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Young People's Changing Conditions From Their Origins To Their David And Goliath Season. A Critical Review Of Youth Studies

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Abstract: It is widely acknowledged in the sociology of youth that the object under analysis – the youth – is particularly elusive, and its definition changes from time to time. In Italy, for instance, being young is a condition that never ends. Living in an overheated world is complicated too, especially if you are young. Individuals are constantly obliged not only to organize their own future, but also to reorganize their biographical paths in response to situations experienced and changing contexts. This is an accelerated world where everything, from communication to warfare and industrial production, takes place faster and has a broader impact than ever before. The aim of this work is to investigate what has led to a particular category of young people being construed (in Italy at least) as “penalized”, and their social conditions as “penalizing”. An effort is made to see what part the sociologists have played in this using the narrative of the four seasons of sociology of youth. To the end, we'll see whether another phase in the sociology of youth is suggesting a new image of these young people. First we need to examine the quantitative data describing the young people of Europe and Italy. Then we can move on to deal with the issue of young people as a sociological object, summarizing the four seasons of youth studies to date. In drawing some conclusions, we can identify a fifth season of youth studies that could pave the way to a new, broad approach to the concept of generation and intergenerational issues.

Keywords: youth studies, generations, adulthood, young people representations

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Youth as a social problem: European to Italian data

There is an abundance of European data produced about young people. This section outlines the most significant data on the conditions of the young in Europe, and highlights the differences vis-à-vis those of Italy's youth. The data include: fertility rates; employment and unemployment rates; the age at which young people leave home; and some details regarding the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) category. These data reveal the main challenges the young face in Italy in their transition to adulthood. Starting with the fertility rate, Romania, France and Bulgaria are the EU Member States with the highest fertility rates among women under thirty (with 1.0 live births or more), while Portugal, Greece, Italy, and Spain have the lowest (with 0.6 live births or less). In 2012, women under thirty accounted for more than two thirds (67%) of the national fertility rate in Bulgaria and Romania, as opposed to less than 40% in Spain, Ireland and Italy, i.e. less than 40% of the babies in these countries were born to mothers under 30 years old (Eurostat, 2015, p. 35). There were only two EU Member States, however, where the mean age of women at the birth of their first child was more than 30 years, the United Kingdom (30.8 years) and Spain (30.3 years), whereas the lowest mean ages for women at the birth of their first child were recorded in Bulgaria (25.6 years) and Romania (25.7 years).

Young women left home earlier than young men, albeit with considerable differences from one EU Member State to another. In 2013, young women in Sweden left home, on average, before the age of 20, and those in Denmark and Finland were almost as young when they did so (at 20-21 years old). These figures contrast strongly with the situation in Croatia, where the average age for women leaving home was nearly thirty, and young women in Slovakia, Malta and Italy were also more than 29 years old when they left home. The results for young men were very similar, with the lowest average age for leaving home recorded in Sweden (20 years old), Denmark (22 years old), and Finland (23 years old), and the highest in Croatia (33 years old), Slovakia, Malta, and Italy (31 years old), Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Slovenia, Portugal and Spain (30 years old). The gaps between the average ages at which men and women left home were widest in Bulgaria and Romania (with a 4-year difference), followed by Croatia (3 years), and narrowest in Sweden, Denmark and Luxembourg (with a difference of one year or less). Men under thirty tended not to fly

the nest in many of the southern EU Member States. At EU level, the figures for 2013 show that 71.9% of 20- to 24-year old men lived with their parents, as opposed to 60.0% of the young women of the same age (Eurostat, 2015). Among the 25- to 29-year-olds, the proportions of young people living at home dropped to 43.0% for the men and 28.1% for the women (Eurostat, 2015, p. 46). The proportion of 25- to 29-year-olds in the NEET category in the EU in 2013 stood at 21% (Eurostat, 2015, p. 144).

Looking at individual EU Member States, the highest proportions were recorded in Greece (42%), followed by Italy (33%), and Bulgaria (32%), and the lowest in Sweden (9%), Austria (10%), Denmark, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands (11%). Compared with the situation in 2008, the figures for 2013 showed a small (3%) reduction in the proportion of NEETs in four EU Member States - Malta, Luxembourg, Germany, and Austria - while the situation had worsened in all the others. The highest growth in NEETs was recorded in Greece (up 22%), followed by Spain, and Croatia (up 12%) (Eurostat, 2015, pp. 143-144). Turning to the employment rates among the 25- to 29-year-olds in 2016, the highest rates were recorded in Malta (83%), the Netherlands (82%), and Austria (81%), and the lowest in Greece (49%), followed by Italy (53%), and Spain (58%). The job market for people aged 25 to 29 showed even greater differences between EU Member States: while the proportion of those employed in Greece dropped by 24% between 2008 and 2013, in Germany and Malta it rose slightly (by around 3%).

Unemployment rates among young people have been increasing in the years since the financial and economic crisis, reflecting the difficulties faced by young people in finding a job. In labor market policies, the main indicator of youth unemployment (called the 'youth unemployment rate') refers to people aged 15 to 24. In 2013, 23% of the EU's labor force in this age group, and 15% of the 25- to 29-year-olds were unemployed. The unemployment rates were higher for the younger age group in all EU Member States. The youth unemployment situation varied widely between EU Member States, but the trends in the performance of the national labor markets were similar for the two age groups. The highest unemployment rates were recorded in Greece, Spain and Croatia, and the lowest in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Malta. The unemployment rates in Greece stood at 58% for people aged 15-24, and 44% for those aged 25-29, and in Spain, they were 56% and 33%, respectively. The lowest

unemployment rates for the younger age group (15 to 24 years old) were found in Germany (8%) and Austria (9%). For the older group (25 to 29 years old), they were just under 7% in Malta, Austria and Germany. Many young people in these age brackets are still studying full time, however, so they are unavailable for work and are not considered part of the labor force. The main indicator of unemployment among young people (the youth unemployment rate) is therefore often associated with another indicator, the unemployment ratio, which compares the number of unemployed with the total population, and not only the labor force (Eurostat, 2015, pp. 159-160). There are some disparities between individual EU Member States, but what they have in common is that the population of the EU is continuing to age, and the share of its population made up of children and young people has been decreasing continuously in recent times. Our society is aging. The share of EU households with children has generally declined over the last few years. Europe has fewer children now. The general perception of the labor market today is one of hardship. Many young people in the EU completing their education in the last few years have found it increasingly difficult to find a job. This may explain why increasing numbers of young people have opted to spend more time in education before entering the labor market. Youth unemployment has become a major problem in some EU Member States, especially those hardest hit by the financial and economic crisis of 2008. The youth unemployment issue was already a problem for the EU as a whole in 2013, when 20.9% of people aged 25–29 were NEET, and it has worsened since. Despite the difficulties that the EU's younger generation has to face, life satisfaction in 2013 was highest among its 16- to 24-year-olds, with an average score of 7.6 out of 10, while the whole EU population scored 7.1.

The aging of the population is particularly severe in Italy. The increase in the relative weight of older people compared to young people in the total population is a phenomenon that has been underway since the end of WWII, albeit with a variable pace (e.g. there was a steady increase in the number of births during the baby boom years). After 1995 - the year with the lowest fertility rate ever recorded (1.19 children per woman) - the rate of decline in the proportion of young people in the country's population slowed. In Italy, during the past year, the strong decline in young people's employment has crossed the years of the crisis, particularly affecting the Millennium generation (Esposito, 2015; Stiglitz, 2016).

Youth as an object of sociological study: the four seasons of Italian youth studies

In this section we will see the so-called “Four seasons of the sociology of youth”. Here is presented a critical summary of the contribution of whom invented this semantics in the discipline (Cavalli & Leccardi, 2013).

In a first season, the 1950s were characterized by little research on youth, conducted by authors like Dursi (1959), Allum and Diamanti (1954), and Grasso (1967), on samples were drawn from among northern and central Italian secondary school students, young Venetians, and high school students, to gather information on their attitudes and behavior. The first pioneering research in Italy was the opinion poll conducted by the Doxa Institute (Luzzato Fegiz, 1966). The main focus of this research was the political and social apathy of young people, who seemed more interested in enjoying their personal well-being than in the political life of the country or their local community. This research represented a generation that were rather dubious about the future, taking a cautious stance in order to avoid having too many expectations. The experience of war was still too fresh for them to ignore its dramatic effects, and the first signs of growth in the country were still too uncertain to allow them to have too much confidence in the future. As Cavalli and Leccardi recall (2013, p. 160), gender differences were still very marked, with young women still relegated to the shadows, to private life and the home. A second season began in the mid-1950s, and lasted through the first half of the 1960s, characterized by the economic miracle and the outbreak of the student movement. Sociology came to be characterized as self-reflection, and the protagonists of the changes underway took an increasingly active part in research. This was a season of militant sociology.

New spaces for autonomy emerged for young people who were moving away from the family, adopting new lifestyles, and gradually phasing out the traditional figures of authority. In the first half of this period, research carried out by Baglioni (1962), and by Martinotti (1966) confirmed the young's political apathy. Then sociological researchers active during those years found signs of change in the cultural revolution of the 1960s. The wave of youth movements started first in America, with the convergence of three factors: the black people's struggle for civil rights; the demand for freedom of speech; and students' collective action at many universities. Thanks particularly to the influence of television, the student movement

soon spread through Europe too, with important analogies, but also with some differences. In Europe, the student movement mingled with the workers' movement, developing into what was called extra-parliamentary opposition. In Italy, a labor movement and a student movement joined forces to combat authoritarianism and demand equal opportunities in access to education.

During the 1970s, these dynamics intersected with the movement for women's rights and the questioning of the gender regime. These are the years when feminist movements developed women's studies. The few surveys conducted in the Seventies show how far-reaching this mobilization became, and how it was facilitated by the process by the institutions acknowledged the role of sociology in Italian universities. The studies by Francesco Alberoni, and Alberto Melucci and his school opened up new and original research perspectives on young people. Alberoni focused more on the dynamics that favored the birth of a movement and its potential for institutional acknowledgement, while Melucci was more interested in how young people lived and spread a culture that broke away from previous generations. Young people were rejecting the old ways of thinking, proposing new patterns of behavior, challenging traditional educational methods, and even schools as an institution (Cesareo & Magatti, 2000). The third season sees a return to private life and an elongation of people's youth. This is the phase that will lead to young people being described as a "penalized category". We are in the 1980s, and youth movements disappear from the public stage. As Alberoni (1977) predicted, movements are born, grow and become established where there is no capacity to find institutional solutions for the issues around which they were born. Europe entered a period of stagnation, and a recession that started in the late 1970s.

Unemployment rates grew, for young people with and without a university education alike, reducing their opportunities for social mobility and promoting an individualism that led them to fall back on their private world. Research conducted in those years described very diverse conditions and underscored that it would be a mistake to discuss young people as a homogeneous category. Several periodic surveys were run by the IARD Institute, which continued until the early 2000s (Cavalli & Leccardi 2013, p. 167). Six national-scale surveys focused on the conditions of the young, based on representative samples (Cesareo, Cavalli, de Lillo, Ricolfi & Romagnoli 1984; Cavalli & De Lillo, 1988; Buzzi, Cavalli & de Lillo, 1997). The findings well represented the multiple facets of young people's

conditions over time: relationships with the family of origin; experiences at school; consumptions; friendships; romantic relationships and couple-forming styles; work; political orientations and values; and deviant behaviors. Cavalli recalls that authors such as Inglehart (1983) contributed to spreading the idea of young issue as a complex phenomena suggesting that young people are the forerunners of postmodern and post-materialistic values. Finally, there is the fourth season of sociological studies on youth.

Many social scientists now agree that the enormous lengthening of people's youth does not facilitate their transition to adulthood, when they should be economically, emotionally and socially independent from their family of origin. There is evidence of an Italian model that relies on families to find solutions to the country's social and economic uncertainties. This hampers the process by which young people become independent and embark on their adult life. According to Cavalli and Leccardi (2013, p. 167), the work done by institutions also hinders the transition to adult life. The school system is incapable of sustaining a work culture, the transfer of skills learned to the working environment, or vocational training. This happens at all levels, from secondary school through university. The market does not offer enough solutions to provide young couples with the means to live without their parents' support. Banks are reluctant to grant loans to young couples unless they can rely on their family's financial backing. In many small or medium-sized family businesses, the founders are reluctant to entrust company responsibility to their heirs. The labor market is polarized, with the legally protected (largely adult male) workers on the one hand, and those (young and women) in insecure jobs on the other. Young people enter the job market late, and always through the precarious employment channels that may, eventually and with great difficulty, lead to full-time continuous employment contracts. Political parties, trade unions, and professional associations seem to prevent the generational replacement, and its consequent creation of some space for young people in institutional positions. The weight of the country's public debt will also be a burden on the public budget and restrict the chances of experimenting with novel ways to involve young people in the public discourse for many years to come.

Taking a look at some of the significant data on the condition of young people in Italy, the generations reaching adulthood in the last twenty years or so include the Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000), and Generation Z. The former is the generation of the Euro and European

citizenship, but also the one that - more than any other- is paying the economic and social price of the latest recession. In 2015, 39.2% of 15- to 34-year-olds were in employment, as opposed to 50.2% in 1993. The traditional path that led from completing your studies to a permanent job has gradually disappeared as a result of the diffusion of temporary employment contracts. By their 30th birthday, 69.9% of those born in the 1950s had completed their studies and found continuous employment. The figure dropped to 58.6% for those born in the 1970s (ISTAT, 2016, p. 9). The sharp decline in the youth employment rate since the economic crisis, which has particularly affected the Millennials, has just recently begun to slow. The drop in the employment rate for people aged 15-34 (which stood at 39.2% in 2015) has stopped at more than ten points lower than in 2008. The employment rate has also risen slightly for people aged 35-49, reaching 71.9% (up 0.3% over 2014), and increased further among people aged 50-64, to reach 56.3% (+1.5% over 2014, and +9.2% compared with 2008).

The growth in the number of people over 50 in employment is due to the retirement age being extended as a result of social security reforms, population growth in the baby boom years, and rising education levels. Comparing the people aged 15-34 who have been employed in the first job for less than 3 years with the people over 54 years old who retired in the last 3 years reveals difficulties in the “job-for-job” replacement of the older workers by younger people. The young were employed mainly in the market services sector (with 319,000 new entries in the business, hotel and restaurant, and business services sectors, after 130,000 employees left their jobs). In other areas, the leavers were not replaced by the new entries (125,000 employees left jobs in the public administration and education, but only 37,000 new employees arrived; ISTAT, 2016, p. 15). This is not only happening in Italy. There are major difficulties (if not a full-blown crisis) in the area of vocational education and training in several European countries: more and more boys and girls continue their formal education to postpone deciding “what to do when they grow up”. According to Kazepov, Barberis and Carbone (2005), we need to look beyond intergenerational accusations to analyze this phenomenon properly. There are important structural factors that make channels for entering the labor market less relevant, and perpetuate situations of unemployment or underemployment that are bound to deter a young person from leaving home. Part of the problem is due to the current economic situation, which is

bound to have had the effect of increasing the number of young adults (18-34 years old) still living with their parents. Over the last ten years, their numbers have increased almost everywhere in Europe. Judging from Eurostat data, the phenomenon has only acquired macroscopic dimensions in some Mediterranean countries (including Italy) and Eastern Europe, but it is also growing in Sweden, Denmark, Holland and France. It is only in Germany that the percentage has dropped (to just over 40% in 2010). In the Nordic countries (Norway and Finland), life courses are much more fluid and the transition is easier (less than 20% of young adults still live at home). This is certainly partly a matter of different cultures, but also of different policies. The proportions of young people aged 18 to 29 living with their parents in 2011 in three different European countries were 23% in Denmark, 33% in Holland, and 79% in Italy (one of the highest in Europe, after Malta and Slovenia with 85%). Eurofound data confirm Italian youth's difficulties with leaving home before the age of 30. In the recessionary cycle we are currently experiencing, especially in countries with a residual welfare for the younger generations such as Italy (Kazepov, Barberis & Carbone 2005, p. 29), the situation has worsened dramatically. Again according to Kazepov, the current dynamics are not only deteriorating due to unemployment (which is not even the main reason why youth continue to live at home), since only 1 in 6 young adults living with their parents are unemployed. In many countries, for example, where the right to further education is limited, students account for a significant proportion of the young adult population, to which we must add those who work but do not earn enough to set up house on their own. In the Italian case, for example, the lack of a readily-accessible and inexpensive rental market greatly reduces the chances of leaving home for the workforce on a very limited income. The lack of a housing policy for decades is another severe structural weakness.

The economic crisis has amplified these phenomena. The slow transition to adulthood has now become stable and structured in Italy, to such a degree that young people tend to defer decisions about their future. Some young people's reaction to the situation is completely passive. The NEET data for Italy are a worrying example of how bad the situation is in Europe. Young people in Italy have found another way of showing their dissatisfaction, however: they leave the country. It is estimated that about 60,000 people under 40 will leave Italy every year, and about 45,000 of them are graduates, attracted by better wages, career opportunities and a

social security currently unimaginable in Italy. This phenomenon has been discussed by the media, but warrants more attention. According to immigration statistics for 2016, produced by ISTAT, the foreign residents in Italy amount to 5,026,153 (i.e. 8% of the population), 12,000 more than in 2014.

This influx is amply balanced by the Italians moving abroad, who amounted to 5.2 million in 2015, two thousand more than in the previous year. This was the first time in many years that the estimated number of Italian nationals expatriating exceeded the number of foreigners registering as Italian residents (in 2014 the two figures were the same). So who are the young people now considered as a 'penalized category'? More than ever, their identities are multifaceted, complex, and highly dynamic. The transition from youth to adulthood no longer follows any set path; it has become fluid, changing from one context to another, and from one individual to another.

Young people today are certainly in a very different position from their parents when they finish their studies and start working – a step that often coincides with when they start a new family. Today, people have children much later in their lives (in Italy, the average age of parents when their first child is born is well over 30 years), often outside the bond of marriage (this applies to more than half the children born in the Nordic countries), and in a context of growing existential insecurity (more in Italy than elsewhere). But these young people are also more mobile, both physically (they go abroad more often), and in occupational terms. The US Department of Labor calculated that people will have changed their jobs at least 10-14 times by the age of 38, but Sennett had already said as much in his famous book "The Corrosion of Character" in 1999 in which shows a disturbing and bleak picture of today's economy. By presenting anecdotes about people working in what he calls the "New Economy", he draws conclusions about the personal consequences of work in the new capitalism. People, he argues, have to cope with new concepts of flexibility, flextime, teamwork, delayering and ever-changing working conditions.

Highlights on the fourth season: two books¹

In 2009 Alessandro Rosina published a book entitled “It’s No Country for the Young. The Italian Anomaly: A Generation without a Voice” (my translation). Part of the book discusses the Italian gerontocracy, with its very elderly politicians, professionals, academics, and ruling class in general. There is an element here that goes beyond this issue and deserves a more thorough social analysis: Italy is a country that attributes little value to its young people, and lacks adequate policies and measures to support their transition to adult life. Some passages in the book are particularly significant:

... the portrait of a country that has not only given up trying to grow, but even trying to survive with dignity. It reflects an unbalanced, iniquitous society that fails to invest in its most vital resources, and does not offer the most capable the opportunities they deserve. Those who do not want to be victims of this system have few options. The way to escape is to go abroad (Ambrosi & Rosina, 2009, p. 44).

It is precisely the precarious nature of work, and the fierce struggle to arrive at some degree of stability, that drains the energy needed for some sort of mobilization and protest to claim their rights. By instilling the subtle awareness that any form of criticism may prompt their expulsion and marginalization, their job insecurity also undermines any chance of conflict. (Ambrosi & Rosina, pp. 345-348) (my translation).

The authors analyze the responsibilities of two generations that, each in their different ways, have produced the negative situation in Italy today. Fathers who monopolize the working space and resources, caring little for the common good; sons who depend on their families, lacking the courage or ability to imagine a different future: these are just some of the reasons that make Italy a country that does not allow its young people to grow up, so they have little weight and little voice. In 2017, almost ten years later, Raffaele Alberto Ventura’s book “The Disadvantaged Class Theory” outlines a situation for young people in Italy that is not very different.

¹ The books cited here are in Italian: Ambrosi, E. & Rosina, A. (2009). *Non è un paese per giovani. L'anomalia italiana: una generazione senza voce*, Marsilio Editore and Ventura, R.A. (2017). *Teoria della classe disagiata*. Roma: Minimum Fax. The translation is mine.

Describing the complaints of a generation obstructed by excessively high expectations and lacking opportunities to become independent, the book offers no solutions, but its value lies in its analysis of the chain of causes that have led a whole generation to be prevented from getting on in life. This class of “disadvantaged” young people come from middle-class families. They have grown up with an economic well-being that they are unable to pass on to their children. They have been educated to have values (including a sense that people should be rewarded on their merits) and their expectations are almost impossible to satisfy in today's real world, in Italy at least. Both books project the same image of a generation of people unable to fulfill their dreams, or to see their future in a different light. The first book focuses on the problem in terms of the unbalanced and inconsiderate generational path along which the older generation has betrayed the younger generation. The second sees the schooling system as the main cause of this situation: the myth that further education could offer everyone the same good opportunities has collapsed (Ventura, 2017, pp.174-184).

A new, emerging season? The David and Goliath phase

In this framework, it is important that we, as social scientists, look not only at the main trends and data, but also at novel and potentially interesting ways to study today's young people. Thanks to the Toniolo Institute, a recently emerging area of research area on youth is focusing on a different concept of young people. The new approach draws on the negative aspects of their transition to adulthood and reflects on how to transform them into opportunities for lifestyle changes. In the words of a psychoanalyst: “The new generations seem inclined to get involved in scenarios that demand no particular emphasis or visibility, engaging in more prosaic, minimal, day-to-day relational networks, in which their links have a concreteness, intimacy and authenticity nonetheless promise to be good antidotes to the sterile and empty rhetoric, rampant exhibitionism and essential inconsistency of the adult world. It is as if they were aware that saving the world is something that depends not on the unlikely solution of a new dawn, but on doing everyday things in less bombastic, but also less mechanical, anonymous and bureaucratized ways. They would seem to have gained the awareness that getting by today means restoring life to less

convulsive rhythms and ways, trying to reduce the increasingly vast distance between people and the machine governing reality” (Stoppa, 2014, p. 33, my translation). After the experience of the Iard (which conducted solid and specific surveys from the 1980s up until 2007 to monitor changes in the condition of young people), much smaller-scale studies have occasionally been conducted on very specific topics. No further large-scale research has been funded to gain a better understanding of life in Italy for the young. As mentioned in the introduction, the biographies of the younger generations have become less standardized and homogeneous, more complex and articulate than in the past, so research on this topic needs to be both broader and more in depth.

Hence the youth observatory created by the Toniolo Institute with the Cariplo Foundation, which aims to become a national reference for analyses, reflections and policies to improve the condition of Italy's Millennials (Rosina, 2013, p. 11). No large-scale longitudinal surveys on the juvenile population have been conducted in Italy as yet. The following paragraphs summarize the first studies that have attempted to bridge this sociological gap and comment on a more complex image of young people in Italy.

The 2013 Report: the other face of a generation held back

The first report on the condition of youth in Italy to be conducted on a large representative sample was published in 2013, based on interviews with 9,000 people between 18 and 29 years old, who were to be interviewed again over a total period of 5 years. The aim of the study was to “understand who these young people really are, what they propose to do, what they place their trust in, how they feel about politics and engaging in public affairs, what plans they have about family, profession and the future” (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013, p. 13). The topics cover the key events in the transition to adult life from age 18 onwards: completing their education, becoming economically independent, starting their own family. Italy's younger generations were having more difficulty than in the past or their peers in other countries in becoming independent and creating the conditions needed to have a family. Family, work, participation and trust in the country's institutions were the crucial issues addressed in the report. The family remained a fundamental reference when facing the difficulties and uncertainty relating to the economic crisis or disorienting personal

choices. The family's role was widely acknowledged, with more than 85% of respondents saying that their family helped them to achieve their goals. Less positive aspects of family ties also emerged, with the risk of the family's willingness to help and protect their offspring having ambivalent effects on the young people's lives and their empowerment to make their own choices in life (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013, pp. 23-71). The section of the study focusing on economic independence and employment questioned the stereotype (disseminated by the media) of Italy's young people being too choosy, or resigned to being jobless. As Rosina and Sironi pointed out, despite high unemployment rates and a shortage of job offers, these young people were not resigned. They tried to react, to find ways to adapt to what the market had to offer. In a fragmented and immobile context like the Italian job market, finding work remained the main path to emancipation from the family of origin and independent adult life. Higher academic qualifications continued to represent an opportunity for young people to improve their status in the working world (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013, p. 93), but the analysis revealed a shortage of opportunities and means to find appropriate employment afterwards, confirming that Italy was at greater risk of brain drain and brain waste phenomena than other countries (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2013, p. 15). As for the young people's social commitment and participation in politics, Italy was one of the countries with the lowest rates of youth volunteering: 1 in 7 as opposed to 1 in 4 for Europe as a whole.

Despite these figures and a reportedly limited sense of belonging, the survey also showed that Italy's youth had a strong tendency to get involved, especially in informal and unstructured activities. In the section of the report that dealt with the media and new technologies, Italy's Millennials showed an active use of social networks and a very positive attitude to technology.

Most of the respondents thought the new technologies had improved the level of information available, and that they could further improve people's lives by creating awareness and greater social interaction.

Finally, as regards their values and attitudes, the young people interviewed seemed very concerned about the future and distrustful of the institutions. This report left many questions unanswered, and concluded with the Authors' recommendation that young people seek alternative ways to create the right conditions for transition to adult life to be full of

opportunities. The report describes a generation that is in difficulty, but still promises to do well, and this is the starting point of the subsequent report.

The 2014 Report on Italian young people: a generation in a maze

The 2014 report begins with a metaphor: young Italians enter adulthood as if it were a foggy maze, looking for their first job and risking getting lost or going the wrong way. This report again describes Italy as one of the countries that has provided few tools and opportunities for young people to cope with the challenges of adulthood and the economic recession. Unlike the previous report, however, it attempts to focus less on the social characteristics and conditions of the under 30s, and more on their more personal and psychological features. The first part of the report deals with their training and occupations. When the complex association between academic qualifications and occupations is analyzed, remaining inactive seemed to be more of a problem than the type of qualifications people possessed. On average, those with higher academic qualifications were more likely to be employed, but tended to experience longer periods under insecure temporary work contracts. The survey revealed the phenomenon of the NEET: Italy is one of the countries with the highest percentage of its youth in this category in the European Union. Interestingly, however, the analysis showed a strong willingness to enter activation paths (especially in the group traditionally defined as “housewives”). The part of the report devoted to trust in the institutions and participation in politics shows a loss (of confidence in political institutions and society in general. The novelty, vis-à-vis the previous report, lies in the last section, concerning respondents' subjective well-being and happiness. Despite the economic crisis, the lack of a (worthwhile) occupation, the many uncertainties regarding their future, and a deep mistrust of the institutions, the majority (71.8%) of the young Italians interviewed were fairly or even very happy. When asked how happy they were, less than 5% answered “not at all”, while 13.3% were “very happy”, 23.6% answered “a little”, and 58.6% were “fairly happy”. Their happiness may appear naive, but these young people were well aware of their difficult situation: 85% of them felt that Italy offered limited opportunities for those entering today's labor market. The lowest levels of data were reached by the NEET, under 30-year-olds who were neither studying nor working. These young people saw their skills unused or faded and risked becoming not only economic, but also

social outcasts. In the long run, persisting in such a condition undermines an individual's self-confidence and their ability to achieve their goals in life.

The 2016 Report: the generative side of a generation

The 2016 Report describes a picture of general insecurity, closure and concern due to recent terrorist attacks and non-EU immigration. These are the prevailing feelings of young people who understand and appreciate international mobility, and a positive relationship between cultures. The year 2015 also brought signs of an economic recovery, however, and a greater confidence in the chances of improving people's quality of life, suggesting a more stable process of economic development and growth. The goals focused on a growth in human capital: enhancing the skills, abilities, and individual characteristics that promote wellbeing in all fields of life. In recent years, the European Union has contributed significantly to raising the level and quality of education and training in the Member States through various youth policies, strategies, programs, and agreements.

The first part of the report concerns four fundamental aspects influencing the condition of young people: education, training and work; life choices and family planning in a time of economic recession; relations with families of origin and their influence on the transition to adulthood (comparing five European countries); social participation and interest in volunteering and civil service. The second part is devoted to analyzing four specific issues: international mobility and attitude to immigration from outside the EU; the "mobile generation" that does not exclude experiences and studies abroad to maximize their professional qualifications; attitude to new technologies in film, cinema and social networks; and - a new entry - the economy of sharing, in a spirit sharing economy and relational society. "Young people consider their schooling as an intrinsic value for the purpose of training for their career. They pay great attention to the quality of what is on offer, which becomes a benchmark for their choices. Though friendships are fundamentally important, they have a "strong" idea of school as a place for learning, not merely as a place to pass the time or an amusement park. It trains them above all to develop their personal skills and knowledge, their reasoning capacity, and their ability to be with others and deal with life. It gives them adequate life skills, but is generally lacking in providing the skills needed in the working world" (Istituto Giuseppe

Toniolo, 2014, p. 52). There clearly emerges a demand for an educational policy that focuses on training everyone to succeed, by seeking more effective ways to develop their talents, and ensuring greater integration with the world of job opportunities. In the socio-political context of 2016, a sociological survey was conducted on a sample of 5000 young people in five countries (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2014, pp. 75-96) including an in-depth psychological study on intergenerational dynamics. It was designed to investigate their perceptions in three specific areas: family representations; support received in daily life; and the influence it has on their decisions. The results revealed peculiarities and clusters relating to several significant differences. Young Italians had a rather complex representation of family by comparison with the other countries: the family enabled them to express themselves more and conveyed more values, but it was less. It was more often seen as a refuge or a prison than in other countries. The Authors concluded that their investigation confirms the peculiarity of the Italian case and its continuing positive opinion of the importance of family for society. They suggested doing more such studies on young people's perceptions of the quality of their family relationships, differentiating between their mothers and fathers (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo, 2014, p. 95). Another very interesting aspect of how young people see the future concerns their plans to have a family. Comparing the intentions expressed in the surveys in 2012 and 2015 revealed a greater likelihood of their having children within three years. Much will depend on how effectively economic growth and adequate family policies will enable them to turn their positive intentions into reality. It is important to highlight the second part of the report, which analyzed young people's attitudes to non-EU immigration in some of the larger European countries. The data revealed a poor knowledge of the migratory phenomenon, and a concern that tended to turn into hostility – signs of an alarmist public debate and of schools failing to invest adequately in developing their students' intercultural skills. Young Italian people were generally willing to move abroad (this was true of more than 60% of the Italian respondents) to improve their chances of adequate employment, whereas only 30% of young Germans were of the same mind – and the difference is closely associated with the different employment opportunities in the two countries.

The 2017 Report: a generation in a struggle

The 2017 Report focused particularly on two crucial stages of the transition to adult life: becoming independent from parents, and forming a new family. The data show that young Italians' expectations and plans do not differ significantly from those of their peers in other European countries, while there is a wider gap between what they would like to do and what they can actually accomplish. For over 70% of respondents, job opportunities and the economic situation have weighed more or less heavily on their chances of leaving home. The importance of objective factors was confirmed by the fact that, as expected, the NEET category was the most severely penalized: in more than 80% of cases, employment issues and the economic recession were significant obstacles (the former for 83% of NEETs, the latter for 84.6%). The thread running through the various sections of the study reveals a generation precariously trying to balance risks and opportunities, penalized by cultural and institutional obstacles that prevent the full exploitation of a whole generation.

The 2017 Report focuses on three main themes: the post- Brexit scenario, and the feasibility of relaunching a process that can overcome new fears and old borders; new communication technologies and social networks, analyzing how their use is changing quantitatively and qualitatively, and the impact of the change on social and relational life; and vulnerability and discomfort, with an analysis of emotional and behavioral attitudes in family, social and educational spheres. The results of the analyses depict a generation that needs to be understood, not overwhelmed by the expectations of the older generations. These young people want to be helped to shape these own desires, and encouraged with appropriate tools to turn them into realistic life projects - as Alessandro Rosina put it, a generation that wants to experiment and be able to take a leading role in a changing world.

Why we need to take a different approach to interpreting the world of the young: the art of battling giants

In the concluding pages of "Young Years 80", De Lillo wrote that a "good" society is one that allows its young people to look to the future with confidence and hope (Cavalli & de Lillo, 1988, p. 163). But what we have seen, ever since the early days of the sociology of youth, is the portrait of

young people who struggle every day to find their place in society. As the previously-reported figures demonstrate, this is true not only in Italy, but also in the rest of Europe. But there is a difference: the severe economic crisis of 2008 and the absence of long-term youth policies have made the transition to adulthood more difficult. If you are between 15 and 29 years old in Italy, you are almost certainly (in 80% of cases) still living with your parents, and you are very likely to be NEET. If you are among the lucky ones who are working, it is very likely that you are postponing an important stage in your transition to adult life because of the flexible and insecure labor market. This is the typical picture of the average young Italian. Thanks to the latest Toniolo report (2017), however, ongoing research has begun to deconstruct this image and provide a more detailed picture of today's young people, that brings to mind the biblical metaphor of David and Goliath. The economic recession, the demographic winter, and the lack of stable job opportunities are the giant problems that every David in Italy faces, but Goliath is not always who we think – and the latest research has sought to show that young Italians are still embarking on their life projects (Cappeliez, Beaupré & Robitaille, 2008).

This paper was designed to explore two issues. The first is that much of what has been said in the sphere of Italian sociology of youth has contributed to creating the idea of young people as individuals who fail to become independent (economically, from their family of origin, etc.). The second is that a new line of youth studies and fieldwork is trying to go beyond this view, because it misreads the situation. The young meet with several obstacles to becoming adults in Italy, but the difficulties do not always lie where we think. Qualities that appear to give people strength sometimes become a source of weakness. Being an underdog can change people in ways that we often fail to appreciate: it can induce them to open doors and invent opportunities, educate and enlighten, and enable what might have seemed unthinkable (Gladwell, 2013, p. 2). Since 2012, we have begun to gain a better understanding of our young people's condition, and how they try to get on with their lives in spite of the economic and cultural crisis.

What emerges is a generation that will continue to struggle for a better life, as we can see from the recent Toniolo studies.

But, even among the sociologists of youth, there is a still lack of awareness that studying the new generations as a continuum, analyzing them in breadth and depth, can serve as an excellent observatory on social

changes. Phenomena and the emergence of the acceleration of social life, the explosion of possibilities for action and experience, the saturation of social and symbolic space (Archer, 1997; 2007; 2012; Eriksen & Schober, 2016) can be connected to youth issue, especially in Italy.

The challenge consists of the tension centred on the complex relationship that binds social and cultural change with the meanings of being human articulated in various regions of the cultural system and lived out in everyday life (Maccarini, 2016, p. 33). We could find new concepts to continue Toniolo's Studies on lifestyle and life course of Millennials. We must continue to study our young people, and not only to revitalize interest in youth issues as a fundamental topic for a society that aspires to introducing innovation to overcome the daunting economic and moral crisis of our times.

We also and especially need more ideas on how to face Goliath - and there is no better way to start than through fieldwork (Goffman, 1989).

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