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Beyond Europe: Alternative visions of Europe amongst young activists in self-managed spaces in Italy

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the attitude towards Europe of young activists in self-managed spaces in Italy, and the extent to which the crises the EU endured in the last decade shape their visions. Unlike pre-financial crisis social movements, in the second decade of the 2000s progressive social movements adopted radical Eurocritical attitudes and shifted towards Eurosceptic positions. The article indicates that young activists in Italian self-managed spaces mainly criticise the economic element of the European integration process and the functioning of the EU institutions. They still refer to the European sphere as the principal field of political intervention, but propose an alternative organisational model oriented by the principles of democratic confederalism and libertarian municipalism in which local, autonomous communities are horizontally connected. This article contributes to the study of Europeanisation and social movements literature by shedding light on a political alternative to the EU grounded on prefigurative practices and a self-managed society.

Introduction

The multiple crises that, in the last decade, shook the European Union (EU) have posed a challenge to the project of European integration. The financial and economic crisis that unfolded since 2008, the so-called migrant crisis that emerged in 2015, and Brexit, have led to the questioning of the EU project's legitimacy (Pirro & van Kessel, 2018). Criticism of the EU and the process of its political and economic integration stood at the centre of the debate and of the electoral programmes of the main

Italian political parties in the general election campaign in 2018. The topic was central to discussions in political assemblies and public events. Against this background, progressive social movement actors seemed unable to elaborate a clear vision of the EU and a unitary position towards the integration process, seeming to focus more on operating the national and local level (della Porta & Parks, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2017). In the ten years that followed the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis, discourses related to European integration lost ground and appeal amongst Italian social movement actors, in spite of the centrality they retained in their debates during the pre-crisis period (della Porta, 2009). Back then, the social movement milieu had expressed a critical attitude towards the European integration process, particularly of its neoliberal character–a position termed 'critical Europeanism' (della Porta & Caiani, 2009). Nevertheless, this view retained some hope of building 'another Europe' by means of transnational campaigns to reform the EU from below (della Porta, 2007, 2009; della Porta & Caiani, 2009). In the second decade of the 2000s, a period in which national sovereignty claims re-emerged with force (Gerbaudo, 2017), Europe-oriented and European policies were rarely discussed by social movement activists, and have been at times completely absent from their discourses. When the topic is tackled at all, it is usually framed in terms of declining confidence and growing distrust in EU institutions. In the 2000s, movement criticism of the EU focused more on European institutions and policies than on the process of European integration as such (Koopmans, Erbe, & Meyer, 2010). Yet since the Great Recession, this criticism has deepened and appears nowadays to lean towards Euroscepticism; a position that 'expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration' (Taggart, 1998, p. 366).

To what extent are progressive social movements in the aftermath of the Great Recession leaning towards Eurosceptic positions? What remains from the critical Europeanism of the Global Justice movement (GJM) of the 2000s? What alternative solutions are advanced? This article contributes to the study of Europeanisation and social movements literature, by analysing the view of Europe and of the European integration process put forward by progressive social movements in the aftermath of the crisis, and by examining how it has evolved since the pre-crisis period. To this end, the article explores the visions of Europe endorsed by young activists in Italian self-managed spaces, the main protagonists of the domestic counter-cultural scene. It also elucidates the features of the

alternative idea of Europeanisation that young activists advance, which appears in the form of prefigurative practises and a self-managed society. The study indicates that young activists have moved away from the Eurocritical positions of the 2000s, partially abandoning the expectations of building another Europe by means of transnational campaigns and reforms. Nevertheless, they did so without completely ceding terrain to the Eurosceptic stance that became widespread in the second decade of the 2000s. Placing themselves between critical Europeanist and Eurosceptic positions, young activists in Italian self-managed spaces do not limit themselves to questioning the deepening of the European integration process, nor to advocate for reforming Europe from below, as the GJM did (della Porta, 2007; della Porta & Caiani, 2009). Rather, they propose an alternative typology of social and political organisation that moves beyond Europe to connect local communities beyond national and European borders. This alternative model envisages a new organisational model grounded on decentralisation, direct democratic practices, and redistribution of power; a paradigm that young activists already prefigure in the daily activities conducted in existing self-managed spaces. This model is guided by the principles of democratic confederalism and libertarian municipalism, and is inspired by the ideals implemented in the self-governing territories of Rojava. Notwithstanding disillusionment about the possibilities of reforming the EU, and their greater pessimism than the preceding activist generation of the 2000s about the possibility of imagining another type of Europe, the young activists nevertheless preserve the transnational element that characterised social movements efforts in the pre-financial crisis. The model they propose combines the local and transnational level of action, thus articulating an alternative idea of Europeanisation that appears in the form of prefigurative practices and a self-managed society.

Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with young representatives of groups and collectives engaged in self-managed spaces across Italy, this article analyses how their visions and practices of Europe changed after critical events like the Great Recession and the multiple crises that the EU endured in the last decade. To this end, it explores the diagnostic and prognostic frames these groups employ when talking about Europe and the European integration process. In addition, it investigates their alternative proposals. By tracing the evolution of the Europeanisation of progressive social movements over time, the article contributes to the literature on social movements and Europeanisation, by showing that social movement actors in self-managed spaces adopted radical Eurocritical

attitudes in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. The article proceeds as follows. I firstly present the theoretical framework and my main argument. Secondly, I outline the rationale for the case selection and the context in which youth activists in self-managed places operate in Italy. Subsequently, I explore the diagnostic and prognostic frames they put forward, which eschew sovereignty claims, rather promoting an alternative political model which has transnationally connected local territories at its core. Finally, I draw some conclusions on the basis of my findings, elaborating on the political alternatives to the EU imagined by the social movement actors under study.

Critical Europeanism, Euroscepticism and social movements: Changing visions of Europe

The visions and attitudes towards the EU and the process of European integration have been widely debated amongst social movements scholars. Research has demonstrated that activists involved in the Global Justice Movement of the 2000s adopted a stance towards Europe named 'critical Europeanism' (della Porta & Caiani, 2009). It combined criticism towards the European institutions and their policies with a more positive attitude towards the European integration process (della Porta, 2009; della Porta & Caiani, 2009). Notwithstanding this critical vision, GJM actors appeared aware of the need for supranational institutions of governance, and conceived Europe 'as the conduit best placed for bringing social justice back to the continent' (della Porta, Mosca, & Parks, 2015, p. 61). Furthermore, they still believed in a progressive Europeanisation of social movements (della Porta & Caiani, 2009) and in the possibility of a democratic transformation of EU institutions (della Porta & Giugni, 2009). Further research has indicated that the visions and attitudes of progressive social movement actors towards Europe and the process of European integration has changed since the economic and financial crisis started in 2008 and the Great Recession that followed. In particular, EU institutions became one of the main targets of anti-austerity movements, as they were deemed responsible for the imposition of neoliberal policies which favoured banks and multinational corporations (della Porta et al., 2016). These EU institutions were 'feared (…) as the enforcers of austerity policies' (della Porta et al., 2015, p. 61). Against this background, discourses emerged framing 'the European Central Bank as responsible for austerity and cuts, and "Europe" as generally in thrall to its economic mission and actors alone' (della Porta et al., 2015, p. 61). In sum, several scholars noted

that anti-austerity movements mobilising in the aftermath of the crisis adopted more radical claims than previous movements in the early 2000s, which still deemed Europe to be reformable. The most recent generation voice more critical positions about Europe (Flesher Fominaya, 2017). For instance, a euro-sceptical stance appears to be dominant within the Indignados movement mobilising in Spain since 2011 (Pianta & Gerbaudo, 2015).

Euroscepticism is an all-encompassing term, with little specification as to what it actually means. For this reason, some scholars have proposed to draw a distinction between hard and soft Euroscepticism. Hard Euroscepticism entails the outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration and the opposition to joining or remaining members of the EU; Euroscepticism refers to a qualified opposition to the process of European integration, based on a negative evaluation of European institutions and policies (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2004). In an attempt to overcome this demarcation, which in their opinion does not do enough justice to the distinction between the ideas of European integration and the EU as the current embodiment of these ideas, Kopeckỳ and Mudde suggested an alternative way of categorising opposition to Europe. Stressing the multi-layered nature of the concept, they propose to differentiate between different typologies of Euroscepticism: a *diffused* support for European integration, meaning support for the general *ideas* of European integration that underlie the EU, and the *specific* support for the general practice of European integration, meaning the EU as it currently developing (Kopeckỳ & Mudde, 2002, p. 300). Based on an analysis of party positions on Europe, the scholars developed a taxonomy of forms of support, or the lack thereof, for the EU. Kopeckỳ and Mudde differentiate between *Euroenthusiasts* and *Eurosceptics*. Euroenthusiast parties or groups support the general ideas of European integration and believe in the EU as the institutionalisation of these ideas, while *Eurosceptics* trust the key ideas of European integration, namely 'institutionalized cooperation on the basis of pooled sovereignty (the political element) and an integrated liberal market economy (the economic element)' (Kopeckỳ & Mudde, 2002, p. 301). However, *Eurosceptics* hold a pessimist view upon the EU's 'current and/or future reflection of these ideas' (Kopeckỳ and Mudde, 302). The two authors further distinguish between *Eurorejects*, that hold both EU-pessimist positions and oppose the general ideas of European integration and *Europragmatists*: they do not support the ideas of European integration underlying the EU, yet they do support the EU.

Endorsing the European integration process but retaining pessimist visions for what relates to the EU, young people active in the self-managed spaces in Italy appear to belong to the Eurosceptic category in the conceptual scheme elaborated by Kopecky and Mudde. However, the Eurosceptic category does not seem to completely fit their positions, as the respondents do not express an indiscriminate support for the European integration process. Specifically, in their stance youth activists endorse, to a certain degree, the political element of the European integration process (the pooled sovereignty), while their grievances against the EU relate mostly to its economic element (the integrated liberal market economy) and the functioning of the EU institutions. Disappointed by the hierarchal way in which the EU has been set up and is developing, they advance an alternative model of social and political organisation that entails cooperation between local territories horizontally connected, which could replace the existing institutionalised cooperation underpinning the political element of European integration. Before delving into the frames employed by young activists mobilising in self-managed spaces, and the alternative model they put forward, the next section focuses on the context of the study and explains the rationale of the case selection.

Context and case selection: Self-managed spaces and young activists in Italy

Along with most of its Mediterranean neighbours, Italy was severely hit by the financial crisis, and its young people were disproportionately struck by the increased unemployment that followed. Alongside Greece, Italy was also strongly affected by the migration crisis that peaked in 2015, leading to a crisis of legitimacy of the institutions of representative democracy (Castelli Gattinara, 2017). Against this backdrop, the Italian social protest milieu was highly fragmented (Andretta, 2016), witnessing a decline in visible protests or occupations and with limited or inexistent cross-border coordination. The feminist and LGBTQ movements constitute an exception to the inability to construct a coordinated campaign at the national and transnational level. Contrary to other groups, feminist and LGBTQ movements grew in number and visibility through the Italian branch of the *Non una di meno* movement (Chironi, 2019), also thanks to their engagement in an intense online mobilisation campaign (Pavan & Mainardi, 2018). Coherent with the tendency of progressive social movements to lean towards the national and local level of action

in the wake of the financial crisis (della Porta & Parks, 2018; Pianta & Gerbaudo, 2015), in the last decade social movement activity in Italy developed predominantly within the national context. In this period, new forms of social and political engagement developed, characterised for being 'personally meaningful and individually oriented' (Alteri, Leccardi, & Raffini, 2017, p. 718). Individuals did not openly target the state or representative authorities, but intervened directly to solve public problems (Bosi & Zamponi, 2019) by building on the idea of 'a self-changing society' (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015, p. 371). These actions included, for instance, individuals consuming in a politically-conscious fashion, engaging in participatory practices, and promoting an alternative economy (Forno & Ceccarini, 2006; Forno & Graziano, 2014; Monticelli & Bassoli, 2017), and getting involved in solidarity actions and self-managed practices (Bosi & Zamponi, 2019). Many people also began to try to re-appropriate, from below, their free time and spaces for socialising and leisure, that have been increasingly threatened by processes of commercialisation, consumerism, and commodification (Milan, 2019). Inspired by mutualist and cooperative values, these alternative forms of resilience (Kousis, 2017) spread throughout Southern Europe. They took the form of activism that tended 'to cover basic and urgent needs related to food, shelter, health, childcare and education, as well as echoing a quest towards alternative economic models' (Kousis, 2017, p. 120).

In the wake of the financial crisis, participation in self-managed and counter-cultural aggregation and social activities increased in number and relevance amongst Italian youths, which opposed the capitalist approach conceiving leisure and aggregation as market-oriented activities (Milan, 2019). Given the scarcity of opportunities for sociability and leisure outside of commercial environments, and the deteriorating material conditions related to an intensified living and financial precarity, self-managed spaces became deeply involved in the struggle for the re-appropriation of social aggregation outside market logics. Besides, these spaces retain an utmost importance for social and political action in Italy. Thanks to the 'accessibility policy' (Pedrini, 2018) that insists on these spaces being open to everybody, in the aftermath of the crisis the Italian young activists spent a considerable amount of free time in self-managed spaces. This study explores the visions of Europe of the young people engaged in these self-managed spaces, which constitute the backbone of the counter-cultural scene in Italy. The spaces investigated are of two types: squatted social centres (*centri sociali*), and ARCI recreational circles (*Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana*/Italian Recreational

and Cultural Association). The former emerged in Italian cities in the late 1980s following the efforts of radical left-wing groups, in a period when traditional left-wing parties and workers' unions were unable to devise new spaces for social and political action (Mudu, 2004, 2012). They have been defined 'liberated spaces' and 'political contentious places' (Piazza, 2018, p. 499), for they 'seek to establish alternative relationships and values opposed to the logic of capitalism' by recovering abandoned spaces and returning them to the collectivity (Piazza, 2018, p. 499). Squatted social centres generally find themselves in properties that were previously vacant and/or abandoned. Once occupied by antagonistic left-wing activists (Piazza, 2018), these buildings are transformed into venues for social, political, and cultural events, open to the general public (Mudu, 2004). Participatory modes of political and social relationships are practiced in squatted social centres (Piazza, 2012), which function according to a cooperative and self-managed system. As for ARCI clubs, these are cultural and recreational circles involved in activities of cultural and social promotion (*promozione sociale*), as well as solidarity actions. ARCI was founded in the late 1950s and was close to the Italian Communist Party. It is nowadays the biggest Italian non-profit cultural and recreational association, counting tens of thousands of members all over the country. The association defines itself as the 'heir of the mutual aid tradition of popular and anti-fascist movements that contributed to build and consolidate the Italian democracy based on the Constitution' (ARCI.it, 2019). ARCI operates cultural centres and branches in all Italian regions, a vast amount of which are youth circles. In both types of spaces, groups and collectives organise cultural, leisure, and recreational activities, and offer and self-organised support services to the wider public, free of charge. Unlike social centres, ARCI clubs are held in rented or owned buildings rather than occupied ones. Both types of initiatives run on self-managed and self-financed means.

This research relies on seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key representatives and active members of groups and collectives engaged in leisure and aggregation activities in the premises of self-managed spaces, as well as on documents such as groups' manifestos and other materials available online. In the sampling strategy, I have followed the rationale to differentiate between types of organisations, in order to account for the diverse organisational structures and cultures that characterise the counter-cultural sector in Italy. To this end, I have interviewed spokespersons[1] of groups and collectives active in squatted social centres (CSO Pedro in Padua; XM24 in Bologna; ESC Atelier in Rome; *Je so' pazzo*

in Naples)[2] and ARCI recreational circles (ARCI Nadir in Padua; ARCI *Ritmo Lento* [Slow Rhythm] in Bologna; ARCI Sparwasser in Rome). I have decided to include spaces with different political traditions and history in the sample, including some with a long political tradition and others counting on a more recent history of activism. Some squatted social centres and recreational circles have been locally rooted for decades, while others were relatively recently established. In all cases, the political collectives active in their premises count amongst their members individuals who participated in previous mobilisation waves. Some were active in the Global Justice movement, which developed at the turn of the millennium, demanding social justice and participatory democracy (della Porta, 2007). Others participated in the Anomalous Wave movement (*l'Onda*), the Italian student movement which spread almost all over Italy between 2008 and 2011 to oppose the neoliberal reform of education promoted by the then ministry Mariastella Gelmini (Caruso, Giorgi, Mattoni, & Piazza, 2010). In order to achieve better geographic representativeness, self-managed centres have been selected to cover metropolitan areas (Rome and Naples) and medium-size cities (Padua and Bologna) across the country. Owing to the small number of interviewees, I acknowledge that it would be inappropriate to make any claims regarding the generalisability of findings. As a matter of fact, generalisability does not constitute the main objective of this study, which aims to offer an in-depth and nuanced perspective on the microcosm of Italian self-managed spaces.

All the respondents are activists in self-managed spaces, and therefore appear generally more fluent in discussing politics and expressing political opinions than the average Italian Millennial with leftist sympathies. The vast majority of respondents are between twenty and forty years of age at the time of interview (the so-called 'Millennial generation', defined as composed of those born between 1980 and 2000), and mostly identify themselves as precarious workers. A certain generational heterogeneity characterises the interviewees, distinguishing an older cohort from a younger one on the basis of their militancy or participation in previous protest movements. Generally, the respondents belonging to the cohort comprised of thirty- to forty- year-olds participated in the 2001 Social Forum in Genoa and the protests against the G8 summit which followed. The majority of them took part also in the alter-globalist movement that emerged in its aftermath and tend to identify themselves as 'the Genoa generation' (IntISCS1, IntISCS5). Differently, younger activists (in their mid-twenties and thirties) do not retain direct memories of the Genoa

happenings, having first approached activism thanks to their participation in the Anomalous Wave movement. The engagement in the different protest waves marks a distinction between the respondents who consider themselves as part of the 'Generation Genoa' and those who feel part of the 'Generation Wave' (della Porta, 2019).

Debating Europe: Diagnostic frames and blame attribution

Overall, young activists ascribe a different salience to European issues. The topic of Europe seems not to stand at the core of the debate in self-managed spaces with a recent history of activism. In contrast, the discussion proves particularly intense in spaces drawing on a longer political tradition, where often militants and activists have actively participated in the GJM and consider themselves as having a pro-European vocation 'despite it not being very fashionable' (IntISCS6). Contrarily, groups and collectives active in self-managed spaces with a more recent history do not attribute a central prominence to the discussions over Europe and tend not to regularly engage in EU-related debates. In their view, the European integration process appears a distant subject, which emerges as a rather collateral theme to the topics of labour, austerity policies, and migration (IntISCS4, IntISCS6). When Europe is discussed, it is frequently in conjunction with its multiple crises. Therefore, it is frequently associated with events having had a negative impact on the lives of young people, like the imposition of austerity policies and budget cuts (IntISCS5), the Greek sovereign debt crisis, and the mishandling of the 2015 so-called migrant crisis. Those events radicalised the internal debate, leading it towards a strong criticism of EU policies and of the limited power of citizens to influence them. A respondent from ARCI 'Slow Rhythm' expresses the difficulties young activists have in tackling European topics, given the diverging visions proposed to solve the EU's democratic deficit. Within the circle, a widespread disillusionment emerged on the possibilities of influencing EU actors and their functioning; Europe is generally considered 'the big absentee' (IntISCS4) in the internal debate. His words also underscore a pervasive feeling of powerlessness of younger generations and frustration towards the limited possibilities of influencing the EU decision-making process. This brings them to question, more widely, the opportunities for citizens to gain political leverage towards what they consider an elitist EU. Along similar lines, an activist of ARCI Sparwasser in Rome laments the lack of instruments and tools available for citizens to affect EU policies. This absence, in her opinion,

discourages individuals from discussing topics related to Europe and distances them from it (IntISCS5). Although young activists acknowledge the pitfalls of EU institutions, they welcome with enthusiasm the emergence of progressive social and political movements and parties with a European vocation, such as *Podemos* in Spain or *Syriza* in Greece. In the context of negativity surrounding perceptions of Europe, they represent a positive point of reference at the social and political level, and a source of inspiration for them.

A high degree of criticism emerges as a common denominator amongst the respondents, regardless of the difficulties encountered in elaborating a clear-cut position towards the EU, and in spite of the diverse visions across and within social movement groups active in self-managed spaces. In the diagnostic frames employed by movement actors, meaning the discourses used to identify a problem and assign blame for it (Benford & Snow, 2000), the EU is almost unanimously portrayed as an out of touch, non-democratic project of neoliberal nature. It is viewed as only serving the interests of Euro-bureaucrats and the markets, while threatening working conditions and social rights (IntISCS1, IntISCS2, IntISCS6). According to the interviewees, other recurring themes emphasise the democratic deficit lying at the very foundation of the EU, its lack of democratic legitimacy, and the non-accountability of EU institutions. The European Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB) are subject to the most criticism, depicted as 'bodies nobody elected that are deciding on the life of thousands of people' (IntISCS6) and the institutions responsible for directing austerity policies at the European level. Several EU bodies are identified as responsible for the manifold European crises, mainly the ECB, as well as other more generically framed 'EU institutions'. In their criticism towards the EU, the respondents predominantly employ a socio-economic frame which links 'Euroscepticism to economic and financial arguments' (Pirro & van Kessel, 2018, p. 329). Accordingly, the economy and economic organisations are portrayed as 'dictating more and more the politics' (IntISCS2). At times, respondents also make use of legitimacy frames, which 'emphasise the democratic deficit underpinning the EU and question the legitimacy of decisions taken by supranational (unaccountable) elites' (Pirro & van Kessel, 2018, p. 329). The young activists in self-managed spaces frame predominantly EU institutions as undemocratic, with the exception of the European Parliament.

In particular, the EU process of integration raises criticism amongst the respondents for the salience of the market integration underlying it, which brings younger generations activists to advocate for the modification of

the founding treaties of the EU. In their view, the treaties shaped the EU as a market-based project rather than a political one, with the purpose of 'granting the free travel of goods, but not that of people' (IntISCS2). This criticism tackles the structural elements of the EU, and the imbalances embedded in the 1992 treaty of Maastricht in particular. The treaty sanctioned the transition of the European Community into the European Union, expanding its competences beyond economic matters and towards the enforcement of a common monetary policy. Another criticised aspect concerns the hierarchical system of the EU and the ways in which national politicians use the EU as a justification to limit rights domestically, as one respondent maintained (IntISCS1). The same respondent attributes the blame for the crisis on speculators, who take advantage of poor people. The spokesperson of CSO Pedro also accuses the ECB, and more generally the troika (composed of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) for the financial crisis, pointing out how the economy controls the political sphere by insisting that the fiscal compact[3] be included in the constitutions of the EU member states (IntISCS2). Expressing a vision of Europe that largely aligns with the socio-economic oppositional frames deployed by activists in the GJM (della Porta & Caiani, 2009), young activists in self-managed spaces interpret the EU and its institutions as failing in the economic area, while enforcing policies against the will and interest of European citizens.

Young activists in self-managed spaces: Cosmopolitan and Europhile citizens mobilising at the local level

The anti-globalisation movement perceived Europe 'as a new centre of power to be targeted, but also as a new political space in which to construct new forms of democracy and collective action' (Pianta & Gerbaudo, 2015, p. 32), whereas the protest movements in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis saw Europe 'only as a culprit and not also the space where a political alternative to neoliberalism could be developed' (Pianta & Gerbaudo, 2015, p. 31). Partially contradicting the observation of Pianta and Gerbaudo, almost all respondents acknowledge the European sphere as the main field of political intervention. In addition, they regard themselves as having a 'Europeanist conscience' and a 'transnational vocation' (IntISCS6). They consider themselves as holding 'connections with other European movements speaking similar languages' (IntISCS2), and they advocate for the need to organise at the transnational level. To this

end, groups and collectives in self-managed spaces are often embedded in transnational networks active across Europe. Examples include the *Transnational Social Strike*, a European platform gathering different groups from all over Europe dealing with work and precariousness, and the *Libera Università Metropolitana* (Free Metropolitan University), 'an experiment in self-education and constituent conflict'[4], based on the free and independent production of knowledge beyond the European region, and centred on sharing rather than transmitting knowledge (IntISCS6). A representative of the ex OPG *Je so' pazzo* explained how the ex OPG is 'a social and political reality integrated in a much larger and complex environment' (IntISCS7). He emphasised that the European orientation is undeniable, in spite of misgivings about the EU.

The respondents portray themselves as belonging to the community of 'transnational citizens' depicted by Balibar (2009), characterised by a cosmopolitan sense of belonging. They have often lived abroad for a significant period during their studies, developing an international character and enjoying more freedom of movement and job opportunities abroad than their parents' generation. These young people have been socialised in an increasingly integrated Europe (Down & Wilson, 2017), therefore directly benefiting from enhanced mobility and educational opportunities across the EU. They identify as being part of an 'Erasmus generation', having participated in the Erasmus university exchange programme. The experience strengthened their perception of belonging to the EU space, reinforcing also the popular image of them as young Europhiles (Lauterbach & De Vries, 2020). However, they also acknowledge negative consequences of having been adversely affected by the Eurozone crisis. In addition, the representative of the ARCI circle Sparwasser stresses that the EU offers opportunities in the form of mobility and working experiences across Europe, but also imposes constraints on individuals, such as those related to economic policies, and the restriction of movement on non-EU migrants which stems from the Schengen agreement. Far from the state-centred concept of European citizenship, she claims that being born in the EU shapes the ways she perceives herself as a citizen of a larger space than her country (IntISCS5).

On the one hand, the young people active in self-manged spaces conceive Europe as a space of freedom, progress and emancipation, while on the other hand they see the EU system as elitist and untouchable. In the meantime, they act mostly at the domestic level, and view themselves as being strongly rooted in the local context. Alongside a clear awareness and feeling of 'being European', in the sense of being embedded in a

European-wide sphere of action, the everyday activities of self-managed spaces are undertaken in most cases at the national and local level. While the debate inside these milieus might touch upon European topics, national and local politics is discussed more often and constitutes the focus of their actions. The more the EU and its institutions are perceived as distant, the more the local dimension gains in importance. As an activist of the ARCI circle *Nadir* of Padua clearly summarises, European politics is not debated by them, with exceptions being the several crises of the EU, as 'more space is given to topics connected to the local area and regional politics' (IntISCS3). Yet, notwithstanding their Europeanist vocation, the young activists' criticism of Europe and the European integration process appears to have radicalised over time, parallel to the increased emphasis on local initiatives.

In summary, young people mobilising in self-managed spaces in the aftermath of the crisis consider themselves as being cosmopolitan and Europhile, and maintain that Europe constitutes a terrain of political intervention, similarly to their peers in the Global Justice Movement. In contrast to the latter, they retain a deeper and radicalised Eurocritical stance and are more focused on the domestic level of action rather than on the transnational one. In addition, they articulate a vision of Europe not grounded in the possibility of its reform from below. Instead of thinking about other ways to reform the EU, they propose an alternative model of social and political organisation based on prefigurative practices and a self-managed society. The next section focuses on this new model of social change young activists put forward.

In search of an alternative: From the conflictual Europeanist option to democratic confederalism

Anti-austerity movements mobilising in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis discussed and elaborated diverse proposals for a different model of Europe and of European integration. These alternative forms of political organisation were envisaged as solutions for overcoming the EU's democratic deficit, corresponding to what Benford and Snow call prognostic frames (2000). In their study of anti-austerity movements, Pianta and Gerbaudo (2015) categorised the prognostic frames elaborated by social movement actors as: the frame of a *reversal of European integration*, a solution that entailed a return to national political processes; the *European adjustment* frame, meaning the reform of the Monetary Union and financial markets; and the *Europe beyond neoliberalism* frame, which

envisages a European integration giving more strength to democracy rather than to the single market. In addition to these frames, this article argues that progressive young activists active in self-managed spaces elaborated a fourth proposal, which I label the *beyond Europe* frame. Having learned from the GJM's lack of success in reforming the EU in the past by means of the 'conflictual Europeanist option' (IntISCS6), the new generation of activists no longer endorse efforts to reform the EU through Europe-wide social movements and coalitions. On the contrary, the respondents advocate for overcoming the EU in favour of a social and political model characterised by a horizontal, decentralised, and open organisational structure.

Based on territorial proximity, this new form of political organisation aims to regain territorial control by envisioning a system that combines federalism with soft cosmopolitanism. Instead of the institutionalised cooperation that nowadays characterised the political component of European integration, the young activists endorse a supranational model, which entails cooperation between local territories horizontally connected. In this case, reclaiming territorial sovereignty does not mean supporting national sovereignty positions inherent in the *reversal of European integration* frame. In the *beyond Europe* frame, local communities and autonomous territories are of pivotal importance as they replace nation-states, which are conceived as obsolete and inadequate to respond to people's needs. This alternative model proposed is oriented by the theoretical underpinnings of democratic confederalism, conceptualised by the founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, in turn informed by the principles of libertarian municipalism envisaged by the political theorist Murray Bookchin. Bookchin defines libertarian municipalism as

> an effort to work from latent or incipient democratic possibilities toward a radically new configuration of society itself – a communal society oriented toward meeting human needs, responding to ecological imperatives, and developing a new ethics based on sharing and cooperation. (2015, p. 78)

In the Democratic Confederalism political model, autonomous districts, cities, and local communities interact and form solidarity networks (Öcalan, 2011). In this system, 'having democratized themselves, municipalities would confederate into a dual power to oppose the nation-state and ultimately dispense with it and with the economic forces that underpin statism as such' (Bookchin, 2015, p. 87).

The principles of democratic confederalism are currently implemented in the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional territory of Rojava (IntISCS2, IntISCS6), the de-facto autonomous region of Syrian Kurdistan, self-governing since 2012 (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboğa, 2016). The political project of Rojava lays its premises on the respect of democratic values, cultural diversity, gender differences, national pluralism, and horizontal participation in local politics via democratic participatory processes. This model has been chosen as inspiration as it is deemed capable of distributing power rather than seizing it (IntISCS6). It also develops 'the autonomy of social subjects' to build levels of counter-power (IntISCS6). As an alternative to the EU model, the *beyond Europe* frame is thus endorsed as it would allow territories and communities to ally in solidarity while maintaining their autonomy, envisioning '(…) an alliance of territories, a chance to federate, to federate paths and experiences of government, each with its own autonomy' (IntISCS6). The Democratic Confederalism political project appears in many aspects extremely diverse from the 'conflictual Europeanist option' and the previous attempts to mobilise transnationally by means of counter-summits protests at the European level undertaken in the 2000s (Kaldor, Selchow, & Murray-Leach, 2015). As the transnational attempts of the GJM have had a limited degree of success, the movements that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis did not completely discard them. By contrast, the transnational dimension persists as a legacy of the GJM even after it was discarded as a strategy. As a matter of fact, this new model is grounded on the idea of establishing transnational connections beyond European borders, while at the same time remaining rooted at the local level, combining thus the local dimension (that of the autonomous territories) with the transnational level of action (the confederation).

This new model of decentralisation and redistribution of political power is informed by lessons learnt from abroad, like the aforementioned experiences of Rojava, but also the Zapatistas' alternative democratic model that emerged at the end of the 1990s in the Mexican state of Chiapas. At the local level, the principles of self-management, solidarity, and mutual aid amongst territories are enacted on daily basis by progressive social movement actors in the framework of the self-managed spaces. The latter become thus spaces of prefigurative politics, which render them 'a real alternative to institutional power' (IntISCS1). The prefigurative character of the actions undertaken in self-managed spaces, meaning the idea of living and practising in everyday activities the desired future society, is practiced internally on daily basis and fulfilled through

participatory, democratic and mutual aid practices, for instance assemblies and social activities having a mutualist character. Mutual aid is intended as a 'doctrine according to which individual and collective well-being can be obtained only by common action' (Zamagni, 2013, p. 238), inspired by old mutual aid societies which followed solidaristic principles and mutual aid developed at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe.

Conclusions

This article analysed the visions of Europe and the criticism of the European integration process advanced by young activists engaged in self-managed spaces across Italy in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Conceived as places of leisure and social aggregation outside of commercial environments, self-managed spaces are the main protagonists of the Italian counter-cultural scene. The study explored, in particular, the extent to which the multiple crises that have affected the EU in the last ten years have shaped the visions of young activists and shed light on the alternative model of social and political organisations they proposed.

The analysis pointed to young activists' increased distrust of EU institutions, to the extent that the Eurocritical stance, already present in pre-financial crisis movements, appears to have been radicalised. This challenges assumptions of the progressive Europeanisation of social movements and increasing hope regarding the EU assumed by some scholars (della Porta & Caiani, 2007). This study argues that the several crises that the EU faced in the last decade have adversely affected the way in which progressive social movement actors frame Europe and the European integration process. It also indicates that Eurosceptic positions have gained ground in the discourses of young activists, although their Euroscepticism appears still milder than that expressed by right-wing parties. Yet, the Italian young people active in self-managed spaces still refer to the European sphere as their main field of political intervention, notwithstanding their central and focal point of action remains the local level. In their discourses and practices, they do not question Italy's membership in the EU or their connections with movements all over Europe. However, the debate on Europe remains rather fragmented, failing to lead to a shared and common position. In particular, a tension emerges between Europe conceived as a field of political intervention and the perceived limited possibilities to influence the EU's decision-making process.

Although they claim to have a Europeanist vocation, young activists express a widespread Eurosceptic attitude towards Europe and the EU

integration process. In most interviews a variety of positions vis-á-vis the EU were present: criticism of EU institutions, as well as the need to change the functioning of the EU, were recurring themes. Young activists also expressed widespread disappointment in the limited possibilities for citizens to gain political leverage toward EU policymakers and to influence the EU decision-making process. Thus, the criticism of the Italian youth activists tends to focus on the undemocratic and non-transparent nature of the EU institutions and elites, as well as on the policies adopted to handle the so-called migration crisis and the imposition of punitive austerity policies. Concerns about the democratic deficit underpinning the EU are expressed mostly towards bureaucrats and policy-makers, described as unresponsive and unaccountable. Given the generational heterogeneity of the respondents, the distinction between the 'Generation Genoa' and the 'Generation Wave' partially corresponds with diverse visions of Europe. Those who participated in the GJM express a stronger disillusionment and disenchantment on the possibilities of reforming the EU from below, as they personally witnessed the failure of this strategy. In contrast, the younger activists belonging to the 'Generation Wave', who had not lived through the years of the anti-globalist movement, appear to be slightly more optimistic.

In a comparative perspective, this research has revealed how the attitude of social movement actors towards Europe has changed over the last decade. A feeling of disillusionment with the EU and its institutions, coupled with a general disenchantment with the process of European integration, dominate current visions of Europe. This contrasts with the pre-crisis years, which were characterised by a less pessimistic, but still critical, attitude. In particular, the dominance of market liberalisation in the process of integration remains one of the most contested aspects. If, on the one hand, social movement actors offer an overall negative evaluation of the process of European integration and criticise EU policies, on the other hand this criticism does not translate into calls to leave the EU, the Eurozone, or a return to national sovereignty and a return to the nation-state. Unlike their predecessors of the GJM, though, in their view 'another Europe' will not be achieved through transnational action or reform from below. Rather, the interviewees aspire to a different political and organisational system functioning according to the principles of democratic confederalism and libertarian municipalism, modelled around the experiences of the Syrian region of Rojava and in the Mexican state of Chiapas. The new system is portrayed as an alternative to move beyond the EU rather than transforming it: for this reason I

have called it the *beyond Europe* frame. This model put at its centre local, sovereign territories transnationally connected and is based on horizontality, decentralisation, and openness: principles which resonate with the participatory and prefigurative organisational forms put in place in self-managed spaces. As a matter of fact, the activists translate their critical visions of Europe into everyday actions of participatory resistance and re-appropriation of space and free time. Besides functioning as their main vehicle of dissent, these actions prefigure in themselves the type of organisational model the young activists aspire to ultimately implement. Basically, the model they put forward is already practised internally and fulfilled through participatory, democratic, and mutual aid practices undertaken in the daily activities of the self-managed spaces. By engaging in practices of everyday resistance informed by mutualistic and solidarity principles, young activists already prefigure the alternative model of social and political organisation for which they advocate. Finally, this article opened the path for a new research agenda that would be interesting to engage with and explore further. Further research could consider the specific generational dynamics existing within the same movement branch. Other options could focus on investigating in more detail the motivational frames put forward by the groups belonging to the social movement milieu before and after the 2008 political and economic crisis. Another research agenda could explore the potential of this alternative typology of social and political organisation in dealing with long-term problems such as environmental degradation.

List of interviews

IntISCS1	10 December 2017	Collettivo Palestra Popolare Teofilo Stevenson/XM24	Political squat	Bologna
IntISCS2	26 January 2018	Centro Sociale Pedro	Political squat	Padua
IntISCS3	26 January 2018	Circolo Nadir	ARCI club	Padua
IntISCS4	9 February 2018	Ritmo lento	ARCI club	Bologna
IntISCS5	12 February 2018	Sparwasser	ARCI club	Rome
IntISCS6	28 February 2018	Esc Atelier	Political squat	Rome
IntISCS7	6 April 2018	Ex OPG 'Je so' pazzo'	Political squat	Naples

Notes

1. The majority of interviewees were appointed as spokespersons. Others expressed their personal opinion, in particular when no clear vision of Europe had emerged from internal debate in the self-managed space.
2. The latter does not technically qualify as a squat, as the City Council of Naples entrusted the building that used to be a forensic psychiatric unit to its occupants for 'civic use' (see for instance Masella, 2018).

3. The 2012 Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union (or European Fiscal Compact) is an intergovernmental treaty signed by 22 EU member states (with the exception of the UK and Czech Republic) which binds all the signatory states to have national budgets in balance or surplus. Government debt cannot be higher than 60% of GDP and government deficit may not exceed 3% of GDP. It also foresees automatic correction mechanisms to correct potential significant deviations, imposing penalties on those countries which fail to meet the threshold in the form of austerity programmes.
4. Libera Università Metropolitana, http://www.lumproject.org/english-2/.

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