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Young Italians and the crisis: emerging trends in activism and self-organisation

Ilaria Pitti and Nicola De Luigi

This chapter discusses young Italians' political activation against the exacerbation of socioeconomic and intergenerational inequalities fostered by the 2008 economic crisis and the austerity measures. The study contributes to the book and to the broader scholarship in youth studies and social movement studies by providing an in-depth analysis of young people's collective reaction to inequalities through self-organisation and mutualism. The chapter is based on qualitative materials (interviews, focus groups and participant observations) collected on five experiences of youth activism in political squats (*centri sociali*). These materials are analysed in relation to three main research questions: how did the crisis transform activists' practices of participation? How has this transformation changed the relationships between activists and the surrounding communities? And what about young activists' relationships with institutions?

Key findings

- Practices of self-organisation let young people experiment with alternative solutions to their own problems, limiting young people's risk of disengaging with their communities because of experiences of inequalities.
- Practices of self-organisation, working at a small scale and focusing locally, foster interactions between young people and other local community members.
- Young people's interest and involvement in political issues are reinvigorated by the combination of small-scale actions with long-term political goals, even though young people may remain sceptical of institutional politics.

Introduction

This chapter presents emerging similarities in the reasons, aims and modes of political activation of young Italians against the growth of socioeconomic and intergenerational inequalities occurring in Italy following the 2008 economic downturn and the adoption of austerity measures by the national and European governments. The chapter considers a specific form of youth participation – namely self-organisation through squatting of public buildings (Mudu, 2012; Genova, 2018; Piazza, 2018) and contributes to the book by analysing young people’s collective reaction to inequalities created or harshened by the austerity.

The chapter conceptualises ‘inequality’ in terms of uneven distribution of social resources and opportunities between generations, which has severely hindered young Italians’ possibilities of achieving economic independence and social integration (Chevalier, 2018) during the years of the crisis. The 2008 economic downturn, known as the Great Recession, and subsequent austerity measures have certainly led to a hostile landscape for Italian society as a whole. However, different groups have been affected in different ways. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, unresolved long-term problems affecting young Italians have been exacerbated, leading many scholars to warn that new generations will likely experience a decline in opportunities in comparison with those of their parents for the first time since the Second World War (Bello and Cuzzocrea, 2018). Along with immigrants and low-skilled workers, young people have been particularly hard hit by the crisis: their unemployment rates rose, and they also struggled with earning a decent wage in a more and more insecure labour market. Moreover, the adoption of austerity policies has negatively affected the already weak capacities of the Italian welfare state to alleviate social risks related to young people’s instable position in the labour market (De Luigi et al, 2018). Young people’s dependency on their socioeconomic background has consequently increased, as well as their sense of social insecurity and cognitive uncertainty toward the future.

The chapter analyses how young Italians have reacted to this scenario through participation. The practices of participation considered in this chapter can be understood as forms of ‘unconventional political participation’. According to the classic definition of Barnes and Kaase, this concept refers to any ‘non-institutionalised direct political action that does not aim to disrupt or threaten the stability of liberal democracies’ (Barnes and Kaase, 1979, p 27) such as blocking traffic, participating in (lawful) demonstrations and (un)official strikes, boycotting products, using physical

force, damaging property, and occupying buildings. In line with this definition, the practices we observe develop outside institutionalised settings and entail elements of protest towards institutions whose solutions to the crisis benefit, according to the young activists, the interests of the adult generation. These practices do not intend to threaten democracy, but young people work to improve it. However, by showing the limits of existing policies, elaborating alternative solutions and asking for a radical change of approach, young activists involved in this study do not simply 'protest' towards institutions, but also engage in a sort of competition with them (Pitti, 2018). As we argue in the chapter's conclusion, this change of approach questions existing understandings of unconventional forms of political participation. Like Sand's contribution within this book (see Chapter 10), this chapter deals with self-organised forms of engagement. However, in comparison with the cases analysed by Sand, this chapter's examples acquire an explicit political nature because they are realised with a political motivation, the character of the addressed issues is collective and young people's actions target political authorities (Van Deth, 2014).

The examples on which this chapter is based are all experiences of political activism developed in the so-called 'years of the crisis', which will be analysed to 'disentangle' the complex changes that the crisis has produced on young people's participation. In particular, the examples considered in this chapter show how the economic crisis has fostered the adoption of new strategies and forms of involvement, the development of a different representation of the role of young people's activism in society and a change in young activists' understanding of the role of institutions. Three main research questions have guided our analysis: how has the crisis transformed activists' practices of participation? How has this transformation changed the relationships between activists and surrounding communities? And what about young activists' relationship with institutions?

After presenting the case studies and the methodology, the chapter answers the research questions by combining findings with discussion of relevant literature. Findings are divided into three themes. The first theme considers how youth practices of activation have changed during the crisis. While providing general information about the economic crisis' impacts in Italy, the section considers why self-organisation became the preferred means of action for the activists. The second theme looks at changes that these forms of participation have fostered in the relationships of the young activists, other citizens and their surrounding communities. Presenting radical activism's evolution within political squats from the 1970s to today, the second theme pays attention to the latest changes in young people's

perspectives on radical activists' role in society. Lastly, the third theme discusses how young people's relationships with institutions evolve when young activists start to supply autonomously a series of services traditionally offered by institutions. In the concluding section, the findings serve as a basis for a reflection on the relationships between young people, inequality and political participation.

Methodology and presentation of the experiences

Casa Bettola, Làbas, Casa dei Beni Comuni, Ex-OPG 'Je so pazzo' and Baobab Experience are the five examples of youth participation on which this chapter is focused. These experiences of engagement have several commonalities that allow for their collective analysis. First, in all these experiences of participation, young people have a prominent role in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Not only are most of the people involved in the cases aged between 18 and 30, but young people have also assumed leading roles in developing these initiatives. Challenging existing understandings of young people as passive political actors, all these experiences can be considered examples of youth empowerment through participation. On a second level, the young people involved in all these experiences were largely already engaged in radical¹ social movement organisations (SMOs) at the local level. Hence, the young people involved in them had a previous and substantial expertise in activism. This allows us to consider if and how the crisis changed this kind of activism, its practices and its motives.

In 2009, following the occupation of a dismissed former roadmen's house in the medium-sized city of Reggio nell'Emilia, a group of young activists opened Casa Bettola creating "a pocket-sized common" (interview with S., activist, April 2016). The group started a series of campaigns and initiatives aimed at defending and promoting rights to housing, public education and work, as well as migrants' rights. The space has progressively become a reference point for the local inhabitants and the home of various social projects such as a school of Italian for migrants, a help-desk that provides legal advice on job-related matters, and a free afterschool for children. In 2012, during a day of strike against crisis and youth unemployment, a group of young activists squatted a former barrack located in Bologna's city centre. During the following five years, young people turned the building into Làbas:

¹ Guzman-Concha (2015) defines radical SMOs as political groups distinguished by: an agenda for drastic changes that would affect elite interests and social positions; a repertory of contention characterised by employing unconventional means; and a counter-cultural identity that frames and justifies unconventional objectives and methods. These movements advocate for radical political and social changes, but do not seek to overthrow democracy and its institutions.

a social centre where different projects were developed for and with the local inhabitants. Làbas grew to include a self-managed shelter for migrants, a weekly farmers' market, a micro-brewery, an organic garden, a pizzeria, a library and a study room, a bike-repair shop, and a kindergarten, as well as hosting daily seminars, workshops, self-training activities and cultural events. In 2013, a group of young people who were previously involved in a local SMO started the renovation of a former barrack of 35,000 square metres located in the outskirts of Belluno, a city in north-eastern Italy. The renovation was carried out in collaboration with other local political groups and associations and led to the creation of the Casa dei Beni Comuni, a social space for social, political and cultural initiatives, mostly related to protecting local environmental resources. In 2015, a group of young activists from Naples occupied an abandoned psychiatric hospital to create the social centre Ex-OPG 'Je so pazzo'. Its name – 'Je so pazzo' – literally means 'I am a fool'. Located in a central area of the city mostly inhabited by disadvantaged families, Ex-OPG 'Je so pazzo' offers an array of free services. These include: a medical unit for gynaecological, paediatric, orthopaedic and nutritional support; a free afterschool; a legal help-desk for migrants; a school of Italian and a school of English; a theatre; a boxing gym; and a space to practise yoga and ballet. In 2015, the Baobab Experience developed in Rome. A group of young volunteers reacted to the migrant 'crisis' the city was facing, with an increase of migrants arriving in Europe and transitioning to Italy in their attempts to reach other European countries. The volunteers decided to occupy and reopen a recently closed public reception centre where they provided migrants with food, short-term shelter, clothes, and psychological, medical and legal support. The Baobab centre helped more than 35,000 people between May 2015 and December 2015, when it was evicted from the squatted building. Since then, activists have carried on their activities on the street, occupying a square with tents sheltering a public canteen, some medical units and a legal help-desk.

Our analysis is based on data collected during a period spanning from 2015 to 2018 within the Horizon 2020 projects Partispace² and Youthbloccs.³ Twelve biographical interviews and one focus group with the activists constitute the core materials for this analysis. Although these experiences

² This project has received funding from the European Union (EU) Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement 649416.

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involved large communities of young people,⁴ biographical interviews and focus groups were conducted mainly with activists occupying key roles in the experiences' history or internal hierarchies. Data from interviews and focus group were integrated with information collected through participant observations undertaken in some of the case studies (Làbas, Casa Bettola, and Baobab), documentary analysis on materials produced and published by the groups (such as leaflets and social media) and further informal conversations with activists. The research and analysis were undertaken in Italian, and the quotations used in this chapter have been translated into English. Data were analysed applying Ritchie and Spencer's framework approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994): the inquiry was carried out by considering both *a priori* concepts and research questions derived from the literature (that is, looking for emerging forms of participation among young people during the years of the crisis) and recurring themes and topics deriving from the inductive analysis of the data. The decision not to anonymise the names of the analysed experiences has been agreed with the activists but requires a brief explanation. The examples selected for this analysis were chosen in part because of their visibility in the Italian context: all of them have received wide recognition for their innovative approaches to activism, which have succeeded in engaging 'non-politicised' individuals among others. The choice to use the real names of the experiences is partially explained by this visibility, which would have prevented any attempt of anonymisation. Moreover, research participants welcome the publicising of the experiences' names, as a further opportunity for visibility and recognition. Pseudonyms have been used for the young people involved in interviews or mentioned in fieldnotes.

From the crisis to self-organisation: young people's reaction to inequalities

Several studies in the past decade have highlighted how the global economic and financial crisis of 2007–08 has had a deep impact on Italian society in relation to political participation (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2014; Bull and Pasquino, 2018). Research shows that changes in participation in the years of the crisis are not linear and have an apparently contradictory nature. On the one hand, the difficulties generated by the crisis and the subsequent

⁴ The informal nature of these forms of youth participation does not allow for a clear assessment of the number of young people involved in them during the study years as there is no list of participants. However, from interviews and observations we estimate that between 50 and 150 young people were involved in each experience.

austerity measures have enlarged the distance between citizens and politics (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2014). For example, in Italy, trust levels have constantly decreased over the past ten years for almost all political institutions and populist feelings have grown steadily (Shannon, 2019). However, mistrust in political institutions and outrage against the country's economic conditions have fostered an extraordinary upsurge of activism, which has manifested especially at local level through grassroots initiatives and SMOs (Giugni and Grasso, 2018; Zamponi and Bosi, 2018). These trends are extremely visible if we focus our attention on younger generations' political behaviours. Especially among young people, increasing disenchantment and disengagement from institutional politics seem to go hand by hand with a growing interest in non-institutionalised political activities (Altieri et al, 2017; De Luigi et al, 2018; Pitti, 2018).

In line with this literature, in the cases we have analysed, the crisis was the 'engine' of young people's participation. An in-depth analysis of young activists' specific interpretation of the 2008 economic crisis highlights the connection between experiences of inequality and the decision to self-organise. The consequences of the economic downturn in people's lives are presented by the young activists as the main reason that led them to participate. Occupational and economic difficulties are mentioned by Ex-OPG and Lâbas activists as the main problems against which they have decided to react. Baobab's activists explain the occupation and reopening of the former public reception centre as an attempt to counteract the "social and relational crisis emerging from the economic one" (interview with P., activist at Baobab, 2018), while Casa dei Beni Comuni develops to solve the continued decrease of local institutional provision due to the cuts and the reorganisation of public services, as exemplified by this quotation:

'We are active in the allegedly most liveable city in Italy, where it is said that all goes well. Unfortunately, this is not the case: behind this statement, there is a social reality where the crisis is materialising not so much in terms of a decrease of income ... but in terms of a social crisis that has been affecting our territory for the last 35 years and that has a big hashtag, which is "depopulation". In the last 35 years our province has lost 15,000 people ... this is a social desertification.' (Interview with M., activist at Casa dei Beni Comuni, 2018)

Although young activists' actions address different forms of inequality generated by the crisis, all of them underline their views that the crisis is not a temporary, economic and global issue, but mainly a structural, social and local problem. From their perspectives, solutions to the problem need also

to be structural, social and local, and they seek a profound shift in people's behaviours and culture. Hence, they opt for practices of self-organisation because they consider these the best way to: find sustainable and long-term solutions instead of simply trying to 'fix' an emergency; foster a deeper reactivation of social ties instead of merely answering people's immediate needs; and empower local communities, by helping them to voice their problems and elaborate shared solutions. This is exemplified by the following quotation:

'For us, the "collective cleaning" of the neighbourhood is not a form of welfarism, or the attempt to put a patch on a hole, but it is way to produce "collectivity" ... people feel they regain possession of their own life, because they say: "This thing that was wrong before, now it is right, so it was good that we have worked together" ... the idea is not to give assistance, but to create political struggle through daily practices.' (Interview with P., activist at Ex-OPG 'Je so pazzo', 2018)

The developed solutions acquire the nature of 'mutualistic' experiences of self-organisation. In social studies and political sciences, this concept refers to a specific form of grassroots mobilisation where people try to build what they claim to be right through their own contributions and resources (Ferraris, 2011; Zamponi and Bosi, 2018). Mutualistic forms of participation aim to address increasing demands for material and immaterial needs (for example, food, housing and health), but also seek to produce political changes. Indeed, what distinguishes mutualism from, for example, volunteering is its political potential: mutualism contains the aim of expressing a political vision and challenging a socioeconomic system perceived as unfair. Young activists address inequalities by proposing alternative solutions that are political and, in so doing, they seek to foster new alliances with the local population and to empower their position in relation to institutions.

From fortresses to squares: changes in youth self- organisation through social centres

In Italy, the occupation of abandoned buildings to create 'political squats' is not new. The so-called '*centri sociali*' (social centres) are forms of youth political participation with a long history in the country. Their roots can be traced back to the mid-1970s, when the *circoli del proletariato giovanile* (centers of proletarian youth) were opened throughout the country (Montagna, 2009; Genova, 2018). These spaces were 'places for meeting and building informal social networks outside schools and factories' (Genova,

2018, p 4) and they were managed by youth groups sharing an 'explicit class-rooted conflictual political identity' (Genova, 2018, p 5). Through the squatting of public spaces, youth groups expressed their concerns about the economic difficulties experienced in the country during those years, as well as about authorities' inability to provide solutions to emerging social needs. Such occupations were harshly repressed at the end of the 1970s (Mudu, 2012), but the squats that survived were turned into *centri sociali*. These became the interface of the autonomous left and anarchist movements, and developed as counter-cultural spaces. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, the activities of the *centri sociali* have mainly raised 'cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organise information and shape social practices' (Melucci, 1995, p 41) through making alternative cultural proposals. From the early 2000s, the range of activities proposed within these centres has progressively broadened to include help-desks for migrants and ethnic minorities, theatres, gyms, independent publishing houses and record labels (Mudu, 2012).

From this list of activities commonly proposed in social centres we can easily understand which kinds of 'users' traditionally frequented these spaces. First, the *centri sociali* were animated and attended by (politicised) young people who either organised or enjoyed the many cultural and social activities proposed in these spaces. Second, *centri sociali* were traditionally attended by people sharing a marginal societal position – migrants, minority ethnic groups and homeless people, as well as sex workers and drug users – who could find a welcoming environment and support through the social projects started in the political squats to address their needs. The rest of the population – that is adults, older people, families, and middle-class and non-politicised people – was rarely involved in them. The centres were portrayed by the activists and understood by the local population as a type of 'fortress': spaces having a strong counter-cultural and counter-hegemonic identity and 'governed' by alternative social rules that separated them from the rest of city (Piazza, 2018; Pitti, 2018).

The evolutions in repertoires of action during the years of the crisis have fostered changes. Mutualistic forms of participation have transformed relationships between activists and the surrounding population. Activists underline that the experiences of Casa Bettola, Casa dei Beni Comuni, Làbas, Ex OPG 'Je so pazzo' and Baobab come from the long and rich tradition of the *centri sociali*, but they also stress a symbolic and pragmatic detachment from the classic way of interpreting activism of these spaces. The novelty in these forms of self-organisation is the transformation of social centres from 'fortresses' to 'squares', by creating dialogues with local inhabitants and by

turning the occupied buildings into spaces at the service of the surrounding communities, where the needs of the whole population – rather than of segments of it – are addressed. The following quotation exemplifies this:

‘Many of us came out of the experience of a more classic social centre. We chose to close this centre because we wanted to open a wider urban experience; wider in terms of kind of intervention and internal composition. This is how Casa dei Beni Comuni was born: we defined it then and we still define it today a social centre at the service of the citizens.’ (Interview with M., activist at Casa dei Beni Comuni, 2018)

Another activist explicitly uses the word ‘square’ to describe the new form of self-organisation: “Làbas has a big central square so opening the social centre in the abandoned building has been like giving back a square to the city” (interview with F., activist at Làbas, 2015).

This move to a ‘square’ occurred in Italian social centres during the historical period marked by the economic crisis and austerity. Young activists at Làbas perceived this link clearly, discussing their decisions to open, within the social centre, a shelter for homeless people. The fieldwork note describes this link:

Antonio (activist) tells us that: ‘We came from experiences in the housing struggle and our housing help-desk worked full-time: there were so many people coming to seek help to find a house. Then there was the social centre [Làbas], which had a large, unused space to put into operation. There was also always the issue of migrants. [We developed] the idea of making a sort of transit point for migrants in movement towards other cities in Europe and so we decided to open the homeless shelter organised within the centre.’ (Fieldnote, June 2015)

To create the shelter, the activists decided to involve local NGOs and volunteers. They organised a city assembly to judge whether there was enough support to start such a project and launched a ‘call for volunteers’ to engage not only people belonging to SMOs, but also ‘common people’. There seemed to be some interest in the proposal. This was perceived as an innovation for the centre, creating novel connections with local people, as explained by one young activist:

Antonio considers the call for volunteers a real innovation and an important breakthrough moment in relation to the classic ‘recruitment’ strategies of Italian social centres: ‘not only in our own development as a social centre, but in the history of social centres’. According to Antonio, this ‘hybrid’

political practice, as he calls it, had never been experimented with before. He explains what he means by hybrid, emphasising the elements of discontinuity from the social centre's tradition: 'Usually, there is a core group of activist [the so-called "collective"] that manages the occupied space, that has the power to make political decisions and use the space. Usually, the space is like "owned" by the collective. What is happening inside this social centre is a genuine hybridisation [with local people], an innovation.' (Fieldnote, June 2015)

Providing alternatives services to (and with) the local population entails a deep change in understanding radical activism's role in society. It emerges that – in order to achieve a deep and long-term transformation of society – radical activism needs to 'be around people', to open its fortresses to non-politicised people and show them that "politics is a tool to transform what exists" (interview with P., activist at Ex-OPG 'Je So Pazzo', 2018). This is exemplified by the words of a young activist:

'So, we escort them [some local people] to the municipal council [to help them to voice a concern] and when you get this small victory, you create political capital because you have shown people that politics is a tool to transform what exists. Our idea is that it is not yet possible to start a revolution today ... In this historical phase it seems rather necessary to rebuild the community bonds and the social ground on which reformist or revolutionary actions can develop. Without this work of tilling the soil from ... elements of passivation and resignation, clearly nothing can be done.' (Interview with P., activist at Ex-OPG 'Je so pazzo', 2018)

The observed practices of self-organisation are based on small-scale actions and have a strong local focus. These characteristics help young activists to foster fruitful interactions with local inhabitants. In the next section, the analysis focuses on what these transformations in youth activism tell us about young people's relationship with institutions, conceived as the classic providers of those services and goods that now they try to produce by themselves.

From claiming to prefiguring: a new position towards institutions

The political transformation described in the previous section reflects a generational change in the approach to participation (Dalton, 2008) and in young people's relationship with institutions and authorities. As previously discussed, in Italy, young people have been affected by the crisis and the austerity measures more than any other generation (Bello and Cuzzocrea, 2018). The direct and everyday experience of the effects of an increasingly

uneven distribution of resources between generations has developed into an 'urgency to do something' (De Luigi et al, 2018). In young Italian activists' practices of self-organisation, feelings of outrage and hope arising from conditions of structural inequality combine with new cultures of democracy (Kelly et al, 2018) where experimenting with innovative, alternative and practical solutions is not only possible, but necessary (Pitti, 2018). This is exemplified in a public declaration from Làbas:

This is the story of a generation that wants to create relationships and open spaces to experiment with practices, languages, new ways of living the city ... This is the story of a generation that wants to create its future, that wants to take back its life starting from the present by defining and pursuing concrete objectives. This is the story of a generation that wants to open political laboratories within the city, elements of anomaly in the crisis, which ... wants to change what already exists in an experimental and shattering way. (Làbas public statement, 2012)

In this evolution of the *centri sociali*, it is possible to notice a non-ideological approach to politics that is typical of younger generations (Dalton, 2008). When it comes to institutionalised forms of engagement, this trend towards a non-ideological politics has been widely used to explain young people's progressive distancing from parties' ideologies. However, the non-ideological approach to politics also leads to less institutional forms of engagement and, in the case of the *centri sociali*, this approach seems to have fostered a 'pragmatic turn' in youth self-organisation. These efforts result in a type of political engagement through which young people seek to enact the new society they envision in the present. The engagement occurs through small-scale, cause-oriented and fluid actions that comply with and reflect long-term political goals. The combination of small-scale actions with long-term political goals reinvigorates young people's interest and involvement in political issues despite their scepticism with institutional politics. This political approach corresponds with what has been defined as 'prefigurative politics': that is, 'a political action, practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the here and now rather than hoped to be realised in a distant future' (Van de Sande, 2015, p 180). According to Castells, when existing institutions fail to manage structural crisis, 'change can only take place out of the system by a transformation of power relations that starts in people's minds and develops in the forms of networks ... of new actors constituting themselves as the subjects of the new history in the making' (Castells, 2012, p 228). Young activists' practices of self-organisation are utopias that 'become material force by incarnating in people's minds, by inspiring their dreams,

by guiding their actions and inducing their reactions' (Castells, 2012, p 228). The following quotation makes the link between the practical actions of today showing the way to the utopias of tomorrow:

'Faced with the immobility of the institutions, we must show that we – that we are nobody ... – are creating another model of reception [of migrants], another model of coexistence. [We are showing that] another way is possible, and we are making it, that is, [we are demonstrating that] there is this cultural possibility which starts from the desert. So today we are sowing and sowing, then we will harvest.' (Interview with P., activist at Baobab, 2018)

Hence, emerging trends in youth self-organisation in the years of the crisis foster a different relationship towards institutions. Through self-organisation, young people engage in domains that are traditionally 'institutional' by creating and providing services that are classically a task of institutions (that is, services for unemployed people, young people, homeless people, migrants and children). The stories of Casa Bettola, Casa dei Beni Comuni, Làbas, Ex OPG 'Je so pazzo' and Baobab are youth attempts to 'unpack and ground their disaffection towards institutions into projects that allow them not only to protest, but also to stop waiting for the intervention of authorities that they do not trust and to win back a power in shaping their lives and the world(s) they inhabit' (Pitti, 2018, p 119). This change of approach leads youth self-organised projects to become 'alternative institutions' in their local areas and compete with local authorities in defining what can be considered a public issue or a public service. This is explained in the following quotation:

'In recent years many districts ["branches" of the municipality in the neighbourhoods of the city] in Reggio Emilia have been closed. These were "institutions of proximity" that once were very important, they were a point of reference. Casa Bettola has progressively assumed a role similar to that of a district ... with people who often come to complain about difficulties ... This has led us to open the "Casa Bettola District" as a provocative, but effective gesture. We have created a new District, with the official signs, trying in some way to challenge politics.' (Interview with S., activist at Casa Bettola, 2016)

In the experiences of mutualism carried out by social centres, at stake are not only social problems and the resources to answer them, but also the politicisation of issues and needs that were previously considered of private concern (and thus requiring private solutions) or 'the discourse on these needs, their interpretations, the conflicts and the powers on their definition and recognition' (De Leonardis, 1998, p 38).

Conclusion

The chapter has analysed the transformations that youth activism has undergone during the years of the economic crisis in Italy. Practices of self-organisation within social centres emerge as forms of collective reaction to the growth of intergenerational and socioeconomic inequalities. Inspired by a mutualistic model of engagement where solidarity is combined with self-help goals (Busso and De Luigi, 2019), these practices have fostered fruitful relationships between young activists and the surrounding local communities. The autonomous provision of a variegated range of services (from libraries to medial units) has turned social centres into reference points for intergenerational contacts and socially diversified populations. Feelings of distrust towards institutions have combined with the awareness of that old solutions are no longer working. The urgency to find new solutions has led young people to experiment with alternative ideas on society through self-organisation.

In relation to the literature on unconventional practices of participation, the novelty of these new forms of self-organisation lies particularly in the new positions young people assume in relation to institutions. Traditionally unconventional forms of participation have been understood mainly as a means of protest against, or to claim via, institutions. Youth self-organised practices in the years of the crisis appear to go beyond protesting and claiming (Zamponi and Bosi, 2018). As we have argued elsewhere (Pitti, 2018), self-organisation is used to express a critique towards and to protest against authorities, but also represents a mean to 'circumnavigate' institutions that are no longer considered a useful and reliable interlocutor.

Young people's disappointment targets not only institutional solutions to the intergenerational and socioeconomic inequalities increased by the crisis, but the very definition of the situation underlying these solutions. While institutions and common discourses tend to present problems as created or harshened by the crisis and, more generally, social inequalities as effects of events and decisions beyond their control, young activists reclaim an understanding of socioeconomic and intergenerational inequalities as 'political issues', that is, as effects of conscious decisions/actions that can be solved by new conscious decisions/actions. In the analysed experiences, young people take a leading role in the repoliticisation of a series of issues – such as poverty, unemployment, migration, use of public assets – that are often depoliticised in institutional discourses, portrayed as nobody's fault and nobody's task or as mere technical issues.

Understanding inequality as a political problem emerges as a turning point in the path towards activation and empowerment of the young people involved in this chapter. This finding confirms the principle that we can elaborate solutions only if we first believe that things are modifiable and that we have the possibility and capacity to participate in this change (Arendt, 1965). In other words, disengagement is not only the effect of distrust towards institutions, but also the effect of normalising discourses (Foucault, 1975) that portray a problem as 'natural' and 'unmodifiable' (Bourdieu, 1998). Revealing the social (and thus modifiable) nature of inequalities, the connections between individual conditions and structural dynamics, and the capacity of individual and collective agency to act on existing structures of inequality, are preliminary – and yet necessary – steps towards fostering youth engagement in society, steps that social sciences have the means and the responsibility to undertake with young people.

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