Youth Issues in Globalized Societies: Social Change, Neoliberalism, Political Participation. A Critical Overview

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to address a specific aspect of the condition of youth today which results from the link between the impact of neoliberal policies and the critical reaction of young people to them. Starting from an awareness that the life experiences of young people in contemporary societies have changed significantly, we will attempt to analyze some aspects of this great transformation. The most influential changes that impact on the everyday life of young people are the transition from education to work, which forges their life experience. The paper focuses on a specific analytical approach which highlights a "structural ecology of youth" which is determined by the intertwining of *macro* (structural), *meso* and *micro* policies, that is the relationship between economics and politics, State and Market, public services and a private quasi-market, all of which define the framework of opportunities available to young people that can influence their lives and transition to adulthood. These conditions also affect both the constraints and opportunities for youth participation in politics. Neoliberal policies on the one hand, the mobilization protest and response on the other define the analytical structure of the paper. Some observations on the last global wave of social movements protest as a reaction to the global economic crisis in 2008-2011 are developed here, highlighting the involvement of youth in this mobilization and describing the main features of youth political participation.

Keywords: Youth, neoliberalism, education, governmentality, political participation.

INTRODUCTION

Starting from an awareness that the life experiences of young people in contemporary societies have changed significantly, we will attempt to analyse some aspects of this great transformation. The "transition to adulthood" of contemporary youth is a period which takes longer and has become 'uncertain', weakened by precarious conditions and flexibility in the labour market, along with prolonged schooling and training (see Côtê 2014; France 2016; Furlong Cartmel 2007; Leccardi 2007). This constellation of factors may be at least in part explained by reference to a specific dimension, i.e. the hegemony of neoliberalism in 'state-crafting' through the adoption of practices and techniques used in governing societies. Privatization, deregulation, marketization are implemented in different policy arenas, and define the rationale of neoliberalism, here meaning the "art of government" (governmentality) which manifests in contemporary globalized societies, not only in western countries but also in other world regions, albeit in differentiated and variegated ways (see Boltanski, Chiapello 2007; Crouch, 2011; D'Albergo, 2015; Dardot, Laval 2013; Dean, 2010; Foucault 2005 b; Lo Schiavo 2017). Particularly in the Education sector, neoliberal policies transform public services into a quasi-market model, impacting heavily on young people's lives (introducing student fees, differentiating the education supply and the opportunities to choose based on different families incomes and resources, separating vocational education and training and public universities).

The nexus between these policies and the condition of youth can be envisaged more clearly by thinking of a "structural ecology of youth" which is determined by the intertwining of *macro* (structural), *meso* and *micro* policies, that is the relationship between economics and politics, State and Market, public services and a private quasi-market, all of which define the framework of opportunities available to young people that can influence their lives and transition to adulthood. These conditions also affect both the constraints and opportunities for youth participation in politics, an issue addressed in the last part of the paper. Firstly, we will address the main issues and theoretical topics in youth studies. Secondly, we will analyse the nexus between neoliberal policies, the foucauldian governmentality approach to a critique of neoliberalism, and contemporary political discourse on youth. Finally, we will examine the main characteristics of the reaction of young people in their opposition to neoliberal policies and the effects of these policies on their life conditions. We shall start from some observations on the last global wave of protest as a reaction to the global economic crisis in 2008-2011, highlighting the involvement of youth in this mobilization and describing the main features of youth political participation (see Della Porta, 2015; Flesher Fominaya 2012; France 2016; Garcia Albacete 2014; Sukariek, Tannock 2015).

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE YOUTH QUESTION: SETTING THE SCENE

Born alongside contemporary sociology and the Chicago School's research into youth subcultures, youth studies have a long history. Yet, these research traditions dichotomize definitions of what "young people" are: on the one hand youth is considered both as "an institution with a core function in the reproduction and maintenance of social order" (France, 2016, p. 14) – the main proponents being two mainstays of sociology, Parsons and Eisenstadt. On the other hand, youth is regarded as the epitome of social change and deep transformations (see Côté, 2014).

Thus, "youth as a social category has always been double-sided, encompassing both a negative and positive stereotype. If there is one stereotype in which youth are sometimes said to threaten the very fabric of society, there is a flipside, in which youth are promised to revolutionize society and cure it of its past ills and failures as well" (Sukariek, Tannock, 2015, p. 7). This dualism warrants further investigation by reference to different analytical approaches. Traditionally, the field of youth studies has been shaped through a modernist and functionalist approach. Starting from "realist" perspectives, it is first possible to see how "adolescent psychology" has drawn on the "anxieties, storm and turmoil" of youth; secondly, modernist approaches emerge based on cultural anthropology, criminology and demographic theories. The latter focus on social integration processes and cultural continuity, expressing concerns regarding social regulation, control, and value priorities. Furthermore, functionalism as an incipient approach in youth studies has viewed "adolescence […] and more recently, the prolonged transition to adulthood […] as an inevitable 'function' of social and institutional changes associated with industrialization and modernization […]. In particular they [functionalists] argue that the period between childhood and adulthood has increased significantly to allow people to better prepare for the complexities of modern life" (Côté 2014, p. 37).

More recently, late modernist and post-structural approaches have developed in youth studies, positioning themselves differently in the "ontological debate" on the youth issue ("nominalism versus realism"). To put it simply, the debate about whether reality is socially constructed or has its own properties is applied to youth studies by restating the question as follows: is youth "merely a name we apply to certain people or does it have an existence independent of how we label it?" (Côté 2014, p. 13). Postmodernist theories, which introduce the cultural turn under the heading of "post-subcultures", contend that "resistance" to "power" is sustained by

"lifestyle", together with reactive consumption, fluid and multiple youth identities and cultural practices. By contrast, late-modernist scholars define a middle ground between agential and structural approaches.

Thus a distinction between youth-studies paradigms can be drawn from two different "political agendas", that is one giving the "explanations of society in terms which emphasize the underlying unity and cohesion" in contrast with theories which highlight the "sociology of radical change" (Côté 2014, p. 17). The latter includes "the various forms of Marxism, critical theory, and conflict theory, all of which have in common a focus on explanations of 'deep-seated' structural conflict, modes of domination and structural contradiction" that are believed to characterize modern societies. The reason for relying on these theories is to enable human "emancipation from the structures which limit and stunt potential for [human] development" (Ibidem).

In order to address the question of power, it is worth adding to this brief account of the development of the theoretical paradigms in youth studies that "Marxist influences in youth sociology first emerged through the work of the Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies, [which] took a political economy approach to analysing youth and proposed that a close relationship existed between economic and political power in defining and shaping the lives of the young" (France 2016, p. 15). Having been contested for its structuralist – and Marxist – stance by post-subcultural theories and the postmodernist cultural turn, the CCCS School has recently regained terrain by virtue of its critical approaches and political economy theory. Highlighting the interrelationship between economics and political action, the political economy approach advocates investigation of "the situation that young people find themselves in today, suggesting that there is a clear relationship between economic interests and political power in shaping their social world" (France 2016, p. 16). By underscoring the structural aspects of social ontology, the "political economy-of-youth" perspective "focuses on the roots of the problems of social exclusion of disadvantaged youth as well as the growing marginalization of the whole age group, seeing the entire youth segment as a special form of class and calling for radical solutions to this class-containment". Moreover, young people "[...] constitute a special form of "class" disenfranchised economically, politically and socially" (Côté 2014, p. 40). The political economy approach disputes the 'depoliticizing' effect of the post-subcultural turn, the one which encompasses the postmodern fabric of identities, i.e. leisure practices and lifestyle wherein the creative processes of constructing identity emerge. Thus,

[...] post-subcultures are argued to involve 'neo-tribes' that fluidly form and disperse as occasions arise, and are predicated on the free-floating identities of their members. The preferred focus of investigation of these post-subcultures is on subjectivities and consumption patterns associated with these neo-tribes. The value-priority stance is one of youth advocacy-liberation along with a celebration of the purported creativity and agency of young people thus involved. For many post-subculturalists the term 'lifestyle' is preferred over subculture, as is the term 'scene' in the case of music [...]. For postmodernists, subcultures react imaginatively through consumption and identity to construct creative meanings that can be liberating from subordination (Côté 2014, p. 151).

Returning to the question of the relationship between social structure and actors, this can also be addressed in terms of *micro-macro* relations, providing a more *micro* corrective to the *macro* political-economy perspective. This same perspective can be re-drawn in terms of a political ecology of youth. The structural ecology of youth maintains that: "there needs to be a greater understanding in youth sociology of what the key *macro*-and/or *micro*-institutional processes are and how they operate in the structuring of decision making. [...]. Youth sociology

has a tendency to give limited attention to the diverse ways in which policies intersect with, shape and impact the daily lives of young people" (France 2016, p. 19). This *micro/meso/macro*-endowed perspective provides a complex analytical setting. Thus, in understanding the structuring qualities of institutions within different fields, it is important not only to grasp the nested qualities of organizations and the way that power operates within and across certain contexts, but also to understand how institutions and organizations both within and outside of the state construct policy and social practice. [...]. The ecology of youth policy, as a field of practice, is not shaped only by the interplay between political ideology and policy delivery that is managed through the political machinery of policy making (France 2016, p. 26, 30).

This overview of the different theoretical approaches in youth studies sketches the main theoretical issues in this field and provides an appropriate conceptual frame for an in-depth analysis of the complex interrelationships between neoliberalism and the sociology of youth. The "political ecology of youth" can therefore be examined in those neoliberal policies that "embrace" youth, shaping their "aspirations", expectations and their time-management, and that rely on the cultivation and augmentation of "human capital". The aim here is to highlight the dimensions and the evolving paths of the neoliberal governmentality of youth.

THE 'NEOLIBERAL' GOVERNMENTALITY OF YOUTH: POLICIES, POLITICS, DISCOURSES

The concept of governmentality is defined by Foucault in these terms: "the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security" (Foucault 1991, p. 102). Thus, it should be emphasized that no strategy or mechanism of power may properly function, or rather operate, without a complex "apparatus" of cognitive, ideational, material resources that enable 'power' to exert its constitutive influence in the "microphysics" of societies, and in the "macrostructures" at the level of political institutions. Different "governmentalities" in different historical eras may combine, functioning simultaneously or in different 'combinations' whereby a part of the *dispositif* predominates to favour a specific mentality of governing. In policy studies, the analytics of government exemplifies governmentality, which is identified along three axes of governing: the cognitive, technical and ethical elements of a given "mentality" of government that shape a specific power or "*dispositif/apparatus*", i.e. truth regimes (the collective discourses that construct social reality), modes of control (technology, devices, practices), and forms of subjectivity (collective and individual identities) (Foucault, 2005 a, b). The heterogeneity of governmentality in the face of sovereignty lies in its "productive" expression of power, i.e. the complex of techniques and knowledges which "govern" life, constantly contributing to the augmentation of life itself. According to Foucault, biopolitics and governmentality are part and parcel of the substance and functioning of power[1].

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[1] In his critical reflection, Foucault identified a specific form of power defined as "biopolitics". When "bare life" and its 'augmentation', that is, when human bodies, individually and collectively, become the specific target of political power, then we have bio-politics and governmentality, namely the specifically modern 'rationality' of government which is aimed at exercising power by constructing opportunities that enable or rather dis-enable a person to take action. In this context, Foucault identified neoliberalism as the last transformation of the liberal government(-ality), that is the market rationale. A rationale which would have transformed, Foucault predicted, the welfare-state model of government in another modality of government, based on competition between different actors and in the commodification of individual and societal resources; for an analytical overview of these topics, see Lo Schiavo L. (2015), "Sovereignty, Governmentality, Globalization and the Crisis of the State. Re-Telling the Story Backwards: A Foucauldian Analysis", *Journal of Social Science for Policy Implications*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 1-18.

The governmentality of youth and the ecology of youth policy (considered at the *macro*, *meso* and *micro* levels of analysis) seem to provide a particularly promising heuristic to explore the impact of neoliberal policies.[2] The different dimensions of young people's lives impacted by neoliberal governmentality can be catalogued and described: education and training, unemployment and work, patterns of dependency, mobility and migration, protest and politics. Both youth as a social category and the individual lives of young people are constantly being worked upon, moulded, given form and substance - in a word, produced – by the action of the state, schools, universities, courts, corporations, the media, churches, NGOs, and other civil society organizations operating at the local, national and global levels (Sakariek, Tannock 2015, p. 4).

Different traditions of youth studies have been reviewed above. However, what we are confronting nowadays is the complex intertwining of the rise and spread of neoliberalism with the concept of youth being used as an expanding social category, by means of specific and targeted policies devoted to addressing and resolving the harsher consequences of the global economic crisis. Thus,

youth is widely used to promote the desirability of social change […]; second, youth is often used as a substitute for other more divisive social categories, such as class, race, religion and nationality, and regularly serves as a universalizing and depoliticizing euphemism that obscures real differences of political interest and ideology. Third, specific characteristics of youth as a social category make it particularly useful for the neoliberal project of renegotiating normative ideas about responsibilities and entitlements from the previous welfare and development state era (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015, p. 5).

Over the last two decades, there has been a remarkable proliferation of youth policies, programming and research. Youth concerns and discourses on youth have been deployed to produce programs, reports, knowledge accounting by the most influential intergovernmental institutions, private and corporate organizations, from the UN General Assembly to the IMF, from the World Bank to the Davos World Economic Forum, from the USAID (i.e. United States Agency for International Democracy) to multinationals such as Nike, Nokia, Cisco, Microsoft, Shell, Coca-Cola and, Starbucks. As governmentality studies remind us, these can all be considered to be the different effects of youth policies as technologies of power and forms of knowledge.

The global shift towards youth-oriented policies, in the North as in the South, has used youth as a social category but expanded it both vertically "in terms of the chronological age range it is popularly understood to cover, and horizontally in terms of the range of groups of people it encompasses. Children are said to be growing up earlier as a result of the spread of mass media, corporate advertising and consumer society; while adulthood is said to be increasingly delayed for many due to the growing need for post-secondary education and training, the disappearance (or continued absence) of stable career employment, and the corresponding rise in the age of marriage, parenthood, financial independence and moving out of familial homes" (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015, p. 15).

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[2] Governmentality Studies and neoliberal critique, along with the study of New Public Management reforms (pursued by the Europeanization process and the expansion of the market logic in the organization of public services), can be considered to be one of the most fruitful analytical approach for the study of contemporary societal transformations.

It follows that: "youth as a social category never simply emerges as an automatic effect of social and economic change, but it is actively constructed as a tool and technology for managing social and economic change as well" (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015, p. 16). In this framework, the main shift has been away "from a century of pathologizing youth and approaching youth in a negative light, to a path breaking sense of positivity and a new-found commitment to embracing and empowering the young" (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015, p. 17). Combining and redesigning at the same time the constituent features of youth as a social category (oriented to the future), the developmental policy framework, (previously used to define "youth") is now being reframed in such a way as to allow the implementation of neoliberalist political and economic reforms.

It is possible to examine some features which compose the "developmental device" ("*dispositif*") as reformulated in the neoliberal framework.

The World Development Report 2007 thus offers readers a model consisting of three "youth lenses" (which it labels as opportunities, capabilities, and second chances) and five key youth "transitions" or "dimensions" (learning, going to work, staying healthy, forming families, exercising citizenship). Taken together these youth lenses and transitions provide a tool for assessing how societies measure up to one another, and determining which policies should be adopted to provide for healthy and progressive social development. In the World Bank's own words, the correct social and economic policies will simply "emanate from a youth lens" (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015, p. 26).

These policies "can be thus deployed to present a façade of engagement with radical, oppositional, grassroots politics that in the end works toward little more than fostering a generic and benign set of designated youth skills, competencies and character traits" […]. Engaging youth in policy making and programs constitutes a widespread practice of intergovernmental and public-private policy networks, which create and sponsor specific programs highlighting and promoting "youth entrepreneurship, free market economy theory and financial literacy" (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015, p. 27, 28).

Therefore, an elucidation of policies is required to describe their components and their functioning. As a starting point, we can define the contemporary neoliberal episteme which better introduces us to the analysis of the youth issue. Neoliberalism as a provider of an operating framework, an "ideological software for competitive globalization", has become embedded within the infrastructure of everyday life, presenting itself as 'naturalized', and it can only be understood in its specific context, "as influenced by a range of factors at the national and local level" (France 2016, p. 43, 44).

We will focus on the remarkable shifts in policy frameworks engendered by neoliberal "ideology" in order to clarify the different aspects of the institutional landscapes and policy environments wherein neoliberalism takes shape (see France, 2016; Harvey, 2005). These shifts can be summarized as follows: over the last two decades we have been moving toward the "commodification of education and training", the "commodification of youth citizenship" and the "privatization of responsibility and inequality". Hence, education and training policies, which address the youth question in terms of unemployment as an effect of shortcomings in education, have defined and implemented programs that not only "individualize the problem of unemployment but also have sanctions and punishments embedded in them as a way of forcing young people into jobs that may not be ones they would choose or suitable for them" (France 2016, p. 251).

As we shall see below, the "shift in emphasis from social responsibility to private responsibility" may take shape within different policy "devices". As far as our specific focus on education and training policies is concerned, we can observe that: "the growing responsibilities within the family for the young, particularly for their welfare needs and for the support they may need to manage and negotiate their way through the complex social milieu that now surrounds them after leaving school are greatly shaped by the resources available within families, and the relationships young people have with their parents. Those with parents who have high levels of economic, cultural and social capital are more able to negotiate their way through the system" (France 2016, p. 252).

Notwithstanding the remarkable variability of neoliberal policy arenas in different national contexts, it is still possible to maintain that there are significant similarities as well. Indeed, many countries have introduced the following changes to post-compulsory schooling that have significantly altered what it means to be young:
- the growth and expansion of education and training
- unemployment and underemployment
- the growth of non-standard and precarious work
- complex lives, fragmented transitions, 'yo-yo' lifestyles and increased mobility (France, 2016, p. 246-248).

As far as education and training reforms are concerned, it is noteworthy that "the reconfiguring of education and training to be the dominant field for the young started as early as the 1980s [...]. The [global] crisis has not slowed this process; in fact, since 2010, young people's involvement in education and training has grown even faster than before. [...]. As national states have increased opportunities to participate, who benefits still remains strongly shaped by class, gender and race" (France 2016, p. 246).

In this analytical framework, underemployment emerges as the (un)expected effect of education and training policies. If unemployment among the young is not a new phenomenon, "in times of crisis young people are always hit the hardest and this has clearly been the case" over the last five years. The causal chain operates thus: "as young people have increased their skills and qualifications, the jobs they were led to believe would emerge in the knowledge economy have not appeared. As a result, we see a large number of graduates unemployed or underemployed for the level of qualifications they have" (France 2016, p. 247).

Consequently, non-standard and precarious jobs have grown hugely. "While large numbers of young people have always worked in occupations that are temporary and insecure, with wages that are lower than those of older groups, this has been growing to the extent that young people are more likely than any other group to be employed on these types of contracts" (Ibidem).

The impact of these policies on the subjectivity and lifestyles of youth can, some would say, be considered a progressive achievement in the embodiment of the "transition to adulthood" or conversely in terms of the negative effects of this transformation on the dynamics of social stratification. In the words of the author: "life is complex and young people find themselves consistently having to manage their lives and make decisions about the next stage. This brings them into education and training, then periods of unemployment, back to education, and then into a job" (France 2016, p. 248).

Young people in different countries are therefore engaged in a sort of "high credentials" arms race being fought in the North as much as in the South (without claiming that no differences

exist between the two regions). Yet, the "studentification of youth market labour" does not bring about a general improvement but leads to widespread forms of "precarisation" and "hierachisation" of working conditions. Thus,

the chase to get the right skills or qualifications has been driven by the ideological arguments of neoliberal governments that claim the future will need those young people with high-level skills and qualifications. Improving the quality of 'human capital' was therefore seen as a necessity but [...] the promise of a 'good life' for those who succeed has been broken. In fact [...], those with low-level skills are likely to be in more demand, while opportunities for secure employment that is well paid may well still be unattainable (France 2016, p. 85).

The theoretical findings outlined above can be summed up as follows: "one of the major consequences of the 'neoliberal turn' has been a shift in the relationship that the young have with the state and with citizenship [...]. Young people's experience of 'belonging' and 'becoming' has undergone significant reconfiguration since the 1980s. The experience of growing up in late modern society is a combination of changes in international capital and national state policies that reinforce the economic imperative and the value of market forces. In this context, traditional models of youth transitions (from school to work) have been radically altered and resituated" (France 2016, p. 54). Against this backdrop it is no surprise that different intergovernmental agencies, such as the influential IMF, have suggested a causal link between youth unemployment and welfare policies for older workers. The "Clash of Generations" has been heralded both as an effective diagnosis and as an appropriate solution to the problem of youth unemployment. For instance, "in the United States, the concept of generational conflict and youth suffering has been used to push for cuts in pension and health care programs for seniors [...]" (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015, p. 71).

In this context, "what we argue here [...] [is that] youth unemployment, as a concept and issue, has also been embraced by global élites as a political opportunity that enables them to frame unemployment as being, first and foremost, a problem of youth, and to use this problem as a way to promote business friendly agendas. [...]. Rather, the issue is, first, the fact that adult unemployment also constitutes a serious problem, and second, the questionable decision to focus policy attention on youth unemployment rather than the unemployment of everyone" (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015, pp. 59, 65).

The governmentality of education policies and the new public management reforms: an outline

According to many scholars, New Public Management, (i.e. the rationale of neoliberal policies in public administrative apparatuses and actions) has introduced watershed reforms in different governing arenas, eminently so in the Education domain. According to Palumbo and Scott: "in the process of changing the governance of universities [in Europe since the 1980s and the 1990s] to make them follow a corporate logic, the reforms introduced to date are transforming their very raison d'être" (Palumbo, Scott, 2016, p. 144). Examining the most important implications of the NPM reforms highlights how "the various rounds of reform have promoted a twin process of managerial homogenization and functional differentiation [...] to conform to a market logic and adopt the same corporate structure. [...]" (Ibidem). For instance, competition between and within universities for funds forces higher education institutions to commodify their intellectual and scientific labour and streamline the productive process to improve their market value. Secondary schools have also been involved in this, as comparative studies testify (see France 2016; Gunter, Grimaldi, Hall, Serpieri 2016).

The rationale of NPM reform implies: the transformation of the centralized and bureaucratic regulatory system into the creation of autonomy and decentralization as a strategy of disaggregation, mixing autonomy and competition as well as 'meritocratic' criteria; the introduction of standardization and performance management as levers for improvement; the establishment of a system of rewards and sanctions in order to achieve "efficiency, efficacy and improvement". Additional funding mechanisms are introduced as incentives to sustain these changes; regarded as vehicle for the establishment of a public/private partnership as an obligatory institutional arrangement for schools. According to the critics: "far from measuring the quality of [education institutions] outputs, performance management techniques have led to the standardization of every aspect of academic activity, forcing individuals, research groups, and departments to conform to an intricate regulatory regime imposed from without" (Palumbo, Scott 2016, p. 167). As far as secondary schools are concerned, the processes of 'quasi-marketization', on the one hand encourages entrepreneurship and competition in order to attract more private funds and, on the other, implements austerity measures devised to reduce public funding. The consumerist stance of these reforms, claim the critics, is not offering any real choices to students and their families as regards education programs; on the contrary these reforms are at least in part diverting debt away from public funds and imposing this burden on students by requiring them to take out loans, to the advantage of private funding providers.

Education, social inequalities and neoliberal policies: some observations
It is possible to consider how: "despite the far-reaching changes which have occurred, class differentials in access to higher education have been maintained in most of the advanced nations and, during the 1990s, the affordability of higher education tended to decline in a number of European countries" (Furlong, Cartmel 2007, p. 29). Thus, while a pre-existent condition of inequality in different educational systems had been addressed by shifting from elitist systems to mass systems, establishing universalistic welfarist systems of education, recent managerial reforms have decisively contributed to reduce the welfare provisions in general, the public services in education in particular. Indeed, "most countries have seen extensive changes in systems of higher education, through various mechanisms, including stratification of provision and financial barriers" (Furlong Carmel 2007, p. 30). In this context unequal opportunities for social mobility have re-emerged; for instance, "young people from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) [...] have found their opportunities more limited since the great recession. Increased participation in post-16 education has been structured and experienced differently dependent on a person's SES" (France 2016, p. 226).

Overall, the ambivalent result of neoliberal education policies consists both in maintaining class stratification in education, while increasing "absolute participation rates" in higher education (see France, 2016; Furlong, Cartmel 2007; OECD 2017).[3] A possible explanation of this dilemma can be found in the rationale of neoliberal policies which creates quasi-market in education domain (i.e. intervening on the supply side and discharging costs to "customers/consumers/students") while increase competitiveness among schools and universities. Thus, "the decision to attend university and choice of educational institution are

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[3] A collection of comparative data on education opportunities and outcomes is yearly published by the OECD in detailed reports wherein the complexity and multifaceted nature of different educational systems as well as the common challenges they face along with different strengths and opportunities of education policies, are addressed; see OECD (2017), *Education at a Glance. Oecd Indicators*. According to the critics, OECD "policies and discourses" has remarkably contributed to the consolidation of neoliberalism influence (see France 2016; Gunter et alii 2016).

highly sensitive to tuition and financial aid levels for all students except for those from the highest income families" (Furlong Cartmel 2007, p. 30).

In this context, scholars have also addressed the "new youth problem". Becoming NEETs[4] – that is young people not in employment, education or training – seems to be the last 'frontier' whithin the transformations of contemporary youth condition. This condition has been considered to be one of the most impacting consequence of the "great recession". According to France, "[...] one of the major consequences of the great recession has been a massive increase in nearly all OECD countries in the number of young people who are NEETs. The biggest and fastest increase is seen among 20-24 year-olds. Those countries that have the highest rates of NEETs are those with the highest levels of youth unemployment. In 2011, in countries such as Chile, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Mexico, Spain and Turkey, where the increase in youth unemployment was high, more than 20% of al 15-29-year-olds were categorised as NEETs" (France 2016, p. 136). In these last years, according to Eurofound, the NEETs rate in the EU 28 countries in 2015, has varied from the minimum of 4-6% in the Netherlands to the maximum of 21,4% in Italy (Eurofound 2016, p. 17).

As far as youth unemployment is concerned, it is possible to observe that,
in 2013, some 23,5% of young people (aged 15–24 years) across the EU were unemployed, the highest level ever recorded in the history of the EU. During the crisis, 17 Member States recorded their highest-ever levels of youth employment (Eurofound, 2014). The youth unemployment rate decreased markedly in 2014 and 2015 in comparison with 2013. In 2015, the EU youth unemployment rate was 20.3%. This decrease was consolidated over the course of 2016. In February 2016, the youth unemployment rate was 19.4%, the lowest level since April 2009. And in 2014, for the first time since 2007, youth employment rose slightly by 0.3% to 32.4%. However, the youth employment rate of 32.2%, recorded a year previously in 2013, was the lowest in the history of the EU. Again, the increase in the employment rate consolidated over 2015 when it reached 33%, the highest level recorded since 2011. Despite the signs of overall improvement, youth unemployment remains high in many Mediterranean Member States: in Cyprus and Portugal, for instance, it is higher than 30%, and in Croatia, Greece, Italy and Spain it is above 40%" (Eurofound 2016, p. 11).

Thus, scholars have observed a nexus between unemployment and the spreading of NEETs condition. A nexus which has been tackled by ALMPs, the active labour market policies aimed at tackling the problems of the engagement of the NEETs. These polices intervene 'actively' in the labour market encouraging the disposition to be engaged in education, training or in searching a job, rather than the disposition to receive unemployment benefits. According to the critics, the ALMPs are "less focused on getting the young into work and more concerned with cutting welfare benefits, increasing conditionality for social benefits and pushing young people towards workfare-type programmes" (France 2016, p. 136). In this sense, "across the policy discourse on welfare reform there has been a shift from one of 'entitlement' to one that emphasises the new social contract of personal responsibility [...]" (France 2016, p.160), re-defining the rules of the welfare conditionality:[5] the responsibility shifts from the state to the individuals. Thence, the "workfare state" takes over the "welfare state": "as we have seen [...]

[4] Operationally, the NEETs indicator measures the share of young people who are not in employment, education or training among the total population of young people (Eurofound 2016).
[5] According to France, the workfare conditionality is implemented by "punishing" non-compliance by young people at various stages of the "work programs": individuals are required to be "available for work, to actively seek work and to accept any work available" (France 2016, p.147), otherwise they lose welfare benefits (that is the welfare-to-work approach).

workfare has become the institutional codification of work-oriented welfare reform – and as such it must be understood as *both* a reactive reform strategy *and* a would-be successor to the welfare state[6]" (France 2016, p. 159).

YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AS A COUNTER-CONDUCT TO THE NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY OF YOUTH: SOME CAVEATS FROM AN OVERVIEW ON 'GLOBAL' UPRISINGS

To what extent is it possible to investigate the "revolutionary nature" of the global subjectivity of youth in the aftermath of the post-recession cycle of global protest? Or rather, in what terms and to what extent can it be heuristically useful to explore their similarities and differences compared with previous "generations" of youth movements? And what about the counter-conducts[7], in the foucaldian lexicon meaning the practices of resistance against the influence of neoliberal power techniques? All these questions introduce a wider analytical dimension which concerns youth involvement in politics, i.e. are young people engaged in alternative politics or simply disengaged?

Much of the recent literature on youth agency and social change places an almost exclusive emphasis on individual agency or on "multitudes of (young) individuals moved into actions" thus ignoring "questions of ideology, social and economic structures and position, collective social organization and strategic, planned action" (Sukarieh, Tannock 2015 p. 111). Yet, in a context in which dominant norms and cultural values constrain the ability of young men and women (and adults) to make strategic life choices, structural inequalities cannot be addressed by individuals alone. Young individuals can and do act against dominant norms, but their impact on youth problems is limited and they may pay a high price for their autonomy. Youth organizations and social movements thus have an important role to play in creating the conditions for social change and in reducing the costs of individual action. Indeed, agency can produce unpredictable, contradictory outcomes that cannot be easily categorized in terms of either transforming the unequal power order or reinforcing it. This means that the outcomes of agency of young women and men, both at the individual and the collective level, need to be contextualized and cannot be assumed a priori[8] (see Paciello, Pioppi, 2014, p. 11-12).

Thus, the depiction of recent global uprisings as being youth-led rebellions has had the effect of isolating youth agency from society as a whole. For instance, the emphasis on youth as

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[6] France is quoting Peck J. (2001), *Workfare States*, New York Guilford Press.

[7] Governmentality consists in an assemblage of different components: power techniques, knowledge, the subjects on which it exerts its influence. In this sense, the essence of governmentality consists in the "conduct of conducts" that is a form of power which is not, as Foucault explained, necessarily coercive, neither warlike nor juridical; it is a form of direction and control of the "free" conducts of individuals. Thus, counter-conducts identify the opportunities of individuals to counter-act forms of control and steering activities on the part of political, economic, societal institutions; see Foucault (2005 a, 2005 b).

[8] The considerations above have been developed analysing the main features of the Arab Spring and the mobilisation of young people in the North Africa and Middle East regions. These scholars maintain also that: "[an] important aspect to be considered by research is that the types of youth activism and forms of youth mobilization are influenced by their different social backgrounds. For instance, urban and educated youth have different needs than those from rural, uneducated backgrounds. Youth belonging to confessional minorities might feel excluded by Islam-based forms of mobilization. Furthermore, activism by young women may encounter gender-specific constraints that limit their ability to influence political, economic and social change. At the same time, however, young women have increasingly learned to circumvent such gender constraints and are becoming more active in political and civic participation" (Sika, Albrecht 2015, 9). According to these scholars, activism in general, and youth activism in particular, does not necessarily need to be in opposition to the political regime but may manifest in different forms. For instance, "as community activism, where grassroots groups work together for collective action. [...]. Youth may also be active in formal organizations, like political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and religious movements" (Sika, Albrecht, 2015, p. 10).

"revolutionary actors" greatly underestimates the central role played by adults and by adult-led organizations protesting over issues that concern not only young people but the whole of society. Youth groups and organizations are certainly pivotal in recent mobilizations (as well as in previous ones), but they are only a part of a broader spectrum of organizations, such as trade unions, peasant movements, political parties, faith-based movements, etc. (see Paciello, Pioppi, 2014, p. 11).

Therefore,
serious limitations exist with all of the theories being used to explain youth movement uprisings in the contemporary period. Youth bulge theory has been criticized for being overly simplistic, deterministic, alarmist and prejudicial towards youth, especially non-white, male youth living in the global South. [...]. More fundamentally, the framing of recent global uprisings as being youth-laid rebellions is a massive misrepresentation that obscures the central role played by a wide range of adults and adult-led organizations, protesting over issues that concern not just young people but people of all ages in society. Youth groups have certainly played a part in these global uprisings, but they have done so as part of a broad spectrum of civil society organizations. In the Arab Spring, a pivotal role has been played by trade unions, peasant movements, poor people's organizations, women's groups, political parties and Islamite and faith-based movements. [...], While the youth frame [risks] to obscure broader divisions of class, race, ethnic, regional and ideological struggle that lie at the heart of these uprisings (Sukarieh, Tannock, 2015, p. 106, 107, 108).

Yet, seen as an "interpretative key" and "gateway" to the great processes of social political transformations and, more specifically, for the transition from authoritarian regimes to more or less democratic states, youth movements have been considered as the harbinger of social change and democratic transformations. 'Lessons' drawn from Eastern Europe transitions can help in describing the impact of deep economic and social transformations on youth and the consequent role of young people in these. In this regard, some scholars argue that the "latest political generation is fundamentally different from previous 20th century political generations". That is, those young people who came after the transition from communism to capitalist democracies, "when change was actually taking place or had been accomplished" have become ever more disengaged with institutional politics. Confronted with economic crises they may find themselves as pragmatists, "willing to operate in the world as they find it, while radicalism burns brighter among the 'greys'. [...]. We have entered an era of historical inversion" given that "throughout the 20th century young people were the idealists and older people were the realists" (Roberts 2009, p. 194).

Likewise, other researchers have investigated lower conventional political participation of youth in western countries by testing some hypotheses which "explain" the phenomenon by attributing this either to non-conformist styles of participation by young cohorts or to their apathy and alienation. In her study Gema Garcia Albacete cites the impact of the delayed transition to adulthood, the long-lasting incertitude about their own present conditions and the future perspectives of youth at the beginning of the 21st century, to be the main "cause" of lower political participation. This conclusion emerged from a longitudinal and cross-national comparative design through which the scholar sought to demonstrate that previous approaches had "misdiagnosed the situation" or "overstated claims" about, respectively, the generational specificity of the new age cohort and the dichotomous hypothesis about the critical attitude or political disengagement of youth. Comparison of 1970s youth, whose political participation was exceptionally high, with their 2002 counterparts substantiates the hypothesis of a significant change affecting the life cycle, and once again the current incertitude of the transition to adulthood is recognized as the main causal factor of the lower political

involvement of youth, both in institutional and non-institutional politics. Despite being excluded by political parties and representative institutions, and their being less prone to participate than their cohorts of the 1970s, these young people may create new forms of political participation "using their everyday life tools to make their voice heard" (García Albacete, 2014 passim) that includes taking part in "upheavals", as the new wave of protest has shown. Although no general trend can be forecast, there are prospects for a continued research program in comparative politics. As far as forms of political participation of young people, scholars claim either that the "young have found new types of informal political expression through the Internet and the new information and communication technologies" or that the disengagement from older politics is detrimental to them "because politicians will not attend to their interests as long as they do not constitute a voting bloc" (Côté 2014, p. 194). While some scholars refer to the emancipatory effects of techno-politics and new media (the 'Internet Idealists'), others express concern about the manipulation of consent, which is part of "a larger manufacture of consent of disenfranchised groups in societies" (Côté 2014, p. 196).

As for the recent global wave of protest, an effectual counter-frame against neoliberal globalization testifies to the 'creative' politicization of the tools of everyday life. One of the most influential youth movements, *Juventud sin Futuro* in Spain, has devised a platform for protest conceived by an "élite" of highly-educated, politically aware young people who, deprived of their present and their future, condemn the commodification of youth as well as its involvement in market dynamics. They aim to retrieve their lives, starting from the de-commodification of education and the re-involvement of collectivities and solidarity in socio-economic and political life (see Della Porta 2015; Juventud sin Futuro 2012).

Whereas, to cite Bourdieu (1993), youth can be said to be "nothing but a word because young people of different social classes have too little in common to warrant a single category" (Bayat, Herrera, 2010, p. 6), it can also be claimed that the youth movement "is about and reclaiming youthfulness", maybe the "truth" lies somewhere between the two. Hence, a cross-generational coalition is needed to strengthen the potential for social and political change in contemporary societies. A re-evaluation of the concerns of social movements regarding change could be particularly fruitful in that maybe the most influential impacts have to be identified in the cultural dimension and a long-term perspective be adopted. Alongside the interaction between institutions and actors, comparing the interactions between the claims of movements with the effects of actions taken by them and the effects of outside events and actions, adopting a historical comparative design may provide an appropriate path for further investigation in the field (see Della Porta 2015; Sukariek, Tannock 2015).

Within this framework, some observations on a specific part of the protests can be made. In particular, student movements have had to deal with both the causes and effects of austerity policies, that is the commodification of public education and universities. They have proposed an alternative model which requests a curtailment of the bureaucracy regulating the education system and rejects the managerial and marketization model imposed by austerity measures. The "imaginary power" of student movements could be said to exemplify a pragmatic critique to neoliberalism against the renewed assault of capitalism on 'common goods' and equality, for education is considered to be quintessentially a common good. In this sense, student movements can be regarded both as the manifestation of a 'generational unit' (in Mannheim's acceptation) in the making and as an instance of wider contestations, resistance and resilience practices (from squatting in abandoned buildings to consumerist ethical choices) against the predatory accumulation practices of capitalism (exerted through privatization of public goods and welfare resources) (see Bosi, Zamponi, 2015; Cattaneo, Di Mauro, 2015).

Addressing specific issues in youth politics: student movements and the expansion of the protest in the neoliberal age. A brief overview

The different diagnoses on the relationship between youth and politics, as we have claimed above, testify to the different, contradictory interpretations of this topic. Indeed, it is possible to regard young people both as the harbinger of alternative forms of politics, or as disenfranchised and disengaged groups from 'formal' politics.

In the aftermath of the Global Recession, student movements have been involved in the wider mobilisation against austerity measures and global inequalities. According to the scholars, the political engagement of students is characterized by some specificities, since education has a politicising effect allowing students "to experiment creatively" new forms of politics. In this sense, student politics has been regarded as a laboratory of politicisation for young cohorts (Brooks 2017). Thus, student movements have taken centre stage in the last global wave of mobilisation and anti-austerity protests. In this context, the scope of the protests has mainly regarded the opposition to neoliberal policies; thus, the shift from the students' claims to those of collectivities, has been justified by the implementation of neoliberal policies, in the High Education sector and in other policy fields as well. This shift has broadened the scope of the protest, widening the "coalition" of social actors contesting neoliberal policies and austerity measures. As some scholars highlight, "student movements can address both university conditions and more general social issues. In other words, such movements always carry on the problem experienced by the generation of their activists and, at the same time, are often part of broader protest cycle in society" (Cini 2017, p. 58).

The nexus between these different aspects has been outlined as follows:
the outburst of the economic crisis in 2008 has represented a decisive watershed in the process of marketisation, to the extent that many governments across the world have adopted ono or more of these measures as a way out of the crisis by pursuing the dominant political creed of the neoliberal and pro-austerity agenda. Austerity measures, following the crisis, have in fact accelerated the implementation of neoliberal reforms in countries where they previously did not exist. Although differences between countries continue to be pronounced, national Higher Education systems are becoming more alike in the sense of being more market-oriented, even in countries with a strong welfare tradition. Fighting back against these processes, student protests arose in several countries across the five continents [...]. Thus, recent years have witnessed the rise and proliferation of student mobilisations as a collective response to the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and its political solutions, also in the field of higher education (Cini, Guzman-Concha 2017, p. 624).

Student movements contest the process of marketisation of Higher Education, the raising of the costs, the privatisation process (with the supplementation of public sources of funding of universities with private sources); they also contend greater institutional autonomy of universities from governments control. Thus, they aspire to different modalities of self-government of universities which concern the procedural dimensions, the substantive and structural dimensions. These consist in the representation and access to the decisional bodies (representation), in the promotion and opposition to the University norms and policies (substantive), in the academic power relations, forms of power, structure and content of education (structural). All these objectives can be regarded as the possible articulation of a normative principle: common goods, by which it is possible to capture an idea of both tangible and intangible goods that no longer can be conceived in economically dichotomous terms of public versus private. During the global wave of protest against neoliberalism and austerity measures, common goods have been the most shared 'master-frame' among different social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados, the Greek movements in Synthagma

Square, along with student movements who have influentially taken part to the global protest. Contesting the marketisation of public services and claiming common goods have been shared goals of a wider protest; in this sense, as some influential scholars maintain, a sort of subterranean politics has "bubbled up" and spread during the "global recession" and the anti-austerity protest (see della Porta 2015; Flesher Fominaya 2014; Kaldor, Selchow 2012).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This essay has collected some critical reflections from different fields. Adopting a triangulation method, we have discussed topics from youth studies, from the critique of contemporary neoliberal globalization, and from the analysis of the acts of opposition to the new forms of capitalistic hegemony in contemporary societies. The Foucauldian governmentality approach to the critique of neoliberal policies and new managerialism has allowed us to shed light on the transformative impact of administrative and regulatory reforms, especially in Education, and also to try to assess the impact of austerity measures. In particular, by assuming the social category of "youth" to be a specific point of view (as well as a target of investigation) may provide one of the most fruitful approaches in critical studies on globalization. Considered as a "highly fluid and unstable category", youth is deeply involved in the processes of the "risk society" with all its uncertainties and inequalities. Neoliberal capitalism views youth as a pivotal resource, as the quintessential manifestation of "human capital" and as the forerunner of a new social order based on competition and meritocracy, net of the discriminatory impact produced by the different endowments (financial and personal) of individuals poised at the "starting line" of their lives. At the same time, youth unemployment and precarious work conditions have inspired rounds of 'reform' which in reality do not stray far from the neoliberal logic of the subordination of work to the 'needs' of capitalism (see France 2016; Sukariek, Tannock 2015). Being intergenerational and/or generational, the global anti-austerity mobilization has been the most conspicuous manifestation by social student movements since 1968. Taking into consideration the two faces of youth, on one side a category of an embodied critique to neoliberal capitalism and, on the other, as its ideological instrument, we have also attempted to assess the role of young people in the global wave of protests, making reference to the findings of the most recent comparative studies on this subject. We have sought the point lying between the two extremes in which one pole emphasizes the centrality of youth in contemporary societal, economic and political processes, and the other underlines their passive, even manipulated, role that legitimizes and serves neoliberal hegemony. As we have suggested, a critical perspective can help to avoid both these extremes, and thereby find the theoretical middle ground.

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