

Winou el shabab.

**Images of transformations
between the two shores of the Mediterranean**

Luca Queirolo Palmas and Luisa Stagi (eds)



Collana ***Immagin-azioni sociali***

04

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Graphic layout: *Elisa Marsiglia*
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This book has been object of a double blind peer-review according with UPI rules.

Publisher
GENOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Piazza della Nunziata, 6 16124 Genova
Tel. 010 20951558
Fax 010 20951552
e-mail: ce-press@liste.unige.it
e-mail: labgup@arch.unige.it
<http://gup.unige.it/>

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(eBook version)

ISBN: 978-88-94943-31-3 (eBook version)

Print on December 2018

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Second-generation youth of Egyptian background in Italy and the representation of the future

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1. Introduction¹

In this paper we analyze the representations of the future developed by a group of young men and women who belong to the so-called “new generations” of migration in Italy (Colombo and Rebughini 2013; Leonini and Rebughini 2010) that is: the sons and daughters of foreign parents, born in this country or here arrived before adulthood, following their parents and a project of family migration.

Specifically, we grounded our analyses on an in-depth qualitative study that involved young people of Egyptian background living in Milan or its province². In this research, we collected nine narrative interviews to boys and girls aged between 18 and 26, with at least one parent of Egyptian origin³. We analyzed their experiences and forms of

-
1. This paper results from the authors' shared analysis and work. Daniela Cherubini is the author of paragraphs 1 and 3, Carmen Leccardi is the author of paragraphs 2 and 4.
 2. This investigation is part of two wider international studies, aimed at analyzing the transformations in young people's lives and forms of social and political participation, in a transnational and comparative perspective. Research project “The ‘indignant’ generation. Space, power and culture in the youth movements of 2011: a transnational perspective (Genind)”, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education (I+D+I) and coordinated by Prof. Carles Feixa Pampols, University of Lleida (2013-2016); and research project is “Empowering the young generation: towards a new social contract in South and East Mediterranean countries (Sahwa)”, funded under the EU Seventh Framework Program and coordinated by Elena Sanchez, Cidob Barcelona (2013-2017).
 3. The interviewed differ for gender and for religious-ethnic belonging (5 come from a Coptic family and 4 from a Muslim one). Their profiles are instead similar with regard to educational level (8 are college students, one student is finishing high school) and juridical status (6 are Italian citizens, 3 are waiting for citizenship recognition being entitled to it). The interviews have been conducted by Dan-

transnational participation in the events that shook their parents' countries of origin, starting from the 2011 revolts. We focused on the impact of these historical events – whose scenario is the “country of origin” but which had a global resonance – on the biographies of these young men and women, on their identities, their forms of participation, their attitudes toward politics and, indeed, toward the individual and collective future. In this paper, we will focus on this latter aspect: we will look at the impact of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, as well as that of the momentous social and political transformations occurring in the parents' country of origin, on the conceptions of the future expressed by these boys and girls.

In contemporary sociology, the representations of the future and the forms of young people's future planning are issues of crucial importance that acquire value and deserve a specific attention in the current context of economic crisis, heavy social uncertainty and radical redefinition of the relationship with time (Leccardi 2017). Nonetheless, in this context the issue of young men's and women's of migrant origin relationship with the future has rarely been thematized or purposely investigated. On the contrary, the theme has been only marginally approached, subordinated to the main topics that usually drive the studies on the so-called “second and third generations” of migration: cultural assimilation, the integration within the society of residency, the identities and forms of belonging created by the sons and daughters of migrant parents.

This gap is evident in South Europe and Italy, the context of our analysis. Notwithstanding an increasing importance of this new generation and the sustained development of studies that investigate its nature and experiences within the Italian context (Ambrosini and Molina 2004; Andall 2002; Barbagli and Schmoll 2011; Bisi and Pförtl 2013; Caneva 2011; Colombo and Rebughini 2013; Colombo 2010; Dalla Zuanna, Farina, and Strozza 2009; Frisina 2015; Leonini and Rebughini 2010; Molina and Ceravolo 2013; Saitta and Cole 2011b, 2011a; Riccio 2011) there still exists a huge knowledge gap concerning the topic of the future.

ielia Cherubini and Ilenya Camozzi between September 2015 and January 2016. As such, they mirror the young men's and women's ideas to that moment, excluding important events in the country of origin and in the relation between Italy and Egypt, among them, the killing of the young researcher Giulio Regeni.

On the contrary, our analysis is based on the belief that the attention to this issue is strategic. The context within which the young men and women of migrant background articulate their visions and relate to the future is indeed full of ambivalences, and it is marked by the contrast between forms of negative discrimination as well as of exclusion in the realms of education, sociality, employment and law (Crul and Schneider 2009; Holdaway, Crul, and Roberts 2009; Di Bartolomeo 2011; Liebig e Widmaier 2009; Eurostat 2011) and the existence of a social and cultural capital (e.g.: bilingualism, ethnic and transnational networks) that can translate in a resource for the articulation of a positive vision of the future and of innovative existential and professional projects. Consequently, the first aim of our investigation is to contemplate these young's relationship with the future, considering their multiple cultural belonging and their partaking in transnational social networks (Camozzi *et al.* 2017). Our hypothesis – that finds its first proof in the results we will disclose – is that this positionality could represent, based on the situation and during different life times, a limit or a resource for the articulation of forms of future planning and uncertainty management for these subjects. Second, our investigation focuses on how the relationship with the future expressed by these young men and women develops and transforms following the Arab Uprisings experience. As we will see, despite the existence of forms of participation mediated by the media, by technologies and by the family of origin, this event bursts into the young's biographies and changes their visions of the future as well as of their ability to act in it. It has thus a strong impact on their relationship with the future and the idea of planning.

2. Time, temporality and the future

As known, the issue of temporality is crucial to understand group's organizations and cultures' deepest and most hidden paths to action (Ricoeur *et al.* 1975). In this context, the representations of the future play a primary role. As concerning the young, for instance, they constitute an extraordinarily transparent instrument to analyze youth cultures and generational semantics. More generally, it can be said that a vision of a long-term future, which is manageable and fashionable through present choices and

plans, and at the same time well conscious of the past, characterizes the time of democracy and politics (Chesnaux 2003). More in detail, the future can be considered the paramount determinant of the time of political responsibility. In this framework, collective movements represent the most genuine expression of the living bond between the past, the present and the future typical of the democratic temporality.

In this sense, the individual action that finds expression within the movements does not simply identify with a mid-long term temporal perspective. Based on this extended temporal background, which includes a reworking of the past, this action links, in the present, to the plurality of other individual actions put in relation by the movement. To its members, it must be underlined, the movement gives specific collective ends that are oriented toward the construction of an alternative future. This process of mutual recognition and reciprocity among actions produces collective identities, that in turn engender new actions. This dynamic – that Melucci (1996) masterfully analyzed in his studies on social movements – operates as a barrier against the discontinuity and fragmentation of the experience, two dimensions that characterize contemporary society. Moreover, within the movements the present “sets up” the future: the collective project that permeates this latter transforms the present in a sort of pursued future projects’ consequence. In practice, the present and the future becomes each other’s interface; they appear indistinguishable.

In the 2011 Arab Uprisings the protests and strategies of civil resistance – included Mohamed Bouazizi’s dramatic suicide, that gave birth to the Tunisian movement in December 2010 – the demonstrations and strikes, built this firm relation between the actions of the present and those of the future. This rich collection of collective actions generated the belief that the present and the future of Middle East and North Africa societies could be changed through the transformation of political regimes. In this way, an alternative vision of the future emerges, built on a project of democratic achievements, social justice and human rights (Gelvin 2015). The – often-dramatic – failure of this era of democratic hopes generated forms of representation of the future in which the collective dimension is silenced and pessimism dominates.

In this chapter, we investigate if and how the two phases of the Arab Springs collective movements’ vision of the future have informed the representations of the

future of some young Egyptians that live in Italy (the “young generations” of migration). Specifically, we want to understand in which ways this encounter might have acted as a “brake” for the generalized uncertainty that characterizes young Europeans’ relationship with the future – and particularly young South-Europeans, the most affected by the recent recession. They are the peers of the young of migrant origin we interviewed, those with whom they daily share spaces, times, hopes and also disillusionments.

However, to proceed with this investigation two preliminary analytical moves are necessary. The first concerns the relationship with the future as a key issue to understand youth cultures and identities; the second concerns the issue of transnationalism, directly embodied by our young interviewees.

2.1. Young people’s biographical time and the future

Despite the fact that the analysis of the future implies themes of strategic importance in order to capture the cultural and political representations of a generation and at the same time to understand its strategies of action, the issue of the future has long been underestimated by the sociology of youth. Only in the last decades the academic community involved in youth studies has accorded attention to the issue (e.g. Anderson *et al.* 2005; Brannen and Nielsen 2007; Brooks and Everett 2008; Devadason 2008; Leccardi 2005; Machado Pais 2003; Woodman 2011). However, despite the relative novelty, this theme has generated a highly stimulating and empirically grounded debate, principally around the issue of the presence or the lack of forms of future planning among the members of the new millennium generation.

One useful link between the theme of the future and that of youth is constituted by biographical time. Biographical time can be understood as the temporal dimension that emerges as the outcome of the processes through which subjects relate to the past, live their own present and deal with the future. Phenomenological sociology, through its interest in *Lebenswelt*, has produced a significant analysis of biographical time. According to Luckmann (1993), biographical time consists in the interpretative cognitive schemata which people use to build a bridge between their life-time and the temporal space lying beyond them. A person’s life therefore relates to a dimension that exists

‘beyond’ both inner and intersubjective time, because it is embedded in historical time. Viewed in this light, biographical schemes – temporal categories internal to the socially available stock of knowledge – can be seen as ‘cognitive solutions’ to the problem of the finiteness of human life. More generally, they may be interpreted as normative models which enable the integration of short-term with long-term temporal sequences of action, and of individual time with institutional times. By their means, and based on the formulation of life projects they allow, more distant time-horizons are related to everyday actions, and vice versa. Moreover, because biographical schemes link individual lives with longer social durations – with respect to the past as well as to the future – they are instruments of prime importance in constructing an individual’s narrative. Hence they are simultaneously expressions of subjectivity and components of the socio-historical world.

Given this close tie between biographical time and socio-historical time, the first tends to change in keeping with historical transformations in the ways of representing the relationship between the past, the present and the future. In order to understand the relation between young people, their lifetime and the future it is necessary, then, to consider the new physiognomy that the future has been acquiring over the course of the last decades. After the economic boom years following the end of the Second World War, the uncertainty deriving from the opening-up of the future changed ever more rapidly into a defensive attitude. The ‘great recession’ of the last few years transformed this defensive attitude – for which the future is represented as characterized more by risks than opportunities – in a true fear. Backed also by the crisis of the ideology of the progress, this fear leads to deny the modern Western vision of the future, usually thought as an open field of promises (Taguieff 2000). As a side effect, we witness a diffuse over-evaluation of the present, a temporal dimension that, in such an epoch marked by uncertainty, acquires sometimes the characteristics of a true lifeline, able to grant some form of control on our life-time.

In a situation like this, there is a great diminution in the validity of the formal calculative rationality which lay at the heart of modern plans. Where social uncertainty strongly grows, it becomes very problematic to foresee the consequences of one’s own actions, their prospects of success or failure. As a consequence, the modern individual

seems to be increasingly incapable of calculations, and even decision-making becomes increasingly difficult. And this occurs in a moment in which, due to the intense processes of individualization at play today, a veritable obligation to make decisions in a multiplicity of different environments enters into biography (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2001).

For the young, all this translates in the urgency to radically redefine the relationship with the future. Given that the push toward the future cannot be stopped, it is necessary to envision new means capable of granting a positive relationship with the future. If mid/long-term projects, intended as an intertwining of goals and extended temporal scales, seem to be abated, it is necessary to develop alternative strategies of time control: for instance, the reduction of projects' temporal extension, increasingly envisioned in the short term; the decision to replace the all-encompassing 'life project' with 'small' circumstantial ones, related to delimited social and existential realms; in some cases, the choice to totally give up the confrontation with future, choosing the present as the privileged temporal scope. Generally, though, for the young, the prevailing of the short-term on the long one does not signify the loss of an interest in the future; rather, the temporal horizon of the action must realistically reduce to face the processes of contemporary social acceleration, imposing also a transformation of the relationship with the biographical time (Woodman and Leccardi 2015). On a practical level, the relationship with the future does not nullify – just in seldom cases – but it nonetheless radically transforms. Specifically, contrary to what happens in moments of intense collective mobilization, the personal and the collective future tends to split, and similarly the biographical project and the collective/social one. In this case, the relation with the future is no more identified with the realization of a collective project of change. The most vital personal energies are invested to find out an individual way to cope with the contemporary accelerated social change and the deep uncertainty that accompanies it.

In the case analyzed in this chapter, for instance, a strong disillusionment followed the hopes of young Egyptians that live in Italy about the possibility to collectively change the future of their country through the uprisings. This disillusionment pushed them to focus on their personal individual future. Through a different path from their

Italian peers, these young men and women end up sharing with them a strongly individualized perspective on the future anyway.

2.2. Youth, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism

But there is a specificity to this perspective, which is well highlighted by the following pages. In our opinion, this specificity must be understood by looking at the transnational experience that these young people live, and its effects on their biographical time.

In his book *Transnationalism* (2009), Steven Vertovec rightly points out that this term has gradually accrued a number of different meanings over recent decades. Yet, despite this plurality, all the interpretations of the term refer to processes related to the dynamics of contemporary globalization, namely: the physical and virtual crossing of national borders by increasingly mobile subjects; the changing experiences and cultures that accompany them, and the new subjectivities that take shape and come to the fore as a result of these movements.

Today especially young people, usually tend to construct representations and imaginaries that draw on symbols, information flows, cultural practices and networks of relationships that are territorially unbounded. However, young transnationalists – as we can define the young Egyptians interviewed in the research – combine on an everyday basis their sense of belonging to a far country with cultures as well as forms of political and social participation without boundaries. This particular experience can engender forms of cultural innovation that are in tune with the “global ecumene” (Hannerz 1992) we all live in.

In a certain sense, we could say that these young people experiment a sort of transnational, cosmopolitan form of experience of the future. Indeed, especially when it comes to politics, the link between transnationalism and cosmopolitanism proves to be particularly strong. As Hirst and Held (2002) underline, forms of transnationalism, and of transnational citizenship in particular, entail the very capacity to detach from the idea of borders and territories, and to open to the cultural heterogeneity that is the basis of cosmopolitanism.

Thus, these young’s vision of the future bears the mark, on one side, of their participation – as indirect it may be – in the Arab Springs, that is, their partaking in a collec-

tive project of change. On the other side, they truly are the sons and daughters of a historical time as the Western one, in which not only the temporal horizons shrink but, and above all, in the face of a pervasive social uncertainty, the ability to plan radically individualizes. The biographical schemes, to recall Luckmann's term (1993), that they build thus bear the mark of multiple historical times and of different perspectives of transformation. They were partly shaped by a strong relation between individual and collective future, but also, at the same time, by the loss of this relation. Linked to the specific global-local relation they live, the specificity of their biographical constructions – and thus of their relationship with the future – suggests a strong analytical interest.

3. Italian-Egyptian young people in Milan: the Arab uprisings and the future

Before analysing the representations of the future of the young people interviewed in Milan, it is important to recall the basic elements of their experience of partaking in the uprisings and their aftermaths. In most case, these are forms of distant participation, in which the use of social networks, of new and traditional (as TV) media is relevant, as following and commenting Egyptian news and events with relatives and friends that lives on both sides of the Mediterranean. In 2011, when the revolutions burst, as well as during the following years, most of the interviewees lived in Italy. A boy and a girl are the exception, being directly involved in some crucial events of the recent Egyptian history during a temporary stay in the country for study or family reasons. In general, though, the cases of direct participation are rare – as street protests and the like – and in the collected experiences, there is no trace of active engagement in social movements and transnational organizations related to Egyptian political life.

This notwithstanding, most of the interviewees show a strong interest and involvement in the 2011 events and a likewise evident sense of disappointment and dismay for the following years dramatic events. In other words, the partaking in the so-called “Arab Springs” – included the distant participation of migrations descendants – seems to be marked by an emotional trend of enthusiasm and disillusionment, as many studies show (Camozzi *et al.* 2017).

This experience impacts on the vision of the collective future and of the possibilities to act upon it. While the revolts and the tearing down of Hosni Mubarak's regime fuel hopes in the likelihood of a collective transformation stemming from the young and from the bottom-up, the following events and the realization of an economic, social and political situation that betrays the expectations of the revolution shake or destroy the faith in the possibility of acting for change. The young express a rather negative vision of the collective future, in which there is no room for any effective, long-term social and political transformation. All appearances notwithstanding and with the exception of passing moments of excitement – in which even Mubarak faces the evidence of an ever-uncertain future – at the end “nothing really changes”:

Nothing is permanent, even President Mubarak was put under pressure and removed (...). There is nothing certain about the future. (...) I think few people control the world; it is something bigger than us (Int. 6, 18-year-old boy, Muslim family, secondary school student).

We hoped things could change, that we could change something, but I think we must admit that things have got worst. Nothing has changed for the better (Int. 7, 22-year-old boy, Muslim family, college student).

Among the interviewees, the vision of national and international politics – and thus of the collective future – that emerges is a vision of a realm out of control, notwithstanding the possible interest and individual stance; a realm on which the “grasp is lacking,” since everything is governed by strong powers, economic and political interests hard to dent. “People do not count, at the end”:

Has this experience changed your way of looking at politics?

Maybe I realized that politics is always more powerful than us. I think that in Egypt is more evident because the government controls everything. Before, I thought that maybe in other countries, in Europe, the US (...) there was more freedom. Then I started to compare what was happening both in Egypt and in Italy, and I realized that also in Italy people complain a lot and the government does very

little (to improve their situation). I think that there is no so much freedom as we think. (...) Now (after all the events in Egypt) I am even more cynical than before. At the beginning, I thought “Maybe this is the right time for something to change!” but this idea lasted just one year and then I realized that it was a farce and in the end, they got what they left but wanted back. At the end, nothing changes. (Int. 8, 26-year-old boy, Muslim family, college student).

I am more pessimistic because after all that happened, the message they let us pass on to the citizens was that they could do whatever they wanted but, ultimately, they do not count, everything is in the hands of the power and they (the citizens) cannot change anything. (...) Regarding my personal situation, I am very confident. In so far as the world situation, I am pessimistic, and I think that things will get even worst (Int. 9, 19- year-old girl, Muslim family, college student).

In contrast with the “shady” vision of the future described above, a “bright” and rather proactive vision of the individual future takes place, as the interview excerpt just quoted above shows. The young interviewed express a rather positive and faithful attitude toward “their” future, and invest many energies to envision and build it, within a framework of uncertainty. They develop strategies to manage uncertainty and to continue to model, adapt and re-model their personal as well as professional life plans. “*I always think about it*” – this is a sort of refrain, a very frequent answer to our introducing question “*Do you ever think about the future?*” – which often leads to an extended part of the interview in which they reflexively think about their short, medium and long-term plans, counter-plans, expectations, and doubts.

In some cases, among these plans, there are projects more strictly linked to transnational relationships and imageries and that, thus, can be read as an expression of the “transnational character” of the lives of this second-generation youth (Levitt e Waters 2002). For instance, plans of migration in Egypt for professional and educational reasons, or for personal ones, tied to personal growth and “roots” search needs.

Do you ever think about the future?

Yes, I do. I already have some ideas actually. But then I don’t know what will

happen. First of all, I want to get the degree (...) I'd like to interrail (...). What else? A master's perhaps... I don't exclude going to live in Egypt. It is a possibility. It would be good, I guess (Int 4, 21 years old girl, Copt, college student).

I have high hopes...

I have big projects and (laughing and joking).

I think all of them will come to a bad end! (...)

I have projects... for instance, I have decided to go to Egypt and study Arabic, because the quality of Arabic teaching is very low here. (...) I will take courses in classic and commercial Arabic and then I will come back to Italy and look for a job (...) I think I'll go round about September for 2 years (Int 2, 23-year-old girl, Copt, college student).

But even outside these striking cases, which imply physical mobility or plans of “return,” in general these young's relationship with the future seems to be marked by their multiple cultural belonging and their partaking in transnational families and social networks. What emerges from the interviews is that these young's relationship with the future twists with multiple cultural references and is fostered by a confrontation with different perspectives and life choices, as represented by relatives and peers – male and female – that live in Italy, in Egypt, or in other parts of the diasporic world. In other words, these young can draw from a heterogeneous repertoire to “think themselves in the future”.

If I look, for instance, at my cousins (in Egypt): after the college, they got married and now have children. (...) I also want to get married and it is hard (to wait) (...) I am a bit envious and I think that they are lucky because they already have what they wanted. But then, I think, you have a child... and you do not have maternal leave. Like my cousin for instance, and she had to quit her job. And I continue thinking that I am happy here and I have the opportunity to do something... I do not want to be a desperate housewife (Int 2 23-year-old girl, Cop, college student).

Do you ever compare your life with the life of your peers and friends who live in Egypt?

As a man?

...yes... As you prefer...

Our culture charges man with the responsibility for everything, so from this point of view, for me it is easier to build a future here, than for a man living there. (...) It is easier for me to build up my future, my job. Unfortunately, who is in Egypt has less opportunities, less motivations to learn something new. And also, to dream, eh! (..) Your best aspiration is to buy your house, have a car, get married and that's all. I would like to do a PhD, I want to do so much (Int. 7, 22- year-old boy, college student, Muslim family).

This has implications both in terms of more chances of choice as well as more complexity and uncertainty. Depending on cases and circumstances, this can be and it is lived by the same young men and women as an additional resource, an “extra oomph,” or a burden, requiring an additional effort to negotiate between different choices, life options and cultural norms.

As a result, the attitudes towards the future expressed by these young people are far both from the negative ones they often describe in relation to their peers living in Egypt, and from the dominant narrative spread among the Southern European youth. They challenge or at least, they do not entirely reproduce the crisis and stolen future tale, typical of a generation who experiences downward mobility compared to their parents' generation. Of course, the profile and the social position of most of the interviewees helps to explain this positive attitude: they are college students, and in most of the cases their parents have medium or high educational levels. But in our view, this is also due to the fact that they often compare their present situation and their future opportunities with the situation lived by their friends, cousins and peers in Egypt, or in other parts of the world and of the Arab world. They are aware that there is always “*someone who is less lucky*” and they particularly appreciate the opportunities related to the fact of living in Europe and enjoying the fundamental right to mobility.

On the other hand, they can also compare their situation with that of their parents' generation, while the history of migration provides a powerful example of how building

one's one future is difficult but possible, in a way open to the idea that their destiny is in their own hands.

In a nutshell, the multiple belonging of these Egyptian-Italian-and-much-more young people, as well as their transnational connections and their relationship with the migration background of their families, appear as key elements that shape their truly innovative elaboration of the relationship with the future.

4. Concluding remarks

By investigating the relationship of young people of migrant background with the collective and individual future and the sociological dimensions of time and of biographical projects, this chapter is an attempt to contribute to overcoming a relevant gap in youth studies and in the research that investigates the so-called “second generations” in Italy and Southern Europe. Drawing on a qualitative research carried out in Milan, Italy, we read the experiences of these young people in light of the recent developments elaborated within these fields of research and discussed in the first part of the chapter, as well as in the book introduction.

Our results suggest that the Arab Uprisings and their aftermaths represent a “crucial event” in the biographies of our young interviewees, which impacts on their construction of identity and belonging, on their relationship with their (or their parents’) country of origin, as well as on their present and future plans. At the same time, our results show that the multiple belongings and transnational ties expressed by this new generation of young people affect their ability to imagine and build their future, as well as their ability to deal with the inner uncertainty that characterizes the individual and collective life of our times. Despite their fairly pessimistic and detached views on the collective future and long-term social change, they do not give up and continue to imagine their individual future and closer plans between two or more worlds. The results show a rich array of choices – whether actually practiced or just imagined – that mark a distance with those people who are used, or forced, to live within only one world, a one-dimensional horizon.

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