

Learning (not) to labour

How middle-class young adults look for creative jobs in a precarious time in Italy

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Introduction

The economic crisis that started in 2008 considerably affected young Italians, becoming part of their everyday life and a taken-for-granted frame of reference (Colombo and Rebughini, 2012). Compared with their peers in Europe, Italian young adults suffer from a higher unemployment rate and more persistent condition of precarious employment, which affects their everyday living conditions and their passage to adulthood (ISTAT, 2016). Such experience of job insecurity, the fragmentary nature of professional careers and the difficulty of achieving economic autonomy strongly contribute to setting a wider scenario of social changes that eventually creates ‘a *new generational location*’ (Colombo, Leonini and Rebughini, 2018, p. 62, emphasis in the original).

Hence, the starting hypothesis of the research presented here is that ‘the crisis’ is not just a temporary economic conjuncture; rather, it is a shared experience, the ‘normal’ context in which young people are about to accomplish their transition from school to work, from childhood to adult life (Cuzzocrea, 2011). Therefore, the crisis itself becomes a social phenomenon reshaping the social positions of individuals in both structural and subjective terms.

Nowadays, one relevant effect often highlighted by scholars and public opinion of such a ‘new generational location’ is an increasing distance between young people and public issues and the consequent uncertainty characterising youth’s existential condition, with a weakening of their wider expectations and projects and a forced focalisation on private and present issues (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). Nevertheless, volunteering and political activism outside institutional contexts are increasing among youth, and the economic crisis, instead of only pushing young people deeper into the realms of the ‘private’ sphere, also caused a proliferation in several of these forms of participation (Henn, Oldfield and Hart, 2017; Genova, 2018). Within such a frame, the chapter presents the case of a collective of students in Italy as an alternative small-scale form of political and cultural action and explores its dynamics and limits. While examining a particular form of youth activism in political squats, the chapter aims particularly to unpack the ‘black box’ of youth agency (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014) within the present structural context set by the economic crisis.

Therefore, the main questions that guide this study concern how classical structural categories like gender and cultural capital work together in defining the structural gap between aspirations and actual potential, by a specific social group of middle-class millennials. Which sets of constraints and alternative opportunities are put back into play in the daily practices of middle-class young students? What is the experience and possibly reflexive re-interpretation according to different degrees of this structural gap?

In order to understand such issues, there is the need to look at the specific intersection of structural dimensions – gender, class and education – which generates different *social locations* (Anthias, 2013) that, in turn, create different constraints, opportunities and strategies. Accordingly, by intersecting gender and cultural capital, I aim to highlight the stratification internal to a generational location. Thus, I start by briefly introducing the question of youth agency and the role of intersectional studies in approaching such an issue. Then, I show how I drew on the seminal work by Willis as a sort of *ante-litteram* intersectional scholar in order to investigate middle-class young students in Italy. Finally, I present and discuss the main empirical findings coming from my field work, and I conclude by analysing how the precariousness produced by the incongruences between the school system and the labour market opens a surplus of space for reflexivity, hence a sort of *sur-reflexivity*¹ which could become a specific resource in coping with the present frame of uncertainty.

Youth agency, intersectionality and habitus fragmentation

Agency is essential to one of the most considerable theoretical debates in contemporary youth sociology: ‘the relationship between individualization . . . and contemporary youth inequalities’ (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014, p. 464). Accordingly, a relevant issue in the way agency is frequently operationalised in the sociology of youth relates to issues on how the relationship between the subject and power is understood (Spencer and Doull, 2015). From this point of view, agency and structure are considered separate and opposed forces found in different portions of the social world and with different effects on the social organisation of everyday life. In this view, structure explains reproduction, whereas an autonomous creative agency explains social change, with Bourdieu (1990) and Beck (1992) being brought in to represent, respectively, the structural constraints and the creative agency of this dichotomy (Woodman, 2009). Eventually, the debate has led to the need to move outside simplistic distinctions between agency and structure and, following from this, to the call for increased dialogue between Beck’s work and Bourdieu’s positions (Farrugia, 2013).

In line with such a plea, it becomes particularly useful to adopt the intersectionality perspective (Crenshaw, 1989; Walby, Armstrong and Strid, 2012; Colombo and Rebughini, 2016) in order to cope with both the various structural dimensions and the individual agency. In fact, the possibility of analysing the articulation of

structural categories such as class, gender and race/ethnicity – instead of considering them as independent and separate forms of power relations – is at the basis of the notion of intersectionality as ‘an epistemological approach to domination’ (Colombo and Rebughini, 2016, p. 439). This leads to expanding the theoretical and heuristic potential of intersectionality as an analytical tool, not exclusively related to the investigation of overlapping forms of oppression, but which also concerns the more general relationship between individual agency and structural determinants. In short, the aim is precisely to show how intersectionality can make a new contribution to the traditional agency/structure debate.

Despite differences and variations, the common theoretical claim of accounts of intersectionality is that different social categories mutually constitute each other as overall social structures as well as in creating composite identities. Structural categories such as gender, cultural capital and class are not parallel; they create each other and consequently cannot be examined separately. Converting this statement into the analysis of youth cultures allows us to think of the complexity of the shared social situation created by the frame of the ‘crisis’ as well as ‘the complexity of their collective answers to their situation’ (Jensen, 2018, p. 414). In a nutshell, it allows us to investigate the constraints and possibilities of a new generational location. Taken as an epistemological approach to domination, then, ‘intersectionality may be useful for the analysis of not only the “matrix of domination” but also the “matrix of privilege” to show how any single categorisation only works in relation to other categorisations to produce a field of opportunities and constraints’ (Colombo and Rebughini, 2016, p. 443).

In this broader – epistemological – sense, intersectionality may be usefully compatible with Bourdieu’s sociology, in particular his view on the body and his idea of the habitus as socially conditioned embodiment (Jensen and Elg, 2010). Habitus is in fact both classed, gendered, ethnicised and racialised. Thinking of the habitus as multidimensional and complex (that is, as simultaneously conditioned by different social structures) but also as the basis for practical agency (Bourdieu, 1990) seems fully compatible with this particular ‘epistemological’ approach to intersectionality.

A key register of the concept of habitus is, in fact, that it incorporates past experiences which are modified by present ones, as well as a sense of a probable future (Bourdieu, 1990). Yet, Bourdieu changed his presentations of the notion of habitus during his works: from earlier elaborations, where a unified habitus is prevalent, to later conceptions of habitus fragmentation (Silva, 2016). It then accounts for a plural interiority in tension with dissonances and fragmented belongings. This is a key theoretical connection with intersectionality: how the habitus incorporates differences and is transformed as the person relates to various fields both over time and simultaneously. The habitus ‘helps to understand social change because it provides multiple locations to negotiate submission and defiance, adaptability and resistance’ (Silva, 2016, p. 174). A challenge for the habitus in contemporary life is then integration, but integration is not solely made within a unit. It can happen from various units and present varied depth and texture in different cases and circumstances.

In the case of young people of Generation Y (Strauss and Howe, 2006; Kelan, 2014), therefore, the research aims to investigate in what way this generation – not necessarily in its most marginal positions – is positioned with respect to structural categories like gender and cultural capital: namely, how and how much they are more or less able to manipulate and reflexively managing such categorisation and how, at the same time, these intertwined categories contribute to define contexts in which these individuals are located. Hence, intersectionality is employed as an analytical approach to investigate how different ‘structural categories’ act not only by adding privileges or disadvantages but, above all, by defining the conditions for particular *social locations* (Anthias, 2013).

Learning (not) to labour: the case of young middle-class activists in Italy

The idea of generational locations (Mannheim, 1952; Woodman and Wyn, 2014), understood as a set of attempts at a solution, answer or response to a shared situation, did not necessarily imply an optimistic prognosis for such solutions. For example, resistance may be practiced in a way that actually strengthens the reproduction of class society. Such mechanisms, in fact, were the main theme of Paul Willis’s seminal work, *Learning to Labour* (1978), that explicitly contains a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between youth agency and structural reproduction. He demonstrated that youth creative resistance against class dominance in school – a practice he termed *counter school culture* – in fact facilitated the reproduction of the overall class system and was part of what doomed working-class young students (the ‘lads’) to traditional, dreary sweatshop jobs. Willis argued that ‘the lads’ gained status from the construction of a tough and sexist masculinity in a situation where they were otherwise disadvantaged due to their class position (Willis, 1978). Thus, mixing and matching the effect of different social categorisations (class and gender), ‘Willis’ analysis may be considered an example of an intersectional analysis without the concept’. (Jensen, 2018, p. 415).

Hence, the inspiring work by Willis could be very useful in researching the present situation in Italy, especially the case of middle-class young millennials. In fact, if we look at the latest Istat report (2016), 62.5% of young Italians between 18 and 34 years of age, the so-called Generation Y (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Kelan, 2014), still live with their parents, with a marked difference among women (56.9%) and men (68%), but above all a significant difference with the European average, which stands at 48.1%. The most interesting aspect of this sociologically growing inequality, the effects of which seem to fall especially on the generation born between 1980 and 2000, concerns the impact from the initial structural conditions: according to Istat (2016), in fact, Italy is among the European countries where the advantage of individuals whose starting status is ‘high’ is greater; that is, at the age of 14 years they lived in a house owned and who had at least one parent graduated and occupied in a managerial profession.

Therefore, the research aims to examine the particular generation of millennials (born between 1980 and 2000), as defined as a new shape of ‘generation betrayed’ (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 148) in which the gap between the aspirations produced by the school system and the actual possibilities it offers becomes a structural fact, that affects in a different way all members of a generation. This imbalance caused by such a structural gap between aspirations and possibilities nowadays assumes – objectively and subjectively – different forms according to different social locations, particularly in the case of the middle-class young student.

If working-class kids, as shown by Willis, while showing capacity for innovation and agency, through opposition to the school they condemned themselves to a social destiny equal to their origin, we could ask what happens to middle-class young adults today within the frame of crisis. If school degrees do not guarantee the working and social position neither to the middle class, but rather produces more and more precariousness, how do the identities of the middle class reproduce themselves?

In order to analyse and map the different social locations of these youngsters positioned in the mismatch between the ‘educational paradigm’ and the prospects of precariousness in the labour market, the ethnographic tool, as again proved by Willis, is needed to grasp the daily living experience of these boys and girls. Accordingly, conclusions presented in this chapter arise from the author’s long-standing ethnographic engagement with a group of 26 middle-class young students from 19 to 26 years of age (10 female and 16 male) in Milan, who squatted in an empty building in the city centre in order to create a brand new space of both political and artistic action, sharing skills and information with one another. In particular, for 11 months I engaged in participant observation (March 2017 to April 2018) and carried out in-depth interviews in order to uncover the rituals, practices and mentalities produced by the participants of this youth political and cultural space, and to understand how new subjectivities and collectivities might come into being.

Finally, in order to investigate the dynamics of their particular social location, I operationalised that into the dilemma about the possibilities and opportunities for planning their future: that is, to plan or not to plan (Devadason, 2008; Woodman, 2011). The search interest, in fact, is to investigate the dynamics of the particular kind of ‘planning agency’ at work in the moment of thinking about the future and imaging and projecting expectations and aspirations.

Unpacking the black box of youth agency: six ideal typical profiles

While the interviews and ethnographic transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis for commonalities, in this chapter I will not present the analysis, as is often the case, as a number of transcript excerpts from a selected part of the participants to illustrate each theme. Instead, as other scholars have already proved

useful (Woodman, 2011; Franceschelli and Keating, 2018), I will present material from six participants in the form of a small case study on each using a number of extended quotations from the interview. Thus, I will illustrate the main themes using the narratives and cases of specific individuals who distilled the wider patterns apparent in the data. These case studies, along with contextual information about their everyday lives and practices collected through the ethnographic work, help us to shed light on the ways in which young people talk about their future and eventually make sense of the often-contradictory experiences of their lives.

The discussion of empirical findings through these six small cases brings to light the dual – and never dualistic – process of agency and structure; that is, the intersection of the categories of age, gender and cultural capital and the differentiation in the ability to manipulate more or less actively these social categorisations. To this aim, I will comparatively present two cases at a time, in order to highlight three different themes that clearly emerged from the whole narratives: (a) the dichotomy lying in their vision of future as a field of opportunity versus a general sensation of feeling stuck in the present; (b) the comparison with past generations; and (c) the feeling of an objective trade-off between achieving a ‘structural security’ and constructing a ‘personal culture’.

Marco and Filippo: on being young, male and educated

When talking about their future expectations, all the participants started from their perspective on finding a job nowadays, in Italy, at the time of precariousness. Yet, particularly two of them, Marco and Filippo,² described vividly the polarisation of such perspective. Both of them, in fact, were born in the same year (1996), they are both students in humanities and their parents are managers or professionals. Nevertheless, while Marco spent the first part of his childhood and his scholastic career in a suburb, Filippo lived all his life downtown and attended one of the better high schools in Milan.

When I asked Marco to explain something more about his hopes and expectations about the future, he offered a very nuanced way of thinking about the potentiality of what he called ‘his generation’ and the multiple institutional impediments on the way. According to him, in fact, only if you are given some ‘personal resources’, mostly from family and education, is there a chance to not ‘remain stuck’ where you are.

Many of my peers with which I shared schools when we were young . . . they didn’t have the same possibilities . . . but I’m not talking about money or stuff . . . I mean . . . it’s not about economic resources . . . it’s more a sort of . . . *personal resources* . . . being open minded . . . my mother used to give me books to read since I was 3 . . . and not everyone got such possibilities . . . and when you live in some places with some dynamics . . . I mean . . . in the suburbs where I lived . . . well . . . from there you can’t really go anywhere . . . *such neighbourhoods create a deep split* between the ones that

actually seek for a chance and maybe they could eventually work it out . . . and the ones that give up to their reality . . . and finally *they start some random job and they will remain stuck forever in this loop* . . . you know . . .

While Marco saw his view of the future as a possibility to escape from institutional weights and constraints that work to lock ‘his generation’ in the place of uncertainty and precariousness, Filippo proposed a quite different narrative about the future of his generation.

we are 20 years old now . . . *in a society in which it seems that if you’re 20-something you’re not of value* . . . but we know we have skills . . . especially in arts, music . . . and politics too . . . and in this little lab we try to understand what we can do with such talents . . . the fact is that ever since I was a child I’ve always been told that here in Italy . . . well . . . there is not work for us . . . and you grow up thinking that as long as you’re only a young man, you are not of value . . . then you start university, but you’re still too young to be of value . . . and then maybe you get a degree, but you’re still too young to make any difference . . . well . . . in such a place . . . it’s hard to think that the world is your oyster . . . you know what I mean? . . . Yet, I’m 20 years old and I have in fact my life in front of me and it’s now the time to really affect my life . . . *we must continue to do so even if we do not make a lot of money with this . . . this does not matter to me.*

Clearly, Filippo reflexively deconstructed the hegemonic discourse about his generation that is reported to be not yet ready to properly participate in the world. Eventually, he is able to manipulate the dominant categorisation about ‘age’ and to convert his actual location in a sort of reservoir of agency and creativity, where future becomes more and more a field of opportunities to catch than a cage of constraints to battle.

Chiara and Loredana: on being part of a generation

The strong feeling of being stuck in the present and the possibility of eventually overcoming such a constraint is often considered by young millennials to be a legacy of the past generation. In fact, Chiara and Loredana deal explicitly with such an issue. They are both born respectively in 1996 and 1995, and both their parents are professionals. While Chiara was attending a design school, Loredana was just concluding her first degree in philosophy and was about to start a master’s degree program in performing arts.

Chiara highlighted how the fear and anxiety about the future are linked to the conversion of the labour market within a frame of precariousness and uncertainty. As she explained during the interview, while her parents could benefit from a guaranteed path from education to work, she and her peers suffer from a generalised anxiety because of the break of such a path. Chiara also finds herself ‘split’ in

a sort of dilemma, between her confidence in her personal agency and her ability to work out everything she wants; and, on the other side, the structural and objective limitations she kept encountering in the real world.

when I compare mine *with other generations* . . . well . . . my parents simply got graduation at university and *everything was easy* . . . Take philosophy for example . . . my uncle got a degree in philosophy . . . and then he worked all his life at *Corriere della Sera* [national newspaper] . . . I mean . . . he never suffer of any kind of anxiety . . . now . . . a lot of my friends studying philosophy . . . *they share the fear of the future* . . . I can see a lot of people around me who are lost and anxious about their future . . . and such a panic eventually locked them to the present . . . so that they are not able to dream big. . . . To me . . . *I have conflicting opinions* . . . on one side . . . when I think about my future I feel like I'm doing well and sooner or later . . . I'll find a job or something . . . I'm pretty sure I'll figure it out. . . . Yet, when it comes to actually doing stuff . . . another part of me tells me exactly the opposite . . . and *eventually I find myself split in such a dilemma*.

While Chiara experienced such a 'split' as an everyday condition of ambivalence, Loredana elaborated even more on the question of comparison between generations. In fact, she is able to handle the social categorisation about 'generation' and she separates the condition of anxiety and uncertainty from the definition of her generation, that is, of what it means to be young in this moment in Italy.

the thing with attending a humanistic course is that after a while . . . it's natural to feel stuck . . . but that's only because we, as a generation, are used to live in the family longer and longer . . . and this gives us a point of view which is not ours . . . It's still the one of our parents . . . so we often look at our future with those eyes . . . that are not the eyes of the contemporaneity . . . and this thing . . . I mean . . . looking at my future through my mother's anxiety . . . it drives me crazy . . . in fact . . . if I consider what today actually represents to me . . . it doesn't look so terrifying . . . *we often carry on what are in fact the fears of the past generation* . . . like . . . 'have you already find a full time job?' but what if I don't want that? . . . there is a generalized anxiety which is inherited from our parents that influences too much our choices . . . and it has to be overcome . . . I don't know how but *I really think we're in a middle of a fight between us and the anxiety of those who came before us*.

Through her reflexivity on her actual generational location, Loredana actively rearranged the meaning of precariousness and future uncertainty, attributing such perspective to the vision of the past generation more than to hers. Yet, as she states at the end of the extract, this does not mean that the ambivalence ('the fight') between feeling stuck in the present and viewing opportunities is solved; rather,

it moves the issue of fragmentation from the structural gap between school and the labour market, towards the reflexive redefinition of her generational location.

Serena and Nadia: on being young, female and educated

A very similar perception of ambivalence can be found also in the case of gender, as the two cases of Serena and Nadia, both born in 1994, help to illustrate. While Serena's parents have working-class jobs, Nadia's parents work as artists in the film industry. While Serena is studying law at the university, Nadia works at a big multinational fashion company.

During the interviews, both of them told me about the feeling of a trade-off between what they could find after school in the labour market and what they are interested in doing in their *personal* life. Yet, such a trade-off is experienced quite differently from the two girls, exactly in the way they experience their gender. In fact, Serena explicitly questions the dominant gendered categorisation of females in the labour market and highlights how she feels the need of 'something else' outside the labour market, in order to become what she aspires.

It scares me a lot . . . I mean really . . . it scares me thinking that if I want to work in something near to what I'm studying I will need to go away . . . from Italy . . . I mean . . . I worked since before starting university . . . but when the only job you can find is to be a hostess . . . I mean . . . take my word . . . *as a girl*, sure there is few things worse than doing that job . . . even if you're doing it for a serious company and you're not dressed up like a sort of doll . . . I mean . . . the job would be to stay still, to shut up and that's it . . . I mean . . . what is it? . . . we're ending up building a generation of waitress, hostess and fashion lovers . . . right now, relying only on institutional supports like university or high schools, it's simply not enough anymore, *it can't make you a person out of yourself* . . . that's why we need something else . . . that's why we start this lab.

In Nadia's case, the question of gender is not so explicit. Nevertheless, the trade-off between her personal agency and contradictory structures is even more deep. What is at stake is something more than a structural gap between her subjective aspirations and the objective solutions offered by the institutions.

Right now . . . I'm taking a road . . . I mean . . . I now work in the fashion system . . . they hired me . . . so . . . well . . . I don't know . . . it's not that I don't like it . . . it's just that *I feel the contradiction* between my personal life project in the fashion system . . . and what I'm doing here . . . at Lume . . . in fact . . . since recently . . . I never told the guys that I was studying fashion . . . and I always thought I needed to choose between working in the fashion system and political participation . . . but now that the fashion people hired

me for a full time job . . . I think *at a personal level* I would keep working there since I love it and it let me to pay the rent, but at the same time I would save my moral integrity keeping working here . . . and maybe eventually even *combining the two worlds* . . . that would be what I really want to learn.

All in all, ‘the contradiction’ she feels ‘at a personal level’ concerns the possibility to keep working in the fashion field, as it fulfils her personal desires as a girl; and, at the same time, being an activist in the artistic laboratory, as it fulfils different ambitions of her being a girl. In the end, as she neatly states, her main aspiration is to be able to ‘combine’ the ‘two worlds’, which means to be able to live what she feels as an ambivalence, without solving it anyway.

Conclusion

In his landmark study of working-class youth in England, Willis (1978) offered keen insight into the process through which working-class students, the ‘lads’, creatively set up an experimental counter-school culture, penetrated the dominant ideology and eventually disqualified themselves from anything but working-class jobs. Willis’s study is in fact a benchmark for understanding the processes of social reproduction for the working class. Less understood, however, is the process through which middle-class youth engages with the same ‘educational paradigm’ from which the ‘lads’ tried to escape.

As the previous extracts have shown, the internal divisions and contradictions that Willis was keen to highlight in the practices of working-class youth can be found also in middle-class processes of identity formation (Kaufman 2003). Thus, while social categorisation like gender, generation and cultural capital certainly act as constraints and contribute to defining the specific social location of middle-class young students, at the same time, such categorisations could be actively manipulated and handled by this particular group of young people, contributing to redefine the boundaries of the same social location.

In particular, three main themes could be underscored. First, social identity of these middle-class young students is constructed against the ‘educational paradigm’ very much like in the case of working-class youth; yet, in this case, the frame of reference for their social identity is searched and found *outside* the labour market. The research findings show, in fact, that middle-class young adults opposed to the neoliberal aesthetics and discourse of hard work and discipline (Franceschelli and Keating, 2018) find in the scholastic institution a discourse of creativity and talent, and a mechanism of conversion from the constraints of precariousness into opportunities for creativity and cultural innovation.

Second, as the discussion of interviews has proved, there is a strong *situational management* of generational, educational and gender contradictions. Uncertainty is a structural factor in the contingency which millennials have to deal with. Despite cultural capital and gender structurally affecting the possibilities in planning about the future and creating aspirations, however, the research indicates

that more relevant than possessing such resources is the practical possibility of activating them. Hence, the *active management of contradictory structures* (like family, school and work) can be driven by a different particular intersection of dispositions (like age, gender and cultural capital) which in turn leads to engagement with practical strategies towards complexity and uncertainty.

Third, the particular change of perspective at work in this specific case of middle-class young activists who look outside the labour market in order to find the resources to construct their social identity is in fact made possible thanks to the exceeding space of *sur-reflexivity*, so to speak, opened by the same fragmentation of the habitus generated by the precariousness produced by the incongruences between the school system and the labour market. This creates the possibility of reflexive strategies for habitus integration (Silva, 2016), which guarantee to keep the ambivalence without going back to any unity.

In conclusion, returning to the more general and core sociological issue of the power balance between agency and social structure, two specific spaces for research could be identified: to develop the potential of applying an intersectional approach to the field of youth cultures, and to identify new areas of empirical research in this sub-field; to call in question the category of millennials as a generation itself, to show how this category is in fact unable to grasp the different situations socially experienced by different components of the current young generation.

Notes

- 1 I rephrase such a term from the well-known definition of ‘*sur-modernité*’ by Augè (1992) in order not to highlight the supremacy of such a reflexivity over others, instead aiming to show the ‘exceeding’ part of the such an agency.
- 2 All student names are pseudonyms.

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