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STUDENT PROTESTS AND YOUTH ACTIVISM IN ITALY

Mobilisation, resistance and resilience before and after the pandemic. A case-study

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Abstract

The most recent global cycle of protests from the early 2000s, appears to have brought back the paradigm of students' and youth activism. In fact, drawing on a more inclusive concept of politics within a comparative perspective, scholars have identified a number of common elements in student mobilisation: asking to be involved in decision-making, demanding spaces for democratic participation, opposing the neoliberalisation of education and the precarisation of work, combating climate crisis, inequalities and injustices, also reasserting these demands after the pandemic. A pragmatic approach to political participation, along with individualization combined with new ways of constructing the collective dimension mainly characterizes contemporary young people political involvement. My longitudinal analysis of three Italian student organisations has enabled me to identify changes in student involvement in the social and political sphere over five years. In particular, I have analysed the impact of the pandemic on the modes of action/protest adopted by the student organisations in question, drawing on a generational and social movements approach.

Keywords

Student activism; generations; individualization; care; reinventing politicst

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1. INTRODUCTION. STUDENT ACTIVISM AND YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Over the last two decades there have been two main cycles of youth mobilisations: the anti-austerity protests in 2008, and the cycle of student protests against the neoliberalisation of education in various countries since the 2000s. Various scholars have framed the latter as a global wave of student protests, the most significant phenomenon since those of the 1960s and early 1970s. Italy is no exception, with its cycle of student protests that exploded in 2008-2011 known as Onda Anomala (the Anomalous Wave): this was both a mobilisation against a sweeping neoliberal reform of the Italian school and university system, and part of the broader anti-austerity protests (cfr. Bessant et al 2021; Cini 2019; della Porta 2015; Klemenĉiĉ 2014; Pickard, Bessant 2018; Rootes 2013; Van de Velde 2021).

As many scholars report, student movements continue to play a leading role in contentious politics (Altbach 1989; Bettin Lattes 2008; Cini 2019; Rootes 2013). The student movements of the 1960s and early 1970s[1] have "fixed in popular memory" the idea of "dissenting youth" (Bessant et al 2021, 1). Scholars acknowledge students' historically significant role as subjects of social and political change, vanguards, characterized by biographical availability and inspired by ideals.

The most recent cycle of protests which unfolded globally from the early 2000s, peaking in 2008-2011, appears to have brought back the paradigm of students' and youth activism, given the reach and scope of these protests, with student movements mobilising in about 50 countries across five continents (Cini 2019; Klemenĉiĉ 2014). This is even more significant at a time when "students, and young people more generally" are portrayed as "politically apathetic and disinterested in politics" (Bessant et al 2021, 5). Influential scholars have examined the "gap between how students are represented and what they are actually doing", since this "has much to do with what is meant by politics and whose representations dominate and win out" (ivi). Drawing on a more inclusive concept of politics, and applying a comparative perspective to student mobilisations, scholars have identified some common features. In response to the neoliberalisation of education systems and the labour market (Antonucci et

[1] Their role expanded in a period that coincided with the consolidation of the Keynesian, Fordist economic model, and the development of welfare democracies, during the so-called *trentes glorieuses*, which created favourable conditions for a process of social and intergenerational redistribution (Altbach 1989; Bettin Lattes 2008; Rootes 2013).

al 2014; Curtmel, Furlong 2007; France 2016; Lynch 2015), "global resonances between student movements" have emerged, as well as "links in the demands made by students in different parts of the world" (Van de Velde 2021, 34). Comparative research (Bessant et al 2017; Bessant et al 2021; Flesher Fominaya 2014; Pickard, Bessant 2018) has revealed a "common thread" which connects demands for real democracy, free education and intergenerational justice, testifying to "generational resonances" between student movements in different countries. What students' grievances and demands have in common has been forged by global processes and events such as the global recession of 2008, the neoliberalisation of education and the flexibilization of the labour market (Antonucci et al 2014; Bessant et al 2017; France 2016), as well as the "increased mobilisation of social networks" (Van de Velde 2021, 34). These global processes have given rise to a global "transition to adulthood regime"[2] which is nonetheless embedded in different national contexts that define the structural conditions it takes place in (cfr. Van de Velde 2021; Woodman & Wyn 2015).

Scholars have identified a number of common elements in student mobilisation: asking to be involved in decision-making in the public sphere, demanding spaces for democratic participation, combating inequalities and injustices in the pre-pandemic world, and reasserting these demands after the pandemic, further expanding the number of issues they are active on. The forms of student involvement have changed over the past decade; student activism in contemporary societies is mainly characterized by a pragmatic approach to political participation, combined with the centrality of the individual dimension, and new ways of constructing the collective dimension (Bessant et al 2021; Pickard 2019; Pirni, Raffini 2022; Pitti, Tuorto 2021).

The case study I analysed in my research is part of this world, and my longitudinal analysis of three Italian student organisations has enabled me to identify changes in student involvement in the social and political sphere over a considerable period of time, as I will clarify further on. In particular, with respect to the last two years, I have analysed the impact

[2] The transition to adulthood, along with that of generation, is one of the two pivotal concepts in youth studies. It refers to the shift from youth to adulthood, as indicated by specific markers such as education, labour and welfare systems. According to scholars, in the last two decades a sort of "global transition regime" has taken shape, influenced by neoliberal economic globalisation, the marketisation of education and the reduction of welfare provision (Woodman & Wyn 2015, 22). Scholars view these changes in structural conditions since the 1980s as shaping the characteristics of generational location (Bessant et al 2017).

of the pandemic on the modes of action/protest adopted by the student organisations in question.

The case-study also provided an empirical testbed for exploring the most recent approaches to studying the social and political activism of young people and student organisations, and participatory practices such as "do it ourselves" politics and "direct social action" (cfr. Bosi, Zamponi 2015; Pickard 2019). These innovative practices have formed in a changing context characterized by individualisation and the deinstitutionalisation of societal and political structures. In the more general context of the weakening of social ties and group affiliations inherited from the Fordist, "modernist" model, and the weakening of the mechanisms for transmitting roles, norms and values to the new generations, the unprecedented scenario that opens up is characterized by both processes of individualization and the reinvention of the social and the political, and the relationship between them (Alteri et al 2016; Cuzzocrea, Collins 2015; Pickard, Bessant 2018; Pirni, Raffini 2022). I will explore these analytical views further on, discussing them in relation to the empirical study I conducted.

2. OUTLINING THE CASE STUDY: LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH ON THREE ITALIAN STUDENT ORGANISATIONS

My research consists in a longitudinal analysis of student involvement in the societal and political sphere. I studied three Italian student organisations, namely the Students' Union, Link University Coordination and The Knowledge Network, over a fairly long period, both pre-pandemic, from 2017 to 2019 (albeit not continuously), and post-pandemic, drawing on qualitative methodologies including direct observation and in-depth interviews. I managed to get back in touch with members of these student unions during and immediately after the lockdown to conduct online interviews, carrying out 15 online interviews between the summer of 2021 and the first few months of 2022, having done more than 80 interviews in person from 2017-2019, when I attended three editions of the Riot Village, the student summer camp which gathers the student collectives belonging to the three student organisations from different cities and regions of Italy. I also examined past and recent documents produced by these student organisations[3]. These empirical observations offer a complex

[3] The Students' Union formed in March 1994 in the aftermath of the end of the "First Republic", namely after a huge crisis in Italian politics. It gathers environmental and anti-

picture of their subjective experiences of the multiple crises that have affected them.

These student organisations were involved in the last, broadest wave of student activism in Italy in 2008-2011, the so-called Anomalous Wave, which consisted in a series of anti-austerity protests and student mobilisations against the neoliberal reforms of school and university, as I shall explain. One of the organisations, the Students' Union, founded in 1994, was among the leaders of these protests. The other two – Link University Coordination and the Knowledge Network (the latter being an umbrella organisation which gathers the first two) – came into being in the same political/organisational environment as the Students' Union, namely that of Italy's left-wing student organisations. Link University Coordination actually formed during the ferment of the Anomalous Wave mobilisation, which triggered a breakaway from the University Students Union (UDU, a left-wing university students' union), and the emergence of various left-wing student collectives during the protests. The Anomalous Wave can therefore be viewed as a catalyst in the development of these three student organisations, even though their protests against the neoliberal reform of university education – known as the Gelmini Law after the name of the minister who presented it – were not successful (the law was approved despite extensive protests) (Cini 2019).

They describe themselves as "political unions", being both student union and political movement: they are active on a range of issues, from environmental policies to migrant and LGBT rights. They are involved in the transfeminist movement "Non una di meno", and Fridays for Future. At present, they have worked on maintaining their activism during and after the pandemic, tackling organisational issues, issues concerning students individually, such as their psychological wellbeing, and collective issues such as the housing emergency, which they had been working on before the pandemic too[4].

The Students' Union in particular took centre stage at the most recent protests, held in the autumn of 2021 and the winter of 2022, against the school/work "alternation programme", in particular after the deaths of two students in January and February 2022 during work experience as

mafia collectives within the area of left-wing union organisations (namely CIGL, the biggest Italian labour union). The other two organisations - the university union Link university coordination, and the Knowledge Network, a confederation of the previous two - came into being ten years later, in 2009 and 2010 respectively, during the Anomalous Wave mobilisations.

[4] As illustrated in the document which can be downloaded here: *https://linkcoordinamentouniversitario.it/riscriviamo-luniversita/*

part of this scheme (it is a compulsory work experience programme for secondary school students introduced in 2015 by the Buona Scuola (Good School) Reform (Grimaldi et al 2016) – as I will explain further on.

These three student organisations took part in the last few Fridays for Future mobilisations, both pre-pandemic (on 15th March and 27th September 2019), and post-pandemic (24th September 2021 and 23rd September 2022). They were also involved in relaunching the environmental movement during the Pre-cop conference held in Milan in late September/early October 2021 and constructing an alternative platform to the intergovernmental arena, namely the Climate Open Platform, which took place in Milan at the same time.

In what follows I will analyse these different aspects and the evolution of the three organisations' political engagement also during the pandemic and its aftermath. The first analytical focus is the impact of the pandemic and how both individual and collective subjectivities responded to it, also in terms of the organisational and political engagement of these student organisations. The second analytical focus is linked to the first and concerns their organised response to the pandemic, with mutualistic practices they developed in the strictest lockdown periods. Their long-term experience in mutualistic practices – developed over the last decade to combat the effects of the austerity policies and the neoliberal education reforms – represented an organisational asset and a resource. The third focus concerns their understanding of the generational dimension, which was tested by the pandemic. This was the second structural, systemic crisis they faced, just a decade after that of 2008, which played such a key role in their political paths. According to some scholars, it is possible to envisage a generational "global resonance" between different student movements that have been active in the last decade, since they share a "common destiny", facing manifold crisis, economic, environmental, pandemic (Antonucci et al 2014; Bessant et al 2017; Christou 2022; De Moor et al 2021; France 2016; Colombo, Rebughini 2019).

3. FOCUS ONE. THE PANDEMIC CRISIS, INDIVIDUALIZATION, REORGANISATION AND PROTESTS

Inevitably, the student organisations I studied have been deeply affected by the pandemic in every respect, from organisation to activism. However, as emerged from the interviews, during the pandemic they developed both critical skills and resilience, in order to "keep the ship

steady" (Marco[5], The Network, aged 25), and to "regroup" as organisations (Giulia, aged 24, Link Bologna), as well as experimenting with new forms of organisation and implementing adaptive strategies.

Before the pandemic they identified the core subject they aimed to represent as the "learning subject", i.e. people engaged in both formal education and the process of lifelong learning. Post-pandemic, they have felt the need to broaden this focus, seeing themselves as part of a generational subjectivity with specific needs and demands, and working to combat atomization, impoverishment, inequalities and disadvantages.

In terms of their analysis of the impact of the pandemic, they considered its effects both on individual members, in psychological terms, and on their organisations. These effects included losing members, but also gaining the potential to expand their presence in other cities and regions and rethink their organisational structures, to adapt to online activism. These student organisations had already used social media for connective action purposes, and the pandemic occasioned a marked increase in this. For two years, albeit not continuously, they had to stop holding meetings in person, which they regard as a key element of their relational infrastructure.

In all respects, the pandemic has had a profound impact on these students' subjectivities. Various interviewees reported on different activism practices in the pandemic being characterized by an *anti-performative* stance. This is a recurrent term in their discourse, which connects the subjective dimension with collectively taking care of everyone's vulnerabilities.

By prioritising the subjective dimension, they are committed to making their organisations non-competitive and non-performative, constructing collective practices that are respectful of people's time, rather than insisting on competitive, highly demanding modes of action. They are experimenting with an approach that combines mobilisation and activism with sociality, taking care of each other rather than adopting a macho, performative stance; accepting the vulnerability that the pandemic brought forth so strongly (Pickard, Bessant 2018).

The worst months of the pandemic were a difficult time for these student organisations. The intermittent lockdowns, the question of online classes, the closure of social spaces (both within and outside schools and universities) and the shortcomings in the policies designed to guarantee the right to study, all prompted both new and old demands,

[5] The names of all those interviewed have been changed.

such as that of bridging the digital divide to enable students to attend online lessons, introducing free education, and promoting student income as a genuine guarantee of the right to study[6]. As for the new demands, in their most recent documents, they discuss the concept of the "University of care". What follows is an excerpt from this document.

> *In order to define the imaginary of the university as a space of Care, it is necessary to reject the bourgeois paradigm of university as a "social elevator", a competitive mechanism devoted to "achieving" levels of influence and power which imprisons the purpose of knowledge […]. In the imaginary of the university of care that we want to promote, that is, a space that provides the cultural tools for the emancipation of individuals, their full self-determination and ability to make their own decisions, ensuring that these tools are accessible to and sustainable for all subjectivities is a necessary, if not exhaustive, prerequisite […]. Building a society that is non-violent, in which "individual fulfilment" does not equate to infringing on the rights of others, also means taking responsibility for not legitimizing, not passively accepting, practices of violence that tend to be viewed as "normal" […].*

The excerpts from interviews presented below effectively illustrate the analytical reflections quoted above.

> *[...] The lack of political attention to universities, and above all the cuts and the ineffective reforms implemented in the last 15-20 years, all emerged during the lockdown, i.e. from March to May [2020] and unfortunately the challenges faced by the student body ballooned: the difficulties involved in following lectures, affording accommodation in university cities, the lack of funding to support the right to study, the extremely high fees […] you could say these elements that came to the fore led to students acknowledging their identity as students once more, and therefore wanting to claim their rights as university students. After this period, little by little, participation on the part of the student body began to dwindle, and though perhaps the element of care was something that students addressed, at that point the perception was that of a return to individualism, a return to the ego, perhaps the duty to study a lot to make up for time lost during distance learning, so they were no longer able to channel all that anger, and the fact of voicing their needs, as they did during the lockdown, into an organised form, to make general demands together with other students. […]. We have never put a limit on the length of discussions […], but clearly we can make people think about the aim of their speeches and how to say things in order to avoid long, drawn-out discussions,*

[6] Among others, I downloaded some documents which address the issue of students' rights: http://linkcoordinamentouniversitario.it/luniversita-e-fuori-programma-ora-decidiamo-noi/; http://linkcoordinamentouniversitario.it/2020/04/06/

so that perhaps those who have less time can still feel involved, and to be inclusive towards those who are shy or nervous about the idea of not being able to speak for half an hour. […]. And then, on the other hand, care - especially in the local areas - is perceived as taking back time for yourself, time to study, from the overload of work that the student organisation can involve (Carla, Link national executive board, aged 26, 2022).

Because while it is true that people have been more fired up since the pandemic, because I think they are seeing things more clearly, and understanding that there are contradictions and things that don't work, and wanting to change them, on the other hand, however, what Thatcher said seems increasingly true, namely that there is no alternative, or there seems to be no alternative, so there is also a strong generational disillusionment towards politics, which makes you wonder why you're involved, what's the point? I think there's just not the same level of enthusiasm that maybe there used to be in the organisations, thinking about the Anomalous Wave and everything that happened in the years immediately after that. Now this enthusiasm has been a bit lost, let's say it's got a bit lost, but it's something people regret, in the sense that I believe that the organisations can take heed of this, and acknowledge this contradiction and try to respond in some way.
(Fabiola, Link, aged 20 Bologna, 2021).

When it comes to the future I see a lot of disillusionment, as I said before about the institutions, but also a lot of fear around what the future will look like […] we are facing a world that we have never really experienced, and that will probably amplify all the repressive dynamics present in the last few years, but there is a whole series of unknowns that actually makes us fearful and all against real change unfortunately. As has been said in various speeches, in various assemblies it is normal to be afraid, but at the same time we must also realize that the symptoms of repression, and immobility are nothing but symptoms of the fact that even the institutions will be afraid if thousands of people begin to imagine a different kind of system, and therefore maybe we can face this relationship between dystopia and utopia and this fear, this uncertainty, by uniting and working towards a common goal, succeeding in imagining a different world and succeeding in and or at least trying to lay the foundations to actually be able to put it into practice, both in our daily lives and in reality in broader terms, in general in Italy and the rest of the world.
(Alberto, aged 18, Last Students' Union Turin, 2022).

As for their long-standing protests against the neoliberalisation of education, I devoted particular attention to those against the school/work alternation programme introduced by the Buona Scuola Reform in 2015, and the organisations' renewed demands for

alternative training experiences, something the Students' Union refers to as "integrated education programmes".

As for the recent protests, they were amplified by the tragic deaths of two young students. On 21st January 2022, Lorenzo Parelli, an 18-year-old student, died when he was crushed by a falling beam during work experience in Udine. Just a few weeks later, on 15th February, Giuseppe Lenoci, aged sixteen, died in Fermi, also during work experience. Students responded immediately, with street protests and by occupying schools: 50 schools were occupied in Rome, 60 in Turin and the surrounding province, and there were also occupations in Milan, Naples, Pisa and Florence. On 28th January 2022 a peaceful demonstration in Turin was repressed by the police, leading to some students being injured and others arrested; there were other episodes of repression in Naples, Rome and Milan. The students' reaction was not long in coming. In my interview with a member of "Last", a student collective associated with the Students' Union, one of the organisers of the occupation at the Gioberti High School in Turin described his frustration and anger, on one hand at seeing the repressive action of the police, and on the other at the lack of answers from the institutions. The parliamentary questions to the Minister of the Interior following these events intensified students' discontent, as the authorities asserted that the police had acted in response to the presence of violent groups that had infiltrated the student demonstrations. The students responded to this unexpected violence from the institutions not only with disillusionment but also fear and indignation. At the same time, the protests offered a glimpse of "another world": the occupations at the Gioberti school in Turin involved students in various activities and workshops that, according to the students interviewed, really appeared to have the power to construct an alternative model of school; a model characterized by renewed sociality and an alternative approach to education.

At present, these students are calling for the abolition of the school/work alternation programme and the introduction of forms of "integrated education" or workshop activities inside or outside school, separate from production processes in order to prevent work experience becoming a way of exploiting free labour. As Lorenzo, national coordinator of the Students' Union, explained, his organisation strove to combine two needs: a form of education that also includes work placements and internships, but that centres on the educational aspect, in order to ensure that these initiatives are not subordinated to labour market imperatives. This is a long-term issue, and the organisation mobilised on it in the recent past. In 2017 it convened the so-called "General

Assembly on exploitation" (in response to the "General Assembly on alternation" held on 16th December 2017 by the Ministry of Education), organising a demonstration in Rome in which students marched in blue overalls. They called for a Code of Ethics for companies that host these work experience projects (which in 2019 became PCTO, *progetti per le competenze trasversali e l'orientamento*, "projects for transversal skills and guidance") together with a Charter of Rights for students involved in the programme, supporting the need for internships which were not forms of free labour: they called for these experiences to be better regulated and more educational in nature.

They also organised a workshop entitled *Cantiere scuola, decidiamo noi* (Constructing education, we decide), which gave rise to two documents: the National School Manifesto and the School Manifesto. To sum up, during the first few months of 2022, after the tragic deaths of two students while on work experience placements, the student organisations responded in two ways: with street protests and school occupations, and with a decisional process that aimed to formulate reform proposals. Six hundred students from all over Italy met on 18th, 19th, and 20th February with these objectives and this approach:

> *We want to take part in the General Assembly on Education in Rome, #Decidiamonoi – #We decide. School buildings in disrepair, antiquated teaching methods, punitive evaluations, being denied the right to study, anxiety and stress are just some of the structural problems that we now face in the classroom. After months of mobilisation and after presenting the State School Manifesto to Minister Bianchi, with the aim of providing concrete proposals to reform education, we are still being ignored. But we are not going to stop, it's up to us to decide on our future: from 18th to 20th February in Rome we will create an opportunity for students, teachers, organisations and movements to come together.*

The document takes up the long-term issues pursued by the Students' Union, a broad platform of demands based on the notion of knowledge as a public good. The Manifesto calls for a training income to ensure free education on all levels, in order to guarantee the effective right to study; free access to all cultural venues; bigger, more effective spaces for participation; affordable digitization for all; and alternative teaching methods, including the abolition of quantitative assessment methods in favour of forms of shared evaluation. It details the problems currently facing state schools, such as the dropout rate, the state of disrepair of school buildings, and the growing levels of inequality, in addition to the new demands and needs triggered by the pandemic, such as the need

for attention to psychological well-being.

Two further excerpts from the interviews illustrate these aspects, pertaining to the last mobilisations in the first months of 2022.

> *About what happened on 18th February [2022], there are people who are still paying the price for being at those protests, in the sense that they are still there - in May, 13 people were arrested, including 11 students, for what happened at that protest, a student was placed under house arrest because she spoke into the microphone, she gave a speech, and on 18th February, three weeks after 28th January, but three weeks when 45 schools were occupied […]. And again, bearing in mind the fact that for two years students had not actually had a voice in public debate, and not even in their own lives. They were instead overburdened by the personal responsibility of staying safe, and at the same time supporting, or helping to support families that were struggling because jobs were being lost, especially those with no safeguards. So then we come to 18th February in front of Confindustria, and the gate was opened by some students who wanted to take some kind of action, go into Confindustria, potentially as a symbolic gesture. […] There were 10,000 people there, which was 4,000/5,000 more than two weeks previously - but what did the institutions actually expect when the only response to all our questions, our requests, our grief, our tears, our distress, was police brutality, with students being injured – students aged 16-17 who were at school with us, and a girl being struck till she blacked out - and when you see your schoolmate passed out in the middle of the street because she was beaten by the police, it's natural to wonder what they were actually expecting. We've presented political proposals, we've protested, we brought Turin to a standstill for more than three/four weeks and still we got no answers.*
> (Alberto, aged 18, Last, Students' Union Turin, 2022).

> *I will try to give you a better idea of the protest on 19th November, which was very, very big, in the sense that 150,000 people protesting on student issues was something that had not been seen for many years, in many parts of Italy. Obviously, these are nothing like numbers at the Fridays protests, but you know better than I do that it was a very special event […] Then 19th November came around […] and we finished work on this manifesto, the "Constructing education" manifesto, which we had been working on since the previous February […]. The Manifesto aimed to update an old analysis of education, and try to present a new model, essentially to present proposals for reforms. The Manifesto was produced during the occupations, school assemblies, committees, collectives […]. From there we launched another occasion for collective reflection called the "General Assembly on state education", which was held two weeks ago [February 2022], […] gathering students from all over the country to discuss rebuilding school education on new bases […] involving different organisations such as Fridays, Non una di meno (Not one less), Legambiente Arci, that is, all the organisations in our country that were*

> *able to present a unified model for school education […] with the aim of pointing out that education is not a sectoral battle, but a battle that affects the whole of society, along with movements, organisations, because in the end, it is school that builds citizens and civil society after that*
> (Lorenzo, aged 20, national coordinator of the Students' Union, 2022).

4. FOCUS TWO: EXPERIMENTING WITH NEW PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: MUTUALISM, CARE, DIRECT SOCIAL ACTION

As emerged from the interviews, the main response of these student organisations to the pandemic consisted in formulating mutual aid practices. These practices have always been an integral part of the identity and modes of action of these student organisations. Mutualism and its core, solidarity, represented a sort of gold reserve that was used during the decade of austerity and the implementation of neoliberal policies as a way of building supportive communities, seen as an alternative to competitive, meritocratic neoliberal mechanisms, and a way of strengthening and extending these organisations, "rooting" them in different local contexts. Mutualism, care and community building – i.e. community organising – are also seen as a practice of social and political activism and an integral part of this approach. In this sense, "the central stake revolves around the articulation between the common and the singular, between individual fragility and collective supports […], [that is], in grasping the singular in what is common" (Martuccelli 2017, 139, 137). The pandemic did not find these organisations unprepared from this point of view. Mutualistic practices were organised through the Arci clubs (a broad Italian network of cultural and social associations) and their social spaces, where these student organisations often congregate. They also built broad networks of social solidarity in collaboration with other civil society players. This approach was common to student organisations in different cities, such as Milan (Lato B Students' Union social space), Turin (Privateers Workshop), Bologna (Slow Rhythm), Rome (Sparwasser and NonnaRoma – Grandmother Rome), and many other cities, as emerged in reflections on these experiences at the first post-pandemic Riot Village in 2021, reported on by Giulia (aged 24, Link Bologna).

One example I was able to investigate was "Don't panic", a mutual network in Bologna. This network, which aimed to give practical help to people in need and the most vulnerable groups in society during the pandemic, from the LGBT community to HIV-positive people, from female victims of violence to the homeless, succeeded in bringing together about 50 associations and more than 200 volunteers in the first phase of the

2020 lockdown. It was set up and organised at the Arci club Ritmo Lento (Slow Rhythm) which is a political space frequented by Link Bologna, student collectives and other civil society associations. These students see Ritmo Lento as a safe space for student activism, where their aspirations to participate in local politics and enjoy their "right to the city" can be fulfilled (Caciagli 2022; Feixa et al 2020). Through "molecular" coordination work, according to Flora (aged 25, from Link Bologna), students from Link Bologna, together with other associations and civic organisations such as Coalizione civica Bologna (Bologna Civic Coalition), the anti-mafia association Libera, and the transfeminist collective *La Mala Educacion* (created within Link Bologna), succeeded in carrying out a very effective mutual aid campaign.

The practices of mutualism and solidarity addressed all aspects of the emergency and also supported specific needs. This included collecting and distributing food parcels and providing help with online schooling for those who could not afford a functioning computer, distributing drugs to the HIV-positive, creating shelters for the homeless in line with Covid regulations, drafting a map of refuges – the so-called "map of the female marauder" - for women victims of violence (whose number grew significantly during the pandemic and the lockdown). They also created "condominiums of care", a sort of community time bank to share care work for children and the elderly across various blocks of flats in the city and raised awareness of the plight of food delivery riders (the so-called "riders of solidarity" who provided a vital service during the lockdown) and their lack of rights (Flora, Giulia, Link Bologna). One of the interviewees (Giovanni, aged 26, Link Bologna) talked about mutualism being a specific "legacy" of the last decade of student activism: it functioned as a mode of resilience and resistance in response to the effects of the austerity policies and characterized the action of the political generation of the Autonomous Wave and the "Children of the Wave".

Mutualism and care practices address subjective vulnerabilities, fostering the construction of forms of political community and socio-economic organisation which represent an alternative to the capitalist, colonial, patriarchal model. The theme of care, which is closely linked to the implementation of mutualistic practices, is also linked to the trans-feminist and environmentalist movements. Taking care of the planet and addressing vulnerabilities and social needs are part and parcel of an alternative mode of societal and economic organisation, as opposed to violent, discriminatory, capitalist modes of organising society (The Care Collective 2020). The "axes of domination" (class, gender, race, speciesism) are also the axes along which resistance and forms of student activism can be

developed.

In particular, a Link university coordination political document of 2022 envisaged an alternative model of university, understood as "the university of care" and inspired by transfeminism, psychological well-being and neurodiversity, launching a project and an "imaginary university" as a space for care. These organisations have always viewed knowledge as a common good, a powerful tool for students' emancipation and full citizenship, and on this basis they are opposed to neoliberal, managerial reforms of education, i.e. education policies devoted to "privatizing" knowledge, which have the effect of increasing inequality, mainly as a result of high tuition fees and meritocratic competition (cfr. Ball 2012; Lynch 2015).

This extract from the document illustrates these points:

> *The maintenance of the capitalist system and the neoliberal social machine is based on reproducing injustices and economic and social inequalities. Education is exploited and enslaved in this sense, in order to inure people to inequality, smooth out conflicts and normalize the idea of knowledge as a slave to the market. Yet it is inadmissible that narratives that propose a misleading and discriminatory idea of the world be perpetrated in places of learning, starting from the fact that the view of the wealthy, capitalist white man is considered the only valid point of view. In the context of educational programmes based on male-focused knowledge, we assert the historical value of discriminated subjectivities and the need for these not to be cancelled by male-focused teaching.* […]. *We endorse the lens of intersectionality as the only useful lens for reading reality; an approach that eliminates the divisions between the classic conceptualizations of the categories of oppression in society, tracing a common matrix that underpins and connects them.*
> (Link Political Document 2022, 19)

Other excerpts from the interviews further clarify their position.

> *During Riot we had a discussion about experiences similar to Don't Panic, with activists talking about what had been done during the pandemic. Don't Panic was discussed, along with initiatives in Rome, Milan, Turin and several other cities - different experiences of mutualism, which after the first wave of Covid then continued, maybe in different ways with needs that changed between the various waves. We can say that this experience gave us a great deal of food for thought, the society of care, the attempt to put different elements at the centre of the debate, that is to try to focus on the solidarity that there was during that time, and the need to restore the sense of community that had weakened in our cities and universities, starting from something like that, something practical, spontaneous […]. We wanted to try and use*

something we have done a lot of work on, namely the redistribution of care work as a tool for community building, as well as liberation. […]. We experimented with condominiums of care, but it could be done on a wider scale, for example the neighbourhood or even the whole city, imagining broader forms of redistribution of care work. It's something we are thinking about right now, it's something to work on.
(Giulia, aged 24 Link Bologna)

5. FOCUS THREE. THE GENERATIONAL DIMENSION OF YOUTH/STUDENT ACTIVISM

Since the 2008-2011 cycle of students' mobilisations, drawing on slogans like "we will not pay for the crisis" and "nobody represents us", Italian students have manifested their opposition to austerity policies and their disenfranchisement from conventional politics, which had denied them a voice. Many studies report that this coincided with a historical turning point when the redistributive process of welfare policies came to an end both in Europe and globally, marking the end of the cycle of Keynesian economic policies and paving the way for monetarist/neoliberal polices, which in turn coincided with a radical change in the socio-economic conditions of the post-70s generations (Bessant et al 2017; France 2016; Moini 2016). This generational location, in a multiple crisis scenario, represents the social and historical *milieu* of the student organisations I studied (cfr. Bessant et al 2017; Cini 2019; Woodman & Wyn 2015). According to the seminal Mannheim's formulation of the concept of generation (Mannheim 1928), it is worth highlighting that "it is composed of three elements" that is first "the site of the generation […], its temporal, structural location"; secondly, "this generational position will shape subjectivity"; thirdly, generations are not homogenous but they are composed by different "generational units" knitted together by their generational bonding; "these units are groupings that, although sharing the same generation, work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways" (Woodman & Wyn 2015, 58-59). In other words, Mannheim distinguishes generation as location and generation as actuality which is likely to be stratified by a number of generational units (Pilcher 1994, 490).

Since the Anomalous Wave, as the interviews and documents I analysed in 2017-2019 show, these student organisations have posed the generational question in terms of a "social question", demanding profound social, economic, and political changes not only for themselves but "for everyone", acting as a generation "in itself, and "of itself" (Turner 2005).

They frame the generational question as a social, general question, also intended as a democratic question, that is the aspiration to participate in the public sphere, to gain spaces and opportunities to be able decide on their own concerns, from school and university to work and rights as fully-fledged citizens.

As far as the generational collocation of these young students and their political positioning are concerned it is worth highlighting that the opportunities for and constraints on their action have been defined by "crisis". Their critical awareness of the effects of the systemic crises they have experienced, that is the global economic crisis in 2008, the pandemic crisis in 2020-2021 and the climate crisis, clearly emerges in the interviews, in which the related terms of individualism, atomization and competition, on the one hand, and solidarity, care, community and mutualism on the other, form two conflicting clusters that define what they are opposed to, and the values and proposals they wish to pursue, respectively.

According to some scholars, generational units and social/student movements may overlap (Bessant et al 2017; Bettin Lattes 2008; Cini 2017; Van de Velde 2021). Generational units can be regarded as subgenerations of a broader generation, while the notion of political generation refers to young people in a specific time and place who become aware of having a "common destiny", and thus express their societal and political agency as a generational unit. Therefore, "social movements can be seen as collective enterprise initiated by a generation of activists united by some common values, behaviours and/or interests, who aim to trigger or resist some type of social change" while "students in mobilisation" can be seen as "an active segment of a specific age-group building and sharing a distinctive cultural and political and/or political identity" (Cini 2017, 59). In this sense then, social movements/student movements and generational units may overlap. In order

In this framework, the youngest generations have developed a radical environmental consciousness which identifies them as "the Fridays for Future generation" (this is actually the broadest global environmental movement) (De Moor et al 2021), since they feel they are the last generation entrusted with the noble task of combating the global climate crisis.

Although the three student organisations I have studied do not represent a numerical majority in the Italian section of *Fridays for Future*, many of their members play the role of spokespersons, given that representatives of various local environmental collectives are involved in the loose, networked organisation of the Fridays for Future movement.-Various interviews highlighted how long these student organisations have been active on environmental issues. In fact, the "Students for the

Environment" internal groups have been active on various local issues, such as the land polluted by toxic waste in Campania (an area in the south of Italy known as *Terra dei fuochi*), and campaigning against major infrastructure projects such as the TAV highspeed rail link, oil drilling in the Adriatic Sea, and the Ilva steelworks in Taranto. Various student collectives which are part of the three student organisations are part of the Fridays for Future movement. These also include those who mobilised in Milan in September/October 2022, when the preparatory Youth Conference of the Parts took place, just a month before the COP26 in Glasgow. Furthermore, these organisations arranged a sort of "counter-Cop" in Milan, the Climate Open Platform.

The following excerpt from an interview gives a better account of these related aspects.

> *I believe that Fridays for Future was a bit of a litmus test anyway, just as this generation has very strong aspirations and a revolutionary spirit because [...] the climate crisis is something that they are all talking about, and feel very strongly about, they feel they have a responsibility to do something about this situation. Also because I believe that one of the most telling narratives for this generation, and also I believe the previous one, the Anomalous Wave generation, is that our parents' generation did nothing, they left us high and dry and we had to deal with it on our own. But I believe that, compared to the Wave generation, perhaps the Fridays for Future generation has more of a fighting spirit, maybe due to the symbols that have emerged, i.e. I for one would not underestimate the figure of Greta Thunberg, for example [...] who is, I believe, for many fourteen, fifteen, sixteen-year-olds, a strong symbol of the struggle. […]. I remember the national assemblies of the Fridays, the first ones that a huge number of boys and girls attended, and I basically believe that this is a representation of why this generation has a strong generational issue, that is, they don't feel represented, no longer simply by a political class, but represented in general by any kind of model. And this is something we should not underestimate because it reflects on the ways they take a stand against this world, and also because mutualism then becomes the definitive tool for building alternative communities that also try to autonomously manage parts of the city, parts of neighbourhoods.*
> *(Marco, aged 24, national coordinator of The Knowledge Network, 2022)*

When it comes to their protests, the interviewees told me about innovative forms of protest, such as "die-ins", when activists lie on the ground pretending to be dead, as a symbolic representation of the effects of the climate crisis, or pretend to hang from a block of ice with a rope around their necks to represent the deadly effects of the glaciers melting. Different respondents emphasised that knowledge is the cornerstone of the

Fridays for Future movement. As Giuseppe (aged 29) told me, the Fridays activists "eat bread and scientific papers for breakfast". Other interviewees also highlighted that the Fridays for Future mobilisations mainly draw on the scientific reports published by the IPCC (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Science is therefore viewed in terms of its emancipatory potential (Luca, aged 25, Link Milano and national executive of Link; Pietro, aged 26, Link Catania).

> *The street protests make a big impact because there are so many people, but behind them there is an incredible amount of work […]. Seeing thousands of people doing this is very powerful, when we pretend to hang from a block of ice with a rope around our necks, to illustrate that when all the ice melts it will be the end of life on earth, or burning a globe in the street, a globe made of paper, which we did to represent how the earth is burning up. There are countless ways of taking action being developed in the environmental context, like the hunger strikes being done, or targeting historical monuments to show the fact that they will no longer exist: there are a lot of new approaches to activism. […]. In actual fact the Fridays' generation is also a little younger than me and let's say […] it is very interesting to see the new approaches, the new kinds of action being practised that were not in use a few years ago, even only 5 or 6 years ago […]. For the Precop we met in Milan at the end of September, and we tried to address the fact that there cannot be a partial solution, a solution of small steps: there has to be revolutionary, systemic change. It is not enough to adopt small measures: there has to be one big change, and we really have to understand the deep roots of climate change. No doubt it's an issue that there is a majority of Western countries deciding on this, even though the main factors behind climate change come from Western lifestyles, while the consequences are felt more in the Global South. […]. What's missing is the connection between climate justice and social justice, namely the fact that no-one takes the social consequences of climate change into account. […]. Entire populations are already being forced to migrate due to climate change, due to the fact that some areas are becoming uninhabitable, so people are forced to migrate and abandon their land. […] There are also considerations to be made and interesting studies regarding, for example, the fact that women and LGBT people are more affected by the climate crisis. Just think of the pandemic, the fact that the pandemic was generated by the changes under way, i.e. pollution, our abuse of nature, intensive farming, zoonoses that would not occur in nature, or would not occur with the severity and frequency they now exhibit, causing pandemics like the one we are experiencing now, and the fact that the pandemic affected different groups and subjectivities differently.*
> *(Roberto, aged 23, Link national board, 2022).*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I intend to formulate some broad considerations on the case study I worked on, along with further theoretical reflections. These student unions have faced subsequent crises over two decades, namely the global recession, the pandemic, and the climate crisis, which have impacted them both individually and collectively. Over two decades, these student organisations have worked on ways to counter solitude and atomization, dealt with struggles and defeats, enacted innovative practices of solidarity and mutualism, and experimented with processes of subjectification, both individually and collectively (cfr. Cuzzocrea, Collins 2015; Martuccelli 2017, 2023). It is possible to identify two different phases and two broad modes of action, namely a more structured one within the union framework, and a less structured one, more open to interacting with social movements (Melucci 1991). While these student organisations have always fiercely opposed the neoliberal reform of education and still mobilise on student-centred issues, they are also active on environmental, anti-mafia and anti-racist issues, thus overlapping with social movements. Having had to deal with two systemic crises in less than ten years, they seem to have identified their generational location as the generation of multiple crises. They have been forced to find a way of managing these crises and formulating a political response to the consequences. In so doing, their dual identity of student unions and social movements seems to have given them a way to both channel their anger and project their aspirations for an alternative future.

In this framework, student activism can be regarded as an arena for experimenting with innovative, creative political practices, which overlaps with the broader field of youth activism and various forms of experimentation with innovative political practices such as direct social action and do-it-ourselves politics (Bosi, Zamponi 2015; Pickard 2019). In analytical terms, there are two recognizable models of do-it-ourselves politics. One is closer to "lifestyle politics", in which individualisation – personal choices and practices – takes centre stage. The second model is more oriented towards the community dimension, and takes the form of volunteering, mutual aid projects, fundraising and campaigning (cfr. Pickard 2019; Pirni Raffini 2022; Pitti, Tuorto 2021).

This latter aspect resonates with "direct social action". This participatory practice includes various forms of engagement and activism, mainly in the social sphere but also in the political sphere. These are "forms of action that are direct, that is, aimed at having a not mediated impact on their object, and they are social, that is, they address society or at least,

some parts of it, rather than state authorities or other power-holders" (Bosi, Zamponi 2015, 374).

These student organisations appear to have engaged in direct social action by means of "doing it themselves", as can be seen in their mutualistic practices and their involvement in environmental and transfeminist movements, together with their aspirations to construct a society of care, which they see both as a response to individualization and atomization, and a form of political engagement. They also view their participation in various social movements as embodying their politically hybrid nature – as half student union, half social movement – and manifesting their generational location.

With the aim of going beyond a narrow, conventional, state-centric definition of politics, the wide repertoire of student involvement that I investigated empirically can offer an analytical prism for examining other ways of viewing and doing politics, working on the relation between the social and the political. Politics can be interpreted as conflict or consensus, as governing or caring about social relations (Bessant et al 2021). These student mobilisations, which regard both student-centred questions and other issues such as gender rights and the climate crisis, mainly via mutualistic action, have contributed to formulating a new political paradigm. They have constantly tried to engage in a sort of political experimentation, and they call their combination of student union and political movement a "political union". Their practices embody their aspiration to pursue grassroots forms of action, while also working at the intersection between the social and the political and formulating new kinds of relationships between the two. They also draw on their generational collocation in this complex re-formulation of the political. They frame their action as being: "not only for us, but also for everyone else", a concept which effectively summarises their aim both to express a conflictual generational stance by protesting against the structural neoliberal reforms which have shaped the youth situation since before the global recession in 2008, and to broaden and "generalise" their demands and aspirations to the whole of society.

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