SECOND-GENERATION YOUTHS: EXPERIENCES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ITALY

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Abstract. The political participation of second-generation youths is still an unexplored subject. The present empirical research has two main objectives: to study whether and how the second-generations in Italy manage to have their voice heard in the development of the policies concerning them, and to examine in depth the role that institutional players and those from the third sector have in support of their struggles. The present qualitative research, carried out between January 2017 and January 2018, has highlighted some new dynamics of activism and the paths of empowerment of the young activists involved. However, the investigation showed a structural weakness of the movements of the young adults and a lack of leaders capable of representing independently the requests forwarded by the second-generations. The role of other players, both institutional and from civil society, in supporting their activism remains preponderant and essential.

Keywords: Young generations, Immigrant background, Political participation, Citizenship, Italy.

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I - INTRODUCTION

In the United States and Europe, studies on migration have progressively moved their focus to the second generations, that is the children of immigrants born or raised in their parents’ settlement country (Gans 1992; Portes - Zhou 1993; Portes 1996; Portes - Rumbaut 2001; Farley - Alba 2002; Crul - Vermeulen 2003; Crul - Mollenkopf 2012). European countries, which did not previously define themselves as immigration countries, have found themselves facing an «unexpected event»: the children of immigrants have challenged the idea that their presence is a temporary phenomenon (Colasanto - Zanfrini 2009).

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In particular, some issues related to the second generations have been widely analysed by different scholars: on one side there are personal and social identities (amongst others Colombo et al. 2009), on the other side educational and working paths, comparing the results achieved by second generations and natives (Heath - Cheung 2007; Santagati - Ongini 2016; Crul et al. 2017). The topic of the political participation of second generation young adults, the focus of the present empirical research, has, conversely, been less explored. The representation and the participation of all groups of citizens are crucial for a proper functioning of democracy (Almond - Verba 1989; de Tocqueville 1990; Putnam 1993). Moreover, the inclusion of young people from immigrant backgrounds is a key issue for social cohesion: the exclusion of a significant number of citizens can have negative effects on the stability of the society (Zanfrini 2007).

This is the backdrop of the present empirical research, that has explored the dynamics and the ways second generation young adults (18-35 year olds) participate actively in Italian politics, in particular taking into consideration the movements and the initiatives in the struggle for the reform of the citizenship law. The hypothesis is that the unfavourable Political Opportunity Structure (POS) in Italy (such as the restrictive rules for acquiring Italian citizenship), together with a highly politicised context, might have favoured the organisation of new movements and struggles for claiming rights and recognition.

Specifically, this research, intends to answer the following research questions: how do second generations in Italy take an active role in politics? What kind of relationship and collaboration is there between young activists, the institutions and the other players of the civil society (trade unions, organizations etc.)?

II · THE CENTRALITY OF THE VARIABLE «GENERATION» IN THE STUDY OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The definition of political participation assumed as a reference point in the present work is the one proposed in the classic work of Verba et al. (1987: 37), that is the set of legal acts fulfilled by private citizens who are, more or less directly, inclined to influence the choice of government representatives and/or the actions they carry out. This definition includes both electoral and non-electoral behaviours. This is fundamental for the target taken into examination: young adults who, despite being born and/or raised in Italy, do not have Italian citizenship and, therefore, cannot vote in the local and national elections. The present investigation is focused on the non-electoral behaviour: the most important political activities occur, sometimes, in between elections (ibidem).

1 Further considerations on the successful paths of the children of immigrants in Europe have been recently formulated, in terms of high levels of education achieved and prestigious job positions. See the Special Issue (2016), The Upcoming New Elite among Children of Immigrants, «Ethnic and Racial Studies», 40, 2.
As highlighted by some researches on the political participation of immigrants and their children (Kellstedt 1974; Lamare 1982; Chui et al. 1991), the variable «generation» is central in the study of the different ways of activation and mobilisation. The first generation of immigrants is facing a series of structural obstacles which will partly disappear with the second and following generations. Such barriers are, for example, the inadequate mastery of the language and the culture of the host country, the scarce familiarity with the political environment, work as an economical need and a priority in the migration process taking time away from other activities, the lack of many rights since they are deprived of the formal citizenship of the host country, and the widespread ethnic-racial discriminations. The strong motivation for participation of the first generations can therefore, in some cases, be transmitted to the second generations, who are no longer facing the problems that strongly limited the possibilities of activation of their parents (Chui et al. 1991). The children of immigrants are also bearers of new claims, since, being socialised in the host country, they have similar ambitions to their native peers and they are no longer willing to accept subordinate conditions like their parents had to (Ambrosini 2005: 44). The identity ambitions of the children of immigrants, unlike their parents, are often projected onto the society where they were raised (Zanfrini 2016). In addition, there is the awareness that their ethnic background represents, directly and indirectly, a social barrier (Portes - Rumbaut 2001): the perception of being discriminated against can increase and reinforce their political awareness, leading to a bigger claim for their rights.

III - THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

When this empirical research started (January 2017), the debate in Italy regarding the proposal for a reform of the citizenship law (Law 91, 1992) was raging. In addition to the old players, committed for years to carrying out campaigns to reform the modalities by which citizenship can be acquired (trade unions, organizations from the third sector etc.), new subjects have gained high visibility and a voice on the political scene. At the end of 2016 a restricted group of young people from immigrant backgrounds gave birth to an online movement #ItalianiSenzaCittadinanza. This movement attracted significant media attention, and different national (as well as regional and local) newspapers, gave a lot of importance to its protagonists, stories, ambitions and claims, above all when the debate on the reform of the citizenship law was set to be scheduled in the Senate agenda. At the end of 2016 there was the birth of another experience deeply different in terms of objectives and origins. This is the National Coordination of the New

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2 Conversely, some difficulties will be in some cases «inherited» by their children, for example the ethnic-racial discrimination.

3 One of the first campaigns for the citizenship rights of the children of immigrants go back to «Bambini d’Italia» promoted by Comunità Sant’Egidio in 2004.

4 See the promoters of the Campaign «L’Italia sono anch’io» («I’m Italy too»).
Italian Generations (CoNNGI)<sup>5</sup>, a network of associations of young people from immigrant backgrounds, which came to life with the support of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (General Directorate for Immigration and Integration Policies) that has so far involved 18 associations of second generations on all the national territory.

Old and new players have been involved in the empirical research, which was carried out between January 2017 and January 2018 in different Italian cities (Rome, Milan, Genoa, Bologna, Reggio Emilia, Padua and Bergamo). Sixteen life stories of young second generation activists – belonging to #ItalianiSenzaCittadinanza, CoNNGI and other social and cultural associations – have been collected. In addition to this, nine semi-structured interviews have been conducted with various representatives from the institutions and civil society involved in the activities of mobilisation of young activists (government officials, union officials, spokespersons from the world of associationism and journalists). Moreover, a participant observation was carried out on the occasion of key events (meetings, national mobilisation, public events etc.), and documentary and publicity materials have been collected and analysed.

From the encounters and interviews with young activists, it has been possible to observe how the subjects who took part in the mobilisation or other initiatives aimed at influencing the policies sphere, have started a series of virtuous paths of empowerment.

Since that moment it looks like both me and the others have understood that we can do whatever we want. And that, some time ago, when we didn’t do anything, if things weren’t changing it was because we weren’t doing anything. This thing has empowered us and pushed us further to work hard and be committed (Interview 10).

On the one hand, activism has reinforced the sense of belonging to a system (an expressive component of participation), and on the other hand, it has strengthened the personal skills and the social capital of young people. The participation processes are therefore a key factor for the activists, despite the outcomes.

A common trait that emerged from the words of both the young protagonists and the other stakeholders, is the emphasis on some peculiar characteristics of the second generations, which make them unique and exceptional. In one activist’s words:

Now we can play the role of bridge builders. And we can do it because we are in it. Being in the middle has a great positive importance for me. You have the mastery of living yourself, just crossing the thresholds, the cultural and linguistic codes from one world and from another one (Interview 8).

Regarding the second generations, a public official claims:

If you have an immigrant background, you have a stronger open-mindedness towards those who are different than, for example, a young person born and raised in Oristano. They [second gen-

<sup>5</sup> http://conngi.it/, 25/02/2018.
Not only doesn’t this rhetoric account for a much more complex and diversified reality, but it can also have some counter-productive effects: the risk is, for example, to restrict young people to some specific working activities that they are thought to be «naturally» inclined to.

Saying «okay, second generation young adults: be bridges to your countries of origin». Yes, okay, if you are interested in international cooperation, that might work. But just because I am Italian and Moroccan doesn’t mean that my job must deal with the relations between Italy and Morocco! This is actually a very useful thing, also in a company, it is a plus that you can have, IF that matches your interests. I don’t like when you are categorized in specific sectors. Second generation young adults, you can be a mediator, an interpreter, you can work in international cooperation, you can deal only with refugees, with refugee shelters. There I can work more easily or be more skillful if compared to my peers, but that doesn’t mean I am not allowed to enter into other environments (Interview 6).

As well as the creation of fixed labels, the rhetoric on the second generations can lead to a moralisation and culturalization of the citizenship: young people from immigrant backgrounds must prove that they are deserving, running the risk of considering citizenship as a moral compensation or a prize to earn (Zanfrini 2007). This issue of «must-be» is also widespread among the second generations, although some young people are fully aware of the risks that this mechanism may cause, as the words of the following activist demonstrate:

I don’t like this thing: you have to prove that you’re good! If a native Italian criticises Italy, people say: «Oh, well, they’ve got the right to do it to improve education and healthcare». If it’s a second generation young adult doing it, people say: «Hey, go back to your country». «But this is my country, I was born here!». So, there’s this thing: I’ll give it to you if you’re good. So you have to prove that you’re good, active, participating, all things that a young Italian doesn’t need to do (Interview 6).

On the same lines a representative of an important and national organization from the third sector says:

You have to prove your «Italianness». But for me this is counter-productive. It pushes towards the direction of the balance of the rhetoric between rights and duties, which anyway confirms the idea that if someone is a foreigner, despite being born in Italy, they are potentially wrong and so they have to prove something to the Italians (Interview 22).

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6 The research has reached the most active young people, bearers of high cultural, relational and social capitals. However, the reality of second generation young adults is variegated and diversified (Portes - Rumbaut 2001). Some authors have deeply analysed other more problematic aspects, such as the possible contrast between the claims of the family and those of the host society (Valtolina - Marazzi 2006), or the formation of gangs of young people (Queirolo Palmas - Torre 2005).
After all, this positive representation of the second generations can be a discursive strategy necessary in a highly politicised context: differentiating the young people born of foreign parents from all the other groups of immigrants can foster the battles for the acquisition of their rights\textsuperscript{7}. As highlighted by some stakeholders, mainly union officials and journalists, in the past few years the environment has deeply changed, compared to the moment, for example, when the campaign «L’Italia sono anch’io» was set up. Nowadays, the most debated subjects are the asylum seekers and the refugees, forgetting therefore all those people that have been living in Italy for many years and who have different needs and perspectives, far from the ones of those who have recently arrived in the country for humanitarian reasons (Codini - Riniolo 2018).

During the various mobilisations or initiatives, it has always been possible to observe a huge support from the third sector organizations and the institutional players. This support, though more discreet than that given to the first generations, seems to be essential and necessary for the second generations. A public official explains:

\begin{quote}
Now we have given a great support, in the shadows, but still great (Interview 24).
\end{quote}

As several stakeholders have critically highlighted, there is a lack of leaders, the movements are not self-sufficient, and those organisational skills that might make the young people self-sufficient and effective in the political scene are completely missing. Referring to the third sector organizations and their relationship with the second generation young adults, a well-known spokesperson of the local institutions says:

\begin{quote}
The approach seems old to me, sometimes paternalistic. I haven’t seen anyone involved in finding new leaders among the second generation young adults in order to make them the spokespeople of such a campaign. As a matter of fact, if we think about the reform of the citizenship law, there’s no name that comes to mind, no name of any young adult who fought for that. Lately some have been emerging, but only for their personal talents, and not because of a structured strategy aimed at pointing out people willing to fight for their causes (Interview 25).
\end{quote}

IV - FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Thanks to the stories of the young second generation activists and the testimony of those who have supported, in different ways and for different reasons, their activism, it is possible to elaborate some final considerations.

The debate on the reform of the Italian citizenship law has favoured and encouraged the political participation of second-generation youths who have gained a great visibility in the public sphere, thanks also to the media attention to their mobilization.

\textsuperscript{7} This is what happened, for example, in the United States with the Dreamers. See Nicholls (2013).
and initiatives. Nonetheless – with reference to the first research question, i.e. the role of second generations in politics –, it is not possible to speak of a political self-sufficient subject capable of representing the second generations: there is too great a lack of leaders and organisational skills for them to be effective in the political scene.

Despite this, some empowerment processes are occurring among those young adults who have become protagonists of the Italian political scene. They put forward requests, claim rights and interests, even without owning Italian citizenship, putting into practice what is defined as «acts of political citizenship» (Ambrosini 2016). It is thanks to these acts of citizenship that young adults are allowed to overcome the rigid dichotomy between fully-fledged citizens and non-citizens: the initiatives and the mobilisations can break new ground towards a symbolic recognition first, and then, possibly, a formal recognition thanks to the pressure on the political system.

With regard to the second research question, i.e. the collaboration between young activists and other players of civil society, what has emerged are some old dynamics that in the past affected the relationships between the first generations of immigrants and the individuals (institutional and other) of the receiving society\(^8\). Confronted with the lack of autonomy and, in some cases, of any organizational strengths, some institutional players and those from the third sector have strongly supported, although discreetly compared to the past, the actions of the young adults, among those no leader or spokesperson, capable of bringing forward their claims in complete autonomy, has emerged.

There is also the rhetoric of deservingness, already analysed in other contexts (Nicholls 2013), that proposes an artificial homogeneity (in positive terms) of a group which, conversely, differentiates itself in the inside. Lastly, the ways the first and the second generations participate are very different from some points of view: the methods of participation of the first generations (considering the associations on an ethnic basis) have been overtaken by a «fluid» participation of the young adults in different fields of society: in politics, volunteering, social commitment etc. A key issue, that for reasons of brevity has not been possible to analyse, is the role that social media has played in these struggles, which deserves a closer examination\(^9\). Finally, in light of the failure of the reform of the Italian citizenship law, it is crucial to follow the development of second generation youth movements and to identify their new objectives in a deeply changed political scenario where migration has become even more the most contentious issue both in Italy and in Europe.

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\(^8\) Regarding the relationship and the role of the third sector institutions, traditionally very strong in Italy, with the immigrant communities and the claim for their rights, see Mantovan (2007).

\(^9\) Regarding the issue of the role of social media, see amongst other Introini - Pasqualini (2017).
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