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**YOUTH AND
UNCONVENTIONAL
POLITICAL
ENGAGEMENT**

Ilaria Pitti



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A Nonna
Fin dall'inizio e per sempre

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As one of the many young scholars who daily deal with the increased competitiveness of the academic life and with the consequent need to work in an efficient, quick, and quantitatively productive way while meeting the continuous deadlines and managing the uncertainties of expiring contracts, I have spent most of my first years in academia jumping from a contract to another, from a fieldwork to another, from an article to another without having enough time to stop and reflect on what I was doing. Although in these years my “luggage” of personal experience and professional expertise has intensively grown, I believe research requires slowness.

This book is my very first attempt to “slow down and take a look around”, connecting the dots between the different researches I have carried out in the last years and reflecting on some broader implications of what I have observed and studied. As any first attempt, it has been frightening and challenging, and the idea of engaging in this endeavour would have not turned in something concrete without the encouragements of a series of people.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract The introductory chapter clarifies the focus of the book, introduces its analytical perspective, and presents its structure. Taking for granted the idea that young generations are “naturally” inclined to engage through non-conventional forms of participation, sociological and political science literature have often overlooked the changes emerging within youth unconventional political practices during the last decades, dismissing the socio-historical situatedness of political behaviours. In this perspective, this chapter argues the need to delve into the relationship between young people and unconventional participation in contemporary society in order to clarify and actualise our understandings of unconventional political participation.

Keywords Unconventional political participation • Youth conditions
• Youth political engagement

The word “participation” identifies a complex set of relationships between individuals and society, and it has two main semantic meanings: on the one hand, it means “being part”, and on the other, it can be interpreted as “taking part” (Cotta 1979).

In the first case, participation concerns the incorporation of an individual in the life of a socio-political solidarity (a society, a community, a group) as a legitimate member and implies the recognition and acquisition

of a status defined by a set of specific duties and rights (Sartori 1984). In this situation, participation has to do with membership and belonging.

In the second case, participation is intended as the active involvement of an individual in the processes of decision-making concerning a given socio-political solidarity and corresponds to active engagement (Kymlicka and Norman 1994).

Without dismissing the interactive dynamic of mutual influence of the two meanings of the term, this book is specifically concerned with participation as referring to “taking part” and it looks at the ways in which young people “take part” in the life of the communities they belong to, through unconventional political practices of participation (Barnes and Kaase 1979).

As we are going to discuss in the following chapter, the concept of unconventional political engagement is used in literature to refer to a variety of political practices broadly distinguished by their innovative, heterodox, and/or non-institutionalised nature and which are often interpreted as forms of protest. The concept is commonly applied in reference to actions ranging from demonstrations to boycotting, from squatting to engaging in social movements, and much confusion seems to exist around what “unconventional” really means.

However, when it comes to the analysis of the relationship between young people and participation, most Western studies on political youth engagement agree on highlighting a steady preference of youths for unconventional practices of engagement ahead of a well-documented decrease of interest in conventional ways of political involvement (Pickard and Bessant 2018). Since the 1960s, an elective youth affinity for unconventional practices has started to be taken for granted, and the idea that young generations are “naturally” inclined to engage through non-conventional forms of participation has become a “mantra” in sociological and political science studies (Dalton 2008).

This analysis does not aim at contradicting this idea, which is largely supported by analyses and researches, but seeks to delve into the relationship between young people and unconventional participation in contemporary society, looking more closely at the forms and meanings that this “natural elective affinity” takes in contemporary society.

The distinctiveness of the approach proposed in this book comprises the choice to focus attention on the connections between unconventional participation and youth conditions in contemporary society, using different case studies to explore *for what*, *how*, and *why* today’s young people

choose certain means of engagement. In so doing, the book seeks to bring back the specificities of contemporary youth at the centre of the analysis of unconventional practices of participation, highlighting their often overlooked socio-historical and generational situatedness.

Being aware that the discussed findings tell only the story of an active minority of young people who decide to engage using these practices (Marien et al. 2010), the book explores what the conditions of contemporary youth say about the unconventional participation of today's youths and what youth unconventional participation tells us about contemporary youth conditions. In so doing, this volume seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge of contemporary young generations' involvement in the public sphere.

The structure of the book combines a robust theoretical analysis with an extensive presentation of findings emerging from qualitative research conducted on different experiences of youth unconventional political participation.

In particular, Chap. 2 presents a reflection on the concept of unconventional political participation, aimed at exploring the different ways through which "unconventionality" has been interpreted in academic literature. In so doing, the chapter argues how literature on unconventional engagement tends to adopt either "purist" definitions (which do not account for emerging forms of unconventional participation) or "too vague" positions (which apply the adjective "unconventional" to almost every participatory action beyond voting). At the same time, the need to clarify on what basis an action can be defined as "unconventional" is argued, looking at the relevance and limits of those understandings where the word "unconventional" corresponds to "new", "heterodox", "non-institutionalised," or coincides with "protest".

Chapter 3 specifies the book's analytical perspective, discussing the need to look at the aims, forms, and meanings that unconventional political participation acquires in the light of the contemporary youth conditions. In consideration of this aim, the chapter looks at the association between youthfulness and unconventionality, exploring the relevance and limits of the explanations based on a life-course perspective and discussing why and how a generational approach of analysis is applied in the present study. An interpretation of contemporary youth's "generational location" (Mannheim 1928) in terms of a process of social "peripheralisation" of youth is proposed.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the stories of three experiences of unconventional political youth participation: a bottom-up politicisation of a neighbourhood started by a group of young Swedish people in an attempt to confront problems of access to housing and urban marginalisation; a squatted building transformed in a self-managed social centre by a group of Italian activists dealing with the occupational and existential uncertainties generated by the economic crisis; and a community centre opened by a group of young Italian *ultras* to overcome the social stigma that portrays them as “just hooligans and vandals”.

The case studies were conducted between 2015 and 2017, within the framework of two European research projects financed by the European Commission’s Horizon 2020 funding scheme: the project *Youthblobs*¹—focused on the involvement of young people in “radical” forms of unconventional political participation in Italy and Sweden, and on the influence of intergenerational relationships on the paths of youth’s political involvement—and the project *Partispace*²—that analyses the spaces and styles of youth participation in eight European cities.

Each case study was conducted using participant observation and biographical interviews, and intends to exemplify a possible combination between a given problematic youth subject (such as problems in getting access to housing, employment difficulties, social stigmatisation, and marginalisation) and the use of unconventional political practices to find a solution to that condition while engaging with issues which are relevant to the community.

In the analysis of each of the case studies, attention will be paid at (a) the goals young people seek to reach through unconventional forms of participation, (b) the specific practices through which these goals are achieved, and (c) the reasons why forms of unconventional engagement are preferred to conventional practices and ways of participation.

Through an extensive presentation of the three case studies, the book aims, first and foremost, to give visibility to the stories of participation of the young people who have been involved in this research, bringing back their efforts and their voices at the centre of the attention. On a second level, the book seeks to highlight how contemporary young people are

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