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Youth multidimensional political activism between singularization and mutualism: the case of *Up* network

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Abstract. In the past two decades, research in both “social movements studies” and “critical youth” studies has recorded the growing criticism, by youth political activism, of the individualizing processes characteristic of the neoliberal turn. Based on research conducted in Italy with the new network of activists *Up*, the article analyses the search for a new equilibrium between processes of singularization, and a community life where solidarity, cooperation and mutualism can build local forms of the common and the collective. In the first part of the article, we describe our analytical tools such as singularization, mutualism and generation, and the way in which they can highlight current political imagination of Italian youth; in the second part we present the results of our investigation and the way in which interviewees claim to belong to a wider frame of the transformation of politics in individualized societies.

Keywords: generation, mutualism, political imagination, singularization, youth.

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, research in both “social movements studies” and “critical youth” studies has recorded the growing criticism, by youth political activism, of the individualizing processes characteristic of the neoliberal turn. Isolation, atomization, individualization as individualism, have been criticized by a generation engaged in devising new forms of political participation able to combine collective solidarity with recognition of the singularity of the individual (Leccardi, Volonté 2017; Martuccelli, 2010). This has fostered multiple local forms of bottom-up response to what is considered the failure of representative mainstream politics and an erosion of democratic institutions (Altieri et al. 2016; Cini 2019; Bosi, Zamponi; 2019 Pirni, Raffini, 2022; Pickard, Bessant, 2017; Pickard, 2019; Colombo

et al. 2022). Indeed, the need to construct collective action starting from an individualized position has become a recurrent refrain. Especially for young people, the notion of collective action assumes a different form and meaning with respect to the traditional patterns that contributed to building the representation of it as political mobilization. These “differently collective” forms of engagement, raised during the austerity crisis (Gozzo, Sampugnaro 2016), and developed during the pandemic.

Within youth social movements, critical attention towards atomization and individualism has been emphasised mainly by the discussion on depoliticization and post-politics (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014); the individualization produced by digital technologies (Airoldi, 2021); connective action (Bennett, Segerberg, 2013) the criticism aroused by anti-austerity mobilizations (Flesher Fominaya, 2017); engagement with environmental issues by participating in climate strikes (Furlong, Vignoles, 2021); new forms of do-it-ourselves politics (Pickard, Bessant, 2017); attempts to build a “caring democracy” on the wave of the pandemic crisis (Pleyers, 2020). In a complementary manner, critical youth studies have focused on the long-lasting consequences of the neoliberal turn and the financial crunch of 2008 (Farthing, 2010; Sharff, 2016; Bröckling 2016; Farrugia, 2018; Kelly et al, 2018). They have done so by analysing the overlap between individualization and individualism as a generational shift to face uncertainty and risks with new forms of self-responsibility and self-entrepreneurship.

While the literature on social movements has mainly underscored and described the practical ways in which young people organize new forms of mobilization (della Porta, 2015), research in critical youth studies has investigated the injunction to cultivate resilience as a double-edged sword whereby personal capacity acquires the role of a moral value. Both bodies of literature point out that, in spite of a widespread rhetoric concerning youth political disenchantment and individualized exit strategies, the decline of conventional representative participation is off-set by practices of reinvention of politics characterized by the encounter of personal meaningful activities and forms of anti-individualistic cooperation in fields ranging from workers’ rights to environment protection. This trend began at least twenty years ago, and it intensified with the consequences of the global Great Recession, and more recently with the pandemic crisis. The inability of traditional political organizations to incorporate young people’s initiatives and requests has encouraged a generation of activists to combine political local initiatives with a generational attitude focused on the intersection among environment, gender and difference equity, social justice, and workers’ rights.

In this article, we highlight that this historical trend of generational self-organization is driven by a search for a new equilibrium between processes of singularization (Martuccelli, 2010; Reckwitz, 2020), and a community life as the basis for political action where solidarity, cooperation and mutualism can build local forms of the common and the collective. While neoliberalism offers recipes for self-fulfilment within “cruel optimism” (Berlant, 2006), the active participation of youth in social mobilizations oriented towards cooperation and mutual caring is not only an engagement in single campaigns for specific political targets – such as work, education or climate – it is also the creation of alternative and less individualized forms of subjectivation (Alteri et al 2016; Melucci, 1996; Beck, 1997; Beck, Gersheimer, 2002; Cuzzocrea, Mandich, 2015; Genov, 2018; Cuzzocrea et al. 2021; Colombo, Rebughini, 2019). We argue that resistance against isolation, atomization and individualistic attitudes is closely connected with the struggles to overcome political indifference. It is a way to intersect the historical process of singularization with acknowledgment of the crisis of representative politics and its difficulties in dealing with structural problems such as social inequalities and climate change. Creative forms of activism rooted in the local dimension, in horizontal relations, in the mutual recognition of fragility, and needs of personal dignity, represent kinds of resistance powered by the legacy of previous mobilizations, such as students’ and anti-austerity movements.

In the following sections, we emphasise how, behind the heterogeneous forms and targets of recent youth political mobilizations, there lies the attempt to construct an alternative Self and a new collective generational identity as the necessary bases of a different social order and a new quality of political participation in an individualized society. We also investigate the way in which the generational location, represented by being the children of multiple crises, provides a focalization on a specific generational experience. By generational location we resituate Mannheim’s classical notion, and we mean a multiplicity of possible generation units that constitute rather ‘generational constellations’ (Beck, 2016: 194); this is a diagnostic concept including different dimensions related to demogra-

phy, material inequalities, access to education, labour market position, as well as of course gender and ethnicity as intersection of social categorizations (Anthias, 2021; Rebughini, 2021). The reference to generation, used as a diagnostic concept, can be then regarded as “a filter that links social change and youth and through which the primary divisions of class, gender or race take on a particular hue for people of particular ages at particular times” (Woodman, Wyn, 2015, 61). In this view, «generational unit represents the segment of an age group that actively shares specific political values and material interests and, for this reason, is often eager to collectively mobilise in society» (Cini, 2017, 59).

We support our analytical observations with the results of fieldworks conducted in Italy from 2017 to 2022. The research was based on ethnographic observations, analysis of political materials, and in-depth interviews with young adults aged between 21 and 37 years old, equally women and men, whose current political activism in various Italian towns had been deeply influenced both by previous experiences of mobilization – such as student protests, anti-austerity struggles and environmental strikes – and by experiences of activism driven by the consequences of the pandemic. The article focuses on the activities of the *Up* Network, a recent attempt to interconnect local and heterogeneous youth mobilizations against neoliberal policies in Italy. We conducted 21 in-depth interviews with members of *Up*. Moreover, we also draw on a previous round of 100 interviews conducted from 2017 to 2019 in various cities in Italy with young activists of the university students’ movement, some of whom are now *Up*’s members (see Section 5). In the first part of the article, we describe our analytical tools and the way in which we use them; in the second part we present the results of our investigation and the way in which interviewees claim to belong to a wider frame of the transformation of politics in individualized societies.

SINGULARIZATION AND THE REINVENTION OF POLITICS

The disillusion of young people with representative politics and their lack of interest in political life has been ascribed to the incapacity of traditional parties to involve them, but also to the historical process of individualization and the crisis of collective identities such as class or other forms of political categorization (Alteri et al 2016). Singularization can be a useful analytical tool with which to understand this disillusion, as well as current forms of youth reinvention of politics. In political terms, the notion of singularization highlights a growing focus on local experiences of activism based on personal networks, with a focus on local resources but, at the same time, with an attempt to extend such political experiences and connect them with other initiatives (Martuccelli, 2010).

The process of singularization within youth mobilizations has not been brought to the fore by most analyses, and it usually remains implicit. Actually, the reference to singularization is analytically more precise than the more widespread notion of individualization in Beck’s terms – which mainly relates to analysis of the way in which social processes are driven by a logic of self-government and responsabilization of individuals (Beck, Gersheimer 2002). And it is better distinct from the notion of individualism, which refers to heterogeneous political ideas, including narcissism, personal interest, or the reference to individual as the supreme moral value. By contrast, singularization is a way to understand the dialectics between individual life and the historical transformation of a society. For both Danilo Martuccelli (2010; 2022) and Andreas Reckwitz (2020) – the main proponents of this notion – the process of singularization is becoming the central feature of current society. In this article we refer to singularization as an analytical tool to frame the results of our interviews. While in Martuccelli and Reckwitz this notion is used to underscore more general historical and systemic transformations, we use the reference to singularization in a more focalized way, to shed light on the intertwinements of singularization processes, generational standpoint and current forms of political activism.

According to Martuccelli (2010; 2006; 2022), the process of singularization is the result of structural transformations such as the personalization of production and consumption, the transformation of work with increasingly individualized careers and salaries, the progressive digitalization and consequent monitoring by algorithms, the personalized relations between individuals and institutions, the construction of identities in terms of the diversification of experiences within the same social category. As a process rooted in structural transformations, singularity

is not solipsistic and it is not separable from the collective dimension. Not only does the singularized individual need the recognition of others, but this recognition makes sense only in relation with other singularities. This entails a new articulation of equality and singularity, with a reconceptualization of the 'common' and the idea of solidarity. In political terms, this fosters a reimagining of common life that starts from the experience at the local level and takes full account of the fact that collective identities are made by individualized actors (Melucci, 1996). The reinvention of politics cannot but start from a rearticulation of the common and the singular.

Similarly, according to Andreas Reckwitz (2020), singularity is a product of social transformations, again in terms of production, consumption, and social positioning; it concerns the decline of standardized needs and claims – including that of social classes – and the rise of the unique and personalized. However, according to Reckwitz, singularization is a process involving not only the individual but also collective entities such as neighbourhoods, towns, communities, and networks engaged in the construction of their political potential. In terms of political transformation, singularity refers to specific qualities that can be valorised and shared at the local level.

The interest in using singularization as analytical tool relates to its difference from the previous discussion on the reinvention of politics thirty years ago (Beck 1997). In the 1990s there was lively discussion on individualization and its impact on mobilizations' strategies, and this was mainly related to the logic of self-reflexive action and the injunction of making oneself the master of one's destiny; this was analysed as an attitude deeply rooted in the 'artistic critique' typical of social movements and countercultures after 1968 (Boltanski, Chiapello 2005; Reckwitz 2017). Indeed, the cultural shift of post-1968 mobilizations and of 'new social movements' was intertwined with a permanent monitoring of one's own actions in everyday life, including forms of collective action, and with the assumption that the results are related more to personal everyday choices than to structural forces. In the dynamic of social mobilizations, characteristics such as self-determination, self-responsibility and personal autonomy became resources essential for successful collective action (Melucci, 1996). This was especially evident in the intersection between lifestyle engagement and political commitment, as a border area common to many youth mobilizations where personal and collective change, individual and collective well-being interacted (Haenfler et al. 2012).

Some decades later, singularization – more than a generic individualization – has become the driver not only of mutual recognition but also of the capacity to act in an unpredictable environment, where it is necessary to mobilize situated knowledge and local specific resources. At the same time – as is evident also in our interviews – personal biography is the binding element with previous experiences of mobilization. It connects different generational belongings, different experiences and local contexts (Bosi, Zamponi 2019; Leccardi, Volontè 2017; Pirni, Raffini 2022). This is a key feature of the way in which current forms of youth political mobilization are also attempts to construct new forms of mutualism, commoning, cooperation and reciprocal care as local practices of political organizing (Pickard 2019; Pitti, Tuorto 2021). Whereas neoliberalism prevailed by incorporating the subjectification claims of post-1968 youth, the current generation of young political activists try not only to fight against the structural inequalities provoked by neoliberal policies but also to produce a new quality of singularization based on an idea of mutualism where friendship and local networks play a central role. This happens exactly in the tension between the injunction to rely on personal capacities, in terms of self-entrepreneurship, and the awareness of one's personal inadequacy to cope with systemic challenges. Therefore, current forms of youth mobilization – in spite of their empirical variety – share the same purpose of constructing new social bonds, reworking singularization processes, sharing emotionally and inwardly the experience of uncertainty. When the children of neoliberalism – and especially the generation that has grown up in the aftermath of the Great Recession – mobilize and stand up against inequalities, they are also building a new generational experience of being a youth, of being an activist, and of being an individual in an individualized world.

MUTUALISM AS MOBILIZATION OF CARE, COMMONING AND SHARING

Within the main cycles of mobilization of the past twenty years there is not only a culture critical of the consequences of capitalism and the commodification of life, but also a growing attention to the joint of equality and

singularity, with a reconceptualization of the common and the idea of solidarity, in a context of flexibility, uncertainty and complexity. In particular, individualistic culture is considered not only as a form of depoliticization but also as a cultural common-sense that must be addressed with a new conception of sociality, sociability and social relationships within innovative organizational processes of political organization (Alteri et al 2016; Bosi, Zamponi 2019; Cuzzocrea, Mandich 2015; De Luigi et al 2018). Hence, different patterns of social relations at the local level underlie mutual dependencies and interconnections at a systemic level. Empathy and care, mutualism as a new form of solidarity, commoning and sharing, are not only bottom-up and grassroots forms of organising mobilization; they are tightly intertwined in everyday practices and presented as new ways to express individual and local singularity, with an idea of the common and of the global. Attention to the emotional level and the culture of reciprocal care are among the main expression of this process between the singular and the common.

Affects and emotions are a traditional focus of social movement analysis, for example regarding the mediatization of protests, and they have been considered mainly as internal mobilizations of resources to support collective action (Jasper, Owens 2014). The analysis of the collective sharing of emotions such as humiliation, anger, fear, but also joy and feelings of solidarity, is a consolidated part of social movements theory. However, more recently, the translation of emotions into practices of mutual care and empathy has been brought to the fore especially by the convergence of gender and feminist movements in anti-austerity struggles, students' movements and climate strikes. This has highlighted a more explicit endeavour to struggle against a culture of individualism, atomization and self-management which takes personal fragility into account as an ethical resource. As leading feminist scholars like Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed have emphasized (Butler, 2020; Ahmed, 2017; Fraser 2016), the circulation of affects and care within the networks of activists is not just a mobilizing resource enabling the protesters' action; it is also a challenge to individualist ideology as a consolidated form of subjectivation. Concretely, this means the entry of private, individualized, questions into the political public sphere, the shift of personal emotions and private practices to the level of contentious politics. This is a way to rethink singularization as the virtuous intersection of individuality and commonality. Even though this approach is built upon previous practices of mobilization, since the beginning of feminist social movements, a culture of 'radical care' has clearly arisen within youth mobilizations (Tronto, 2013). This is an alternative to the pitfalls of the 'artistic critique' of self-realization and self-care; but it is also a conjunction between the opposite poles of recognition and redistribution, as well as a new way to construct personal dignity.

This is substantially expressed in local practices of mutualism and cooperative self-help as explicit opposition to an individualist culture. Mutualism as form of solidarity has a long tradition in workers' movements as a means to resist isolation and separation of local struggles, but also as a clear alternative to charity and occasional support (Spade 2020). Mutualism also relates to mutual dependencies and benefits. In face of the risk of experiencing singularization as a way to deal with systemic problems in an individual way, recent youth mobilizations have engaged in the construction of local forms of mutualism in relation to public goods such as education, health care, personal assistance, working spaces; and they have underscored the affective dimensions of solidarity in collective action (Scholz 2008). Since the anti-austerity mobilizations – and even more so since the pandemic – mutualism has become a pivotal element of youth political activism. It has relied on a culture of horizontality and bottom-up capacities of self-organization, reshaping social relations in a less individualized direction. From food banks to community gardens, from psychological counselling centres to recycling networks, there is a focus on 'making common' practices as collective performativity, with the aim of creating more cooperative, sustainable and less individualist social spaces. This entails an equal relation of reciprocity among peers who share goals, ideals and longer-term political planning, but also personal emotions and uncertainties. Organizing mutual benefits starting from differentiated social situations – in terms of age, gender, class or ethnicity – is today a fundamental element of solidarity in youth political activism, and a way to intersect personal needs for recognition and assistance with wider struggles against more impersonal forms of economic and political oppression (Petrini, Wettergren 2022).

This is in turn related to the practices of commoning and sharing – knowledge, relations, emotions but also objects and properties – within the network of mobilization, in an attempt to democratize the access to resources. Again, this is a way to resist the transformation of singularization into a commodification of the self or the

temptation to take shelter in self-referential communities (Tejerina Montaña et al. 2019; Sukarieh, Tannock, 2015). While digitalization and social media platforms have certainly enhanced a culture of sharing economy and user-generated practices among young people, recent youth mobilizations have fostered commoning and sharing as means to achieve cooperation, participation, trust, the pooling of material and immaterial resources. In synergy with mutualism, sharing and commoning are used as strategies to emphasize heterogeneous activities whose unifying aim is that of combatting the hyper-individualisation of everyday life experiences. Also in our interviews, mutualism appeared as a mobilization of care, empathy, commoning and sharing as the paramount elements of different mobilization targets from environmental sustainability to precarious worker struggles.

GENERATIONAL CLAIMS: SITUATING ONESELF IN A HISTORY OF MOBILIZATIONS

A last analytical point to be made before presenting the results of our research relates to the use of the notion of ‘generation’ by current youth political mobilizations. In our empirical data, the idea of generation was omnipresent; but at the same time, it was used carefully by the interviewees, who did not want to be considered a generation stand-alone, but as full protagonists of a political change. They claimed the singularity of their generation, describing it as characterized by a lack of political mentors, or strong transcendental and idealist references, and by unprecedented uncertainty and complexity. Their focus on concrete problems, on local networks of solidarity and mutualism, was an innovative generational way to conciliate the singular and the plural. As one of the interviewees said:

We were orphans, then we became castaways... we are always in the middle of the storm... We no longer wait for someone to come and save us, nor do we feel the lack of a spiritual father, we have moved beyond that stuff... We grew up without those points of reference, we made up our own minds (Mauro, 34 y.o. Up)

Within current youth political activism, the reference to a generational shift, especially after the Great Recession of 2008, has become self-evident. More than a strong identification in a single traumatic change, the generational dimension is primarily defined by the subjective experience of the inadequacy of the vocabulary, the remedies, and the political references of the past. This requires experimentation with new forms of activism and political imagination. While the interviewees in our research sample claimed to be a generational unit sharing the same historical experience – that of being in the ‘perfect storm’ cumulating economic and environmental crises – they primarily expressed a new political stance more in tune with a context of post-industrial capitalism. This was especially evident in some areas of mobilization, such as workers’ rights and struggles against precariousness, where identifying oneself with a generational unit is also a way to cope with the risk of individualist attitudes as ‘exit strategy’ (della Porta 2019; Zamponi 2019).

The idea of generation clearly framed the manner in which young activists articulated their mutualistic actions during the pandemic, using a ‘we’ to identify themselves as members of the same collective of solidarity. Like that of singularization, also the category of generation can be considered a useful heuristic tool with which to specify the features that have characterized the mobilization of young people in recent years; a mobilization in which they have developed new generational skills in terms of political action such as the capacity to update the tradition of mutualism and the feminist culture of care. Moreover, the experience of the pandemic has highlighted a specific generational approach to the local and personal management of sudden crises which is closely bound up with attempts to innovate political participation by activating local networks. It is in these networks that the singular lived experience can be framed in a historical and collective process. This concerns an attempt to rethink politics as an encounter of the personal and the systemic, beyond the pitfall of dealing individually with systemic problems, such as unemployment, the commodification of higher education, or climate change (Alteri et al 2016; Cuzzocrea et al 2021; Cini 2017; 2019; Kelly et al. 2018).

In the following sections, we analyse singularization and new generational ways to build mutualism with the help of the case study on *Up*, a new Italian network of political activism. This case highlights how, in spite of the

political and organizational fragmentation of most recent youth mobilizations in Italy, engagement in a culture of singularization able to recognize the common and the plural expresses the core of the current reinvention of politics by young people, and its main generational stake.

RESEARCH AND METHODS

The empirical focus of this article is on 21 in-depth interviews with *Up* Network of activists (for a description of *Up* see Section 6) conducted from 2021 to 2022, during the pandemic, which coincided with the foundation and the first phase of *Up* activities. The interviews were conducted online, with 14 men and 7 women, aged from 23 to 37. Besides the 21 interviews, we participated in a number of online meetings and assemblies scheduled monthly by *Up* and on specific occasions, such as the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. These included three national online assemblies, and the first in hybrid modality, which was held in Rome in November 2021, for a total of around 40 hours of observation. The main documents drafted by the *Up* Network, together with its communications on social media – such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Twitch and YouTube – were examined, whilst the online thematic groups, working in relation to specific topics, were followed on Telegram channels.

Besides this specific focus, our empirical data included previous research on other political activism groups of university students, in which a significant number of the *Up* Network's current members participated. This research took place from 2017 to 2019, and it was based on 90 in-depth interviews, 30 of them conducted face-to-face in various Italian cities from Milan to Catania and during collective meetings, and all the others online; this also included the ethnography of three editions of the *Riot Village* student meetings (one week during the summers of 2017, 2018 and 2019), for a total of around 120 hours of observation. In this previous research, the interviewees were all members of student movements, mainly *Link* and *Students' Union*. Moreover, 10 interviews were also conducted, face-to-face, in 2018 with the activists of *LUMe* in Milan, a more independent part of students' mobilization in that city. All the activists interviewed were aged from 21 to 30; 43 were women, and 57 were men.

For all the interviews, we recruited respondents mainly by contacting them during their public activities and by means of snowball sampling. Overall, the recruitment strategy, besides ensuring a basic socio-demographic distribution by gender, and a homogeneous educational qualification (graduates or university students), aimed at obtaining a variety of regional situations, with a specific focus on activism, personal history of participation in previous movements, and local political engagement. The interviews were conducted by the authors, read and encoded according to the main themes that emerged (Holstein, Gubrium 1995). The interpretative work was based on a final double synthesis between the authors. All interviews were audio-recorded and were structured by incorporating some agreed common themes, as closely as possible following the structure of an everyday conversation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and pseudonyms were given. They varied in length, within a range of 45 to 120 minutes. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the following main issues: (a) the personal history of activism and the role played in the current network of reference; (b) the generational location and the personal motivation to participate, especially in relation to mutualism and reciprocal care; (c) the attitude to individualization and the current way of doing politics. In the case of the 21 interviews with *Up* members another focus concerned the history and the current aims of the network, along with the role played by the interviewee in the organization. The online and in-presence ethnography during the meetings was also classified, recorded and transcribed verbatim, together with personal notes of the observers.

NAVIGATING THE PERFECT STORM: *UP LET'S RAISE OUR HEADS!*

“We wanted to change everything before the pandemic, we must absolutely do it now”: with this phrase begins the *Manifesto for Reconstruction* written by the activists of the Italian association *Up Let's raise our heads!* Created during the months of the first lockdown, *Up* is a network of young activists who share a common biography of

mobilisation marked by a strong generational character. *Up* gathers around 600 activists, and various associations based on Italian local communities, in particular mutualistic and solidary organizations. The activists are mainly young adults aged between 25 and 35 years old, most of them with prior experience of mobilization in student and anti-austerity movements. This generational location is fully recognized by activists as a distinctive feature of the current dynamic of local reinvention of the political.

This biographical characteristic among *Up*'s members can be traced back to their participation in some of the organizations that animated student mobilisations of the *Anomalous Wave* after 2008, such as the *Students' Union* and *Link University Coordination*, *The Knowledge Network*, along with a more general experience of student mobilization started in 1994. This experience left a long-term legacy not only in students' issues but also in the field of other social claims – such as anti-racism, anti-fascism, ecologism, feminism and LGBT rights – enacted both at national and local level, since these student organisations were, and still are, deeply rooted in different local contexts.

In *Up* we feel like travel mates, in a story and in a way already started with the student mobilizations of 2010, that's why we are now a generation of friends seeking a more complex activism compatible with the necessities of adult life (...). With these people the link is strong, some of them I haven't seen for years, but there is a high level of reciprocal trust and friendship related to past political experiences. (...) The nodes of the *Up* network are associations of individuals, everyone decides to take part in the association, issues keep them together... this is not a relation existing only in the digital world. (...) Doing politics has a great deal to do with the dimension of individual life, with opportunities that you get as individual, and that are also generational opportunities... [as well as] individual ways to see politics. (Mauro, 34 y.o. *Up*).

Let's say that the generational element has been present from the beginning in our political genealogy since *Link* comes from the *Anomalous wave*, it was born there, in that context and with those claims, and it is still part of us. (...) It is clear that, without an intersectional analysis, our organization would hardly be viable today because it would be short-sighted for this, also as far as the fight against neoliberalism and the neoliberal university is concerned. There is also an analysis on feminism, on environmentalism that places all our practices and our action in a precise frame of reference with defined coordinates that are those of the problems of our time (Elisa, 27 y.o., *Up* network).

Building on the experience of previous mobilization, *Up* is a network of mutualistic practices carried out in different communities. Its networking is based on involvement in mobilizations organized by other collective subjects to which *Up*'s individual activists belong, or with which *Up* collaborates, such as *Fridays for future*, *Non una di meno*, or the LGBT community. Moreover, *Up* is a network that also supported candidates in the recent Italian local elections, in various municipalities such as Rome, Trieste in the North-East, and Caserta in the South of the country.

The gathering of groups of activists, who already experienced the *Anomalous Wave* mobilization in the 2008-2011 and the anti-austerity protests (Cini 2019; Lo Schiavo 2021a; Lo Schiavo, 2021b) actually was, at its very beginning, a product of the lockdown during the pandemic. Thus, mutualistic practices for these young activists are at the same time a device tested into several crises, and a space for experimenting new solidary practices as forms of direct social action (Bosi, Zamponi 2015, 2019). Mutualistic associations and social spaces are regarded also as a ground to be cultivated in order to extend (by involving them) the heritage of solidarity activism consolidated over a decade to younger generations as well, and to explore new terrains of social and political engagement with the aim of claiming spaces of agency not only in the conventional sphere but also in the unconventional sphere of politics (cf. Pickard, Bessant 2017; Pickard 2019).

Hence, the networked structure of *Up* involves various mutualistic organisations, along with political coalitions and civic lists involved in the local elections of 2021. The network involves associations in the various areas of the country also in its organizational and operational structure. As a network of networks, *Up* comprises associations in different areas of activism; its binding force is represented by the personal biographies of the singular members, who recognize themselves as activists of *Up* but also of the specific associations or groups belonging to the network. For example, an activist can be a member of *Up* and of one of the associations of the network such as the *Comunet Officine Corsare* (Co.mu.net Privateer Workshops) – a mutual association founded in Turin in 2018 which delivered food parcels during the pandemic, but also opened psychological counselling desks and imple-

mented an action-research on workers' recovery of abandoned factories – or of the cultural circle *Arci Sparwasser* in Rome that hosted homeless people and organized food collection during the pandemic, together with *NonnaRoma*, another mutual association which provides mutualistic services. Among these transversal hubs of activism, we can mention *Dot panic! Let's organize ourselves*, protagonist of a mutual network created within the *Arci Ritmo Lento* in Bologna, and led by more than 50 associations and more than 200 volunteers coordinated by student collectives and student unions, and the transfeminist university collective *La Mala educacion*, with activities ranging from the delivery of food parcels to the mapping of anti-violence centres for women, as well as activities to combat early school leaving and to assist the homeless.

Because of this heterogeneity, the organizational infrastructure of *Up* is divided into thematic groups, active both online through Telegram channels, Facebook and Instagram, and on the ground in the various areas of the country. This polymorphic organization reflects the political goals identified in the programmatic documents and the different areas of mobilization and activism. For example, the “Work, Rights and Welfare Working Group” gives space to the generational claims of labour rights through thematic campaigns implemented in various local contexts; while the “School, University and Research Working Group” reflects the long-term issues present in past mobilisations as students, and still campaigns for free education at both school and university. Environment, ecology or gender are other fundamental areas of discussion, while the “Mutualism and Solidarity Practices” working group is a transversal hub dedicated to monitoring mutualist activities.

This complex organization is also a way to connect generations, as well as current and previous experiences of activism and do-it-ourselves politics, with specific attention to younger activists, who especially during and after the pandemic were affected by strong feelings of isolation and individualization.

We need physical spaces to meet people, a space where we can have a beer, discussing politics, receive a package of something we need... a space where we can physically meet. (...) Often young people aged 15 to 18 years old coming to our space seem not to care about politics... or better they come but they seem hopeless, their immediate need is for sociality, they need a community... They are hopeless because they see the failures of previous generations... there is an incredible need for sociality (Sara, 28 y.o. *Up*).

A GENERATION BETWEEN SINGULARIZATION AND MUTUALISM

Up is an interesting case to analyse because most of its members, in spite of their young age, have a quite long experience of activism and good reflexivity on previous mobilizations, such as those by student organizations or feminist movements. In this section we analyse the way in which *Up* activists talk about the issues of mutualism and singularization in relation to their personal experience of activism, but also in generational terms. Indeed, the self-generational location of activism emerged clearly among the interviewees, who perceived themselves as fully part of the genealogy of youth mobilizations of recent decades, but also as unique in their effort to reinvent politics amid the extreme crisis of all the previous political references. The generational location is here a historical and biographical fact. It builds a social and political situatedness in terms of intra and inter-generational bonds in the practices of activism (Edmunds, Turner, 2005).

The self-generational location of *Up* members is identifiable on considering the temporal caesuras constituted by the multiple crises that have marked their individual and collective biographies. In particular, the economic crisis of 2008 and the neoliberal and austerity policies have defined a biographical frame characterized by precariousness and political isolation. These have had a profound impact on students fully involved in a broad process of neoliberal school and university reforms, in opposition to which they have reacted with the various waves of student and anti-austerity mobilizations (Cini 2019; *Authors*). This generational positioning has also been highlighted by the pandemic, which has been an opportunity to relaunch the challenges and rearticulate political participation, as one reads in *Up's Manifesto for Reconstruction*, which is also a generational claim and an attempt at ‘practical inter-sectionality’¹.

¹ <https://attiviamoci.org/manifestoperlaricostruzione/>

The idea of *Up* came out at a time when it seemed too difficult to realized it... [because of the pandemic] we no longer had a place where we could meet, discuss and cultivate relationships. We discovered instead that the pandemic was an opportunity for politicization for many and this opportunity had to do with the material conditions of people, which have undoubtedly worsened (...). [Hence] We tried to create a community as a shelter and a point of reference for our generation. *Up* aims to be this, a way to rethink the rules to restart political participation and an instrument of experimentation. (Renata, 32 y.o. co-founder of *Up*).

Surely the generational one is a strong perspective, in the sense that being young in this country is a starting point to be taken into consideration because it clearly means that you are deprived of a whole series of possibilities that previous generations had... from this perspective, it makes sense to act in a generational perspective, without excluding other problems or other generations but precisely in order to make a political discourse. Clearly, this dimension is closely interconnected with two other issues, which are the question of work and the fact that young people are the most precarious subjects, and then also with the ecological question, which is a problem that worries young people... so, let's say, the generational question is then a threefold question (Franca, 25 y.o., *Up* network).

The generational perspective was proudly asserted by interviewees as a valuable specificity, as well as a source of emancipation from the experiences of previous generations of activists. This claim was even stronger among the elderly members of *Up*, who had traversed different cycles of mobilization.

We are a generation totally and, in some ways proudly, orphaned. We have always been the children of nobody, the structures in which we have acted we have always had to build by ourselves. Something that has always been theoretically very clear to us and that we have always actually practiced, is the non-separation between the social and the political (...) taking sides with people in need, organizing an anti-war initiative, combatting precariousness, also standing for elections are not different things. Simply, you may have been doing politics. Even if you are not a politician, people still look at you as someone who effectively does politics (Carlo, 37 y.o. co-founder of *Up*).

Finally, one of the main purposes of our research was to investigate the relation between the multiple new forms of mutualism and the social processes of individualization in terms of singularization. *Up* is a good example to investigate the different forms of activism that arise in the interstices between the social and the political – interstices in which the individual dimension is not disconnected from the collective one. Forms of mutualism are intertwined in different social spaces wherein processes reconstructing common and mutual dependencies characterize a new generational approach to political engagement wherein care and recognition have a fundamental role. The centrality of mutualist practices in political reconstruction, and development of the relationship between the social and political was underscored by the *Up* members interviewed as an intersection of the individual and the common. Often, mutualist practices are likened to a form of ‘direct social action’ by activists, “in the attempt to enter into a direct relationship with their local community, (...) for experimenting with new practices, new networks of relationships, new cultural and political codes” (Bosi, Zamponi 2019, 162).

In my opinion, mutualism is the quintessence of care... and the pandemic has taught us this. It is not a horizontal relationship but a circular one... and it means precisely that everyone does a bit of caring. Actually, mutualism is reciprocity, redistribution, organization of needs and of everyone's perspective (Elisa, 27 y.o., *Up* network).

Undoubtedly, a great asset of our network its substantial dialogue with many other associations that have implemented mutualism practices during the past year. (...) Some of these associations are members of *Up*, and let me say that this is a great benefit for us because it helps us never to lose contact with reality and enables us to cope with problems... to take a step forward which makes us able to take up the challenge of politics (Renata, 32 y.o. co-founder of *Up*).

The first phase of the pandemic was a completely new experience in which precisely the element of mutualism was disruptive. (...) The issues of care and of the redistribution of care work emerged in a more disruptive way. So, on the 8th of March we opened the “condominiums of care”: that is, the idea of redistributing care activities within condominiums (...). This was a way to do politics during the pandemic while avoiding human desegregation, isolation, preserving a human dimension. (...) Doing politics is not only doing formal meetings. It is also preserving a space of sociability and open discussion (Franca, 25 y.o., *Up* network).

‘Abacus of Care’ organizes activities such as opening green areas that were closed before our intervention, we are talking about dumped spaces not simply of badly managed spaces. (...) We achieved results for which the local health authority and the mayor them-

selves called us to understand how things had to be done. [About our initiatives] we were told we were thoughtful activists because we concretely did things. (Renzo, 27, y.o., *Up*).

Thus, *Up*'s initiatives are first of all a programmatic critique of the neoliberal and individualistic model of society. *Up* promotes sustainable policies, programmes for the redistribution and strengthening of welfare services, free education and public health care, the fight against insecurity and exploitation in the labour market, public policies in the field of digital platforms, a pluralistic and fluid construction of the relationship between genders. This is a way to interpret the relationship between an old, purely representative model of politics, and a new way of doing politics that is performed by rearticulating the relationship between social and political spheres within the broader processes of individualization, and starting by renewing personal relationships.

In the interstitial space of mutualism, individualization and personal singularity are not obstacles to social and political activism; rather, they are part of it because activists must confront atomization, fragmentation, competition, and the need to develop uniqueness, with the capacity to activate resources of mutual recognition, acknowledge reciprocal dependencies, and mobilize situated knowledge and local resources. *Up* activists, as well as the protagonists of student movements that we interviewed before the pandemic, define themselves as a 'generation of the crises' engaged with new forms of sociation against anomic isolation. They develop a complex analysis of their activities that simultaneously claims to be personal but also transversal to multiple issues such as the environment, gender, social equality and generational claims.

Atomization and individualization are elements of the neoliberal system, that is the exaltation of self-management (...). This is the anthropological model in which we grew up... single individuals next to each other but not together. Solutions concern just the individual sphere, that's why it is so difficult to imagine collective solutions... [So], we create alternative sociality, we create a community as a form of political activism, as a way to build human relations, a sociality alternative [to individualism], to the sociality of consumption and enjoyment, just to compensate competition... With our activity we fight against the cultural roots of individualization... The individual attitude is no longer enough for us, we need a community against political solitude... psychological and political wellbeing together (Walter, 21 y.o. Link student organization)

We live in an individualist society, amid polarized dynamics of blackmail... that's why we need to create a dynamic of care... because if you live in an individualist society, you have to think only about yourself to survive, you also realize that you are in this situation with the others... there is a generalization, there is a mass process... [So] it is not true that there is an individual process... that's why we need an alternative model of relations. (Aldo, 20 y.o. Student Union)

Doing politics in the field is a way of escaping the loneliness of everyday routines, of being together, of valorising proximity, and to look ahead (...) [Because] nowadays individual activity can make the difference. (...) Politics is a collective fact and doing politics from an individual standpoint is not to say that we are handing over to individualism and neoliberalism... rather, individual activity, a personal way of doing politics, is important... the pandemic has shown us a different way of doing politics and political aggregation (Renata, 32 y.o. co-founder of *Up*).

CONCLUSION

In Italy, as generally in Europe, the crisis of youth political participation and the rise of individualist attitudes of private happiness date back to the 1980s; and in spite of more recent waves of political activism, this decrease of political participation is a matter of fact, at least if compared to the golden age of social movements. However, more than twenty years of research in this field demonstrate that new forms of political activism, different from conventional political participation, are still producing new ideas and strategies of engagement. This article has added another piece to this analysis by focusing on the interactions between the social processes of singularization and the need to build new experiences of mutualism and reciprocal recognition.

An intersectional struggle against political isolation – reassembling and intersecting different social categorizations – characterizes all the activities of the networks of activism that have been analysed in this study. Within the frame of a generational self-identification, activists attempt to connect and make interact different

traditions of democratic struggle. In particular, by connecting heterogeneous local experiences, the *Up Network* is an attempt to create synergies among similar initiatives. Its explicit aim is to integrate usually separate dimensions, such as singularity and solidarity, recognition and redistribution, gender claims and environmental protection, generational identifications and solidarity with other generations. All of the *Up Network's* initiatives converge in the effort to transform neoliberal individualization from within, through a web of singularities in connection and exchange among local experiences, where individuals can feel that they can make the difference. All the interviewees underscored the attempt to cultivate communities to prevent the fragmentations of experiences, struggling against an isolation that blurs the perception of inequalities. Doing politics passes through intersectional communities in which categorizations – such as gender, age, class or local issues – are no longer self-referential. If the singular is not separated from the systemic, it is possible to avoid feeling oneself as an isolated monad engaged in a process of self-management, developing reciprocity and redistribution, as a first step towards a new political representation.

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