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Living Conditions and Life Perspectives of Young People in Italy

Some Findings of the Fourth Survey on Italian Youth

Massimiano Bucchi, Ph.D., studied Sociology at the Universities of Trento, Sussex and Wisconsin. He has a Ph.D. in Social and Political Science from the European University Institute in Fiesole/Italy and he is currently enrolled as a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Sociology at the University of Trento. He also takes part in the research activities of the IARD Institute. Some of his recent publications are: *When Scientists Turn to the Public: Alternative Routes in Science Communication*. In: *Public Understanding of Science*, 5, 1996; *How do Young People Cope with Risk? An Emerging Trend among new Generations*. In: *Mittelforum*, 9, 1997; *Metafore e paradossi nella comunicazione della scienza*. In: *Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale*, 51, 1996.

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ITALY

IARD's¹ fourth national survey on young people's living conditions and life perspectives in Italy follows the design of the three previous studies (carried out in 1983, 1987 and 1992), and permits researchers to monitor youth trends in Italy in a longitudinal perspective. The most recent study is based on a representative sample of 2,500 Italians aged 15 to 29, who were interviewed in spring 1996.² This contribution outlines some general trends which might also be of interest to international readers. It focuses on Italian youth and politics, young Italians' geographical identity, their attitudes towards the process of European integration, and their paths on the labour market.

Young People and Politics: Changing Patterns

It is worth noting that the current survey was the first study of Italian youth after the Tangentopoli scandal (1992) and the collapse of traditional parties such as the DC (Christian Democrats) and the PSI (Socialists). As compared to 1992, a renewed interest in politics on the part of the young can be observed.

Table 1:
Attitudes towards politics (%)

	1983	1987	1992	1996
I consider myself politically committed.	3.2	2.3	3.3	3.0
I am well-informed about politics, but I am not directly involved.	44.2	39.3	39.4	50.5
I think politics should better be left to those who are more competent than me.	40.0	42.1	36.4	26.3
I am disgusted by politics.	12.0	15.8	20.4	19.9
No attitude expressed.	0.6	0.6	0.4	0.3

For the entire decade, i.e. from 1983-1992, the two middle attitudes »interest« (»I am well informed about politics, but I am not directly involved«) and »delegation« (»I think politics should better be left to those who are more competent than me«) were basically balanced. In 1996, 50.5% of the respondents chose »interest«, almost twice as many as those who preferred to delegate (26.3%). These data refer to young people aged 15-24.

Among the various issues studied in the survey, the only sharp drop (from 21.3% to 7.3%) was noted in the area of peace and disarmament, while the only significant rise (from 5.8% to 8.2%) was registered regarding the issue of electoral campaigns. The most important current trends in young Italians' voting orientations are:

- the decrease in Catholic voting (dropped from 26.8% to 6.4%);
- a stronger inclination to vote for extremist parties, namely for the right (i.e. for AN-MSI; increased from 4.7% to 26.4%), and for the left (i.e. for Rifondazione Comunista; increased from 4.0% to 12.1%);
- the decline of leghismo (the figure for young people inclined to vote for Lega Lombarda dropped from 13.8% of the sample to 5.5%);
- the decline of smaller parties which were very popular among youth in 1992 (Green party and Rete, dropped from 15.9% to 5.8%).

After the processes of secularization and political disenchantment highlighted in the 1992 survey, processes of radicalization with strong ideological connotations have resurfaced. As compared to the overall population, young voters seem to take a much more radical stance both towards left-wing and especially towards right-wing parties.

Radicalization as a Return to Ideologies

What is most striking is not the shift to the right (a phenomenon which has mostly been ignored by the media but which the experts have long been aware of) or the process of radicalization *per se*. The aspect raising the most serious questions is the quality of such changes. If we try to interpret the new data by referring to the previous survey (which showed the decline of »ideological« parties and the rise of non-confessional, radical, »new« parties), we come to the conclusion that this trend has basically reversed.

Following the disintegration of the Christian Democrats, all parties with a clear ideology are growing rapidly: »ideological« parties, which drew 49.9% of the votes cast in 1992, got a total of 65.4% in 1996. At the same time, the rise of new parties (i.e. those parties set up after 1970 and not splinters of long-established parties) seems to have come to a halt (30.4% in 1992, as compared to 32.5% in 1996). The process of renewal and growth of non-christian parties, documented in the 1992 survey, apparently has been replaced by an ideologically-dominated process of radicalization. This not only favours the extreme right, but also the extreme left. These changes go hand in hand with a substantial decrease in Catholic votes, a decline in commitment towards the community and a rediscovery of politics as an arena for discussion rather than a place of experience and action. The rediscovery of ideology as well as the weakening of the most pragmatic and concrete aspects of public commitment may well be two sides of the same coin.

Perhaps young people have simply lost interest in being actively involved in politics, and prefer forms of communication and expression that are more linked to talking than to doing. This would be in line with the currently typical view of politics which is seen as a spectacle.

Italy: Jigsaw Puzzle of Small Local Homelands

The 1996 IARD survey provides interesting insights into young people's views regarding the area they live in. The results are consistent with what emerged from other studies on the same subject, though often in sharp contrast to current opinion. The general debate in political institutions and in the media tends to focus on contrasts cutting across the territorial identity. Particular attention is paid to the growing contrast between regional (or macro-re-

Table 2:
Which of the following geographical units do you feel you belong to most of all, and as a second choice? (%)

Area	First choice	Second choice	Total
the town I live in	40.2	19.2	59.4
my region or province	10.5	23.2	35.7
Italy	32.2	31.8	64.0
Europe	3.1	13.1	16.2
the world in general	12.6	10.6	23.2
no reply	1.4	2.2	3.6

Table 3:
Do you think that it is important (or unimportant) for Italy to be part of a United Europe? %

very	56.5
quite	32.4
little	4.2
not at all	1.6
no reply	5.3

Table 4:
What should be the pillars of European unification?

Percent of those who very much or quite agree

one single currency	83.8
a single army	56.5
a common foreign policy	79.6
more power to the European Parliament	79.9

gional) identities and national identity, to the disadvantage of the latter, with a subsequent crisis of national sentiment.

This does not hold for young people; on the contrary: the emerging profile is multi-faceted. Young people integrate the different levels of territorial identity, combining local and national identities, as well as the cosmopolitan identity, without any major conflict. They piece together and adapt the main territorial definitions they are faced with in line with their cognitive and practical needs.

Town, Region, Nation: Multiple Identifications

Young people were asked to name the two geographical units towards which they felt most attached. The picture obtained is characterized by two priority reference points: the local context and the national context (Table 2).

If we focus our attention on the geographic unit stated as most important, we can see that 40.2% of the young Italians identify most strongly with the local context (their town), and 32.2% feel most attached to Italy. The other items do not evoke as strong a sense of belonging: just over 10% mainly identify themselves either with their region or the world in general, whereas only a very small percentage (3.1%) choose Europe. In view of the strong focus on Europe in the past few years, this is an interesting and perhaps surprising finding. However, the results obtained in the survey show that young people do not perceive Europe as a »homeland« but rather as an important economic and representative area.

The polarity between town and nation is dominated by the former, which has the greatest impact on people's daily lives. It would, however, be wrong to interpret this in terms of opposition or as an indicator of a rigid hierarchy between the two. When looking at the second choice, we find that the most frequent territorial reference is Italy (32%), while identification with the local territory is chosen by a small proportion of youths (19%), and is lower than the identification with the regional territory. Among the larger areas, there is a slight preference for Europe (13%) as compared to the world in general.

In short and summing up the data, there is a rank order of territorial identity: the local community tops the list, the national identity takes the second place, while the regional identity is third. International frameworks such as Europe are less popular, maybe because – unlike the »world in general« – Europe is a well-defined administrative institution and emphasis has been put more on its practical advantages than on the creation of European identity.

Europe: Strong Currency, Weak Identity

Europe – the most important territorial reference for only 3% of the young people – is given far more credit as an institutional reference framework: 56% of the young people think that it is important for Italy to be part of a united Europe, and for another 32%, this is »quite« an important goal (Table 3).

9 out of 10 youths, i.e. almost all, are in favour of building a unified Europe, and thus the European Union. But since they feel they belong elsewhere, this is the result of different motivations and considerations. Young Italians feel that the main pillars of European unification should be a single currency (84%), international prestige and a more powerful European Parliament (slightly below 80% in both cases). A single army is considered much less important (56%) (Table 4).

Again, priority is given to »practical« aspects: economy, external protection, regulation. In other words, Europe is not yet (and one wonders whether it will ever be) seen as a »homeland« or a place with which one can identify. It is rather a common home for the nations and homelands it comprises. This also holds for Italians who still define themselves as such while hoping to join Europe, and who are able to combine their national and local identities. In this way, Italy can be defined as a jigsaw puzzle made up of a variety of different homelands.

Italian Youth and Work: Coping Strategies Deteriorating Job Market

The data of the 1992 survey might be suitably characterized by the statement that very few young people were seeking their first job; the figure had fallen threefold as compared to 1987. The positive economic conditions, as well as signs of a growing flexibility on the job market suggested that young people on the whole could expect opportunities, independence and professional careers in their jobs.

However, since the mid-nineties, the economic cycle has once more reversed and, unlike other periods after the Second World War, it shows totally new features: a gradual decline in the number of jobs available, a drop in the number of those marginally unemployed (students, housewives and retired people looking for a job) and of first job seekers, as well as a sharp rise in the number of people unemployed because they lost their job. Moreover,

eastern regions of the north. On the islands, there are more unemployed than employed, who therefore constitute the minority of the active population.

The number of young people who have lost their job is growing faster in the south than in the north, and a higher number of students in the south than in the north has led to a more pronounced reduction in the number of employed people.

Differences in the job market and occupational structure also account for differences in earnings and number of hours worked. Young people employed in the northeast not only earn, on average, 38% more than their southern peers, they also enjoy a higher degree of equality.

Job Market Trends: Supply and Demand

In a job market where the institutions responsible for job orientation, vocational guidance and training are highly ineffective (as is the case in other major European countries), the data available confirm that young Italians still tend to adopt typically individualistic strategies when looking for a job. More than half of those employed obtained their first job through connections either in their family or in their circle of friends and acquaintances. The family is the main channel for finding first jobs in 30.7% of cases, whereas friends and acquaintances account for another 36.0%. Only 16.7% obtained their first job by actively seeking work on their own. Other ways of finding a job – e.g. via vocational guidance centres – are highly ineffective, though these levels vary according to the geographical area. While 8.1% of young people find a job through the job centre in the islands, the percentage drops to below 2% in the centre and the mainland south. Especially in the north, schools are a way of finding first jobs, however, only for 7%. In the northeast, the direct relation between schools and companies has a certain impact, which shows that small companies still can take on young workers.

Among young job seekers, young Southerners are generally two times more willing to move from the south to the north as compared to the preparedness of their northern peers to move from northern to southern Italy.

The uneven structure of the labour market in the north and south of Italy is reflected in the job satisfaction reported by the interviewed youngsters. While almost 90% of the young people in the north are satisfied with their job, only about 60% of those living in the south or on the islands have a high level of job satisfaction. Compared to 1992, the proportion of young people who are prepared to renounce part of their income in order to

Table 5:
Job Position of Respondents According to Geographical Area (%)

Position	North-west	North-east	Centre	South	Islands
permanent, full-time employed	27.9	31.6	21.7	13.8	10.6
permanent part-time employed	3.7	3.3	2.4	2.8	3.8
temporarily employed	3.7	4.0	6.9	7.5	6.5
self-employed	8.6	9.0	9.2	9.4	4.7
total number of employed	43.9	47.9	40.2	33.5	25.6
unemployed	4.2	4.5	8.0	11.4	15.2
first job-seekers	2.4	3.0	4.5	6.0	13.5
total without job	6.6	8.5	12.5	17.4	28.5
total active population	50.5	56.4	52.7	50.9	54.1
students with odd jobs	11.2	7.3	6.6	4.6	4.4
full-time students	36.7	35.8	38.8	39.4	35.8
housewives	1.5	1.5	1.9	5.1	5.6

there is a widening gap between the north and the south of the country, to the disadvantage of the latter.

Therefore the behaviours and attitudes young people develop to cope with the serious deterioration of the job market constitute the most important aspect of the 1996 IARD survey.

Young People and the Job Market

The sample data suggest that the number of young first job seekers is growing as compared to 1992 (although it has not reached the record levels of 1987), while the number of those who have lost their job has risen significantly to 7.4% – the highest level as compared to all previous reports. Moreover, the proportion of those with a full-time permanent job in the northeast of the country is three times higher as compared to the Italian islands (Table 5).

There are many more young people with temporary jobs in the south than in the north of Italy. There are relatively more self-employed workers in the northeast, centre and south than in the northwest and on the islands. There are five times as many young first job seekers on the islands than in the northwest, and almost four times as many unemployed.

On the whole, the percentage of jobless ranges from 6.6% in the northwest to 25.8% on the islands. In the south, the percentage of housewives, i.e. women who decide not to enter the job market, is significant. Except for the islands, the south also has the highest rate of full-time students.

In short, the job market shows a growing gap between the main islands and the rest of the south, and between the western and

work fewer hours has dropped from 22.7% to 16.7%, while the number of those who would rather work more hours to have more money is rising. Though this trend still prevails in the entire country, it is obviously more marked in the south and on the islands than in the northeast of the country.

The general assumption made on the basis of the previous report is confirmed by the most recent survey: geographical differences in attitude towards work do not derive from different conceptions of work, but are rather the consequence of the different market conditions young respondents have to come to grips with.

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Decline of Security – Rise of Distrust

Last not least, mention should be made of a finding which might be related to the development on the labour market: the widespread distrust in other people. Three quarters of the young interviewees agreed that »one is never sufficiently careful in dealing with other people«. Less than 20 % of the young Italians considered other people to generally deserve their trust. These expressions of distrust reach their peak among youth living in the south or in small towns, among self-employed youth and working class youth. In other words, feelings of distrust (which often seem related to actual hostility, e.g. against immigrants) increase in situations offering less social security in today's Italy.

Annotations

- ¹ IARD is a leading nonprofit research institute in Italy, operating in the fields of socio-cultural education and training processes on the basis of a multidisciplinary approach which integrates psychology, pedagogy, sociology and economics. Beginning from May 1994, IARD has decided to internationalise its research activity, particularly because the comparative perspective is becoming more and more strategic.
- ² The interviewed youngsters were sampled controlling for gender, age, region and size of their place of residency. A book containing the complete findings of IARD's fourth national survey on the situation of youth in Italy will be published by Società Editrice Il Mulino in September 1997. For information and a more comprehensive synopsis in English contact <http://www.sociol.unimi.it/ulysses/iardhome.html>.