

The Post-Pandemic World. The Hopes of the Young and their Desire to Take Part in Building a New World

Il mondo dopo l'epidemia. Le speranze dei giovani e la loro voglia di partecipare per costruire un nuovo mondo

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Abstract

What are the motivations, ideas, and expectations of young people regarding the future during the Covid-19 pandemic? This was the central question in the survey we conducted, and which led to various findings. There were those who paint the future in an apocalyptic way, others who see a world of hope, of social and economic reconstruction that will put solidarity, the environment and work at the center. A moral dimension also emerged from the responses of the interviewees, social responsibility towards human values, respect for others, and above all the desire to participate in political choices. The answers also show a good degree of awareness of the current political difficulties and of the current condition of youth in Italy.

Quali sono le motivazioni, le idee, le aspettative dei giovani riguardo il futuro al tempo della pandemia? Questa è la domanda che ci siamo posti nella nostra ricerca, che ha condotto alla rilevazione di atteggiamenti molto diversi: da quelli che dipingono il futuro in modo apocalittico, ad altri che intravedono un mondo di speranza, di ricostruzione sociale ed economica che metterà al centro la solidarietà, l'ambiente e il lavoro. Dalle risposte degli intervistati emerge anche una dimensione morale, la responsabilità sociale verso i valori umani, il rispetto dell'altro. Accanto a questa anche, e soprattutto, la volontà di partecipazione alle scelte politiche. Dalle risposte si evince inoltre un buon grado di consapevolezza verso le attuali difficoltà politiche e soprattutto verso la situazione in cui versano i giovani oggi in Italia.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, young people, students, participation
COVID-19, pandemia, giovani, studenti, partecipazione

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about many changes in people's everyday lives, expectations, values, and actions, because of its global impact. The present survey was conducted from April to June 2020 and concerns the views of the young on their future, their ability to make plans, and their desire to be involved. The survey included both closed-ended (with a choice of answers) and open-ended questions and it was submitted to a sample of students of Trieste University and other young adults who heard about this project by word of mouth. Respondents to the questionnaire were 355.¹ Despite differences in sex, origin, parents' education and economic condition, we did not find significant differences in the answers with respect to the categories we identified for coding. For this reason, we did not consider it important to specify the general characteristics of the respondent for each answer, although in terms of "social position", such as income, professional status, and education (schooling), our sample can be considered highly representative of the Italian social stratification. Our priority in this case study was not the statistical representativeness of the sample, but the gathering of a collection of significant answers which were interpreted and commented as being of interest to understand the perspectives of the interviewees².

This research starts from the perspectives outlined by Youth Studies, which in recent years have sparked a heated debate on partly new issues and in particular on the analysis of inequality. Among these issues, there are the meaning of youth and being adults, the reconceptualization of inequalities, job insecurity, the extension of higher education levels, the new condition of women (Spanò 2018).

The voice of young people, their desire of recognition and political participation

Participation is a fundamental concept in the democratic life of every country. Historically, it has to do with the legitimacy of a country, and therefore with the ability to

¹ The sample was made up of 355 respondents of which 27% were not university students. 24% were males, 76% females. 91% of the sample was made up of Italians, and only 16% presented their economic situation as difficult. 57% of the individuals in the sample lived with their family and only 16% of them declared to have a strong interest in politics. For further information on see G. Delli Zotti and G. Blasutig (2020).

² We would like to refer to a similar project of the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Trieste in 2016, as part of the European project Euth, Tools and Tips for Mobile and Digital Youth Participation in and across Europe (<https://www.euthproject.eu/>).

verify consensus, and the way people fight – using political tools – against the conditions of inequality that may be present in society. For this reason, participation has both to do with the search for consensus and the struggle against inequality. Participation is therefore a crucial way to the conscious expression of consensus of people over the government institutions. It concerns also how any collective organization acts upon the structure of inequality by questioning the values that support it. When we speak of participation, we refer therefore to two distinct actions: on one hand, the activity of doing politics as a profession; on the other, political participation as the expression of beliefs in civic society (Pizzorno 1970). The purpose of our survey was to register the needs of youth as reaction to the stress brought about by the pandemic and by the consequent government decisions to restrict freedoms and social opportunities. If participation involves being together and feeling as equal, or rather a “combination of two logics of action marked respectively by autonomy and solidarity” (Ceri 1996: 510), we will see how the request for political voice and for community is particularly heartfelt among our interviewees.

Let us move on from the responses to the question “What would you do to make life better in your community?”. The reactions of the young interviewees are very interesting, as they are mostly self-referenced. They reflect their insecurities and social unease, the fear of a world that has marginalized them, the lack of decent jobs, and similar worries. We could say that we are listening to cries of pain due to the perception of a condition of social exclusion:

Young people should be offered jobs and people in their 60s should be made to retire. I would have Italy be governed by more young people and have the current members of parliament retire.

Young people should be helped to find a job.

I would help young people learn how to organize their time, to be passionate about something, to have goals, to better understand themselves in order to prevent the difficulties faced as teenagers.

Centers where young people can be heard should be created and initiatives that involve them in society, making them responsible.

Create situations to help integrate young people into the political and cultural life in the city where I live.

I would work on prevention; I would involve kids and make them feel passionate about something. They are bored and have stopped dreaming.

More activities to turn young people into active citizens and have them participate in their community.

On one hand, these reactions show a demand for respect and both employment and social opportunities, while on the other they highlight the need to be involved and to participate in political choices. The whole of the responses reveals a high degree of awareness of the situation in which the youth is across the country. Seminal works (Almond and Verba 1963; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978) have enlightened the correlation between social status and participation, showing that the higher the social-economic condition of an individual, the greater his/her propensity towards political participation is, and our findings confirm this hypothesis. Many answers have to do with politics and political criticism and express an urgent request for change and social justice:

At national level, I would change the political system and the system of government. The current ones are definitely ineffective both internally and with regard to the provisions and laws that rule our country.

I would change all our politicians.

I would make sure everyone has access to an education (not just to gain technical knowledge but to learn to reason) and to political culture in order to be able to vote with knowledge of the facts.

I would engage in politics and social issues.

I would overturn the Italian political system by making it a true, and not only supposed, democracy, with rights and opportunities where the law is the same for everyone.

I would like to rid our country of all the inequalities linked to the social origin of young people, especially in higher education.

The crisis of politics and the request for good governance through simplification and de-bureaucratization was evident. However, other issues also emerged. These cover different areas of intervention for the improvement of social life and life in communities. The type of interventions requested address issues such as equal opportunities, the environment, the elderly, poverty, disabilities, and immigration. In conclusion, the qualitative data collected highlighted some very interesting sides of both the issue of participation and that of future expectations.

If participation also refers to the public being listened to and to the acknowledgement of requests and opinions, or rather “consultation” (Pellizzoni and Osti 2008), the suggestions offered by the interviewees answering the open-ended questions examined

in the survey are many and very articulate. There was the desire to participate and above to grasp reality, but at the same time we recorded in the respondents the perception of the difficulties to enter the “control room”. We could label the new generations as invisible (Diamanti 1999) or disenchanting (Bontempi and Pocaterra 2007), because of their detachment from participating in a phase characterized by the eclipse of politics and by progressive ebb in the private sector. The youth is progressively withdrawing in a subjective and intimate dimension (Ricolfi 2002), but our findings shows the good will of young people, their eager to be involved again in politics, or at least their regenerated political interest. Furthermore, in contrast with the recent studies on young people and their future after COVID-19 conducted by the Giuseppe Toniolo Institute of Higher Studies (2020), we observed, in spite of the very pessimistic description of their view of the world, as will be seen in the responses that follow below, a strong desire to plan one’s future.

The world after the pandemic

A major impact of the pandemic on people’s lives concerned the way they perceive the future ahead. One of the open-ended questions we asked was: “What do you think our society will be like in the future, after the coronavirus pandemic?”. In sum, three main views emerged as a reaction to this question: an *evolutionary* view, a *static* one, and an *involutionary* one. These views are somewhat related to the psychological traits of the individuals interviewed: optimists believe in a world that will possibly and desirably evolve into a new collective awareness and into greater human development leading to social improvement; realists tend to believe in a continuation of the status quo; pessimists predict a general worsening of the human condition. We will turn now to the analysis of the three positions above mentioned through an interpretation of their meanings and referring to some of the answers provided.

As mentioned above, optimists have an evolutionary view of the post-COVID world. The picture they depict is full of hope. People and their relationships play a crucial role in the improvement of society by means of a system of solidarity in which the importance of our environment, among other things, emerges.

I hope this situation is the starting point of an eventual and actual global project on environmental sustainability.

Greater focus will be placed on the value of our environment and of interpersonal and family relationships. The presence of others in our lives will be more valued. At least I hope so.

Society should adapt in order to face the future challenges that nature, and not only, will confront us with (in-deed, those who are adaptable will also evolve).

The three statements above disclose a moral dimension, or rather a duty of social responsibility with regard to human values, mutual respect, and the love of dear ones. These attitudes imply an inclination to sacrifice as a means towards the required transformation.

I believe and hope that more importance will be given to our values and the little things in life which we used to neglect or put aside, like family, spending time together, feeling united though physically apart, doing good deeds, feeling part and parcel of the same community.

We should all change our habits and bear a greater sense of responsibility towards each other.

This is not what I think but hope. I hope that our future society will have an increased awareness of the problems we face and that we will have the strength to deal with them – not ignore them as we have done till now. We need more solidarity and substance, and less boasting about the things we do not own and less individualism.

Maybe we will manage to adopt a new, less consumerist lifestyle and continue to praise the little but essential things that the quarantine has helped us value: our homes, families, and our loved ones.

Such a moral dimension implies a rethinking of the current economic and social structure on which human relations are currently based. In the words of Moroni and Corradini (2020: 146-147): “It is clear how unsustainable this techno-nihilist capitalism is from an environmental and social point of view. As regards the environment, the universal destination of all goods, justice at a global level, and the individual rights of people are the foundational values of every human being. These values can only be fostered by means of a different kind of development model and a new economy, i.e. an ecological and social market economy”. In such a new ecological and social market, individuals would be accountable in their relationships and exchanges, provided that it is capable of combining economic growth with justice and solidarity within a new kind of economic behaviour (Rusconi 2006). In the following set of answers, one interviewee describes a sort of collective catharsis which, because of social impact of the virus, will help people (finally) gain a profound understanding of the value of our existence:

I believe many people will make drastic changes in their lives. They will change jobs, homes (obviously, if this is financially possible). Some people will leave their partner because they no longer feel good together, etc. I believe a lot will change for all of us.

This vision of a collective rebirth seems to coincide with a sort of “cultural leap”, which critics of the neoliberal paradigm aspire to (Bortolotti 2013). On the opposite, realists believe nothing will change. Human nature and the behaviour of mankind will not change very easily and everything will go back to the way it used to be. History will repeat itself endlessly, following the same script. After all, people tend to be traditional and habits are hard to break. The good things learned in this period will soon be forgotten. Realists seem to view human nature pragmatically and with a bit of disillusioned resignation while seeing themselves lacking any sort of enthusiasm or inspiration for the future. In principle, the current socio-economic paradigm in unlikely to be any different, even when there is a need for change.

I believe our lives will go back to the way they used to be as the nostalgia for our old routines can be easily perceived. This “return to everyday life” will regard both the good and bad things in our daily lives, especially pollution.

People will soon forget the little that has been learned.

At first, people will cherish the little things in life more; but as time goes by, that will change and everything will go back to the way it used to be.

Ideological change might take place. It is hardly likely from my point of view – albeit desirable on my part [...], that this consumerist capitalist neoliberalism will change at all: profit will be the only religion admitted and granted ideologically.

We are not capable of being better beings. I do not think we will be any better after all that we have been through. Even after the two world wars and the many conflicts in the world it had been claimed that everything would be different but nothing changed. We will not learn anything this time either. It is in our nature to quickly forget past tragedies and to stick to the status quo.

Lastly, the scenarios depicted by pessimists are negative as they predict an involution of history after the pandemic. Their vision features a future dominated by fear, a reactionary transformation that will make people unhappier, and principally, an unavoidable economic crisis, coupled with a crisis of democracy and values. Overall, a nightmarish scenario is described – an alienated world in which the situation might become uncertain, chaotic, and contentious thus feeding authoritative drives and the implementation of force on part of public authorities:

We will find ourselves living in a society controlled by fear and in the middle of a new economic crisis.

We will need each other less and everyone will be more afraid.

Cash crises, growth of nationalisms, and conflicts with Europe unless it provides a strong response.

Nothing will be the same again. We will all have more fear and there will be a huge economic crisis. Many companies have closed already or will close.

I believe people will grow even more skeptical regarding the legitimacy of institutions. In Italy, I believe that abstentionism will grow. After a period of recession, an economic boom might follow in countries that are more stable and advanced. I am doubtful about Italy, which will suffer the crisis long term.

People will be emotionally and physically distant from each other long term due to the fear of contagion. Egoism will prevail due to the economic difficulties the pandemic is causing in our country.

[...] our fragile democracy in Italy is at huge risk: the dormant authoritarian drives that revealed themselves during the health emergency, on the left as well unfortunately. Take for instance the questionable “constitutionality” of the Prime Minister’s decrees, the scarce or total lack of involvement of Parliament, Democratic Party governors invoking the use of flame throwers, the press at the service of the powerful establishment, the offensive against runners, balcony-style sheriffs, etc.. I am afraid that in the near future we will witness the introduction of tracking systems and “social credit” systems, such as those used in China: a disturbing technological “middle age” is looming. I hope people, regardless of their political alignment, gain awareness of the risks the situation poses.

We will experience one of the greatest crises ever seen and everything will change: “I believe we are facing a second “attack on the Twin Towers”; “I believe things will go from bad to worse. Oppression is the key word in Phase 2. The government seems to prefer us in a state of fear and ignorance. There is no such thing as real justice. No one seems to have actually understood the rules, so people do as they please. Rules are strictly enforced or violations are overridden with indifference. This will lead to, as is already happening, people feeling confused and obsessed with rules which, as always, the government issues not make to benefit its people [...], but politicians themselves.

Unfortunately, I fear the world will be even more subjugated by populism, by anti-scientific thinking, by trends towards the reassessment of sovereignty; in general, those in each of these groups will isolate themselves and despise others. This will be yet another excuse for creating borders... I fear this very much.

What will my future be like?

Answers to the two open-ended questions on the future (one on the situation in general and the other concerning personal attitudes) were extremely interesting as they helped us understand the different perception of reality by people, with regard to the world in general and to one's personal future plans. The first question was about what the future in general will be like after COVID-19. Responses were a sort of cacotopia, or rather a description or representation of reality in an imaginary but predictable (based on present trends) future, perceived as negative or highly negative, in which an undesirable life experience is foreshadowed – a bit like in Huxley's *Brave New World*. In the second question, based on a real personal project, the respondents showed a greater inclination to outline a potential experience where the overall situation is not heavily altered. The difference between the two perceptions is extremely meaningful. A personal life project is a fundamental emotional anchor that instils inner security and strengthens personal skills. This is also associated with a spirit of adaptation, the willingness to react resiliently to uncertainty and adverse events.

The general spirit that we gathered from these interviews is masterfully described in the words of a young student:

I do not believe my future plans will by any different. I will continue my studies in order to pursue a university degree. However, this virus has definitely taught me to cherish my family, the moments we spend together, my home, my garden so much more as well as to value more the people that surround me. Indeed, it is only when we are denied certain things that we fully understand how precious they are.

Adaptation skills seemed to permeate the consciences of the interviewees to a great extent, together with their ability – now acquired – in this era, to deal with increasing uncertainty (Spanò 2018):

I will adapt to the social changes that come to be by changing the strategies and tools I use to reach my goals, at least until I set other ones for myself following the new normal.

I will do my best to adapt to the situation and try to reinvent myself for the occasion.

My life project will not change. I am convinced of the goal I am pursuing by studying Political Science. Therefore, I believe things for me will continue quite similarly to the way they were before, even though I might be inclined to do more.

What is very remarkable is the interviewees' awareness of the present moment. The experiences gathered in these times of pandemic have taught people to live the present

to the full and with awareness, like a springboard for future life projects. It is in this context that we see the availability, or perhaps the willingness, to participate in civic and political activism.

After having given it much thought, I believe I will choose a party or a political movement to join and where to start militating (but the left seems to be lifeless). As for the rest, as I try to pursue my degree, all I see are unstable precarious jobs, temporary employment, seasonal work, or whatever else is available.

I will try to be more active as a citizen.

It comes as no surprise that many young interviewees face the future with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, especially when they think of the implications of the current crisis on the economy and employment. Nevertheless, this rarely leads to abandonment, discouragement, and surrender. Generally speaking, the young interviewees show that they want to keep the bar steady and straight as regards their personal life projects (often imagining themselves abroad), an independent lifestyle, a home, steady relationships, and a family of their own:

I had a lot of projects in place for this year, in connection with my education and more. I am a fresher in university and honestly things couldn't have gone worse. However, we cannot cry over spilt milk; on the contrary, we need to roll up our sleeves and work even harder.

In the short term I will focus on my studies, observe the political and economic dynamics around me at this particular time of our lives; later on I will not think twice when it comes to looking for a job abroad if in Italy there continue to be unemployment, debt, and if cuts in public spending continue to persist.

Many jobs will be at risk, but my life project will not be much different.

Conclusion

It is interesting to see how the responses gathered among the young women we interviewed are widely anchored to traditional models. Many of them see at the center of their future marriage, children and family commitments. On the contrary, young men seem to put a job first, thus making the difference between young men's and women's responses quite noticeable.

I would like to graduate and have a job, at least until I get married ... (female)

I think if I have children I will leave my job to dedicate myself to the family. (female)

I would like to find a good job that satisfies me and then start a family. (male)

Women's expectations are strongly affected by the deeply rooted stereotypes that characterize the dominant culture; furthermore, in a society where the burden of the family is still mostly shouldered by them, the prospect of social and work realization fades considerably when experiencing maternity or in times of economic crisis. Indeed, gender is also relevant when determining a person's state of vulnerability. As a matter of fact, women tend to feel that their future life projects are more at risk than men's (Saraceno and Naldini 2013) and unfortunately in the period of the pandemic it is women who pay the highest price. According to a survey, in Italy 67% of women versus 55% of men believe that their future plans are at stake. The gender gap is smaller than in the other European countries contemplated in the survey, especially in France, where the gap is close to nil (Rosina e Luppi 2020: 4). It should be taken into consideration that the employment rate among women in Italy is the lowest in Europe (49.5%). In addition, women, who are the weakest subjects on the labor market – with lower wages and in greater numbers in the least-paid sectors – are affected by the pandemic to a greater extent than men and will experience a further reduction of their capacity for autonomy and self-determination due to this event (Ferraio and Profeta 2020).

However, if personal life projects – even if differentiated by gender and characterized by consolidated cultural stereotypes – demonstrate a positive attitude and a willingness to participate in the growth of society and personal fulfillment, the visions of the future are pessimistic. Fear is present in many interviews. Many respondents foresee a future where the economic and social crisis will negatively affect democracy and values. The future time is not promising well and these young people seem to be aware of it.

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