Melancholic but practising change. Italian students in times of isolation

Davide Calenda, Università degli Studi di Firenze
Laura Leonardi, Università degli Studi di Firenze

Introduction

This study was firstly motivated by concerns arising about COVID-19 overlapping with the well-known structural and cultural constraints that young people often experience in the transition to adulthood in the Italian context. High levels of job insecurity for example, along with weak youth policies and the ongoing centrality of the family in the welfare system shape young people's life projects in ways that often limit individual autonomy (e.g., Crocetti, Meeus 2014; in a comparative perspective see Lodovici *et alii* 2012). Informal work, for example, is a structural aspect of the student condition in Italy (Perocco, Cillo 2017) and the combination between work and study is linked to aspirations to autonomy in view of reducing material dependence on the family of origin (Euorostudent 2018). This generation grew up in the recession, with Italy performing poorly and uncertainty progressively undermining large sectors of society. For this reason, young people in Italy can no longer 'sit back' and rely on family protection as comfortably as many commentators—belonging to the baby-boomer generation often suggest while referring to them as mammoni. An explorative online survey was designed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on students' everyday life at the outset of the pandemic. In particular, it was aimed at students of the School of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Florence.

Research method

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The (anonymous) online questionnaire was administrated through a Google on 9 April and delivered to students through emails in compliance with privacy and ethics standards. The lockdown had started one month earlier and by the end of the month we had collected more than 130 responses, 112 of which were complete and considered valid. The sample is random, not representative but well balanced in terms of gender composition. Most of the respondents were Italian aged under 22 and living with their family of origin at the time of the survey (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics (N: 112)

	N	%
Gender		
Female	66	59
Male	46	41
Age		
20-22	70	63
23-25	25	22
25+	17	15
Citizenship		
Italian	91	81
Other	21	19
Living conditions		
with family	84	75
alone/partner/friends	28	25

The questionnaire was structured in three sections and included a total of 15 questions, which were mostly multiple-choice. All sections and in some cases individual questions were introduced by a short text aimed at contextualizing the subject, while also providing concrete examples as necessary (see the questionnaire attached). The first section addressed emotional impact. Emotions play a fundamental role in all social phenomena (Turner, Stets 2005), mediating the relationship between individuals and society (Ahmed 2004). This is why emotions were incorporated as intervening variables in the response to the challenges of COVID-19. We have considered both emotions and feelings asking students about their prevailing ones at the time of the survey. Besides, students were asked to report their main attitude towards the current emergency through selecting among different options. This variable turned out to be very helpful for exploring similarities and differences between students considering several items proposed in the questionnaire (see Tab.1 next). The second section addressed the impact on daily life practices and routines, encompassing both individual and social activities. We invited students to reflect on the current and potential changes that COVID-19 brought into their everyday life. We also expect the state of emergency rising concerns about ethical issues. For example, we asked students whether they were willing to reconsider some aspects of their lifestyles, behaviors and orientations encompassing different environmental and societal issues. The third section was mostly about social and institutional aspects, selected among those given

significant media coverage during the first stage of the emergency. In particular we touched upon information, surveillance and governance issues. The responses to these questions would help to shed light on students' orientations about aspects that are relevant in the debate on democracy, and especially in current crisis. Along the same line, a standard question was also included on political trust. Although it was not wholly essential for the purpose of this research, we wanted to check for this variable as the situation had brought up political concerns in the shape of the extraordinary state of emergency and the related extension of state powers over individual freedoms. Finally, and importantly, we checked for the students' orientations towards the future.

It is worth bearing in mind that the students who participated in the survey are familiar with the social processes underlying the subject of this research, in particular with the sociological debate on risk and globalization. Although this fact should not be methodologically overlooked – i.e. risks of bias - and the results cannot be generalized, we believe that well-informed participation in a survey constitutes an aspect of research transparency and enrichment.

Main Findings: A resilient generation?

"I liked that you asked about the psychosocial and emotional impact of the Lockdown". "I have more time to study now but I can hardly concentrate. I am afraid my learning is getting worse and worse". These are two of the various comments we received as soon as we set up the online survey among students of the School of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Florence.

The results of our survey show the intensity and structure of the impact of COVID-19 among students, which can to some extent be explained by the above mentioned patterns. Almost 7 in 10 respondents live with their family and the same proportion combine work and study. In some cases, the students live alone or in shared housing, and for them COVID-19 can be a real challenge for their continued independence. A 28-year-old student, exemplifies this situation well when she comments that 'it is a class privilege to be able to stay at home and live the period of social distancing serenely. If you don't know whether you will continue to work in the future or be able to pay your bills and the rent, you can't feel so calm'.

Uncertainty is also common among students who work despite still living with their family of origin, because the lockdown threatens their financial autonomy, thereby increasing their concerns. Overall, 70 per cent of the respondents consider the changes brought by COVID-19 into their daily lives to be significant, with sadness and melancholy being the most widely reported feelings, followed by anxiety. But after controlling for each item that changed significantly – e.g., personal care, social and family relations, work and study □ we observed that anxiety is much higher among those students who experienced a negative impact of COVID-19 on the time spent working and, to a lesser degree, studying. The results show that these students also feel more 'insecure and confused' than other students when it comes to defining their attitude towards the current emergency (see Tab.1). In this group of students, the overall emotional impact of the crisis is more intense than in other groups.

Table.2 Material and emotional impact of coronavirus, N. 122, % within group

How would you define your attitude towards the current emergency?	Group 1: Practical and concrete (n:26)	Group 2: Awareness, determination, decisiveness and creativity (n:36)	Group 3: I cannot really tell (n:23)	Group 4: Insecurity and confusion (n:27)
Changes in the time spent for studying and working since the lockdown started (less time) (% within group)				
Studying	15	28	39	41
Working	50	67	61	81
What emotions and feelings do you experience mostly (% within group)				
Anger	7	19	30	37
Sadness	58	50	48	74
Melancholy	42	64	56	70
Solitude	19	22	9	30
Anxiety	42	31	35	70

Would the challenges brought by COVID-19 into the students' everyday lives further jeopardize their life projects? Recent empirical evidence causes concern about how greatly COVID-19 is not just impacting employment in Italy, especially among young people (Istat 2020), but life projects as well (Luppi, Rosina 2020). Developing her comment further, Sara claims that 'the university should be concerned about the condition of its community after the pandemic'. Much policy research is needed to tackle this concern. Some would argue, however, that catastrophic events are not new in human history and institutional order will progressively be re-established.

Historically, Italians know that the phoenix can rise from the ashes. Poverty, pestilence, territorial cleavages and political conflicts, organized criminality and so on and so forth might have engendered resilience among Italians across history. Dynamics of adaptation already seem to be at work to some extent and not just in Italy, as demonstrated by people and governments around the world adopting very similar conduct and arrangements to normalize the crisis. Besides and unlike the contingent emergency the emotional and material consequences of COVID-19 can be managed to some degree; most of the students who participated in our survey were not overwhelmed by desperation and fear, with insecurity experienced by some, but mainly due to COVID-19 impacting on their financial situation as argued above (Tab. 1). An alternative narrative instead contemplates COVID-19 ☐ along with broader issues of global risks such as climate change ☐ as fostering human agency, for example, by enabling people to attribute new meanings to their practices. There is ground for this hypothesis: climate change is already a mobilizing force, fostering ethics that can steer social action around the world, as the successful 'Fridays for Future' movement demonstrates. Many years ago, in an outstanding review of Berger and Luckmann's book 'The Social Construction of Reality', sociologist Ivan H. Light (1969: 196-197) argued that:

> social stability depends frequently upon the successful organization of universe maintenance […] social survival is functionally more important than social stability. Social survival often depends upon the successful cultivation of widespread uncertainty […] sooner or later, people must cease to pursue the phantom of certainty and acknowledge the role of their own subjectivity in attributing meaning to the universe (Light 1969: 196-97).

Could COVID-19 boost the creative potential of disorder among this new generation? From the millennials onwards, today's young people have been growing
up in risk societies, developing resilience, a common-sense approach to life and the motivation to be creative. Overall, these constitute resources that can be mobilized
not only to adapt to COIVD-19 but also to question social processes and the contradictions underlined by the current crisis. The respondents to our survey were mostly born at the turn of the new millennium, hence belonging to the so-called
Generation Z. According to several studies, this generation □ of digital natives □ is the first truly global generation, characterized by postmaterialist leanings and openmindedness towards issues encompassing climate change, gender inequalities and cultural diversity (e.g., Mohr and Mohr 2017; Pew Research Center 2019).
Our results suggest that COVID-19 can engender students to further cultivate these orientations, although with some differences according to the actual circumstances. For example, those students feeling unsecure and confused seem to be more concerned with improving aspects related to personal well-being and social needs, whereas attention to aspects related to identification and self-expression –
i.e., rethinking consumption habits and further cultivating green behaviors □ prevails among those students feeling resolute in facing the current situation.

Tab.3 Impact of coronavirus on personal practices and social orientations. N. 122, % within group

How would you define your attitude towards the current emergency?	**Practical and concrete**	**Aware, determinate, creative**	**I cannot really tell**	**Insecure and confused**
The current state of emergency may lead people to redefine some aspects of our lifestyles. Has something changed or could change regarding the following aspects?				
Yes, I am concerned about this aspect (% within group)				
Taking more care of myself connecting with my needs and wishes	35	40	52	56
Be more altruistic	23	14	17	33
Rethinking my consumption habits	35	61	35	44
Adopting a eco-friendlier lifestyle	12	30	17	15
Doing more to make the World a better place	27	36	35	30

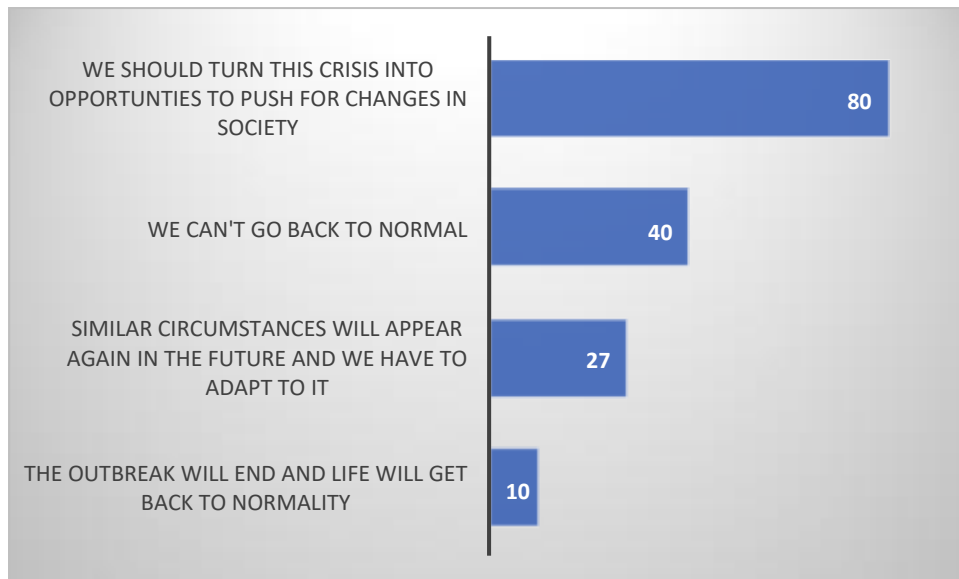**The institutional dimension and orientations towards the future**

Generation Z seems to be rather pragmatic regarding political issues, having fluid
political identities that develop more and more around – global cultural issues
(Castells 1997) and beyond the traditional left-right dichotomy. However, at the
same time, economic downturns and the crisis of welfare regimes can lead to temporary
reversions to materialist values (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Crouch 2019), which often

gives ground for populist parties to flourish. Similarly, while

global in its very nature, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided national governments with good arguments to (re)take control over their borders and increase consensus, sense of community and patriotism. This is at least what happened in the first weeks in Italy. At the time of the survey the Italian prime minister was more popular than he had ever been, while the Italians where showing a sense of community that echoed the post-war situation. Against this exceptional situation, however, trust in the national government does not emerge among our students as clearly and unconditionally as

may have been expected. Only one in three students say that the national government should have centralized more power in order to manage the situation.

Another third of the sample think that it would be better to decentralize power to

local institutions and civil society organizations; the other third does not have a

clear opinion about this issue. In addition, many students see the collaboration with

the EU and international organizations as important. Along the same line, despite being deeply melancholic, sad and concerned about the current situation, the students disagree with the surveillance deployed by governments to track and monitor the pandemic: 65 per cent do not consider this necessary and fear that it may be used for improper purposes. The students are also concerned about social surveillance practices, in particular peer-to-peer surveillance that translates into videos circulated on the social media about alleged lockdown violators. The students consider these practices as potentially dangerous for social cohesion. We expected insecurity to trigger more surveillance (Lyon 2001), but it is actually among those students who feel insecure and confused that the criticism against surveillance, especially peer surveillance (67 per cent) is higher. This result seems to be consistent with the remarkable demand for social solidarity among the students in this group. Almost all of the respondents are worried about fake news as well. Overall, this result suggests that our students are not seduced by the rhetoric of fear. Besides, scepticism towards political actors is rather high (at approximately 50 per cent), with social movements and organizations scoring better (at just 10 per cent) than political parties. The respondents are concerned about the social processes underlying the current crisis and consider it an opportunity to foster changes in society in order to make it more inclusive and more sustainable.

As figure 1 clearly shows, the idea that COVID-19 should be grasped as an opportunity to change things in society was by far the most selected option when

we asked students about their orientations towards the future.

Fig. 1 About the impact of coronavirus emergency and further scenarios, which of the following statements do you agree with the most? (Multiple response; N. 122, %)

WE SHOULD TURN THIS CRISIS INTO OPPORTUNTIES TO PUSH FOR CHANGES IN SOCIETY	80
WE CAN'T GO BACK TO NORMAL	40
SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES WILL APPEAR AGAIN IN THE FUTURE AND WE HAVE TO ADAPT TO IT	27
THE OUTBREAK WILL END AND LIFE WILL GET BACK TO NORMALITY	10

Conclusive remarks

The objective of this survey was to bring out the impact of the state of emergency and isolation on Italian students. It aimed to capture the change in their emotional state and daily practices, their orientation towards emerging social and institutional issues, and their plans for the future. For a not insignificant part of the students who hold down a job while attending university, the negative impact of the lockdown falls on their work rather than studies. The sense of insecurity and uncertainty that might be expected, however, is not the most widespread and pervasive emotion, since it affects only one quarter of the sample. Even though almost no one thinks that we will return to 'normality' as we knew it, the emotional response in the majority of cases is one of sadness and melancholy associated with resolute awareness and a good dose of creativity: this is how the
majority of students define their prevailing emotional state and the attitude with which they are facing the situation. A common, clearly expressed expectation emerges regarding future scenarios: 8 in 10 students believe that the current crisis should be seized as an opportunity to bring about changes in society. This fact emerges from the responses to everyday practices which students have already consolidated or would like to improve in the light of the crisis caused by COVID-19: greener behaviour, more altruism, more conscious consumption, construction of a more inclusive sociality through social media, and more commitment to building sustainable environmental development.
Almost everyone considers fake news a threat and asks for a clear and authoritative institutional response. On the other hand, this institutional demand does not translate into consensus towards the digital surveillance that many states are adopting to contain the pandemic. Even peer-to-peer surveillance is seen as an element of division rather than a safeguard of the common good. As we expected, and in line with other surveys carried out on representative samples for example, the Eurobarometer it is the non-partisan networks and movements of organized civil society that gain the greatest degree of trust. On the other hand, a polarization of orientations seems to emerge as to what the government should do at this juncture i.e., in the first month of the lockdown in terms of whether

powers should be more centralized or decentralized at the level of

municipalities and civil society networks. Nonetheless, the proportion of those who are undecided is substantial (about one quarter of the respondents). The first option was mainly selected by those who feel a greater need for security the students who had suffered most from the impact of the lockdown on their studies and work. The response the institutions will be able to give on this ground will be important in shaping the social and political scenarios of the near future. Indeed, Zygmunt Bauman (2017) stressed that the perception of insecurity associated with anxiety is very dangerous for social cohesion and democracy because it can lead politicians to "trade" the value of security for the values of freedom and solidarity.

Let us remember that, in the European context, young Italians together with young people from Eastern Europe were among the most likely to align themselves with the sovereigntist positions in the most recent elections. The majority of students who answered the questionnaire do not seem to be a breeding ground for fear entrepreneurs. They are not anxious or paralyzed by insecurity: on the contrary, the

pervasive feeling of melancholy does not prevent them from reacting and introducing change both in their daily practices and future prospects. They accept the challenge of the pandemic to rethink their life trajectories, in the awareness that proactive behavior needs to be adopted immediately in order to build a sustainable future and generate change both at the individual and collective level.

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