CHANGING VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD?
ITALY IN THE EUROPEAN VALUES STUDY AND WORLD VALUES SURVEY (2018)

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Youth condition, student movements, generations, and sociological critique
A theoretical discussion based on a case study

1. *Introduction*

The heuristic value of studying young people's lives and their collective action – both theoretically and empirically – has emerged clearly in the sociological debate over the last few decades. Contributing to this debate is the main analytical aim of this paper, which explores a case study of three Italian student organisations engaged in protesting against neoliberal education reforms, and also claiming agency in the broader political sphere.

According to some scholars, it is possible to develop a political economy of generations as a critical approach to the study of neoliberal globalisation processes. This approach enables us to analyse the main characteristics of neoliberal processes and their effects on youths. In particular, a political economy of generations «helps identify and understand the politics of neoliberalism and how it has produced significant generational disadvantage» (Bessant *et al.*, 2017, 187). Drawing on a relational concept of generations, as per Bourdieu (1987, 3), who asserts that «the real is relational», this approach offers a historical and critical perspective on neoliberal capitalistic policies and their impact on young people's lives, including economic, socio-cultural, political and policy-related aspects in a specific spatial/temporal context, as will be clarified further on (Bessant, 2014; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; Bessant *et al.*, 2017).

In this vein, some scholars highlight the heuristic value of a reworked concept of social and political generation which includes perspectives of both structure and agency, and investigates both the structural conditions which impact young people's lives, and the changes in their social and political subjectivity in response to this (Mannheim, 2008; Beck-Beck-Gernsheim, 2009; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; Raffini, Pirni, 2016; Bessant *et al.*, 2017; Cini, 2017). In a broader sense, the notion of generation is a guiding framework, a heuristic which fine-tunes our perspective on young people, highlighting changes and elements of continuity (Bessant, 2014; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; Colombo, Rebughini, 2019).

Youth politics is therefore interpreted in two opposing ways: one approach emphasises the disenfranchisement of "apathetic" young people,

disillusioned with conventional/electoral politics, while the other highlights the creativity and specificity of youth political engagement, not only in response to the multilayered crisis which affects their lives (*i.e.* the economic crisis and the neoliberal austerity policies of the 2000s), but also when it comes to revitalizing politics (Rebughini *et al.* 2017; Pickard, Bessant, 2018; Pickard, 2019). Scholars maintain that the categories of young people and students overlap, given that so many young people in contemporary societies are in education, and this also means that they may be both crucial witnesses to, and actors in, profound social transformations. Indeed, student movements have regained prominence due to the last waves of global protests and mobilisations against austerity measures, neoliberal education reforms and labour policies (Bettin Lattes, 2008; Klemenĉiĉ, 2014; della Porta, 2015; Cini, Guzmàn-Concha, 2017; Fana, 2017; Piazza, 2018; Cini, 2019).

Based on these considerations, this paper illustrates and discusses an in-depth case study which deals with three Italian student organisations and their mobilisations over the last decade in particular. The secondary school Students' Union, Link University Coordination (hereinafter Link), and the Knowledge Network (hereinafter The Network, an umbrella organization that gathers the two) have been at the forefront of the opposition to the neoliberal education reforms affecting both schools and universities, and they also protested against the austerity measures of 2008-2012 and long-term effects of these. Their broader political engagement has led to involvement in different fields: anti-racism, anti-fascism, transfeminism, the rights of immigrants and the Lgbtqia+ community, and environmental issues. The empirical research I conducted focussed on the politics of these students' organisations, and their protests.

In what follows, after discussing the main analytical perspectives concerning neo-liberalisation processes, along with the main elements that characterize young people's lives in the contemporary period and their political engagement in student movements, I will illustrate my empirical research on the three abovementioned student organisations and their protests, as well as exploring the major issues in the theoretical debate on youth studies and the sociology of youth, looking in particular at two pivotal concepts: generations and the transition to adulthood. As I will illustrate further on, it should be noted that common ground appears to have been reached on a «complementary» (Spanò, 2018, 81) conceptualisation of these two pivotal concepts[1].

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[1] Though this perspective is still being debated, it is supported by prominent scholars (Woodman, Wyn, 2015). This means that a process of convergence of the so-called "twin tracks" within youth studies (that is structure *versus* agency, transitions *versus* generations, economic conditions *versus* lifestyle and youth cultures), seems to be under way (Spanò, 2018, 57; 78-83; 95); (cfr. Colombo, Rebughini, 2019, 1-5).

2. *Neoliberalisation processes and neoliberal education reforms. A focus on Italy*

Neoliberalism is understood both as a «distinctive political and economic philosophy that first emerged in the 1970s dedicated to the extension of the market and market-like forms of governance, rule and control across – tendentially at least – all spheres of social life» (Brooks *et al.*, 2016, 1212), and as a policy template which is being implemented «in cumulative rounds of regulatory restructuring» (Brenner *et al.*, 2010, 190) in different policy domains. Scholars underline the need to develop an analytical and critical perspective when studying neoliberalism which, from a historical point of view, can be viewed as a specific phase of capitalism. It consists on one hand in the process of dismantling the Welfare State, and on the other in the circulation and implementation of policies which aim to restore the structural conditions of capitalist accumulation and its control by élites (Harvey, 2007; Moini, 2016; Piketty, 2020).

These changes have been pursued through a wide set of public policies, identified and decided both on an intergovernmental, supranational level (by IFIs including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank but also the WTO, the OECD and the EU) and on a national level in the various countries, and are implemented in different ways in different areas, from social services to the labour market, from public health to education (Brenner *et al.*, 2010; Palumbo, Scott, 2017). Neoliberalism as statecraft hinges on four approaches to the reengineering of the state. Firstly, commodification, in which market or market-like mechanisms are extended to other social domains. Secondly, a shift in social policy away from protective welfare to corrective workfare. In particular, this includes redefining the welfare state by implementing active policies (workfare), the managerialisation of education, in terms of both organization and delivery, and cuts in protective measures designed to safeguard workers. Thirdly, there is the societal and "ontological" aspect of neoliberalism, which frames individuals as rational subjects and encourages them to compete in flexible labour markets that demand entrepreneurship, lifelong learning and transferable skills (i.e. employability). Neoliberalism thus entails a sort of ongoing revolution, because it is based on the idea of re-organizing society by multiplying and intensifying market mechanisms; this inevitably changes subjects and subjectivities, as well as giving rise to an entrepreneurial subjectivity regarded as a source of "human capital" (Dardot, Laval, 2013; France, 2016; Moini, 2016). Last but not least, the influence of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm on policy making, with policy trajectories aimed at privatisation, liberalisation, and marketisation in various fields, implemented in different ways. Liberalisation consists in deregulation and re-regulation processes modelled on market rules, with the aim of creating the conditions for competition within and between public organisations, along with forms of privatisa-

tion in the provision of public services (Brenner *et al.*, 2010; Palumbo, Scott, 2017).

In particular, the neo-liberalisation of education leads to a managerial approach being applied to the organization and delivery of education services, i.e. a shift from a bureaucratic, professional, model of education with a central, hierarchical governance, to a decentralised, managerial, competitive model, along with the introduction of quasi-market mechanisms. Meritocratic governance in neoliberal education policies involves introducing competitive dynamics and incentive mechanisms based on punishment and rewards, and implementing standards and performance assessment devices (Donina *et al.*, 2015; Capano *et al.*, 2016; Palumbo, Scott, 2017; Piketty, 2020). Privatisation, *i.e.* the importing of «ideas, technologies and practices from the private sector» (Verger *et al.* 2016, 8) into the governance of education, has fostered the implementation of NMP principles which consist in «a gradual shift in the organisation of the public sector towards decentralisation, autonomy, differentiation and the introduction of market type mechanisms of welfare [i.e. education] provision» (Grimaldi *et al.*, 2016, 97).

In Italy in particular, the neoliberal turn in education has seen both watershed reforms, and a «mosaic strategy», with «the implementation of structural […] education reforms put forward through small and moderate policy innovations» (ivi, 48). As for universities, «the approval of Law 168/1989 represented the first step in the adoption of NPM principles in Italian higher education by introducing the principle of autonomy. Then Law 341/1990, known as the Ruberti Law (due to the name of the proponent, minister of Public Education) implemented the principle of didactic autonomy» (ivi, 46). In 1999 the Berlinguer Reform reinforced the principle of autonomy and established a system of credits, promoting standardised evaluation and student mobility across Europe in the context of lifelong learning programmes[2]. Subsequently, Law 240/2010, better known as the Gelmini Law, introduced a sweeping reform which hugely changed university governance. «It favoured the centralisation of university bodies, the managerialisation of decisional bodies, and reduced the power of the collegial organs» (ivi, 55). This law also changed the rules for university recruitment, establishing the professional role of the fixed term researcher.

This relentless cycle of higher education reforms over the last three decades has been characterised by different dynamics and modalities. «The first stage concentrated on autonomy and market orientation […], the second stage focused on reforming the teaching organisation […]

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[2] In particular, the EU Bologna process was a decisive catalyst for the implementation of managerial reforms in education, aimed at developing the most competitive knowledge economy in the world (Capano *et al.*, 2016).

[while] the third stage has focused on academic staff and, cutting public funds. […]. In 2008, the public funds allotted to the universities were 8.6 billion euro and in 2014 they were 7.8 (a decrease of 0.8 billion, -9,6% from 1,19% to 0,95% of all Italian public funds). This drastic cut is unique among the advanced capitalist states (OECD 2015)» (Scacchi *et al.*, 2017, 207-208). The reductions in education spending compared to other OECD countries have been accompanied by an increase in university fees and the cost of education in general. Along with a significant reduction in the recruitment of university and school staff, various forms of inequality between the North and South of Italy have also emerged, in terms of resources available (Viesti, 2018).

When it comes to neoliberal reforms of the school system, it is worth mentioning at least the last[3] watershed reform, the so-called "Good School" reform (La Buona Scuola, Law 107/2015) – which strengthened the managerial role of head-teachers, who are now expected to appoint teachers and reward them for their performance in terms of competitive results, and seek funds from local authorities and private corporations. This reform also introduced a work-school alternation scheme that the aforementioned student organisations are fiercely opposed to, as will be explained below (Taglietti *et al.*, 2018).

2.1. Contemporary youth condition, neo-liberalisation processes, and the ecology of youth policies

When it comes to identifying and analysing the main features of young people's lives in the neoliberal era, both the ecology of youth policy (which includes different, related policy spheres (France, 2016)), and the concept of the transition to adulthood can be useful heuristic tools. Global transitions to adulthood are characterised by growing inequalities and converging neoliberal policy paths. Firstly, there is evidence of an emerging global transition regime characterised by a number of key elements, such as young people's generalised involvement in secondary education and increasing enrollment in tertiary education, their experience of geographical mobility and a de-standardised transition to adulthood which sees them dependent or semi-dependent on their parents for longer, or means they need to take out loans to fund tertiary education (Furlong, Cartmel, 2007; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; France, 2016; Bessant *et al.*, 2017). Secondly, it can be said that «transitions have become more fragmented owing to contemporary changes […], and are shaped by structural inequalities» (Antonucci *et al.*, 2014, 4). In particular, youth transitions are «institutionalised in different social policy structures so that differences

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[3] For a critical overview of the different neoliberal reforms of schools see Grimaldi *et al.* (2012).

in welfare regimes can shape the way that transitions» unfold (Hamilton *et al.*, 2014, 17). These changes include neoliberal education reforms, the flexibilisation of the labour market and the reformulation of social policy, in the context of the broader shift from welfare to workfare (France, 2016; Bessant *et al.*, 2017).

The shift from welfare policy frameworks to workfare schemes is accompanied by the lowering of the cost of labour, and an increase in precariousness and underemployment. The neoliberal promise based on the dogma of upskilling – designed to address the presumed mismatch of skills between the education system and labour market needs – has been broken. Indeed, upskilling programmes, which promise to increase qualified jobs by means of traineeships and internships, have ended up generating precarity and forms of underemployment (Bessant *et al.*, 2017; France, 2016). Some scholars, drawing on empirical evidence from comparative studies, also highlight that «despite possession of greater skills and higher educational credentials […] workers with high qualifications and skills are today exposed to the constant risk of unemployment, lack of income and social marginality» (Murgia, Poggio, 2014, 80). They also highlight how work precarity impacts on other spheres of life, «from residential independence to family formation», adding to «the complicated interweaving between access to work and different forms of social protection» (*ibidem*). In this respect, scholars emphasise «the Italian paradox», characterised by «a progressive increase in the levels of education which, however, corresponds to a qualitative stagnation of the employment structure» (Arcidiacono, 2015, 67); young people thus run the disheartening risk of overeducation.

Barbieri's significantly titled work "Italy is no country for young men (and women)" highlights how the country's welfare policies display a structural preference for the elderly (Barbieri, 2011; Sgritta, Raitano, 2018), and illustrates the clear turn to neoliberal policies over the last three decades. Notably, «the main characteristic of the Italian welfare state is a strong bias toward overprotecting the ageing risk to the complete advantage of the baby-boomer cohorts» (Barbieri, 2011, 111-112). This adverse situation is accompanied by the effects of the flexibilization of the labour market, together with the neo-liberalisation of education, which has increased inequality in educational attainment: a combination that creates an ecology of youth policy which has a profound impact on young people's lives. In particular, «the flexibilization of the Italian labour market […] began in the early 1980s, [and] spiked between the second half of the 1990s (Legge Treu 1997) and the early 2000s (Legge Biagi 2003)» (ivi, 11). As other scholars testify, while the objective of these reforms was to shorten time of entry into the labour market, evidence shows that «compared to those born in previous years, tertiary graduates born after 1975 in Italy have suffered an earnings penalty at the beginning of the career much more severe than that experienced by those holding

a lower education» (Fana, Raitano, 2016, 4). In this vein, when analysing early-career wage patterns of various cohorts of Italian workers, it can be said that «generations entering the labour market over the 1990s […] experienced, compared to the previous generations, a permanent loss in earnings during the first phase of the career due to a lower entry wage not offset by a faster career» (ivi, 7).

The flexibilisation of the labour market continued with further impactful reforms, such as the Jobs Act in 2014 (Law 183/2014) which introduced a new type of open-ended contract that significantly reduced firms' obligation to reinstate unfairly dismissed workers (Fana *et al.*, 2015). Interestingly, «the share of temporary employment registered in 2015 (14%) is the highest since the beginning of the reform period (1997-015) whilst the share of young people employed with a temporary contract tripled from 20% to 60% over the entire period» (Fana *et al.*, 2015, 11), highlighting the increasing precarisation of young workers. In general, precarisation and exploitation, underemployment and forced migration characterise both transition trajectories and the generational conditions that affect young people's lives as testified by scholars in comparative terms (Antonucci *et al.*, 2014; France, 2016) and in the specific case of Italy too (Fana, 2017; Sgritta, Raitano, 2018).

3. *Transitions to adulthood, generational units and student movements: a possible triangulation. Theoretical reflections from the case-study*

The structural relationship between the complex dynamics of neoliberal globalisation and the changes in young people's lives and– as illustrated by the political economy of generations – is exemplified by the impact that the economic, political, cultural and social changes in societies have on transitions to adulthood (i.e. the paths taken in the journey to becoming autonomous adults, which implies having completed education and being part of the labour market, creating a family and living in independent housing), and the specific effects these changes have on generational units that share a given time and space, and thus develop a specific worldview (Mannheim, 2008; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; Bessant *et al.*, 2017).

Notably, some scholars have developed a conceptual triangulation between the concepts of transitions to adulthood (as described above), generational units and student movements, as I illustrate below (Bettin Lattes, 2008; Bessant, 2014; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; Bessant *et al.*, 2017; Cini, 2017). According to Bourdieu (1985, 1987), it is possible to identify the historical, material and cultural conditions that contribute to the social construction of generations. It is thus possible to detect common elements, social conditions significant enough to shape «fields of action which in turn mark and inform those who were exposed to

those events in their formative years in ways that forge particular kinds of habitus, particular sensibilities, indelible dispositions, ways of seeing and being» (Bessant, 2014, 144). In particular, specific global events have defined «a *zeitgeist* for people born after the early 1980s», marked by the rise and spread of neoliberalism, the advent of digital technology and the political/economic process of globalisation (Bessant *et al.*, 2017, 51). With respect to this, the political economy of generations is regarded as a useful conceptual tool, not only because it highlights the main traits of the "paradigm shift" from the Keynesian/Fordist welfare model to neoliberal workfare societies (a historical benchmark indeed), but also by virtue of its theoretical contribution to the reworking of two pivotal concepts in the sociology of youth. The revisited concept of generation, and the critique of the conventional conceptualisation of the transition to adulthood, have sparked rich debate in youth studies that we do not have room to describe here (Furlong, Cartmel, 2007; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; France, 2016; Bessant *et al.*, 2017). Suffice it to say, it has emerged that drawing on both concepts, i.e. the concept of generation, and the transition to adulthood, from a complementary perspective, can be advantageous for gaining insight into both social change and social reproduction (Bessant *et al.*, 2017). As Woodman and Wyn (2015, 82) clarify: «a lens that is attentive to the making of generational conditions can highlight how transitions policies shape young lives». In this sense, we can analytically identify an intersection between the concept of transition and that of social generation when observing the life conditions of the current "precarious generation" and their de-standardised transition to adulthood (Furlong, Cartmel, 2007; Murgia, Poggio, 2014; Fana, 2017; Pickard, Bessant, 2018; Colombo, Rebughini, 2019).

In a broader perspective, what emerges from the reworked concept of generation is a sociological turn[4] which both broadens and empirically fine-tunes the concept of political generation exploring the role of specific generational units (Mannheim, 2008) that may overlap with social movements, and with student movements in particular (Bettin Lattes, 2008; Bessant, 2014; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; Cini, 2017). In this sense, «a generational unit represents the segment of an age group that actively shares specific political values and material interests and, for this reason, is often eager to collectively mobilise in society. It is precisely in this latter sense that the concept of social movement and that of generational unit seem to overlap in certain aspects» (Cini, 2017, 59). Thus, «social movements can be seen as a collective enterprise initiated by a generation of activists united by some common values, behaviours and/or interests,

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[4] This leads to a nuanced understanding of the subjective, 'conscious' dimension of a political generation, regarded as a bounded, situated agency (cfr. Mannheim, 2008; Woodman, Wyn, 2015; Spanò, 2018; Colombo, Rebughini, 2019).

who aim to trigger or resist some type of social change» (*ibidem*). Scholars also underline that the movements capable of driving change in society are «typically youth movements» and these mainly «consist of or are led by students» (Rootes, 2013, 1277). Furthermore, since the global student protest *par excellence* in 1968, student movements have expressed their agency by establishing student power in contemporary societies and consolidating student representation in educational institutions (Altbach, 1989; Rootes, 2013; Piazza, 2018; Cini, 2019; della Porta, 2019).

In the 2000s, as attested to by comparative studies, a global, student-led series of protests, spanning five continents and about 50 countries, took a stand against austerity, and specifically against the neo-liberalisation of education (Klemençiç, 2014; della Porta, 2015; Cini, 2017, 2019; Piazza, 2018). The most recent global wave of anti-austerity protests unfolded in 2008-2011 (after the global recession) and also involved student movements, which were indeed at the forefront of these mobilisations (Flesher-Fominaya, 2014; della Porta, 2015). During these global demonstrations, from 2008 to 2010 Italian students staged two separate protests, against austerity measures and in opposition to neoliberal education reforms «with the enactment of two national laws, Law 133/2008, introducing significant cuts to the public system of funding, and Law 240/2010 [Gelmini Law], providing for the restructuring of university governance towards managerial patterns. The first student campaign lasted three months (between October and December 2008) and the second one two months (between October and December 2010)» (Cini, 2019, 78). This series of protests, called "the Anomalous Wave", had two distinct peaks, the first more student-centred, and the second broader in scope, and actually gave rise to two of the three student organisations analysed here: Link[5] and the Network were founded in this period, while the Students' Union, established in 1994, played an integral part in the Anomalous Wave mobilisations (Zamponi, 2012; Cini, 2019). While these protests did not succeed in stopping the Gelmini Reform, they nonetheless provided a testing ground for new forms of participation, and enabled these student groups to express their aspirations for autonomous political subjectivity.

According to the sociology of movements, one integral element in the processes of identity building and forging collective action is the symbolic dimension, which entails the construction of master frames (Andretta, 2005; della Porta, 2005, 2015; Rutch, 2005; Melucci, 1996). The master frame[6] that emerged from our analysis of the most recent documents

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[5] Link is currently present in 27 universities and its members sit on university boards; the Students' Union is present in numerous secondary schools nationwide.

[6] According to Snow, master frames can be regarded as «collective action frames that have expanded in scope and influence such that they color and constrain the orientations

and protests of these organisations is that of anti-neoliberalism. These organisations strive to assert the idea of education as a common good, to counter the commodification/marketisation of knowledge. Their opposition to precarisation and their fight for free, high-quality education can be regarded as sectorial frames connected to this main one (Andretta, 2005; The Knowledge Network, 2011), while their multi-issue political engagement can be regarded as a creative, regenerative reworking of left-wing ideals, as we will see below. These student organisations, above all the Students' Union, are thus part of a long story of mobilisation. The Student Union was founded in 1994, whilst Link and the Network were founded in 2009-2011 in the context of the Anomalous Wave mobilisations (that the Students' Union took part in, with protests at school). These student organisations were thus part of different student protests within broader waves of national and global mobilisations in the last three decades. They present a number of specific characteristics: a networked organisational structure, joint campaigns, and the intergenerational sharing of "memories" of their past mobilisations. Indeed, they took part in the Global Justice Movement mobilisation in Genoa in 2001, and the global and European social forum too. As Giuseppe B. (aged 35, former national coordinator of the Students' Union[7]) testifies[8], the 2000s were «years [of] a continuous mobilisation within the movement of movements […], opposing the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and supporting opposition against neoliberal globalisation»[9]. As Lorenzo Z. (aged 36, researcher and former member of the national board of the Students' Union) maintains, their major involvement in movements critical of globalisation put these student organisations on the map as «radical social movements». They saw this as a way to assert their autonomy as student organisations, and express their subjectivity as students, but also to mobilise on general issues.

and activities of other movements within cycles of protest» (Snow, 2012, 390). This conceptualisation appears to be «especially relevant to […] large scale mobilizations and protest events constituted by an alliance or coalition of a multitude of heterogenous groups, as in the case of the November 1999 anti-World Trade Organisation protest in Seattle» (*ibidem*). More generally, in the sociology of movements a framing perspective is particularly valuable when it comes to identifying the cognitive, symbolic, interactive dimension in the collective action-building process.

[7] During the 2019 Riot Village, the Students' Union – the most long-lived of the three – celebrated its 25th anniversary and recalled its participation in the Global Justice Movement.

[8] At their 2019 national gathering, the Riot Village, they organised two days of workshops and assemblies to celebrate the anniversary of the Students' Union foundation, and recall the two last decades of their mobilisations.

[9] The ages of all interviewees indicated as well as their roles in the organisations refer to the period when I conducted the interviews.

4. *Analytical observations from the fieldwork*

Coming to the case study I conducted, the research was carried out over three years, from 2017 to 2019, albeit not continuously. It included taking part in demonstrations, assemblies and working groups, conducting interviews and performing direct observations. I carried out 80 interviews and analysed 50 documents, Facebook pages, and the home pages of these student organisations. I took part in three editions of the students' camp called the Riot Village (in 2017, 2018 and 2019)[10]. These are national gatherings of participants from different cities and regions, who come together to attend the national assemblies and spend their free time strengthening their bonds of friendship.

I used a qualitative approach for the semi-structured interviews, when identifying the main frames that emerged from the interviews, analysing the documents, and performing direct observation in the field (Silverman, 2011), at the annual gatherings of these organisations, events that have a particular symbolic, relational, and political significance for these organisations. These events enabled me to observe that, as Melucci puts it, «youth culture simultaneously displays a susceptibility to integration and a tendency to separate itself from the public» (Melucci, 1996, 122). My fieldwork gave me the opportunity to see that these students experienced the Riot Village as somewhere they could express themselves freely, enjoy spending time with friends, have fun and get into the student spirit, but also engage in political reflections, envision mobilisation strategies, and engage in decision-making regarding their own organisations, such as electing their boards (this is a key aspect that reflects their hybrid organisational model of "political union", namely half union and half movement, as they report in their official documents, as well as in the interviews). The event both enabled them to express their eagerness to take a stance and be active in the public sphere, and helped them prepare for it, like a sort of collective cocoon.

These three student unions operate on a national level (with national boards, assemblies, and congresses) and a regional, city, local level. The local presence of these student unions is not only a significant organizational feature, but also an integral part of how they define themselves (*ibidem*); it is an element of their "identity" as a movement, which, however, is not exclusionary but framed as the outcome of a concerted collective action.

There are recurring elements in their narratives that feature in their documents, which in turn can be regarded as an identity-building com-

[10] I participated in other significant events, such as the Link Congress in Bologna on 18th June 2017, the General Strike organised by the national left-wing trade union CIGL in Rome on 17th June 2017, which these three organisations took part in, and the General Assembly of the Students' Union in Rome on 17th December 2017.

ponent for these organisations. The research shed light on their view of the main characteristics of neoliberal education policies, both at school and university, and their opposition to neoliberal hegemony and the kind of competitive, self-referential, even atomistic subjectivity it engenders. They therefore enact specific participatory practices, from sharing-based activities (such as book-swapping, second-hand book markets, help desks, study groups and cooperative learning), and experimental initiatives such as the Consultoria, a self-run counselling service concerning sexuality and gender identity issues at the University of Bologna. These initiatives are hosted in specific locations such as social centres and at participatory workshops like Slow Rhythm in Bologna, Zona Franka in Bari, Lo Spaz in Pescara, and Lato B in Milan.

4.1. Being young, being students, being activists: when students protest

As for their political agency, at least three main aspects emerged from my analysis of the documents, interviews and assemblies of these student organisations: a) their mobilisations and campaigns against neoliberal education reforms and the way they are implemented; b) their embedded agency within institutions, that is their lobbying activity as students' unions, addressing the outcomes of neoliberal education policies – both at school and university, and in terms of their impact on their lives in general; c) their exploration of a different kind of politics, broader in scope, modalities and goals, in which they creatively experiment with both their subjectivity and new forms and practices of political participation. Scholars have recently attempted to capture these by formulating new interpretative paradigms, coming up with different interpretative categories to comprehend these new forms of social and political agency, such as Do-it-ourselves politics (DIO) and Direct Social Action (DSA) (Bosi, Zamponi, 2015; Pickard, 2019). These new modes of political engagement are characterised by sub-politicisation, networked individualism, online and offline connective action and renewed social critique and agency, in various hybridised, intersectional domains. From a generational perspective, this political agency is a manifestation of complex, fragmented generational units, and can be viewed as both the enactment of different, intersecting dimensions of young lives such as mobility, precarisation, hybridisation, and the ability to reinvent forms of the social and the political, starting from experimenting with creative solutions formulated in response to the uncertainty in young people's life perspectives (Alteri *et al.*, 2016; Raffini, Pirni, 2016; Pickard, 2019).

As my research showed, these organisations are opposed to neoliberal education reforms, and are active in both secondary schools and universities. Their shared framework of protest is inspired by the idea of knowledge as a common good, as can be read in the specific documents they have produced, such as *The Other School, the Right One* (2015), the *Manifesto for the Liberation of Knowledge* (2011), and *The New Uni-*

versity (2015), which express their critique of the neo-liberalisation of education, and identify the aims and scope of their protests. To counter the commodification and «enclosure» of knowledge embodied by neoliberal reforms, they envisage an alternative model based on knowledge as a common good, and consequently advocate free access to both school and higher education. They call for a dialogic approach to academic evaluation, and a participatory model for school and university governance, and they also organise sharing-based practices in schools and universities, from book-sharing and book-crossing to peer-to-peer lessons; practices which challenge the individualistic, self-entrepreneurial, competitive, subjectivity of neoliberalism.

They have also protested against various forms of exploitation and the inadequate training given to students on university work placements, and school pupils on the work placement scheme introduced by the Good School Reform. They call attention to the exploitation of students in traineeships, internships and apprenticeships, pointing out that corporate actors benefit from tax breaks when they train young people in schemes that often consist of unpaid work in various forms (workfare). They believe that students should have the right to refuse to enter into loan schemes that leave them burdened with debt after university, and have also protested against the Jobs Act, the market labour reform which introduced new kinds of temporary/fixed term contracts, which they addressed in the following terms "We are not servants. Precariousness is the problem, the Jobs Act is not the solution". This is the title of one of their official documents, the contents of which were explored in their assemblies and debates, and came up in the interviews as well, whenever they expressed their desire to see an end to precarity, and a way out of the unemployment/underemployment trap: to stop being "lost generation".

The most recent period has seen four important national campaigns: one in 2015 against the Good School Reform; one in 2016, entitled *All In* and led by Link, calling for a reform of students' entitlements to funding and services, and for free education; a third launched in 2016 by the Network called *Free Education*, and the *Redemption* campaign led by the Students' Union in 2016-2017. In particular, on 13th October 2017, 250,000 students took to the streets to protest against the work placement scheme introduced by the Good School Reform, and on 27th May 2017 they went to Parliament to present their national inquiry called "Standing up for our Rights. The Time is Now" (which demonstrated for instance, that 57% of students who carried out work placement schemes did not have the opportunity to attend training programmes in line with their studies). They also asserted the need for a charter of students' rights for work placement programmes, to guarantee the actual formative value of these schemes. On December 16th 2017 they staged a protest in front of the Ministry of Education wearing blue workers' overalls to claim their

rights as students to be given effective training courses in work placement schemes, and prevent all forms of exploitation.

They are also active on other issues, such as the environment (in 2019 they joined forces with Fridays for Future, one of the most influential transnational youth and environmental movements of our time), feminism, and the rights of migrants and the Lgbtqia+ community, combining union-related lobbying activities with mobilisations concerning intersectional identity-related issues, and taking a stand against fascism and the mafia. In particular, the «learning subject» they reference is a model designed to counter the neoliberal subjectivity – competitive, entrepreneurial, consumer-like – and assert the alternative, «intersectional», not purely «student-centred» subjectivity that is the basis of their participatory practices. In this sense, they appear to reflect the «metabolic richness of stimuli, relations, and exchanges» that characterise youth mobilisations and politics, alongside the key role played by campaigns and mobilisations, which is a specific feature of youth politics. According to Melucci (1996, 130) «besides proceeding by campaign mobilisations, youth action integrates a manifold set of belongings, identities, and interests». This begins from the concept of "student citizenship" they have identified, and that they lay claim to, and their view of urban space (a constant element of youth experience: Woodman, Wyn, 2015) as a test bed for experimenting with new forms of political action, and re-formulating the relationship between the social and the political.

The following paragraphs present excerpts of interviews which explore different aspects of their organisational, social and political action and collective identity. It emerged that their decisional methods are inspired by a dialogical, deliberative conception of democracy, inherited from the experience gained in global social movements (conveyed through the different generational units that have belonged to these organisations over the last two decades), in social forums in the first decade of the 2000s, and during their most recent mobilisations. The method they apply, termed synthesis is designed to manage conflicts and the presence of different views and positions within their organisations. As we will see, they also assert their hybrid identity as both a student union and a student movement.

> We call ourselves a political union. In the sense that as a student union we represent a given category, namely learning subjects (i.e. young people attending traineeships, internships, Ph.D courses etc.), but we also represent students' interests in specific situations in general political terms, from the perspective of an overall transformation of society. Thus, it is a form of representation of a specific social category [that is, students] but also from a broader, more general perspective, trying to construct a systematic, radical discourse (Giacomo C., aged 22, national coordinator of The Network).

As for the democratic method of decision-making which exemplifies their conception of democracy, Giuseppe I. (aged 22, member of the board of Link Bologna) maintains that

having internal debate does not harm the organization. [...]. It is worth trying to be transparent in the attempt to manage conflicts [...]. The method of synthesis allows us to make political advances, encouraging everyone to converge but not forcing anyone to step sideways or take a step back. [This method] relies on responsibility: everyone has to believe in it, or it won't work.

We are a hybrid between a political movement and a traditional structure, a sort of intermediate body...structured, with internal democracy, making decisions by means of the synthesis method... there are no membership cards, and activists can legitimately decide the policy direction of the organisation... together we have been engaged in... building opposition to neo-liberalism, improving access to education, and avoiding a terrifying future for our generation, starting from material needs, a clear idea of the political space we occupy and a clear vision of the world...for us the image is Mad Max atom punk... The left died well before we were born... and what we do, in reality, is like that typical scene, the scene in which they used pieces from the ruins to build completely different objects for various purposes, so you get armour made out of street signs or the motor of a fridge becomes the engine of a car... This variety explains what we do... it is clear that we have to move forward from this in the future... what we are continually trying to do is to reshape language, images, forms of organisation, decision-making processes, experiences of various kinds from the widest possible spectrum of the left's heritage (Daniele R., Link University of Turin, aged 24).

As for the creative approach to politics and party/conventional politics in particular, Martina C. (national coordinator of The Network, aged 22) maintains that

we are the ones who stirred things up. I chose to get involved [in these student organisations] because you feel like the organization is in your hands, you have the power to change things rather than just following the patterns of [party] orthodoxy [...].

These innovative elements came from the mobilisations of 2008/2010, and also from other mobilisations in the field of environmental movements or anti-mafia activism and feminist organisations. The latter strongly influence our organisations, in terms of both the distribution of official roles and the *modus operandi* of the organisations and their activists.
According to Camilo V. (aged 24, member of the board of the Network Milan)

politics is a feeling. The collective conveys this great feeling of harmony and common action. Before we were a political community, we were above all a human community and therefore we know each other, we know we are among friends». In particular, their experience of belonging to generational units emerges when, like Camilo does, they talk about being part of «a generation in which paradigms have profoundly changed, in the sense of having to assume that work must be flexible, uncertain, not something that is permanent: the fact that we have to accept precarious work as a positive thing.

We are trying to deal with both needs and expectations in our lives, precisely because we are a generation that is experiencing these contradictions, the lack of representation, the difficulties involved in entering the world of work, and even the emotional consequences of all this, which hardly anyone talks about […]. We try to build social collective spaces to help people feel less alone, but we are not always successful and that is something that makes me feel guilty, as well as angry (Martina C., national coordinator of The Network, aged 22).

At present

capitalism tells us to choose a life that is not worth living, to choose an unstable and poorly paid job, to choose one of the 43 contractual forms in the labour market in Italy, to choose between having a job and having a family, to choose a professionalizing degree, to go private or choose poor quality public healthcare, to choose a loan to pay for our studies […] to choose a future of precariousness, a life not worth living […] instead we have chosen a radical life, we have chosen to rebel, but without losing our tender side (Giuseppe I., aged 22 Link University of Bologna).

So

for us, the children of the crisis, whose expectations have been denied, our time has come: it's time [to fight and have] the courage to imagine the future (Roberto I., aged 33, former national coordinator of the Students' Union).

We have always acted like an avant-garde […]. In a changing world we are a generation of people with diversified attitudes, an aptitude for challenges, strength, irreverence. […]. While we were dreaming, we were also looking for all the elements to create an organization […] to challenge conventional politics, put its back to the wall (Danilo L. aged 26, former national coordinator of the Students' Union).

With the next campaign, the University of the Future, we want to up the ante, and put forward ideas as well as protesting (Lorenzo M., Link University of Milan, aged 23).

Davide L. (aged 20, coordinator of the Students' Union Bari) underlines the key role played by spaces in enabling students to get together.

Our spaces are physical spaces which bring students together, a fundamental material resource which unfortunately is gradually being diminished in various cities.

As Fabio D. (aged 26, former member of the board of Link University of Bologna) maintains:

I have been dealing with activities within Slow Rhythm [a social centre for students and young activists in Bologna] and Urban Thinking [a citizens' participatory process concerning urban regeneration policies] […]. When discussing spaces in Bologna, the student perspective cannot be ignored.

Thus, he specifies, «we need to take a critical, political approach to space», given that urban space is being reconfigured as a workplace in the context of the gig economy, platform capitalism and poorly paid jobs in logistics, which very often involve young workers. The creative resignification of social space, and university space in particular, connecting different issues, is highlighted by Noemi (aged 25, Link University of Bologna) when she talks about setting up the «Consultoria», a counselling centre in the University of Bologna that focusses on gender and sexuality and draws inspiration from the experience of Italian feminists of the 1970s, with the aim of regaining a «radical positioning» on gender identity and working towards «the politicisation of the personal».

5. *Concluding remarks*

Having discussed the findings of my research in detail, to conclude I would like to summarise the theoretical implications of my analysis. This article explores the literature on transitions to adulthood, generational units and student movements, along with that illustrating neoliberal reforms of education and the labour market. Thus, it takes into account three perspectives, namely the political economy of generations, along with broader social theory, the sociology of student movements, and youth studies. I believe this multidimensional analytical framework offers a suitable approach to the complexity of contemporary youth subjectivities and life conditions.

These theoretical premises were explored in the fieldwork, and I also presented a number of insights that emerged directly from the field. While aware that these three student organizations cannot be viewed as statistically representative of the youth universe, it nonetheless emerged that listening to the voices of those involved, and investigating the development and participatory practices of these organizations, has given me a privileged perspective on the complex, changing, magmatic panorama of contemporary youth. While a significant part of the community of scholars in youth studies is focusing on how young people are being forced to deal with a long period of social and political crisis, another key component, while aware of the impact of this multi-layered crisis, seems more interested in observing the creative political practices that these young generations are experimenting with, and the latter that this research work refers and contributes to.

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