and Overall 2014).

Research exploring the relationship between sexism and age remains relatively scarce, and it has traditionally been assumed that young people are less likely to exhibit sexism (Fitzpatrick Bettencourt, Vacha-Haase and Byrne 2011). A study (Hammond *et al.* 2018) focused on the increase and decrease of both benevolent and hostile sexism across the age span of men and women, found that men tend to show strong hostile sexism in adolescence, which tends to decrease as they become young adults – probably due to the need to achieve satisfaction in romantic relationships. Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, seems to remain constant in men as they grow older. For women, however, benevolent sexism is stronger during adolescence and mid-adulthood.

Sexism appears to be closely linked to conservative views of society, often intertwined with religious beliefs, family influences and political orientations (Van Assche, Koç and Roets 2019; Schäfer 2021). This interrelationship illustrates that sexism is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather part of a complex system of ideologies and social structures that support and perpetuate it. Far-right political movements (Llanera 2023) emerge as vehicles for conservative visions that emphasise male superiority and female subordination. Through rhetoric that exalts traditional and hierarchical societal values, these movements fuel and perpetuate sexist attitudes, thereby reinforcing gender inequalities. This intersection between sexism, social conservatism and extremist politics reflects a complex dynamic that goes beyond individual everyday interactions.

Another aspect that has been studied in relation to different levels of sexism is education. It appears that individuals with lower levels of education may be

more exposed to both benevolent and hostile sexism. This phenomenon could be partly attributed to a lack of exposure to academic contexts that promote critical awareness and broader reflection on social issues (Hellmer, Stenson and Jylhä 2018).

Finally, what has been termed modern sexism appears to be prevalent among contemporary young men (Off, Charron and Alexander 2022), and is based on three fundamental assumptions: denial of discrimination; negative attitudes towards requests for equality; resentment towards perceived preferential treatment of women (Godbole, Malvar and Valian 2019). Based on the belief that gender equality has been achieved in all areas – and sometimes overstated to favour women over men – this form of sexism tends to trivialise current gender issues, seeing them as a form of victimisation by women themselves. Off *et al.* (2022) have shown, through research conducted in 27 European countries, that many young men perceive advances in the rights of women as a threat, especially in places where there is high unemployment and consequent mistrust of institutions. Increasing competitiveness between men and women could therefore also be the result of an uncertain view of the future that fuels intolerance and declining solidarity. This could reflect a subtle but insidious form of discrimination that often manifests itself as resistance to efforts to achieve gender equality. In particular, it seems that some young men fear that extending rights and opportunities to women will come at the expense of their own privileges, leading to a backlash against progressive gender policies (Ruthig *et al.* 2017).

3. EUROPEAN UNION POLICIES ON GENDER EQUALITY

Human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law are values and rights at the core of European integration. A key aspect of the commitment of the EU to these principles is its active role in promoting gender equality as a cross-cutting priority regarding social, economic, and cultural development. By ensuring that gender equality policies are not only established but also effectively implemented across its Member States, the EU aims to achieve a coherent and unified framework. This approach is crucial for influencing and connecting governance at the EU, national, and regional levels, ensuring consistency and progress in the pursuit of gender equality (Ahrens 2023). This commitment is enshrined in the Treaties of Rome and further strengthened in the Lisbon Treaty and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The achievement of gender equality involves three dimensions: equal treatment focuses on the principle of equal rights and it is implemented through legal measures that ensure everyone is treated the same regardless of gender; equal opportunities, on the other hand, acknowledges differences between genders and seeks to address these through policies such as positive action or affirmative measures, aiming to create fair conditions for all; equal impact, which operates primarily through gender mainstreaming, aims to achieve equitable outcomes by integrating gender considerations into all policy and decision-making processes (Jacquot 2023). Over the years, EU policies have evolved to better encompass these results, leading to the development of new instruments. Gender mainstreaming, as a transversal approach, challenges the traditional focus of gender equality policies, which were primarily limited to employment and occupational issues. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) supports the EU institutions and governmental bodies in integrating a gender perspective into their work. EIGE provides insights on the relevance of gender in a variety of policy areas, suggests practical actions for EU and local institutions, helps to improve individual competences to mainstream gender throughout the different stages of the process of policy, programme, and project development and implementation. The EIGE platform accelerates the integration of gender equality into diverse areas as a routine part of administrative processes, rather than an exceptional or strictly legislative effort (D'Ambrosi *et al.* 2024; Schmidt 2005; Jacquot 2023). The inclusion of intersectionality as a cross-cutting principle, for the first time in the Gender Equality Plan 2020-25, is a further effort to address the multiple and intersecting forms of deprivation, disadvantage, and discrimination that interact with gender inequality.

However, the rise of political movements and parties promoting a more conservative agenda, and in some cases openly opposing gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, has exposed a growing resistance to these values, challenging the role of the EU as a defender of human rights and democratic freedoms (Köttig, Bitzan and Pető 2017; Roggeband and Krizsán 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2020; Ahrens, Gaweda and Kantola 2022). During the 2019 and 2024 European elections, the rhetoric of certain political parties focused on opposing what they labelled as “gender ideology,” a term used to criticise policies and legislation aimed at promoting gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights. This marked a significant shift in the European political landscape, where issues like feminism, marriage equality, transgender rights, and anti-discrimination measures became cen-

tral, yet often polarising topics of debate. The opposition to gender equality was particularly pronounced in Member States where governments and parties explicitly rejected EU directives on civil rights, arguing that such policies threaten national traditions and family values (Galpin and Trenz 2019; Macaluso 2020). This rejection has fueled a broader public debate about what it truly means to be part of a united Europe and which values should be considered fundamental and non-negotiable. In this context, the EU faces a significant challenge: how to maintain cohesion among its member states in the face of increasingly divergent opinions on these crucial issues. On one hand, the EU continues to actively promote policies aimed at eliminating gender disparities and protecting civil rights; on the other hand, it must contend with a growing resistance that often manifests in national laws and policies that directly contradict European objectives.

4. YOUNG EUROPEANS

Young people born from the 1990s onwards, have experienced processes of transnationalisation in the face of growing European policies. They are European native and immersed in a Europeanised society; their daily life is intertwined with the values and principles that the EU stands for, such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Indeed, they are far more likely to support liberal and post-materialistic values (Norris and Inglehart 2019). We assume they are fundamental to the shaping of a European identity, thanks to their ability to make their voices heard through the creation of social movements and associations, which can contribute to the maintenance of democracy and the assertion of social rights (Verderame and Benocci 2021; Della Porta 2022). If the literature shows contrasting trends regarding youth participation, distinguishing between institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms, and also highlighting forms of isolation and passivity, it is among the youth that new practices of participation emerge, grounded in the connection between personal experience and universally significant issues (Pitti 2022; Raffini 2024). In this way, young Europeans are a driving force in the building of the European public sphere.

Education plays a significant role in shaping the perspectives of these young Europeans. With access to higher education and opportunities for exchange programs across EU Member States, they are exposed to different ideas and cultures from an early age (Van Mol 2019). This exposure fosters an open-mindedness and tolerance that transcends national boundaries, leading to

a more transnational worldview. Moreover, young Europeans are often at the forefront of social and political movements, championing causes such as environmental sustainability (Della Porta and Portos 2023), LGBTQ+ rights (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; Baker 2017), and inclusivity (D'Agostino 2023). Their activism reflects a deep-seated belief in the power of collective action to effect meaningful change, echoing the spirit of solidarity that underpins the European project (Zamponi and Bosi 2018; Della Porta 2022).

Despite their progressive attitudes and values, and the spread of a generational cleavage, young Europeans are not immune to the challenges of the cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Schäfer 2022). The rise of populist movements and nationalist sentiments in some parts of Europe poses a threat to the values of openness and cooperation that they hold dear. In addition, economic insecurity and social inequalities continue to affect young people, fuelling discontent and disillusionment with traditional political institutions (Cabezas 2022). One field in which these tensions are particularly pronounced is around gender issues. While young Europeans overwhelmingly support the principle of gender equality, there is growing concern about the emergence of "modern sexism" (Off, Charron and Alexander 2022). Young citizens are increasingly recognised by the EU institutions as a key demographic group to invest in through its policies. They have grown up in the EU already established, which is the contest of their everyday life. Interestingly, compared to older generations, they tend to have a more transnational outlook, often viewing themselves as European citizens despite their nationhood (Lauterbach and De Vries 2021). This mindset is largely shaped by their upbringing in a barriers-free world, where travelling, studying, and living across EU borders is commonplace (Bettin Lattes and Bontempi 2008; Recchi 2013). The increased practices of spatial mobility, facilitated by low-cost airlines, as well as the interconnection of social practices detached from physical space enabled by digital media (van Dijck *et al.* 2018; Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2020), intertwine with a series of Europeanization mechanisms, such as Schengen, the Euro, and incentives for intra-European mobility in education, work, and volunteering. This represents a significant reconfiguration of social practices 'beyond borders', constituting a central piece in a broader 'reinvention of the social', with new generations seen as potential key actors (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022; Pirni and Raffini 2022).

Focusing on Italy, Flash Eurobarometer 545 (2024), on youth and democracy, offers insights into the attitudes and behaviours of young Italian citizens on a

number of issues, including their expectations from the EU. Italian youth have clear expectations from the EU, with the top three being the preservation of peace and international security (33%), the fight against poverty and social inequalities (32%), and the promotion of human rights, democracy, and common European values (28%). In terms of civic engagement, 52% of young Italians have taken action to change society in the past year. The most common areas of activism were human rights (40%), climate change and environmental protection (38%), and health and well-being (35%). Interestingly, activism around equal rights regardless of gender, race, or sexuality was notably lower in Italy (23%) compared to the EU average.

5. AIM AND STUDY DESIGN

Within the framework outlined above, this study explores the point of view of young Italians involved in formal or informal groups that uphold communication flows of debate and participatory practices regarding European integration. The aim is to analyse how these activists, involved in European networks of debate enhanced by social media and engaged in collective activities to mobilise others to raise awareness towards European policies, values and rights, perceive the significance of gender related issues in shaping European society and the effectiveness of European institutions in achieving this goal.

Previous research (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022) suggests that young people, mainly the most educated, are relevant agents in articulated networks of participation facilitated by social media. They mix different kinds of initiatives, going through those solicited by the European institutions with formal organisations, but also interpreting them with independent meanings or activating distinctive autonomous plans. In particular, the project *together.eu*, a pan-European community promoted by the European Parliament after the 2019 European elections, as an extension of the *#thistimeimvoting* campaign, activated participatory practices among young citizens, according to spontaneous trajectories and outcomes not necessarily predefined from above. These young activists often debate on the EU related issues regarding current affairs they consider relevant in the daily life of the citizens, and also on values, rights and social problems, considered as fundamental for shaping European integration and the context of their transnational way of life. An interesting point to remark, is the pragmatism and realism among the young people involved in these networks: they go through differ-

ent kinds of opportunities – institutional, personal and informal, face-to-face relationships and mediated by the social networks. So the institutions are not the main driver of the participation but a functional instrument for sustaining autonomous ways of engagement.

The 2024 European Elections were a relevant event for investigating how the young Italians involved in this kind of network of debates and practices mobilised others in order to raise awareness towards EU policies and to promote electoral participation. The hypothesis we investigate is that gender equality is a sensitive issue, as a symbol of the values and rights at the centre of the conflict over the meaning of the EU. In particular, some research questions arise:

RQ1: Gender has been included in debates and events run by young activists?

RQ2: How do young people perceive the role of the European institutions in addressing gender issues and promoting youth participation in these practices?

Qualitative research was carried out using in-depth semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The interviews were conducted between March and May 2024, both in person and via video conferencing platforms.

The interviewees are 18 Italian activists (11 males and 6 females) of youth organisations, both with formalised structure or spontaneous groups. The Italian community of the project *together.eu* was a starting point: first, the Italian organisations listed as partners in the website were selected, then a snowball sampling was adopted. Indeed, the *together.eu* website includes formal and institutionalised organisations, but the young volunteers are often involved in multiple initiatives, and we were able to identify a wide array of non-formalised participation initiatives that are equally active and interesting (Pitti, Mengilli and Walther 2023).

The roles of the interviewees within the associations are very different: presidents, founders, co-founders, communication managers and active members. All participants are aged between 18 and 35. Their educational backgrounds are largely homogeneous; in fact, they are all university graduates or about to graduate, apart from one participant who was employed in a family business. As previous studies have shown (Parito, Pérez-Calle and D'Ambrosi 2022; Parito, Raffini and D'Ambrosi 2025), the academic background of the young adults involved in these associations is not very diversified, ranging from law, political science, communications to business studies, with only one respondent holding an engineering degree. Politically, most of the young people interviewed identified with left-wing or centre-left parties, even if

they declared dissatisfaction with their programmes. Interestingly, the researchers encountered considerable difficulty in finding young individuals who aligned with the right-wing. In the end, we managed to interview only two participants who openly identified as right-wing. The challenge was not just about locating right-leaning youth within informal groups, but more about finding individuals interested in EU policies. In fact, both right-wing interviewees expressed a noticeable lack of interest in European matters, stating that their focus was primarily on national politics.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews underscore a complex landscape where the young activists recognize the relevance of the gender issue, and the potential of the EU to drive gender equality. At the same time, interviewees recognise the cultural, political, and institutional constraints. The need for pragmatic, non-ideological approaches, combined with stronger enforcement of the EU values and regulations, emerges as a common thread in addressing these challenges. Based on these assumptions, some key themes and insights can be identified:

- a) Political, ideological and generational divide: the interviewees perceive a clear divide in how young people with different political backgrounds evaluate gender issues; the awareness regarding a difference with older generations also emerges.
- b) Role of the European Union: the EU is seen as "home"² that should enforce its core values, including gender equality. However, scepticism emerges about its effectiveness, particularly in influencing member states with more conservative views. This is a wider question concerning the institutional reform to make the EU stronger and equipped to tackle the challenges, indeed it is difficult to implement a comprehensive gender policy across the Union. Suggestions include stricter enforcement of gender equality directives and the imposition of penalties on non-compliant member states.
- c) Activism, education and awareness: The interviewees perceive a growing mobilisation among young people regarding gender issues. This is seen as a positive trend, but they recognise that more needs to be done to translate activism into concrete policy changes. The interviewees stress the importance of education and awareness campaigns to foster a deep-

er understanding and commitment to gender equality among young people.

A prominent aspect of the political divide is the way gender equality is prioritised by young people with different political affiliations. The interviewees clearly report this perception, and the accounts of the two right-leaning activists compared with the others confirm these divergences. Activists who identify with centre-left or left-wing ideologies see gender equality as a fundamental issue that should be at the forefront of political discussions. They argue that the EU has a crucial role in enforcing gender equality as a core value. This perspective is rooted in the belief that gender equality is not just a social issue, but a fundamental human right that underpin democratic societies. Gender equality intersects with broader themes of social justice, inclusivity and human dignity which are central tenets of these ideologies. One interviewee observes:

People under the age of 35, especially my peers, feel this struggle a lot. But it depends a lot on how much you feel it, also depending on your political affiliation. I notice that maybe if you are a young man and you feel more right-wing, you see it as something you can do without, I don't say without, but... maybe they are conservative and they don't care, whereas maybe people like me, who also feel more centre-left, I think these are fundamental struggles [...] This is an issue that should be universal, without having to ideologise too much and then risk a conflict of factions, because when there is a fight between the right and the left, nothing happens on these issues. (Andrea B.)

Conversely, it seems that young people with right-wing affiliations view gender equality as less urgent than other issues. They believe significant progress has already been made towards gender equality, making further action unnecessary (Dietze and Roth 2020). The remaining gender differences are considered either minimal or natural, based on differences in individual choices and competencies rather than systemic bias. It is a belief rooted in the notion that meritocracy should prevail and the positions of power and influence should be awarded on the basis of individual competence and qualifications rather than gender. This view is closely related to our research question, which explores how gender issues have been meaningfully incorporated into events or projects organised by pro-European networks. It is also closely related to discussions concerning *all-male panels*, often referred to as *manels* (Clayton O'Brien and Piscopo 2019) at conferences and events. While most of interviewees who identified themselves as centre-left or left-wing emphasise they pay attention to the selection of speakers, striving to maintain a balanced representation of men and women, those who identify as

² A lot of the interviewees explicitly state "EU is home" and they identify themselves first as European and then as Italian.

right-wing expressed a different view. The latter argue that the panel composition at their events reflects the most qualified people for, rather than any form of gender bias. This stance contrasts with the practices promoted by EU calls, which require ensuring balanced gender representation.

But I think the best way to fight this kind of problem is to really evaluate it 100%. For example, we have had conferences with only women and conferences with only men. Let's say that. I think you don't just need to go and see whether someone is male or female, you really need to go and see what their skills are. (Aurelio B.)

The interviewees also perceive a generational divide which affects the effectiveness of EU gender policies (Bristow 2021). The generational divide manifests in differing levels of support for gender equality initiatives, with young people generally advocating for more comprehensive and intersectional approaches to gender issues. These approaches not only address traditional inequalities but also tackle new and emerging forms of discrimination that are increasingly apparent in society. Older generations, by contrast, often exhibit a more conservative stance, grounded in traditional views of gender roles and scepticism towards what they perceive as an overreach of gender policies (Sosa 2021; Farahat and Leijten 2022). One interviewee highlighted this issue:

The whole value dimension around us is a construction that happens over time. So there are some things that we all agree on, and there are others that we did not agree on so much. Gender is a generational issue, and I see that in our youth section this idea is much more present than in the main section attended by senior members. In addition, the institutions are not neutral, and this is a kind of awareness that can certainly be very, very valuable. (Giorgia S.)

The generational divide plays a significant role in the European discourse on gender issues (e.g. abortion rights, gender pay gap, domestic violence, work-life balance etc.), particularly in how gender policies are viewed and implemented. Interviews suggest that younger generations are generally more supportive towards progressive and inclusive approaches, seeing them as essential for ensuring equality and upholding human rights. On the other hand, older generations tend to be less enthusiastic about these changes. This reluctance is often shaped by cultural, religious, or conservative political values (Van Assche, Koç and Roets 2019; Schäfer 2021). There is a concern that highly ideological and generational approaches can polarise debates and hinder the practical implementation of gender equality. Indeed, some activists' express scepticism towards some gender-

focused policies perceived as driven more by ideology than by pragmatic needs.

The division also expresses the way national governments respond to EU gender equality directives. Despite the EU actively pushes for policies to implement the rights of the women and promote gender equality, the extent to which these policies are adopted varies widely among Member States, highlighting a disparity in commitment to these issues across Europe. The EU can give directives to the Member States, but it is not really able to require them to adopt specific measures (Banjac 2017).

The problem is that I think Europe is not as strong as it wants to be. That is, it exists, it has a lot of important things that it is doing, but it does not have the authority because it does not exist in the same way as the United States. (Elena S.)

The European Union, as we know, takes some of the sovereignty away from the individual states, but in the end it is the individual state that has the final decision on certain issues. So in the end the decision remains with the sovereign state. So if we take the case of Italy as an example, unfortunately I think there is still a very strong cultural problem, so although the EU is a very good example – both as institutions per se, and as institutional figures like Ursula von der Leyen and Roberta Metsola, who are very strong female figures – Italy as a nation needs to do more. (Eleonora S.)

The flexibility afforded to Member States in implementing EU directives can lead to varying experiences across different countries, shaping how young people perceive the effectiveness of EU policies in promoting gender equality.

The aim of the young people involved in these communities of participation can thus be defined as an effort to foster social development through collaboration between different kinds of actors. Through ludic, recreational, artistic, and educational activities (Milan 2019), the young activists promote participation grounded in a thorough understanding of the EU and its policies, which they acquired through both formal and informal practices (D'Ambrosi and Parito 2022).

The interviewees underline a relevant educational gap. They recognise a significant lack in both affective education and civic education in Italy, which makes it difficult for young people to fully understand what the EU is, how it functions, and what areas it governs. Affective education plays a crucial role in shaping the awareness and sensitivity of individuals towards gender issues. By fostering emotional intelligence, empathy and critical thinking, it helps individuals to recognise and challenge gender stereotypes, power dynamics and inequalities. A well-rounded affective education encourages open dis-

cussions about identity, relationships and social norms, ultimately promoting greater engagement in gender-related debates and advocacy.

As one interviewee said:

When we talk about gender, we also need to talk about generations. Our generation is different – we are part of a group where gender differences are becoming less pronounced. But there's a significant gap between us and the older generations. I believe that Europe needs to address both fronts simultaneously, showing that gender issues are far less prominent for us. For instance, when I talk to 16- or 17-year-olds about sexual orientation, it's completely normal for them to discuss these topics, even topics like sexuality. They need affective education, because they are often left to navigate these themes alone. This is why I think we need to push for a major effort, even at the European level, to talk about emotions and relationships. The focus is often on gender differences, while the gap between generations is overlooked. We need a political awareness campaign that highlights generational coexistence, giving equal weight to both gender and generational issues. I always say we should go into classrooms and ask the younger generation what they think – they have so much to teach us. (Simone R.)

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This exploratory study suggests that in the communication flows of European public debate and participatory practices, where young people are key actors, gender issues receive significant attention. In any case, it should be noted that the interviewees have specific characteristics: not only do they have a high level of education, but they also study in specific disciplinary fields (political and social sciences, economics and humanities).

It is noteworthy that most of the interviewees are male, yet no difference emerges compared to females in the perception of relevance. Young activists recognise gender equality as value and a human right at the core of the EU democracy. They perceive efforts to address gender equality as a challenge essential for shaping a society characterised by social justice, inclusivity and human dignity. This is not an idealistic outlook, the EU and its policies are considered in a pragmatic manner, evaluating the importance for tackling gender disparities but questioning the effectiveness of the adopted strategies, in particular their ability to effectively influence national-level decision-making.

The interviewees recognise a cultural divide between generations, with the older people perceived weakly equipped to understand the younger way of thinking and living. Another perceived divide is ideological, between young people aligning with the politi-

cal right or left. We have to remark that the interviews were conducted in the lead-up to the European elections, while the translational public debate was focused on the possibility that right-wing and far-right parties could gain support both in Italy and in many other member states. In the Italian public debate, the main parties of the center-right governing coalition display all the main attributes of the radical right, namely nativism/ethnonationalism, sovereignism, authoritarianism, Euroscepticism, and populism (Bressanelli and Candia 2023) and they opened a conflict, amplified by social media, around values such as gender equalities and human rights that are fundamental values of the EU. So, we can argue the involvement of left-leaning young activists to counteract this trend. However, our analysis did not find a debate between activists of differing orientations, as we had expected. Instead, we observed a lack of interest from right-leaning youth in participating in a transnational debate or engaging with European issues in general.

Some limitations of this explorative research should be noted. The interviewees have a higher education level with a specific academic background mostly in political and social science. Broadly, the most educated young people are involved in the networks of participation analysed. The activists recognise this educational divide, highlighting the need for enforced and more suitable educational activities for the younger people. Further research should explore the link between political orientation, education and values stance, to provide additional understanding of the attitudes of young people towards the UE and the implementation of gender issues.

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Biographical Work in Queer Volunteering. Findings from a Case Study on German Young Adults

PATRICK LEINHOS

Abstract. While research has revealed subjective, biographical and identity-related meanings of volunteering, gendered perspectives have not yet been given a central focus. Little is known about the impact that volunteering has on construction of (gendered) biographies. The present study aims to address this research gap by undertaking a biography-analytical study of young adults involved in queer volunteering, exploring the influence of queer volunteering on the (gendered) construction of their biography. By using the documentary method of interpretation, relations between queer volunteering and the biographies of the volunteers were reconstructed. In this article, the central ways in which the biographies of queer activists are presented in their biographical interviews are firstly presented and reflected upon. All the cases in the underlying sample use theorising and argumentative modes to construct their biographical self-representations. Then, the manner in which young adults engage in biographical work is reconstructed. To conclude these aspects, queer volunteering contexts are discussed as spaces for biographical work. In queer volunteering contexts, volunteers are able to identify themselves, develop the necessary competences to deal with everyday challenges, regain their agency, find visible role models and thus opportunities and anchors for biographisation.

Keywords: queer, volunteering, biography, meaning, biographical work

1. BIOGRAPHICAL MEANINGS OF VOLUNTEERING

The selection of volunteering contexts is based on biographical experiences. The attribution of specific meanings to volunteering is contingent on biographical relations, contextual influences and situational considerations. «Participation emerges from young people's biographical experiences, experiences of self-efficacy (or their lack) [...], their search for recognition and belonging, their coping with their personal lives and their attempts to make an impact and to change things in their lives and life-worlds» (von Schwanenflügel *et al.* 2019: 442). Contexts of voluntary work are chosen to enable experiences of belonging, community and recognition, autonomy, independence and self-direction, security, emotional support, visibility, self-efficacy, emancipation and identity work (von Schwanenflügel 2015; McMa-

hon *et al.* 2020: 164). Volunteering can therefore lead to an experience and expansion of agency. This impacts identity formation, enabling people to perceive themselves as autonomous, self-determined and capable of independent action. Volunteering can therefore serve as a coping mechanism for biographical challenges (von Schwanenflügel *et al.* 2019: 438). Volunteering is «part of the young people's identity-work where they pursue identity-offers and positions which reflect their experiences in the past, their needs and motivations in the present, and their desires for their imagined futures» (McMahon *et al.* 2020: 171).

Findings have been obtained on the subjective, biographical and identity-related meanings of volunteering. However, gendered perspectives have not yet been given a central focus. Some perspectives emphasis on gender inequality – e.g. androcracy (Biester *et al.* 1994; Sauer 1999), reproduction of social inequalities in volunteering (Munsch 2011; Grasso and Smith 2022), public/private spheres and gender segregation (Siltanen and Stanworth 1984; Vromen 2003). Nevertheless, little is known about the impact of the topic of volunteering on constructions of (gendered) biographies. The present study aims to address this research gap by undertaking a biography-analytical study of young adults involved in queer volunteering, exploring the influence of queer volunteering and the associated issues and topics on the (gendered) construction of a biography.

In the underlying study (Leinhos 2024), biographical-narrative interviews (Schütze 2016) were conducted with young adults who voluntarily campaign for the recognition of gender and sexual diversity and against hetero- and cis-normative discrimination in political and trade union interest groups, queer associations and educational projects. As the interviewees are predominantly in their early to mid-20s, the term «young adults» is employed to encompass the simultaneity of autonomy (e.g. the coming of age, marked by expanded opportunities for engagement) and dependencies (social expectations of entering the labour market, familial obligations, and occasionally financial constraints). This term also acknowledges the interplay between social structures and the practices of young adults. By using the documentary method of interpretation (Bohnsack *et al.* 2010; Bohnsack 2014), relations between queer volunteering and the biographies of the volunteers were reconstructed. This way the focus is on the thematic dimension of volunteering as queer. This does not mean that the people involved are or have to be queer themselves. The sample also includes interviews with hetero-cis-people who campaign for the recognition of diversity and against discrimination based on ascribed gender and

sexuality. Assuming that only queer people are queer activists would reify marginalisation and make diversity an issue solely for marginalised people.

In this article, the central ways in which the biographies of activists in queer volunteering are constructed are firstly presented and reflected upon (1). Then, the manner in which young adults engage in biographical work is reconstructed (2). To conclude these aspects, queer volunteering contexts are discussed as spaces for biographical work (3).

2. BIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF YOUNG ADULTS IN QUEER VOLUNTEERING

The interviews with young adults in queer volunteering are characterised by the presentation of an implicit construction of agency, the processing of biographical uncertainty and a mode of self-realisation in volunteering. The analysis of the interviews reveals that self-reflection, theorising and argumentations are essential modes of biographisation in all the cases studied. In consideration of the methodological reflection that these modes of biographisation «deal with disorderly chunks of biographical experiences» and are indicative of the interviewee's biographical work (Schütze 2006: 110), this section provides a reflection on the background of theorising and argumentative modes in biographical interviews. Firstly, the focus is on field-related discourses and theoretical implications of queer volunteering. The second focus is on biography theoretical backgrounds. Theorising and argumentations thus come into play as forms of biographisation and biographical competence in dealing with experiences of crisis. Finally, theorising and argumentative biographisation is considered a moment of community building and solidarity.

At first glance, an explanation for this theorising self-view seems obvious: The perceived necessity of coming out evokes introspection and the capacity for differentiation, recognition and endurance of heterogeneity (Göth and Kohn 2014: 33). Those engaged in the field of queer activism are well-versed in social science concepts relating to gender, sexuality, identities, heterogeneity, diversity, marginalisation, discrimination, etc. Volunteers engage with the subject, work with it, communicate its content to others, and incorporate these aspects into their political work. Individuals volunteering in gender and sexuality-related fields are inextricably linked to the theoretical contributions of gender and queer studies. In the context of queer volunteering, the practical application of these theoretical concepts is elevated to a norm of volunteering. Engaging with these discourses fosters

introspection and reflection on individuals' personal experiences and their social interactions. As Oldemeier and Timmermanns (2023: 187) conclude, a queer affiliation can evoke the critical consideration of social norms.

Furthermore, volunteers involved in queer issues are within a domain of institutionalised and discursive «overdetermination» (Schmidt 2023: 65), both with respect to individual positioning within the context of a heteronormative matrix and, in the case of formalised volunteering, in terms of (legal) operating options, ideas and requirements of volunteering itself. This overdetermination renders conventional formats of self-description more probable.

Theorisations, scientific concepts or common-sense knowledge that are invoked in argumentation also become explanatory patterns or «keys to biographisation» (Bartmann and Kunze 2008: 183). This is not surprising against the background of a conception of «biography» at the intersection of individual agency in reciprocal tension with the orientation schemes of different spaces and social, collective structures (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000: 117; Mažeikienė 2012). The presentation of a biography is never a solitary endeavour; it always has to be considered in the context of the prevailing social, interactive and situational framework conditions, and be informed by the collective knowledge. The awareness of one's own position outside of these matrices, and the associated experiences of foreignness in heteronormative fields, evoke challenges to one's own self-presentation. Argumentations emerge in order to make oneself socially understandable, to position oneself in the social world and to identify oneself. «The individual realisation of belonging to a minority that deviates from the common ideas of binary gender norms and/or heteronormative desire suggests a self-reflective examination of how one perceives oneself and one's environment» (Oldemeier and Timmermanns 2023: 187). Argumentation can be used to connect to collective knowledge, to embed one's own experiences in collective situations or to invoke generalisable, stereotypical concepts to frame one's own experiences and actions.

Furthermore, normalising or distancing depictions of varying intensity can be interpreted as references to experiences of crisis. The emotional impact and perceived significance of potential norm violations can be mitigated through rationalisation and theorisation of personal experiences as being in accordance with established norms. Retrospective reinterpretations, self-observations and explanations based on generalised knowledge can be interpreted in a number of ways. They can be understood as a «protective wall» (Schütze 1983: 286). However, they can also be biographically learned

ways of dealing with problems and possible crises. Argumentative passages serve as indications of biographical competences of addressing problematic situations and a document of the adoption of collective structures. In the context of challenging biographies, theoretical considerations can offer a cathartic effect. In interviews, interviewees are able to discuss emotional relationships or biographical difficulties in a scientific context, thereby engaging in self-reflection in a distanced manner. The exclusion of negative aspects in self-reflection results in a distancing of one's own experiences from social reality. This process enables the maintenance of an image of a self-determined individual, at least on a narrative level. The result is a depiction of an individual who effectively copes with and shapes everyday life, unencumbered by societal constraints (Bröckling 2015). This retrospective reinterpretation of experiences and the explanation of situations, actions and contexts can be described as «self-therapy» (Overmann 1988). In this process, the application of scientific knowledge enables self-discovery and self-representation in accordance with social norms.

Overmann (*Ibidem*) proposes an alternative theorisation concerning scientific theorising, reflexive self-constructions. These modes of representation frequently emerge in the context of endeavours to establish a sense of community and solidarity, wherein individuals have the opportunity to experience and embed their sense of self. In this context, the concept of communitisation is closely intertwined with the collective knowledge of how to live together. Theorising and argumentation facilitate the establishment of a connection to collective knowledge, thereby offering protection from social demands and moral support to its members.

On the one hand, theorisations and argumentations can therefore be an expression of painful, repressed experiences from which people distance themselves, which they cannot express, which they have not processed. They can be an expression of the impossibility of coherent biographical representation, alienation from practice or a lack of autonomy and agency. The aforementioned aspects can be found in the analyses of the cases in the underlying sample, as does the perspective of biographical competence. Theorisations and argumentations point to the existence of reflexive processing skills, learned ways of dealing with conflictual experiences, relief through theorisations or connections to collectivity. In the field of volunteering, solidarity is established on the basis of shared attitudes. The shared experience of deviating from society's hegemonic stereotypes can be processed biographically in the protection of the collective, in mutual exchange and with moral support. Volunteering also makes it possible to experience the

de-individualisation of experiences of difference, which can awaken their potential for change. The de-individualisation of biographical problems, particularly the identification of experiences of difference as a structural problem caused by gender and sexual norms, enables (political) association to achieve common goals. These opportunities for communitisation act as a driving force for the reproduction of this immanent scientific imprint in the field. As a result, the volunteers successively theorise their (volunteering) actions, their own selves also increasingly coming into focus. Concomitantly, the established norm of academic style and self-reflexivity is upheld. These theorisations engender introspection and reflective interpretations of one's own life. Consequently, they facilitate the construction of a consistent biography, biographical stability and (biographical) agency. Furthermore, the adoption of theoretical discourses functions as the 'entry ticket' into the domain of queer volunteering, which is reflexive in nature. Theorising and argumentation thus enable a connection to the collective structures of queer volunteering.

3. BIOGRAPHICAL WORK IN QUEER VOLUNTEERING

This study explores the significance and relevance of volunteering contexts for biographies. Biographical relevancies of hegemonic discourses and counter-discourses in the context of queer volunteering can be analysed using subjectivisation theory approaches in biographical research (Spies and Tuijter 2017; Spies 2018). However, the question posed here is concerned with the biographical constructions of the volunteers. Therefore, the following discussion is based on the concept of "(biographical) work on the self", because «creating oneself as a 'person' seems to be possible only by telling how one became what and who one is now» through biographisation (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000: 116). A biography and a biographical self-presentation are the results of biographical work, with the person who has engaged in this work being the biographer (Schütze 2014). The term biographical work refers to the recognition of one's own biography, i.e. the «attention to one's own biographical identity in its development and changeability» (Schütze 2014: 124) with the aim of a formative attitude. The concept of biography has been defined as a «self-reflection and self-description» that structures the life-time (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000: 115) or as a «self-observation and interpretation of own life» (Mažeikienė 2012: 131). The focus of biographical work is therefore on recognising and processing the conditional and formative dimensions of one's own life story (Schütze 2014: 130).

The work of orienting the temporal process of the individual's life and of social change can be termed 'biographical work'. Biographical work is a practice that has been developed in modern societies in order to solve some of the main issues of integration and order. Biographical work is a way to orient the individual and make him or her reliable for institutions in a historical social situation (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000: 115).

The logic of constructing biography developed in biographical work guides the formation of identity and frames the processing of external demands and stimuli (Schütze 2014: 124). The potential for biographical work to engender empowerment lies in its capacity to facilitate change and autonomy by enhancing reflective abilities (Mažeikienė 2012: 134). In moments of introspection or interaction with significant others, the characteristics, connections, processes and mechanisms of one's own life story can be discerned (Schütze 2014: 125). Consequently, a biographer can reflect subjective sources of meaning, personal positioning (of action), biographical resources, individual moments and recuperations of potential for distraction or injury, personal and framework conditions of social relationships, as well as personal orientations, interests and abilities. The necessity for biographical work is evident in situations where routine is disrupted by changes, where a context conducive to well-being (e.g. a home) must be established and created, where social relationships involving mutual adoption of perspectives are to be initiated, where obstacles to one's own ability to act are to be identified and where an authentic self is to be presented that is both self-critical and flexible (Schütze 2014).

In this context, it is crucial to develop an understanding of how to adequately deal with attributions and collective perceptions as well as the demands of different areas of life. A biography is defined as the «interplay of objective structures and consciousness» thereby underscoring the dynamic interplay between individual agency and the broader societal structures (Mažeikienė 2012: 130). On the one hand collective and social contexts represent the framework conditions for all actions as well as (biographical) work on the self. On the other hand, a narration of a life story can function as a means to cope with modern world contingencies (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000: 115). Collective identities have been demonstrated to exert a pivotal influence on biographical actions and agency, as well as the representational shaping of biographical narratives (Schütze 2014: 130f.). This concept pertains to various social entities, including families, groups, (religious) communities, nations or states, society, culture, regions, and overarching entities such as the concept of a global community or, in a theoretical sense,

generalised or significant others, social worlds or arenas and social categorisations. These include typifications of selves and others, ideas of centre and periphery, historicity, universalised or institutionalised mechanisms, postulates or ideas of action, being or interaction (*Ibidem*). These collectivities are in an interdependent constitutive relation with biography, biographical identity and biographical work and biographical work is at the same time the search for 'suitable' environments and contexts (Ivi: 123). Biographical work can establish a socially appropriate connection between the individual and society, produces «a network of events and options», and processes time, situations and the becoming of the self in a dialogical and interactive way (Fischer-Rosenthal 2000: 117f.). This exploration is enabled by a person's understanding of their own life and the structures surrounding them (Mažeikienė 2012: 134). From the perspective of a praxeological sociology of knowledge (Bohnsack 2014), biographical work can be understood as the processing and negotiation of the notorious discrepancy and interdependence of the logic of practice or *modus operandi* of action and contextual requirements. The focus is therefore on dealing with, appropriating, demarcating, incorporating, borrowing or adapting, confronting, etc. expectations, social requirements and ideas of biographisation, life courses and identity.

In order to systematise the presentation, the following section employs the reconstructed typology of the significance of queer volunteering in biography (Leinhos 2024) to present how biographical work can be carried out in queer volunteering and how queer volunteering influences biography and the recognition of the self. This is illustrated by quotations¹ from interview transcripts.

3.1 Volunteering as a reinforcement of agency and emancipation from biographical heteronomy

In the biographical presentations typified as 'volunteering as a reinforcement of agency and emancipation from biographical heteronomy', a tendency towards an emphasis on crisis and a perceived lack of agency is observed in the retrospective, i.e. in life periods preceding the volunteering.

In a present-day perspective and in the most positively connoted future sights, the cases aspire to self-determination and emancipation. In this type, the medium and context in which these endeavours take place is queer volunteering. In this context, there is a self-realisation of one's own ability to act, as well as the possibility of demarcation, (re)interpretation, negotiation and pro-

cessing of perceived biographical deficits. An example of this is Jasmin, who meets with political decision-makers to implement queer content in legislative procedures.

And then we actually met once. I think I've flipped a switch from okay. I can somehow seem to be quite good with people who you usually perceive as such authorities... as such obvious authorities that you know from TV. Apparently I can also talk to them quite well and you can just talk to them and you can somehow have a coffee with them um: [...] so my experience, so you can somehow meet on a human level let's say so [...] and I think that somehow a switch has been flipped I think that was actually another very strong somehow politicising moment (transcript Jasmin).

Here in this self-theorising description, Jasmin accentuates her own ability to converse with individuals from diverse spheres of influence as a resource. Nevertheless, this is not an exposition of herself, but rather a presentation of her experienced agency, which she supports argumentatively with learnt skills of communication. The switch metaphor refers to an implicit before and after: previous knowledge excludes political action, it is not within the horizon of possibilities. In the present, the possibilities, competences and knowledge are available so that the goals can be pursued. Jasmin characterises this as a moment of realisation that not only reveals the possibility of political agency, but has also "activated" it. The knowledge reconstructed in the description of her self-described politicising moment is closely linked to her first contact with the political sphere. Jasmin demonstrates the manner in which individuals can obtain or discover resources, knowledge, skills and abilities in volunteering activities. Queer volunteering facilitates the realisation and maintenance of agency and self-determination. This way, volunteer contexts function as a medium of (self-)empowerment. Life stories and experiences of heteronomy that have been connoted deficiently encounter volunteer contexts that, due to their thematic focus, become a medium and possibility for the enactment of biographical orientations. In the process of «exploring issues, formulating plans, experimenting with them, revisiting the problem, creating new plans, taking action, encountering difficulties and finding ways to resolve these» (Percy-Smith *et al.* 2020: 184), the objective is to empower oneself and enable autonomy. The process of attaining agency within the heteronormative system is achieved through the medium of queer volunteering. «Participation is a learning process in which individuals gradually develop their capabilities to participate through practice» (Ivi: 196).

¹ The quotes were translated into English.

McMahon *et al.* (2020: 170) also observe a similar figure of volunteering as a search for recognition and belonging that people did not have in the past. Accordingly, people seek contexts of volunteering that enable them to counteract or deal with marginalised and damaged identities and experiences of exclusion or difference from the past, and to realise a desired positionality. Within a volunteer context, individuals empower themselves, experience self-efficacy, and «become the people they want to be» (*Ibidem*). These changes are observed as biographical turning points (Ivi: 172f.; with reference to Rosenthal 2004), in which volunteer contexts and positions are attributed a decisive role in promoting (self-)empowerment and overcoming challenges in terms of agency and self-efficacy.

3.2 Volunteering as the creation of opportunities for biographisation

The biographical presentations typified as ‘volunteering as the creation of opportunities for biographisation’ are more about biographical uncertainties caused by experiences of difference and the difficulties of positioning oneself in the world with its norms and demands.

of course you're then confronted with the fact that somehow, uh, in puberty you suddenly don't uh fall in love with a girl but with a boy and that's just the first time that I think you're confronted with the fact that you don't act according to expectations even if you don't want to so falling in love isn't something you consciously decide so I think that was the first time that you or that I was affected by something like that and I think it was the only time or it wasn't necessarily a topic otherwise so as I said it wasn't really talked about at school and yes that was I think the first time that I was confronted with something like that. even if I don't think you realise at that moment that what you're feeling now is somehow different from others, um and it's just a kind of label and that people are being persecuted and discriminated against for it um I don't think that's so clear yet but I think you realise that it's somehow different than others (Transcript Lukas).

As demonstrated by Lukas, cases of this type are characterised by a realisation of their position at the periphery of social norms. Against this backdrop, criticism is levelled at the perceived deficiencies in education concerning diverse lifestyles and forms of intimacy, both within society and within the context of educational institutions. In light of their experiences, individuals tend to seek social acknowledgement, a sense of belonging to a community, social support, and positive role models – «I didn't really identify as gay back then

because it wasn't tangible for me» (transcript Lukas). An implicit connection has been established between this and their volunteering activities. This connection is evident not only in the fact that they wish to address this criticised circumstance for themselves and their own biographical positioning through volunteering, but also in their endeavours to address it for others. The objective of the present volunteering is to render plural lifestyles, love and life models visible, to educate about them and about structures and modes of differentiation and categorisation, to provide processing and support instances and to maintain offers of possible identification foils. The overarching aim is to ensure that the interviewees themselves or other people do not have to present their own biographies as non-conformist.

This pattern is similar to a mode McMahon *et al.* (2020: 172) have discovered, in which individuals seek or create a context in which they can fully express their identities and feel a sense of belonging. The pivotal difference is that it encompasses not solely the creation of contexts and opportunities for themselves to biographise (as gay, bi, trans, inter, etc.), but also the facilitation of these same opportunities for others. This process facilitates the realisation that one can assist others, pass on one's personal history and experiences, and thereby become a role model for others. «Where one's own story can be elevated to a role model and orientation for others, it experiences a revaluation and a higher meaning as a good or right path. Behind this is the need for a specific form of recognition» (von Schwanenflügel 2015: 233). This way of volunteering can be conceptualised on two levels: firstly, on the social level, involving the representation of others and the contribution to collective decision-making processes (e.g. in political parties or committees); and secondly, on the individual level, encompassing the maintenance of personal visibility and the representation of one's own experiences and perspectives (Pais 2008; Pitti *et al.* 2021).

3.3 Volunteering as a continuation of family attitudes

In the biographical presentations typified as ‘volunteering as a continuation of family attitudes’, the family is the central framework for biographisation. This is the case with Mira, for example. Her first statement in the interview refers to the fact that her entire family lives in the region where she grew up. The family references also form a consistent background for the description and legitimisation of political interests.

we had two stays abroad as a family [...] and uh yes; that means I'm a convinced European. I became interested in

politics very much very early on, certainly at the age of 11 with somehow no idea. My parents watched the news in the evenings at 8pm and [...] found that very depressing but I was still interested in it (transcript Mira).

Cases of this type reflect family attitudes towards social issues, the exercise of political practice and skills acquired in the family household (e.g. through political «lunch table discussions») as a legitimising basis for their volunteering activities. Skills and knowledge acquired in the family are negotiated as a continuation of the family's attitudes towards political involvement. The volunteer context is therefore implicitly constructed as a suitable environment for the individual's own biographical orientations.

Other studies also identify exposure to political issues within the family as the starting point for the development of their political interest (Hillebrand *et al.* 2015). Nohl (2022: 59) describes that political role orientations also develop in interactions in family contexts. It is here that we can learn how collective decisions are (or can be) negotiated, what can become the subject of dispute, and how power-shaping positionings are carried out. In the type I have reconstructed, volunteering is formulated as a continuation of the family's (political) attitudes. This is linked to the implicit recognition of the central importance of the family for one's own biography. Voluntary work is then directed towards the continuation of competences, skills and attitudes acquired in the family.

3.4 Volunteering as an extension of community experiences

The biographical presentations typified as 'volunteering as an extension of community experiences' is based on a biographical orientation towards social integration as an emotional connection, support and anchorage, as an instance of both demarcation and community, of stability and appreciation, and as an instance for moments of self-reflection. The latter is particularly evident in Malina's statement:

and the person I was with [...] then um came out to me as trans, which at first questioned a lot of things for me [...] and I totally questioned my own labels so um what does that mean for me what does that mean for my sexual orientation and um we came to the club 14 in city 12 about it [...] is such a contact point just a counselling centre also with a youth group (transcript Malina).

The first contact with queer volunteering is negotiated both in the context of a peer relationship and in moments of biographical work. Social interactions and

social inclusion as a central biographical orientation of Malina form the context of biographical work. Cases of this type find social integration within the context of volunteering. However, this is not achieved in a functional manner with the objective of establishing friendships and peer relationships through volunteering. Instead, volunteer contexts are negotiated as possibilities of community building and as opportunities for collective action, due to their inherent social structure.

um and that was kind of a really matter of heart project from the very beginning simply because I also really loved the people behind it um it was really cool to be able to put the group together myself and see how it grows together. We've only just got together so we're supra-regional that's about 25 people and in different places um we met last month in city 2 that's always like that: it's just so nice to have such an empowering group somehow (transcript Malina).

To Malina, friends are people with whom she is «on the same wavelength feministically» and «my favourite people are also all volunteers somehow» or with whom she «shares feminist point of views» (transcript Malina). Sociality is always implicitly considered and present; other people are therefore always present and their influence is always reflected – also and above all in her volunteering.

Cases of this type combine sociality and volunteering. Other research findings also discuss social integration and the development of community and social relationships as functions and consequences of volunteering (Hirschle and Kleiner 2016; Kleiner 2021). A sense of belonging and a sense of community are therefore central elements of participatory practices (Frankel and Mountford 2021). Behrens (2023: 204) differentiates between community-building processes according to geographical (local and global), intergenerational and identity (e.g. queer movements) dimensions. As Shabel and Montenegro (2023: 219) observe, «to participate politically is to do and to be with others and thus, inevitably, is to act within the framework of certain human relations».

The connection between biographical work and sociality in the context of queer volunteering transforms the context of queer volunteering into a place of biographical work. In this sense, biographical work can be realised in the social contexts of queer volunteering, social structures and community. Consequently, social others become a possibility for volunteering, and, conversely, volunteering can become both the result and the possibility of realising biographical aspirations.

4. CONTEXTS OF QUEER VOLUNTEERING AS PLACES OF BIOGRAPHICAL WORK

In order to cope with life as a queer person, it is beneficial to be aware of queer lifestyles, communities, backgrounds, and explanations for one's own life situation and the reactions of others (Krell and Oldemeier 2018). Queer spaces facilitate comprehension, designation and articulation of one's own sexuality and gender (Hiestand and Levitt 2005; Beemyn and Rankin 2011). Additionally, they encourage interaction with others. As Göth and Kohn (2014: 34) observe, this enables concrete forms of support, which are constituted by a sense of belonging, social support and the experience of spaces without marginalisation. From the perspective of "biographical work", such biographical (self-)realisation or reflection of one's own (biographical) orientations, resources and (im)possibilities in volunteering are used as the basis for seeking or finding a specifically suitable context for the enactment of biographical orientations, or for shaping volunteering contexts in accordance with biographical orientations. Firstly, orientations of emancipation from heteronomy can be cultivated by identifying, developing and actualising one's own agency within contexts of volunteering. Secondly, in the context of experiences of difference, the necessity of role models and social anchor points can be addressed through volunteering, thereby educating about pluralistic ways of life, making them visible and creating biographical identification opportunities for oneself and others. Thirdly, the competences acquired in the family can be applied in volunteering in accordance with family attitudes. Finally, the opportunity for the enactment of biographical aspirations for social integration and community is presented as a chance for community experiences and community action. In the context of (queer) volunteering with its framework conditions, contexts and structures, it is possible for those involved to become aware of themselves, to recognise their agency, to live out and realise their biographical orientations, to develop, acquire and reflect on the (biographical) skills and abilities necessary for this and to be recognised for this. Depending on the focus, reflecting on experiences in volunteering contexts and situations can lead to an interpretation and reinterpretation of one's own biography. This may also result in the appropriation or incorporation of structures of volunteering, or the specific organisation and interpretation of volunteering according to biographical priorities. Volunteering can therefore be regarded as a context of biographical work on the self, in which one's own biography can be constructed in a consistent and stable way.

The community also provides possible answers for dealing with prejudice, discrimination and experienced or expected violence and offers opportunities to position oneself beyond the heteronormative standards of mainstream society (Göth and Kohn 2014: 34). Queer affiliations and alliances have been shown to offer support and safe space, as well as acceptance and security (Oldemeier and Timmermanns 2023: 191). In light of the unavoidable nature of social norms pertaining to gender and sexuality, queer spaces provide a valuable opportunity for individuals to identify and address chosen aspects of their personal experiences. Queer contexts offer means to avoid the self-construction as deviant and to a certain extent to become an empowered subject (Vogler 2022: 314). Moreover, queer spaces offer a platform for challenging and resisting these inequalities. Queer volunteering incorporates an inherent moment of sociality and therefore can contribute to the development of a positive attitude towards one's own queerness. It can establish a sense of community and facilitate coping with minority stress (Goldbach and Gibbs 2015: 300f.). The social relationships, opportunities for exchange, affiliations and potential for self-development that result from volunteering can promote positive self-esteem and positive references to gender identity.

This provides support for individuals in their coming out and helps them to experience recognition and acceptance. Biographical crises can be addressed through volunteering. Many volunteers involved in queer movements perceive their participation as a means of augmenting their self-efficacy and agency (Krell and Oldemeier 2018). Moreover, the analysis in this paper supports the findings of a favourable impact of queer movements on the coping mechanisms employed by children and adolescents in dealing with discrimination, violence and uncertainties concerning their gender and sexuality. Contexts involving queer volunteering have been shown to create spaces of opportunity, provide resources and impart knowledge for the formation of alternative and positive concepts of identity (Klapeer 2020: 11). The typology presented and the reflections on biographical work in volunteering based on it were reconstructed on the basis of queer volunteering, but could also be transferred to other volunteering topics that are based on marginalisation. However, these considerations are not arbitrary, but a more abstract and generalised typology that can serve as a starting point for analysing and contrasting the significance of other areas of volunteering for the biographies of those involved. After all, hetero-cis-people also use contexts of queer volunteering for their biographical work. The distinctive aspect of queer engage-

ment is that the self-reflexivity within the horizon of (gender) norms triggered by queer volunteer spaces, the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange with others are strategies for dealing with the speechlessness about one's own position and situation, for making diverse identities socially visible and imaginable, and for reconstructing and deconstructing these norms as such. Queer volunteering contexts have been found to offer significant coping mechanisms, resilience, and support strategies (Ivi: 27).

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Modalità e tematiche contemporanee dell'attivismo trans* in Italia. Forme di resistenza e cura

MICHEL STERBINI PERTICARÀ

Abstract. Research focusing on the rights of trans* people highlight different discriminations encountered in various aspects of daily life, such as workplaces or healthcare settings. The gender binary that structures the social order impedes the recognition of self-affirmation and the protection of personal human rights. In response to institutional lacks and political attacks, the trans* community develops different resistance mechanisms, organising itself into associations, advocacy groups, and networks. This article explores queer activism in Italy, with a particular focus on the trans* movement and its collective care practices, developed both through physical and virtual spaces, as a response to these daily and systemic forms of discrimination. Using qualitative methodologies such as semi-structured individual interviews and desk analysis of online pages, this paper concentrates on the issues followed by young trans and non-binary individuals in Italy through their activism, and the various forms of direct social action they engage in. These practices claim spaces of autonomy and create networks of convergence, promoting self-affirmation while combating isolation and exclusion. The analysis therefore reveals how activism can serve as a source of individual and collective care and emancipation, where mutual aid and resource exchange act as practical laboratories for a solidarity that can drive social change.

Keywords: trans* activism, LGBTQ+ community, social movements, non-binary identities.

1. INTRODUZIONE

La Trans Rights Map di TGEU, organizzazione che si occupa dei diritti delle persone trans* in Europa e nell'Asia Centrale, nel 2024 ha assegnato all'Italia un punteggio di 9,5 su 32 indicatori volti a descrivere il livello di riconoscimento, tutela e benessere delle persone trans* e *gender non-conforming* (TGNC)¹. Secondo la survey condotta nel 2023 dalla FRA², il 75% delle donne trans, il 64% degli uomini trans e il 49% delle persone non binarie rispondenti in Italia hanno dichiarato di essersi sentite discriminate in vari settori della vita nei 12 mesi precedenti (FRA 2024). Questi dati traducono

¹ <https://transrightsmap.tgeu.org/home/>

² Agenzia dell'Unione Europea per i diritti fondamentali (Fundamental Rights Agency).

in numeri un sistema in cui le persone trans*, ovvero chiunque non si riconosca nel genere assegnato alla nascita³, faticano a vedere la propria identità riconosciuta e i propri diritti tutelati. La legge n.164/1982 che regola il riconoscimento giuridico dell'identità di genere (RGIG), infatti, è imperniata su standard corporei e comportamentali fondati sul binarismo di genere, che a loro volta riproducono (Osella 2022). La sua applicazione prevede che un tribunale analizzi perizie mediche, psicologiche ed endocrinologiche che attestino la "disforia" o "incongruenza" di genere, per concedere la rettifica dei documenti e/o procedere con operazioni chirurgiche di affermazione di genere. Nonostante da pochi anni non sia più classificata come disturbo mentale dall'OMS, la transgenerità è patologizzata e la sua legittimità misurata sulla disforia e sul disagio che si provano. I saperi medici hanno un ruolo centrale in tale patologizzazione, e ai tribunali spetta regolamentare l'esperienza trans* in base a misurazioni arbitrarie dei livelli di "mascolinità" o "femminilità". È dunque necessario rispettare una serie di requisiti, che possono essere letti «in termini di "sanzione" per aver attraversato i confini del genere dato nonché "misura preventiva" volta a impedire futuri attraversamenti» (Palazzo 2021: 6). È possibile chiedere la rettifica in seguito a modificazioni dei «caratteri sessuali», ma quali siano le modificazioni necessarie non è stabilito dalla legge, e resta all'arbitrarietà dei singoli tribunali. Fino al 2015, ai fini del RGIG, era imposto il ricorso ad operazioni chirurgiche genitali, senza che queste fossero scelte liberamente, risultando in una sterilizzazione coatta contro i diritti all'identità di genere, alla libera scelta, alla salute e quelli riproduttivi. In seguito alle sentenze della Corte di Cassazione e della Corte Costituzionale, tali interventi non sono più obbligatori, ma resta necessario dar prova di possedere «gli aspetti psicologici, comportamentali e fisici» (Corte costituzionale 2015) del genere "opposto". Ciò sottintende che l'identità di genere sia verificabile in base alla performance del proprio ruolo di genere (Butler 1988). Un simile assunto esplicita a livello giuridico quel *pensée straight* (Wittig 1992) che in-forma tutte le istituzioni ed erige a norma delle configurazioni prestabilite di Uomo e Donna come idealtipi per cui si è chiamato a rendere conto (West e Zimmerman 2009). Così, i percorsi di transizione sociali e/o medicalizzati non sono visti come liberi atti di autoaffermazione, ma come «una serie di atti terapeutici il cui fine è "guarire" e "correggere"» le "anomale" esperienze trans*, e di atti legislativi rivolti a normarle e normalizzarle (Voli 2018: 99).

Le transgenerità mostrano le contraddizioni e l'artificialità del sistema binario che regola l'ordine sociale, pertanto sono accettate solo se riconducibili a canoni cisgenere ed eterosessuali, duali e lineari, negando la possibilità di tutti gli «spazi intermedi» (Palazzo 2021: 14). Le persone trans* che scelgono di non intraprendere una terapia ormonale, e tutte le persone che vivono il proprio genere in modo non conforme agli standard, non hanno la possibilità di vedere riconosciuta la propria esistenza a livello giuridico. Ciò comporta ripercussioni sul benessere individuale, ostacoli d'accesso a servizi o all'esercizio dei propri diritti, e una maggiore vulnerabilità alle discriminazioni. Secondo l'indagine esplorativa condotta da ISTAT e UNAR nel 2023 riguardo le discriminazioni lavorative verso le persone trans e non binarie, una persona su due ha vissuto almeno un evento di discriminazione nella ricerca del lavoro per la propria identità di genere (ISTAT-UNAR 2024). Anche il diritto all'abitare può essere compromesso, a causa di pregiudizi e ostilità che si incontrano nella ricerca di una casa (*Ibidem*). Le difficoltà e le porte sbarrate aumentano quando si intrecciano altri assi di marginalizzazione, come nel caso di persone razzializzate che non possiedono la cittadinanza italiana.

La divisione per sesso anagrafico dei registri elettorali espone molte persone trans e *non-binary* ad *outing*, violazione della privacy e disagio nel doversi collocare in una fila che non rappresenta la propria identità, in contesti spesso non preparati ad accogliere un coming-out, causando situazioni in cui si rinuncia ad esercitare il proprio diritto al voto⁴.

Altre difficoltà vengono riscontrate nell'accesso ai servizi sanitari: tra il 2020 e il 2022, l'Istituto Superiore di Sanità ha rilevato che il 47% di persone transgenere si sono sentite discriminate per la propria identità e/o espressione di genere nell'accesso o nell'utilizzo di servizi sanitari (ISS 2022). La scarsa familiarità percepita nei professionisti sanitari rispetto alle questioni LGBTQ+ e alle proprie esigenze sanitarie, può avere come conseguenza una resistenza nell'effettuare screening di prevenzione e nel cercare assistenza medica. Le persone non binarie si confrontano con forme peculiari di stigma e, qualora vogliano intraprenderla, incontrano maggiori barriere di accesso alla terapia ormonale, con una minore probabilità di ricevere un trattamento affermativo (Scandurra *et al.* 2019: 48). Ciò avviene a causa di stereotipi come quello del «corpo sbagliato» (Engdahl 2014) o del non essere «abbastanza trans» (Garrison 2018). Tale *gatekeeping* può aggravarsi quando la persona trans* è anche una persona neurodivergente e/o con disabilità.

³ Si intendono dunque sia identità binarie che non binarie, comprendendo tutte le non conformità di genere al di là delle singole definizioni

⁴ Per approfondire: <https://iosonoiovoto.gruppotrans.it>

Non per ultimo, il clima politico attuale minaccia l'autodeterminazione di adulti e minori di genere non conforme. Si pensi all'ispezione ministeriale nei confronti dell'ospedale Careggi di Firenze⁵, tra le pochissime strutture in Italia a offrire assistenza a minori *gender-diverse*, o alla commissione istituita dall'esecutivo per riscrivere le linee guida dei percorsi di affermazione di genere, escludendo associazioni e studiosæ trans* e affidando l'incarico a personalità avverse alle istanze LGBTQ+⁶. Infine, decisioni come il declassamento di farmaci utilizzati nella terapia ormonale sostitutiva dalla fascia di rimborsabilità a quella di non rimborsabilità aumentano le barriere economiche all'affermazione di genere⁷.

2. L'ATTIVISMO COME RISPOSTA

In contesti di marginalizzazione e discriminazione, l'attivismo e la partecipazione a mobilitazioni possono diventare una risposta a ciò che si avverte come ingiustizia. Contro un ordine sociale e istituzionale basato sulla disuguaglianza, i movimenti sociali prendono vita difendendo la solidarietà interpersonale e reclamando spazi di autonomia (Offe 1985). Ogni processo di movimento sociale si caratterizza infatti per un elemento conflittuale nei confronti di altri attori che possiedono o reclamano il controllo di interessi, risorse e decisioni (della Porta e Diani 2006). Tale relazione oppositiva non si esaurisce in un aspetto negativo, ma genera degli obiettivi comuni, articolati in termini politici e sociali, un senso d'appartenenza e un'identità collettiva che si costruiscono nella partecipazione, e reti entro le quali scambiare risorse, definire iniziative e strategie (*Ibidem*: 21). Il genere, come altri assi di oppressione o linee su cui si muovono i conflitti sociali, può fungere da facilitatore dell'azione, sia individuale che collettiva, in modi che possono riprodurre o contestare le strutture e le normatività di genere (Lavizzari 2020). Per questo, in una quotidianità caratterizzata da barriere e organizzata sulla cisonormatività sistemica, le persone e le comunità trans* mettono in atto diverse strategie (de Certeau 1980) per r-esistere.

L'attivismo trans* si potrebbe definire come quello sforzo collettivo che «s'impegna per far sì che l'attraversamento dei confini di genere sia, per tutte le persone che lo necessitano, più facile, più sicuro, più accettato» (Stryker 2022: 7). Esso si lega fortemente al movimento queer, caratterizzato dalla decostruzione e storicizzazio-

ne delle categorie sociali e identitarie, e dall'obiettivo di contestare la stigmatizzazione di determinate soggettività e di fornire valori, forme di organizzazione e possibilità di vita alternativi a quelli dominanti (Bernstein 1997: 537-538). La ricerca non si è ancora dedicata a ricostruire in modo adeguato la storia del movimento trans* in Italia, custodita in parte dagli archivi delle associazioni e dalle memorie individuali. Nelle poche restituzioni, inoltre, non trovano spazio le voci degli uomini trans (Ferro 2019) e delle soggettività non riconducibili a standard binari, ed è difficile rintracciare le storie di resistenza locate nelle regioni meridionali. In questa sede non si intende compiere una ricostruzione del movimento trans* italiano, ma solo tracciarne una breve genealogia per introdurre alcune modalità e tematiche. Esso nasce all'interno del movimento di liberazione gay – inizialmente raccogliitore di una serie di istanze e soggettività – e si intreccia fin da subito con gli ambienti punk, anarchici e di contestazione sociale. Negli anni Settanta in Italia sono attive realtà di liberazione sessuale e di genere, come ad esempio il F.U.O.R.I. (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano), in cui sono in prima linea anche persone di genere non conforme. Sulla spinta degli avvenimenti del Settantesimo, le realtà LGBT e queer (autodefinitesi “froce”) iniziano a convergere a livello nazionale, in occasioni come ad esempio il Convegno nazionale contro la repressione tenutosi a Bologna nel settembre 1977 (Marcasciano 2024: XIX), dando vita alle prime conferenze nazionali del «movimento gay rivoluzionario» a Bologna nel 1978 e a Roma l'anno successivo (Ivi: 171). La nascita del movimento trans* viene simbolicamente fatta risalire al 1979, con la protesta di un gruppo di donne trans che, in una piscina pubblica di Milano, mettono i loro corpi al centro reclamando il diritto al riconoscimento delle loro identità. Da quel momento, in varie città italiane si avvia un fermento che porta alla nascita del MIT (all'epoca *Movimento Italiano Transessuale*, oggi *Movimento Identità Trans*) in varie città del centro e nord Italia, con la sede di Bologna come unico MIT attivo ancora oggi. In seguito, il movimento trans* si differenzia molto da quello gay per riflessioni, modalità e necessità, e dagli anni Novanta e Duemila iniziano a nascere più realtà queer e trans-centrate in varie città d'Italia, parallelamente a reti online sottoforma di mailing list, blog, siti.

Da allora, come gli altri movimenti sociali, quello trans* è composto da reti che al loro interno vedono attori eterogenei: singoli individui, attori organizzati più formali come le associazioni o più informali come i collettivi, gruppi interni a realtà più grandi come i centri sociali, ma anche progetti artistici e sportivi. Ogni attore partecipa attraverso modalità differenti, le quali

⁵ <https://www.ilpost.it/2024/03/02/procura-firenze-indagine-careggi-disforia/>

⁶ <https://www.editorialedomani.it/politica/italia/commissione-affermazione-genere-senza-associazioni-trans-ozbgvop3>

⁷ <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2024/02/24/24A00956/sg>

dipendono dalle risorse (economiche, culturali, di tempo) a disposizione, dalle esperienze pregresse, e dalle cornici culturali e valoriali di riferimento che portano a ritenere determinate forme d'azione più legittime (Bosi e Zamponi 2019: 30). In senso generale, il movimento trans* si batte per il riconoscimento della piena esistenza e dei diritti di chi non si ritrova nel genere assegnato alla nascita, e per una redistribuzione del potere di assegnazione (medica, istituzionale, di ruoli culturali) che riconosca a ognunə la possibilità di autodeterminarsi. Ciò si riflette in un processo continuo in contrasto con la burocrazia organizzata dall'etero-cis-normatività istituzionalizzata. La dimensione materiale di redistribuzione delle risorse e delle possibilità è centrale, ad esempio nelle battaglie per il lavoro o per una sanità pubblica, informata e priva di barriere d'accesso. Sono in gioco anche «conflitti non materiali» (che pure hanno ricadute molto materiali) come quello della produzione del sapere (della Porta e Diani 2006: 53), ad esempio nel contestare le definizioni patologizzanti o le narrazioni mostrificanti della transgenerità (Arfini 2007). Questo e molto altro viene portato avanti attraverso diverse azioni che, seguendo le definizioni di Bosi e Zamponi, possiamo definire “dimostrative” e “sociali dirette”. Le azioni dimostrative, come ad esempio le manifestazioni e le proteste, si pongono con termini rivendicativi e conflittuali nei confronti del sistema politico, mentre le azioni sociali dirette consistono in diverse forme di risposta immediata a un bisogno specifico e materiale, nel tentativo di attuare un cambiamento diretto (Bosi e Zamponi 2019: 23). Assieme ai momenti di contestazione, le azioni sociali dirette costituiscono un ampio mosaico d'azione per tutte le realtà d'attivismo trans* e queer. Sono centrali le attività culturali alternative, come i momenti di socializzazione, di autofinanziamento, gli eventi di discussione e le formazioni; ma all'interno di una comunità per cui l'accesso alle risorse materiali e del sapere non è scontato, sono altrettanto fondanti pratiche di mutuo aiuto e di messa in comune di mezzi e conoscenze (Ivi: 87). A fronte di una crescente privatizzazione dei servizi e delle attività di consulenza, e di una mancata preparazione alle necessità delle persone trans*, la creazione di sportelli legali e del lavoro, l'accompagnamento a servizi sanitari e il supporto *peer-to-peer* rappresentano forme di solidarietà attraverso le quali reclamare spazi di autonomia.

La creazione di «spazi liberi» (Evans e Boyte 1986), nella comunità queer definiti «spazi safer», è necessaria tanto per rispondere al bisogno di luoghi sicuri, quanto per sviluppare azioni collettive, relazioni, legami e competenze (Bonu Rosenkranz 2024: 122-123). In questi contesti, la cura, intesa «come abilità individuale e col-

lettiva di porre le condizioni politiche, sociali, materiali ed emotive» affinché la vita possa prosperare (The Care Collective 2021: 21), è messa al centro come principio organizzatore dell'azione, divenendo una «cura-in-pratica» (Ivi: 32).

Portando avanti rivendicazioni, fornendo servizi e spazi di cura e ascolto, non solo si formulano risposte a oppressioni e carenze istituzionali, ma si dà vita a un soggetto collettivo, forme di solidarietà e culture controegemoniche che possono fungere da motori di cambiamento (della Porta e Diani 2006: 12).

3. METODOLOGIA

Questo articolo presenta alcune delle principali istanze dell'attivismo e delle mobilitazioni queer e LGBTI+ in Italia, focalizzandosi soprattutto su alcune tematiche, modalità e strategie che le persone trans* giovani portano avanti quotidianamente. Le riflessioni qui riportate, basate su metodologie qualitative, sono presentate in tre sezioni. Nella prima (par. 4), si prenderanno in considerazione interviste semi-strutturate, condotte tra Febbraio e Aprile 2022, rivolte a persone non binarie che sono attive – in gruppi o individualmente, online e offline – su tematiche LGBTQIA+ e/o questioni più ampie riguardo la giustizia sociale. Le partecipanti sono state selezionate in base a expert interviews e in seguito campionamento a valanga, anche attraverso delle *call for participants* diffuse su canali social. Hanno preso parte dieci persone di età compresa fra i 19 e i 34 anni provenienti da varie aree d'Italia, in maggioranza regioni del centro o del nord, di cui otto persone bianche e quattro persone neurodivergenti, che si riconoscono nell'ombrello *non-binary* con identità e incorporazioni variegata.

In seguito (par. 5), si parlerà di due progetti come esempi delle emergenti forme di mobilitazione e mutuo-supporto che creano reti, in maniera tra(n)sversale fra l'online e la presenza fisica, sul territorio nazionale: Hubsoletto e Queer Mushroom Forest. La riflessione qui riportata è basata sull'analisi desk dei loro siti web e pagine social, che riportano diverse iniziative e modalità di azione, ma è anche frutto della conoscenza di alcune delle persone che compongono queste realtà, data dalla condivisione di alcune parti di un comune percorso di lotta.

In ultimo (par. 6), si presenterà il caso di alcune realtà d'attivismo dell'Emilia-Romagna tramite *expert interviews* semi-strutturate realizzate con attiviste appartenenti ad associazioni LGBTQ+, condotte negli ultimi due mesi del 2024. Le interviste sono state realizzate contattando le associazioni attraverso e-mail o messaggi Whatsapp, e rientrano all'interno di un progetto di ricer-

ca più ampio ancora in corso. In questa sede vengono prese in considerazione sette partecipanti, tutte persone bianche di cui una cisgenere, appartenenti tra loro a cinque diverse associazioni LGBTQ+ o trans* collocate in quattro comuni della regione, con ruoli e competenze differenti. Attraverso di esse, si tratterà una panoramica delle azioni che le associazioni intraprendono per rispondere alle discriminazioni affrontate dalla comunità trans* in ambito sociale e lavorativo, prestando attenzione a dinamiche legate al territorio o a fattori generazionali.

Sono prese in esame tre ricerche differenti poiché offrono tre punti di vista utili a comporre un'analisi della partecipazione giovanile nell'attivismo trans* e nel movimento queer contemporaneo in Italia. La prima (par. 4) offre una panoramica, sicuramente non esaustiva, sulle tematiche e le rivendicazioni generalmente portate avanti. Dopo aver delineato i temi affrontati, la seconda ricerca (par. 5) apre uno spaccato su alcune modalità emergenti di agire attorno a queste istanze, fornendo alcuni esempi di come la dimensione online – da sempre fonte di scambio per la comunità queer – venga oggi vissuta e utilizzata, in addizione e commistione ad altre forme. Infine, riflessioni e prassi vengono calate nel caso studio delle associazioni trans e LGBTQ+ dell'Emilia-Romagna (par. 6), presa in considerazione per la storica presenza di mobilitazioni nel suo territorio e per il ruolo che essa ha avuto nelle prime tappe dell'attivismo trans* italiano (Marcasciano 2024), ritenendo interessante indagare lo stato contemporaneo di quel contesto di associazionismo.

L'analisi riportata si innesta anche sull'esperienza di chi scrive, essendo in prima persona parte di un'associazione e di una collettiva trans-centrate nel territorio emiliano. Il mio preciso posizionamento sociale, politico e territoriale porta con sé al contempo possibilità e limiti epistemici, impattando la mia prospettiva. La posizione di *insider* (Roseneil 1993) comporta inevitabilmente, nelle varie fasi della ricerca, l'emersione di bias o rischi, come ad esempio quello di parlare al posto di altrə sovrapponendo la propria prospettiva, o di tralasciare specifici elementi di un'esperienza condivisa dandoli per scontati (Imray Papineau 2023: 577). A causa dei rischi che presenta, a livello analitico, il coinvolgimento personale nei contesti d'attivismo analizzati, è importante che dalla cosiddetta *militant research* si sviluppi una teoria aperta e relazionale, che incorpori le diverse forme in cui le persone lottano «contro-e-oltre forme di oppressione» (Halvorsen 2015: 471). Allo stesso tempo, il mio impegno preesistente all'interno di reti di attivismo trans* ha significato una facilitazione nell'accesso al campo, favorendo la comunicazione con le partecipanti e la costruzione di rapporti di fiducia. La familiarità con il contesto

implica anche una conoscenza empirica più approfondita rispetto a quella di una persona *outsider*, dunque una dimestichezza con il linguaggio e i significati simbolici tipici (Roseneil 1993: 189), permettendo di inquadrare le esperienze e i temi più complessi in contesti più ampi.

Una linea netta tra la posizione di insider-pari e outsider-ricercatore non si dà una volta per tutte, giacché questa distinzione si muove su confini che, per motivi diversi, alle volte sono molto chiari e altre più sfumati, anche in base alla percezione delle partecipanti. Se condividere esperienze sociali ed emotive porta la ricercatore a prendere una posizione (Imray Papineau 2023: 583; Lubit e Gidley 2020), allora è bene dichiarare che questo contributo ha l'obiettivo di far spazio alle mobilitazioni delle persone trans*, riconoscendole come siti strategici «per la produzione di un discorso controegemonico» (hooks 2018: 128), luoghi di creatività e potere in cui ritrovarsi e agire con solidarietà (Ivi: 133).

4. L'ATTIVISMO QUEER CONTEMPORANEO

Le esperienze personali affrontate dalle soggettività non eterosessuali e cisgenere possono portare alla decisione di attivarsi in forme variegata di coinvolgimento politico e sociale. La partecipazione delle persone trans* si estende al di là delle istanze riguardanti il genere, perché la vita di ciascuna si compone di attraversamenti (Mohanty 2003) fra il proprio posizionamento di genere e la propria provenienza, la posizione lavorativa, l'orientamento relazionale o il proprio neuro-funzionamento. In questa sezione si parlerà di «attivismo queer», anziché «attivismo trans*», per restituire l'ampio spettro delle tematiche emerse dai vissuti raccontati, che rientrano in una lunga storia italiana di politiche non-identitarie impegnate in questioni sociali ed economiche (Di Felicianantonio 2014). Queer è infatti riconosciuto come il nome di una linea politica che connette diverse rivendicazioni. È «una maniera di pensare» ma anche di agire, un «modus operandi» (Mar): un insieme di strumenti tramite cui decostruire gli assunti cis-etero-normativi, eurocentrici e capitalisti che strutturano le istituzioni e la quotidianità. Essere queer, per moltə, significa tanto un'identità individuale quanto un'appartenenza collettiva, non solo una descrizione di sé ma una «posizione politica» (Mar). «Queer è una comunità che si ribella a una discriminazione e che è anche molto intersezionale, di sostegno reciproco» (Jordan). Il coinvolgimento delle persone partecipanti riguarda tematiche variegata al di là dell'identità di genere, ad esempio l'asessualità e l'aromanticismo, le non monogamie, il carcere, la giustizia ambientale e i diritti umani.

Tale pluralità si riflette anche in una varietà di modalità: alcune persone sono attive all'interno di associazioni che erogano servizi e realizzano progetti, altre lo sono in collettivi o reti meno strutturate, con la possibilità di fluire tra i ruoli in modo più orizzontale. Alcune persone si occupano individualmente di divulgazione, condividendo la propria storia e le proprie conoscenze fornendo supporto *peer-to-peer*. C'è chi si attiva in modo sia individuale che collettivo, e chi fa parte di più gruppi; ciò che accomuna moltà è l'esperienza di collaborazione con altrə attivista, associazioni o collettivi. L'alleanza è finalizzata al raggiungimento di obiettivi comuni, alla scoperta e all'approfondimento di tematiche o allo scambio di pratiche. «Mi sono avvicinata ad altre persone che facevano parte di altre comunità, [...] ho iniziato a notare come tutti gli argomenti si intersecavano tra di loro e come avevamo delle cose in comune e delle cose che ci distinguevano [...] Per me è un continuo dare e ricevere» (Fox).

Anche i mezzi si diversificano tra divulgazione sulle piattaforme social, formazioni condotte di persona a studentə, insegnanti o professionistə sanitarə, riunioni di rete online per riunire partecipanti da tutta Italia, eventi itineranti a livello nazionale, o creazione di spazi in città in cui non è ancora presente un riferimento d'attivismo queer. Le modalità online possono rispondere a esigenze specifiche personali o condizioni più ampie, come avvenuto durante il fenomeno della pandemia COVID. Gli spazi online costituiscono spesso il primo luogo dove in prima persona si incontra virtualmente la propria comunità e dove si forma un'autocoscienza. Per questo, sono spesso luoghi in cui si generano discorsi che escono poi dallo schermo, metaforicamente con il permeare di argomenti nel dibattito politico, e concretamente con la creazione di gruppi e reti che organizzano eventi fisici e manifestazioni di piazza, permettendo la presenza in più di un territorio, in base alla collocazione di chi ne fa parte.

L'intersezionalità (Crenshaw 1989) emerge come un elemento centrale e ricorrente per le pratiche queer, distanti da una visione assimilazionista che riconosce nell'acquisizione di alcuni diritti civili il raggiungimento di un mondo inclusivo (Di Felicianonio 2014). Tale appiattimento della politicizzazione dei movimenti LGBTQ+ sui diritti civili invisibilizza le parti più marginalizzate, e dunque più vulnerabili a discriminazioni ed esclusione sociale, della comunità (come le persone trans*, migranti, povere, intersex o asessuali). «Comunità queer è una comunità di lotta e non tutte le persone Lgbt sono in lotta alla fine» (Jordan). Alcuni esempi emersi sono la volontà manifestata da alcune associazioni LGBT di escludere l'asessualità dalla tutela che avrebbe voluto offrire il Ddl Zan, e più in generale la mancanza di partecipazione alle mobilitazioni politiche

da parte delle persone più privilegiate, economicamente e in termini di diritti, della comunità. «La maggior parte dell'attivismo queer viene invisibilizzato. Per molti le manifestazioni Lgbt sono il pride, e [...] quelle manifestazioni che sono più di protesta, che sono più politiche vengono proprio ignorate» (Jordan). L'intersezionalità è una modalità che considera il complesso dei meccanismi sociali e istituzionali che creano sistemi di esclusione e producono, in negativo alle identità riconosciute, soggettività oppresse. «Il mio sentirmi queer è anche il mio sentirmi vicino alla comunità delle persone neurodivergenti, vicino alla comunità delle persone disabili, delle persone povere, vicino a tutta una serie di situazioni che secondo me stanno necessariamente dentro questo spezzone» (Luna). La trasversalità è qualcosa che ha a che fare con come ci si sente posizionatə a livello collettivo, e da questo presupposto si direziona il proprio attivismo. «La mia storia è già di per sé intersezionale, la mia vita e la vita di tutti è un'intersecazione di diversi fattori, di diverse storie, caratteristiche» (Moggia). La bussola con cui orientarsi è allora la pratica di mettere al centro «le voci più inascoltate» (Astrid) e le soggettività più marginalizzate anche all'interno degli spazi LGBT – individuate nelle persone asessuali, bisessuali, sex worker, migranti o non binarie.

Proviamo qui a riassumere le principali rivendicazioni dell'attivismo delle generazioni più giovani queer e trans* in quattro aree (non elencate in ordine di importanza). Una prima necessità avvertita è quella di una maggiore visibilità delle comunità marginalizzate, ad esempio attraverso l'utilizzo del linguaggio esteso (Manera 2021). La rappresentazione è un altro strumento tramite cui rendere visibili collocazioni fuori dalla lente cisgenere e superare le narrazioni stereotipiche delle persone trans* (Arfini 2007). Le persone non binarie non trovano quasi alcuna rappresentazione e quando succede si incontra uno "stereotipo non-binary": «una persona molto magra, afab, capelli corti, un po' androgina, [...] possibilmente vestita in modo un po' particolare» (Jordan). La rappresentazione viene individuata come centrale sia per permettere alle persone di riconoscersi e auto-validarsi, che per una maggiore consapevolezza sociale riguardo alle esistenze queer.

A livello mediatico [...] Elliot Page non è l'unico modello a cui dovremmo ambire, ci sono tante altre persone transmasche che non hanno corpi conformi come il suo, non sono bianche, sono bipoc⁸, sono grasse, sono persone neurodivergenti, perciò esiste una pluralità di corporeità e funzionamenti neurologici che sono diverse e che meritano altrettanta rappresentazione (Tristan).

⁸ Black, Indigenous, People of Color

Un altro grande terreno di mobilitazione è quello del riconoscimento sociale in chiave di autodeterminazione. In questa direzione si muovono le richieste di una «legge dal basso» (Jordan) a contrasto dell'omo-bi-trans-a-fobia e di una legge che sostituisca la Legge 164, a favore di un modello in cui la rettifica anagrafica e l'accesso a interventi chirurgici possano avvenire senza la sentenza di un tribunale, e senza l'obbligatorietà del percorso psicologico. Nel 1982, una legge che permettesse il riconoscimento giuridico di chi aveva già intrapreso una transizione medica, da autodidatta o all'estero, fu una svolta importante e una conquista delle attiviste dell'epoca (Marcasciano 2020). Oggi però, a fronte di altre esperienze che stanno prendendo spazio, appare necessario superare una legge patologizzante e binaria (Lorenzetti 2013), «non legare l'accesso agli ormoni al requisito del nullaosta, [...] trasformare la procedura di cambio anagrafico da giudiziaria ad amministrativa» (Tristan). Per migliorare nella quotidianità situazioni di disagio psicologico e sociale, viene fatta advocacy anche per istituire la carriera alias nelle istituzioni educative e sui posti di lavoro, per inserire una terza opzione al marcatore di genere M/F sui documenti d'identità per le persone intersex e non binarie, o per rimuoverlo del tutto come tutela di un dato sensibile. La richiesta di depatologizzazione riguarda anche le esperienze di neurodivergenza, tagliate fuori e marginalizzate da un sistema economico, culturale ed educativo produttivista nello stesso binario modo in cui è esclusa la non conformità di genere.

Una terza area di mobilitazione riguarda la formazione erogata dalle associazioni e dai collettivi al personale sanitario, a dipendenti degli sportelli pubblici, o a insegnanti. Le cause dei lunghi tempi d'attesa per accedere alla transizione tramite il SSN sono da rintracciare anche nelle poche strutture in cui è possibile farlo, e al basso numero di professioniste/i formate sui temi della salute queer. Similmente, l'introduzione di un'educazione sessuo-affettiva che riconosca la competenza delle attiviste queer formate (Mar), renderebbe scuole e università luoghi più accessibili, fornendo al personale e alle studentesse strumenti per abbattere le barriere di controllo dell'identità e della corporeità (Bourelly 2022). Nella stessa direzione va l'impegno volto a rendere accessibili le tematiche LGBTQ+ al di fuori della propria «bolla».

Abbiamo fatto dei format per riuscire a coinvolgere persone che non facevano parte del nostro stesso ambiente in eventi di discussione [...]. Una delle cose che forse ho più a cuore è il fatto di non rinunciare al fatto di essere intersezionali, e quindi radicali [...], ma contemporaneamente essere accessibili [...]. Non dobbiamo spiegarci agli altri, [...] però [...] è

giusto che qualunque persona abbia gli strumenti per avvicinarsi (Luna).

Un quarto focus è posto sulle questioni di classe che le persone queer affrontano a causa di scarse condizioni di lavoro o, come nel caso delle sex workers, di mancanza di tutele e criminalizzazione. A ciò si sommano difficoltà economiche, derivate dai costi della transizione medica e del supporto psicologico cercato in risposta al *minority stress* subito (Scandurra *et al.* 2019), e difficoltà riguardo alla questione abitativa, dovute alle discriminazioni incontrate nella ricerca di una casa.

L'attivismo assume diversi valori e significati per chi lo porta avanti. Aiutare persone della propria comunità, fare *advocacy* e divulgazione, agire per generare cambiamenti sociali, anche se su piccola scala, sono momenti in cui «aiutare gli altri ha una forte valenza d'aiuto per sé stessi» (Focardi *et al.* 2006: 23). Si attivano dunque forme di auto-mutuo aiuto, in cui è centrale tanto l'autodeterminazione quanto la mutualità, che rafforzano il senso di comunità basato sul perseguimento di fini comuni (Giarelli 2014). Il senso di impoteramento (Nadotti 2020) è allora sia un obiettivo dell'attivismo, per generare spazi «di creazione e non di sottomissione» (Borghi 2020), sia un sentimento provato dalle attiviste stesse, che rafforza il proprio sé e il senso di appartenenza a un'identità collettiva tramite l'azione (della Porta e Diani 2006: 91).

Ho parlato in piazza per il Ddl Zan [...] ed è stata la prima volta che siamo riusciti a parlare in una piazza importante, [...] a livello nazionale, di aromanticismo e asessualità. [...] Mi ha dato una carica infinita e [...] la fiducia di poter dire: siamo una comunità e siamo qui tutti insieme a lottare per una cosa sola (Fox).

«Per chi è nella condizione di privilegio di farlo» (Tristan), esporsi e attivarsi in base alle proprie capacità e possibilità deriva dal «bisogno di fare qualcosa», una necessità in cui il confine tra privato e pubblico sfuma in un «senso di liberazione individuale e collettiva» (Moglia). In un clima di strumentalizzazione dei corpi trans* e intersex, e in risposta all'esclusione sociale e istituzionale delle persone giovani e dei loro bisogni (Pitti 2022), ci si riappropria della valenza politica attraverso varie forme di impegno, rendendole il mezzo tramite cui provare a generare cambiamenti. L'attivismo funge dunque come meccanismo di *coping* individuale e collettivo, con la messa in campo di tattiche (de Certeau 1980) utili a resistere a barriere quotidiane ed esistere in un mondo ordinato in modo da non comprendere tutta. «Se vuoi vivere [...] devi fare politica, perché il tuo essere quello

che sei ti rende una questione politica. Per forza fai attivismo, perché vuoi vivere!» (Miri).

5. FORME EMERGENTI DI CURA

Le varie forme emergenti di partecipazione giovanile sono spesso dirette a colmare vuoti istituzionali o porre rimedio a disuguaglianze strutturali, «dando vita e prendendo parte a progetti che non richiedono interventi “esterni”»⁹ (Pitti 2022: 23). Molte realtà di attivismo trans* oggi rispondono alla ristrettezza delle prassi giuridiche e al *gatekeeping* delle procedure mediche con strategie che “circumnavigano” le istituzioni (*Ibidem*). Nascono ad esempio canali online in cui si richiede supporto da parte della propria comunità in situazioni di emergenza abitativa, casse di solidarietà economica¹⁰, piattaforme in cui scambiare conoscenze acquisite nel proprio percorso o sportelli *peer-to-peer* d'orientamento. Lo svolgimento di queste attività in presenza si alterna alla modalità online, fondamentale in particolar modo per le generazioni più giovani e per chi si trova in territori con scarsa presenza di spazi fisici a cui rivolgersi. Proprio per rispondere all'esigenza di conoscere i servizi sul territorio nascono i progetti di mappature indipendenti. Diversamente da portali istituzionali come Infotrans, realizzato dalla collaborazione del SSN con l'UNAR, che segnalano i servizi dedicati alle persone trans* più vicini, collettivi come Zona Transitò Libero creano mappature della *qualità* di tali servizi. Ciò significa raccogliere le esperienze di chi ne ha usufruito, «per tracciare un quadro dal basso di come i bisogni della comunità vengono soddisfatti»¹¹. Le mappature di questo tipo esprimono una forma di cura collettiva in cui chiunque mette in comune la propria storia raccomandando, sconsigliando, e preparando altrè pari in un sistema sanitario poco formato ad accogliere adeguatamente l'utenza TGNC.

Un importante lavoro di «mappatura intersezionale» è portato avanti dal progetto Queer Mushroom Forest. Grazie a passaparola e segnalazioni, tiene traccia di strutture e professionistè sanitariè, associazioni, servizi scolastici, sportivi e gruppi genitoriali indicando la loro preparazione sui temi trans*, intersex, di migrazione, del sex work. Presentando un'idea di affermazione a tutto tondo, si delinea una definizione ampia di salute – per le persone trans* spesso relegata alla terapia ormonale o a percorsi psicologici obbligatori – in cui sono compresi diversi bisogni al di là di quelli farmacologici,

come quello di confronto ed espressione. Oltre a ciò, una persona gestisce uno sportello online informativo, e sul sito¹² sono presenti pagine con informazioni dettagliate riguardo varie aree di autodeterminazione in ambito sociale, relazionale e medico, ad esempio la salute riproduttiva e l'IVG, le variazioni delle caratteristiche del sesso, l'accesso al voto o i diritti relazionali. Da qui nascono le zine, autoproduzioni cartacee, sul benessere intimo per persone *gender expansive* e sulla procedura per il cambio del nome in prefettura¹³, che viaggiano insieme al progetto in vari eventi in presenza in collaborazione con altre realtà e associazioni. Una tale messa in comune di tempo, saperi ed energie, rappresenta un «archivio vivente» di solidarietà, una «corrente sotterranea di resistenza» (Vergès 2021: 113). Informare riguardo ai propri diritti o condividere pratiche utili nella sfera personale, lavorativa, burocratica, significa mettere in comune delle risorse immateriali e collettivizzare le proprie abilità e conoscenze (The Care Collective 2021: 62), per far fronte ai meccanismi escludenti del sistema economico, sanitario e giuridico.

In una direzione simile va il lavoro di Hubsoleto, collettivo formato da professionistè trans che dal 2023 opera come centro per l'autodeterminazione di genere. Partendo da posizioni personali, professionali e politiche queer, Hubsoleto offre servizi per la persona online e in alcune città d'Italia gratuiti o con fasce di prezzo diversificate in base alla disponibilità economica. Tra i servizi, anche la stesura della relazione psicologica per accedere alla terapia ormonale o richiedere la carriera alias, accompagnamento all'IVG, percorsi di sostegno psicologico, supporto nella stesura del curriculum vitae e diverse consulenze mediche. Il sapere professionale è messo a disposizione nel tentativo di non creare le gerarchie che spesso caratterizzano le relazioni di cura del sistema sanitario. Hubsoleto utilizza un approccio depatologizzante verso le persone trans*, intersex, neurodivergenti e disabili, considera le barriere che la classe economica può rappresentare nell'affermazione di genere, e nei suoi percorsi centra l'autodeterminazione di ogni persona, facendo posto all'euforia di genere, di contro a un modello medico che considera le esperienze TGNC per la loro disforia (Johnson 2015). In questo modo, la cura ha forma di partecipazione politica poiché implicata in rivendicazioni. Questo tipo di attivismo ha come obiettivo quello di contribuire a promuovere un modello

⁹ Traduzione dell'Autore

¹⁰ Come ad esempio la Cassa Trans* Padova

¹¹ Dalla pagina di presentazione del progetto: <https://zonatransitolibero.altervista.org/info/>

¹² <https://queermushroomforest.weebly.com/>

¹³ Tale procedura, possibile solo per chi possiede la cittadinanza italiana, permette di cambiare il proprio nome senza mutare il marcatore di genere (M/F) presente sui documenti. Viene utilizzata come tattica alternativa alla rettifica anagrafica in tribunale, per chi non vuole o per chi, a causa dei requisiti richiesti, non può ricorrere a tale iter.

di salute in generale e di “presa in carico” «alternativo a quello psico-biomedico individualizzante» (Fiorilli e Leite 2021: 141) occidentale e capitalista. Tale configurazione, con i suoi inevitabili limiti, non è statica ma si inserisce in un movimento più ampio, non costituendosi solamente come sostituto dei servizi pubblici, ma come laboratorio politico per la loro trasformazione radicale (Ivi: 139). Da qui il nome, che rappresenta la lotta portata avanti per diventare un giorno un servizio obsoleto.

Le emergenti pratiche di partecipazione, come ad esempio le realtà Queer Mushroom Forest e Hubsoletto, rappresentano forme non binarie di attivismo, unendo modalità tradizionalmente considerate vicendevolmente escludenti. La dimensione online e quella offline si alternano e sorreggono strumentalmente a vicenda, l'erogazione di servizi convive con la rivendicazione politica, e la competenza e la professionalità sono esercitate all'interno di una logica di mutualismo e condivisione.

6. IL CASO STUDIO DELL'EMILIA-ROMAGNA

L'Emilia-Romagna si compone di un'ampia rete di mobilitazioni LGBTQ+, organizzate in collettive, associazioni e gruppi all'interno di università o centri sociali, con posizioni e modalità differenti tra loro. In questa sede si prenderà in considerazione la realtà dell'associazionismo, con la consapevolezza che esso rappresenti solo una parte del movimento queer che anima il territorio, popolato da molte iniziative di varia natura. Rispetto a realtà più informali, le associazioni sono caratterizzate da una più distinta divisione dei ruoli operativi e dall'erogazione di servizi parallela a forme di *advocacy*, ma compongono anch'esse un insieme eterogeneo per pratiche, tematiche e progettualità, con differenze dovute dalle posizioni di chi ne fa parte e dal territorio in cui operano. L'attivismo TGNC associativo può realizzarsi all'interno di un'associazione trans* e intersex, di un'associazione LGBTQ+ indipendente, o di un gruppo specifico all'interno di una sede locale della rete nazionale Arcigay, e le soggettività trans* che vi partecipano sono in maggioranza persone sotto i trent'anni che si identificano nell'ombrello *non-binary*.

Una prima modalità in cui le associazioni rispondono ai bisogni della comunità è attraverso la creazione di sportelli legali, psicologici e per il lavoro. Questi permettono ad esempio di fornire supporto nel percorso di affermazione, nel conoscere i propri diritti in situazioni discriminatorie, nella stesura del CV o nella ricerca di lavoro. Capita inoltre che le associazioni partecipino a sportelli erogati da altre realtà, associative o istituzionali, per intervenire in supporto di casi che riguardano perso-

ne trans*. Alcune associazioni, in seguito a finanziamenti vinti tramite bandi regionali o nazionali, assieme a una rete di altre realtà di attivismo o comunali, formano centri antidiscriminazioni (CAD) o case rifugio di accoglienza. Questo può significare che alcune persone che inizialmente si avvicinano agli sportelli delle associazioni o ai CAD come utenti, entrino in seguito nelle attività come volontarie «a dare ricchezza alla comunità» (Adele). Accanto alla presenza di figure professionali nell'erogazione dei servizi, la dimensione *peer-to-peer* è centrale in appositi sportelli d'ascolto (ad esempio quelli telefonici), in gruppi di auto-mutuo-aiuto, ma anche in momenti informali come gli eventi di socializzazione. Capita che si identifichi una persona, particolarmente in vista per il suo impegno in determinati progetti, come «figura elder» (Adele) di cui potersi fidare e a cui potersi rivolgere per confidarsi o chiedere aiuto. Allo stesso tempo, la modalità più praticata di mutualismo riguarda lo scambio di conoscenze e consigli tra pari, ad esempio riguardo quali luoghi o professionisti di vario tipo siano più *trans-friendly* e quali più ostili, ma si muovono anche nella direzione di un supporto concreto, come nell'aiuto fornito nella ricerca di lavoro tramite contatti personali. Grazie alla condivisione del proprio vissuto, è possibile individuare assieme delle strategie per affrontare la transnegatività che struttura gli spazi attraversati quotidianamente. Al pari di servizi più strutturati, la «forza dell'informalità» (Adele) è dunque in grado di produrre piccoli cambiamenti significativi.

Mi parlava di difficoltà al lavoro, soprattutto per quanto riguarda il vestiario, [...] Abbiamo trovato insieme un piccolo...accordo, e ha cominciato ad indossare i leggings, perché potevano essere scambiati [...] come pantaloni molto attillati, quindi comunque dare l'impressione che ci fosse una persona con genere fluido davanti, ma che non dichiarasse apertamente quindi un minimo di passing ancora ce l'avesse. [...] Ho pensato: non posso dire tu chi sei, ma [...] se io ti dico chi sono, forse tu inizi a capire tu chi sei (Nicolò).

Qualche volta è saltato fuori il suggerimento di [...] magari farsi scrivere una lettera in cui si assume, si prende una responsabilità di assumerti prima di mostrare i documenti, insomma qualche scappatoia per cercare di fare in modo che l'azienda non possa così facilmente inventarsi delle bazzec [...] per non ammettere che sono transfobiche (Alice).

Un altro elemento comune è la creazione di reti con altre associazioni e collettivi per realizzare progetti o far fronte comune nelle rivendicazioni. La rete, «come una sorta di ragnatela, deve prendere qualunque cosa, fa un po' come una sorta di micelio. [...] Tutto è interconnesso, [...] non ha senso lottare a comparti stagni» (Jules).

L'intersezionalità viene adottata «come metodo di lavoro», senza cui non è possibile rispondere adeguatamente a bisogni che sono «multi-sfaccettati» (Adele). Tale approccio è reso possibile proprio dalla partecipazione a progetti di altre associazioni, ad esempio con un focus sui diritti delle persone migranti o con disabilità, dove poter apprendere e portare anche la propria «cassetta degli attrezzi». Anche gli enti pubblici e le istituzioni locali, come le università, i servizi sociali, uffici a contatto con il pubblico o i comuni cittadini o di provincia, alle volte entrano in queste reti di scambio per richiedere o fornire supporto, ad esempio attraverso dei tavoli interistituzionali con le associazioni, ma altre è difficile dialogare con loro o coinvolgerle in progettualità. Le collaborazioni di questo tipo possono portare a confronti complessi, ma la sensazione descritta è quella di utilizzare le cornici istituzionali per coinvolgere realtà che possono apportare miglioramenti in una situazione di quotidianità transfobica. Attraverso questi atti di *advocacy* o «*pressing*» (Chris), come anche tramite l'organizzazione di manifestazioni di piazza o altre forme di protesta, non ci si limita ad essere una realtà che offre servizi, ma ci si pone come entità politiche che si mobilitano come «agenti del cambiamento» (Moggi).

Un tema che emerge trasversalmente tanto nelle realtà associative quanto nei contesti dei collettivi, riguarda la fatica che si incontra nella tensione fra il tempo messo a disposizione come volontaria e il proprio lavoro, in un contesto sociale ed economico capitalista che non lascia spazio alla cura comunitaria. La forza che ha il lavoro nel condizionare le scelte personali, e dunque il tema del privilegio di classe, è anche ciò che frena le persone che si rivolgono alle associazioni per chiedere aiuto dal denunciare situazioni di discriminazione.

Quando si tratta di sospetto licenziamento, o sospetta discriminazione, poi è difficile che si va avanti [...] Ci son capitati tanti casi di persone trans che stanno subendo vero e proprio mobbing sul luogo di lavoro, [...] "Vuoi fare un colloquio con la legale?" però mi dicono di no, perché ovviamente dicono "Io poi devo pagare l'affitto" (Adele).

Nei casi in cui, ad esempio, non si concretizza un'azione legale contro il datore di lavoro, può comunque accadere che il processo avviato con l'associazione abbia un impatto positivo sulla persona, in termini di senso d'accoglienza e autoconsapevolezza. La sensazione che molte persone trans* affrontano nell'accesso ai servizi è quello di svalorizzazione e mancanza di ascolto, per questo gli accompagnamenti offerti dalla stessa comunità trans* rappresentano situazioni di ascolto e empowerment nel diventare consapevoli dei propri diritti. L'aspettativa di rigetto (Rood *et al.* 2016) è radicata tanto

da «non pensare di essere soggetti difendibili» (Nicolò) a causa della percepita «legittimazione» e «invisibilizzazione» (*Ibidem*) degli atti discriminatori o violenti rivolti alla comunità TGNC. Il ruolo della comunità è quello di «non lasciare le persone da sole, fare pressione sulle istituzioni» e i servizi, e dare «un supporto [...] concreto, laddove c'è un passaparola di comunità con dei contatti, attivarli per sostenere le persone» (Chris). Per chi fa attivismo, è altrettanto importante ricordarsi di non poter sempre risolvere situazioni ascrivibili a una più ampia cornice di oppressioni sistemiche, ma poter essere «una pietra in un fiume dove questa persona mette il piede» (Moggi). Ciò significa essere presente anche nelle situazioni che non trovano soluzione, supportando la persona nell'affrontarle, condividere la rabbia per le ingiustizie, «fare lavoro di cura» (Jules).

Parallelamente alle pratiche di solidarietà, la mobilitazione politica è necessaria sia per rivendicare il proprio spazio che per diffondere una cultura de-patologizzante e de-infantilizzante, che abbatta pregiudizi e stereotipi generati dalla violenza epistemica (Spivak 1988) delle narrazioni. Ciò è vero soprattutto per le persone non binarie, che alle volte incontrano difficoltà anche nel confronto con le generazioni trans* adulte, nell'essere riconosciute come «abbastanza trans», nelle modalità di affrontare le tematiche rilevanti per la comunità, e nella gestione di «spazi sempre meno orizzontali» (Nicolò).

Non abbiamo un immaginario comune, [...] soprattutto noi persone non binarie che non siamo ancora nemmeno state riconosciute nella comunità trans, la comunità trans binaria è ancora molto sospettosa nei nostri confronti. Molto spesso quando io dico di essere una persona non binaria, per esempio, devo specificare che sono anche una persona trans, [...] non lo danno per scontato (Nicolò).

Alla sua nascita, l'attivismo trans* in Italia rispondeva a un clima di forte criminalizzazione delle persone transgenere. Non era riconosciuta la possibilità di esistere giuridicamente (e non solo), e si poteva essere identificate dalle forze dell'ordine come pericolose per la sicurezza e la moralità pubblica, essendo private dei documenti e del diritto di voto (De Leo 2021: 186), con casi di applicazione alle persone trans dell'articolo 85 TULPS riguardo il divieto di mascheramento fino all'inizio degli anni Duemila (Marcasciano 2002: 138). Da ciò è nato un attivismo di protesta che ha portato alla Legge 164/82, una vittoria per l'epoca, ma con un carattere «sanatorio» e patologizzante che fallisce nel riconoscere necessità e identità, esistenti da sempre, che oggi riescono a conquistare sempre più spazio, ma faticano ancora a vedersi riconosciute negli archivi storici della memoria transgenere. La differenza che le generazioni più giovani avver-

tono non riguarda di per sé l'età anagrafica, ma piuttosto «dipende molto da quando una persona ha iniziato il suo percorso di affermazione di genere» e da quando ha avuto accesso al mondo dell'attivismo (Alice). Per questo motivo, «ci deve essere un dialogo intergenerazionale anche a livello del nostro stesso attivismo», che ha «perso tanti pezzi della nostra storia» (Jules).

Uno stacco intergenerazionale è avvertito anche nei confronti di quelle parti più assimilazioniste dell'attivismo gaylesbico che faticano a riconoscere legittimità alle questioni che riguardano le soggettività bisessuali, asessuali e transgenere. Questa tendenza porta a considerare le rivendicazioni come scomparti separati, concentrandosi ad esempio unicamente sui diritti civili non considerando il diritto all'abitare o al lavoro. Le generazioni più giovani sentono invece «che i diritti civili e i diritti sociali vanno di pari passo, che la rete è tutto» (Jules). La «contaminazione» tra generazioni, identità e differenti livelli di privilegio sociale ed economico, può risanare questa frattura, come racconta una persona gay cisgenere adulta: «Pensavo: sì, abbiamo battaglie comuni, però fondamentalmente siamo due famiglie separate. Invece, proprio anche dai discorsi che mi ha fatto questo amico [trans] ho capito che in realtà [...] siamo proprio la stessa comunità» (Gabriele).

L'emersione di nuove necessità, voci e comunità segna anche la presenza di un attivismo fatto da associazioni e collettivi di provincia o di piccoli centri urbani, un tempo considerati meno rilevanti rispetto a città come Bologna.

Fino a tre anni fa noi, [ci] consideravano il far west. [...] adesso ultimamente si sta facendo anche valere Parma, Modena, Reggio, poi dialoghiamo tra di noi, [...] collaboriamo anche con alcune realtà di Bologna, [...] siamo dentro Italia Trans Agenda [...]. La tendenza ultimamente, e forse l'abbiamo un po' capita, è che bisogna convergere (Adele).

7. CONCLUSIONI

L'attivismo queer in Italia si compone di network, fisici e virtuali, centrali nella circolazione di azioni, idee e rivendicazioni (Di Felicianantonio 2014: 45), riflettendo la dimensione intersezionale che da sempre caratterizza le sue politiche e analisi anti-normative (McCann e Monaghan 2020). L'attivismo delle generazioni trans* più giovani si inserisce in questo quadro, attivando processi di cura non sempre semplici, in risposta alle aspettative e norme di genere che ordinano il mondo sociale e istituzionale. Diversi attori tra gruppi, associazioni, collettivi o singole persone, mettono in atto forme variegata

di azione sociale diretta (Bosi e Zamponi 2019), come la costruzione di centri antidiscriminazione, la creazione di sportelli *peer-to-peer*, eventi di socializzazione o la messa a disposizione delle proprie competenze. Attraverso queste azioni si costruiscono reti che offrono opportunità autonome o semi-autonome di supporto (della Porta e Diani 2006: 49). Muovendosi tra il sociale e il politico, le varie pratiche di azione costituiscono anche processi di soggettivazione individuale e collettiva (Bosi e Zamponi 2019: 25). Il riconoscimento reciproco, l'ascolto e le pratiche che quotidianamente fanno la differenza valorizzano «la dimensione emancipatrice individuale» (Ivi: 246), permettendo lo sviluppo di capacità critica e di solidarietà delle singole persone. In questo modo, si recupera l'agentività persa nello scontro con l'invisibilità e la discriminazione, mobilitandosi per la comunità di cui ci si sente parte. Tramite l'incontro e il confronto, si acquisisce una consapevolezza che permette di rintracciare le cause delle proprie difficoltà e delle proprie *disforie* nelle strutture sociali, economiche e istituzionali, e così le emozioni possono avere effetti trasformativi (Bonu Rosenkranz 2024: 121). L'attivismo può allora configurarsi come una forma di cura al contempo personale e comunitaria. In un sistema di sovradeterminazione delle persone queer, la condivisione di spazi fisici e online, di risorse fisiche e immateriali, è una messa in comune che favorisce l'autoaffermazione, contro l'esclusione e l'isolamento. In questo processo si delinea anche l'identità del movimento, che cambia nel corso del tempo, prestandosi a costanti ridefinizioni e alleanze. L'attivismo trans* ha la potenzialità di raccogliere diverse istanze che si intrecciano con quella di genere, in linea con l'approccio intersezionale e intergenerazionale sempre più intrapreso dal movimento femminista negli ultimi anni (Bonu Rosenkranz e della Porta 2025). La resistenza collettiva alla cisnormatività si accompagna, allora, alla costruzione di alternative che comprendono la classe, la razzializzazione e la disabilità come elementi paralleli da cui partire (Lorusso *et al.* 2023).

L'azione sociale diretta radica nel territorio i processi collettivi (Bosi e Zamponi 2019: 25), ma le reti attraversano il territorio nazionale, anche grazie alla dimensione online, nella quale le giovani generazioni sviluppano vere e proprie «culture digitali della cura» (Byron 2020). Superando una concezione binaria dell'offline contrapposto all'online, quest'ultimo rafforza le azioni di supporto, e implementa livelli di cura non sempre raggiunti tramite le tradizionali «gerarchie della cura» (*Ibidem*: 174). Il movimento queer ha sempre creato forme di affettività e relazione alternative, profondamente radicate nelle rivendicazioni politiche. Gli sportelli *peer-to-peer* online, le autoproduzioni che informano le persone sui propri dirit-

ti e i centri d'affermazione gestiti da persone trans* rappresentano forme di «cura promiscua» e «indiscriminata» che mettono in relazione persone estranee, con esperienze simili ma non necessariamente vicine (The Care Collective 2021: 51-55). Le pratiche di cura, da lavoro di riproduzione sociale in cui le disuguaglianze sono messe a valore per mantenere le strutture economiche (Bhattacharya e Vogel 2017), diventano pratiche di interdipendenza e relazione (Fragnito e Tola 2021: 8). Attività tradizionalmente escluse dalla politica generano solidarietà resistenti e trasformative, formulando nuove politiche che mettono al centro i bisogni. In un quadro di sempre maggiore individualismo, le azioni sociali dirette rappresentano un'opportunità di partecipazione tramite cui «politicizzare» la quotidianità (Bosi e Zamponi 2019: 24). Le battaglie del movimento trans* si concretizzano negli spazi del quotidiano, come il lavoro, le istituzioni sanitarie o il diritto alla casa, traducendo le rivendicazioni politiche in attività di «cura con» (Tronto 2013), in cui chi ha bisogno non è visto come incapace o inferiore, ma come voce da ascoltare per misurare l'adeguatezza della cura (*Ibidem*: 149-150). In opposizione alle narrazioni neoliberiste dell'indipendenza e della responsabilità individuale della propria felicità, la «disforia», le difficoltà nell'accedere ai servizi e altre vulnerabilità sono trattate come spie di un sistema svelato come esso stesso disforico, che produce differenze e gerarchie (Preciado 2022).

In conclusione, è importante sottolineare come i progetti e i servizi delle associazioni rappresentino ancora troppo spesso la principale fonte conoscitiva in Italia riguardo le discriminazioni affrontate dalle persone trans* e queer. La ricerca accademica fornisce ancora una visione limitata della comunità LGBTQ+, con un effetto negativo in termini di rappresentazione e considerazione verso chi non è contemplato dalle raccolte di informazioni e dati, come le persone non binarie o intersex (De Rosa e Inglese 2020). In un clima politico sempre più ostile anche al sapere queer prodotto negli ambienti accademici¹⁴, anche la ricerca può rendersi parte attiva, raccogliendo dall'attivismo ciò che esige approfondimento e attenzione, per «sfondare lo spartiacque tra «discorso» ed esperienza, saperi specialistici e intelligenza emotiva, lavoro intellettuale e urgenza politica» (Nadotti 2020: 26).

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¹⁴ https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2025/01/08/news/protesta_docenti_ispezioni_anti_gender_ministra_bernini-423926303/

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Interview with Judith Bessant

EDITED BY ILARIA PITTI

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Q. What initially motivated you to explore the intersection of gender and youth participation in your research?

A. I was motivated to explore the intersections of gender and youth participation partly because I considered it an important issue in my research for a number of theoretical, ethical, political and social reasons. I was also motivated by my own experiences as a student and then as a young woman working in the academy (Bessant 1998) and other institutions which were and still are masculine and misogynist spaces. I experienced first-hand sexual and age-based discrimination, harassment and various forms of overt and opaque violence. I also saw plenty of that behaviour going on around me. This often seemed odd to me especially in the late 1980s and 1990s given the raft of anti-sex discrimination legislation we had in place by then, and all official commitments to inclusive education, equitable workplaces and safe social institutions and society.

Throughout my academic career I remained curious about the discrepancies I saw between the official accounts about gender equity and claims by governments to promote youth participation. What I saw of the lived experience of girls, boys and women as they studied and worked inside schools, workplaces and communities revealed a huge gap between the theory and the actual practices (Bessant and Watts 2025).

I became interested in trying to identify and understand how what I saw happening were really embedded and normalised practices, what Bourdieu called habitus operating in certain fields like education, workplaces, and the state. I noted too how girls and young women were often not being recognised as having equal value. I also saw how they experienced inclusion or exclusion in decision-making processes in ways determined by their identity based on factors like their age and gender, as well as their ethnicity, and class (Bessant 2022; Bessant *et al.* 2025).

I was also interested in trying to promote a democratic idea of including more diverse experiences, ideas and voices in the deliberative and decision-making processes inside organisations or the whole community.

More recently it became apparent that girls, and especially quite young girls, were assuming significant leadership roles in various forms of contemporary political action linked to the climate justice movements. Along with some colleagues I followed young girls as they engaged in the public sphere and assumed centre stage for powerful speechmaking and leadership (Bessant *et al.* 2023).

Q. In your opinion, what are the most significant barriers young women and gender-diverse individuals face today when engaging in political and civic participation? How does intersectionality, particularly concerning race, class, and sexuality, intersect with gender to shape the experiences of young activists?

A. There are a number of “barriers” which include:

- A combination of long standing “adultist” age-based prejudices and sexism sustains harmful misrecognitions that define the subaltern status and experience of children and young people (Bessant 1998). This is also encouraged by some popular but problematic social-medical science research, or “scientism” (Bessant 2008), that works to bolster and reproduce the many negative stereotypes about young people as inherently irresponsible, lacking in good judgement, who are deemed cognitively and morally defective, and so incapable of being a citizen or a “proper” political agent). These accounts work intersectionality to further undermine, devalue, and denigrate young people by drawing on prejudices about gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. This tends to mean that children, young people generally are not recognised as equal to others adult typically white, male political actors;
- The habitus of people including many experts, professionals and policy makers in many organisations and government agencies also function to sustain and normalise exclusionary practices based on age and gender. That habitus of these functionaries also encourages a blindness to various forms of deception that includes a politics of denial that works to uphold and reproduce various prejudicial world views and oppressive institutional practices;
- The dominant discursive regimes and/or conditions in which one becomes a “proper” speaker and in which deliberations occur;
- The “way things are” and the various powerful sectional interests that work to ensure the prevailing arrangements remain as they are. I refer particularly to a refusal or reluctance to share or cede power within the hierarchical structures of authority that characterise bureaucracies and organisations. That is, those in established positions are not likely to want to relinquish their privilege, authority or power to young people. In short, the dynamics of power relations and inequalities are a barrier to certain kinds of people (e.g. young people, girls etc) participating (with effect) in decision making processes.

Q. Despite persisting barriers, young women and gender-diverse individuals have today much more opportunities to express their voice. How has the role of gender in youth participation evolved over time, and what lessons can be learned from these shifts?

A. This is a big question. It may be the case that young women and gender diverse people now have more opportunities to use their voice, but the question remains: who is listening and what is happening when they do speak? There remain many obstacles to young women and gender diverse people being able to “express their voice”, but importantly to be seen and heard and to actually make a difference. Only days before this interview the recently elected 47th US President declared that there are “only two genders”.

One thing history teaches us is that while there are times when we get significant and speedy transformative change, most change if it happens occurs slowly.

We see evidence of how change takes time in the ways many girls and women (often in solidarity with others) have worked to contest exclusionary practices and prejudices and gender-based inequalities. Yet, this doesn’t always result in change.

I think of how a young Syrian girl, Bana al-Abed’ who, with her mother’s support, documented for the world what life was like for a child in war torn Syria. With an ISIS regime in charge years later the prospect of Syrian women being treated justly are slim. I think too of Emma Gonzales who in 2018 played a key role in the mobilisation of America’s gun control movement when she co-founded the gun-control advocacy group “Never Again MSD” in response to the mass killings in Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida in which 17 people were killed. But that gun movement has been utterly ineffective, and the killings continue.

The history of the women’s movement is an obvious example of how women’s action can help bring about positive change but as we know that takes time and is not enjoyed by everyone.

There are many historical and contemporary examples of how young girls and women have moved to claim a space and voice in the public sphere – noting too how there is a rich array of ways of participating. More recently this has been facilitated by the advent of digital technologies that have helped enable many hitherto excluded to enter the public sphere.

I refer to cases like Vanessa Nakate, a young Ugandan who began the climate change movement in January 2019 at the age of 23. She organised protests, speaking publicly, creating and exchanging content on-line and mobilising others. Then she went to Davos in early

2020 to take part in a major climate conference (Bessant 2021). She was invited to a photo shoot by US based Associated Press agency of herself standing alongside other young female climate activists who included Greta Thunberg, Loukina Tille, Luisa Neubauer and Isabelle Axelsson all of whom were young white activists. She was erased by the press agency from that group photo. In response Nakate created a video which she uploaded onto a digital platform to challenge the erasure of the only Black person in that image and the marginalisation of voices from the Global South. She got much exposure, followed by some apologies but the world is still heating up and the erasure of young black women and gender diverse people continues.

I am not saying this to spread despair or to justify apathy or a do-nothing attitude, but simply to say that helping to make change can be slow, hard and sometimes frustrating work as much as it can be rewarding. There are many people who are actively opposed to the interests of young women and gender diverse people and there are even more who don't care one way or the other. So those who are committed to deep justice for women and gender diverse people have to keep working hard and using any resources we have to achieve the changes we want.

Q. What role do digital platforms play in amplifying or undermining gendered participation among youth?

A. The advent of social media provides significant opportunities for many young people to access information, to communicate locally and globally, to cross borders and mobilise action, to extend and diversify their repertoires of political action and generally engage politically -often in highly effective ways. The growth of social media helped in organising and advocacy and has been an important "development" for going some way to overcoming many gendered norms and practices that create barriers to effective political participation. For many girls and young women, who historically, and in some cases now, have been excluded from public space and consigned to subordinate roles in domestic private-space, access to digital media has made a major difference in their capacity to access information, communicate and to participate politically.

This is one of many reasons to be alarmed about recent moves by governments like my own national government in Australia, to ban children under 16 from accessing social media. While there are some grounds for concern about social platforms, banning children under 16 (and excluding them from relevant debates) is a

deeply anti-democratic and harmful "solution" to any of those real problems.

The flipside to the increased access for girls and young women to social media, is that some young people who have engaged in political action and who identify as female or non-binary or who are neurodiverse are likely to experience censorship, abuse, and/or erasure on media platforms. This is to say nothing of how social and digital technology have been instrumental in driving the growth of "surveillance capital", and other kinds of surveillance. This aspect which is so significant to the political-economy of contemporary capitalism gets much less attention in public discussion than it warrants. The ways the billionaire owners of surveillance capital have "cosied up" to President Trump in 2025 highlights the obstacles to getting any traction in holding these organisations to account even in so-called liberal democracies.

If it is true that many girls and young women have also assumed the role of "influencers" to engage politically or for other reasons, equally we cannot ignore the role played by social media platforms in promoting 'toxic masculinity', misogyny, xenophobia, white supremacist racism, and authoritarian populism which seem to be encouraging increasing numbers of boys and young men to embrace far-right agendas and movements.

Finally I add that while acknowledging the significance of the relatively recent expansion of social media should not encourage us to forget the significant role young people played prior to the advent of social media in politics generally especially in bringing about major political change (Bessant 2018; Bessant 2021). I guess my point is that it is not wise to expect, as some people did in the late twentieth century, that the technological power of the new digital media would always work to support a more participatory democracy, bolster human rights, reasoned debate and social justice.

Q. Young women have been at the forefront of global climate movements, advocating for environmental justice. What do you think drives their prominent leadership in this space, and how does their gender influence the public's response to their activism?

A. Another good complex question. We certainly cannot ignore the relatively novel development of increasing numbers of girls and young women entering the public sphere, many of whom have assumed leadership roles and taken centre stage in global climate movements. We see this when we look at who is initiating and mobilising campaigns and a range of actions, who is speaking, who is "answering back". There are also many

young women now participating in more formal electoral and extra parliamentary politics.

I say this mindful that it is not a good idea to generalise about the experience of being young and female, or non-binary. That said, there are some commonalities which are often experienced differently depending on where and who you are.

Moreover, the young women and non-binary people who have led or participated in the global climate movements make up a small fraction of the whole population.

In respect to the second part of the question - what drives them to do what they do, my research with colleagues involved in an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project ('New Possibilities: Young People and Democratic Renewal')¹ found they were variously moved by a range of interests and emotions that included a sense of responsibility, feelings of betrayal, hope, righteous anger and fear. We found that many young people were tired of the broken promises, and the failures by too many older elite policy makers and leaders to consider their well-being and secure their right to inherit a planet that is habitable.

The rejection of traditional politics by many young people and girls suggests something significant is happening. We may well be witnessing the beginnings of a new kind of social and political imaginary brought forth through the hands of girls and young women.

Q. Recent studies indicate a growing gender gap among young people, with young men showing increased support for conservative and far-right ideologies. Young men appear to have become more patriarchal in their orientations compared to young women and even older men. Moreover, conservative and far-right parties have gained traction particularly among young men who feel sidelined by mainstream politics. Considering these trends, how do you interpret the role of gender in influencing young people's attraction to far-right movements and what should/could be done to reverse these trends?

A. We cannot ignore the toxic forms of racism, prejudice, and discrimination that are being promoted and amplified in our social media. We need to acknowledge the highly toxic role of "influencers" like Andrew Tate, and "Sneako" (Nicolas Kenn De Balintazy) who promote extreme masculinity-misogynistic memes and val-

ues, and play on the vulnerabilities of many boys and young men trying to work out who they are and what their future holds for them. The fact is that over the past half century many of the traditional forms of masculinity that once were taken for granted have been seriously questioned and contested. This raises questions about what it means to be a boy or a man in a context which many people experience become at different levels more and more precarious. We are looking to a future where it cannot be assumed men will be the major or only breadwinners, where secure employment for life is increasingly unlikely and where traditional white male "white" privileges no longer prevail as they once did. Yet it is important not to generalise or essentialise. We need to acknowledge that many boys and young men today abhor and reject the kinds of far-right politics marked by white supremacist racism, xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia or a predilection for conspiracy theories and hyper-violence.

Q. Research on youth participation has largely highlighted the critical role of socialization processes, mentorship, and role models in fostering consistent youth engagement. Considering the contemporary political and public arenas, which politicians do you believe serve as significant role models for young women today? What about non-political public actors (e.g., celebrities, writers, etc...)? How do these figures influence young women's aspirations and participation in political and civic life?

A. Unfortunately, I don't think there are too many female political leaders or political figures who are significant role models for young women. I can think of US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or a small number of Australian Members of Parliament including Monique Ryan, Zali Steggall and Zoe Daniels but I am hard pressed to think of any others.

While we do now have more women in formal politics, I think by the time many either get elected or become leaders they are so are compromised by the process of demonstrating their fitness for leadership they have forgotten what they stood for. I think of examples like former US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton or former Vice President Kamala Harris.

Just because you are a woman does not mean that makes you a positive role model. You need to demonstrate continual valuable-good character and virtues such as courage, clarity, honesty, integrity along with a commitment to values like equity, fairness, and an inclusive vision of social justice. On this point I think there are some male politicians who make good role mod-

¹ Collin, P., Bessant, J., Catanzaro, M., Gordon, F Jackson, S, Watts, R., Australian Research Council funded project 'New Possibilities: Young People and Democratic Renewal' https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/young-and-resilient/projects/current_projects/New_Possibilities_Young_People_and_Democratic_Renewal

els for young women -and men- because they are clear about their end purpose and who ensure what they do is aligned with valuable political commitments. I have in mind the Australian Independent Senator David Pocock who, amongst other things continually worked to support young people and young women in particular on climate change, and former Australian Senator Bob Brown, a tireless campaigner for climate justice.

Q. In your research, have you come in contact with particularly interesting projects and/or policies considering the intersection of gender and youth participation?

A. In terms of the research I can think of a number of people who are doing good work at the moment addressing intersecting inequalities and how they connect to young people's political participation and to various campaigns for justice. I have in mind Dena Ayra (University of Birmingham), Juliana Bidanure (New York University), Laura Lundy (Belfast University) and Aoife Daly (University Cork) and the Centre for Youth Climate Justice. Colleagues of mine at the Young and Resilient Centre at Western Sydney University like Phillipa Collin and Michelle Catanzaro, and then there is Eve Mayes and her colleagues at Deakin University Australia all of whom are doing great work studying and encouraging young people's political participation. I think too of Blanche Verlie (University of Sydney), Ben Bowman (Manchester University), Sarah Pickard (Sorbonne University), Hedi Viterobo (Childhood, Law and Policy Network). Donatella Della Porta and her colleagues at COSMOS (The Centre on Social Movement Studies) along with Maria Grasso (Queen Mary University of London) and Marco Guigni (University of Geneva) also produce important work on gender, youth participation and related topics

Then there is John Wall and colleagues at the Childhood Institute at Rutgers University doing terrific work studying and advocating for young people's political participation.

Rys Farthing's work on children's rights, young people's privacy and digital technology is also invaluable. I also find work by Tanu Biswas (University of Stavanger) refreshing and helpful. There are many I have not identified.

The work of some philosophers and theorists who, while they do not specifically focus on gender and youth participation, are nonetheless very helpful for helping to better understand the intersections of gender and youth participation. I have in mind writers like Jacques Ran-

ciere, Michel Serres, Charles Taylor, Hannah Arendt, Rosi Braidotti and Axel Honneth to name but a few.

Q. What are the key gaps in research on gender and youth participation that you believe need urgent attention?

A. There are a number of "gaps" or areas where more work is needed.

We need good evidence-based accounts and assessments of so-called youth participation projects in which governments and NGOs claim to encourage children and young people in genuine participatory exercises but which are nothing of the kind. Such research should also consider the harms that these exercises cause to young people and to "our" "democratic political culture" by what are youth participation projects which are primarily about the governance of young people while giving an impression young people are participating.

We also need more good empirical, theoretically and practical work that shows what good youth participation and good youth participation policy looks like.

We need more good research about how many countries are experiencing an educational crisis with issues of school engagement as increasing numbers of young people discover that the school culture and more particularly the curriculum is not for them. Many form this view in a context of increased employment precarity, mounting higher education-based debt and explosive income and wealth inequality that few governments acknowledge let alone address. We need to know more about these entangled elements of a profound cultural, educational and economic transformation where human capital theory no longer makes much sense -if it ever did. More evidence-based research on the benefits and harms associated with social media is needed. This needs to be done, in conjunction with careful assessments of the value of banning children from social media and the impact of doing that on youth people generally and specifically on their political participation,

Given that many young people are engaged in climate action and engage politically with a range of other "issues of the day", attention needs to be given to practices of criminalisation of young people's politics. In some countries young people engaged in climate action and other kinds of issues are killed or "disappeared". We need more research on the criminalisation of climate protest and a better appreciation of the implications of the quashing of dissent expressed by young people about issues such as war, genocide, immigration, gendered violence, and religiously based violence directed at women and members of the LGTBQIA+ communities.

On a more global basis we need to be able to think better what about intergenerational justice looks like in the Anthropocene, and how to achieve it.

Finally, it is also important to think about what an alternative post-anthropocentric ontology might look like and the role of young people in helping to create that.

Q. How can future youth-led movements ensure inclusivity and gender equity in their organizing structures and goals?

A. Working to ensuring inclusivity and gender equity in youth led movements depends on the capacity of the leaders and “rank and file members” need to work recognise that all participants in those movements whether they be young, and female are capable as autonomous political agents who are of equal value and deserve equal respect to every other person in the collective. This recognition then needs to inform how participants act and interact individually and collectively on a daily basis and in every activity. We should never assume that just because participants are young and female they are somehow immune from ageism and other kinds of prejudices and harmful practices.

This entails avoiding denial or self-deception about discriminatory and unjust behaviours by people which can also occur amongst those who consider themselves progressive.

We are after all, all human.

In my view what this means, amongst other things, is that participants in such a movement need to be mindful of the value of *reflexive practice* (in the Bourdieusian sense). Engaging in reflexive practice can help ensure that any political interventions are directed towards clearly articulated goods, and that in pursuing those ends the people involved display qualities or virtues like kindness, good judgment, and courage. This requires having clarity of purpose in respect to the action being taken and thinking about how what we do is aligned with our political and ethical positions.

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La doppia sfida della democrazia

AMBROGIO SANTAMBROGIO

Abstract. Democracy today appears to be facing two existential challenges – one internal and the other external. *The internal challenge* is inherent to democracy itself, rooted in its intrinsic fragility, and therefore likely inescapable. *The external challenge*, by contrast, stems from the rise of new autocratic models that are marked by stark technocratic, populist, and sovereignist tendencies. In order to address this second, and arguably decisive, challenge, democracy must also reckon with the first – not by renouncing its core principles, but rather by renewing its essence, its responsibilities, and its future outlook.

Keywords: post-democracy, social imaginary, neo-liberalism, institutional flexibility, populism.

La democrazia è sempre lotta per la democrazia.

Antonio Scurati

(Tante città, una piazza per l'Europa, Roma, 15/3/2025)

1. INTRODUZIONE

È finito il mondo liquido. I cambiamenti repentini, convulsi ma sistematici che attraversano le nostre società ci stanno portando in un'altra direzione. Secondo Bauman, la modernità liquida induce a pensare che non abbia più senso interpretare il mondo in quanto unità, cioè come un insieme dotato di senso. Esso appare come qualcosa sempre sfuggevole, che di questa sfuggevolezza fa la sua identità. Ma proprio qui sta il suo carattere ideologico: nascondere una solidità, un ordine assai rigido e inelastico, dietro una apparente liquidità, non apparire come totalità:

la rigidità dell'ordine è il prodotto e il sedimento della libertà degli agenti umani. Tale rigidità è il risultato finale della politica della "briglia sciolta": deregolamentazione, liberalizzazione, "flessibilità", accresciuta fluidità, totale apertura dei mercati finanziario, immobiliare e del lavoro, minore pressione fiscale; o delle tecniche che permettono al sistema e ai suoi liberi agenti di sfuggire a qualsiasi forma di coinvolgimento, di evitarsi a vicenda anziché incontrarsi. I corpi solidi per i quali oggi – nell'epoca della modernità liquida – è scoccata l'ora di finire nel crogiolo ed essere liquefatti sono i legami che trasformano le scelte individuali in progetti e azioni collettive (Bauman 2003: X-XI).

La solidità della modernità liquida si fonda sull'ideologia che al soggetto tutto è possibile, e lo lascia in balia di una solitudine indifesa e senza protezione, così che il suo fallimento – assai probabile – possa essere vissuto come la sconfitta personale di chi non ha meritato ciò che gli era potenzialmente disponibile. E, soprattutto, viene liquefatto tutto ciò che prova a opporsi in forma organizzata. L'ordine liquido è il prodotto di una solidità che allenta i legami sociali, e nasconde il potere dietro una ideologia competitiva e meritocratica: in questo modo, si cancella il conflitto sociale tra soggetti collettivi trasformandolo in competizione tra individui isolati. La concezione dell'*homo œconomicus* viene portata alle sue estreme conseguenze, all'interno di una sfera competitiva che diviene sempre più globale: la globalizzazione economica del neo-liberalismo¹, con tutte le disegualianze di cui si nutre e che produce, è la realtà solida nascosta dietro l'ideologia della liquidità.

Tutto ciò sembra oggi sottoposto a una brusca inversione di marcia: la crisi della globalizzazione e l'emergere dei populismi sovranisti sono due tra i principali elementi di questa trasformazione epocale². Si riaffacciano

modi di pensare che non temono di esplicitare direttamente e senza infingimenti le loro posizioni, espressione di nuove modalità di potere che sembrano capaci di ridisegnare il panorama sociale e politico complessivo. In particolare, alla possibilità di una diffusione e condivisione dei diritti – l'aspetto universalistico potenzialmente presente nei processi di globalizzazione – sembra sostituirsi un attacco diretto ai principi democratici fondamentali, in nome di visioni autocratiche e particolaristiche. In questa situazione, vorrei sostenere che la democrazia, nelle forme che conosciamo, sembra essere sottoposta a due sfide epocali, una interna e una esterna. La *sfida interna* è una caratteristica propria, e probabilmente ineliminabile, della democrazia e attiene alla sua «intrinseca fragilità» (Eisenstadt 2002: 9); la *sfida esterna*, invece, è oggi portata da nuovi modelli autocratici, caratterizzati da una natura tecnocratica, populista e sovranista. Proverò a sostenere che, per affrontare la seconda e decisiva sfida, la democrazia deve fare i conti anche con la prima, senza perciò rinunciare a sé stessa, ma piuttosto rinnovando la sua natura, i suoi compiti e le sue prospettive.

2. ORDINE E STABILITÀ

Tutti i regimi socio-politici hanno il compito di affrontare la sfida di durare nel tempo. Molta teoria sociale e politica ha riposto la fiducia sulla durata nella possibilità di raggiungere e mantenere l'ordine sociale e politico. Il problema dell'ordine diviene così centrale. Si pensi, per fare un esempio, al modo con cui viene affrontato da Durkheim. Nella sua prospettiva, l'anomia è il principale problema moderno proprio perché mina alle fondamenta il mantenimento dell'ordine collettivo. E lo fa non solo, e non principalmente, a livello sistemico, quanto piuttosto mettendo a rischio, dopo aver eroso quella fondata sulla religione e tipica delle società pre-moderne, la possibilità di una struttura della personalità relativamente coerente, capace di far fronte alle esigenze della vita di tutti i giorni. La fragilità del mondo moderno secolarizzato riposa tutta sulla difficoltà che possa darsi una coscienza collettiva – generalizzata, condivisa e coerente – una volta che la religione abbia definitiva-

¹ Uso il termine neo-liberalismo invece di neo-liberismo per sottolineare gli aspetti non solo economici del nuovo ordine globalizzato. Come scrive Gerstle, «apporre il prefisso 'neo' a 'liberalismo' non implica tanto distinguere questo liberalismo da quello classico, quanto separarlo da ciò che il liberalismo moderno è diventato nelle mani di Franklin D. Roosevelt: una versione della socialdemocrazia» (Gerstle 2024: 13).

² Per una ricostruzione storica dell'ascesa e del declino del neo-liberalismo, con particolare riferimento agli USA, si veda Gerstle 2024. L'autore, a partire da un'analisi del New Deal, sostiene che il neo-liberalismo costituisce un vero e proprio ordine politico, basato su una specifica visione del mondo e su una corrispondente prospettiva morale, in grado di sviluppare una capacità egemonica che si impone anche sui democratici americani. Come conseguenza della crisi della globalizzazione neo-liberale, secondo Gerstle siamo oggi davanti non solo, e non semplicemente, a una profonda crisi del pensiero progressista, ma a una vera e propria crisi della democrazia: «l'ordine del New Deal aveva persuaso una cospicua maggioranza di americani che un forte Stato centralizzato potesse gestire nel pubblico interesse un'economia capitalistica dinamica ma pericolosa. L'ordine neo-liberale aveva convinto una maggioranza di americani altrettanto ampia che il libero mercato avrebbe svincolato il capitalismo da inutili controlli statali diffondendo la prosperità e la libertà [...]. Oggi nessuna di queste proposte gode del sostegno e dell'autorità di un tempo. Disfunzioni e disordini politici regnano sovrani. Che cosa avverrà dopo? È la domanda più importante che gli Stati Uniti e il mondo devono affrontare» (Ivi: 320). La critica all'ordine neo-liberale fa spesso leva su Polanyi (2010). Un ottimo esempio recente è il libro di Streeck, secondo cui «il trasferimento di competenze dalla statualità alla governance globale [...] condurrebbe alla instaurazione di una tecnocrazia o di una meritocrazia, al dominio degli esperti o del mercato sottratto all'influenza democratica» (Streeck 2021: 11). L'autore propone una «uscita verso il basso dell'impasse neo-liberale, nella prospettiva cioè di una democraticità strutturale, della governabilità politica e prosperità economica di una architettura 'micro-statale' e di un ordine intra e interstatale privo di centro e aperto ai particolarismi dei singoli Stati» (Ivi: 44), posizione sviluppata nel cap. V del libro, significativamente intitolato *Fuga verso il basso: il micro-stato e le sue possibilità* (Ivi: 255-334). Anche il libro di Wolf, un noto giornalista del Finan-

cial Times, ha diversi echi polanyiani (Wolf 2024). Nel suo ultimo libro, Stiglitz sulla questione è categorico: «neo-liberal capitalism [...] failed, and failed so badly», poiché non è «environmentally, socially, politically, or economically sustainable». L'autore propone «an alternative framework, progressive capitalism (or a rejuvenated social democracy), which puts the well-being of all citizens as its center and goes beyond material goods to incorporate a sense of security and freedom» (Stiglitz 2024: 215, 235, 264). Per un'analisi del rapporto tra neo-liberalismo e democrazia, si vedano Gardels, Berggruen 2019; Gamble, Wrights 2019.

mente abdicato al compito di esserne la fonte di senso: in questo modo, il rapporto tra personalità individuale e solidarietà sociale diviene sempre più problematico. Con le parole di Durkheim, «dobbiamo attribuire a questo stato di anomia [...] i conflitti che incessantemente rinascono e i disordini di ogni sorta di cui il mondo ci dà il triste spettacolo». E questo perché «le passioni umane non si arrestano che davanti a una forza morale che rispettano» (Durkheim 1962: 10, corsivi miei). Il quadro teorico generale è chiaro: le passioni umane possono essere gestite solo da una forza morale che proviene da una sfera collettiva superiore; se quest'ultima viene meno o è in crisi, allora regnano conflitti e disordini, in una parola l'instabilità, e l'ordine sociale è a rischio.

L'ordine sociale garantisce, in breve, la stabilità e quindi la durata nel tempo della società. Si crea un rapporto forte e inscindibile tra durata e ordine: quest'ultimo garantisce la stabilità e, di conseguenza, la durata. Ritengo che questi nessi causali siano tutt'altro che evidenti; siano cioè possibili, ma non necessari. La durata può essere garantita anche in altri modi, soprattutto se la flessibilità e l'elasticità dei sistemi sociali non vengono necessariamente considerate come il rischio fondamentale. Siamo proprio sicuri che alla forza dell'ordine si contrapponga solo il caos del conflitto e del disordine? Per Durkheim (1996), ma anche per Merton (1970), è più facile che si produca devianza quando c'è una mancanza di sintonia tra dimensione individuale e collettiva, quando cioè si dà anomia. Quest'ultima può essere vista come un vuoto (Durkheim), oppure come una realtà indotta da una tensione tra forze contrastanti, nello specifico tra mete e mezzi condivisi (Merton). In entrambi i casi, la maggiore autonomia e il relativo disorientamento dell'individuo lo portano tendenzialmente fuori dal lecito. Anche questa sembra essere una conclusione tutt'altro che necessaria e sostenuta dai fatti. Se così fosse, una società molto dinamica avrebbe tassi di devianza necessariamente più alti, cosa tutt'altro che empiricamente vera.

Può essere invece altrettanto plausibile l'idea contraria: in una situazione caratterizzata da alti livelli di cambiamento sociale, un individuo eccessivamente legato a un insieme univoco e incrollabile di valori potrebbe essere più in difficoltà di altri. Per lui, sarebbe probabilmente più difficile mantenere una identità relativamente coerente attraversando le mille diverse e complesse situazioni che caratterizzano la società: ciò che può essere valido in un contesto potrebbe rivelarsi inutile o controproducente in un altro. Una società in mutamento, quindi elastica e flessibile, richiede probabilmente individui anch'essi maggiormente elastici e flessibili, capaci di interagire in ambiti differenziati e con soggettività diverse dalla propria, in grado cioè di far fronte alla complessità e alla diversità: in breve, di gestire un certo grado di

anomia. Quest'ultima, perciò, invece di essere un pericolo per la durata del sistema sociale, potrebbe anche essere vista come una risorsa necessaria per il suo mantenimento. Non necessariamente produce devianza, ma può essere una modalità di integrazione. Si pensi, per fare un esempio, alla gestione del mondo LGBTQ*: si creano più disordine e conflitto difendendo con le unghie e con i denti la presunta sessualità naturale, oppure rinunciando a imporre universalmente valori che appaiono sempre più rigidi e desueti?

In estrema sintesi: l'ordine, se nemico del cambiamento, può mettere a repentaglio la stabilità. Il cambiamento, se gestito, può permettere ai sistemi sociali di mantenersi nel tempo, nutrendosi di una flessibilità che consente di rimanere sé stessi cambiando. Come scrive Eisenstadt, «se la fragilità rimane certamente una caratteristica tipica della formazione e dello sviluppo costituzionale dei regimi democratici, allo stesso tempo essi mostrano un elevato grado di resistenza e di flessibilità» (Eisenstadt 2002: 11) e quindi, potenzialmente, una elevata capacità di durata, proprio perché più capaci di gestire il cambiamento. Questa mi sembra essere la sfida interna della democrazia: costituire una struttura sociale che si mantiene cambiando, consentendosi un margine continuo di flessibilità per cui, da un lato, nonostante i cambiamenti, essa continua a essere riconoscibile come tale – sempre democrazia è; dall'altro, nonostante rimanga la stessa, attivi cambiamenti che possono renderla apparentemente irriconoscibile. Naturalmente, non solo la democrazia fa della flessibilità la sua risorsa principale. La storia è piena di esempi in cui la stabilità è stata mantenuta attraverso il cambiamento: si pensi, per fare un classico esempio letterario, al Gattopardo. Ciò che però voglio sostenere è l'idea per cui, una volta appurato che ordine e stabilità non necessariamente coincidono, la democrazia porta intrinsecamente con sé la sfida di costituire un ordine che si mantiene attraverso il cambiamento, attraverso una apparente fragilità, anche attraverso conflitti e disordine³. La democrazia è proba-

³ A questo proposito, è ancora oggi indispensabile citare Dahrendorf: «la lotta tra la libertà e il totalitarismo può essere considerata come una lotta tra differenti atteggiamenti nei confronti del conflitto sociale. Il monismo totalitario è basato sulla concezione che il conflitto può e deve essere eliminato, e che un omogeneo e uniforme ordinamento sociale e politico costituisce la più auspicabile delle condizioni [...]. Il pluralismo delle società libere è basato sul riconoscimento e sull'accettazione del conflitto sociale. Può darsi che in una società libera il conflitto abbia perduto gran parte della sua intensità e della sua violenza, ma esso sussiste ancora e sussisterà sempre: la libertà nella società significa soprattutto che si riconosce l'apporto positivo e la funzione creativa della diversità, della differenziazione e del conflitto» (cit. in Segatori 2019: 28-29). Commentando la critica che Dahrendorf muove a Parsons, Habermas così chiosa: «quindi i conflitti sociali sono qualcosa di desiderabile e ciò di cui c'è bisogno non è che siano risolti, ma che siano

bilmente un processo continuo, piuttosto che una realtà stabilita. Si tratta allora, in primo luogo, di definire cosa necessariamente deve rimanere perché di democrazia si tratti: esiste un nucleo democratico non negoziabile?

La risposta è positiva, e può essere articolata in molte direzioni: istituzionale e giuridica, in primo luogo; politica, in secondo luogo; sociale, si pensi alla centralità che assumono il pluralismo e la partecipazione (Dahl 1986; 2002a); basata sul riconoscimento e lo sviluppo dei diritti fondamentali; orientata verso l'attenzione per le politiche egualitarie; ecc.⁴. Su tutti questi aspetti esiste una letteratura sterminata. Vorrei qui sottolineare, nell'identificare tale nucleo, l'importanza spesso sottovalutata che ha una dimensione culturale di fondo, *capace di costituire identità*. Discuto qui, tra i vari aspetti, proprio la questione culturale perché ritengo fondamentale il legame tra forme di legittimazione istituzionale della democrazia costituzionale e sistema di valori che le nutrono dall'interno: le une non reggerebbero senza l'altro. Siamo, per così dire, davanti a una connessione sinergica che non può essere messa in pericolo dai processi di cambiamento e di trasformazione sociale.

Usando Taylor, proverò a mostrare l'esistenza di un *immaginario collettivo democratico*, andato costruendosi nel tempo, che costituisce un elemento fondamentale del nucleo indisponibile della democrazia. Va da sé che tutte le caratteristiche con cui identificare ciò che non deve mutare perché si possa continuare a parlare di democrazia – per lo meno nel senso moderno del termine – devono consentire quella elasticità e flessibilità che rendono la democrazia disponibile al cambiamento, entro limiti definibili, e solo apparentemente fragile.

3. L'IMMAGINARIO COLLETTIVO DEMOCRATICO

Ci sono cose che offendono gravemente la coscienza collettiva moderna. Indipendentemente dalla singola posizione sociale e politica. Si dà un senso di offesa e di tradimento solo se esiste una coscienza, in questo caso collettiva. Lo sforzo di Taylor sta nel sostenere che, lungo le travagliate vie percorse dal processo di sviluppo della modernità, si è andata sviluppando e poi affermando una coscienza collettiva democratica condivisa,

incorporata in un immaginario sociale moderno (Taylor 2005). Nel suo libro, a mio parere, Taylor parla di immaginario in una direzione affine all'approccio fenomenologico. Infatti, la sua idea di immaginario costituisce una sorta di senso comune diffuso, alla base della nostra comune rappresentazione del mondo, che diamo per scontato al punto – cosa che vale per tutto il senso comune – da non esserne riflessivamente consapevoli. Qualcosa cioè di indisponibile, anche se in modo irriflesso⁵. Solo in situazioni particolari, al cui interno questo nostro deposito di senso condiviso sembra essere messo in discussione, esso può apparire alla nostra comune coscienza riflessiva. Si tratta per l'appunto della situazione di trasformazione epocale che stiamo vivendo, e si tratta allora di vedere se siamo in grado di difendere quella indisponibilità anche riflessivamente. Vediamo però innanzi tutto in cosa consiste per Taylor questo immaginario democratico e come si è andato formando⁶.

Per Taylor, essere moderni non è solo una collocazione cronologica: richiede la capacità da parte degli individui di «immaginare la loro esistenza sociale» (Costa 2005: 9). Perciò, la modernità è caratterizzata da una nuova concezione dell'ordine morale della società. Essa fu dapprima solo un'idea della mente di alcuni influenti pensatori, ma in seguito finì con il plasmare l'immaginario di ampi strati della popolazione e, infine, di intere società. La trasformazione di questa visione dell'ordine morale nel nostro immaginario sociale ha coinciso con la nascita di certe forme sociali che caratterizzano in maniera essenziale la modernità occidentale: tra le altre, l'economia di mercato, la sfera pubblica e l'autogoverno del popolo (Taylor 2005: 20).

Si tratta di un processo che porta l'elaborazione teorica di alcuni pensatori della modernità – in primo luogo, la teoria del diritto naturale di Grozio – a far parte di una visione condivisa dell'esistenza sociale. Alcuni contenuti teorici diventano immaginario quando non rispondono più a questioni di correttezza e di coerenza, ma si tra-

istituzionalizzati e gestiti in una maniera civile» (Habermas 2019: 158). Per una analisi recente di Dahrendorf, si veda Leonardi 2019.

⁴ Dahl scrive che «lo sviluppo di un sistema politico che consenta un'opposizione aperta, la rivalità e la competizione tra un governo e i suoi oppositori, è un aspetto importante del processo di democratizzazione»; e prima di iniziare la sua analisi, premette che «la caratteristica fondamentale della democrazia sia la capacità dei governi a soddisfare, in misura continuativa, le preferenze dei cittadini, in un quadro di eguaglianza politica» (Dahl 1986: 27).

⁵ In estrema sintesi, per Schütz il senso comune svolge la sua funzione di rendere riconoscibile il senso intenzionato dall'attore sociale solo in quanto dato per scontato, cioè in maniera irriflessa. Ogni mattina, quando vado dal mio panettiere, egli non mi chiede come mai sono nel suo negozio: dà per scontato il senso intenzionato del mio essere lì ed entrambi diamo per scontata tutta una serie di comportamenti che identificano la nostra relazione mattiniera. Però è sempre possibile sottoporre il senso intenzionato irriflessivamente a un'analisi riflessiva: perché sono qui? perché mi sto comportando in questo modo? Attraverso queste domande, secondo Schütz, è possibile far apparire quel senso che prima giaceva come dimensione irriflessa nel fluire delle azioni quotidiane (Schütz 1974).

⁶ James (2019) mette giustamente in luce come in Taylor sia centrale il carattere storico degli immaginari sociali. Per un approfondimento del carattere storico e aperto del processo di sviluppo degli immaginari moderni, si veda Rundell 2020. Questo carattere di apertura produce, a parere di Rundell, modernità differenti.

sformano in una dimensione prescrittiva, che riguarda la prassi sociale, costituendo così la base di un nuovo ordine morale, in contrasto radicale con quello precedente. Per Taylor, l'immaginario pre-moderno si fonda su una forte sintonia tra ordine umano e ordine naturale, che rimanda a una dimensione ontologica alla base di tutto, e che riguarda Dio e il cosmo. Da questa sintonia promana l'ordine umano, organizzato in una gerarchia di posizioni, interne a una scala decrescente di dignità: chi prega (il clero), chi combatte (i nobili), chi lavora (tutti gli altri).

Questo tipo di ordine diventa moderno quando, cancellate le gerarchie e il loro riferimento a una dimensione cosmica, si fa espressione delle relazioni tra individui che cooperano in vista del bene comune: la morale perde la possibilità di inserirsi in, e di essere espressione di, un ordine oggettivo naturale. Tenzialmente, ora l'ordine si basa su rapporti di reciprocità tra eguali, che costituiscono una nuova idea di socialità. Non si tratta di un processo «sottrattivo» (Ivi: 34), bensì costitutivo. Ciò che Taylor intende sottolineare è che una parte importante del nuovo principio di socialità è costituita dai nuovi immaginari sociali.

Questi ultimi sono caratterizzati da quattro elementi. 1. La società è fatta da individui liberi ed eguali, attori morali indipendenti da ogni gerarchia pre-definita, e viene prima della sfera politica, facendosi autonoma da quest'ultima. 2. Di conseguenza, la politica «appare come uno strumento per qualcosa di pre-politico» (*Ibidem*), e mira al benessere reciproco, a partire dalle esigenze che provengono dalla società. 3. La politica, perciò, è al servizio dei cittadini e ha, come primo compito, quello di garantirne le libertà, intese come diritti. 4. Tutto ciò acquista un carattere universalistico, cioè deve essere garantito a tutti. Tocqueville, opportunamente, direbbe che il principio di eguaglianza sostituisce quello di gerarchia: gli individui sono eguali perché godono degli stessi diritti.

Questo immaginario diventa, in un lento processo conflittuale di secolare sedimentazione, senso comune condiviso. Come scrive Taylor,

per immaginario sociale, intendo qualcosa di più ampio e di più profondo degli schemi intellettuali che le persone possono assumere quando riflettono sulla realtà sociale in un atteggiamento distaccato. Penso, piuttosto, ai modi in cui gli individui immaginano la loro esistenza sociale, il modo in cui le loro esistenze si intrecciano a quelle degli altri, come si strutturano i loro rapporti, le aspettative che sono normalmente soddisfatte, e le più profonde nozioni e immagini normative su cui si basano tali aspettative (Ivi: 37).

Questo «atteggiamento distaccato» richiama molto da vicino l'idea di intenzionalità riflessiva, mentre tutti

il resto della citazione riecheggia quella dimensione di opacità e di dato-per-scontato tipica del senso comune. L'approccio fenomenologico consente di radicare questo «atteggiamento distaccato» dentro la vita quotidiana, e di spiegarne il funzionamento. Non a caso, per Taylor, «l'immaginario sociale è quella comprensione, quel sapere comune, che rende possibili le pratiche comuni» (*Ibidem*)⁷.

Trovo questa sintonia anche in altre tre direzioni. La prima ha a che vedere con il rapporto tra teoria e prassi, tra struttura e cultura. A mio parere, Taylor rifiuta sia un approccio idealistico che uno materialistico, dal momento che «non è possibile distinguere i due fattori per porre la domanda 'chi causa chi?', proprio perché «storicamente le idee si presentano sempre avvolte in certe pratiche» (Ivi: 45-46), e viceversa. Ritengo sia importante l'avverbio 'storicamente': la teoria, diversamente dal radicamento storico del senso comune, mira ad astrarre da ogni adesso-e-così, dalla dimensione concreta dell'agire⁸. La seconda direzione, sopra già richiamata, porta con sé una nuova idea di socialità, autonoma da ogni sfera religiosa o naturale: «è questo che sta alla base dell'etnocentrismo dei nostri avi. Essi erano incapaci di comprendere la differenza, per esempio, tra loro e gli amerindi nei termini [...] di una differenza tra culture, e la interpretavano invece come la distanza tra natura e cultura» (Ivi: 51), tra civili e incivili. La terza fa leva sui concetti di sradicamento e di disincantamento. Essi «comportano una nuova autocomprensione della nostra esistenza sociale in cui viene attribuita un'importanza storicamente inedita all'individuo» (Ivi: 62). Ora non ci rapportiamo più al sacro come società, ma sempre più come individui⁹.

Tutto ciò produce tre grandi forme di «autocomprensione sociale»: l'economia, la sfera pubblica, l'autogoverno democratico. Vediamo brevemente. L'economia sostituisce l'ordine cosmico, governato dalla benevolenza divina, con un ordine materiale, che mira al beneficio di tutti attraverso la benevolenza reciproca. Mentre «il disegno divino è un disegno di cause che si intrecciano», quello umano riguarda «significati che si armonizzano» (Ivi: 78): si pensi alla teoria della mano nasco-

⁷ Adams, Blokker, Doyle, Krummel e Smith sostengono che l'interesse di Taylor «per i temi fenomenologici della conoscenza pratica e implicita influenza la sua concezione di immaginario sociale. Nonostante Taylor descriva l'avvento degli immaginari sociali attraverso concetti chiave di tipo filosofico e teorico che provengono da pensatori come Locke, Grotius, Rousseau e Tocqueville, il suo intento è piuttosto quello di mettere in luce il loro comune fondamento nella vita quotidiana, così come quello di sottolineare ciò che sta alla base di un (sicuramente fragile) senso di unità geograficamente diffuso» (Adams *et al.*, 2015: 24-25).

⁸ Naturalmente, anche fare scienza è una pratica: il fatto è che si assume il compito di essere sistematicamente riflessiva.

⁹ Trovo strano che su questo aspetto Taylor non faccia alcun riferimento alla sociologia della religione di Durkheim (Durkheim 2005).

sta di Smith e alla sua teoria dei sentimenti morali, in particolare alla simpatia. La benevolenza si esercita ora su un fine materialistico, il benessere economico, e non più su quello spirituale. Di conseguenza, «per i moderni, la società organizzata non coincide più con la comunità politica» (Ivi: 87); e neppure, a maggior ragione, con quella religiosa¹⁰.

La sfera pubblica è uno spazio comune tra i soggetti, caratterizzato dall'uso dei media. È un insieme di spazi reali che danno corpo a uno spazio immaginato, meta-topico, come lo chiama Taylor. Si tratta di uno spazio non necessariamente politico. In sintonia con Habermas (2001), è uno spazio di confronto riflessivo che può potenzialmente coinvolgere tutti, dal momento che tutti possono avere interesse per tutte le questioni pubbliche¹¹. Di conseguenza, la sfera pubblica acquisisce uno status normativo: attraverso il conflitto e la differenza, rende possibile l'accordo perché fa leva sulla discussione razionale. Il senso di appartenenza a una comunità politica viene ora prodotto anche all'interno di una sfera indipendente dalla politica, basata sul pluralismo. In questo modo, l'eterogeneità sociale viene tenuta insieme, e soprattutto mantenuta viva, attraverso un processo anch'esso pre-politico. L'unità politica può essere vissuta come espressione di un processo di ricomposizione sociale, anch'essa, così come l'economico, completamente secolare: «è un'associazione che non è costituita da nient'altro se non dall'azione comune che compiamo al suo interno». Per riassumere, la sfera pubblica è «uno spazio extra-politico, secolare, meta-topico» (Taylor 2005: 100; 105).

La terza dimensione extra-politica è la società civile organizzata intorno all'idea di popolo, inteso come nuovo attore collettivo. Il popolo è la finzione normativa su cui fondare un'entità politica indipendente da una legittimazione che provenga dalla religione, oppure che si formi a partire da un preesistente stato di natura. Si tratta di una finzione giuridica a cui viene data la capacità di agire in quanto unità politica. Un esempio tipico è la Costituzione americana, proclamata in nome di «noi, il popolo» (Ivi: 152)¹².

In tutte e tre le dimensioni, troviamo l'idea di immaginario, dal momento che tutte esistono in quanto è possibile immaginarle come realtà autonome. Per Taylor, la

modernità democratica produce in modo processuale, ed estremamente conflittuale, un nuovo immaginario collettivo, cioè una nuova visione collettiva della realtà che si fa senso comune: «la società in cui viviamo non è solo l'ordine strutturato politicamente: noi apparteniamo alla società civile, siamo collegati in un'economia, possiamo avere accesso a una sfera pubblica e muoverci in un mondo di associazioni indipendenti» (Ivi: 141).

La mia idea è che questo immaginario agisce dentro la modernità, è una forza attiva e dinamica, produttrice di cambiamento sociale. Un effetto significativo è legato alla centralità sempre maggiore che acquisiscono le identità sociali, a volte anche a discapito di quelle politiche, e al loro processo di progressiva autonomizzazione da queste ultime. Per fare un esempio, si pensi all'emergere dei giovani come soggetti sociali; o alle donne, agli omosessuali, ecc. Alla struttura della stratificazione sociale, o più in generale alla complessità delle appartenenze sociali, corrisponde sempre meno una precisa collocazione nell'arena politica. Ad esempio, è oggi sotto ai nostri occhi lo scollamento tra soggetti deboli e partiti di sinistra. Resta però l'idea di fondo: la modernità porta con sé lo sviluppo di una sfera pre-politica che fa riferimento a un immaginario collettivo democratico, al cui interno stanno le questioni dei diritti e dell'eguaglianza. Attraverso la spinta all'inclusione di soggetti deboli e marginali, e non solo della classe operaia, il nuovo ordine morale – individualista e fondato sui diritti – tende a penetrare all'interno di tutte le nicchie sociali, si pensi ad esempio alla famiglia, fornendo al tempo stesso un insieme di credenze condivise e la possibilità del cambiamento proprio sulla base di quelle credenze¹³.

Abbiamo così identificato un nocciolo duro, indisponibile, alla base della democrazia, che permette di riconoscerla da altre forme di regime politico e che consente, al tempo stesso, si perdoneranno gli apparenti paradossi, una stabilità mutevole e una fragilità forte¹⁴. Mantenere

¹³ Naturalmente, può esserci una tensione tra i contenuti normativi degli immaginari moderni e le concrete pratiche sociali. Secondo Diehl, si tratta di due modelli diversi di temporalità: l'affermazione dei primi può avere tempi diversi rispetto alla loro realizzazione all'interno dei vari contesti sociali, alcuni dei quali possono essere più refrattari di altri (Diehl 2019).

¹⁴ Trovo estremamente lucido un testo di Eisenstadt, in cui si chiariscono bene fragilità ed elementi di forza dei regimi democratici, facendo di questi elementi le caratteristiche proprie della democrazia. Per Eisenstadt, «il punto centrale è l'asserzione secondo la quale è l'apertura di tali regimi a costituirne il requisito principale di persistenza. In sostanza, i processi politici democratici rendono possibile l'incorporazione, all'interno del quadro istituzionale, dei simboli, dei temi e delle domande provenienti dai movimenti di protesta. L'apertura del processo politico moderno può, infatti, incentivare lo sviluppo di una concezione del gioco politico non a somma zero» (Eisenstadt 2002: 12). Sul processo di incorporazione della protesta, la sfida chiave cui è davanti la democrazia, si veda il cap. VIII del testo (Ivi: 99-127).

¹⁰ Ci sono qui le basi per quell'autonomia dell'economico criticata da Polanyi (2010).

¹¹ Taylor riporta un brano di Burke, citato da Habermas, secondo il quale «in un Paese libero ogni uomo pensa di avere interesse a tutte le questioni pubbliche» (Taylor 2005: 96).

¹² Un altro esempio importante, non richiamato da Taylor, è la critica di Marx alla filosofia del diritto di Hegel. Per Marx, non è la costituzione a costituire il popolo, come Hegel pensa, bensì il popolo a darsi una costituzione (Marx 1977).

queste due apparenti contraddizioni, e farne la caratteristica della propria natura socio-politica, è, a mio parere, la sfida interna alla democrazia.

4. LA SFIDA AUTOCRATICA

Nel suo *Postdemocrazia*, Crouch così scrive:

le mie tesi fondamentali sono queste: mentre le forme della democrazia rimangono pienamente in vigore – e oggi in qualche misura sono rafforzate –, la politica e i governi cedono progressivamente terreno, cadendo in mano alle élites privilegiate, come accadeva tipicamente prima dell'avvento della fase democratica; una conseguenza importante di questo processo è la perdita di attrattiva, sempre più accentuata, da parte di argomenti a favore dell'egualitarismo (Crouch 2003: 9).

Oggi anche la postdemocrazia sta subendo un attacco esterno, talmente forte da far sì che non è neppure detto che «le forme della democrazia rimangano pienamente in vigore», e tantomeno ne risultino “rafforzate”. Per Crouch, le tendenze verso quella che chiama postdemocrazia sono rintracciabili nell'aumento esponenziale del potere delle lobbies economiche; nello svuotamento del processo elettorale, sempre più controllabile perché in mano a esperti nelle tecniche di persuasione; nell'aumento dell'acquiescenza da parte delle masse dei cittadini, che hanno un ruolo sempre più passivo ed eterodiretto; nella conseguente impossibilità di politiche egualitarie, capaci di limitare il potere sia economico che politico dei più potenti.

Tutti questi processi, bene evidenziati da Crouch, sono andati sviluppandosi negli ultimi anni ben al di là delle stesse analisi di Crouch¹⁵. Non solo, sono intervenuti anche nuovi e decisivi fenomeni che stanno mettendo a repentaglio le stesse basi liberali della democrazia, fenomeni che vanno molto al di là delle tendenze postdemocratiche. Ancora nei primi anni 2000, Crouch poteva scrivere, nonostante tutto, che «la democrazia stia attualmente vivendo una delle sue fasi più splendide», e che «di sicuro oggi viviamo in un'epoca più democratica rispetto a qualsiasi fase della democrazia nel terzo venticinquennio del XX secolo» (Ivi: 17-18)¹⁶. Il libro di

Crouch è ancora tutto interno alla fase neo-liberale della globalizzazione economica, con la sua critica ai sistemi di welfare, l'attacco al ruolo interventista dello Stato, l'affidamento al mercato del ruolo di regolamentazione dei processi economici e sociali, l'affermazione di una ideologia individualista e meritocratica, la liquefazione dei legami sociali, ecc. Questo orizzonte lo porta a scrivere, nel tentativo di identificare il cuore dei processi che hanno caratterizzato l'epoca post 1989, che «insomma, più lo Stato rinuncia a intervenire sulle vite della gente comune, rendendole indifferenti verso la politica, più facilmente le multinazionali possono mungere, più o meno indisturbate, la collettività» (Ivi: 25). In ogni caso, «non è una situazione di non democrazia» (Ivi: 26), ma, per l'appunto, di postdemocrazia.

Postdemocrazia e società liquida, a mio parere, sono due facce della stessa medaglia: entrambe le analisi, quella di Bauman e quella di Crouch, mettono l'accento sugli stessi processi, il primo sottolineando maggiormente gli aspetti sociali; il secondo quelli politici. Tali processi possono essere così riassunti: liquefazione dei legami sociali, in particolare quelli di opposizione, capaci di mettere anche solo parzialmente in discussione i meccanismi dell'ideologia dominante¹⁷; trasformazione delle dinamiche conflittuali tra soggetti collettivi in competizione meritocratica tra singoli individui; smantellamento delle politiche di welfare; aumento indiscriminato e insensato delle disuguaglianze, non solo economiche, ma anche di peso politico; indifferenza totale nei confronti della crisi ecologica e ambientale, vista solo come un potenziale freno ai processi economici; apparente passo indietro dello Stato, che, da un lato, si disimpegna rispetto a politiche di redistribuzione, ma, dall'altro, non rinuncia a giocare un ruolo decisivo nel sostenere i processi di globalizzazione economica e di finanziarizzazione dell'economia (Gallino 2023); aumento della personalizzazione della politica; depolitizzazione della società e progressivo allontanamento dalla partecipazione, soprattutto quella elettorale. Sono naturalmente, quelli elencati, i principali processi, ai quali se ne affiancano molti altri, in particolari quelli legati alla trasformazione

¹⁵ Crouch si è soffermato sulle più recenti evoluzioni della postdemocrazia, proponendo anche soluzioni ai problemi sempre più vistosi che si sono andati producendo negli ultimi anni (Crouch 2020).

¹⁶ Si tratta di una posizione piuttosto diffusa all'epoca. Dahl, ad esempio, scrive che «nella seconda metà del XX secolo il mondo ha sperimentato un mutamento politico straordinario e senza precedenti. Tutte le principali alternative alla democrazia sono scomparse, si sono trasformate in forme eccentriche e residuali o si sono asserragliate nelle loro ultime roccaforti» (Dahl 2002b).

¹⁷ In modo particolarmente efficace, Crouch scrive che «l'assioma politico contemporaneo sulla sparizione della classe sociale è anch'esso un sintomo di postdemocrazia. Nelle società non democratiche, i privilegi di classe sono sbandierati con orgoglio e arroganza e alle classi subordinate si chiede di riconoscere tale loro condizione; la democrazia sfida i privilegi di classe in nome delle classi subordinate; la postdemocrazia nega l'esistenza di entrambi, privilegi e subordinazione. Anche se questa negazione può essere vigorosamente contestata attraverso l'analisi sociologica, è certamente via via più difficile per chiunque, a parte gli azionisti e la classe manageriale, sempre più sicuri di sé, percepirsi, o essere percepiti, come un gruppo sociale chiaramente definito. Questo fatto, e lo squilibrio che produce, sono una causa rilevante dei problemi della democrazia» (Crouch 2003: 61).

meritocratica e individualizzata della vita collettiva, in tutti i luoghi in cui essa si svolge: nelle Università, nelle famiglie, sui luoghi di lavoro, finanche nella vita privata e nelle relazioni affettive.

Le trasformazioni che tutto questo ha avuto e continua ad avere sulla stessa struttura della personalità, producendo ansia, insicurezza e risentimento, sono state messe in luce da una letteratura ampia e articolata.

Questa situazione è andata velocemente cambiando. Se quanto descritto da Bauman e da Crouch può essere ancora visto come espressione di una sfida interna alla democrazia, che tiene in ogni caso salde le forme culturali e istituzionali per lo meno della democrazia liberale, oggi siamo davanti a una sfida che proviene dall'esterno, da forme politiche e sociali che assumono l'aspetto di nuove autocrazie, presenti al di fuori dei regimi democratici, ma in via di sviluppo anche all'interno delle strutture democratiche tradizionali. Alla sfida interna, si affianca così una sfida esterna alla democrazia¹⁸.

Provo a riassumere quelle che mi sembrano essere le principali caratteristiche delle nuove autocrazie, in particolare di quelle che si stanno producendo all'interno dei regimi democratici: riemergere di una identità collettiva che si richiama al nazionalismo sovranista; critica alla globalizzazione economica in nome della centralità delle economie nazionali; forte ostilità nei confronti delle élites economiche, finanziarie e politiche che hanno guidato la globalizzazione, sentite come lontane, portatrici di istanze incomprensibili e incapaci di fare l'interesse collettivo; trasformazione della nozione di conflitto: mentre il mondo liquido ha trasformato i conflitti tra soggetti collettivi in competizione tra individui, ora si sottolinea il conflitto tra una nuova idea di popolo, guidata dal leader, e quelle élites sovranazionali e globalizzate di cui sopra; trasformazione della nozione di società civile, che non è più il luogo del pluralismo, e della conflittualità tra soggetti collettivi, ma quello della cancellazione di queste differenze attraverso la nozione di popolo; processo di personalizzazione carismatica, e quindi irresponsabile, della politica, che trasforma la nozione di rappresentanza attraverso la messa in crisi del ruolo tradizionale dei partiti; ri-politicizzazione di tipo totalitario, perché sempre più irrazionale e fondata sulle emozioni – in particolare

su paura e risentimento –, della società; ferma e stolidità negazione della crisi ambientale, in nome della ripresa dello sviluppo delle economie nazionali; critiche feroci al politicamente corretto e, più in generale, a tutte le politiche del riconoscimento; trasformazione del linguaggio politico, che usa sempre più termini aggressivi e violenti; e, in ultimo, ma non per questo di secondaria importanza, centralità delle nuove tecnologie, mass mediatiche e connesse allo sviluppo dell'intelligenza artificiale. L'elenco è approssimativo e incompleto, ma spero renda abbastanza bene il cuore dei processi di attacco alla democrazia che abbiamo tutti quanti sotto ai nostri occhi.

Mi voglio soffermare, approfondendole brevemente, su tre questioni. La prima riguarda il rapporto tra populismo e democrazia. Il nuovo populismo, indipendentemente dal fatto che sia di destra o di sinistra, costituisce un attacco decisivo alla democrazia, in particolare, come sostengono Mudde e Kaltwasser, alla democrazia liberale. I processi di globalizzazione economica puntavano a ridimensionare il ruolo dello Stato come regolatore dei conflitti sociali, affidando la regolamentazione collettiva ai mercati e attaccando direttamente il modello di democrazia di welfare. Ora il populismo, invece, «si oppone alla democrazia liberale» (Mudde e Kaltwasser 2020: 111). Questo aspetto consente di definire meglio cosa si intende per democrazia. A partire dalle grandi rivoluzioni politiche moderne – la Gloriosa rivoluzione inglese del 1688-1689; quella americana del 1776; quella francese del 1789 – si affermano le basi della democrazia liberale moderna, in sintesi basata «sulla combinazione di sovranità popolare e principio di maggioranza» (Ivi: 98), sulla divisione dei poteri, la difesa dei diritti fondamentali, la protezione delle minoranze, la laicità dello Stato, ecc. Sulla base di questo modello, conservandolo ed espandendolo, in particolare attraverso il meccanismo di incorporazione della protesta (Eisenstadt 2002), nel secondo dopoguerra si sviluppa il modello della democrazia di welfare, che amplifica il ruolo della contestazione pubblica e della partecipazione politica, al fine di sviluppare il riconoscimento dei diritti sociali, dell'egualianza e del riconoscimento. Attraverso la critica alla globalizzazione, il nuovo populismo mira ad attaccare direttamente i fondamenti della democrazia moderna, cioè le sue basi liberali:

infatti, il populismo sostiene che nulla dovrebbe limitare la volontà del popolo (puro) e rifiuta fundamentalmente la nozione di pluralismo, ivi inclusi i diritti delle minoranze e le garanzie istituzionali che dovrebbero tutelarli. Nella pratica, i populistici invocano il principio della sovranità popolare per criticare le istituzioni indipendenti che si prefiggono di proteggere i diritti fondamentali (...) la magistratura e i media (Ivi: 99).

¹⁸ Intendo dire dall'esterno della democrazia, ma potenzialmente anche all'interno di Stati democratici, come sta avvenendo negli USA e in diversi Paesi europei. Siamo cioè davanti a un processo di autonomizzazione del problema democratico dalle forme rigidamente statuali, anche per l'importanza che assumono sempre di più organismi sovra-statali, si pensi in particolare all'Europa. Tra l'altro, proprio quest'ultima, in quanto organizzazione politica, penso possa costituire potenzialmente, nonostante tutte le difficoltà e i problemi che ha davanti a sé, un soggetto particolarmente significativo per la difesa e lo sviluppo della democrazia.

In secondo luogo, questo processo produce una estrema politicizzazione della società, che snatura quella sua dimensione di autonomia pre-politica e plurale che, abbiamo visto, costituisce una dimensione fondamentale dell'immaginario politico democratico moderno. Questa sua autonomia, conquistata conflittualmente nel tempo, viene assorbita e inglobata dalla nozione di popolo. Alla apparente de-politicizzazione neo-liberale, si sostituisce una ri-politicizzazione basata su un legame pre-politico tra leader e popolo, che cancella il meccanismo della mediazione tra soggetti collettivi e sistema politico, mediazione garantita tradizionalmente dai partiti politici. La crisi di questi ultimi è anche l'espressione di questa trasformazione della rappresentanza, basata sulla riduzione – a volte anche sulla cancellazione – del rapporto di dialogo/conflitto tra società civile e sistema politico, ognuno nella sua autonomia. Al meccanismo della rappresentanza mediata si tende a sostituire quello della rappresentanza diretta, fatta propria da un leader che incarna le istanze del popolo e della nazione. Questo rapporto viene nutrito e incoraggiato dalla capacità del leader di fare leva sui sentimenti di smarrimento, confusione, paura e risentimento che le crisi economiche neo-liberali hanno causato. La complessità del mondo appare sempre più ingestibile agli occhi del comune cittadino, il quale sviluppa un bisogno impellente di rivalsa, rassicurazione e semplificazione. Entra in gioco quella anomia durkheimiana che, nella sua forma totale, espressione di un vuoto di riferimenti collettivi, può produrre una vera e propria fuga dalla libertà.

Infine, vorrei mettere l'accento sulla trasformazione della nozione di conflitto. Il populismo sostituisce al conflitto interno alla società civile, conflitto che viene poi mediato e articolato dal sistema politico, quello tra popolo ed élites: il primo tipo di conflitto è articolabile democraticamente, naturalmente se si esercita all'interno delle modalità giuridiche consentite; il secondo è, invece, profondamente illiberale, per due motivi: tende a cancellare l'articolazione e l'autonomia della società civile, e il suo pluralismo interno, con l'idea di un popolo omogeneo e indifferenziato; rende di fatto impossibile la dialettica tra società e sistema politico, delegittimando i partiti di cui quelle élites sono espressione. Nel tentativo di ricostituire un soggetto politico capace di opporsi alla frantumazione individualista neo-liberale, si ricade daccapo nell'ossessione anti-democratica dell'unità. Forse più di tutti, Laclau si è esercitato su questo aspetto: eterogeneità e pluralismo oppure omogeneità e identità? Dopo aver chiarito che «il popolo non avrà la natura di una espressione ideologica, ma sarà una relazione concreta tra agenti sociali. In altri termini, sarà una via per la costruzione dell'unità del gruppo», così che «chia-

meremo *domanda popolare* una pluralità di domande che, attraverso la loro articolazione equivalenziale, costituiscono una più ampia soggettività sociale. Sono queste domande popolari che prendono a comporre [...] il popolo come potenziale attore storico» (Laclau 2019: 69-70)¹⁹, Laclau sottolinea che «se l'eterogeneità sociale [...] prevale, non c'è più alcuna possibilità di fissare una catena equivalenziale. Va però sottolineato anche che una totale equivalenza renderebbe impossibile l'emergenza del popolo come attore collettivo» (Ivi: 190). Secondo me, la seconda ipotesi è la via che i populismi sovranisti stanno imboccando. Nelle loro mani, il popolo diviene l'indifferenziato attraverso cui esercitare il nuovo potere autoritario: diversamente dal nazismo e dal fascismo, si tratta di una identità vuota – direbbe probabilmente Laclau –, che non ha bisogno di appoggiarsi ad alcuna altra ideologia, non a quella della razza e non a quella dell'impero.

In nome dell'identità popolare e nazionale, si sta imponendo, all'interno dei regimi democratici, l'idea che la maggioranza piglia tutto. Il *criterio della maggioranza* è così il ponte che idealmente collega sfida interna e sfida esterna: da un lato, la democrazia non può fare a meno di tale principio, che agisce come uno degli strumenti di incorporazione della protesta; dall'altro, però, una maggioranza democratica può prendere decisioni e votare per partiti antidemocratici, innescando la crisi esterna. Come scrive Eisenstadt,

si tratta del problema delle relazioni tra la tutela di diritti apparentemente inalienabili (come la libertà di parola, di associazione, di informazione, ecc.) e il corollario alle regole del gioco costituzionale, in sostanza il sistema di

¹⁹ Con le parole di Laclau, «l'identificazione di un significante vuoto è la *conditio sine qua non* per l'emergenza di un popolo. Ma il significante vuoto può operare come un punto di identificazione solo se e quando rappresenta una catena equivalenziale [...]. Da un canto, la rappresentazione della catena equivalenziale da parte dei significati vuoti non è meramente passiva. Un significante vuoto è qualcosa di più dell'immagine di una totalità già data: è ciò che costituisce a tutti gli effetti quella totalità, introducendo una nuova dimensione [...]. Dall'altro canto, se il significante vuoto opera come punto di identificazione per tutti gli anelli della catena, deve realmente rappresentarli, non può risulterne del tutto autonomo [...]. Come già sappiamo, questo duplice movimento è il luogo della tensione. L'eccessiva autonomizzazione del momento totalizzante finisce per distruggere il popolo, cancellando il carattere rappresentativo di questa totalità. Ma una autonomizzazione radicale delle varie domande ha lo stesso effetto, poiché rompe la catena equivalenziale e rende impossibile il momento della totalizzazione rappresentativa» (Laclau 2019: 153-154). Mi si perdoni la lunga citazione. A mio parere, questa tensione esprime quella tra democrazia e liberalismo: da un lato, abbiamo il popolo democratico e dall'altro la differenziazione liberale, a mio parere arbitrariamente contrapposti. Come ha dimostrato Taylor, esistono anche altre vie per riempire il senso di legittimazione di un sistema politico democratico attraverso, per citare ancora Laclau, «simboli relativamente stabili» (Ivi: 161).

decisioni prese dalla maggioranza e, quindi, l'applicazione della regola maggioritaria. Le decisioni di una maggioranza democraticamente eletta possono abolire o superare quei diritti, o sono questi ultimi a segnare il limite di validità della regola maggioritaria? (Eisenstadt 2002: 25).

In effetti, possiamo ora vedere all'opera, all'interno di democrazie liberali, l'idea che la maggioranza rappresenta direttamente il popolo, e quindi si senta legittimata a esercitare poteri che mirano esplicitamente a superare i diritti costituzionali. Il popolo ha sempre ragione, e la maggioranza democraticamente eletta si sente di avere le mani completamente libere. I soggetti sociali, e il conflitto di cui sono portatori, sono stati ridimensionati prima dalle politiche neo-liberali in favore dell'individualismo meritocratico; ora vengono cancellati dall'arena pubblica perché minacciano il nuovo ordine sociale e politico. Riprendo ancora un aspetto centrale dell'analisi di Eisenstadt:

I pericoli principali che i regimi devono affrontare hanno le loro radici nelle basi stesse della democrazia costituzionale, e vanno oltre il semplice rispetto delle regole del gioco. Il primo problema riguarda la creazione e la difesa di una cornice entro la quale le diverse visioni del bene comune possano competere, senza compromettere il funzionamento del sistema stesso. Il secondo problema trascende la garanzia che i principali attori politici rispettino le regole del gioco e fa riferimento alla capacità di incorporare la protesta, ridefinire i confini della politica e trasformare le basi della legittimazione dei regimi stessi (Ivi: 99-100).

Il primo problema riguarda il fondamento della democrazia liberale, nella direzione indicata da Taylor. Il secondo problema, che attraversa tutta la storia della democrazia moderna, diviene il motore interno alla democrazia di welfare, si pensi solo a come «il socialismo ha cambiato il quadro degli obiettivi politici della società, favorendo al tempo stesso il processo di incorporazione della protesta e poi estendendo il campo degli obiettivi stessi» (Ivi: 101); ma si pensi anche al ruolo giocato nel secondo dopoguerra dai movimenti, giovanile, femminista, ecologista e così via. La nuova forma di autocrazia, o se si vuole di democrazia illiberale, mette in discussione entrambe le dimensioni, cancellando di fatto il ruolo autonomo della società civile e del pluralismo. In questa direzione, una più precisa analisi sociologica dovrebbe essere in grado di mettere in luce le basi sociali di questa trasformazione.

Per riassumere: la globalizzazione neo-liberale si è dimostrato fallimentare, come dimostrano le continue crisi economiche, la crisi ambientale, le pandemie, ecc. Ma, soprattutto, è fallita l'idea che il mercato possa esse-

re davvero una mano nascosta capace di regolamentazione collettiva.

Tutto ciò ha prodotto un nuovo forte bisogno di governo, che non sia economico, bensì politico, capace di riprendere in mano i destini collettivi. Si sta ricreando quella situazione mirabilmente descritta da Polany: la società si ribella all'egemonia dell'economico e richiede un nuovo protagonismo politico, che può assumere le forme drammatiche dei regimi autoritari. Quando l'economia si sottrae al controllo sociale produce tensioni che possono degenerare in una "grande trasformazione". Da qui la necessità di una critica all'egemonia dell'economico, a «una scienza che pone le leggi che governano il mondo degli uomini al di là di ogni ragionevole dubbio. Fu per ordine di queste leggi che la compassione fu allontanata dai cuori e che una stoica determinazione di rinunciare alla solidarietà umana in nome della massima felicità del maggior numero di persone acquistò la dignità di una religione secolare» (Polany 2010: 130).

Proprio in questa direzione possiamo interpretare l'attuale rinascita di populismo e sovranismo: si tratta di una reazione distorta alle frustrazioni collettive create da disuguaglianze divenute insopportabili. Perciò oggi lo scontro centrale non è tra capitalismo e anti-capitalismo, bensì tra democrazia e autoritarismo. È uno scontro che attraversa le nostre società, uno scontro in cui la sfida interna assume la forma di una sfida esterna: difendere sia la democrazia liberale che quella di welfare, mantenendo quella fragilità instabile, ma resistente, tipica delle democrazie moderne, implica allo stesso tempo far fronte a una sfida che proviene da tentativi autocratici nati all'interno della democrazia, facendo leva sul criterio della maggioranza popolare.

Sfida interna e sfida esterna sono così oggi due facce della stessa medaglia, e sarebbe un errore separarle. I diritti civili e politici, tipici della democrazia liberale, sono ormai strettamente connessi a quelli sociali e di welfare: non possono essere difesi separatamente. Il punto sta proprio nella capacità democratica di riattivazione della società civile, della ricchezza plurale prodotta dalla complessità delle appartenenze dei diversi gruppi sociali, nel loro intreccio di identità e interessi. Oggi più che mai abbiamo bisogno di quei conflitti e di quel disordine che le nuove autocrazie cercano di controllare e, talvolta, di eliminare.

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Ligatures and their *leib*-bound and socially mediated *leib*-bound ties – foundations for an actualization of Ralf Dahrendorf's concept of life chances with recourse to Karl Popper's theory of the three worlds and its extension

KARSTEN BERR, OLAK KÜHNE, LAURA LEONARDI

Abstract. This essay deals with the extension of two concepts that have proven themselves in social science research and philosophy, but also have the potential to be applied in other contexts on the one hand, and to enter into a reciprocal connection on the other, namely Ralf Dahrendorf's life chances approach and Karl Popper's theory of three worlds. The extension of the Three Worlds Theory concerns the intersubjective, that of the life chances approach the integration of the human *leib* (as a connection between body and mind) into the concept of ligatures (which, in conjunction with options, form and determine life chances). The *leib* not only shapes ligatures, but it also mediates social ligatures, so that it has a prominent influence on life chances.

Keywords: life chances, Karl Popper, Ralf Dahrendorf, *leib*-ligatures, *leib*-mediated social ligatures.

1. INTRODUCTION

The life chances approach is closely linked to Ralf Dahrendorf (1929-2009), a German-British sociologist, political theorist, and practitioner as well as public intellectual. Ralf Dahrendorf's thinking was – as he himself explained – strongly influenced by his teacher Karl Popper (1902-1994), his political philosophy and philosophy of science. In this respect, the path to integrating the ideas of Popper and Dahrendorf, both advocates of a liberal society and open science, is quite short.

The life chances approach of Ralf Dahrendorf (1979) can not only be considered a central point of reference in his work alongside his role and conflict theory and his reflections on political philosophy, it also represents integral references to the other parts of his work, for example, acting in roles determines the possibility of developing life chances, conflicts develop not least from the pursuit of life chances and in his political philosophy the facilitation of life chances has a strong normative significance (Kühne and Leonardi 2020). Following Dahrendorf, life chances are characterized by options,

as «opportunities to choose» (Dahrendorf 2007: 44) and ligatures, as «structurally predetermined fields of human action» (Dahrendorf 1979: 51) which express themselves in deep ties. The first aim of our essay is to work out the *leib*-bound meaning of ligatures – which also has an influence on options. This is a desideratum – not least in Dahrendorf’s work – as he focuses on the social and the relationship between the individual and the social. In this article, we want to work out the significance of the body for dealing with ligatures, but also options, in order to create a basis for updating Ralf Dahrendorf’s life chances approach and making it usable for further questions. In doing so, we draw on the concept of *Leib*, which is widespread in the German language and in German philosophy. *Leib*’ means living body – and thus connected with thinking and feeling.

In order to structure these considerations, we use Karl Popper’s theory of the three worlds (Popper 1979; Popper and Eccles 1977) which, in addition to the world of cultural content (World 3) and World 2 of individual consciousness, also identifies material World 1. If the desideratum in Dahrendorf’s considerations lies in the limited consideration of World 1, for Popper it lies in the intersubjectivity of the social. Although World 3 is often understood as social (as in Weichhart 2018 criticized), World 3 is ultimately only a product of intersubjective processes and cannot be equated with them. This gives rise to the second aim of our essay: To reflect on the integration of the intersubjective into the theory of the three worlds.

As has become clear from this introduction, our essay straddles the boundary between philosophy and sociology by linking the concept of life chances, which originates from Ralf Dahrendorf’s sociology, with the philosophical concept of Karl Popper’s Three Worlds Theory, but also with the concept of the body. The aim of this connection is to work out the differentiation of life chances on the one hand, but also the need for further differentiation – here in particular the concept of the ligature.

However, before we turn to expanding the concepts, we will first introduce our analytical framework, Karl Popper’s theory of three worlds (section 2). In this section, we will also address the question of why the Three Worlds Theory needs to be extended in order to provide a more appropriate analytical framework for studying social processes will then turn to the concept of life chances as developed by Ralf Dahrendorf (section 3). In section 4 we turn to considerations of *leib*-bound ligatures, to which we turn in section 5 when we deal with *leib*-mediated social ligatures. In section 6 we link our considerations back to the concept of life chances and

discuss the significance of our extension for this concept in a conclusion and outlook.

2. POPPER’S CONCEPT OF WORLDS – ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND THEIR NEEDS FOR EXPANSION IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL PROCESSES

In the following, we introduce a distinction based on the ideas of Karl Popper and his three-world theory, which addresses different ways of accessing or participating in the world (Niemann 2019; Popper 1979, 2019 [1987]; cf. also Kühne 2020; Kühne and Berr 2021; Weichhart 1993, 1999). Popper assigns World 1 to living and non-living bodies, World 2 to the contents of consciousness, i.e. individual thoughts and feelings, such as «perhaps also of subconscious experiences» (Popper 2018 [1984]: 82). World 3 can be described as «all planned or intentional *products* of human mental activity» (Popper 2019 [1987]: 17; Hervorhebung im Original) for example, scientific propositions or theories, but also socio-culturally shared understandings of “space” or “landscape”. World 3 serves as a supplement to Worlds 1 and 2 as «the world that anthropologists call ‘culture’» (Ivi: 18).

In summary, Popper’s approach does not imply a strict (extensional or ontological) separation of the three distinct “worlds”, but instead offers a “quasiontological” analytical framework for the (intensional or aspectual-ascriptive) recording of world accesses, world assignments and world participations, corresponding hybridities and typical interactions in their references to society, the individual and materialities (Kühne 2018; Weichhart 1999). Depending on the question and direction of analysis, a specific aspect of the human “world” can be emphasized without a specific world phenomenon being countervallently assigned to only one specific ‘world’ and thus one specific aspect of possible ways of accessing the world. Undoubtedly, there is only «one world» (Gethmann 2023: 109) but which is accessible in three specific world references (cf. Berr 2020; Davidson 2004; Gabriel 2019; Ganslandt 2004; Habermas 1995; Prange 2010). This means that entities or phenomena can be analytically and intensionally assigned to several worlds, whereby these worlds also interact with each other. The center of these interactions is World 2 of the individual consciousness, insofar as it is coupled back to World 1 and World 3 and – Popper does not address this aspect, which is why in the following (section 5) – communicates intersubjectively with other Worlds 2. For example, humans have a physical body (World 1), a consciousness (World 2) that can communicate and interact intersub-

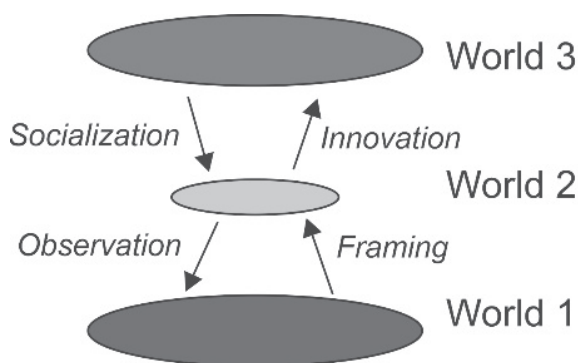


Figure 1. The three worlds theory of Karl Popper (on the basis of Kühne 2020).

jectively with other Worlds 2, and access to the world of social and cultural contents (World 3). As a physical-material “*body*”, people have a “share” in World 1; as an “animated *body*” or *leib* (cf. Waldenfels 2000) they have a share in both World 1 and World 2.

As far as the interactions between the three ‘worlds’ are concerned, World 2 is connected to World 3 by the fact that an individual is introduced to social knowledge, patterns of interpretation and evaluation (socialization) and has the opportunity to anchor new knowledge, patterns of interpretation and evaluation in society (innovation). World 2 is connected to World 1 through individual observation, while at the same time it receives a structuring framework for its activities through its corporeality and physicality, from which it cannot detach itself (more detailed: Kühne 2020) (see overview Figure 1). Moreover, individual consciousness not only has a central function for the conception of an open society (Kühne, Berr and Jenal 2022) but also for the resolution or settlement of conflicts (Dahrendorf 1979, 2002; Popper 2011[1947]).

If Popper and subsequent theories define World 3 as the realm of the cultural, the realm of the intersubjective (Worlds 2 as ‘ego’ and ‘alter’) must be disregarded, since World 3 is ultimately only a product of intersubjective processes and cannot be equated with them (cf. the exemplary critique by Weichhart 2018). Donald Davidson has therefore distinguished three mutually irreducible world relations: an objective, an intersubjective and a subjective one (Davidson 2004). This means that people want (cf. Prange 2010) basically want to know “what is going on out there” (objective world reference); “what others think” (intersubjective world reference); “what I/we think” (subjective world reference). However, “out there” can now be interpreted in Popper’s sense not only as World 1, but also as World 3 (and even as Worlds 2 in the sense of Descart’s other-

psychic); also, “what the others think” (intersubjectivity) can be understood simplistically and misleadingly as Popper’s World 3.

In order to avoid this ambiguous use of terms, it is advisable to consider three fundamental epistemological perspectives (see introductory and overview: Hartmann 2020): the observer perspective (third-person perspective), the first-person perspective (first-person perspective) and the participant perspective (we-perspective). The observer perspective is the “objective” standard perspective of the natural sciences, which aims to arrive at objective findings from a distance that observes phenomena and is supposedly detached from its integration into a community of language, action and culture. This is therefore often reserved for World 1 or the objective reference to the world, but can also be applied to World 2 (for example in psychology or behavioral research) and World 3 (for example in cultural sociology or the history of ideas) as well as to the subjective and intersubjective reference to the world. The “subjective” first-person perspective is the perspective of an individual “I” (as prototypically in Descartes 2008 [1637] and Locke 1981 [1689]), which is based on subjective evidence, experiences or views, also supposedly detached from integration into a linguistic, action and cultural community. This perspective, which underestimates or even ignores the significance of intersubjectivity as well as the contents of World 3, remains reserved for World 2. The “intersubjective” we-perspective is the perspective «that presents itself to each and every one of us as a participant perspective, the perspective of participating in a communication community» (Hartmann 2020: 88) – paradigmatic for the cultural and social sciences.

Accordingly, World 3 can only take the area of the intersubjective into account if a participant perspective is scientifically adopted with regard to intersubjective processes between Worlds 2 that lead to World 3 as the product of these intersubjective processes. For World 3 as a product of these processes, an observer’s perspective can be adopted that focuses on World 3 in its product character.

This relationship between intersubjective World 3 production by Worlds 2 and World 3 as a product of this production can also be illuminated in more detail from a specific anthropological perspective. The question of a purposeful understanding of “man”, of “who” or “what” he is, can also be reformulated as a question of his ineluctable *activities*. This means that people cannot see themselves exclusively from an ego perspective, for example through introspection (as in behaviorism; cf. Skinner 1978; Watson 1957), or from an observer perspective, such as neuroscientific studies (cf. Jan-

ich 2009; Roth and Strüber 2018) but only through their *actions* and the *products* of their actions themselves. If, with Popper, World 3 also means «the world that anthropologists call ‘culture’» (Popper 2019 [1987]: 18) then World 3 as a cultural product and thus also as a product of action also refers to culture-creating people in their authorship of action (Gethmann 2006). On the one hand, human life is part of an event that «takes place entirely without our intervention in the realm of the inanimate and animate» (Hartmann 2020: 234) and which we usually refer to as natural events (World 1). Human life is also largely communal life (intersubjective Worlds 2) and as such is culturally constituted by human action (World 3). People live in social contexts that create and produce infrastructures such as buildings, streets, cities and landscapes or tools, equipment and things of the most diverse kinds and also develop and pass them on over generations – in this way, a «cultural history» is created (Hartmann 2020: 234) which both provides the framework for cultural products and is itself a product of human activity.

If people can only become transparent and understandable in their own products, then this means that «culture [...] is both the framework and product of the establishment of people» (Orth 2000: 7) or production and product at the same time. People can therefore only adequately understand themselves in relation to the participant perspective of human communities of language, action and communication. Every «self-assurance» (Mittelstraß 2003) any self-understanding and any self-determination of human beings are therefore only possible within the «spell of the results, exemplifications and instantiations of their actions [...] just as the activity of a mole can only be recognized by its hills» (Hubig 2006: 86). In other words: «What a person is is revealed in their actions and in the products of their actions» (Hartung 2018: 130). With Hugo Dingler’s Faust quote: «In the beginning was the deed» (Dingler 1928: 73) with Friedrich Schiller: «The mind possesses nothing but what it does» (Schiller 2004: 680).

There is another aspect: people not only intersubjectively produce World 3 as a product, but this product also has an effect on them as producers. With regard to human cultural activities, this basically means that the world shaped in this way also retroactively shapes people. To summarize, this means: «We are the producers of culture. But then, through repercussions, we are also produced by it» (Landmann 1964: 185). Accordingly, people become ‘human worlds’ through the use of technical, structural and design products, but also through institutions and organizations created by themselves and through the entire field of the symbolic (Cassirer

2001, 2002b, 2002a; Reckwitz 2011) as human beings. For, according to Ernst Kapp, for example, man is in the «self-created creation of its means of culture» (Kapp 1877: 26) «is not simply given, but is made» (Maye and Scholz 2015: XLIV).

The differentiated nature of the Three Worlds and the importance of intersubjectivity emphasized here illustrate how the individual and the social are bound to and in the world 1. This bound has an impact not least on the emergence, development, utilization or denial of life chances.

3. THE CONCEPT OF LIFE CHANCES BY RALF DAHRENDORF AND THE NEED FOR CONCRETIZATION OF RALF DAHRENDORF’S LIGATURE CONCEPT

For those who have delved into Ralf Dahrendorf’s work, it seems almost strange that he left out the relationship between life chances and World 1, particularly by not giving due importance to the component of *leib*-mediated ligatures in his definition of life chances. It seems strange because the definition of life chances in Dahrendorf is functional to the analysis of active liberty in society making the normative concept operational. In addition, the impulse of this research, as Dahrendorf has repeated in many venues, goes back to a personal experience of imprisonment therefore of physical, hence *leib*-bound, constraint, habeas corpus being the basic right for individual freedom. By revisiting then his definition of life chances, we can also identify its limits and the opportunity for integration through a further articulation of the concept, notably in the component of *leib* mediated ligatures.

Life-chances are socially structured. They are a function of options, «alternative possibilities of choice of action in social structures», and of ligatures, «memberships, relationships that provide meaning to action» (Dahrendorf 1989: 17). Life-chances are not mere choices between alternatives, a range of opportunities, because they are social in nature. Since the individual is placed within «ties dense with emotional connotations» (Dahrendorf 1981: 41) that are configured as social relations (Ligatures), which give sense and anchorage to social belonging. Options refer to the horizon of action, they are decisions open to the future, while social bonds as social relations constitute the foundations of action. Options are, in turn, a combination of entitlements and provisions. Entitlements express a relationship to persons and things by which their access to them and their control over them is legitimate (Dahrendorf 1989: 14). Provisions have a quantitative aspect, more economic

than legal and political, they are the bundle of alternatives in certain areas of activity (Dahrendorf 1981: 41). The constant tension between the components of life-chances is linked to the often decoupled relationship between the material provisions of economic sphere and the political and cultural conditions, the so called Martinez Paradox (Dahrendorf 1989: 11). In the terms of Popper's three-world theory, it is clear that life chances, being related to the individual dimension of consciousness, reflexivity and feelings, finding realisation in individual autonomy, are centred on World 2, but at the same time are made possible by World 3 and are nourished by World 1.

Ligatures are cultural ties associated with ascriptive units as is the case with family, religion, gender or an age group, but also by class placement or place of birth. Ligatures therefore guarantee from an unquestioned bond a basis of certainty without which society could not structure itself. But in cases where they are too exclusive and prescriptive they can suffocate individual freedom. However, ligatures transform in modernity and from ascribed become increasingly a choice: «With increasing mobility, local and general local bonds too become available rather than given [...] In the end, even the biologically based distinctions of age and sex, as it were, put up for auction» (Dahrendorf 1985: 45). Ligatures that are too weak, however, do not perform an anchoring and sense-making function for options, and this can degenerate into a state of anomie. Therefore, there is a continuous process of reconstructing culturally mediated ties: «The search of ligatures is evidently one of the forces of our time» (Ivi: 77).

Apart from referring to some aspects of *leib*-type ligatures that take on an open structuring power as opposed to some contexts in which they are rather a closing factor, Dahrendorf does not develop this aspect more, although an awareness shines through, in popperian terms, that the phenomena related to the corporeality of social life, such as mobility, locality, age, gender, to mention but a few, are produced by a continuous process of reshaping the World 1 that passes through the intersubjectivity of the social in the World 2 and is accompanied by changes in the World 3.

We can hypothesize that Dahrendorf assumed, and therefore did not elaborate, that *leib*-mediated ligatures are to be considered an integral part of agency freedom, to be sought also in the material world, in the so-called "realm of necessity". He, for example, quoting Popper (but also paraphrasing Marx) problematizes the distinction that places the activity of fishing or hunting in World 1 and creative production in World 2, because the two are also qualitatively related each other and to the

generative potential of World 3. Liberty of agency, therefore, is a cross problem running through the 3 Worlds, and this perhaps led Dahrendorf to drop the analytical distinction proposed by Popper (Dahrendorf 1981: 122), mentioning in this case the role of ligatures but not going deeper.

This article continues the series of publications in which Ralf Dahrendorf's understanding of ligatures is differentiated and concretized (Kühne *et al.* 2024; Kühne 2024; Kühne and Koegst 2023). In comparison to this article, the aforementioned publications deal in particular with the ethical and moral dimension of ligatures, their degree of explicitness and the question of their directionality (whether as a commitment to one's own actions or the actions of others). In this article, however, we will deal with the significance of the *leib* in relation to ligatures.

In his book *Life Chances*, Ralf Dahrendorf (1979: 199-204) deals with Karl Popper's Three Worlds Theory by referring to his explanations in *The Self and its Brain* (Popper and Eccles 1977). In comparison to Popper's later remarks on the theory of the three worlds (Popper 1996, 2018 [1984]), these three worlds tend to be thought of as separate. In the following sections, we will attempt to establish the links between the three worlds. Beyond these explanations in the book *Life Chances*, Dahrendorf hardly included Popper's three worlds theory in his considerations, and certainly not conceptually (although this would have been possible). In this respect, we will 'read Dahrendorf through the lens of Popper' in the following in order to further work out the extent to which – also with regard to life chances – a Dahrendorfian worldview using Popper's category system is helpful in understanding social problems (this has already been done in other contexts, especially in Dahrendorf's conflict theory: Kühne 2020; Kühne and Leonardi 2022; Kühne, Parush *et al.* 2022).

We have already addressed two desiderata of Popper's and Dahrendorf's perspectives in the introduction, which we will deal with below: Popper's limited consideration of intersubjective processes (other Worlds 2) on the one hand (see section 5) and Dahrendorf's little consideration of World 1 in its significance for social processes. We will deal with this in particular in the following when we expand the concept of ligatures to include *leib*-bound and *leib*-bound-bound social ligatures.

In this context, we will also look at the extension of Dahrendorf's and Popper's understandings, whose conceptions of the three worlds and life chances do not fully spell out their temporal boundedness. This applies even more to the spatial and cultural boundedness. This applies to World 3, which exhibits spatial differentia-

tions, for example in the ability to deal productively with specific parts of World 1 (Kühne *et al.* 2024). However, this also concerns life opportunities that are not available in the same way in all societies and sub-societies, whether due to material-spatial, socio-spatial or culturally bound ligatures.

4. EXPANDING THE UNDERSTANDING OF LIGATURES THROUGH *LEIB*-LIGATURES

Even if the concept of ligatures is initially directed towards the relationship of the individual (World 2) to the social (other Worlds 2, aggregated by contents of World 3), the physical constitution of the human being forms a ‘structurally predetermined field of human action’ (Dahrendorf 1979: 51). As has already been made clear, humans and their bodies are also part of World 1. Human being-in-the-world refers to all three of Popper’s worlds. In this sense, we refer to the human *leib* in our considerations, in the sense of the lived, sensed, living and experienced being of the human being, which is not limited to the material of the body alone. In this respect, we understand the *leib* as human’s being-in-the-world that extends to all three worlds and not just his share in World 1 (body). If we refer solely to human’s share of World 1, we explicitly designate this as human’s body.

In his *leib*-bound constitution, ligatures emerge with particular clarity and immediacy, as the human being can be seen as a «deficient being» (Gehlen 1940) can be described. Their physical constitution in particular considerably restricts their ability to interact in the World 1. However, despite these limitations, humans are able to interact with the world solely in and through their physicality. In this respect, *leib*-bound ligatures are a *conditio qua non* for intersubjective processes, which we will discuss in the following section on *leib*-mediated social ligatures. The understanding of *leib*-bound ligatures makes it clear which ligatures humans are subject to in principle as a hybrid of the three worlds.

Physical ligatures are initially based on the physical specifics of the deficient being human. His viability is linked to a relatively small section of the conditions of contingency offered by the universe. He is only able to live in a very specific composition of the atmosphere, connected to a very small air temperature range, he regularly needs food and is particularly dependent on drinking water. The human body is sensitive to kinetic influences and, compared to other living beings, is only able to carry small loads in relation to its body mass (an ant carries many times its body weight).

However, the ligatures of the *leib* do not only refer to the body. World 2 is also part of the *leib*. The state of the body is shaped not least by how bodily states (World 1) are interpreted by World 2 and how World 2 affects one’s own *leib*. And furthermore, through the mediation of one’s own *leib*, also on the rest of the world.

Leib-bound ligatures change in the course of life: in newborns they are so overpowering that the person just born would not be able to live without help from others. Even if *leib*-bound ligatures can be pushed back in the course of life, a person is dependent on the help of other people in many situations (a simple example: medical help). In old age and old age, the binding effect of *leib*-bound ligatures increases again, as does dependence on others. This is where the social significance of the *leib* becomes clear, which we will look at in more detail in the following section. Before that, however, we want to look at the possibilities of dealing with *leib*-bound ligatures.

Humans are – to a certain extent – able to limit the binding force of ligatures. The *leib* can be geared towards becoming more efficient and resilient through certain activities (such as sport), the enlargement of *leib*-bound ligatures can be restricted by means of medical interventions and people are able to (temporarily) override certain ligatures by means of technical devices (whereby they often subject themselves to other, social ligatures, as will become clear in the next section). To illustrate this with an example: By means of modern transportation, people are technically able to cover large distances in a short time, which they could not achieve on their own due to their physical limitations (at the same time, however, they subject themselves to a network of norms that are a condition for using transportation). The deficient being thesis can therefore be supplemented by the further thesis that humans are also «capable beings» (Gerhardus 1978: 157). In this understanding, ‘the human being’ is also equipped with «faculties, abilities, powers and talents [...] which, depending on his entire biological make-up, are the basis of a multitude of different, mutually promoting and perfecting skills» (Ivi: 151; author’s emphasis). Seen in this light, people may have deficiencies, but they can more than compensate for them with abilities and skills, they can even surpass them: Humans may not be able to do many things (such as fly), but they can do many other things (such as manufacture airplanes). The «determination of man cannot succeed by recourse to biological factors alone» (Recki 2009: 46), with Kant: «The physiological knowledge of man goes to the exploration of what nature makes of man, the pragmatic to what he, as a freely acting being, makes of himself, or can and should make of himself» (Kant 1983: 29). The defects can therefore «be

turned by man into the very means of his existence, in which man's determination to act and his incomparable special position ultimately rest» (Gehlen 1993: 36). To stay with the terminology we use: The human being is able to push back the *leib*-bound ligatures or to circumvent them. The *leib*, in turn, also becomes a projection surface for one's own aesthetic ideas (which in turn are socially mediated, which in turn illustrates the great social significance; Shusterman 2011).

From these brief remarks, the significance of the *leib* in relation to ligatures becomes clear on the one hand, and on the other, their social boundedness and relevance. With regard to Dahrendorf's understanding of ligatures, one could speak of proto-ligatures in the case of *leib*-bound ligatures, as they are a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for social ligatures and are necessarily upstream of them.

5. EXPANDING THE UNDERSTANDING OF LIGATURES THROUGH *LEIB*-MEDIATED SOCIAL LIGATURES

The previous section highlighted key aspects of the constitutive significance of dealing with *leib*-bound ligatures for human existence. However, it also became clear how much the individual is dependent on other people when dealing with *leib*-bound ligatures. Thus, *leib*-mediated social ligatures are based on a person's *leib*-bound vulnerability. On the one hand, this relates to being integrated into World 1; on the other hand, it also relates to World 1 mediated exchange with other Worlds 2. This exchange has a central influence on *leib*-bound perception, but also on the effectiveness of *leib*-bound ligatures, which thus become *leib*-bound-mediated social ligatures. The *leib*-mediated social ligatures prove to be more interesting for the social science perspective than the *leib*-bound (proto)ligatures, as they make it possible to focus on social contexts, in this case, in relation to the integration of World 1 in general and, in particular, the integration of the human being (in its three-world hybridity) in World 1 by means of its body.

With Dahrendorf's understanding of ligatures as «structurally predetermined fields of human action» (Dahrendorf 1979: 51) a categorical framework can be developed according to which the significance of *leib*-mediated social ligatures in such fields can be thought through:

a) In the field of economics, the *leib*-bound nature of social ligatures becomes particularly clear: as a bodily existence, humans are involved in the processes of production, distribution and consumption of

goods and services. In a socially differentiated society, people are not able to secure their existence without being integrated into economic processes (even self-sufficient people remain dependent on the economic field in a variety of ways, such as tools or the need for medical care). Integration into the economic field by means of wage labor is associated with various physical consequences, such as compulsory attendance or certain (one-sided) physical burdens (whether physical or psychological).

- b) The field of politics determines in part the possibilities and limits of the *leib*-bound interaction of people, the use of their technical aids, but also the interaction of people as a *leib*-bound existence with the rest of the World 1. Thus, the field of politics determines who is allowed to use technical aids for dealing with *leib*-bound ligatures and under what conditions - and who is not (for example, participation in motorized private transport is dependent on certain conditions: the suitable preparation of the material space by means of roads, the proven ability of the driver to participate in road traffic, and much more). The implementation and enforcement of this form of *leib*-bound social ligatures is carried out in the field of politics by the administration, while compliance with the rules is monitored by the judiciary. The judiciary, in turn, is able to maximize the application of ligatures to bodily involvement in World 1, for example through deprivation of liberty (in some states it is able to completely abolish bodily involvement in World 1 by means of the death penalty).
- c) The field of social communitization is not least concerned with the social operationalization of ligatures in the form of norms and roles. These are often related to people's physicality, but generally have an influence on it. For example, *leib* ideals emerge in social communities, which are generalized, find social resonance and spread, but can then also be replaced by new *leib* ideals.
- d) The field of culture, to be found in Karl Popper's terminology, especially in World 3, contains various *leib*-mediated social ligatures, for example with regard to the appreciation of the *leib* in comparison to consciousness, the conceptual separability of mind and body, but also the significance of the *leib* as an expression of social status, the desirability of interventions in physical appearance (for example through tattoos), and more generally, the bodily operationalization of *leib*-related aesthetic ideas. Overall, the influence of *leib*-mediated social ligatures on the meaning of options becomes clear at this point.

Innovations in dealing with ligatures have a double bodily reference: firstly, all innovations are mediated by the *leib*, because communication always takes place using World 1; secondly, the innovations can also have bodily relevance, for example when the changes in social-community and cultural ligatures are enforced intersubjectively to shape the *leib*.

From these remarks on *leib*-mediated social ligatures, but also on *leib*-bound (proto)ligatures, their temporal boundedness becomes clear. Different ligatures have different relevance in different phases of life, but ligatures also change in (World 1-mediated) intersubjective exchange. In this respect, World 3 is also subject to change and this change becomes relevant in changed, disappearing, newly emerging ligatures. Thus, innovations in the technosocial context can cause some ligatures to lose relevance, while others emerge or gain importance in order to contain the unintended side effects of innovations (as the example of motorized private transport suggests). However, *leib*-bound and especially *leib*-mediated social ligatures are not only subject to temporal changeability, they are also not (always) universally valid in terms of space. Thus, in different cultural and social contexts, *leib*-mediated social ligatures are differently pronounced, with the result that their physical manifestations meet with a different social resonance; in certain socio-cultural or spatial contexts, tattoos are considered a desirable expression of individuality even in middle-class circles (as in large parts of California), while in other contexts (East Coast) there is little acceptance of them in the same milieu. Linking *leib*-ligatures and *leib*-mediated social ligatures back into the concept of life chances.

The human *leib* (as the connection between worlds 1 and 2) was a prerequisite for the struggle for options and the confrontation with ligatures that had hardly been considered until then. However, as a result of his *leib* bound ties, man is bound to his bodily ligatures in all activities that he carries out. In this respect, their opportunities in life are always bound to these bodily ligatures. Since the human being is a social existence and only in special cases is able to exist outside of social integration over a longer period of time, his corporeality is not limited to individual interaction, but becomes the object and tool of social processes. As a result of the ineluctability of the corporeal, society – as shown in this article – makes use of the corporeality of the human being in order to enforce ligatures.

In sociology, the *leib* was long regarded as a basic condition of social relationships (whether between Worlds 2 or between World 2 and World 3) that was not questioned further. In recent years, researchers from var-

ious critical post-structuralist perspectives (prominent examples include Bourdieu 2016; Butler 2011; Foucault 2012[1985]) have worked out that corporeality is part of the social. The constitutive significance of people's attachment to World 1 was not taken into account in Dahrendorf's concept of life chances, nor was the intersubjective attachment of the development of World 2 in the work of his teacher Karl Popper. In combination with the constitutive extensions of the concept of life chances made here to include bodily and bodily-bound social ligatures on the one hand and the introduction of the intersubjective component in Popper's three worlds theory on the other, we are in a position to establish an understanding of the social connections of humans via their bodily constitution, which places their creative handling, their self-determined handling and the innovative capacity of humans in dealing with their bodies at the focus of considerations, not the passive dimension as an object of the inscription of social processes.

The fact that the *leib* is undoubtedly an object of social measures has been sufficiently discussed in this article. However, ligatures, especially if they are self-chosen, are able to lend meaning to options. This gives rise to life chances. Life chances are – as shown – constitutively linked to the physical existence of human beings. Reflecting on the ligature-like nature of the *leib* can be a starting point for the development of options; this applies in particular to *leib*-mediated social ligatures. Only by becoming aware of *leib*-mediated social ligatures can they be questioned with regard to the degree to which they are binding and follow, partially follow or not follow them can arise. Life scope for action for a decision to opportunities arise from the possibility of making these decisions. A prerequisite for the ability to recognize ligatures (whether bodily bound or socially mediated) and to reflect on one's own life situation is the ability to reflect, which does not arise solely from the individual World 2, but is mediated intersubjectively – by other Worlds 2, mediated via World 1 with recourse to World 3. In terms of the goal of increasing life chances, it is therefore the task of society to ensure the ability to question the binding nature and acceptance of ligatures.

In our essay, we have fundamentally addressed the question of expanding the concept of ligatures to include bodily and bodily-mediated social ligatures in order to emphasize the life-opportunity approach around the world-boundedness of human beings. On the other hand, it became fundamentally clear that the expansion of the three-world theory to include intersubjectivity has great potential for integrating the social into this quasi-ontological understanding of the world. Both on their

own, but also in conjunction with each other, require further conceptual and, in particular, empirical study. This concerns, for example, the investigation of the effect of *leib*-related ligatures in different spatial-social environments, but also the investigation of the subjective interpretation of *leib*-related and *leib*-mediated social ligatures in different life situations or the connection of options in relation to forced or chosen ligatures.

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Generations, Education and Common Values: a study on five Italian cohort-generations, from the Reconstruction to Gen Z

MATTEO BONANNI

Abstract. The concept of values has long been at the core of sociological discussions. Considering the extensive range of literature and diverse approaches, there is a clear gap to be addressed. Lyons and colleagues (2005, 2007) have noted the absence of studies investigating value differences between generations. In this paper, data were used from the Italian subsamples of the European Social Survey (ESS) for the years 2018, 2020, 2022 to provide evidence to fill part of this gap. The paper's goals are to fill the gap in literature and determine if values can differentiate generations that are close in time. These goals will be pursued using the Basic Human Values theory of S. H. Schwartz that are currently part of the ESS questionnaire and the cohort-generation tool for the comparison. Five different cohort-generations were considered: the Reconstruction generation (born between 1927 and 1948), the Baby Boom generation (born between 1948/49 and 1968), Generation X (born between 1968/69 and 1979), Y (1979/80 and 1995) and Z (1995/96 and 2008). The last, complementary goal is to understand whether education (which can be considered the biggest change that has affected generations over time) can describe the changes in values over generations. This will be done in line with an awareness of the fundamental role of education and its potential to change values, attitudes and expectations.

Keywords: generations, values, education, social change.

1. GENERATIONS AND VALUES

In contemporary times, individuals of all ages are intertwined in a mosaic of relationships and values that are in a constant flux of changes. From the post-World War II era to Generation Z, each generation has its own distinct perspective and worldview. These perspectives are mutable over time, shaped and reshaped by experiences, contexts, culture, technology and more. Within this intricate and dynamic framework, it is important to observe the divergent perspectives and values of these groups, which create a compelling landscape for studying social changes and identity. Examining a generation comprehensively is a complex task that requires focusing on the multiple levels that constitute it. In discussions about generational unity, it is crucial to always consider the contexts and connections that define them (Mannheim

1952; Casavecchia 2022). This paper aims to compare generations and differentiate them using values as a tool, which unlike other variables, can reflect historical contexts as well as the relationships inherent in each generation. While there has been extensive research on values and generations, particularly in relation to work and its evolution, few studies have focused on fundamental human values (Lyons *et al.* 2005; Robinson 2013). In this work, Basic Human Values (BHV) refer to Shalom A. Schwartz's theory (1992), building upon Clyde Kluckhohn (1951) and Milton Rokeach's (1973, 2008) studies on values. This theory is now part of the European Social Survey (ESS) questionnaire. According to Schwartz (1994: 20): «A value is a (1) belief (2) pertaining to desirable end states or modes of conduct, that (3) transcends specific situations, (4) guides selection or evaluation of behavior, people, and events, and (5) is ordered by importance relative to other values to form a system of value priorities».

Values, as understood here, represent elements that articulate conscious goals, theoretically and empirically addressing fundamental aspects of human and social nature, such as biological needs, the necessity of social interaction, and the requirements of well-functioning social groups.

2. THE BASIC/PERSONAL HUMAN VALUES

Schwartz's values address the intrinsic aspects of individuals, societies, and cultures. These values consist of ten basic values and four higher-order values. These are operationalized through 21 items¹ on a likert scale² (PVQ 21) in the ESS questionnaire. The foundation of this typology of values is based on the idea that they represent a circular continuum of motivations (Schwartz 1992, 2006, 2012, 2016). Each segment of this circle is a fuzzy subset of other values arranged conventionally (see Figure 1). There are 19 basic values in total, comprising ten personal or individual values encapsulated within four groups.

In the author's early analyses (Schwartz and Sagiv 1995), different sets of values were studied using smallest space analysis, which supported the concept of regions of values. These configurational analyses enabled the observation, across various country samples,

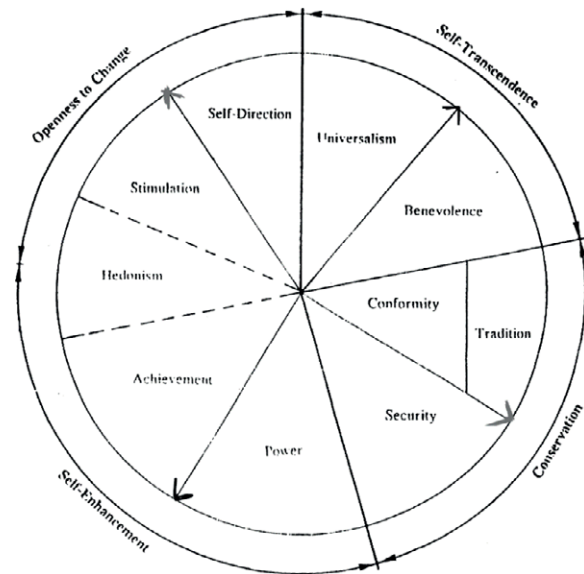


Figure 1. Theoretical model of relations among motivational value types, higher order value types, and bipolar value dimensions. Source: Schwartz 1994.

of the value structure theorized by the author and the specific relationships in terms of distance or proximity between values. The theoretical framework organizes the four highest values along two polarized dimensions: openness to change versus conservatism, and self-enhancement versus self-transcendence. The first dimension distinguishes between dynamic values and those oriented towards maintaining order, while the second dimension separates values focused on altruism and universalism from those emphasizing self-interest more broadly. This dynamic criterion of contrast is rooted in considering both the harmony and conflict among values in decision-making (Schwartz 2012). S. H. Schwartz explains this dynamic within a universal value structure: vertically, there is contrast between personally focused values (self-enhancement and openness to change) and socially focused values (conservation and self-transcendence). Horizontally, values are contrasted based on factors like anxiety, loss aversion, promotion of gain goals, and self-protection versus self-expansion and growth (self-enhancement and conservatism versus openness to change and self-transcendence) (Schwartz 2006). These highest values lie above ten other values constituting them: Openness to change comprises self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism, which collectively signify independent thought and action, seeking novelty and challenge in life, and deriving gratification from oneself; Conservatorism comprises security, conformity, and tradition, reflecting desires for societal stabil-

¹ ESS questions: «Now I will briefly describe some people. Please listen to each description and tell me how much each person is or is not like you. Use this card for your answer» – <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/ess-methodology/source-questionnaire>

² Very much like me, Like me, Somewhat like me, A little like me, Not like me, Not like me at all

ity, adherence to social norms, and respect for customs, ideas, and traditional cultural or religious prescriptions, not to be confused with political conservatism; it should be understood as a general spirit of preservation which individuals tend to adopt; Self-enhancement includes achievement and power, indicating aspirations for success, demonstrating competence in social contexts, attaining prestige and status, and controlling resources; Self-transcendence encompasses values such as benevolence, universalism, and humility, focused on enhancing the well-being of close individuals, appreciating the well-being of people and nature in general (Sagiv and Schwartz 2022). As noted by Davidov (2010), these values are generally considered a fundamental aspect of culture that is not easily quantifiable. When considering generations as social groups and examining a cultural element such as basic values, we can hypothesize that these may offer distinct criteria that extend beyond social structures and the increasingly similar social contexts in which different generations live (Chisolm 2023). Regarding this topic, Lyons and colleagues (2005: 769), «despite the lack of empirical evidence to support a generational value typology», present some evidence related to the difference between the Baby Boom generation and the Generation X. The aim of the scholars is to specify differences in BHV between people of different generations (Lyons *et al.* 2007).

3. VALUES, MICRO AND MACRO CHANGE OF SOCIAL GENERATIONS

In this framework, generations play a dual role in social change, both driving and promoting it while also being influenced by it. Values concurrently undergo change (Cavalli 2004). This is especially evident when examining generations during their youth, where youth perspective acts as a primary catalyst for social change (Cuzzocrea 2022), distinct from viewing youth merely as alternatives to the dominant culture (sub-cultural perspective; Bennett 1999) or as immature individuals (big grown-up babies or choosy, as commonly portrayed in Italian public opinion).

To understand the change in values as a generation-defining element here, we can use the category “social generation” (Woodman and Wyn 2015), also seeking to integrate the critics of other authors (France and Roberts 2015). This approach not only considers the structural and biological aspects that define a generation, which would provide only a contextual definition, but also incorporates values, cultural elements, and individual factors. This comprehensive perspective enables a

deeper study, encompassing the identity of a generation and its internal relationships to go beyond the conflicting relationships between the concept and associated critiques, which assert that the concept of social generation improperly challenges the notion of social change by disputing the role of class struggle or even technological innovation (Thorpe and Inglis 2019). In the conclusion of one of their works, the major critics of the approach affirm:

We think a more important and relevant way of looking at these questions is by exploring the interrelationship between macro- and micro-processes that underpin the everyday social practice of young people (ed. or generations in general) (France et al., 2012). For example, we need to recognize how neo-liberalism and global capitalism act as a force of creative destruction’ (Harvey, 2005) that not only constructs and shapes the macro world but also the types of relationships we have (through relations in the workplace, education, the family and beyond) (France and Roberts 2015: 227)

We can address this critique by recalling that in sociology, C.W. Mills (1959) asserted that a social study cannot be considered complete unless it addresses the intersections of biography and history. Following the previous academic and echoing earlier thinkers such as Ortega Y Gasset (1923) and Mannheim (1952), Abrams (1982) emphasized the importance of historical interpretation in understanding generations. Expanding upon the insights present in these classic perspectives, it is possible to provide a framework that considers both macro-social and micro-social aspects, as well as contextual and international dimensions. Furthermore, other approaches can be used that have provided tools for studying possible micro-macro combinations (Coleman 1994; Ramström 2018).

To better understand and use the concept of social generations, we necessarily explore two main paths: (1) focusing on the original concept to understand and study peculiarity and differences in micro and macro aspects of generations, and (2) exploring the expansion of the concept into the idea of a global generation (Roberts and France 2021). Regarding the first path, there is a notable oversight in considering elements of generational identity that define differences between generations. While this does not negate the validity concept of generation, the absence of common analysis criteria exposes the concept of generation to uncritical and popular usage by media and the marketing world. Moreover, the concept of social generation challenges the other theories of social change, such as the class struggle theory or that of technological innovation. Therefore, the proposal here is to consider the history and loca-

tion of generations, trying to address the possibilities of conciliating these elements. As modernity progresses, interpreting the birth and constitution of generations becomes increasingly intricate, underscoring the necessity to identify criteria for identifying the generational unity. The discussion does not encompass the second path directly; however, it is possible to offer valuable insights for examining it. The concept of global generations (Beck 2008; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2009) poses many problems likely related to a misunderstanding of the original concept of generations (Thorpe and Inglis 2019). Firstly, it is true that global phenomena and international communication possibilities have multiplied, but it is equally true that these are experienced differently depending on individuals' reference categories, which are partly influenced by geographical, historical, and social origins, as well as many other factors. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2009) critique of the concept of generation as methodological nationalism is fundamentally flawed because it fails to account for differences among individuals and, secondly, it conflates the global north and global south, which are not two precise generational units. Moreover, Mannheim already had a sensitivity that extended beyond national boundaries, and his arguments connected the emergence of new generations or generational units to history and geographical location, thus taking the context into account (Woodman 2016).

These digressions are useful for the following work, both to provide an overview of the discussion on the concept of generation and to introduce the comparative possibilities offered by Schwartz's BHV in the debate on generations. Vertically across age groups and horizontally across countries, these values can be one of the elements that help to question and refine concepts, given the availability of data, questionnaires, and theoretical frameworks.

3.1 *Changing values*

The discussion on values intersects debates about generations. Another influential figure in the discourse on values, Ronald Inglehart, preceded Schwartz with similar insights. Despite starting from different assumptions and operationalizations, their perspectives do not significantly differ.

In Schwartz's theory, there appears to be an association between generational changes and values. For instance, he links the level of security experienced by generations to their values: during periods of high insecurity, values of conservatorism and self-enhancement tend to be more pronounced, whereas values of openness to change and self-transcendence are more prevalent during secure times (Egri and Ralston 2004).

In Inglehart's Theory of Silent Revolution, he identifies a correlation between economic well-being, the affirmation of democracy, and changes in values over time (Inglehart [1977] 2015; Inglehart *et al.* 1998). Higher levels of economic and personal security are associated with the transition from materialist to post-materialist values. This theory is built on the pillars of resource scarcity and socialization: as societies satisfy basic needs and achieve a certain level of material and cultural wealth, values such as freedom, personal growth, health, and environmental concern emerge. These values have shown stability across time and generations. Translating these concepts into common generational labels, from the Baby Boomer generation onward, societies have moved into a post-materialist era (Inglehart 2018). The major difference between these two ways of observing change lies in the structural conception of value: in the case of personal or basic human values theory, these are defined «as desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people's lives» (Schwartz 2016: 63); in the case of Inglehart's theory the explanation is endogenous and focused on the mutation of values linked to the primary and secondary needs (Maslow 1948) caused by the socio-economic circumstances (Inglehart 1977; 1990). This difference partly explains the use of the BHV theory in this work. The debate is focused on the difference between the studies supporting the idea of the rank of values and their replacement and radical change over time, versus others that support the thesis of rating values, their co-presence, and their dominance-values mix over time (Bettin Lattes 2014). When considering values as a ranking, they are in conflict, while when considering values in a rating, there are some elements of rationality, and these are understood together in multiple and even contradictory shapes. The choice of approach depends on the researchers, yet we cannot establish whether one approach is better than the other, while we can bring evidence to help us determine which one better contributes to understanding social reality (de Lillo 1988). In the Italian framework, Antonio de Lillo carried out some studies on values and youth. Like the more recent studies on the crisis's effects on values, he noticed the necessities of security of the generation of the 1980s. In the classification of this work, these years represent Generation X's full of youthfulness and the transition to adulthood, along with the birth of the first members of Generation Y (de Lillo 1988). This result already contradicted Inglehart's findings. In the general and modern international landscape, there seems to have been a resurgence of material values in recent years according to the Inglehart's thesis, likely due to various fac-

tors such as economic crises (2008), political turmoil, health crises (2019-2022), and armed conflicts (e.g., the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the renewed instability in the Middle East). This phenomenon has been referred to as a backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Specifically, in relation to the global financial crisis of 2008, some scholars have noted a radical shift in values among certain cohorts of European youth (Sortheix *et al.* 2019). This shift primarily concerns the value of security, influenced by subsequent welfare state cuts. Inglehart also used the value of security to highlight these changes. However, using Schwartz's categories, the financial crises led to an increase in values such as tradition and security, with a less pronounced rise in conformity. Conversely, values related to hedonism, self-direction, and stimulation have decreased, while benevolence has increased. Observing these first results, and moving from the same assumption, the theories of Schwartz and Inglehart demonstrate a different sensitivity to the changes and adaptive reaction to values of people in contemporary history, as highlighted by de Lillo in the 1980s.

3.2 *The channel of values: the role of education*

Values and education have always been analyzed in sociology. For instance, Karl Mannheim discussed the important role of education in fostering democratic values (Casavecchia 2017). In the education debate, structuralist views, which see the transmission of values as positive, are contrasted with critical views that consider them a tool of domination (Giancola and Salmieri 2024). This debate is relevant in the context of generational studies in Western societies, given the widespread expansion of education. This phenomenon is one of the most significant contributors to generational differentiation (Giancola and Bonanni 2023). The underlying hypothesis concerns the relationship between education and changes in BHV across generations, given that the increase in participation in formal education is the most evident phenomenon affecting different generations. Despite critical or functionalist perspectives on the role of education in value transmission, it is recognized that values and educational choices are strongly interconnected with individuals' backgrounds and life circumstances. Educational institutions are specialized in transmitting values and could change them, while values can sometimes influence educational achievement (Vecchione and Schwartz 2022). All Western societies transmit values through education, fostering intellectual openness and the capacity to question established norms and cultural traditions as education levels rise. In the BHV theory, Schwartz (2007, 2012) identifies and reports a statisti-

cal association between universalism and participation and achievement in higher education, with the values in a reciprocal and linear relationship. In Italy, studies have shown a positive correlation between education levels and values of stimulation and self-direction, and a negative correlation with values of tradition and security (Schwartz *et al.* 2012; Capanna *et al.* 2005). It is important to acknowledge that many factors influence this association, such as teachers, peer groups, school principals, micro-policies, etc., especially in contemporary liberal democracies where educational inequalities persist.

In this sense, schools, rather than education in general, serve as a double-edged sword: they transmit both knowledge and competencies while also reproducing values across generations (Halstead and Taylor, 2005). In this intermediary position, schools and education are crucial for shaping value awareness, though their influence can at times be critical.

4. METHODOLOGY

The ESS databases of waves 8, 9 and 10 (2016; 2018; 2020) were used for the analysis, extracting only the Italian subsample (15,639 cases). To identify the cohort-generations, the variable "Year of Birth" (*yrbrn*) was recoded into five categories: Generation Z, which includes those born between 1996 and 2008, Generation Y or millennials, which includes those born between 1980 and 1995, Generation X, which includes those born between 1969 and 1979, the Baby Boom generation, which includes those born between 1949 and 1968 and the Reconstruction Generation, which includes those born between 1927 and 1948. The logic behind these five cohort-generations is linked to the necessity to identify groups which make it possible to conduct statistical analyses, attempting to adhere as closely as possible to the definition of generation. The values were constructed using two sets of theoretically oriented principal component analyses (PCA), the first on the 21 items of the questionnaires divided by the ten personal values described above and the second on the ten extracted, divided by the four highest values. This was followed by a series of bi- and trivariate analyses aimed at highlighting differences and similarities in values among cohort-generations.

5. DISTINGUISHING GENERATIONS BY VALUE ORIENTATION

Observing the aggregate means of the components representing BHV, the differences between generations

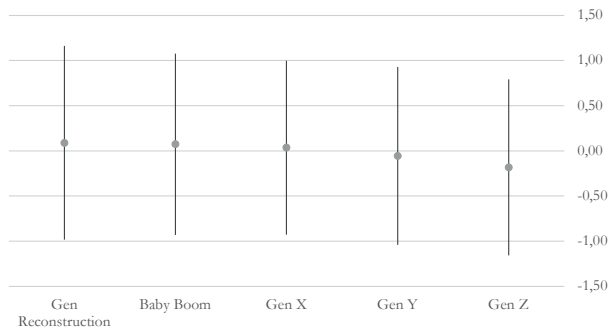


Figure 2. Mean scores on the conservatorism value by cohort-generations. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

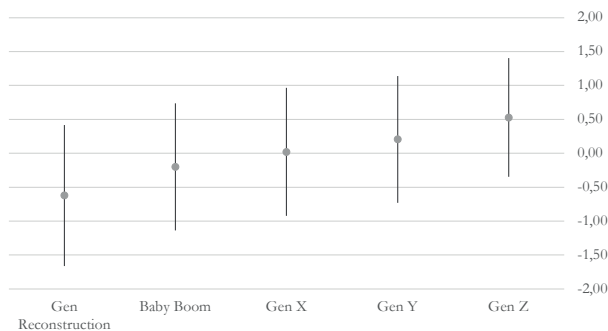


Figure 3. Mean scores on openness to change value by cohort-generations. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

become apparent. Comparing these generations reveals significant contrasts, particularly between conservatism and openness to change. The oldest generation scores highest on conservatism and lowest on openness to change, while the youngest generation shows the opposite trend. This suggests a linear reduction across generations, likely influenced by age ($p < 0.00$).

Considering the values of self-enhancement and transcendence, both show higher means among younger generations. The difference is more pronounced in self-enhancement, indicating a notable interest among Generation Z in values related to power and achievement ($p < 0.00$).

In attempting a general explanation, we observe both differences and similarities in how values are perceived across generations: Baby Boomers are closely aligned with the Reconstruction Generation in all the highest values. Generation X fluctuates between negative and positive sides of the spectrum, reflecting their unique experience straddling different social eras compared to the Baby Boomers. This generation serves as a foothold for social change, influencing subsequent gen-

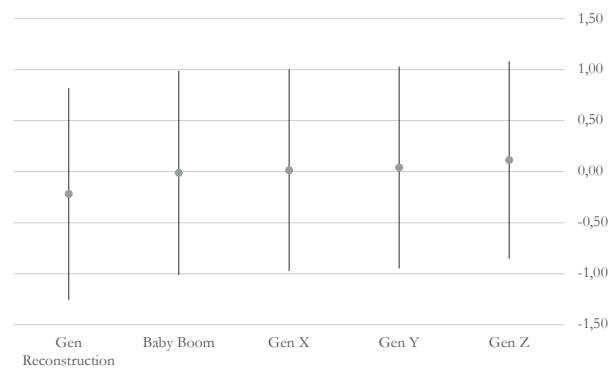


Figure 4. Mean scores on self-transcendence value by cohort-generations. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

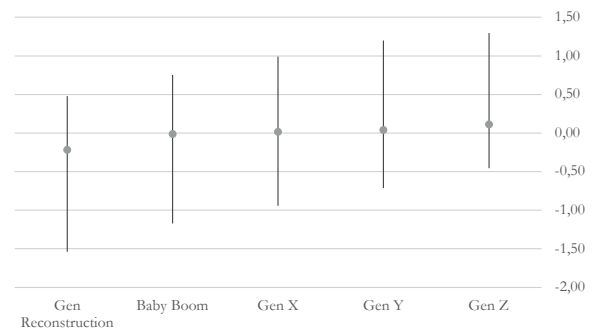


Figure 5. Mean scores on self-enhancement value by cohort-generations. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

erations in diverse ways. Moreover, Generation X differs from Generation Y, with the latter resembling Generation Z to a significant extent. Going deeper, breaking down the values we can observe that Generation X and Generation Y are differentiated by varying levels of self-enhancement and conservatism, which manifest in differing means for values related to power, achievement, hedonism, tradition, conformity and security ($p < 0.05$).

This distinction is necessary, as these two generations are the most challenging to differentiate, in that they have not experienced significant historical breaks that set them apart. Moreover, social change has accelerated and made differences more difficult to discern. As stated previously and in line with the objective of using values as criteria for distinguishing between generations, especially those more closely spaced in time, it is also crucial to consider the details. This is precisely because these generations exemplify the point made by L. Chisolm (2023). In attempting to explain this, we can hypothesize that the Italian Generation X, being the first to experience worse conditions than their parents

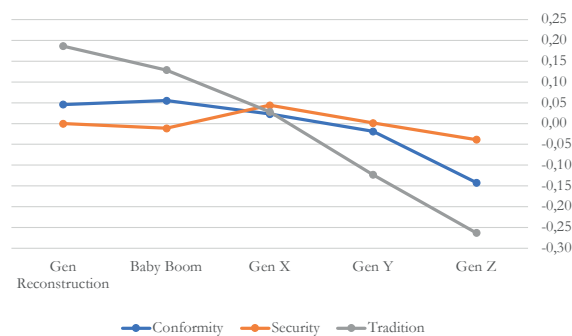


Figure 6. Mean scores on conservatorism sub-values through cohort-generations. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

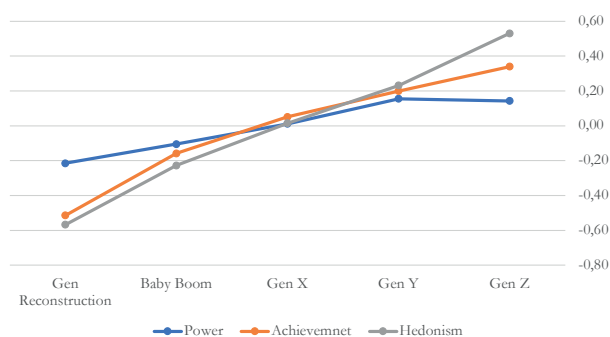


Figure 7. Mean scores on self-enhancement sub-values through cohort-generations. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

(Schizzerotto *et al.* 2011), developed a stronger inclination towards conservatorism not only culturally but also structurally. When we associate this with increasing levels of self-enhancement compared to previous generations, this combination of values can provide insight into the value orientations of these two generations. The first generation had to adapt to a crisis context, while the second generation was born into crisis conditions and was probably already equipped with some tools to navigate difficulties (McCrindle 2003, 2006).

Using cohort-generations as a proxy for historical periods, we observe an overall increase in self-transcendence, self-enhancement, and openness to change. Conversely, conservatorism shows a significant decrease.

5.1 Education changing values

Arguably, one of the most significant changes in generational history is the expansion of the educational system (Giancola and Bonanni 2023). As discussed earlier, today's younger generations are much more educat-

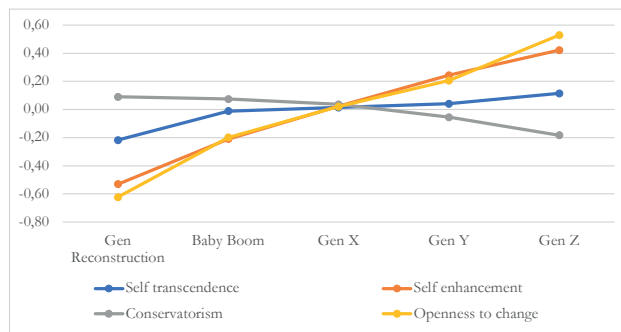


Figure 8. Mean scores on highest values through cohort-generations. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

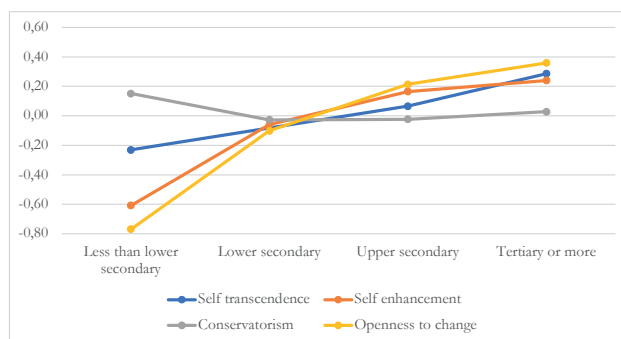


Figure 9. Mean scores on highest values through cohort-generations and level of education. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

ed than their predecessors. The underlying hypothesis of this paper thus revolves around the idea that education, now playing a fundamental role, drives changes in values or is closely associated with them. Specifically, we anticipate that all four of the highest values will increase with higher levels of education, except conservatorism, which we expect to decrease. As illustrated in the following graphs (see Figure 9), the mean value increases across all cases except for conservatorism ($p < 0.00$).

As educational qualifications increase, self-transcendence – which includes values such as universalism and benevolence – increases. Similarly, self-enhancement, which encompasses values related to power, achievement, and hedonism, as well as openness to change, which consists of stimulation and self-direction values, also increase. This provides insight into the role of education and emerging trends across generations. We must first reiterate, as previously stated, that three of the five cohort-generations under observation (Generations X, Y, and Z) experienced what we have referred to as the expansion of education, a period in which education became more widespread and ceased to be the prerogative of the upper social classes. This shift may have led

to changes in value systems. Naturally, this expansion means that the number of upper secondary graduates is significantly higher in Generation X, while the number of university graduates (due to demographic and social factors) is greater in Generation Y. It is important to clarify that the aim here is not to quantify the net effect of educational expansion on values, but rather to observe how these values change over time, with the understanding that this phenomenon may have influenced part of this transformation. Consistent with this, the following section will explore the trivariate relationship between education, generations, and BHV.

5.2 Issue of values: education between generations

Comparing the means for educational level attained within all generations, we observe some similarities and differences that highlight the closeness of certain generations. For self-transcendence, the effect of the level of education increases the means of the value bringing all generations closer, except for the Reconstruction Generation. The largest increases were observed in Generation Z, X and Y. For the Baby Boomers, the increase is less pronounced compared to the subsequent generations. We can infer that an increase in the level of education, apart from in the Reconstruction Generation, involves an increase in levels of self-transcendence that brings generations closer together ($p < 0.00$).

In self-enhancement, the distance between the generations remains constant. In order from the oldest to the youngest generation, we notice that as the cohort-generation increases, the starting point is higher than that of the previous generation and continues to increase, maintaining a constant distance between the levels of education. In other words, it is a scalar equivalent effect ($p < 0.00$).

In conservatism, the similarities are more specific. As educational levels increase, the level of conservatism increases for Generations X and Y, despite starting from much lower levels than the Baby Boomers and the Reconstruction Generation. While the increase for the former is substantial, it is not the case for the latter pair, where there is a decrease. For Generation Z, which starts from the lowest level of conservatism of all, there is an increase that brings it roughly to the levels of the Baby Boomers and the Reconstruction Generation. Thus, it can be said that for Generations X and Y, the importance of tradition, conformity, and security returned with an increase in the level of education, opposite the trend seen in the older generations ($p < 0.00$).

The openness to change increases with the level of education starting from higher levels in successive gen-

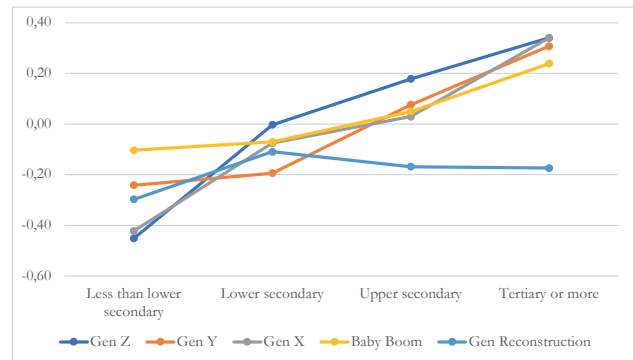


Figure 10. Mean scores on self-transcendence by cohort-generations through level of education. Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.

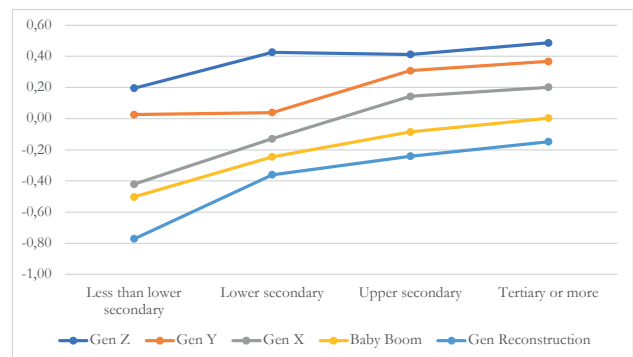


Figure 11. Mean scores on self-enhancement by cohort-generations through level of education. Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.

erations. The results may be influenced by the number of cases in all categories ($p < 0.00$).

Considering these results, we can attempt to provide an interpretation related to the macro-themes characterizing the values debate. The growth in levels of self-transcendence and self-enhancement is probably related to changes in the production system and economic paradigm, currently neoliberal (Piurko *et al.* 2011; Beattie 2019). As educational qualifications increase, the younger generations exhibit higher levels of self-transcendence, even starting from lower averages, likely due to a greater awareness of the need for universalism in an interconnected world, and benevolence. For self-enhancement, as the neoliberal logic becomes increasingly embedded in individuals, the value means increase with educational qualifications across all generations. The distinction between generations is likely more pronounced for self-enhancement, but the latter and self-transcendence clearly indicate the combined effect of educational qualifications and generational differences. Openness to

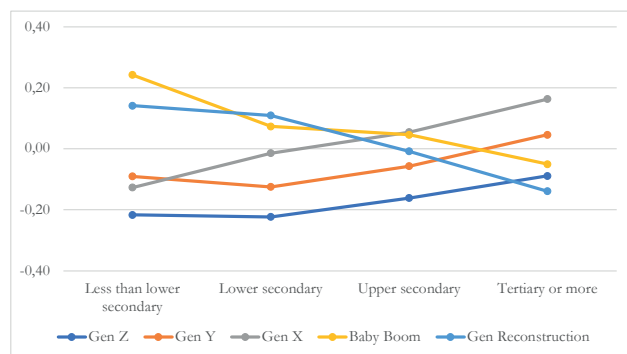


Figure 12. Mean scores on conservatism by cohort-generations through level of education. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

change and conservatism likely tie in with the concept of crisis (Sortheix *et al.* 2019). For all generations except

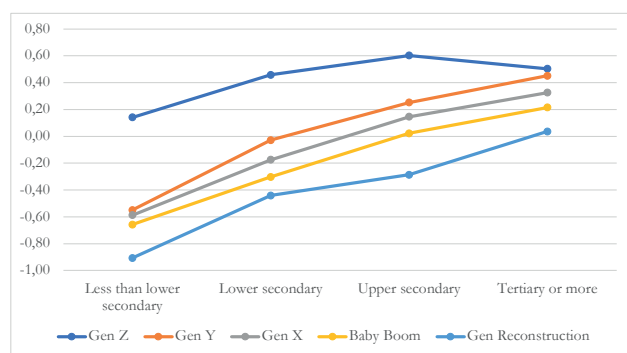


Figure 13. Mean scores on openness to change by cohort-generations through level of education. *Source: Author elaboration on ESS data.*

Gen Z, openness to change values increase as educational qualifications rise. These values instead decrease upon graduation from tertiary education for Generation Z, remaining very close to the levels of Generation Y. This aligns with the debate about the role of crises, but the effect of educational level reached appears independent of this, given that educational level reached increases across generations. This increase has been described as the largest and most stable change among generations, impacting values; vice versa, these values impact the elements that make up and characterize national educational systems (Benoliel and Berkovich 2018). For conservatism, the trend is not general. As educational levels increase, the slope of conservatism steeply decreases for the Reconstruction and Baby Boom Generations, where the prospect of growth was clear, and there was

a possibility of aspiring to individual and collective improvement. For X-ers and Y-ers, particularly the first, the prospects were greatly reduced. It is conceivable that the tendency is to preserve the advantages acquired through qualifications, favoring security that is difficult to achieve and maintain. The same is true for Generation Y, but at lower mean values, and for Z, which starts from much lower levels of conservatism compared to other generations but is growing rather than decreasing. These findings are consistent with the results of de Lillo (1988) on «changing in values»: the generation that lived through the 1980s, Generation X, was then and still is the generation with the highest levels of conservatism or materialist values. The results of the analysis just presented and of the earlier work just mentioned provide clues as to the fact that we are probably not dealing with a backlash, but with new configurations of values resistant to change within generations. X-ers exemplify the enduring disposition of values over time and the latent unity that values represent. From a socio-political perspective, this trend in conservatism can partly explain the return of the political right and the populist and security rhetoric, not considering all the other possible factors that can contribute to explaining this phenomenon. Right-wing parties are often, and generally, more inclined than others toward conservative strategies, tending to capture the prevailing spirit of preservation that individuals exhibit during certain historical periods (based on an association between historical and empirical evidence, this hypothesis should be verified through further research and consolidated data). Additionally, this trend challenges the materialist and post-materialist logic of value substitution from older to younger generations as a general trend because the disposition to conservatism of the X-ers remains constant and is evident when comparing them with Y-ers. Furthermore, this trend is parallel to the trend of the other values, giving a consistent gradient of the Generation's possible combination of values. Conservatism increases alongside openness to change – the former a proxy for materialist values and the latter for post-materialist values. Noting this, we can affirm that there is not a backlash of materialist values in the Italian case, but rather a new configuration and shaping of values.

6. CONCLUSION

The study progresses through three stages of analysis – from monivariate to trivariate – emphasizing the importance of examining the nuances of generational values. Classical sociology teaches us that values can

guide actions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Durkheim 1920; Weber 1922; Blumer 1966). From a mono-variate perspective, it is notable that the differences between generations that are closer in time are more striking than those between the youngest and oldest. The shifts in polarity between Generation X and Y with respect to conservatorism levels are particularly notable (see Figure 6). All the component values of self-enhancement are observed increasing (see Figure 7). Regarding the first, while traditional and conformity values tend to decline, albeit slowly post-Generation X, security values remain relatively steady, with a peak observed in Generation X – current adults who experienced the 2008 crisis in their youth. These values then remain positive but begin to decline again for Generation X and Y. From a bivariate perspective, this trend is even more pronounced across generational continuities and educational attainment levels, where conservatorism is the only value that increases with higher education levels but decreases over generations. From a trivariate perspective, plotting education levels on the x-axis and mean values on the y-axis, we observe that all the values tend to increase with higher generations, with self-transcendence showing the most significant growth among education levels. Analyzed across generations, conservatorism shows a positive trend with increasing educational qualifications for Generations X and Y, while it increases but remains negative for Generation Z. This contrasts sharply with the older generations where conservatorism values remain low despite increasing educational qualifications, contradicting expectations. Education exhibits a variable role across generations and values. Up to the trivariate level, the observed potential of education confirms what is found in the literature and described in the initial paragraphs. For all values, except for conservatorism, the trend is increasing but not for all generations: for X and Y, the trend is increasing in this regard. It was expected that with increasing education levels, the mean for each cohort-generation would decrease for this highest value. Therefore, the results presented contradicting expectations, at least at the descriptive level.

In summary, values appear to be a useful criterion for distinguishing generations, alongside their historical context in space and time, at least within the Italian case considered here. Based on these analyses, we can assert that values have not simply been replaced from one generation to another; they are instead reconfigured, forming new combinations. Thus, positive conservatorism values coexist with openness to change, self-transcendence, and self-enhancement, indicating a general shift in societal values rather than a resurgence of old values. However, there has been a resurgence of popu-

list and security-driven political rhetoric, emphasizing values associated with conservatorism, particularly security, over time. In conclusion, further analyses should explore generational shifts in values to better understand the deeper concerns of the population (particularly in Italy, capturing both the growing emphasis on security and the enduring openness to change). These analyses should also extend to countries where right-wing parties have regained support following periods of crisis and should further explore the findings presented so far, attempting to understand, from a multivariate perspective, the direct impact of cohort-generations on changing values, in combination with the education variable. The goal is to discern the net effect of both variables on value changes, and more importantly, to determine whether such an effect exists at a more complex level of analysis.

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***Community organizing* di S.D. Alinsky: pratiche di gestione del conflitto sociale all'interno delle democrazie liberali**

FRANCA BONICHI

Abstract. In recent years, several countries governed by liberal democracies – including Italy – have witnessed the emergence of significant “bottom-up” political initiatives aimed at challenging dominant power structures and advocating for their social redistribution. Many of these initiatives have drawn, either directly or indirectly, on the radical-democratic current of community organizing, founded by sociologist Saul David Alinsky, who was trained in the Chicago School of the 1930s. After years of obscurity, Alinsky’s name resurfaced in public debate, particularly during the election campaigns of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton – albeit with different connotations. While Clinton’s undergraduate thesis on Alinsky was portrayed as a ‘communist’ precedent from which she sought to distance herself, Obama on several occasions referred to his formative experience as a young community organizer in Chicago, claiming the relevance and effectiveness of such practices, even within the context of an electoral campaign. Community organizing, then – as I will seek to illustrate in these pages – appears to retain significant contemporary relevance, not only as a political practice to counter oligarchic tendencies within our societies, but also as an analytical lens through which to reconsider the profound crisis affecting the political, cultural, and organizational paradigms of liberal democracies.

Keywords: community organizing, social conflict, grassroots mobilization, participatory democracy, political empowerment.

*Il grido dei poveri non è mai stato
'dateci i vostri cuori', ma sempre
'tenetevi lontani'; non chiedono
amore ma uno spazio vitale.
(S.D. Alinsky)*

1. SAUL DAVID ALINSKY (1909-1972)

Trattando di questo tema è d'obbligo partire dall'opera e dal pensiero di Saul David Alinsky che proprio del *community organizing* contemporaneo è stato il fondatore. Ovviamente in questa sede non mi propongo una ricostruzione esaustiva della biografia di questo autore¹ e neppure una organica

¹ Non intendo presentare qui una ricostruzione organica ed esaustiva della biografia di Alinsky, ma limitarmi ad alcune note che possano essere di utile contesto per comprendere meglio la sua

esposizione del suo pensiero e della sua azione quanto piuttosto una riflessione su alcuni temi da lui trattati, sia a livello pratico che teorico, che mi pare contengano ancora una notevole rilevanza per la nostra esperienza contemporanea.

Particolarmente significativo appare il contesto accademico e sociale in cui è avvenuta la sua formazione, la Chicago degli anni Trenta del secolo scorso. Il tessuto sociale della città subisce infatti in quegli anni importanti trasformazioni per effetto di un massiccio processo di urbanizzazione e per la presenza di consistenti flussi migratori che rendono necessari nuovi strumenti di ricerca e di intervento sociale. Si determina così un particolare *milieu* culturale, non solo fortemente caratterizzato dalla presenza della prestigiosa Università in cui avevano insegnato personalità come John Dewey, ma in cui si afferma il giornalismo di inchiesta e di denuncia e assume rilevanza l'intervento sociale organizzato di Jane Adams che per la prima volta mette in discussione l'approccio filantropico borghese con cui venivano trattate fino ad allora povertà ed emarginazione.

Nel 1926 Alinsky si iscrive al Dipartimento di sociologia dell'Università di Chicago e studia con Ernest Burgess e Robert E. Park. Una esperienza fondante rispetto alla sua biografia perché, come è noto, in quegli anni questo Dipartimento diventa un vero e proprio laboratorio in cui si mettono a punto nuovi concetti e nuove tecniche di ricerca. A Chicago la formazione di Alinsky può quindi avvalersi non solo di nuovi strumenti di ricerca sociologica che vedono il coinvolgimento diretto del ricercatore, ma al tempo stesso di un nuovo approccio alle politiche pubbliche fondato su una conoscenza analitica dei settori di intervento ed insieme orientato alla denuncia e alla mobilitazione politica.

Alinsky all'interno di questo contesto costruisce una sua teoria e pratica dell'azione collettiva di cui si possono cogliere i primi elementi già nella sua partecipazione a diversi progetti sulla criminalità. Significativo in particolare è il suo contributo al *Chicago Area Project* finalizzato alla prevenzione della criminalità giovanile che costituisce non solo una conferma di quanto acquisito dai suoi maestri della scuola di Chicago, per cui crimine e disagio sociale andavano imputati alla "disorganizzazione sociale" piuttosto che a cause razziali o ereditarie, ma anche una opportunità di utilizzare tutto un repertorio di strumenti e pratiche innovative (alcune con chiaro riferimento a quelle di *social community survey* apprese da Burgess) che ricorreranno poi in tutta la sua attività sociale. Pratiche quali il coinvolgimento diretto degli

operatori nella vita delle bande giovanili, il reclutamento e la formazione di attivisti locali, la collaborazione con l'associazionismo del territorio, l'organizzazione di nuove associazioni in cui la popolazione potesse definire e poi gestire un programma di intervento su specifici problemi.

Sulla scorta di questa esperienza Alinsky nel 1939 istituisce, insieme a Joseph Meegan il *Back of Yards Neighborhood Council* (BYNC), una coalizione di associazioni e di abitanti, nell'area *Stockyards* di Chicago, quella resa famosa dal romanzo di Upton Sinclair del 1905, *The Jungle*.

Il Comitato promotore di BYNC è composto da una pluralità di attori, dalle chiese cattoliche, alle organizzazioni sindacali, ai commercianti a singoli abitanti.

Per Alinsky l'obiettivo da conseguire era la creazione di una forte, riconoscibile organizzazione locale in uno dei quartieri operai più etnicamente diversificati d'America, facendo leva sugli attori esistenti, le istituzioni religiose, prima di tutto, che nell'ambito del community organizing saranno successivamente definite 'organizzazioni ancora', assieme ad altri soggetti territoriali, e sulla costruzione di un'agenda che fosse rappresentativa di istanze e bisogni percepiti a cavallo delle 'trincee' etniche che strutturavano ma al tempo stesso disarticolavano, la vita locale. (Coppola e Diletti 2020)

Negli anni Quaranta BYNC organizzerà campagne di notevole successo attraverso mobilitazioni volte a risanare le abitazioni, a riequilibrare prezzi e salari, a garantire servizi scolastici e sanitari, a far sparire gli usurai. In dieci anni il quartiere non sembra più lo stesso tanto da far guadagnare a BYNC il riconoscimento del Governatore dell'Illinois, Adlai Stevenson, per aver «trasformato il malcontento sparso e senza voce in una protesta unita». L'attività di BYNC non si limita però ad affrontare i problemi del territorio, ma nel 1946 dà il suo sostegno allo sciopero degli *United Packinghouse Workers*, lavoratori del settore alimentare, aderenti alla confederazione sindacale (CIO) dei lavoratori dell'industria, determinando una convergenza tra chiesa e mondo sindacale assolutamente inconsueta in quegli anni. La sistematizzazione e la ricostruzione delle attività di BYNC costituirà la materia principale di uno dei due testi più importanti di A. *Recall for Radicals!*, pubblicato nel 1946 e recentemente tradotto in italiano.

Sulla spinta di quanto realizzato con BYNC, Alinsky nel 1940, col sostegno del vescovo cattolico Bernard James Sheil, dell'editore del *Chicago Sun-Times* e del proprietario di un grande magazzino Marshall Field, fonda *Industrial Areas Foundation* (IAF). Questa organizzazione intende impegnarsi a livello nazionale soprattutto

azione politica e il suo pensiero. Per un approfondimento sulla biografia di Alinsky il riferimento più importante resta quello di Horwit S.D. *Let them call me a Rebel*, New York, 1989.

nell'ambito della formazione di *social organizer* e di raccolta fondi per campagne di *organizing*. IAF in un periodo, a cavallo tra gli anni Cinquanta e Settanta, opererà con successo dando vita ad organizzazioni e formando attivisti che avranno un ruolo importante nelle mobilitazioni sociali e sindacali di quegli anni. L'ambito di intervento va da campagne per la registrazione elettorale degli elettori messicani (California 1947) alla formazione della prima generazione di dirigenti della *United Farm Workers*, il sindacato contadino di Cesar Chavez e Dolores Huerta.

Negli anni successivi Alinsky contribuisce a costituire *TWO (The Woodlawn Organisation)*, che operava per la difesa dei diritti civili in un quartiere afro-americano di una area marginale di Chicago. Un'associazione di associazioni, come altre organizzazioni IAF, che concorse notevolmente a dar voce a questa comunità anche attraverso la formazione di leader e militanti che poi diventeranno importanti a livello nazionale come Arthur Brazier, in seguito portavoce del movimento *Black Power*.

Nel 1964 sostiene con successo *Rochester Race Riot*, una importante lotta a Rochester contro Eastman Kodak (il cui unico contributo alle relazioni razziali, scherzava Alinsky, era stata l'invenzione della pellicola a colori!) ed altre imprese della città in cui la maggior parte degli operai erano afro-americani che svolgevano lavori sotto pagati, non qualificati e che vivevano in alloggi degradati. Qui Alinsky invitato ad aiutare la comunità nera ad organizzarsi si trova di fatto ad operare con *FIGHT*, un gruppo in cui insieme alle chiese della zona, sono attivi anche leaders neri per i diritti civili.

Alinsky negli anni Sessanta ottiene riconoscimenti importanti. Viene ricevuto da Paolo VI e stabilisce un rapporto di amicizia con Jacques Maritain, il maggior esponente del pensiero cattolico-democratico di quegli anni. È in contatto con Martin Luther King e con i movimenti giovanili degli anni Sessanta con i quali però si trova spesso in disaccordo, specie sul piano ideologico. Analoghe difficoltà caratterizzano i suoi rapporti con il movimento delle *Black Panthers* cui non rimprovera tanto la radicalità, quanto piuttosto la tendenza ad un auto segregazionismo che contrastava con la sua concezione di comunità che, proprio dalle relazioni anche inter-razziali, avrebbe dovuto trarre la sua forza.

Anche dopo la morte di A. gli attivisti del C.O hanno continuato a portare avanti le loro battaglie impegnandosi in campagne di massa per i diritti civili (in particolare per la registrazione al voto delle minoranze) e per i diritti di welfare (Schutz e Miller 2015). Negli ultimi anni anche le campagne per la sindacalizzazione di lavoratori immigrati impegnati nel terziario dei servizi,

come quelle sostenute da *Service Employees International Union*, insieme a nuove forme di sindacalismo territoriale (come quelle sperimentate a Los Angeles), si sono ispirate direttamente alle tecniche organizzative di C.O.

2. ALCUNE PAROLE-CHIAVE

In coerenza con l'approccio pratico utilizzato da Alinsky e poi da quanti hanno fatto riferimento a *community organizing*, ho pensato di presentare quelli che a mio parere sono i capisaldi di questa corrente di pensiero sotto forma di un piccolo, essenziale glossario. L'intenzione è quella di sottolinearne il carattere pratico (Alinsky si riferisce alle sue 'osservazioni' suggerendo di considerarle come facenti parte del taccuino di un *organizer*²) e allo stesso tempo di cercare di sistematizzare notazioni e riflessioni che spesso si trovano disperse e non sempre esposte in maniera organica.

2.1 Popolo

Opportunamente i curatori della recente edizione italiana di *Recall for Radicals* annoverano tra le questioni più significative sollevate da Alinsky «il ritorno dell'importanza del 'numero' come dimensione irrinunciabile della pratica democratica» (Coppola e Diletti: 40). In effetti in molte occasioni A. dichiara, anche con enfasi che «the masses of people were are the substance of society» e come la democrazia sia destinata ad estinguersi senza il supporto di una attiva partecipazione popolare.

In coerenza con questa convinzione A. mette in luce i limiti di una concezione solo procedurale dei sistemi democratici che assegna ai cittadini unicamente il ruolo di elettori e nota come la sfiducia nelle masse che caratterizza i leaders di ogni schieramento sia in netta opposizione con quell'ethos democratico su cui lo Stato americano si è fondato.

The past, the glorious past with all of its comfortable familiarity, was rooted in a general surrender of everyday democratic rights and responsibility of the people. It was founded on masses of people who were and still are denied the opportunity to participate; who are frustrated at every turn and who have been so long that they have lost their voices (Alinsky 2020:193)

² «L'importanza di molte di queste osservazioni, frutto del lavoro sul campo, non può essere sottostimata, ma allo stesso tempo esse non si prestano facilmente a essere suddivise in capitoli. Si addicono piuttosto a quello cui si potrebbe pensare come al taccuino di un organizzatore» (Alinsky 2020: 250)

Non si tratta però solo di dichiarazioni di principio, le masse cui Alinsky fa riferimento sono soggetti concreti, conosciuti da vicino, perché tutta la sua opera appare di fatto orientata a 'guardare dentro le masse' del suo tempo, a documentarne le condizioni di vita, le aspirazioni e ad individuare le difficoltà che si frappongono alla realizzazione di una autentica partecipazione popolare.

Un tema questo che conserva anche ai giorni d'oggi, una significativa attualità, come notano i curatori della recente traduzione italiana, dal momento che consente di avviare una riflessione sulla progressiva svalorizzazione della partecipazione collettiva avvenuta negli ultimi decenni nelle organizzazioni politiche e della società civile dei paesi a capitalismo avanzato e sugli effetti di questo processo rispetto alla vita democratica. All'interno di queste realtà il coinvolgimento attivo degli associati, la loro organizzazione sembra infatti aver lasciato il posto alla professionalizzazione delle funzioni interne, quali l'attività di *lobbying*, la raccolta fondi, la comunicazione. Un processo che in un primo periodo pareva soddisfare, sia esigenze di maggior efficacia dell'azione delle associazioni, sia quelle di una partecipazione meno ideologica e identitaria degli associati. In anni recenti questo modello di "professionismo della società civile" sembra però rivelare significative inadeguatezze rispetto ai problemi emersi all'interno delle società neoliberali che il susseguirsi di crisi economiche hanno contribuito a definire o a riaccutizzare. La riscoperta a livello internazionale di *community organizing* può essere pertanto interpretato come un tentativo di risposta rispetto a nuove domande non solo di salari adeguati e servizi, ma anche ad un bisogno di partecipazione collettiva che la frammentazione sociale e la dimensione multiculturale ha reso sempre più pressante.

Se indubbiamente *community organizing* può essere considerata una corrente di pensiero e di azione votata alla partecipazione popolare è meno chiaro però chi sia il soggetto cui si fa riferimento. Questi 'molti' vengono infatti individuati facendo ricorso a vari termini e locuzioni: popolo, *little people*, gente, gente comune, lavoratori, poveri, persone comuni, esseri umani, non organizzati, etc.

Il testo in cui A. cerca di precisare maggiormente questo tema è probabilmente *Rules for Radicals* (1971), in cui si legge: «L'umanità è stata ed è divisa in tre parti: i ricchi, i poveri e quelli che hanno poco e vogliono di più». In cima a questa piramide trovano posto i ricchi, «con il potere, i soldi, il cibo, la sicurezza e il lusso» (*Ibidem*: 39). I 'poveri del mondo' sono individuati per le loro condizioni di vita: «sulla scena mondiale sono i più numerosi. Sono accomunati da un destino di miseria, di

case cadenti, malattia, ignoranza, debole peso politico e disperazione». Ma anche descritti antropologicamente:

*Rappresentano un ammasso di ceneri fredde di rassegnazione e fatalismo, ma dentro sono tizzoni incandescenti di speranza che possono essere alimentati dai mezzi per ottenere il potere. Una volta che la febbre comincia, la fiamma segue. Non hanno altro posto dove andare se non verso l'alto. Odiano la classe dirigente dei ricchi, con la sua opulenza arrogante, la sua polizia. i suoi tribunali e le sue chiese. La giustizia, la moralità, la legge e l'ordine sono semplici parole usate dai ricchi per giustificare e mantenere lo status quo. Il potere dei poveri risiede unicamente nel loro numero (*Ibidem*)*

Tra ricchi e poveri c'è la classe media. «Personalità sdoppiate», in bilico tra la conservazione dello *status quo* per difendere quello che hanno e la ricerca di un cambiamento che faccia avere loro di più.

Come è facile osservare si tratta di una visione dicotomica della società che non può non richiamare il classico approccio elitista al tema del potere. In coerenza con questa tradizione di pensiero il riferimento alla dimensione aritmetica e quindi alla potenza che il numero conferisce alle masse popolari sottintende infatti un elemento di "omologazione" e allo stesso tempo di "eteronomia". Il numero non solo registra e quindi 'conta' una uguaglianza di condizione, ma allo stesso tempo, escludendo dalla conta chi uguale non è, rende visibile una differenziazione, una giustapposizione, per cui le masse risultano definite in contrapposizione alle élites.

Una rappresentazione dicotomica della opposizione sociale che, è fin troppo ovvio sottolineare, non può che rivelarsi schematica e riduttiva ed in ogni caso inadeguata se proposta per analizzare in modo approfondito l'antagonismo sociale all'interno delle nostre complesse società a capitalismo avanzato. Non è sempre facile, infatti, cogliere appartenenze e connotati sociali comuni nella vasta costellazione dei gruppi antagonisti e quindi individuare con sicurezza gli aggregati sociali cui vecchi e nuovi *winners* e *losers* fanno riferimento. Allo stesso tempo però si potrebbe ipotizzare come questa schematicità di analisi e questa indeterminatezza semantica possa risolversi anche in una risorsa, consentendoci di cogliere un particolare aspetto della crisi che le nostre democrazie stanno attraversando. Il fatto, cioè, che 'i molti', l'attore collettivo principale che ha sostenuto la concretezza operativa della cultura democratica e ne ha legittimato storicamente il quadro istituzionale di rappresentanza e di governo, abbia perso progressivamente identità di appartenenza sociale e soggettività politica. All'interno di questo quadro il numero (il fatto di essere in 'molti') potrebbe infatti essere assunto come una sorta di 'rozzo'

indicatore di una condizione comune di subalterneità sociale e politica. Una condizione in cui l'elemento unificante più significativo sembra quello di trovarsi dalla stessa parte rispetto ad una linea di frattura che continua ad attraversare anche le nostre società, dividendole tra un 'alto' ed un 'basso'. E questo un po' paradossalmente anche quando il potere si rende 'astratto' nei meccanismi finanziari e nelle logiche di mercato e la condizione di subordinati si frantuma, si differenzia e diventa 'invisibile' nel sottosviluppo e nell'emarginazione. Una condizione comune che tuttavia non è sempre facile definire facendo riferimento alle tradizionali appartenenze sociali e utilizzando il classico repertorio lessicale che parla di classe operaia, di massa, di popolo e che quindi sconta una difficoltà anche terminologica ad essere propriamente denominata.

Un problema definitorio che in ogni caso non sembra coinvolgere, e tanto meno preoccupare, gli attivisti di *community organisation* vecchi e nuovi che individuano proprio i *dispossed* nella concretezza della loro condizione di vita (di cui hanno una conoscenza diretta), nell'estremo disagio, prodotto da precarie condizioni economiche e culturali ma anche nell'assenza di prospettiva di cambiamento e di nessuna possibilità di rappresentanza politica. Una situazione anche paradossale, non solo perché clamorosamente collide con l'*ethos* democratico su cui è fondato lo Stato americano, ma anche perché non tiene conto che questi 'molti' potrebbero far valere, anche in modo eversivo, il potere che il numero conferisce loro. Una potenza che può essere agita anche all'interno di discorsi diversi e che, ed A. non ha difficoltà ad ammetterlo, potrebbe persino costituire un rischio e una minaccia per la stabilità dei regimi democratici (un esempio drammatico e recente l'assalto a Capitol Hill del 6 gennaio 2021). Più precisamente rispondendo alle accuse che gli sono state rivolte relativamente al fatto che il potere del popolo potrebbe portare all'affermarsi di regimi totalitari e fascisti, A. nota, con un argomento che sarebbe piaciuto ad Hannah Arendt, come questa possibilità si concretizzerebbe solo quando il potere delle masse si esprimesse come una sorta di 'potenza dell'inerzia', così come era successo in Europa negli anni tra le due guerre.

Questo giudizio non moralistico, né ideologico nei confronti delle masse popolari legittima, sia per A. che per i suoi epigoni contemporanei, il progetto di emancipazione di *community organisation* la cui missione principale è proprio un impegno metodico e paziente contro l'indifferenza e l'apatia (Gecan 2014). Solo una cittadinanza democratica, forgiata attraverso processi di informazione e di educazione può infatti costituire l'unica difesa efficace rispetto ai rischi involutivi sempre presenti anche all'in-

terno di sistemi democratici maturi e, potremmo aggiungere, proprio 'restituendo lo scettro al principe' contrastare anche le derive populiste contemporanee.

2.2 Conflitto

Si è già notato quanto nella formazione di A. sia stato importante il contatto nella Chicago degli anni Trenta, con il movimento *Settlement House* di Jane Adams che rompe con il tradizionale modo filantropico-borghese di affrontare i temi della povertà e dell'emarginazione. Una presa di distanza che caratterizza non solo l'opera di A., ma che costituisce una peculiarità degli interventi sociali anche attuali di C.O. che pongono al centro della loro azione sociale l'inevitabilità del conflitto sociale e la conseguente necessità della costituzione di una struttura organizzativa (*community organisation*) per gestire con successo questo conflitto.

In *Recall for Radicals!* un intero capitolo è dedicato a *Conflict Tactics* e inizia precisando che a *people organisation* non può che costituirsi come a *conflict group* in quanto solo una decisa lotta per i diritti negati a tanta parte dei cittadini può rimuovere le cause che sono alla base di una condizione tanto generalizzata di sofferenza e infelicità.

Its sole reason for coming into being is to wage war against all evils who cause suffering and unhappiness. A People's Organisation is the banding together of large numbers of men and women to fight for those rights which insure a decent way of life. Most of this constant conflict will take place in orderly and conventionally approved legal procedures, but in all fights there came time when 'the low spoke too softly to be heard in such noise of war' (Alinsky 2020: 198)

Il motivo della radicalità di questo conflitto è da ricercare nel carattere strutturale dei mali che affliggono le masse popolari per cui richiedere assistenza sanitaria, migliori scuole, migliori salari, lottare contro la discriminazione razziale significa lottare contro lo status quo in nome della democrazia e della giustizia sociale. La posta in gioco è quindi politica e consiste nel restituire il potere ai cittadini contro le logiche di potere del liberismo capitalista e contro la burocratizzazione statale.

La natura del conflitto cui A. si riferisce si precisa nella parte di *Recall for radical* dedicato al programma. Se la funzione di una organizzazione è quella di diventare forte e potente per realizzare i propri fini è indispensabile che questa possa definire un programma *broad, deep and all-inclusive* (Ivi: 56). Questo precisamente significa che i problemi che riguardano una comunità attengono ad ogni aspetto della vita per cui non si deve cadere nel duplice errore di affrontarli come indipendenti gli uni

dagli altri e quindi di non cogliere la relazione funzionale esistente tra una comunità e la scena sociale più ampia. Molti problemi di natura locale e contingente altro non sono infatti che manifestazioni di agglomerati di conflitti, pressioni, tensioni che riguardano l'intero ordine sociale. Un esempio significativo è quello che A. attinge dalla sua esperienza di 'criminologo' a Chicago quando gli era apparso ben chiaro come la criminalità non potesse essere considerata come un fenomeno isolato ma piuttosto come un problema più generale di disorganizzazione sociale nel suo insieme. Intervenire sul crimine, o sui problemi del disagio giovanile, significava allora affrontare con coraggio e spirito militante questioni strutturali (*basic issues*) come opportunità lavorative, sicurezza economica, alloggio, salute. Questioni fondamentali rispetto alle quali è indispensabile acquisire la consapevolezza che queste sono parte di conflitti sociali più generali e strutturali quali *the concept of guaranteed income and welfare, private and governmental housing, public healthcare and private medical treatment* ed altri ancora (Ivi: 58). Un intervento sociale, che come quelli 'convenzionali', non prenda in considerazione questa relazione, secondo A., è destinato al fallimento e conseguentemente a perdere credibilità. L'esempio riportato è quello dei programmi sociali rivolti alle comunità-slum che invece di porre rimedio a quei problemi di fondo che contribuiscono alla rovina economica dello slum e dei suoi abitanti, hanno principalmente lo scopo di far adattare gli abitanti alle loro difficili condizioni di vita. Questi operatori si presentano alla gente dello slum *under the aegis of benevolence and goodness, not to organize the people, not to help them rebel and fight their way out of the muck. No! They come to get these people 'adjusted'; adjusted so they will live in hell and like it too* (Ivi: 59). Una forma di tradimento sociale (*social treason*) perpetrata in nome della carità che non solo non risolve i problemi ma contribuisce a creare disillusione e apatia. La soluzione sarebbe procurare a queste persone un buon lavoro dignitoso ma il lavoro è un problema fondamentale e *the fight for jobs leads one into the most merciless of arenas, the struggle of capital and labor the fight for life*. I consigli di quartiere tradizionali non possono e non vogliono estirpare i problemi alla radice e pertanto ripiegano su interventi migliorativi irrilevanti e superficiali. A questo proposito A. apre scenari che sembrano presi da un film di Ken Loach quando denuncia l'assurdità di rivolgersi a persone disoccupate, le cui famiglie affogano nella disperazione più cupa, e non offrire loro lavoro e sicurezza ma *supervised recreation, handicraft classes and character building*. E sprezzantemente aggiunge in riferimento ai corsi per la riqualificazione professionale: *To train men for a job*

when is no job is like dressing up a cadaver in a full-dress suit; in the end you still have a cadaver (Ibidem).

Non solo. A. prende esplicitamente le distanze dal modo con cui i *liberal* americani organizzano tipicamente le loro proteste (*conventional liberal protests*) sostenendo senza mezzi termini come un impegno sociale davvero efficace significhi essere coinvolti in una vera e propria *eternal war* e non possa ridursi ad *a philanthropic plaything or a social service's ameliorative gesture* (Ivi: 135).

Con un linguaggio sprezzantemente ironico liquida le *liberal protest* come una forma di dibattito culturale attraverso cui ci si limita all'indignazione, alla riprovazione del comportamento immorale dell'avversario, ed infine all'approvazione di una mozione. I liberali possono al massimo manifestare solidarietà e simpatia per le lotte per la casa, per la sicurezza economica e per altri problemi sociali ma non impegnarsi a fondo per vincere, per ottenere risultati perché queste proteste di fatto non sono loro, non sono per la difesa dei loro diritti.

Nel conflitto contro la sofferenza sociale non valgono regole di *fair play* perché l'avversario agisce contro queste regole, come contro 'le cosiddette regole dell'etica'. L'unica speranza per una P.O per uscire da una pesante situazione di degrado e di sfruttamento è affidata ad un progetto politico (nel senso etimologico di lotta per il potere) per il quale una comunità deve cercare con coraggio, determinazione, efficacia di organizzarsi.

The People Organisation does not lives comfortably and serenely in a ivory tower where is not only can discuss controversial issues but actually possess the choice of whether or not to take a hand in the controversy...shing forces, clash lives in a world of hard reality..in the middle of smashing forces, clashing struggle people s, sweeping cross-currents, ripping passions, conflicts, confusion, seeming chaos, the hot and the cold, the squalor and the drama, which people prosaically refer to as life and students describe as 'society' (Ibidem)

Quanto sinteticamente ricostruito mi pare ci offra l'opportunità per riflettere sul fatto che il tema del conflitto sociale, anche nella sua accezione meno inquietante di conflittualità democratica (con tutte le pratiche a questo connesse), sia divenuto del tutto marginale all'interno del discorso politico di campo progressista.

Un mutamento significativo rispetto al passato, colto anche da alcuni analisti (Zolo 2000; Fassin 2018), secondo cui ad una politica, sostenuta da un forte senso di riscatto collettivo e da una visione della storia intesa come continuo progresso materiale e sociale, sembra essersi progressivamente sostituita una politica «morale», che si manifesta più come testimonianza che come

disponibilità ad agire e che ha convertito le grandi passioni collettive in buoni comportamenti personali. Una impostazione di pensiero e di azione secondo cui l'impegno politico appare caratterizzarsi ai giorni d'oggi più come una presa di posizione privata, anche se agita in pubblico, che come comportamento collettivo su un progetto condiviso di cambiamento. Un'azione politica che d'altra parte sembra ricevere la sua motivazione principale da un uso politico di valori e sentimenti morali come la sacralità della vita umana, la compassione e l'empatia verso la sofferenza, la benevolenza, la solidarietà. Una trasformazione significativa di prospettiva che si manifesta anche nel lessico utilizzato per cui si parla di fragilità piuttosto che di disuguaglianza e sfruttamento, di trauma piuttosto che di violenza, di resilienza più che di resistenza³.

Idea fondante di questo tipo di visione è quella di "umanità"⁴ che presuppone che l'eguaglianza dei diritti sia naturale e che si precisa nella convinzione che tutte le vite siano ugualmente sacre e tutte le sofferenze meritino di essere alleviate. Una convinzione moralmente inattaccabile, soprattutto se contrapposta al cinismo e all'indifferenza che hanno ispirato le politiche securitarie che a partire dai primi anni 2000 hanno caratterizzato lo spazio pubblico. Non è però difficile notare come questo approccio produca un particolare sguardo per cui l'attenzione risulta spostarsi dalle strutture sociali responsabili di quella sofferenza e rivolgersi ad un soggetto-costruito in termini morali nel quale è possibile riconoscersi sulla base di una comunità morale, la presunta unità del genere umano. Questa logica umanitaria, ed è questo forse l'aspetto più interessante, agisce allora, anche se in modo inintenzionale, per privare gli eventi (le migrazioni, la miseria, la fame, la guerra...) di ogni specificità storica e politica e quindi finisce per considerare l'ordine politico all'interno del quale questi si compiono come una "semplice cornice". Si può pertanto produrre il risultato di una sorta di oscuramento delle cause strutturali di disuguaglianza e di sfruttamento dei fenomeni oggetto di intervento che risultano ridotte al ruolo di variabili indipendenti su cui non vale la pena o (nel migliore dei casi) non è possibile intervenire.

³ Emblematiche, a questo proposito, le variazioni intervenute all'interno del campo semantico della parola "solidarietà" che dà valore forte del movimento operaio (solidarietà di classe) è trasmigrata in ambito assistenziale assumendo significati per lo più riconducibile al termine religioso di "misericordia".

⁴ Umanità nella doppia accezione che si può ricavare dalla traduzione dei termini inglesi di *mankind* e *humaneness*. Quindi umanità come insieme di uomini e donne, carattere che li distingue dagli altri esseri viventi (appartenenza all'umanità), ma anche come sentimento morale nei confronti degli esseri umani (dar prova di umanità).

Un uso politico di sentimenti morali che si manifesta anche nelle forme che assume la rappresentazione dell'avversario politico, in modo sempre più ricorrente definito attraverso la contrapposizione tra bene e male. In questo nuovo quadro il nemico politico, soprattutto quello più estremo (ed in questi anni soprattutto sulla scena politica interna e internazionale ne sono apparse varie versioni) non viene più rappresentato come colui la cui azione politica è orientata da una visione del mondo e della società inconciliabile e alternativa rispetto a quella "legittima", ma dal fatto di restare prigioniero di pulsioni talmente intolleranti e basse da metterne persino in dubbio la umanità. Si potrebbe quindi sostenere che nelle raffigurazioni odierne della inimicizia radicale, che pure continuano a far parte della comunicazione politica, non esista più il nemico politico, ma esista solo il reprobato morale, il fuorilegge. Risulta infatti oscurata, o posta in secondo piano, quella situazione di potenziale/latente conflitto, nell'ambito di una particolare contrapposizione di interessi, di definizione di identità, di opposizione sui criteri di allocazione delle risorse, che individua la specificità della politica.

Dalla lezione di Saul Alinsky, così come dalle pratiche di C.O contemporanee, scaturiscono esperienze in netta controtendenza rispetto a questa impostazione per cui proprio attraverso la politicizzazione dei problemi si sono prodotti risultati significativi, a livello locale ma anche nazionale. È quanto è avvenuto in anni recenti, sia negli Stati Uniti che in Spagna, dove si sono sviluppate campagne marcatamente politiche su temi quali lo sfruttamento sul lavoro, la condizione dei migranti, le questioni abitative, la precarizzazione sociale. Una politicizzazione della condizione sociale che non può che riportarci l'eco dei movimenti italiani ed europei degli anni Settanta e di quelli più recenti del social forum.

2.3 Comunità

La nozione di comunità, come è fin troppo ovvio sottolineare, occupa una posizione centrale nella pratica e nella teoria del C.O e forse proprio alla sua valorizzazione si deve il rinnovato interesse per questo approccio.

Se infatti l'orientamento verso la minimizzazione del pubblico nei discorsi e nelle azioni della politica dimostrava già segni di crisi, nei lunghi mesi della pandemia si sono percepiti limiti e fragilità dell'approccio neo-liberista e quindi si è resa più urgente la necessità di superare una visione che faceva dell'individualismo e della competizione i suoi tratti più salienti.

All'interno di questo mutamento di prospettiva, anche se parziale, la nozione comunità ha assunto una nuova rilevanza per cui la troviamo richiamata nei con-

testi più vari (politici, sindacali, culturali, dei servizi, formativi, virtuali, energetici, commerciali...) e qualche volta anche un po' improbabili. Un termine cui si associa spesso un significato generico e comunque polisemico il cui tratto più unificante può forse essere individuato nel voler proporre una opzione opposta all'individualismo, egocentrismo, narcisismo, competitività imperanti.

L'approccio di A., ma anche delle recenti esperienze di C.O., ci offrono l'opportunità di riflettere su questa nozione e di coglierne un possibile utilizzo nell'ambito del discorso politico contemporaneo.

Procederemo inizialmente per 'negazione' chiarendo cosa *non* è la comunità cui A. e i suoi epigoni fanno riferimento.

Innanzitutto, non si tratta di una comunità etnica, il legame che unisce i suoi membri non è la nascita, non presuppone uguaglianza di razza, lingua, religione. «La gente d'America è la gente del mondo. Gli americani sono arrivati da tutti gli angoli della terra» (Alinsky 2020: 6). Questa è una questione decisiva della pratica e della riflessione di A.: l'azione collettiva implica il superamento delle appartenenze etniche, di una logica 'segregazionista' e deve proprio la sua efficacia alla capacità di organizzare solidarietà ampie ed inclusive.

Questa convinzione trova conferma già nella prime campagne di A. e nel tentativo spesso riuscito di superare l'ordine politico urbano della Chicago degli anni '30, dominato da coalizioni di potere che intrattenevano con i gruppi sociali subordinati relazioni clientelari realizzate prevalentemente su base etnica. Un tema che si rivelerà cruciale anche negli ultimi anni della sua vita e che marcherà la sua lontananza da movimenti come il *Black Power* di cui A. criticherà proprio la strategia autosegregazionista. Una convinzione che continua a caratterizzare i movimenti che fanno riferimento a CO, come si può leggere anche in un documento recente.

Il community organizing fa propri i principi di multiethnicità e di interreligiosità, ponendosi l'obiettivo primario di unire gruppi che solitamente tra loro non dialogano, di unire persone che solitamente tra loro non si relazionano, ma che magari si trovano ad affrontare gli stessi problemi sul medesimo territorio. (Inwinski 2016)

Detto tutto questo non si deve pensare che la comunità cui fa riferimento A. possa essere assimilata ad una "comunità di pratica", nel significato che gli viene attribuito ad esempio da Etienne Wenger che studia i vantaggi di un processo di apprendimento condiviso e partecipato (Wenger 2006). Una comunità di persone quindi che svolgono delle attività in comune durante un certo arco di tempo e imparano a farlo meglio quando interagiscono regolarmente. Come le nuove "comunità della

cura" sorte in anni recenti anche in Italia, costituite da gruppi di persone (*caregiver*) unite dal fatto di prendersi cura di qualcuno o di qualcosa in sostituzione di servizi o di interventi pubblici adeguati.

La comunità cui fa riferimento A. è una presenza più strutturata perché è radicata all'interno di un determinato territorio. Può essere considerata quindi una sorta di "comunità di territorio" che fa dell'occupare un determinato spazio urbano un elemento importante di aggregazione. Qui si frequentano le chiese e le scuole, i mercati e i grandi magazzini, le industrie dove si lavora, le case popolari dove si vive. Qui si precisano bisogni e problemi comuni. Una comunità che non solo vive determinate relazioni, ma ha comunque una sua storia, sue tradizioni, anche tradizioni di lotte sociali.

In *Radicali, all'azione!* Un intero capitolo è dedicato alle tradizioni e alle istituzioni comunitarie con severi moniti rivolti agli *organizers* a non dar vita ad un *outsider movement* ma al contrario a considerare il fatto che la costruzione di una organizzazione di quartiere non può che trarre «linfa vitale dalle radici stesse della comunità» (Alinsky 2020: 179). Una organizzazione di quartiere dovrebbe quindi all'inizio configurarsi come una rete delle associazioni presenti su un determinato territorio con lo scopo primario di dar vita a relazioni cooperative e di abbattere le barriere etniche ed ideologiche che separavano i vari gruppi.

A livello locale sono infatti maggiormente possibili conoscenze personali più approfondite e franche discussioni attraverso cui possa risultare più evidente la vicinanza di condizioni e interessi.

Un progetto che sembra trovare una eco in alcune pratiche che si sono affermate in anni recenti come le cooperative di comunità che si stanno realizzando anche in alcuni nostri territori come quelli montani, o in nuove forme di *welfare*, appunto, di comunità. Collettività di persone che si riconoscono in un'idea, in un interesse, in una storia comune. Bruno Latour direbbe che questi diversi pubblici sono quelli che hanno in comune un "*matter of concern*": un tema di interesse che sta a cuore a tutti loro.

Queste nuove comunità non mi sembrano però del tutto sovrapponibili con quelle cui A. fa riferimento che sono una rete di associazioni che hanno però uno scopo politico esplicitamente dichiarato, «un programma di difesa dei diritti fondamentali dei poveri» (Ivi: 5). Quindi una organizzazione politica, anche se informale, che si prefigge di rappresentare e difendere gli interessi di una comunità nei confronti del sistema di potere e che pertanto può configurarsi più come «una collettività di interessi che di persone fisiche» (Ivi: 128).

Una nozione, quella di interesse, declinata da A. e dai suoi epigoni in modo anche originale in quanto fa riferimento anche ad una particolare forma di legame sociale, caratterizzato dalla partecipazione e dall'organizzazione necessaria per difendere quegli interessi e risolvere quei problemi. Ed è proprio alle strategie e alle tattiche da seguire è dedicato tanto spazio non solo nei libri di A. ma anche da parte di chi, anche attualmente si ispira alla C.O., costituendo questo impegno una vera e propria *conditio sine qua no* per una comunità che intenda veramente costituirsi come tale (Chambers 2014).

Problemi come quelli del lavoro, di redditi più alti, di sicurezza economica di casa, salute che rappresentano questioni sociali strutturali, una sorta di microcosmo di più vasti conflitti, non possono essere affrontati e risolti attraverso strategie assistenziali e/o filantropiche ma devono essere oggetto di azioni politiche specifiche. Ne consegue quindi una necessaria politicizzazione delle questioni sociali e l'inevitabilità del conflitto in cui le comunità non possono che essere coinvolte per cercare di soddisfare i loro bisogni.

Questo modello di comunità, come 'strumento di emancipazione', per essere ancora chiarito mi pare possa essere utilmente messo a confronto con alcune esperienze che sono sorte negli anni Sessanta-Settanta nel territorio fiorentino e di cui quella della Comunità dell' Isolotto costituisce forse l'esempio più conosciuto. Aggregazioni che si costruiscono sull'onda dell'alluvione del 1966, che attivano reti sociali tra soggetti anche tradizionalmente in conflitto tra loro, come le parrocchie e le case del popolo, e che fanno della partecipazione popolare la loro cifra distintiva. Comunità di quartiere che affrontano i problemi dei loro territori operando una decisa politicizzazione di questioni, tradizionalmente estranee all'azione politica e considerate di pertinenza esclusiva della sfera privata come quelle della casa, della scuola, dell'assetto del territorio, dei servizi sociali. Un 'pensare globale e un agire locale', richiamato ancora a Firenze dagli attivisti del *Social Forum* che non sarebbe dispiaciuto ad A.

2.4 Militanza

In *Rules for Radicals* A. chiarisce, senza mezzi termini e con qualche supponenza, lo scopo della sua organizzazione affermando che, come il *Principe* di Machiavelli fu scritto per insegnare ai ricchi a detenere il potere, così le sue opere hanno lo scopo di aiutare i poveri ad ottenere una loro rivincita sui ricchi:

Tratteremo del modo in cui si crea l'organizzazione di massa e ci si impadronisce del potere per consegnarlo in mano al

popolo; parleremo del modo in cui si può realizzare il sogno democratico di uguaglianza, di giustizia, di pace, di cooperazione, di pari e piene opportunità per l'istruzione, per un impiego utile, per la salute e per tutte quelle circostanze in cui l'uomo ha la possibilità di vivere dei valori che diano senso alla vita (Ivi: 25)

All'interno di questo progetto, senza dubbio impegnativo, risulta cruciale il ruolo e quindi anche la formazione dell'*organizer*, tema al quale A. nei suoi scritti dedica molto spazio e che costituisce, anche ai giorni d'oggi, la parte del suo pensiero più utilizzata. A. in diverse occasioni sottolinea come quello dell'*organizer* sia un ruolo che preveda necessariamente l'acquisizione di specifiche competenze tecniche e di particolari capacità organizzative ma che si caratterizzi principalmente per l'adesione a determinate convinzioni, a precisi valori. Requisito principale di questa militanza è infatti credere nella gente: «Se la gente ha il potere di agire, nel lungo periodo essa potrà, nella maggioranza dei casi, prendere rette decisioni. L'alternativa a ciò sarebbe il governo di una élite, sia essa una dittatura o una qualche forma di aristocrazia politica» (Alinsky 2018: 33).

Questa convinzione non si limita però ad essere dichiarazione di principio, ma deve tradursi in un preciso orientamento della pratica politica. Già a partire dalle prime pagine di *Recall for Radicals!*, in cui A. affronta il problema dell'organizzazione e parla della necessità di predisporre un programma, ammonisce gli organizzatori circa la necessità assoluta che questo non possa e non debba venire da nessun altro se non dai gruppi sociali coinvolti. In caso contrario si tratterebbe di una vera e propria azione autoritaria.

Non sarebbe un programma democratico, ma bensì un testamento monumentale della mancanza di fiducia nell'abilità e nell'intelligenza delle masse di giungere con le proprie forze alla soluzione per risolvere i problemi che le affliggono. Non si tratterebbe di un programma comunitario e le persone avrebbero ben poco a che vedere col programma (Ivi: 142)

Nello stesso modo, da tutta l'esperienza di C.O. viene messa in evidenza l'ineludibile necessità di creare una leadership locale.

Una organizzazione di quartiere deve radicarsi tra gli stessi cittadini: se dovessimo immaginarcela come fosse un albero, i leaders autoctoni sarebbero le radici e le persone la terra in cui queste affondano. Per attecchire al terreno e ricavarne nutrimento l'albero deve essere sostenuto dalle sue radici (Alinsky 2020: 42).

Molte pagine degli scritti di A. e dei suoi epigoni sono dedicati a questo tema ed in particolare alla selezione e alla formazione di questa leadership. Progetti di cui non sono taciute le difficoltà ma di cui, negli anni è stata confermata l'assoluta necessità.

Anche il miglior organizzatore esterno, uno che metta in pratica il suo credo democratico, uno che riponga fiducia assoluta nelle persone e nella loro leadership non potrà costruire una organizzazione, una struttura finita. Potrà agire da stimolo...Potrà svolgere un ruolo chiave nel gettarne le fondamenta, ma solo le persone e i loro leader potranno costruire una organizzazione di quartiere (Ivi: 164).

È bene comunque sottolineare come questa convinzione, pur così importante, non abbia alla base un fondamento ideologico. A. scrive molte pagine contro le ideologie e in molte occasioni sostiene la necessità che i militanti siano persone aperte, flessibili, recettive rispetto ai cambiamenti sociali. Credere nella gente, prima che essere un valore democratico, all'interno dell'esperienza del C.O si configura piuttosto come una necessità funzionale, ha a che fare con l'efficacia del progetto. Solo chi vive in quei quartieri, chi subisce quelle condizioni di lavoro, chi soffre i mille modi della marginalità sociale, ha le migliori conoscenze e competenze per identificare, bisogni, interessi e proposte di soluzione.

Potremmo notare come il ruolo dell'*organizer* si caratterizzi quindi per realizzare una relazione bidirezionale rispetto ai gruppi sociali da attivare per cui non può essere assimilato ad un militante tradizionale (di un partito, di un sindacato) ma neanche ad un tecnocrate. Suo compito non è quello di costruire potere per sé quanto piuttosto quello di attivare un metodo che permetta la politicizzazione di interessi comuni tanto da trasformare le proprie condizioni di vita⁵.

Questa particolare capacità di "sentire" i problemi che A. attribuisce alla gente comune sembra richiamare quanto Antonio Gramsci scrive a proposito della dialettica virtuosa che si dovrebbe strutturare tra "elemento popolare" e intellettuali; "perché il primo "sente" ma non sempre comprende o sa mentre i secondi sanno ma non sempre comprendono e specialmente non "sentono".

Ma cosa intende Gramsci per "sentire"? Precisa innanzitutto che non si tratta solo di appassionarsi all'oggetto del sapere, anche l'intellettuale pedante infat-

ti può essere appassionato. Il problema consiste invece nel non essere distaccato dalla popolazione, nel sentire le passioni elementari del popolo, comprendendole e quindi spiegandole e giustificandole nella determinata situazione storica, collegandole ad una superiore visione del mondo.

Il "sapere" non si fa politica senza questa passione sentimentale tra intellettuali e popolo-nazione [...] Se il rapporto tra intellettuali e popolo-nazione, tra dirigenti e diretti, tra governanti e governati è dato da una adesione organica in cui il sentimento-passione diventa comprensione e quindi sapere (non meccanicamente ma in modo vivente) solo allora il rapporto è di rappresentanza e avviene lo scambio di elementi individuali tra governanti e governati, tra diretti e dirigenti, cioè si realizza la vita d'insieme che sola è la forza sociale, si crea il "blocco storico" (Gramsci 1971: 135-136)

È bene comunque chiarire come questo atteggiamento pur richiamando il "sentire" non debba essere confuso come una propensione filantropica o paternalistica – «se l'organizzatore inizia col dichiarare il suo amore per la gente, finisce immediatamente per allontanare tutti» (Alinsky 2020: 109) – ma piuttosto faccia riferimento alla necessità che i militanti si dispongano in una posizione di vicinanza e di ascolto, sia per legittimare il loro ruolo, sia per conferire efficacia alle loro iniziative. Un progetto comunque, come si legge in tante testimonianze e rapporti redatti da attivisti di CO, non certo facile. A. ammette infatti in diverse occasioni come non sia sempre entusiasmante il contatto con persone a basso reddito e nota come questa frustrazione derivi dal fatto che «noi spesso fantastichiamo sui poveri»:

Troppi liberal e radicali hanno una immagine eccessivamente romantica dei poveri; pensano come sia cool un abitante d'una baraccopoli pervasa dalla povertà e lo prendono come paragone di giustizia e si aspettano che lui si comporti come un angelo nell'attimo stesso in cui le sue catene vengono rimosse. La povertà è brutta, cattiva e degradante, e il fatto che quelli che non hanno vivono nella disperazione, discriminazione e privazione non li dota automaticamente di alcuna speciale qualità di carità, giustizia, saggezza, pietà e purezza morale. [...] Ma ciò non significa che devi lasciarli lì a marcire. Devi solo continuare a lottare (Tozzo 2015: 118-119)

È solo quando le persone hanno l'opportunità di agire e di cambiare la loro condizione che iniziano a pensare seriamente ai loro problemi. È qui che mostrano le loro capacità, si pongono le domande giuste, creano uno speciale parere professionale e si sforzano di trovare delle risposte. «A questo punto ci si comincia a rendere conto che credere nella gente non è solo un mito romantico» (Alinsky 2018: 115).

⁵ Richard Sennet propone A. come esponente di una netta frattura storica che si è venuta aprendo sin dal XIX secolo, tra la sinistra "politica" e la sinistra "sociale". La prima con un orientamento verticistico, una organizzazione centralizzata e tendente a proporre modelli uniformi di pensiero e di azione; la seconda che cerca di accogliere voci contrastanti e mettere insieme persone diverse, ponendo al centro la costruzione di legami (Sennet 201: 63-64).

Un compito quindi di cui A non sottovaluta le difficoltà ma ineludibile all'interno di un sistema democratico. Sottovalutarlo significa esporsi al rischio, certamente non lontano dalla nostra esperienza contemporanea, che le masse popolari vengano abbandonate alla "passione cieca e al settarismo" e possano diventare facile preda di vecchi e nuovi autoritarismi.

Molte cose ci sarebbero da aggiungere che forse sarebbe utile anche oggi considerare. Colpisce in particolare modo, leggendo anche i resoconti di esperienze più recenti che fanno riferimento a C.O l'insistenza nel sottolineare il fatto che l'*organizer* per essere tale non solo deve essere 'vocato' ma come debba forgiare questa sua vocazione sottoponendosi ad una severa disciplina. Svolgendo questo ruolo non c'è infatti spazio per lo scoraggiamento o la frustrazione perchè la persistenza (*persistence*) dell'azione è un requisito indispensabile per il successo. Non si deve credere però che questa militanza si caratterizzi per un ottuso dogmatismo rispetto ad un partito preso. L'altro requisito fondamentale che la connota è infatti la flessibilità (*flexibility*), ovvero la capacità di adattare alla situazione relazioni e strategie. Una capacità in grado di produrre anche modalità di disobbedienza civile e di protesta, assolutamente creative e non convenzionali.

Cosa ricavare oggi dall'esperienza di C.O?

Innanzitutto, credo che per chi faccia ricerca e si impegni in politica in area progressista sia incoraggiante leggere di esperienze che hanno avuto successo, che hanno prodotto significativi cambiamenti nell'affermazione dei diritti civili e nel contrasto alle disuguaglianze sociali. Serva a ricordarci, come sostenuto nel discorso di fine anno 2024 del Presidente della Repubblica Sergio Mattarella che «La speranza siamo noi. Il nostro impegno. La nostra libertà, le nostre scelte».

Inoltre, da questo tipo di esperienze ci giungono alcuni elementi di riflessione che non sono certo da sottovalutare rispetto alla crisi in cui versano le democrazie contemporanee, segnatamente rispetto alla partecipazione popolare.

Tra i tanti, mi limito a richiamare la rilevanza attribuita al conflitto, alla convinzione del carattere inevitabilmente conflittuale che ogni rivendicazione viene ad assumere quando si prefigga di affrontare in modo efficace questioni relative al disagio e alle disuguaglianze sociali. Un conflitto non cercato per motivazioni ideologiche ma che si rende necessario a causa del carattere strutturale dei mali che continuano ad affliggere le masse popolari. Una *eternal war* per cui, all'interno del modo neoliberista di produrre e di distribuire le risorse, lottare per l'assistenza sanitaria, la scuola pubblica, migliori salari, abitazioni dignitose, contro la discriminazione razziale significa, prima o poi, entrare in conflitto

con gli assetti dominanti di potere. *Tertium non datur*. Non sono efficaci, pur essendo moralmente apprezzabili, gli interventi filantropici, né quelle politiche sociali di inclusione che di fatto conseguono l'unico fine di fare adattare le persone alle loro dure condizioni di esistenza.

In coerenza con questo approccio conflittuale nelle esperienze di C.O possiamo individuare anche un monito, non troppo implicito, ad uscire dalla "trappola della culturizzazione della politica", intendendo con questa locuzione una preminenza che i partiti di centro-sinistra in Europa e oltremare hanno accordato già da diversi anni a questioni come l'identità etnica, culturale, religiosa o sessuale, (implementando sensibilità ed istituzioni a questa conformi) rispetto alle politiche redistributive. Un orientamento, molto discusso e non condiviso da quanti, come Nancy Fraser, che imputano proprio al neoliberismo progressista la responsabilità del fatto che le politiche identitarie non solo non riescano a contrastare, ma al contrario rischino di favorire la produzione di ineguaglianze sociali e di individualismo. Questo perché, più o meno direttamente e consapevolmente, viene messo in discussione il programma politico ed etnico dell'universalismo borghese, l'istituzione di un sistema legale impersonale che prescinde dalle singole appartenenze e mantiene sullo sfondo le questioni identitarie. Per cui denigrare l'impersonalità della legge, sulla scorta delle politiche identitarie, contribuirebbe a favorire la frammentazione neoliberista e una nuova "feudalizzazione" della società.

Connesso a questo approccio è quella che potremmo definire come una visione elitista dei rapporti di potere. Con questo non voglio certo affermare che A. si lasci coinvolgere nella *querelle* tra elitisti democratici e antielitisti che pure ha caratterizzato il dibattito pubblico americano, e non solo, a partire dagli anni '50 del secolo scorso. A. non studia le *élites* e i loro rapporti e neppure gli effetti di queste presenze sulla democrazia americana. È piuttosto interessato a vedere cosa succede nell'altro polo di questa relazione di potere, nelle masse. Uno sguardo non comune e soprattutto non ideologico nel senso che le sue analisi sulla condizione e le caratteristiche del popolo, spesso anche impietose, non sono utilizzate per legittimare il potere delle *élites*. L'attenzione verso le condizioni di vita dei *dispossessed*, sia quelle materiali, sia quelle 'antropologiche' (apatia, sfiducia, passività, regressione) costituisce una lente per valutare la buona salute di un sistema democratico e soprattutto per saggiare l'efficacia, dal punto di vista della legittimazione e del consenso, dei suoi valori fondanti. Se infatti i valori liberal democratici di libertà, autonomia, giustizia sociale, partecipazione, pace non inverano le politiche, rischiano di essere percepiti come fastidiosa retorica,

utile solo a legittimare le *élites* che presidiano le diverse articolazioni del potere. In particolare, la sfiducia nelle forme collettive di protezione sociale, a favore di forme esclusive (prima gli italiani, gli americani...), rendono drammaticamente evidente la fragilità di una legittimazione democratica che con gli anni si è fondata sempre più sul concetto di interesse: la democrazia conviene perché garantisce un certo livello di welfare.

La cronaca, non solo americana, anche in tempi recenti, continua a fornirci prove di questo tipo di disaffezione che dalle *élites* passa anche alle stesse istituzioni e nel rifugio del presente, della propria condizione identitaria, cerca quel senso che “le magnifiche sorti e progressive” democratiche non riescono più a fornire.

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A scuola di singolarità: tra standard d'eccellenza e self-made-talent

AURORA MARIA LAI

Abstract. While the processes of singularization spread out the school, teaching takes on different postures. These, dictated by different orientations to value (old and new school), are characterized by practices and objectives diametrically opposed each other, articulated between the resistance of general and the innovation of particular. How is it possible despite this polarization that the outcome – in terms of which student's behaviours are positively recognized – is unambiguously singularization? The biographical agency represents the activation of identity, caused by the compulsion to reflect (Rosa 2017) and the existential need to “be someone” (Martuccelli 2017b), and becomes progressively the objective of formal socialization. Although the criteria for evaluating life (and identity) project respond to the orientation of the teacher's value – which are diversified – the rhetoric of sacrifice and merit permeates both declensions of recognition. On the one hand, old school tries to consecrate the standard of excellence; on the other hand, new school contributes to the construction of a unique biographical mechanism, the self-made-talent. Both are results of more or less explicit processes of inclusion/exclusion. Formal socialization – historically structured around the logic of the general – meets and clashes with the logic of the particular, affecting significantly the biographical and identity composition of the pupils.

Keywords: singularization, school, talent, excellence, meritocracy.

1. UN INEDITO INCARICO ESISTENZIALE

Le trasformazioni tardo-moderne, che hanno risignificato il ruolo dell'individuo nella società, sono state tanto progressive quanto radicali. Se l'individualismo moderno si caratterizzava per l'ancoraggio alla similarità – quindi all'identificazione – l'emersione del valore della distinzione e poi della singolarità hanno caratterizzano lo spostamento verso l'individuazione. Tali trasformazioni si pongono in continuità rispetto alla maggiore centralità dell'attore sociale ma, al tempo stesso, rivoluzionandola. Nel districare tale passaggio, l'intuizione di Rosanvallon (2013) riesce a sottolineare una volontà di democratizzazione che si struttura, successivamente, attorno al desiderio di accedere ad un'esperienza pienamente personale.

Quest'ultima – determinata dalla singola biografia e rimuovendo quindi il pesante fardello dell'ascrittività della propria condizione (*Ibidem*) – disegna un nuovo equilibrio tra struttura e azione sociale. Da una parte l'uguaglianza

za si pone come valore imprescindibile mentre, dall'altra parte, la narrazione sulla responsabilità individuale e sulla propria agency biografica inizia ad essere risignificata.

Sulla base dell'accoppiamento strutturale tra mutamento sociale e modelli identitari (Rosa 2017), si va delineando una rinnovata attenzione attorno al tema dell'esistenza (Crespi 1994). In questo quadro, il valore dell'individuazione non solo radicalizza l'individualismo moderno (Martuccelli 2017b), ma diventa un imperativo identitario assumendo una connotazione specifica: la *singularità*. La logica sociale del particolare (Reckwitz 2020) si impone quindi come quadro interpretativo dominante veicolando precisi paradigmi di riconoscimento. Questi ultimi sono configurabili come una tendenza della cultura tardo-moderna all'aspezzatura dell'originalità e della straordinarietà (Rigotti 2021), dell'essere qualcuno e diverso dagli altri (Martuccelli 2017b), del diventare padrone della propria storia (Rosanvallon 2013) performando la propria unicità e autenticità (Reckwitz 2021).

L'inedita postura nei confronti dell'esistenza non solo delegittima il primato ontologico di matrice cognitiva, che a lungo ha privilegiato la razionalità come unica forma di conoscenza, ma si sostanzia in nuove forme di accesso all'esperienza vissuta (Crespi 1994). Tuttavia, l'invito alla conoscenza di sé stessi (*Ibidem*) nonostante la forte tendenza del senso comune alla naturalizzazione e banalizzazione di questo processo, presuppone un colossale e continuo esercizio di *singularizzazione* – così come intesa da Reckwitz (2020). La riflessione su sé stessi ha infatti una natura coercitiva (Rosa 2017) che spinge ad una costante ottimizzazione del sé, non proponendosi come opzione ma come norma sociale (Reckwitz e Rosa 2023). È di estrema centralità sottolineare che tale esercizio non presuppone una “semplice” auto-riflessione ascetica, ma si fonda su una continua attivazione identitaria (Rosa 2017) e sul riconoscimento. Infatti, l'unicità è tale solo se viene validata: l'aspirazione alla singularità può avere luogo solo se avviene in relazione con l'altro (*Ibidem*; Rosanvallon 2013) perché intrinsecamente votata al riconoscimento (Martuccelli 2017b). L'obiettivo non si riduce quindi alla scoperta della propria autenticità, ma si estende ad una «conoscenza societalizzata del sé» (Ivi: 140) dove la vita personale diventa indissociabile dall'intersoggettività, da cui scaturisce il peso delle continue sfide esistenziali, oltre che un crescente sentimento di essere «esposti al mondo» (Martuccelli 2017a: 15). È attorno al cambiamento ontologico della conoscenza del proprio sé e alla rinnovata centralità dell'esistenza, che si struttura la moltiplicazione delle “prove-sfide” (*Ibidem*) inteso come strumento di accesso all'esperienza che permette sia di *ex sistere* (essere e allo stesso tempo “guardarsi”

essere), sia di avviare processi di riflessività della coscienza (Crespi 2017). Esercizio, quest'ultimo, tutt'altro che banale. L'imperativo dell'autonomia (Rosa 2017) e la conseguente responsabilizzazione dell'individuo – forte delle presunte basi ugualitarie derivate dal *mis*-riconoscimento delle componenti ascrivite – rendono il raggiungimento della singularità un incarico esistenziale tal volta insostenibile. Il rinnovato valore morale dell'acquisività si pone quindi come presupposto di due fondamentali traiettorie: la valorizzazione del self-development (Reckwitz 2021) e l'invisibilizzazione del privilegio.

Nel momento in cui la prova-sfida ci permette di guardare «al tempo stesso, il risultato dei meccanismi societari che la producono e [l']esperienza vissuta dagli individui» (Martuccelli 2017a: 72) diventa un prezioso strumento concettuale ed analitico. Infatti, non solo ci offre un quadro interpretativo per leggere le biografie ma, contemporaneamente, permette di qualificare la svolta esistenziale come oggetto dei processi socializzativi.

Tale intersezione diventa dirimente nella socializzazione formale, dove non solo questo quadro concede di problematizzare le strutture a partire dalle esperienze (*Ibidem*), ma permette di rendere ancor più evidenti come l'obiettivo di creazione di singularità sia incarnato nelle strutture sociali tardo-moderne. Intendendo la socializzazione come quel processo volto a regolare valori, norme, atteggiamenti e comportamenti delle nuove generazioni, la scuola assume una fondamentale funzione di conformità culturale (Besozzi 2006), orientata tanto all'approvazione sociale quanto al riconoscimento del suo ruolo. In un contesto dove il valore della singularità e dell'esperienza assumono un ruolo generativo, la scuola non può esimersi dal mettersi in discussione. La coazione a riflettere infatti non si riduce alla dimensione individuale, ma coinvolge anche le realtà istituzionali (Rosa 2017). La progressiva de-formalizzazione di questa agenzia, così come il dotarsi di dispositivi più complessi per una socializzazione attiva e riflessiva (Sciolla 2006), sono processi e pratiche da leggere attraverso questo quadro esistenziale. I meccanismi negoziati e particolari richiedono al corpo docente la loro stessa capacità di singularizzarsi, una competenza riflessiva atta a rispondere a nuove esigenze (Colombo 2005) che si traducono nella presa in carico di componenti prettamente esistenziali.

Rilevare che la scuola sia investita dai processi di singularizzazione – intesa anche nella sua capacità di rendersi piattaforma esperienziale – è significativo per almeno due distinti piani analitici. Il primo cerca di cogliere il carattere normativo di questa nuova composizione, studiarne i “prodotti”, teso a confermare l'incisività e il potere trasformativo che i processi tardo-moderni – per come sono stati tematizzati in precedenza – hanno eserci-

tato sull'istituzione scolastica. Il secondo piano analitico, che sarà prioritario in questo contributo, assume i quadri interpretativi del primo per poi soffermarsi ai processi di riproduzione e creazione della socializzazione all'esperienza e, con questo obiettivo, necessariamente dovrà guardare il riconoscimento – e la costruzione identitaria che ne deriva – come il suo oggetto di studio.

Attraverso questa seconda lente interpretativa guarderemo ai processi socializzativi non più come la condizione di strade e percorsi già battuti, connotati quindi come sicuri; ma come una sorta di elicitazione di strumenti interiorizzati che aspettano solo di essere scoperti, suggerimenti volti all'individuazione – autonoma – di traiettorie originali. Il nucleo duro di questo tipo di socializzazione è la sua non riconducibilità a norme. Se non si può insegnare ad esistere (Crespi 1994), perché ciascun attore sociale deve trovare dentro la sua esperienza i mezzi più opportuni, si può però socializzare al valore del “fine”, quindi promuovendo la norma sociale per eccellenza della tardo-modernità: essere qualcuno. Possiamo delineare una schizofrenia costituente di questo processo, fondato sull'universalismo ma anche sul mis-riconoscimento dei privilegi, declinato poi in un'accresciuta responsabilizzazione del sé, avente l'unico obiettivo di gestire performativamente l'esistenza. Mantenendo saldo questo quadro interpretativo, il momento in cui si richiede a chi abita la scuola – docenti e discenti nei distinti ruoli di agenti di socializzazione e “socializzandi” – di avere o trasmettere la consapevolezza del sé, di performare o costituire il proprio progetto biografico come presupposto del riconoscimento dell'intero apparato esistenziale, è indubbiamente la maturità. La narrazione attorno a questo evento si articola durante l'arco di tutto l'ultimo anno di scuola secondaria di secondo grado, connotandolo socialmente come momento nel quale è necessario attivare gli strumenti di accesso all'esperienza e, attraverso questi, diventare un individuo unico e singolare. Non è tanto la concretezza del progetto biografico a essere sottoposta a valutazione, ma il suo potenziale per diventare strumento di singolarizzazione. Esattamente in questa contingenza, lo sforzo di ridefinizione del sé diventerà l'impegno più coinvolgente di ogni soggetto (Palmonari e Rubini 2006).

2. AGENTI DI SINGOLARIZZAZIONE: VECCHIE PRATICHE E NUOVE ESIGENZE

La chiarezza del progetto di vita delle discenti diventa il banco di prova della propria capacità di self-actualization (Reckwitz 2021), ma soprattutto della bontà dell'intero processo socializzativo che sta alla base della sua

costruzione. In questo contesto, sarà necessario volgere lo sguardo a come le docenti – corredate anch'esse del loro portato esperienziale, quindi dai loro attraversamenti societari – interpretano e riproducono questa prova-sfida, quali strategie di riconoscimento attuano e, in sintesi, come reagiscono a questo inedito incarico esistenziale.

Nella misura in cui l'apertura verso l'esistenza – corredata dall'impegno di performare la propria singolarità – diventa il nuovo imperativo tardo-moderno, la scuola necessariamente deve riflettere sul suo obiettivo socializzativo. Attraverso questo quadro, il contesto della socializzazione formale offre l'opportunità di poter leggere le reazioni del cambio di paradigma verso la logica sociale del singolare. Il ruolo delle docenti e delle loro pratiche rappresenteranno quindi l'ago della bilancia tra due ordini di valori: quelli su cui si è costruita la stessa istituzione scolastica, come il fondamento ugualitario; e la matrice delle trasformazioni che la attraversano, ispirate all'originalità, alla singolarità, all'autenticità e all'unicità. In questo gioco di equilibri contribuiranno – con un'importante funzione di legittimazione – le narrazioni attorno ai temi dell'impegno individuale, del merito e dello sforzo (Rigotti 2021).

2.1 Sulla Practice Theory come matrice metodologica

Considerando l'articolazione dei concetti e l'intersezione di linee teoriche che ispirano lo sguardo interpretativo di questo contributo, l'analisi sarà supportata dall'armonia offerta dalla teoria delle pratiche sociali come proposta da Reckwitz e Rosa (2023), intendendo queste ultime come «costantemente riprodotte e tuttavia sempre in uno stato di cambiamento» (*Ibidem*: 28 [trad. mia]). Tale orientamento assume che le pratiche sociali non siano «possedute» dai singoli attori sociali, ma si qualificano come strutture immanenti e indipendenti dalle particolari qualità di un individuo, sono quindi «*supra-individual*» (Ivi: 29). Tale dimensione di superiorità non si sostanzia però in un ordinamento gerarchico; infatti, «il sociale funziona come pratica attraverso i soggetti e presuppone [...] la loro comprensione soggettiva dell'azione e del mondo. [...] [Gli individui] devono aver già acquisito le competenze corrispondenti, forme di conoscenza e modelli di interpretazione (ciò che Bourdieu ha chiamato “habitus”)» (*Ibidem* [trad. mia]). La dimensione sovra-individuale permette quindi di guardare alle pratiche di insegnamento, riuscendo a tenere stretta e costante la correlazione con i modelli interpretativi delle singole docenti. L'orientamento al valore – che diventerà la principale chiave di lettura nel proseguo del lavoro – si configurerà quindi come la matrice (sovra-individuale) delle pratiche, capace di evidenziare il loro radicamento

o la loro ispirazione a logiche sociali puntuali, orientate a promuovere obiettivi socializzativi diversificati. Questa intersezione permetterà di leggere il ruolo degli agenti di socializzazione formale come una finestra d'osservazione volta a sottolineare le correlazioni tra struttura e azione sociale: tra il principio dell'uguaglianza e il valore dell'unicità, tra logica sociale del generale e le trasformazioni imposte dalla logica sociale del particolare.

Attraverso questo impianto interpretativo, il campo empirico è stato tracciato attorno alle docenti della scuola secondaria di secondo grado che avessero un numero di ore di insegnamento sostanzioso rispetto ad altre colleghe durante l'ultimo anno del percorso. Tale criterio è dirimente per agevolare l'individuazione delle pratiche volte ai processi di creazione della singolarità, sostanziate nella stimolazione dell'agency biografica di studentesse e studenti. Nello specifico sono state coinvolte n. 51 docenti¹ – distribuite in 6 diversi istituti in Toscana e Liguria – alle quali è stata sottoposta un'intervista semi-strutturata² costruita con un'intenzione inizialmente esplorativa. Successivamente, dati gli orientamenti che si delineavano attorno all'esperienza di insegnamento, questo materiale si è rivelato di estremo interesse per i fini conoscitivi considerati in questo contributo. A tale strumento è stato affiancato un questionario rivolto a studentesse e studenti appartenenti alle classi d'insegnamento delle intervistate, che ha collezionato n. 295 risposte. Nonostante lo sguardo si soffermerà su quanto emerso dalle interviste rivolte alle docenti – in linea con gli obiettivi conoscitivi esposti sopra – in un'ottica di “risposta” socializzativa, la tematizzazione verrà talvolta corredata dalle evidenze relative alle studentesse.

2.2 Modelli d'interpretazione: Old e New School

Per poter leggere con cognizione il significato attribuito all'agency biografica delle studentesse – attraverso il rinnovato valore attribuito all'etica del sacrificio e al merito – è necessario un lavoro prima di codifica e poi

di categorizzazione dei modelli interpretativi delle docenti al fine di rintracciarne l'orientamento valoriale. Tale operazione si rende cruciale per connettere le pratiche di insegnamento ad un'intenzionalità del fine socializzativo.

Già Besozzi (2006: 351) aveva ben tematizzato come l'agire di ruolo delle docenti fosse distinguibile in base alla preminenza di componenti attribuibili alla tradizione o all'innovazione; traiettorie che coinvolgono l'interpretazione dei saperi, delle competenze, delle modalità e della relazionalità. Per argomentare ulteriormente la distinzione analitica operata da Besozzi, durante le interviste si è reso chiaro come la radice della tradizione fosse connotata da un'aderenza ai valori della logica sociale del generale; mentre la matrice dell'innovazione fosse riferibile all'amplessissimo spettro delle spinte singolarizzanti. L'unità di misura che distingue i modelli d'interpretazione delle docenti è, per meglio dire, riconducibile al grado di interiorizzazione della norma sociale della singolarità e – di conseguenza – alla valorizzazione dell'esperienza come mezzo e fine dell'educazione (Dewey 1949). Secondo questo criterio possiamo non solo distinguere due orientamenti al valore puntuali, ma anche utilizzarli come finestra attraverso la quale osservare il sociale che si traduce in pratica per mezzo dell'azione soggettiva (Reckwitz e Rosa 2023); promuoverle a categorie interpretative che permettono di problematizzare le strutture a partire dalle esperienze (Martuccelli 2017a). Da questi fondamentali presupposti si articola la distinzione analitica tra docenti *new school* e *old school*, significata dalla volontà – o dalla sua assenza – della presa in carico delle prove-sfide esistenziali nel proprio ruolo di agenti di socializzazione.

Premettendo che tale suddivisione non presenta alcuna correlazione con la generazione di appartenenza delle docenti³, lo sviluppo di queste due categorie ambisce a riassumere i modelli interpretativi rispetto ad una serie di pratiche di insegnamento. Nello specifico – a seguito di una prima ricognizione dei temi emersi con più frequenza nelle interviste – sono stati presi in considerazione⁴ i seguenti topics: funzioni della scuola; funzioni dell'orientamento; rapporto scuola-famiglia;

¹ Distribuiti, in base al genere, in n. 13 uomini e n. 38 donne. Data la larga prevalenza di persone di genere femminile in questo contributo si è prediletto l'uso della formula del femminile sovraesteso per rivolgersi a tutti/e i/le docenti. La stessa pratica verrà adottata per studenti (n. 127) e studentesse (n. 162). In ogni caso, le differenze tra i generi – in termini di orientamenti alle pratiche d'insegnamento – quando rilevanti verranno debitamente tematizzate.

² Il processo di costruzione, validazione e utilizzo dello strumento è stato sviluppato in seno al laboratorio di ricerca *Cult-In-Edu* (Cultura, Individuo e Educazione) coordinato dalla Prof.ssa Silvia Cervia, di cui sono membro dal momento della sua fondazione. La conduzione delle interviste è stata svolta dalle/dai tirocinanti di Scienze Politiche dell'Università di Pisa, che con curiosità e passione si sono cimentate/i nella raccolta di questi preziosi dati, motivo per cui rivolgo a loro i miei più sentiti ringraziamenti.

³ La media ponderata dei diversi orientamenti presenta la differenza di un solo anno di nascita (*old school* 1974; *new school* 1975), insieme alla vicinanza con l'età media delle intervistate (1975, 49 anni), rende del tutto inopportuno un criterio interpretativo generazionale. Anzi, si sottolinea come in alcuni casi si è rilevato come alcune delle docenti più giovani rientrassero nella categoria *old school*, mentre alcune colleghe più anziane avessero orientamenti marcatamente *new school*.

⁴ La modalità di analisi dei dati ha seguito i criteri della *template analysis* – una forma di analisi tematica capace di ordinare gerarchicamente i codici, strutturando così il processo di analisi, offrendo allo stesso tempo la flessibilità necessaria alle esigenze derivanti dallo specifico oggetto di ricerca (King 2012) – ed è stata condotta attraverso il supporto del software NVivo 14.

rapporto con studentesse e studenti; rappresentazione della Gen Z; rappresentazione dell'uso delle tecnologie e pratiche di valutazione. Successivamente sono stati creati dei *memos*, corrispondenti a ciascuna intervista, aventi la funzione di riassumere i posizionamenti rispetto ai temi appena menzionati. Attraverso un'ulteriore operazione di analisi è stato attribuito alle singole interpretazioni di ciascun topic i codici old e new school che, in seguito, hanno concorso alla categorizzazione generale finale. Quest'ultima è infatti il risultato di un attento bilanciamento dei vari posizionamenti che, con uno sguardo squisitamente qualitativo, si pone l'obiettivo di rilevare la matrice valoriale di ciascuna docente. L'esito di questo processo analitico permette quindi di guardare ai modelli interpretativi delle docenti, non solo attraverso la restituzione compendiaria del suo grado di aderenza al valore della singolarità, ma di rintracciare anche la variabilità interna nel dettaglio delle pratiche. Opportunità, quest'ultima, che permette di restituire una fotografia di quali siano i sentieri percorsi dai processi di singolarizzazione, dimostrandone le modalità di radicamento nei portati valoriali individuali.

In base a quanto appena detto, con la categoria "docenti old school" (n. 19) si intenderà innanzitutto un panorama valoriale adiacente alla logica del generale, propenso quindi a non accettare le prove-sfide implicate dall'apertura verso l'esistenza. La codifica delle sfide – e la loro risoluzione – coinvolgeranno la docente solo rispetto al suo ruolo professionale senza implicare la dimensione esistenziale. In ragione di tale posizionamento, questo gruppo di insegnati ha bisogno di agire una forte strategia di consacrazione del confine identitario – della dimensione locativa come intesa da Sciolla (2010). A tal fine, rivendicare l'autorevolezza del proprio ruolo diventa obiettivo primario, tematizzando tutte le invasioni di campo da parte delle discenti come un'incolmabile e "naturale" distanza gerarchica e generazionale. Coerentemente con questo impianto, il fine socializzativo della scuola deve rimanere la formazione – intesa come semplice trasmissione di nozioni. Le studentesse potranno "decidere" se appropriarsene e utilizzarle per la costruzione della propria biografia. Data la distanza tra docenti e discenti, il fallimento delle seconde non qualifica in nessun modo la percezione del sé delle prime. Nella misura in cui alla Gen Z viene riconosciuta una fragilità intrinseca e connaturata, mancare al compito di "essere qualcuno" è interpretato come esito della pigrizia che connota questa generazione. Per questo motivo, oltre che per la visione della propria professione come chirurgicamente separata dal novero dell'esistenza, il fallimento delle discenti non qualifica né il processo

socializzativo né il proprio operato, anzi, corrisponde ad una colpevolizzazione individuale.

La scuola dovrebbe riacquisire quell'autorevolezza che avevamo una volta e lo può fare solo se effettivamente seleziona. [...] Chi non ha voglia di studiare va mandato a lavorare [...] così almeno imparano un mestiere e così anche la scuola riacquisterà quell'autorevolezza che ha perso. [...] Bisogna aumentare la meritocrazia, pensi all'apparente contraddizione inclusione e selezione. Bisogna includere tutti, ma aiutare e premiare i meritevoli, gli altri no [...] altrimenti passa il concetto che: io pur non facendo niente ottengo i risultati positivi come coloro che si sono impegnati. (int. IPES_002)

Chiarito il fine e il panorama valoriale di questa categoria di docenti, la modalità di relazione con le discenti sarà orientata alla verticalità e a un preciso paradigma della disciplina. I sistemi di riconoscimento tenderanno a formalizzarsi ulteriormente rendendo la valutazione uno strumento spesso sanzionatorio. L'esito di questo processo tenderà a qualificare il proprio gruppo come unica frontiera di riconoscimento, causando una propensione verso l'essenzialismo culturale e, conseguentemente, ad una chiusura neo-comunitaria (Reckwitz 2020; 2021).

Con la categoria "docenti new school" (n. 27) intenderemo invece un panorama valoriale pienamente influenzato dalla logica sociale del particolare, quindi permeato dalla singolarità e dall'unicità. Questo gruppo di docenti accoglie pienamente le prove-sfide, aprendosi costantemente all'esperienza e cercando di socializzare le proprie discenti all'intrinseco valore di questa predisposizione. Tale postura implica un abbattimento delle barriere gerarchiche, mis-riconoscendo l'autorevolezza come presupposto relazionale. Dato l'inquadramento esistenziale il rapporto non sarà più docente-discente ma persona-persona, costruendo un relazione "autentica", intesa come genuina e orientata ad agire individualmente e non come chiunque altro (Reckwitz 2021). Questo tipo di propensione renderà la cura una postura morale (Mortari 2015) dove fiducia, empatia e dialogo diventeranno strumenti necessari per accedere all'esistenza delle discenti, oltre che piattaforma per la propria. Attenzione che si convertirà, quasi fisiologicamente, in un fine socializzativo orientato all'educazione – intesa in tutto il suo portato esperienziale.

[Il percorso socializzativo] deve essere finalizzato proprio a sviluppare quelle competenze orientate all'autonomia, all'affermazione di sé, del ragazzo, dell'identità, [...] deve farli riflettere su chi è, sulla propria identità, su quello che vuole, avere la possibilità di avere un contesto che lavori sulle competenze [...] superando questa... diciamo visione

della scuola che trasmette contenuti, quindi per conoscenze. [...] La chiave di volta... ci vuole un senso di adattarci al mondo reale, che è quello delle competenze. (int. SCNP_004)

La presa in carico di queste prove-sfide si tradurrà in un legame profondo tra il proprio operato e il risultato del processo socializzativo; infatti, il fallimento o il successo delle discenti diventerà per le docenti strumento primario di riconoscimento identitario. L'orientamento al self-development rende questo gruppo di insegnanti aderenti al meccanismo di culturalizzazione tipico della tardo-modernità: l'iper-cultura (Reckwitz 2021). Quest'ultimo si sostanzia nella formulazione di un «paradiso di possibilità che aspettano di essere conquistate» (*Ibidem*: 19 [trad. mia]) e, conseguentemente, diventare veicolo di creazione di singolarità e unicità.

2.3 L'alfabetizzazione al singolarismo

Con l'intento di restituire come i processi di singolarizzazione vadano strutturandosi nelle pratiche, il fine socializzativo assume un ruolo significativo. Data la stretta correlazione tra quest'ultimo e le modalità di costruzione del progetto di vita delle discenti, diventa infatti necessario entrare nel merito sia della distribuzione sia del contenuto semantico dei due codici di istruzione ed educazione.

Il processo definitorio istituzionale attorno alla scuola delle competenze – intesa come risposta a un nuovo bisogno di formazione di giovani che richiede una profonda e convinta revisione delle proprie modalità di insegnamento commisurato alle caratteristiche di ciascuno (MIM 2016: 32) – offre un'apertura semantica notevole dei concetti di educazione ed istruzione. Se quest'ultima è stata tradizionalmente intesa come la capacità della scuola di trasferire cognitivamente conoscenza attraverso la didattica (Besozzi 2006), la tendenza tardo-moderna che rivoluziona il primato ontologico verso l'esperienza

(Crespi 1994) mette indubbiamente in discussione l'esatività della formazione in senso stretto. Questa narrazione è condivisa dalle docenti nella misura in cui «prima della materia che insegniamo siamo educatori, e quindi educare vuol dire aiutare i ragazzi a tirar fuori quello che è il meglio di loro stessi per prepararli al dopo» (int. MFCF_002). Nonostante alcune docenti old school rivendichino – in piena tendenza neo-comunitaria – il valore dell'istruzione (25%) lo slittamento di altre insegnati di questo gruppo verso la pratica new school è significativo. Sono da identificare come acceleratori di tale processo la ri-significazione del processo socializzativo a livello istituzionale, così come la reale complessità offerta dagli inediti incarichi esistenziali.

Il gruppo old school prima vede uno spostamento verso un posizionamento neutro rispetto al tema della funzione dell'orientamento – che ricalca il valore delle conoscenze o delle competenze come strumento per l'agency biografica delle studentesse. Successivamente, per quanto concerne le funzioni della scuola, si sposta significativamente nella narrazione educativa-esistenziale (con un incremento del 14%). Tale slittamento verso la valorizzazione del sé è da correlare necessariamente a come viene interpretato il successo del processo socializzativo. Nell'analisi delle interviste è evidente come le funzioni della scuola abbiano un ruolo di ancoraggio, utilizzato dalle docenti ma modificandone e sfumandone il contenuto. Infatti, nonostante le dovute differenze di ordine valoriale, il fine che accomuna le due categorie di docenti è la creazione di singolarità performanti, quindi l'individuazione e la valorizzazione delle potenzialità delle studentesse in un continuo processo di autodeterminazione riflessiva (Rosa 2017). In sintesi, entrambi gli orientamenti causano e riconoscono positivamente l'agire soggettivo singolarizzato. Per questo motivo la distinzione tra istruzione ed educazione, così come tra conoscenze e competenze, collassano a favore di una categoria più ampia: l'alfabetizzazione al singolarismo. Fermo restando le profonde differenze nelle pratiche di insegnamento – derivanti dai due modelli interpretativi

Tabella 1. Modelli interpretativi e pratiche di insegnamento a confronto

	Logica sociale di riferimento	Codifica delle sfide	Paradigma di relazione	Fine socializzativo	Fallimento del processo socializzativo	Processo di culturalizzazione
<i>Old School</i>	Generale	Esternalizzazione (coinvolge solo il ruolo professionale)	Disciplina (verticalità)	Istruzione (selezione)	Attribuzione di colpa alle discenti	Essenzialismo culturale (chiusura neo-comunitaria)
<i>New School</i>	Particolare	Prove-sfide (esistenziale)	Cura (orizzontalità)	Educazione (self-development)	Manchevolezza del proprio ruolo	Iper-cultura (singolarizzazione)

Fonte: Elaborazione dell'autrice.

Tabella 2. Orientamento al valore e fine socializzativo

	<i>Orientamento al valore</i>	<i>Funzione orientamento</i>	<i>Funzioni scuola</i>
<i>Old school</i>	37%	27%	25%
<i>New school</i>	53%	53%	67%
<i>Neutro</i>	10%	20%	8%

Fonte: Elaborazione dell'autrice.

– le nuove necessità esistenziali tardo-moderne insistono sulla costruzione di meccanismi di socializzazione negoziati e particolari (Sciolla 2017).

È attraverso questo quadro – dove il fine socializzativo assume inequivocabilmente le connotazioni del self-development – che possiamo identificare le docenti come agenti di singolarizzazione. Al di là di quanto ciascuna percepisca il suo agire di ruolo come determinante nella costruzione delle biografie delle discenti, il successo diventa un imperativo. In linea con il proprio orientamento al valore cambierà quindi il criterio e l'obiettivo socializzativo: laddove l'old school ambisce al consolidamento di uno standard d'eccellenza, la new school intercetterà e valorizzerà il talento di ciascuna discente. Il filo rosso che accomuna la prescrittività di questo processo di autorealizzazione (Crespi 1994) è da rintracciare nel rinnovato valore dell'impegno individuale e dello sforzo (Rigotti 2011) quindi, in buona sostanza, nella fede meritocratica (Sandel 2021).

3. L'ETICA DEL SACRIFICIO

Il comandamento della realizzazione individuale, profondamente radicato nella società tardo-moderna, si fonda sulla narrazione del "se vuoi puoi" (Rigotti 2021). Questa forma di autoregolazione – intesa come auto-costruzione e auto-costrizione (Giacomantonio 2007) – è intimamente connessa con l'etica del sacrificio e dello sforzo. L'apertura verso l'esistenza non solo contempla il rischio di un'interrogazione radicale del proprio sé, ma acquisisce questo compito in tutta la sua portata etica (Crespi 1994). A tale invito universale corrispondono però processi che generano sistematicamente asimmetrie, nella misura in cui la singolarizzazione non si propone come processo lineare per tutti gli individui (Reckwitz 2021). È in questa intersezione che l'etica del sacrificio trova nel merito il suo corrispettivo morale, nonché la sua forma primaria di riconoscimento.

Il merito si propone come forza redistributiva fondata su criteri acquisitivi come il talento e lo sforzo, descrivendo una "nuova" forma di distribuzione del potere

(Cingari 2007). La prima tematizzazione della meritocrazia è ricondotta alla paternità di Jung (2014 [1994]) che la intese, criticamente, come somma di sforzo e intelligenza. In realtà ancor prima di Jung, come evidenziato da Cingari (2007), il sociologo Alan Fox (1956) aveva sottolineato la fondamentale capacità dell'ideale meritocratico di creare una risonanza, e quindi un rafforzamento, tra benefici – o tra svantaggi – di natura diversa. Possiamo trovare all'interno della letteratura sociologica nei confronti del merito un *life motive* che Arendt (2017: 236) sintetizza come la critica di una nuova forma oligarchica costruita a partire dal talento e che, in quanto tale, si basa su relazioni di potere (Karabel 2005). La pretesa di unire variabili naturali, quindi il talento, con virtù comportamentali (Sandel 2021), trova pieno sostegno nella tendenza tardo-moderna di esasperare la purezza del criterio meritocratico (Rigotti 2021) in quanto pienamente correlata alle necessità singolarizzanti attorno al «develop [your] "innate" self» (Reckwitz 2021: 125).

Nella retorica dell'ascesa – del tutto connessa al valore della singolarità – la cultura del merito trova espressione attraverso la sua attenzione univoca all'istruzione, indicata come risposta alla disuguaglianza (Sandel 2021). Nella socializzazione formale la meritocrazia si traduce in due dimensioni fondamentali: l'ossessione per il talento; e quelli che Rigotti (2021) indica come meccanismi di attivazione del merito. La prima dimensione è rilevante nella misura in cui il talento diventa veicolo di unicità; mentre la seconda si sostanzia in una predisposizione esistenziale verso lo sforzo, che non si esaurisce solo nell'intercettare la propria dote "naturale" ma nella capacità di saperla performare. In buona sostanza, le due dimensioni rappresentano corrispettivamente il fine e il processo verso la singolarità. Il talento diventa quindi lo strumento di riconoscimento delle studentesse e, nello specifico, del loro grado di "essere qualcuno". L'apertura alla socializzazione dell'esistenza costruisce attorno al talento un sigillo di validazione, capace di riunire natura e sforzo in pieno spirito meritocratico. In ragione di tale rilevanza, quando le studentesse hanno avuto la possibilità di scegliere tra più aggettivi che avrebbero voluto li rappresentassero, ben l'84% delle/dei rispondenti hanno segnalato "talentuosa/o". Corrisposta però da "solamente" un 54% di discenti a cui davvero questa dote è stata riconosciuta, sancendo un primo ma importante passaggio costitutivo di quelle che Rosanvallon (2013) chiama classi di singolarità. L'ancoraggio al panorama esistenziale è quindi duplice: da una parte, la stessa ricerca del talento diventa un'importante esercizio di accesso all'esperienza, quasi eleggendolo a criterio di valutazione della persona; dall'altra parte, la «coscienza societalizzata del sé» (Martuccelli 2017b) esige il riconoscimento

del talento stesso. Tra questi due elementi – individuazione e riconoscimento – è racchiuso lo sforzo, volto a mostrare e performare le proprie capacità. L'assonanza tra talento e merito diventa quindi immediata anche per le/i discenti, tanto da rappresentare le attività che gli riescono meglio come frutto del proprio impegno a partire dalle occasioni che hanno saputo cogliere (42%), come esito del proprio sforzo sulla base delle singole predisposizioni (25%), oppure come semplice e “naturale” messa a valore delle proprie doti (21%). La retorica della naturalizzazione dei talenti è un tema strettamente connesso all'ideale meritocratico. Questo posizionamento tenta di soddisfare l'esigenza ugualitaria traducendola in una parità di condizioni naturali di partenza, attraverso l'assunto che ciascun individuo possieda un talento “in potenza” che aspetta di essere scoperto. Già Bourdieu e Passeron (2006) hanno fatto chiarezza su quanto questo nobile presupposto fosse una mera forma di legittimazione e di riproduzione di assetti di potere, andando poi ad alimentare quella che Cingari (2007) chiama filiera di derivazione positivista, dipendente da una «lotteria genetica arbitraria» (Bell 1972: 42 [trad. mia]).

Attraverso questi presupposti – e inquadrando il merito come strumento di riconoscimento del proprio talento – i due modelli interpretativi old e new school assumono posizionamenti diversi in corrispondenza del fine socializzativo. Nel caso delle docenti old school l'istruzione viene rivendicato come compito principale della scuola corredandolo, conseguentemente, dall'importanza attribuita alla funzione di selezione. In questo quadro il merito viene qualificato come strumento per separare l'eccellenza dalla mediocrità, connotando il fallimento come colpa. Esattamente attraverso questa interpretazione si manifesta la forza conservativa della meritocrazia, orientata a ricreare disuguaglianza in ogni generazione (*Ibidem*). Questo gruppo di docenti crede nella predestinazione e naturalità del talento ma, allo stesso tempo, tende a porre maggiormente l'attenzione sullo sforzo. Contrariamente, le docenti new school rintracciano il fine socializzativo nell'educazione al self-development. A rendersi prioritaria, attraverso una relazione di cura, sarà quindi l'individuazione dell'unicità di ogni singola/o discente. Lo sforzo assume un minor valore perché non è inteso attraverso l'interpretazione offerta delle docenti old school, ma assume una connotazione del tutto esistenziale: l'etica del sacrificio. Quest'ultima si sostanzia nella capacità di guardare l'esistenza senza esitazione alcuna, con la curiosità attiva di scovare i lati più autentici del proprio sé. È su questa linea che si struttura la pedagogia del talento, qualificando quest'ultimo come «principio formativo unitario di questo secolo» (Margiotta 2018: 18), quindi orientata a «[riferirsi] allo studente

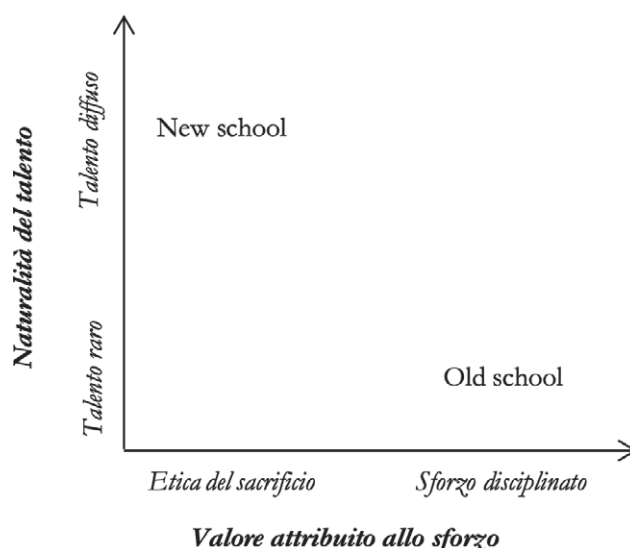


Figura 1. Composizione del merito rispetto all'orientamento al valore delle docenti. Fonte: Elaborazione dell'autrice.

nella sua integralità e unicità. [...] [offrendo] l'opportunità ad ogni studente di scoprire e valorizzare le proprie attitudini personali» (Capobianco 2018: 49).

Il differente valore attribuito allo sforzo ha quindi una natura semantica. La componente dell'*effort* intesa da Jung si articola in due significati: da una parte assume la forma di uno sforzo disciplinato per l'old school; mentre dall'altra parte si traduce nell'etica del self-actualization (Reckwitz 2021), strumento necessario per la conoscenza del proprio sé. Queste specifiche composizioni del merito – sulla base della differenza semantica rispetto allo sforzo e sull'importanza attribuita al talento – saranno fondamentali per comprendere la precisa temporalità rispetto alla fase del processo di singolarizzazione nella quale avviene il riconoscimento. In sintesi, a partire dalla combinazione di talento e sforzo nei singoli modelli interpretativi, scaturiscono delle pratiche di insegnamento volte a valorizzare diversi momenti del processo verso la singolarità delle discenti. Percorso che, attraverso il valore morale del successo individuale – e il giudizio del fallimento – creerà inevitabilmente vincitori e perdenti, meritevoli e immeritevoli, ed è esattamente su questa base che si costituisce la «patologia della singolarità», intesa come la relegazione in una «classe di singolarità» giudicata spreghiativa, diminutiva» (Rosanvallon 2013: 263).

4. ECCELLENZE RARE O TALENTO DIFFUSO?

Nella misura in cui l'alfabetizzazione al singolarismo unifica i due gruppi ad un livello «*supra-individual*»

(Reckwitz e Rosa 2023: 29), l'elemento che crea il modello interpretativo – e conseguentemente una differenza in termini di pratiche – è da distribuire su due fattori. Ad incidere sull'orientamento al valore delle docenti è il fine socializzativo (selezione o self-development) che è informato, ma allo stesso tempo informa, la composizione del merito – esito della combinazione di diverse concezioni di talento e sforzo.

Tali differenze si strutturano successivamente nelle pratiche, traducendosi in una diversa temporalità in cui avviene il riconoscimento del talento e della sua performatività.

Considerando lo sviluppo del talento come espressione di unicità, quindi come fondamentale strumento di creazione di singolarità, possiamo leggere questo processo attraverso le fasi che caratterizzano le pratiche di singolarizzazione. Queste ultime si sostanziano in: osservazione (riconoscimento e scoperta della singolarità); valutazione (attribuzione di valore e certificazione della singolarità); produzione (rappresentare e performare la singolarità); appropriazione (capacità di singolarizzare attraverso l'esperienza in una prospettiva situata) (Reckwitz 2020: 46-47).

Il modello d'interpretazione old school si costituisce a partire dal valore dell'istruzione e della selezione che offre alle discenti più diligenti, tramite uno sforzo disciplinato, il raggiungimento dell'eccellenza. Attraverso questi strumenti la responsabilità di osservare, validare e produrre la singolarità è completamente a carico delle studentesse. Allo stesso tempo, la pratica di appropriazione si sostanzia in una «manipolazione» (*Ibidem*) della narrazione del percorso scolastico che renderà il raggiungimento dell'eccellenza un frutto riconducibile esclusivamente alla qualità della socializzazione formale. Il riconoscimento del talento – quindi della singolarità – sarà perciò destinato solamente ad intelligenze già singolarizzate e capaci di performare al meglio le loro unicità. Le docenti old school, nel costante tentativo di consacrazione dello standard d'eccellenza, troveranno in questa temporalità del riconoscimento la legittimazione del merito e, di conseguenza, della trasparenza del proprio operato. La chiusura neo-comunitaria tipica di questo gruppo – declinando sistematicamente l'apertura all'esistenza – riuscirà comunque a competere nella creazione di singolarità. Tale condizione si renderà possibile nella misura in cui troveranno, nel novero dell'essentialismo culturale, tutti gli strumenti utili alla propria legittimazione sia interna che esterna. Ovviamente, le modalità attraverso cui le studentesse riescono a raggiungere l'eccellenza non solo non sono problematizzate, ma vengono interpretate come percorso fisiologico di selezione.

Contrariamente, ad informare l'impianto del modello d'interpretazione new school è il valore educativo del self-development. Attraverso l'invito diffuso di cogliere le prove-sfide (Martuccelli 2017a) esistenziali, questo gruppo di docenti rende l'osservazione la pratica di singolarizzazione più consistente. La convinzione che ciascuna discente possieda in sé un talento in potenza – che aspetta solo di essere scovato – spinge le docenti a problematizzare il paradigma della disciplina e promuovere la cura. Il rapporto docente-discente diventa persona-persona, affiancato da una continua attività di *talent-scouting* e da un'ossessione per il potenziale. Nonostante l'apertura verso l'esistenza, che renderà costante l'accompagnamento della docente in ogni pratica di singolarizzazione, il primo e importante momento di riconoscimento sarà proprio l'individuazione del talento. La riuscita di questo progetto è quello che in precedenza abbiamo chiamato l'inedito incarico esistenziale della scuola, intento a produrre biografie originali e singolarizzate. Se la fase di validazione della singolarità (valutazione) si interseca perfettamente con l'individuazione del talento (osservazione) – dove entrambe presuppongono il supporto esistenziale della docente – la pratica di produzione assume invece delle caratteristiche particolari. In questa precisa fase subentra il *Self-made-talent* inteso come un meccanismo premiale – che pone le sue basi sul riconoscimento – sul lavoro di stampo imprenditoriale che l'individuo fa su sé stesso e sulla sua unicità. Tale meccanismo presuppone che la temporalità del riconoscimento sia sincopata: la sua intensità sarà infatti distribuita in modo diffuso nella fase di individuazione iniziale, codificata come missione prettamente esistenziale ed educativa; mentre sarà corrisposto in una fase finale solamente per chi riuscirà a costruire una biografia unica e originale.

Su queste basi possiamo definire il *Self-made-talent* come un ulteriore, sebbene più raffinato, meccanismo di selezione della scuola. Data questa sua funzione, racchiude la tendenza – esattamente quanto il corrispettivo old school – alla creazione di classi di singolarità (Rosanvalon 2013). Il giudizio morale che divide i meritevoli dagli immeritevoli compone, da una parte, l'eccellenza e la mediocrità, mentre dall'altra parte i vincitori e i perdenti della singolarizzazione. Il limite che permette di varcare il confine del successo è segnato dalla capacità di performare la propria unicità, da un processo di appropriazione che si fonda sulla capacità manageriale del proprio sé, su un prestigio *singularity based* (Reckwitz 2021). Gli “esiti perversi” (Martuccelli 2017b) di questo processo si possono leggere solo attraverso questo confine, come la profondità della disuguaglianza e il giudizio morale attorno al fallimento (Sandel 2021). Un barato creato

dallo stesso meccanismo meritocratico: quanto più saremo uguali e dotati di talenti naturali di partenza, tanto più i privilegi verranno mis-riconosciuti e tanto più l'individuo dovrà impegnarsi in una lotta impari verso la singolarizzazione per essere riconosciuto come qualcuno. È sull'etichetta degli immeritevoli – attribuita in modo più o meno manifesto – che si sorregge la violenza simbolica del discorso meritocratico (Cingari 2007).

5. CONCLUSIONI: «I CAPACI E MERITEVOLI»

La rinnovata attenzione verso l'esistenza (Crespi 1994) insieme alle spinte di creazione della singolarità, sono qualificabili come le traiettorie di trasformazione più significative della socializzazione formale. In questo contesto, l'imperativo dell'acquisività ha fatto virare il riconoscimento e il merito verso la valorizzazione di biografie uniche e singolari. Questo ha comportato una nuova semantica dell'uguaglianza, presupponendo che tutti gli strumenti utili a raggiungere l'ambizioso traguardo di essere qualcuno fossero già interiorizzati. L'attivazione di questi ultimi non solo genera un riconoscimento di matrice esistenziale, ma viene legittimato attraverso il paradosso meritocratico. La presunta uguaglianza strutturale – vigilata da un criterio che ambisce a garantirne la sua trasparenza – si manifesta in un mercato che risponde ad una logica opposta: *winner-take-all or the most* (Reckwitz 2021). In questa asimmetria a giocare un ruolo di primordine sono le docenti che, tramite le loro pratiche, sentono di avere un potere redistributivo.

Attraverso il quadro interpretativo proposto è possibile evidenziare come le pratiche non siano derivazioni meramente biografiche, ma si inseriscano in logiche sovra-individuali (Reckwitz e Rosa 2023) orientate a promuovere uno dei due piatti della bilancia: il generale, il merito, la disciplina e l'essentialismo culturale; oppure il particolare, il talento, la cura e l'iper-cultura. Allo stesso tempo, a prescindere dai modelli interpretativi delle docenti, il valore dell'unicità è talmente pervasivo da rendere l'alfabetizzazione al singolarismo il vero obiettivo della scuola tardo-moderna.

L'ossessione per il talento e la funzione di selezione diventano così i presupposti per guardare l'ideale meritocratico e per esplorarne la sua formulazione. La diversa composizione di talento naturale e sforzo agisce sulle pratiche di insegnamento sottoforma di riconoscimento della singolarità, presupponendo temporalità diverse. È esattamente su questa base che si presenta l'unica distribuzione che possiamo qualificare come ugualitaria, ed è relativa alle costanti pressioni per la costruzione di una vita autentica, originale e creativa. Saper performare le

proprie capacità singolari si traduce nel riconoscimento del merito, come citato dalla stessa Costituzione italiana che contempla l'esistenza delle studentesse solo se «capaci e meritevoli». Essere individui singolarizzati garantirà quindi la legittimazione del proprio sforzo e la creazione di un'esistenza dove si può essere visibili. Inevitabilmente la promozione di alcuni genererà il fallimento di tanti altri, creando classi di singolarità (Rosanvallon 2013). Il rapporto tra vincitori e perdenti è significato da come viene concepito il successo, ed è per questo motivo che guardare al futuro attraverso il talento non è di per sé sbagliato, ma è come questo si traduca in un giudizio morale (Cingari 2007) a rappresentare l'origine della disuguaglianza.

Questo tipo di impianto socializzativo – improntato sul successo individuale – è fortemente ancorato sia alla responsabilizzazione individuale, sia alla cultura delle emozioni positive (Reckwitz 2021). La scoperta e sviluppo del sé non solo diventa un compito pervasivo, attivo e totalizzante, ma deve anche essere condotto sotto una tirannia dell'ottimismo (Rigotti 2021). Quest'ultima, oltre che interpretare la sofferenza protratta e il fallimento come una scelta, non riconosce il valore morale del dolore (*Ibidem*). Più le emozioni positive diventeranno aspetto centrale nell'esistenza, più cresceranno quelle negative che però non verranno ritenute legittime (Reckwitz 2021). È del tutto assente, nel panorama della scuola, una *socializzazione al fallimento* tesa a veicolare valori, norme, atteggiamenti e comportamenti per poter gestire l'asimmetria connaturata nei processi di creazione della singolarità. Al contrario, anche laddove subentra il valore della cura come paradigma di relazione, l'obiettivo socializzativo è di farsi carico della fragilità per trasformarla immediatamente in successo, per renderla una piattaforma esperienziale e di singolarizzazione. Tale tendenza non solo perpetra – attraverso il meccanismo del Self-made-talent – il valore dello sforzo di trovare il proprio sé come prova-sfida esistenziale, con tutte le disuguaglianze che ne derivano; ma ha permesso all'ideale meritocratico di trovare una nuova e attualizzata forma di legittimazione.

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Francesco Raniolo, *La partecipazione politica. Fare, pensare, essere*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2024

ANDREA MILLEFIORINI

1.

A 23 anni dalla prima edizione e a 17 dalla seconda, *La partecipazione politica* di Francesco Raniolo conosce nuova vita, e sarebbe del tutto fuorviante definirla terza edizione, perché non si tratta affatto di questo. Dopo più di tre lustri, all'autore si è presentata nuova e abbondante materia per dare alle stampe una "Partecipazione politica 2.0" che chiarisce e ridefinisce un quadro che nel frattempo ha conosciuto mutamenti così ampi da richiedere un'opera riscritta praticamente *ex-novo*, senza, tuttavia, tralasciare i punti focali e rilevanti che avevano caratterizzato la prima edizione, così da fornire al lettore una prospettiva anche longitudinale del fenomeno. Si ha quindi, al termine della lettura di questo volume di 270 pagine, una panoramica ampia che permette di comprendere cosa è rimasto e cosa no, cosa c'è oggi e cosa non c'era ieri, nonché la direzione di marcia, sociale e politica, di un fenomeno che è trasversale a diverse dimensioni e livelli della politica e delle istituzioni. Sicché, altro merito di questo lavoro è quello di sconfinare e di trattare con competenza e padronanza temi anche più generali come i sistemi politici, le istituzioni, la democrazia, la comunicazione politica, la depoliticizzazione.

Il libro è organizzato in modo da poter affrontare l'analisi del fenomeno partecipativo trattandone tutte le sue diverse prospettive, interne ed esterne, senza mai tornare più di una volta sullo stesso argomento, e anzi proponendo nei diversi capitoli schemi interpretativi di questo o quell'aspetto mettendolo in correlazione con altre variabili sociali, politiche o istituzionali e costruendo così delle mappe e delle tipologie esplicative molto efficaci.

Altro aspetto che risalta dalla lettura complessiva del volume è un impianto bibliografico solido e ricco, al contempo aggiornato e tuttavia non dimentico di testi che pur avendo sulle spalle qualche decennio risultano ancora oggi fondamentali e attuali nello studio e nella comprensione dei fenomeni politici. Diremmo che questo è uno dei maggiori pregi del libro: aver saputo coniugare senza discontinuità o salti cronologici una letteratura politologica e sociologica che risulta così, grazie ad un filo del discorso che non si interrompe mai, il riflesso di una disciplina scientifica che ha compiuto un percorso di continua crescita e costruzione collettiva del proprio sapere.

Il testo si suddivide in tre sezioni: la prima, dal titolo *La parola e le dimensioni*, nella quale viene esposto il concetto e il problema della sua defi-

nizione, e dei diversi tipi di partecipazione che la letteratura ha di volta in volta individuato e proposto. Questa parte tratta quindi della sostanza della partecipazione politica, in cosa essa consiste nei fatti, quali forme assume, da quali motivazioni è messa in moto, quali livelli di coinvolgimento prevede da parte dei cittadini.

La seconda parte, dal titolo *Le parole e le arene*, è a sua volta suddivisa in capitoli i cui titoli sono molto eloquenti: “Votare”, “Associarsi”, “Parteggiare”, “Comunicare”.

Infine la terza parte, *Davanti al futuro tra innovazioni e sfide*, è dedicata ad una riflessione generale sulle prospettive future della partecipazione in base all’analisi delle criticità esposte sino a quel punto del volume.

2.

Dare una definizione del concetto di partecipazione politica sarebbe un’operazione che rischierebbe di far “girare a vuoto” i concetti ivi contenuti, nel senso che, proprio in quanto trattasi di un fenomeno trasversale a diverse sfere, livelli, categorie sociali, essa potrebbe essere un po’ come una rete da pesca che ha maglie o troppo strette, sì da trarre a riva troppi pesci e quindi di strapparsi prima ancora dello sbarco, oppure troppo larghe, sì da non riportare a riva un bel niente. Raniolo si tiene quindi alla larga da un simile rischio, pur arrivando a far comprendere molto bene al lettore, alla fine della prima parte, in cosa consista effettivamente l’oggetto del suo studio. È vero, egli riporta, diligentemente, la nota definizione di Pizzorno:

«La partecipazione politica è un’azione in solidarietà con altri, nell’ambito di uno stato o di una classe, in vista di conservare o modificare la struttura (e quindi i valori) del sistema di interessi», ma lo fa solo come punto di partenza, non di arrivo. Poi prosegue infatti il discorso con una serie di riferimenti che, a distanza di diversi decenni da quella definizione, sono ormai imprescindibili: «La questione centrale di come si ri-definisce la partecipazione politica in contesti post-classisti e, comunque, ad elevata disuguaglianza (trasformazioni del prendere parte) e post-statali e, comunque, con crisi dei confini (trasformazioni dell’esser parte). Tutto ciò mentre i partiti programmatici e di integrazione di massa – ma anche i sindacati – sono ormai scomparsi» (Raniolo 2024: 34-35).

C’è poi la questione della orizzontalizzazione della partecipazione politica, processo iniziato già negli ultimi decenni del Novecento, ma accentuatosi e divenuto strutturale nel XXI secolo grazie soprattutto alla digitalizzazione, che ha contribuito a rendere il fenomeno partecipativo meno verticale è più «puntiforme, liquido, turbolento» (*Ibidem*: 36). Si moltiplicano inoltre le are-

ne, che conoscono gruppi più o meno organizzati e più o meno estesi, a volte così poco estesi da rasentare la individualizzazione.

C’è, infine, tutta la galassia della partecipazione civica, che nel frattempo ha continuato a crescere, e che rappresenta oggi un fenomeno che probabilmente supera, in quantità, la stessa partecipazione politica. Ma si tratta davvero di due fenomeni diversi? Sino a qualche anno fa, la risposta in letteratura sarebbe stata affermativa. Oggi ci si comincia invece a porre la questione se non si tratti invece di due sotto-tipi di uno stesso fenomeno. Raniolo sembra accreditare questa lettura, riprendendo anche l’approccio di Giovanni Moro per il quale la stessa partecipazione politica altro non è che una pratica di cittadinanza.

In conclusione Raniolo sintetizza la sua proposta di definizione, e di studio, della partecipazione politica proponendo di analizzarla sulla base delle tre dimensioni del “prender parte”, del “sentirsi parte” e dell’“esser parte”, che vanno da un livello maggiore di intensità ad uno minore. Tra tali dimensioni c’è sempre complementarità e interdipendenza, ed esse si intrecciano con quattro arene fondamentali, che sono le arene istituzionali (Il Palazzo), le arene della Protesta (la Piazza), le arene comunitarie o civiche e le arene mediali e del web.

Corre, lungo tutto il corso del libro, un punto che sottende a diversi aspetti di volta in volta analizzati: la perdita di legittimità e il “deconsolidamento” della democrazia, conseguenza di attuali sfide che i modelli di democrazie come li abbiamo conosciuti sino ad oggi sembrano non riuscire a fronteggiare. Le cause principali di questo stato di cose, riprendendo anche le ricerche di Yascha Mounk, vengono individuate nella crescita delle disuguaglianze, nell’eterogeneità e nella progressiva frammentazione della comunità politica, nella repentina crescita del pluralismo culturale, nella rivoluzione digitale (Ivi: 68-69).

Molto istruttivo, a riguardo, il grafico (Ivi: 79) con i livelli di soddisfazione per la democrazia, con l’Italia che si colloca comunque in buona posizione, con un 71,5 rispetto alla media europea di 60, in ciò evidentemente dimostrando che l’astensionismo (“dalle prime elezioni politiche del 1948, affluenza 92,2, ad oggi, 63,9%, abbiamo perso per strada poco più di 28 elettori su cento”, ricorda Raniolo) non è necessariamente legato a sfiducia nella democrazia ma solo a carenza di offerta politica o di sfiducia verso una specifica classe politica. Vero è che, sempre ad avviso di Mounk, «i cittadini si stanno disamorando della democrazia; sono sempre più aperti alle alternative autoritarie; partiti e movimenti non concordano sul rispetto delle norme democratiche basilari – a partire dall’accettare la sconfitta elettorale». Tuttavia sarebbe forse opportuno distinguere: vi sono certamente

paesi in cui tali processi sono più marcati e, sembrerebbe, irreversibili, e altri in cui sono presenti solo *a latere* o comunque non ancora in forma predominante, come appunto l'Italia o, altri esempi, il Regno Unito, la Germania, tutti i paesi scandinavi. Non è affatto detto che in questi sistemi politici tale processo sia irreversibile.

Una parte rilevante del volume, sia con una sezione specifica ("associarsi"), sia con richiami anche in altri capitoli, è dedicata all'associazionismo come forma di partecipazione politica. Il tema che accompagna questa sezione è la capacità di organizzazione e di auto-organizzazione, che certo riguarda tutti i soggetti politici, dai partiti ai movimenti alle forme di associazionismo. Tuttavia essa pare oggi molto più viva e in fermento nel mondo della partecipazione civica e associativa che non in quello dei partiti e degli stessi movimenti politici: «Uno dei fenomeni partecipativi più rilevanti degli ultimi decenni, in tutto il mondo, è la straordinaria capacità dei cittadini di auto-organizzazione come attori delle politiche pubbliche», scrive Raniolo citando Giovanni Moro. E qui si pone una questione rilevante: sino a ieri infatti il confine tra politica e società civile era chiaro, netto, ben visibile. Oggi quel limite comincia a essere più incerto, labile, confuso. La società civile assume spesso, direttamente, ruoli o funzioni che prima erano demandate a soggetti o attori politici, mentre sono oggi questi ultimi che vanno spesso quasi alla ricerca di un "bollino" conferitogli dalla società civile per assumere maggior credibilità e autorevolezza. Eppure, osserva giustamente Raniolo, il "parteggiare" non può essere una dimensione alla quale la politica possa rinunciare, pena lo svuotarsi della sua carica innovativa, oppositiva, conflittuale. È in grado il livello civico e associativo di garantire questa essenziale funzione? E qui il discorso entra dritto dritto nel problema, più che decennale ormai, della crisi dei partiti politici tradizionali, ma non solo tradizionali.

Ci troviamo qui al cuore della questione partecipativa. Il vecchio mondo novecentesco dei partiti è finito ma non ne è ancora sorto uno nuovo, o almeno definito, e tutto avviene in forme incerte, confuse, a volte eterodirette da centri che non appartengono alla politica ma alla comunicazione, a grandi soggetti economici, ai campioni della digitalizzazione e dell'innovazione tecnologica. Tutto questo ha contribuito a debilitare e ad abbassare di qualità il livello del discorso politico, sgomberando del tutto da esso una qualunque visione prospettica dell'azione pubblica, improntata ad una qualche immaginazione del futuro. Sarebbe lungo affrontare questo specifico aspetto della politica contemporanea, che risente a sua volta di mutamenti culturali e identitari profondi avvenuti nelle società "ipermoderne", come

le ha definite Touraine. Una cosa tuttavia è certa. Come scrive Raniolo, «l'effetto di de-strutturazione è profondo e con effetti duraturi» (Ivi: 174). Una destrutturazione che è ancora pienamente in corso, e dove una partecipazione certamente meno intensa ma più diffusa che in passato, meno "politica" e più civico-sociale, dunque con meno carica conflittuale che in passato «si è rivelata un utile strumento di sostanziale anestetizzazione della partecipazione democratica», ricorda Raniolo citando Sorice. Quest'ultimo «definisce la partecipazione contemporanea una 'partecipazione disconnessa', che finisce per riprodurre la frattura tra chi partecipa e chi decide» (Ivi: 182). E la politica, quella *fatta*, non quella *partecipata*, svolge una parte in copione che vorrebbe apparire conflittuale ma che lo è alla fine solo di facciata, solo "d'ufficio", diciamo così, prendendosela, a destra, con gli immigrati e, a sinistra, con chi non è politicamente coretto. Temi, come si vede, assai lontani dai problemi reali delle società contemporanee, e che se riescono a solleticare certi umori e certi sentimenti diffusi, non assolvono di certo a quella che dovrebbe essere una funzione fondamentale svolta da una classe politica, quella di indicare strade, prospettive, progetti di miglioramento della vita dei cittadini.

La fine della democrazia dei partiti, e il passaggio alla "democrazia del pubblico", espressione quanto mai riuscita coniata da Bernard Manin, riassume un po' tutte le criticità e le opportunità che la mediatizzazione e la digitalizzazione stanno portando con sé nei sistemi politici contemporanei (e non solo in quelli democratici). Il grande merito di Manin è stato quello di aver saputo immaginare questo idealtipo – che si aggiunge ai due che lo hanno storicamente preceduto, quello della democrazia delle élites e quello della democrazia dei partiti – ben prima che gli effetti della digitalizzazione iniziassero a mostrarsi. In fondo, la digitalizzazione non ha fatto altro che accentuare ancora di più il processo che già era iniziato con la mediatizzazione, e che era ben presente al filosofo politico francese (che ci ha lasciati nel novembre scorso). La sua democrazia del pubblico, per come è stata descritta e spiegata, resta tuttavia più un modello in cerca di una ulteriore focalizzazione che non un paradigma in grado di rispondere alle tante incertezze e ai tanti vuoti lasciati dalla fine dei partiti, delle loro culture politiche e delle loro ideologie. Come ho avuto modo di osservare in un mio precedente lavoro, le democrazie del pubblico sono delle democrazie "sfocate", nelle quali cioè tra attori politici e cittadini non vi è un sufficiente allineamento tra bisogno identitario diffuso socialmente e possibilità/capacità della politica di ridisegnare nuove prospettive in grado di dare rappresentazione concreta e visibile a quel bisogno identitario. Ciò è causa di un

difficile collegamento tra livello micro (vita quotidiana dei gruppi sociali, vita quotidiana dei singoli) e livello macro (culture politiche e ideologie di cui sono portatori i grandi soggetti politici nazionali) della società. Quando questi due livelli, in un aggregato sociale, non comunicano più bene tra loro, o quando sussistono interruzioni, discrepanze, insomma non uno sbocco adeguato, il processo di costruzione di senso di una società ne viene inficiato e ciò mette a rischio, alla lunga, anche la fiducia nelle istituzioni politiche, oltre alla stessa integrazione e solidarietà sociali. Quel rapporto così importante è messo in crisi da una causalità doppia e reciproca: la de-massificazione e la frammentazione sociale in gruppi, categorie, settori sempre più autoreferenziali sono entrambe causa di difficile ricomposizione delle identità sociali in una cornice di riconoscimento collettivo.

Appendice bio-bibliografica su autori e autrici

Thelma Beaulieu is a student-apprentice in Coop'Eschemm, enrolled in a Master's degree on Childhood and Youth: policies and support, at the *École des Hautes Études en Santé Publique* (EHESP). Her work focuses on youth involvement, youth work and dialogue between young people and elected representatives.

Karsten Berr studied landscape conservation at the University of Osnabrück, and philosophy and sociology at the Distance Learning University of Hagen, where he gained his doctorate with a thesis on philosophy in 2008. After appointments in Oldenburg, Hagen and Vechta, he headed a German Research Foundation project from 2012-2017 on the theory of landscape and landscape architecture at the Technical University of Dresden, Brandenburg University of Technology (Cottbus), and the University of Vechta. In May 2018 he took up an appointment at the University of Tübingen's School of Geo-Sciences. His research focuses on the inter- and transdisciplinary theory, practice and ethics of landscape and architecture, landscape conflicts, the philosophy and aesthetics of art, nature and landscape, cultural theory, and anthropology.

Matteo Bonanni is a PhD student in Sociology and Applied Social Research at the Department of Social and Economic Sciences of the University of Rome La Sapienza. His work focuses on the study of youth and generations, education and educational systems, and the educational and social mobility of individuals. Among his recent works are: «Le destinazioni educative della Generazione X: risultati e disuguaglianze in una prospettiva generazionale» (published in *Quaderni di Comunità: persone, educazione e welfare nella società 5.0*, 3, 2023, pp. 289-323, with Prof. O. Giancola); and the contributions «I teorici della riproduzione delle disuguaglianze» and «Dal funzionalismo al capitale umano: una visione positiva dell'istruzione» for the volume edited by O. Giancola and L. Salmieri (2024), «Disuguaglianze educative e scelte scolastiche. Teorie, processi e contesti» (Milan, FrancoAngeli).

Franca Bonichi ha insegnato Sociologia generale presso le facoltà di Scienze della formazione e di Architettura, e Sociologia dei movimenti e delle istituzioni presso la Facoltà di Scienze politiche C. Alfieri dell'Università di Firenze. Attualmente collabora alla docenza di Sociologia Politica e Sociologia della leadership presso la precitata Facoltà fiorentina di scienze politiche. Ha pubblicato studi sulla teoria delle élites e sul concetto di cittadinanza democratica. Ha fatto ricerche e pubblicato saggi su temi inerenti all'educazione, in particolare sulla formazione internazionale a Firenze e sui percorsi scolastici ed universitari delle studentesse negli atenei della Toscana.

Rossella Ghigi, Associate Professor of Sociology at the Department of Education Studies, University of Bologna. After graduating in Political Science from the University of Milan, she earned a DEA in History and Civilizations from the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (EHESS) in Paris and a PhD in Sociology and Social Research from the University of Trento. She has published articles in national and international journals, authored monographs, and edited books and special issues of journals. She is a member of the PhD faculty in Sociology and Social Research Methodology at the University of Milan and Turin. Her research focuses on gender role socialization and education, body modification practices, feminist theory, intersectional inequalities, and access to reproductive rights. Among her most recent publications: *Body and Gender. Sociological Perspectives* (with R. Sassatelli, Polity 2024); *Insegnare genere e sessualità. Dal pregiudizio sessista alla prevenzione della violenza* (with S. Demozzi, Mondadori, 2024); *Fare la differenza. Educazione di genere dalla prima infanzia all'età adulta* (Il Mulino, 2023, 2nd ed.); *Feminism. Historical Legacies and Current Challenges* (with C. Rottenberg, eds., *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, Special Issue, 2019).

Simona Guglielmi, PhD in Sociology, is an Associate Professor in General Sociology at the Department of

Political and Social Sciences of the University of Milan. She is a member of the public opinion research laboratory spsTREND. She is a member of the faculty of the PhD programme in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research (SOMET, Universities of Milan and Turin). She currently serves as the principal investigator on national research projects examining youth, generations, and social change. She has served as a local representative of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP-Italy) since 2020, in collaboration with Andrea Pedrazzani. Additionally, she is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Italian team of the European Values Study (EVS). Her principal research interests are in the areas of public opinion and value change, with a particular focus on nationalism and national identity, political culture and institutional confidence, youth and generations. She has expertise in the collection and management of survey data, and her methodological and technical skills include comparative studies, survey experiments, and structural equation modelling. Her work has been published in several academic journals, including the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *East European Politics and Societies*, *European Societies*, and in edited scholarly books. She is the author of a monograph: *L'identità nazionale e i suoi confini* (EGEA, 2018).

Her research interests focus on second-generation immigrants, national identity, citizenship and political participation.

Sina-Mareen Köhler, Full Professor of Education in the field of School Research focused on Youth at the Department of Education and Social Sciences at the University of Cologne. She graduated in Education from the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg and earned a PD and PhD in Education. She has published in national and international journals and is the author of several monographs. Sina Koehler is member of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Erziehungswissenschaft* (DGfE) and is engaged in the group of inclusion research. She is also part of a network focused on autism and neurodiversity. Sina Koehler does qualitative research in perspective of the Praxeological Sociology of Knowledge. Her current research topics are disability and school related in/exclusion, youth temporalities, friendship and peer groups, biographies and transformation, participation and political socialisation. Among her most recent publications: «Special Section Young people's time work: searching for certainty in uncertain times» (with Carmen Leccardi & Andreas Walther, *Time & Society* 2025/2026); «Young People's Future Orientations in Relation to Disability and Experiences with Non-Participation» (with Maren Zschach, *Time & Society*, 2025);

«Does vocational education at regular schools matter? – A longitudinal case study of students experiences with vocational orientation programs» (*Educational Science. Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2017).

Olaf Kühne studied geography, modern history, economics and geology at the University of the Saarland and took his doctorate in geography and sociology there and at the Distance Learning University of Hagen. After working in various official capacities for the Federal State of the Saarland, he was from 2013-2016 Professor of Rural Development and Regional Management at Weihenstephan-Triesdorf University of Applied Sciences, and Extraordinary Professor of Geography at the University of the Saarland in Saarbrücken. Since October 2016 he has been Research Professor of Geography at the University of Tübingen's Chair of Urban and Regional Development. In 2019, he was a visiting professor of sociology at the University of Florence. His research focuses on landscape, social acceptance of landscape change, sustainable development, and regional development. In dealing with the complexities of spatial research, he has developed a "neopragmatic approach" that allows for the integration of different theoretical perspectives.

Aurora Maria Lai è dottoranda in Sociologia, Storia e Cultura Politica presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche dell'Università di Pisa, dove ha collaborato al Laboratorio di ricerca Cult-In-Edu (Cultura-Individui-Educazione). I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano i processi di costruzione identitaria e del progetto biografico nel contesto della socializzazione formale, con un particolare riguardo alle implicazioni derivanti dalle dinamiche di singolarizzazione e dei relativi processi di performatività identitaria.

Marie-Anaïs Le Breton has a PhD in spatial and urban planning, and is an associate researcher to the *Espaces et Sociétés* laboratory. Her work relates on young people's right to the city, that she explores through action-research.

Maxime Lecoq, Employee-member of *Coop'Eskemm* and PhD student within the cooperative, Maxime Lecoq contributes to social experiments designed to support young people's engagements. As part of his thesis, he is particularly interested in third places for young people.

Patrick Leinhos, Research Associate at Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Department of Education and Pedagogy, Educational Sciences with

the focus on Social and Cultural Dimensions of Education. Leinhos' main fields of research include: qualitative methods of research, research on youth, adolescence and peer studies, research of voluntary work and participation, queertheoretical approaches. Amongst recent publications: Leinhos, P. (2024), «Biographischer Stellenwert queeren Engagements» [Biographical significance of queer commitment], in *Voluntaris*, 12(2): 11-27. Gabriel S., Leinhos, P. (2024), «Dateability?! Begehrens- und Geschlechterkonstrukte in Infrastrukturen von Dating-Apps» [Dateability?! Desire and gender constructs in the infrastructures of dating apps], in *GENDER. Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft*, 16(2): 100-121. Leinhos P., Helwig, T. (2024), «Geht's um Inhalte oder geht's um Personen? Diskrepanzen zwischen Erwartungen an junge Erwachsene in politischen Institutionen und ihren dargestellten Handlungen» [Is it about content or is it about people? Discrepancies between expectations of young adults in political institutions and their portrayed actions], in K. Bock, T. Franzheld, C. Grunert, K. Ludwig, N. Pfaff, A. Schierbaum, W. Schröer (eds.), *Pädagogische Institutionen des Jugendalters in der Krise*, Springer VS, Wiesbaden, pp. 327-345.

Laura Leonardi is a full Professor of General Sociology at the University of Florence. From 1999 to 2005 she was professor with Grant Jean Monnet, and in 2008 she was awarded a Jean Monnet Chair. She was responsible for the SharEU project (2016-2019) for the Jean Monnet Center of Excellence at the University of Florence, of which she leads the homonymous interdepartmental center. She has directed numerous international and national research projects. Her interests are mainly centered on sociological theories, conflict and social change, globalization and Europeanization, inequality and social citizenship.

Stefania Leone è professore ordinario di Sociologia generale e insegna Sociologia, Ricerca sociale e politiche pubbliche e Comunicazione pubblica presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e della Comunicazione dell'Università di Salerno. Dal 2010 è Responsabile Scientifico dell'Osservatorio Giovani (OCPG). Nell'ambito degli youth studies partecipa a network di ricerca internazionali e nazionali (Osservatorio Giovani dell'Istituto Toniolo di Milano, Istituto IARD, Comitato Scientifico Eurispes, board scientifico di Riabitare l'Italia per la ricerca sulle Aree Interne, board editoriale di Giovani e comunità locali). Tra gli altri campi di interesse lavora su disuguaglianze, analisi delle politiche pubbliche, comunicazione pubblica, interazione sociale e sui temi inerenti lo spazio pubblico. È direttrice del-

la collana FrancoAngeli SUS, Scienze Umane e Società e componente di board e comitati scientifici editoriali di collane e riviste scientifiche. Tra le ultime pubblicazioni: «Genesi e confronto tra politiche pubbliche ed evoluzione della condizione giovanile» (con Orio A.), in Andorlini C. e Pedrini T. (eds) Fondazione Feltrinelli 2024; *Voglia di restare. Indagine sui giovani nell'Italia dei paesi* (co-curatore e autore), Donzelli 2023; *Creare società. Approcci e contesti di youth work e agire creativo*, FrancoAngeli 2022; *Cittadinanza creativa. Giovani, partecipazione, innovazione, educazione* (con Caramiello C.), FrancoAngeli 2021.

Lidia Lo Schiavo is an Associate Professor in General Sociology at the University of Messina, promoted to full professorship on December 1st, 2023. Her main research interests revolve around Youth Studies, Sociology of Movements, Social Theory, Sociology of Migrations. She is a member of the Board of the RN 30 ESA Network and member of the RC48 ISA Network, and of the Italian Association of Sociology – AIS. She has participated as a presenter in several International Conferences, most recently at the 16th ESA Conference, 27-30 August 2024, at the Workshop Study Day «Youth between crises and strategies», 11-12 January 2024, held in Paris at the EHEES- CNRS LAB, at the ESA RN 30 Youth and Generation midterm Conference, at 20-23, September 2023 in Sardinia, at the XX ISA World Congress of Sociology as co-organiser of a session and as presenter. She has been invited as a visiting professor at the Manchester University, at the Manchester Metropolitan University (18-23 October 2024). Her recent publications include: Lo Schiavo L., Rebughini P. (2023), «Youth Multidimensional Political Activism Between Singularisation and Mutualism: The Case of Up Network», in *Cambio. Rivista sulle Trasformazioni Sociali*, pp. 1-16; *Soggettività studentesca, Generazioni, Partecipazione e Condizione giovanile in Italia*, Morlacchi, Perugia, 2023 (book); «Student Protests against Neoliberal Education Policies in Italy. Three Student Organizations», in Bessant J., Mesinas M. A., Pickard S. (eds) (2021), *When Students Protest*, Rowman & Littlefield, New York- London: 105-122.

Patricia Loncle is a sociologist at l'Ecole des Hautes Études en Santé Publique (EHESP) and a member of the Arènes laboratory. She is interested in youth and vulnerability issues, and in public policy at different decision-making levels. She works closely with the Coop'Eskemm team and develops participatory action-research.

Nicola Maggini is a Tenured Assistant Professor in Political Science at the Department of Political and

Social Sciences of the University of Bologna. He is also a member of the scientific council of ITANES (Italian National Election Study), CISE (Italian Center for Electoral Studies), and the research laboratory spsTREND. His main research interests are socio-political attitudes and behaviors, electoral systems, voting behavior, and party competition in a comparative perspective. After obtaining his Ph.D. in Political Science from the Italian Institute of Human Sciences, Nicola conducted research and/or teaching activities at the University of Milan, the Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, the University of Florence, LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome, New York University (Florence), and Middlebury College (Florence). He has published articles in various international journals, including *European Political Science Review*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *West European Politics*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *South European Society and Politics*, *International Sociology*. He is the author of the book *Young People's Voting Behavior in Europe. A Comparative Perspective* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Maryam Mahamat is an employee-member of Coop'Eskemm. She holds a master's degree in public policy evaluation and is specialized in youth policy. As part of her work, she supports local initiatives to encourage young people's involvement and participation.

Yağmur Mengilli is Associate Professor of Social Pedagogy with a transnational focus on gender and youth at the University of Tübingen. Her work focuses on processes of learning, positioning, and identity formation in youth cultural practices such as graffiti, ballroom, and the Swiftie fandom, as well as in pedagogical settings like open youth work. Particular attention is given to how young people negotiate and reshape public space through acts of (re)addressing and everyday cultural practices. Her research examines how informal practices function as sites of knowledge production, social critique, and belonging. Her most recent publication is «Youth cultural practices as modes of time work: Chilling as rescheduling everyday life» (*Time & Society*, 2024).

Andrea Millefiorini è professore associato di Sociologia politica dell'Università degli studi della Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", dove insegna anche Sociologia generale. È stato caporedattore e membro della redazione di *MondOperaio* sotto la direzione di Luciano Pellicani, dal 2000 al 2008, nonché direttore politico della rivista *Ragion socialiste*, dal 1995 al 2001. Dal 2018 è mem-

bro del Consiglio scientifico della Sezione di Sociologia politica dell'AIS

Andrea Orio è ricercatore presso l'Osservatorio Giovani OCPG dell'Università degli Studi di Salerno, Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e della Comunicazione (DISPC), e dottorando di ricerca presso lo stesso Dipartimento. Insegna Sociologia e i suoi temi d'interesse nell'ambito della sociologia generale riguardano gli Youth Studies, le politiche pubbliche sociali e giovanili e la metodologia della ricerca sociale. È membro di gruppi di ricerca nazionali sulle tematiche giovanili e partecipa al comitato editoriale della collana Scienze Umane e Società di FrancoAngeli. Tra le sue recenti pubblicazioni: «La condizione giovanile nei territori del margine. Un focus sul capitale territoriale delle aree interne a partire dalla percezione dei giovani» in Membretti et al. (eds) Donzelli, 2023 (con Leone S., Iovino G.); «Scelte di vita e culture ambientali: giovani neorurali che restano nelle aree interne», in Welfare e ergonomia, 9(2), 2023 (con Leone S.); «I giovani e la casa nello scenario europeo. Stili abitativi e tendenze», in Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo (a cura di), Rapporto Giovani 2024 (con Bichi R., Leone S.); la curatela Partecipazione e youth work. Percorsi di crescita e attivismo giovanile (con Leone S.), FrancoAngeli 2024.

Mariaeugenia Parito è professoressa associata di Sociologia dei processi culturali e comunicativi presso l'Università di Messina. I suoi interessi di ricerca vertono sulle relazioni tra sistema mediale e sistema politico e istituzionale con particolare attenzione ai processi di costruzione della sfera pubblica europea e dell'identità europea, ai flussi di dibattito pubblico transnazionale e ai cambiamenti delle pratiche partecipative promossi dei giovani nell'ecosistema mediale ibrido.

Fabrizia Pasciuto è assegnista di ricerca al Dipartimento di Civiltà Antiche e Moderne dell'Università degli Studi di Messina, dove svolge una ricerca incentrata sull'analisi di uno spazio europeo di dibattito pubblico animato dai più giovani, analizzando il loro coinvolgimento in multiformi flussi di comunicazione. Ha conseguito il titolo di Dottoressa di Ricerca in Scienze Cognitive nella stessa istituzione, presentando una tesi dal titolo *Tecnologia e Sessualità: la genderizzazione dei Sex Robot*. I suoi principali interessi di ricerca sono nel campo della Sociologia della comunicazione, con particolare interesse negli Science and Technology Studies in relazione agli Studi di Genere e alle loro implicazioni sociali come la discriminazione, il linguaggio d'odio e l'inclusività. È cultrice della materia nella cattedra di Sociologia

della comunicazione e ha partecipato come relatrice in numerosi convegni nazionali ed internazionali.

Ilaria Pitti is Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Youth Studies at the University of Bologna. Her research investigates youth activism, everyday practices of civic participation, and the intersectional inequalities that shape them. She has also examined how women navigate and transform highly masculine political and cultural arenas such as political squats (centri sociali) and organized football fandom. Her most recent publications include the articles «Young Women's Informal Leadership: Reflections on Taking Responsibility in Youth Participation» (*Young. Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 2024, online first, with J. Lütgens & A. Walther) and «More than Crumbs: Emotional Entanglements and Situated Ethical Strategies in Qualitative Research» (*American Behavioral Scientist*, 2024, 68(5): 678–695).

Matthieu Rault is an employee-partner in Coop'Eskemm. After an initial experience in youth work, he decided to pursue further studies in sociology and youth public policies and graduated with a master's degree on youth policy and care from *l'Ecole des Hautes Études en Santé Publique* (EHESP). He also is involved with the cooperative in a range of projects, including action-research and professional training, as well as European initiatives focusing on youth participation.

Paola Rebughini is Full Professor of Sociology of culture and communication at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan. She got her PhD from the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* in Parigi, where she was researcher for some years, and a Marie Curie grant at the University of Warwick (UK). Currently she is director of the PhD in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research at the University of Milan. She works on social theory and cultural theory, youth cultures and youth activism, cultural pluralism and everyday life practices. Among her recent publications: *Orientarsi nelle trasformazioni sociali: Le parole chiave*, Carocci, Roma, 2024 (eds. with E. Colombo); *Sociologia delle differenze. Genere, cultura, natura*, Carocci, Roma, 2022; *Framing Social Theory. Reassembling the lexicon of contemporary social sciences*, Routledge Publishing, London (eds with E. Colombo), 2022; «Enchanted realism: Representations of self-fulfilment among Italian youth after the pandemic», *Current Sociology* (with Colombo, E. e Demirsu, I.), 2024; «Individualization and individualism: facets and turning points of

the entrepreneurial-self among young people in Italy», *Sociology*, 2022 (with E. Colombo e L. Domaneschi).

Veronica Riniolo, Ph.D. in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research, is Assistant Professor (tenure-track) in the Department of Sociology of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan. Her main research interests are in the areas of migration and youth with a migrant background with a focus on political activism and discrimination. She teaches Sociology of Interethnic Coexistence and Laboratory of Quantitative Social Research and she is a member of the Faculty Board of the PhD program in Sociology, Organization, and Cultures, where she teaches Mixed Methods. She is member of the Scientific Committee of the Italian team of the European Values Study (EVS) and of the World Values Survey (WVS). She is a member of the Scientific Board of the Methodology Section at AIS (Italian Association of Sociology) (2019-2021; 2022-2024). She is a member of the Editorial Boards of several national and international journals. In 2024 she worked as an External Expert for the European Commission and since 2017, she has offered consultation on themes of immigrant integration within Italy for the European Migration Network (EMN). Her research has appeared in peer-reviewed academic journals such as the *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *Social Indicators Research*, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *Migration Letters*, *Revue Interventions Économiques*. She is the author of a monograph: *L'integrazione dei migranti in Svezia. Tra sfide e opportunità* (FrancoAngeli, 2018).

Martina Rolandi, PhD student in Methodology and Social Research at the Universities of Milan and Turin. Her research focuses on feminism and religious participation in various Catholic associations. She is the author of «Old cleavages for a new democratic scenario? A multilevel analysis of the relationship between religiosity and support for RRP in Europe» (with G. Dolci and A. Giorgi, paper presented at the *International Conference on Political Sociology - Democracy and Society: Challenges, Risks and Opportunities for Contemporary Democracy*, Bologna 2024).

Alice Sanarico is a PhD student in Sociology and Methodology of Social Research at the University of Milan. She is a member of the public opinion research laboratory spsTREND. As part of the lab's activities, he participated as a research fellow in the realisation of projects on youth values in Italy.

Ambrogio Santambrogio insegna sociologia presso il Dipartimento di Scienze politiche dell'Università di Perugia. Le sue ultime pubblicazioni sono: *Studi di teoria sociale. Solidarietà, riflessività e senso comune*, Morlacchi, Perugia 2025; *Sociologia ed esistenza. In dialogo con Franco Crespi* (a cura di), il Mulino, Bologna 2024; *Utopia without Ideology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2023.

Michel Sterbini Perticarà, Dottorando in Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale presso l'Università di Bologna. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano le discriminazioni e le tattiche di resistenza delle persone trans e non binarie nel mondo lavorativo, le autonarrazioni trans* e l'attivismo queer. Nel 2022 ha partecipato al Convegno Nazionale *Gender R-Evolutions* organizzato dall'Università di Trento. Ha lavorato come borsista presso l'Università di Cagliari nell'ambito di una ricerca sugli elementi chiave della mobilità lavorativa nella cornice del progetto EURES TMS (2021-2023). Nel 2024 ha partecipato alla Third International Conference di Scuola Democratica con un intervento sulla discriminazione transfobica come forma di violenza di genere. È attivo all'interno di un'associazione e di una collettiva formate da persone trans*.

Dario Tuorto, Full Professor of Sociology of Political Phenomena at the Department of Education Studies, University of Bologna. He graduated in Sociology from the University of Naples Federico II and earned a PhD in Sociology and Social Research from the University of Trento. He has published in national and international journals and is the author of several monographs. He is a member of the PhD faculty in Sociology and Social Research Methodology at the University of Milan and Turin. His research primarily focuses on political participation, with particular attention to age and gender differences, socio-political socialization processes, and social exclusion. He has also worked on issues related to welfare, internal and international migration, and education. Among his most recent publications: *Prima agli italiani. Welfare, risentimento, sciovinismo*, (with E. Gargiulo and E. Morlicchio, Il Mulino, 2024); *Underprivileged Voters and Electoral Exclusion in Contemporary Europe* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); *I giovani nella società contemporanea. Identità e trasformazioni* (with I. Pitti, Carocci, 2021).

Marta Visioli is currently finishing her PhD in Sociology, Organisations, Cultures at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. In her research, she has developed a qualitative investigation into the European dias-

pora and activism of women from the Horn of Africa. Her research interests include women's rights, activism, racism and intersectional discriminations. She participates in the research group *SiD-Sociologhe in dialogo* and collaborates in the MULTIHURI project - Racism and discrimination: Human rights under threats, led by the University of Valencia, with the participation of the CIRMIB Centre of Università Cattolica.

Anna Lena Winkler is a research associate in the field of School Research focused on Youth at the Department of Education and Social Sciences at the University of Cologne. She holds a Master of Education from the RWTH Aachen University and has already published in journals and conference proceedings. She is actively involved in interpretation groups applying the documentary method and is a co-founder of a doctoral researchers' working group. Anna Lena Winkler is currently pursuing a PhD on the topic of boys and experiences of injury. Her research focuses on youth, masculinity and peer relationships.

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