

### What Matters? Changes in European Youth Participation

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### WHAT HAPPENS?

#### Changes in European youth participation

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**ABSTRACT:** During the twentieth century, theoretical and empirical studies aimed to analyse changes in individual participation and in social and political dynamics. A great emphasis was attributed to the process of individualization. Young people were described as a generation with a limited political involvement, especially considering traditional forms of political participation, but more and more likely to search an "individualized" way towards the participation. Furlong and Cartmel bring back the youth identity to the thesis about the reflexive rebuilding of identity, according to which the individualization is a process due to some structural characteristics of post-industrial society. Employing data from European Values Study researches, we test if and how structural variables and contextual dynamics affect political involvement and its changes, with particular attention on youth involvement. Actually, participation takes the form of a multifaceted reality and youth individual profiles are heterogeneous. The process of individualization has, in this sense, different effects and various consequences on participation's profiles. According to these considerations, this analysis shows the incidence of structural, contextual and cognitive dimensions on individual choices to participate, focusing on longitudinal plan and cohorts. A second step compares the causal importance of structural and cognitive dimension on different typologies of involvement.

**KEYWORDS:** Individualization, Participation, Association, Youth Involvement

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## **1. Late *modernity* and the process of individualization**

Sociological studies have reinterpreted political participation, looking at new and emerging forms of social activation and shifting the focus from collective forms of participation to individualized, from on-site and offline modalities to online (Stayner 2007). Particularly over the last twenty years, political participation - more than other phenomena - has highlighted the process of individualization that marks post-industrial societies (Beck 2006; Lash 1992; Giddens 1990, 1991a, 1991b; Millefiorini 2015). This leads to the hypothesis that young people, since they are socialized within this context, more clearly reflect its distinctive features (Cuzzocrea and Collins 2015).

The interpretation of the transition process to the new era - late modernity or post modernity - has consequences on how to study and interpret individualized participation. Reproducing "older dichotomies, and the replication of wider disciplinary debates at the sub-disciplinary level" (Woodman and Threadgold 2011: 8; see Abbott 2001), the sociology of youth replicates many long-running questions and discussions, such as structure versus agency, continuity versus change, or embedded inequality.

If one were inclined to assess the contemporary world as the fruit of an epochal transition (that may only be comparable to the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times), one would emphasize the breaking points of, and stress the need for, an overall redefinition of the paradigms of social research (Lyotard 1984; Baudrillard 1988). According to this point of view, the post-modern age implies a weakening of structural analysis. This viewpoint, which we define as "radical", is based on the assumption that some structural variables have lost their predictive "power" with regard to political and social behaviour, to be replaced by new and different lifestyles that make traditional theories inappropriate.

In order to analyse the participation of young people, the perspective that we apply is named as "revisionist". This approach accepts some observations about changes in social dynamics. The perspective doesn't imply that the characteristics of late modernity produce a strong break with the past. This transformation is not so radical as to require a complete redefinition of the paradigms in the social research. Since its beginning, the modern age, in fact, has revealed growing differentiation and pluralization of lifestyles, the weakening of social regulatory processes, and a reinforced sense of uncertainty (Giddens 1990). Although today social structures appear highly fragmented, with the origins of these transformations often unknown, behaviour and life styles changes are detectable and can be predicted by using instruments and theories that are already known (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

Many categories that have emerged in the modern age are still present and are applicable to the analysis of our society. Nevertheless, the relationship between individual and community has changed significantly. From this point of view, we share and adopt more cautious positions in interpreting these changes: this is in keeping with scholars who do not presuppose the coming of a new 'post-modernist' era but the arrival of 'high modernity' or 'late modernity' (Giddens 1990, 1991a, 1991b) or 'reflexive modernization' (Lash 1992). While not denying the long-term implications related to recent socio-economic changes, these prospects are based on the assumption that the changes do not represent turning points but can (and must) be interpreted using the keys that are already known, if necessary to readjust them. There are divergent consequences, if we are looking at participation.

The first perspective shows a "withering" of political involvement, with a gradual return to the private sphere and an intense relativism of values. In this case, individualization is closely linked to individualism. The term individualization refers to a long "process" of emergence of individualism in modern societies. According to an individualistic logic, a person tends gradually to free themselves from the constraints of the traditional social bond and from the rigidity of social norms and sanctions (Millefiorini 2015: 14).

The second perspective, alongside a decline in traditional forms of participation, shows a rise of alternative ways of activation and aggregation of interests. According to Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1991a), individualization should clearly be separated from individualism, for many reasons: "while individualism is commonly understood as a personal attitude or preference, individualization refers to a macro-social phenomenon" (De Beer and Koster 2009: 54-55). In particular, changes in the welfare state replaces "many traditional institutions, like the family, the local community, church and class, as the defining collectivity of people's identity" (ibidem). In this prospective, individualization is produced by modern institutions and is undergone by individual citizens.

Individualization, related to some structural aspects of post-industrial society (Furlong and Cartmel 1997) gives impetus to new issues from the personal sphere and issues as ecology, animal rights, quality of life, etc. The socio-structural variables retain, in this perspective, an explanatory value, due to an asymmetrical structure of access to meaning<sup>1</sup> (Bettin Lattes 1999), that is able to determine an internal segmentation in-

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<sup>1</sup> The author has delineated two distinct youth generations: a passive one which looks at social reality according to the patterns proposed by the late-adult generations; a minority one of committed actors, in which traces of protagonism with unreleased characters can be glimpsed (see Weber, Loumakis and Bergman 2003).

side the young generation about conceptions of risk and strategies of action (Oloffson and Wall 2008; Woodman 2011).

## **2. Collective dynamics and individualization**

The process of individualization, which can already be traced in the late 1800s, has accelerated rapidly over the last two decades. In the transition from first to second modernity, traditional reference systems lose their relevance in the face of the growing importance attributed to the individual, in particular in relation to his freedom. Individualization is linked to the growing centrality of free choice with respect to controversial issues. At the same time, individualization involves the weakening of absolute sources of legitimacy. Identity and personal fulfilment become more important than in the past, although the reference to the other and solidarity are relevant (Sciolla 2004; Cuzzocrea and Collins 2015). For example, there is a crisis of traditional structures such as parties or voluntary associations while "individual, short-lived, noncommittal, and highly results-oriented volunteer involvement" is rising (Hustinx 2005: 624). Sociological studies have developed an analysis of the sub-dimensions of the phenomenon, highlighting the combination of three trends, which cannot always proceed in parallel: de-traditionalisation as the gradual loss of the adherence of individuals to traditional institutions; emancipation, as the declining influence of social groups and institutions on individual attitudes; heterogenization as the result of a lack of traditional institutions' appeal and as the growth of personal (and different) choices (De Beer and Koster 2009: 55-56). In this context, values are evolving rapidly, and this transformation is considered a direct effect of the process of individualization: the centrality of the individual's personal liberty, the pursuit of self-realization, the autonomy claim, as well as the relativization of authority. In the new landscape, there is a strong tension between the pursuit of freedom and the defence of equality, and between the principle of authority and that of responsibility.

Regarding this last point, individualization consists in individual actors taking on the effects - even collateral - of their actions (Bauman 2000). The centrality attributed to the ability to control the trajectory of their lives acts as a counterbalance to risk perception, uncertainty and insecurity. The narratives of young people show that they would like to shape their futures - even in this challenging era - in an attempt to become autonomous and 'personally effective', in different settings (Evans 2002). Young people are committed to control of their life's "trajectory" in the areas of family life,

peer relations, and education, by becoming better resourced for the future (Aaltonen 2013).

The European Value Study data confirms that European citizens see their lives as "under control" to a greater degree than they did in the past, and this occurs as part of a process that can be considered a gradual self-direction of subjective identities. Despite the severe economic crisis, Europeans believe they can control and direct their own lives. From 1981-84 to 2008-10, there is a slow and gradual growth toward the polarity of "control" with a strengthening of the modalities that express greater confidence in their abilities (Table 1).

**Table 1 - How much control do you have over your life? (Column % 1980-2008)**

<i>Levels of control</i>	<i>1981-1984</i>	<i>1990-1993</i>	<i>1999-2001</i>	<i>2008-2010</i>
1	3,34	2,48	2,59	2,49
2	2,54	1,92	1,68	1,93
3	4,96	4,25	4,10	4,46
4	6,38	5,52	4,81	5,20
5	15,66	16,67	15,11	14,57
6	13,00	13,12	12,11	11,02
7	16,24	16,67	17,05	16,27
8	20,03	19,19	21,03	21,20
9	9,02	8,02	9,42	10,52
10	8,83	12,15	12,10	12,34

Source: Own elaborations on EVS 1980-2010

Although recent studies have shown that the two main ethical universes shared by young people relate to freedom on the one hand and the respect of rules on the other (Sciolla 2004; Wall and Oloffson 2008), the debate on the process of individualization is more complex (Pollock 1997).

The analysis of Beck projected individualization within the globalization process, that has profoundly changed our belief system (especially the perception of risk). Undergoing a complex system of interdependencies, the individual no longer perceives his existence as ordinate and linear but rather as the result of individual choices and strategies. According to the scholar, the decisions are apparently conscious and deliberate: behind the expression of freedom, however, structural constraints are still hidden.

Individualization is at the centre of a complex of developments and social experiences: on the one hand, it refers to the dissolution of pre-constituted forms of social life -

for example, the wearing out of traditional categories like class and social status, gender roles, family, neighbourhood, but on the other there is the rising of relevant new groups or categories. With the current crisis of traditional categories used to study social life (religion, traditional culture, State, etc.), researchers need to find new instruments and concepts (Beck 2000: 4-5). According to this perspective, the apparent individualization is nothing other than a new form of social homologation, based on conforming to the (individualistic) behaviour of others: in this homologation, the individual finds the reassurance that can help to mitigate the fragility and weakness of his ego, caused by individualization process (Millefiorini 2015: 155). Modern societies impose themselves on the individual by establishing new institutional demands, new controls and constraints, through the labour market, the welfare state and by bureaucracy. Entitlement to benefit derives from the possession of precise requirements that, in turn, stem from individual choices and decisions, for which a person has to be responsible. The burden of responsibility for the individual's destiny, in traditional societies, was instead shifted to the collective level. In such cases, in the face of limited personal freedom, the possibilities were preselected: advantages or constraints were inextricably linked to class, religion, gender, etc.

Subjects are now "craftsmen" of their own destiny, according to rhetoric of choice that imputes new benefits or social positions to the individual's capacity to commit himself, to compete with others and to act. From the perspective of "collaborative individualization, young people "may shape-shift as the individuals that comprise them encounter and move through different challenges, and thus affiliate with different communities of support" (Cuzzocrea and Collins 2015: 148). Connection with other people can be inside a strategy of "networked individualism" that young people conceive of as a key part of their own success (Evans 2002). According to a logic of resilience or of resistance, individuals share knowledge and experiences with others.

It is, nevertheless, necessary to separate the level of subjective perception from that of concrete possibilities. "Widespread opportunities", perceived subjectively, are not always real: structural constraints remain, and these are often not detected individually (thus generating anxiety, a sense of failure and uncertainty)

Dangers and insecurities, which were before defined within specific contexts, and through the mediation of classes or social groups, are now interpreted and processed by individuals. The choice falls on subjects but they are often not able to take it with a sufficient degree of certainty. Structural constraints - old or new - are not irrelevant: uncertainty and risk assume a much more central role in directing the individual, inasmuch as he perceives his own opportunities as uncoupled from structural conditions, regardless of what actually happens. Beck points out that the individualization process

also depends on presence of structural constraints as the group, the State and context (Beck 2000: 10).

Similarly, Giddens emphasizes the structural dimension: the social structure exerts an influence on the growing disinterest in political institutions and the simultaneous increase of the centrality of economic institutions. Whether this is to be considered as a new era with discontinuous character in the longitudinal plane, or in continuity with phenomena already evident in the modern age, there is no doubt that current society is characterized by a number of socio-economic changes that have produced a growing perception of uncertainty and a weakening of social security. In particular, there is a new "contingency of the life course" with a crisis of traditional "transition" (Heinz 2001: 9; see Pollock 1997, 2002). It is now very difficult to observe a linear succession of steps such as the conclusion of studies, getting a job, leaving the parental home, moving to new, autonomous living quarters, marriage (or similar linkage), parenthood: "their order and the irreversibility and the frame which ensured their overall meaning are lacking" (Leccardi and Ruspini 2006: 2). Wyn and Woodman (2006) point out the importance to study the experiences of each single generation more than to compare generations. There is not a unique model of transition (education, work and family). In fact, applying only a comparison among generations, studies overestimate the importance of failed transitions despite rising new paths of transitions.

Traditional structural dimensions, such as gender, ethnicity and social class, continue to be fundamental to the interpretation of social facts, but the underlying dynamics can be re-defined, at least in some respects. Paradoxically, studies that describe deep-en processes of change forget to include the economic spheres of life but "cultural representations can change while economic conditions remain static". His analysis dwells on youth and the reproduction of structured inequalities. In studying youth, "we need to remain aware of these crucial economic continuities, and frame our interpretations accordingly" (Furlong 2006: xv). Therefore, the traditional ways of conceptualizing social class can, for example, be revisited in the light of the changes in the labour market. One must also consider the impact of the subjective perception of social change. In fact, if structural dynamics continue to affect the macroscopic level, the mechanisms and processes underlying these dynamics are, today, more and more difficult to manage and redirect, or even simply for the individual to perceive. All this weakens collective action, and makes for a consolidation of values and of individualistic and individualizing logic. It may be imagined, for example, that subjects, in disadvantaged positions, tend to perceive the social world as unpredictable, dark, full of risks and uncertainties: these problems are dealt with only by acting on the level of individual negotiation, even where the interdependence dynamics remain intact (Elias 1982).



### **3. The political trajectory of the new generations**

Changes in values induce a reflection about the young generation and individual acts. Reflections of the individualizing path are not always pessimistic<sup>2</sup>. With different accents, it is underlined that change does not coincide with a destruction of values but rather with a different assessment of the universe of values (Boudon 2003). If it is true that there is a growth in individualism, this happens as part of a mediation/tension with a specific social context. Therefore, typical traits of individualism can vary in a few years, depending on their socialization experience (Nugin 2013). Similar observations can be made with respect to the thesis of De Lillo on the emergence of restricted social relations among young people in Italy: the young people are more likely than in the past to move towards intimate relationships (friendship, family, love), without hindering the spread of a solidarity ethic (De Lillo 2007).

In the branch of studies that suggests continuity between first and second modernity, there is a debate over the real possibility of integration in a highly individualized context. Beck talks about young people as subjects that are capable of redefining themselves with respect to future challenges: they are looking for an individualized way of conducting their relationships, of participation, socialization, of individualizing the path leading back to the emergence of sub-politics (Beck 2000). According to Beck, there is an opportunity for a possible recomposition of politics, but it is necessary to know how new phenomena should be regarded. The commonality of material interests and citizens' participation in welfare cannot realistically become a social cement (and there are no preconditions for such structures, in contexts where regimes of poverty, destitution and recession have become established). The author outlines a way to integration that requires a full understanding of the individualized nature of society itself. The mobilization of young generations depends on the development of analysis able to interpret current challenges, such as unemployment or the ecosystem crisis: it should not repress, but rather encourage individual uprisings, in order to forge new alliances that are politically open, and can be defined as "projective integration" (Beck 2000).

New topic areas and new repertoires of action are also identified by Giddens: late modernity (and its individualization) process directs participation towards "life politics", that is, policies which affect "issues which flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization

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<sup>2</sup> The post-modern age is associated with a weakening of the traditional references (and safeties) of stability and ability to plan pathways through life (cfr Sennett 1998).

influence global strategies" (Giddens 1991a, 1991b). The supposed crisis of traditional participation would actually hide the emergence of new participatory practices: innovative repertoires are informal, non-institutionalized, horizontal and increasingly divorced from traditional social cleavages, but they are important for the construction of an individualized subjectivity. These theories have focused research on "new" youth participation, inducing an overall redefinition of categories of participation, which are also linked to the strengthening of the digital platform (Stayner 2007).

Several scholars have identified the loss of relevance of what have traditionally been defined as structural factors (social status, family, genus, etc.) in determining or influencing choices, values and attitudes. They have felt that this leak was the consequence of individualization, or rather of its social causes (work flexibility, uncertainty, risk, etc.). The civic-political identity construction of young people would be linked, in this perspective, to personal dynamics and perceptions, and therefore be difficult to predict or analyse with reference to traditional instruments. If it is true that individual subjectivity increasingly characterizes social experience, especially for youth, and that the criterion of personal choice - which is no longer irreversible - becomes less binding, it is also true that the contemporary world and its characters have changed the link between social context and individual perception. According to Bauman (2000), loneliness and insecurity characterize the construction of individual identity, especially among younger generations. This involves a radical redefinition of the relationship between subject and social context, in which the individual has a plurality of memberships, all labile. The hypothesis deserves, however, empirical confirmation.

The aim of this work is to observe how the individualization process has affected and altered the relationship of young people with politics: their choice over participation, and the modalities that are open to a social segment that is particularly exposed to the destabilizing effects of contemporary society. In particular, we want to investigate how structural dimensions can help to explain or identify the possible emergence of specificities and differences with respect to political participation. The hypothesis is that structural dynamics and conditions are relevant because they significantly affect how young people experience the process of individualization. The presence of resources - family, relational and / or cognitive - strongly affects (today, perhaps even more than in the past) the definition of individual experience. Modalities and methods of participation do not disregard this dynamic but are integrated with it. It is true that post-modern society brings with it the emergence of individualized forms of participation, and also generates new ways of defining participation in view of the reflexive paradigm. To summarize, the hypotheses that we want to evaluate are as follows:

H1 The process of individualization implies a greater overall tendency of young people to self-referential participation (sport, culture, age-related issues) and a lower propensity towards those participatory modalities that take place in more traditional political "containers" (parties, unions, religious groups)

H2 Structural variables still have a greater predictive power on the propensity to involvement than other related dynamics that are more linked to the process of individualization (subjective states expressed as opinions, motivations, ethical guidelines, etc.). This also applies to those forms of participation considered as "self-referential", the increase of which may actually come from a greater propensity for individualization of choices (individualized participation). It is probable that opportunities continue to be dependent on structural conditions, although action involves an alignment of these with "Desires" and "Beliefs" (Hedström 2005). In particular:

H 2.1 The context has a significant influence on selected methods of participation. Therefore, living in areas with a better quality of life (higher average incomes, lower unemployment rates, etc.) implies a significant increase in opportunities for involvement;

H 2.2 The structural characteristics relating to individuals (gender, age, education level, income) also affect the propensity to participate. Although the weight of these variables is less than that attributable to the context, they nevertheless have - in total - a higher predictive value compared to motivations and subjective opinions.

#### **4. Associations and participation in Europe**

We would expect to find the crisis of identity reflected in data on political and social associative phenomenon. The *European Values Study* trends show - in all EU countries - dynamics that only partially confirm this thesis. A decrease of associations (-13.30%) is observed over the period 1981-2010 which involves a new balance between the associative forms. This significantly decreases the adherence to the "classic" organizational structures that emerged in the early modern period and more specifically the trade union, while still maintaining limited membership in political parties and political groups. In addition, involvement in religious associations decreases while membership in "post-materialistic" organizations (defence of human rights, environment, etc.) increases (Tab. 2).

**Table 2- Belonging to different types of organizations (% positive responses by type)**

	<i>1981-1984</i>	<i>1990-1993</i>	<i>1999-2001</i>	<i>2008-2010</i>
Political Parties/groups	3,8	4,2	3	3,2
Trade Unions	17,9	20,5	11,5	7
Professional associations	5,6	5,3	4,7	3,8
Religious Organization	11,6	7,6	11,3	8,2
Welfare Organization	3,8	3,4	4,1	3,4
Cultural activities	7,5	9,5	12,4	11
Youth work	8,9	6,2	6,3	6,7
Human rights	1,5	2,2	3,3	3,1
Environment, ecology, animal rights	3,7	0	5,7	4,6
Total	64,3	58,9	62,3	51

Source: Own elaborations on EVS data (1980-2010)

Controlling for cohort and period (Tab. 3), differences due to age remain sufficiently stable over time. This trend is therefore due to lifetime effects, rather than period effects. However, youth political involvement shows a further, recent reduction. This result is not detected for the other age groups. The limited political participation of young people is, therefore, an actual current trait.

Cultural and recreational involvement is rising among young people, while traditional participation is increasing among the oldest cohort and post-materialistic choices among adults. Altogether, the youth participation does not decrease, while the number of persons who do not participate is declining. A longitudinal comparison rather implies a different articulation of preferences.

By focusing on the longitudinal plane, the low presence of young people in traditional associations (religious, trade union, party) is balanced by their growing participation in associations related to sports, culture and youth work. These forms of engagement can be defined as examples of self-referential choices. This is one detectable result of structural effects due to the growing importance of the individualization process. The increase in post-materialistic participation (environment, ecology, animal rights) increases more clearly for the age group of 35-54 years old.

We could hypothesize that the increasing youth mobilization centred on post-materialist values, detected by Inglehart in the Eighties as an indicator of the "silent revolution" of youth, is today finishing. The effects are still visible in the adult age group. The question is: what has replaced the post-materialist ethics, and given young people a new push towards mobilization?

**Table 3 - Belonging to different types of organizations (% positive responses by type)**

<i>Belong to:</i>	<i>EVS-waves</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>1981-1984</i>	<i>1990-1993</i>	<i>1999-2001</i>	<i>2008-2010</i>	
<i>15-34 Years Old</i>					
Welfare organizations/volunteering	3,83	3,22	3,60	2,92	3,26
Religious organizations	11,63	7,59	11,31	8,16	9,40
Culture, sport, youth work	8,18	12,14	13,55	12,69	12,75
Trade unions/professional associations	11,73	12,90	8,06	5,42	9,18
Parties, local communities	3,81	3,14	2,76	2,55	2,84
Third world, women, peace movements	//	1,65	2,01	1,80	1,75
Environment, ecology, animal rights	3,69	4,00	5,72	4,56	4,80
No one organization	76,79	74,86	71,15	72,69	73,46
<i>35-54 Years Old</i>	<i>1981-1984</i>	<i>1990-1993</i>	<i>1999-2001</i>	<i>2008-2010</i>	<i>Total</i>
Welfare organizations/volunteering	3,99	4,69	5,46	4,50	4,97
Religious organizations	16,58	9,15	13,17	11,31	11,77
Culture, sport, youth work	4,74	9,36	11,18	10,13	10,23
Trade unions/professional associations	14,48	18,32	13,81	10,89	14,06
Parties, local communities	3,28	5,36	4,66	3,56	4,50
Third world, women, peace movements	//	2,63	2,78	2,57	2,61
Environment, ecology, animal rights	4,04	4,00	6,60	6,85	6,39
No one organization	71,15	70,67	68,12	70,51	69,87
<i>55 Years Old and more</i>	<i>1981-1984</i>	<i>1990-1993</i>	<i>1999-2001</i>	<i>2008-2010</i>	<i>Total</i>
Welfare organizations/volunteering	4,30	5,88	6,72	6,31	6,34
Religious organizations	20,84	13,22	17,28	14,31	15,45
Culture, sport, youth work	2,47	4,87	6,75	6,87	6,28
Trade unions/professional associations	7,55	8,82	6,78	6,42	7,15
Parties, local communities	3,10	4,42	4,83	4,16	4,45
Third world, women, peace movements	//	2,40	2,71	2,56	2,52
Environment, ecology, animal rights	2,86	3,00	5,13	6,20	5,45
No one organization	74,40	79,64	73,22	72,57	74,56

Source: Own elaborations on EVS data (wave 2008-2010)

The data are consistent with the theory of Beck, that young people have discovered their own enjoyment, whether it be in the form of sports, music, consumer goods or the simple joy of living and, because politics has nothing to do with all of this, at first

glance the young people themselves may appear to be a-political (Beck 2000). Giddens points out, by contrast, that late modernity is characterized by a growing emphasis on "life politics" (eg. protection of the environment, animal rights) at the expense of "emancipatory politics", which aim at the extension of rights and emancipation. Life politics are, rather, 'politics of self-actualisation in a reflexively ordered environment' (Giddens 1991a: 214). Giddens does not deny the relevance of 'emancipatory politics' in late modernity but the intimate and personal sphere becomes ever more frequently linked to other issues such as the environmental crisis and animal rights issues (Inglehart 1990). The author notes that the global experiment of modernity intersects with the penetration of modern institutions in everyday life, in a sphere of mutual influence. Not only the local community, but also the most intimate moments of the individual's personal life are intertwined in relationships that have an indefinite time-space (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994).

Altogether, sociologists of late modernity argue that the current social changes are not simply the product of different political orientations within the same frame, which could be called 'traditional', but involve the transformation of political values themselves. According to this view, the current emphasis placed on reflexive identity construction and lifestyle involves a set of themes and priorities that have an intrinsically political nature, but that lead the individual to society through a direct connection with the political world, without the traditional mediation of social groups.

Digital platforms will increase opportunities for "self-expressive politics" (Stayner 2007), eliminating the space-time constraints in political participation. Individualistic and unconventional ways increase compared to traditional collective ones. The latter require the simultaneous presence of other actors and a relative "commitment", the first - especially the digital versions - "rely on cumulative input to make an impact" (Stayner 2007: 160-161), requiring no coordination nor immediacy.

These considerations allow for identification of the point of failure, in studying political behaviour in an era characterized by a growing sense of individualization. Young people, especially, may express an interest in the policies implemented without being active in their turn. People are often involved in politically relevant actions without voting or joining any political group, or refuse any political involvement, maintaining a cynical attitude despite their familiarity with politically relevant issues (Gauthier 2003).

The data we have collected are in line with Beck's thesis. young people show a slight increase in interest towards life politics (against their lower participation in emancipatory politics), but the trait that emerges most clearly is the growing self-reference of youth participation. The dimensions that young people consider most important are, consistently, not politics and civic engagement but friendships and leisure time. The

least important are traditional political involvement and the sphere of emancipatory politics, while religious associations are significantly reduced considering both diachronic and synchronic trends, compared to other age groups. The appropriate term to describe this condition is that of "silent rebellion": young people get together and recognize themselves in rebellion against their obligations to perform, for no apparent reason (Beck 2000), but their condition underlies a sort of political choice, which has already been defined as "youth anti-politics" (Beck 2000; Wyn and Woodman 2006; Woodman 2011).

Young people tend to avoid organizational structures and their obligations especially when these are formalized (party, but also religion) but they give great importance to the intangible value of quality of life, looking for experiences and conditions that cannot be bought (leisure, friendships, self-determined efforts, etc.). Non-conventional acts or protests are even avoided and a similar trend is detected (from the eighties to the present) for all respondents. However, the importance of self-determination and flexibility does not imply reduction in structural constraints (Woodman 2011). Instead, the structural constraints are even more important splitting between those who are able to reconstruct a coherent biography without effort and who has to change every day trying to identify guidelines for building a coherent biography (Biggart and Walther 2006; Leccardi and Ruspini 2006; Wall and Olofsson 2008) The new problem of individualized era is that proportion of structure and agency can strongly vary among different groups (Nugin 2013).

A principal component analysis<sup>3</sup> (PCA) is used to synthesize information on different variables, showing results for supranational differences in relation to propensity to participate. The structural variables in the analysis are nationalities, age cohorts (18-34 years old, 35-54 years old, more than 54 years old), level of education and income. Other variables are level of interest in policy-relevant issues and politically relevant actions (political consumerism, strikes, signing petitions, illegal demonstrations and protests<sup>4</sup>).

The results are detected considering EU members and other countries with similar social, ethical and political conditions<sup>5</sup>. The context is not marginal. Belonging to a geopolitical area implies differences for selected answers.

<sup>3</sup> Principal component analysis (PCA) is a statistical procedure used to convert a set of correlated variables into a set of linearly uncorrelated variables. The number of these last variables (or components) is less than or equal to the number of original variables. The resulting vectors are uncorrelated orthogonal sets.

<sup>4</sup> Variables were selected in order to include conventional and unconventional participation.

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, this analysis includes Norway, Switzerland, United Kingdom and Netherlands since their similarity to Sweden. Then, Belarus has been inserted because of the proximity to Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. The aim is not to analyze the European Union as a supranational institution but the spread of dynamics

The dynamics, until now described on the basis of cohorts, change considerably if we take nationality as the criterion (Fig. 1). The southern areas are those in which direct involvement in protest activities is not particularly widespread, but is perceived as a possibility. The Scandinavian area is the more active, both in terms of traditional political action or post-materialistic involvement. This is also the area with the highest socio-economic well-being. One could argue that the better quality of life limits the negative effects of the perception of risk and uncertainty. In other words, in Northern Europe are concentrated - presumably - those young people who have a positive view of themselves as individuals, with the ability to deal with risks and uncertainties. Therefore, the cultural matrix of this contextual differences emerges. In fact, States of the former Soviet Union are those in which respondents are least oriented towards political involvement, direct or potential.

Besides, young people and adults show a higher propensity towards the "opportunity" to participate, while people over 55 years old are more oriented towards the pole of action. These dynamics are further intersected by the economic welfare conditions and with the level of education. Clearly, mechanisms underlying participation choices cannot be investigated by selecting the age cohorts as the only relevant information. Even so, the study of youthful orientation allows for predictions on the future of Europe to be advanced that are relatively significant (Bettin Lattes 1999; Cuturi, Sampugnaro and Tomaselli 2000).

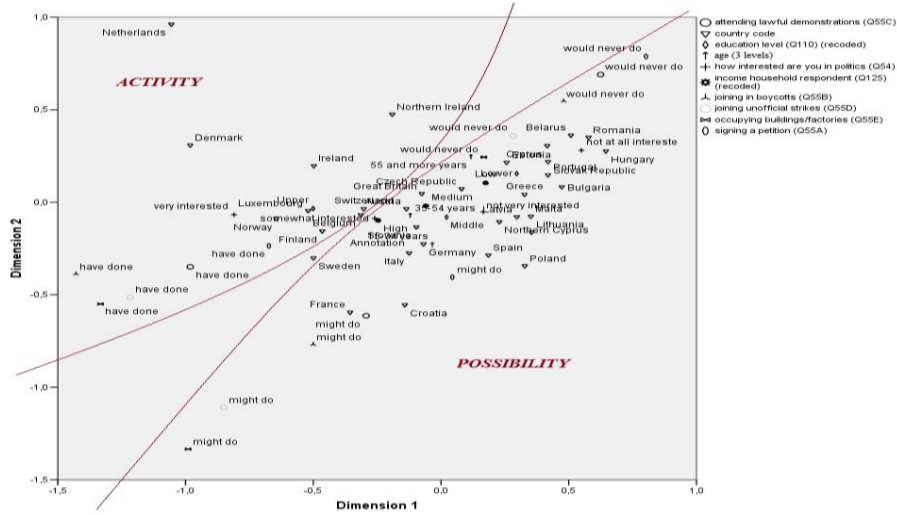
The behaviour and attitudes of the young people show that the structural dynamics are relevant to their mobilization choices. The next CPA (Fig. 2) refers to people aged 18-34 years and includes, in addition to the previous variables, belonging to politically relevant organizations. We distinguish among "traditional" (parties, unions, professional associations, community), and self-referential (as cultural, sporting, recreational) and "post-materialistic" organizations (ecology, volunteering, human rights, for peace).

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related to individualization process and participation in similar territories (looking at a geo-political, economic, cultural points of view).

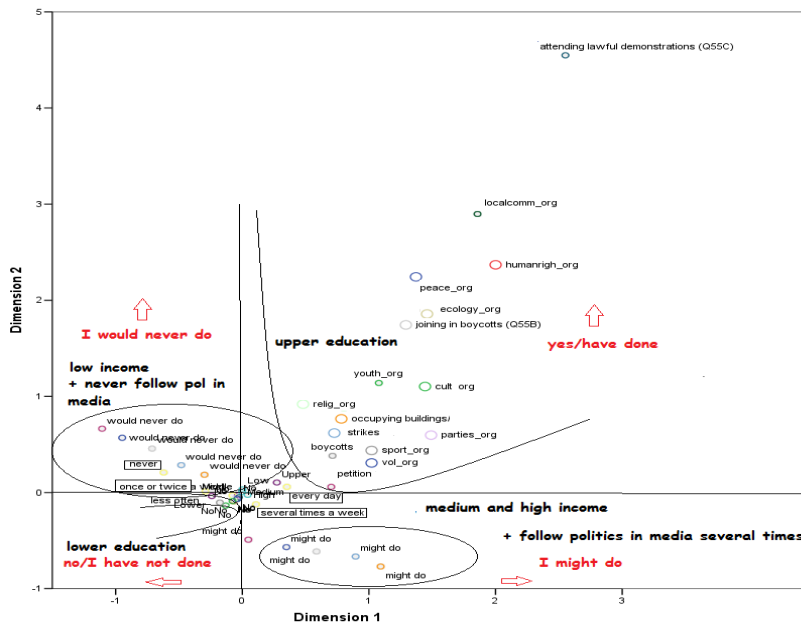


Figure 1 – CPA on participation dynamics in Europe



Source: Our own elaborations of EVS data (1980-2010) - Cronbach's Alpha 0,7

Figure 2 – CPA on youth participation (people aged 15-34 years)



Source: Our own elaborations of EVS data (1980-2010) - Cronbach's Alpha 0,8

The data show an association between structural conditions (O = Opportunities), reference ethics (D = beliefs, values, Desires) and actions (B = Behaviour) consistent with the DBO theory (Hedström 2005). Sense of uncertainty, risk, and other-determination *versus* self-determination are not due to the irrelevance of structural and social constraints (Nugin 2013). Instead, the individual's inability to perceive these constraints increases as well as limitations associated with the structure of opportunities (Evans 2002). Therefore, youth participation choices remain restricted to structural constraints that also encourage the propensity to gather information from the web, representing a propensity towards individualized information that is particularly widespread among young people.

Specifically, the pole of participation includes young people with high levels of education, while the absolute rejection of involvement characterizes young people with lower levels of education. These dynamics are not dissimilar from those found among adults and, secondly, it is found that the level of education of young people is associated with family income and parental education. The second axis of the factor solution shows the importance of income, related to the use of new media for the purpose of keeping informed.

The results are in line with the new social capital thesis. A great resource for young people is the increase in education levels, which conveys new participatory and relational resources (Nugin 2013). According to this argument, educated young people improve bridging social capital, being more oriented towards solidarity and egalitarianism (Newton 1999).

The findings confirmed that the process of individualization - undoubtedly present on the cognitive level - does not necessarily imply selfishness. There emerges a mixture between personal interests as the search for freedom and a desire to build authentic relationships as a propensity towards altruism and egalitarianism. This combination of values is a condition that has intrigued the sociologists of post-modernity.

Beck points out that the individual who desires freedom in his relational life cannot avoid relating to others on an equal basis, and live "authentically", explaining the reasons for such a complex ethical selection (Beck 2000). The debate also remains open in relation to the need to define the lack of interest in politics - at least in its traditional form - shown by young people across Europe. Is it a significant signal of generational

change, or a normal effect of the life course<sup>6</sup>, longitudinally traceable across several decades?

A transversal position refers to the importance of structural dynamics orienting (even in participation) individual choices (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Woodman 2011). According to this perspective, decisions and guidance of young people not disregard those of their parents. The importance of education and family income is, in fact, confirmed by considering data collected about the EU member states. Looking for a middle ground between rejection and acceptance of the full individualization thesis, it is possible to opt for the actual presence and viscosity of different dynamics. The ability to access resources and acquire competence is now (more than ever) the key to a secure life. This condition often depends on structural dimensions, which create opportunities and constraints. In turn, these dimensions may promote or inhibit certain skills.

Because of this, hetero-determination, sense of uncertainty and risk as well as self-determination and contextual control are the main modes by which social life can be faced (Wall and Olofsson 2008). They can be configured as two sides of the same coin. This condition is linked to contextual and social dynamics that are more and more difficult to control as a result of the globalization process.

The coexistence of these dynamics can result in two different existential conditions. The first is someone who accepts events, the second is someone who decides to act consciously and shows his capacity for self-determination. The first case is one in which experiences of “crisis” are encountered. People also live these experiences, perceiving them as totally personal failures, rather than as the result of structural conditions. This happens because of the lack of intermediation groups that mediate between individual needs and social constraints. Individuals therefore perceive themselves as hetero-determinates, able to control their own existence, and at the same time to trust others or institutions.

The second case is one in which the subject constructs a positive biography that, thanks to learning potential and private resource (roots) as well as to the capacity of self-awareness (reflexivity), exceeds the oppressive burdens of society and reflects freely on messages, identity, situations, processes and options developing a cohesive and responsible approach (Baglioni 2011).

Studies and analysis have shown a growing duality between “central” and “marginal” people (Bettin Lattes 2007; cf. Weber *et alii* 2003; Woodman 2011), including apathetic young people undergoing social change in terms of an erosion in their socio-

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<sup>6</sup> Park supports this view (Park 2000), while Adsett (2003) refers to the incidence that has - in the reading of the phenomenon - the high political and civic engagement shown by the baby-boomers.

political ties. Central people have the resources to develop an autonomous and reflexive relation with politics. Moreover, working and existential insecurity is not covered by the protections of the welfare state, and is affected by the manifest failure of the market to ensure equal life chances for individuals. These conditions can easily transform young people into precarious citizens (Alteri and Raffini 2007).

## **5. Participation choices and the individualization process**

The first part of this study shows that youth propensity for traditional political involvement is currently limited, compared to that of other age groups. The growth in self-referential youth involvement is also clear, confirming the first hypothesis ( $H^1$ ), as well as the high incidence of structural traits ( $H^{2.2}$ ) - in particular, contextual effects ( $H^{2.1}$ ). The last aim is to explain the propensity towards involvement, assessing:

- the predictive capacity of structural and motivational variables ( $H^2$ );
- the possible impact of interaction between age cohorts and structural dynamics.

Questions we have tried to answer are: can motivational dynamics, associated with the individualization process affect different propensities for involvement? Do these variables affect more, less or as much as the structural ones? Are there differences due to age cohorts?

There are several measures related to individualization process, as well as there are many dynamics that can be investigated. The literature is certainly wide. Moreover, there are many difficulties associated with the measurement of these dynamics. The aim of this work is not to describe the broad debate. However, we indicate the findings and cite studies useful to support our choices, making a necessarily limited selection of variables. In order to propose indices of motivational profiles that are due to individualized paths, we have taken the following specific dynamics into consideration.

The centrality of autonomy *versus* dependency is measured as individual perception to have or not control over life. This is an important measure of individualization process as well as an instrument to split between central and peripheral subjects, looking at the effect of structural constraints on individual opportunities (Bettin Lattes 1999; Evans 2002; Wall and Olofsson 2008; Woodman 2011; Nugin 2013). The variable is constructed by assigning 0 to the respondents who do not feel able and 1 to the respondents who consider themselves fully capable.

Another important measure is the weakening or intensification of the reference to absolute sources of legitimacy, measured in relation to the "authority" value option (Houtman, Aupers and Koster 2011). This can be also considered as a measure of indi-

vidual dependence *versus* self-reference and autonomy (Schwartz, Cotè and Arnett 2005; Nugin 2013).

The individualization process is also linked to the importance of individual self-fulfilment (Evans 2002; Schwartz *et alii* 2005), traced to the dummy “high satisfaction” (built by assigning 1 to those who have levels of satisfaction higher than 7 on a scale from 0 to 10), while the need to make responsible choices is defined with the dummy “freedom” (Evans 2002; Nugin 2013; Hushchyna 2015). The importance of freedom as value is often associated to the priority of individual responsibility and both concept are usually defined as important elements for individualized societies (Heelas, Lash and Morris 1996; Hushchyna 2015).

Finally, we select the weakening of collective action and the consolidation of individualistic values (Schwartz *et alii* 2005, Woodman 2011), assessed by considering the reliability attributed to the behaviour of other subjects, the propensity to distrust but also the importance attached to money as a priority, defined with the dummy “trust”, “be careful” and “money”.

According to the model of 'individualized' act, these are the principal traits characterizing current younger generation (distinguishing between two opposite behaviours of “central” and “marginal” young people). We now wish to assess the predictive power of each factor, considering different forms of involvement.

The application of binary logistic regression models to *European Values Study* data (wave 2008-2010) specifies different profiles. The dependents are dummy variables about kinds of participation. The independent variables are related to structural traits (gender, education, cohort), context (North and South Europe) and propensity to inquire (use of new media).

Dynamics related to the process of individualization are synthesized through a PCA that splits between dimensions of control and trust. The first factor synthesizes variables along the *continuum*: No control- authority-money-freedom *versus* high satisfaction-control, while the second summarizes the variables along the *continuum* be-careful *versus* to be fair.

Specifically, each of the six proposed models has a different dependent variable corresponding to the choice to attend a specific kind of association among those previously described. The structural conditions are recognized through dichotomous variables for the gender (m), the cohort (young, adult), the level of education (high *versus* low), income (high *versus* low), the territorial area (North Europe, South Europe). Further dependent variables are measures related to information (use of new media). Additional covariates are the two factor loadings related to motivation and ethical options characterizing the individualized societies. The perception of oneself as being able to

control one's own life is an important factor to distinguish "individualized" subjects into two subcategories of self-directed and other-directed, with corresponding feelings of trust / distrust (Wall and Olofsson 2008). Interestingly, those who consider themselves satisfied have more control over their life than confidence in others.

*Profile 1: The choice to participate*

The propensity to participate is higher among those with higher levels of education. Among young people the participation is higher than among old people or adults. Involvement is less common in the South than in the Centre or North Europe. Overall, the structural and contextual dynamics are more relevant compared with motivational traits and with individual perception. There are no significant effects due to interaction between cohorts and high education or income, while living in north Europe influences the propensity to involvement.

**Table 4 – Binary logistic regression models (B parameters for profiles 1-3)**

	1. Association (Y-N)		2. More Associations		3. Protest Acts	
Gender M	0,24***	0,24***	0,04	0,037	0,11***	0,10***
Old people	R.c.	R.c.	R.c.	R.c.	R.c.	R.c.
Young	0,50***	0,75***	0,17***	0,47***	0,09***	0,15***
Adult	0,37***	0,59***	0,23***	0,33***	0,29***	0,28***
High Education	0,65***	0,65***	0,72***	0,72***	0,47***	0,47***
High income	0,39***	0,39***	0,10**	0,09**	0,30***	0,30***
Info by media	0,30***	0,30***	0,44***	0,44***	0,64***	0,64***
North	0,56***	0,82***	1,07***	1,27***	1,65***	1,59***
South	-0,43***	-0,25***	-0,29***	-0,19**	0,77***	0,84***
F1 – Control	0,08***	0,08***	0,19***	0,19***	0,09***	0,09
F2 – Trust	0,16***	0,16***	0,29***	0,29***	0,16***	0,17
Constant	-1,76***		-2,54***		-1,83***	
Old people * North		R.c.		R.c.		R.c.
Young * North		-0,43***		-0,50		0,03*
Adult * North		-0,37***		-0,14		0,13
Old people * South		R.c.		R.c.		R.c.
Young * South		-0,27***		-0,19		-0,16**
Adult * South		-0,26***		-0,11		-0,07
Constant		-1,92***		-2,66**		-1,84
<b>Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients</b>						
Block	48,59		38,95		16,59	
Model	4155		5166,00		6761,00	

Source: Own elaborations on EVS data (\*\*\*=sign 0,001 \*\*=sign 0,01 \*=sign 0,05)

Specifically, compared to the older cohort resident in the same area, the probability increases by 9 percentage points for young people living in North Europe, 11 points for adults. This is particularly useful, since northern Europe is the area with the highest propensity towards participation. Conversely, young people living in southern Europe (the area with the lowest propensity to engagement) have a chance to participate that decreases by 13 percentage points compared to the elderly (the most active cohort for this area).

*Profile 2: more than one membership*

The probability to be involved in more than one organization (Tab. 4) is higher among adults than among the old. However, age is not the most important factor. People with higher levels of education and/or living in North Europe have the greatest probability to take part in several organizations. The most important factor is residence in Northern Europe. Motivations associated with the process of individualization are less relevant. Comparing with other models, pro-social attitudes (F2-TRUST) exert a certain positive influence on the choice to participate. However, the structural dimension has the greater predictive power, and interaction effects between age and structural variables do not significantly affect the propensity to participate.

*Profile 3: Political protest acts (petitions, boycott, strike)*

Political protest actions are forms of behaviour related to the traditional meaning attributed to the political sphere. These acts are institutionally relevant. The highest propensity towards this type of involvement is among those living in Northern Europe and among those who use new media, but the probability to act also increases among those with high levels of income and education. The motivational dynamics are of little significance. Young people of Northern Europe have a much higher propensity for involvement compared to the elderly. This propensity, while higher, is considerably reduced in the South (Tab. 4).

*Profile 4: Youth involvement (youth work, culture, sport)*

Currently, these organizations are the most selected by young people. Young people today have a proportion of overall attendance for this type of association that is 25% (if counted within the cohort). The most significant variables, in addition to the young age, are those related to structural features: residence in Northern Europe, high level of education and income. The willingness to participate is rather negative for those living in the South and, again, the lowest values were recorded compared to the factor

solution (Tab. 5). The interaction between cohort and context are not, however, statistically significant.

**Table 5 - Binary logistic regression models (B parameters for profiles 4 - 6)**

	4. youth association		5. political association		6. post-mat assoc.	
Gender m	0,36***	0,35***	0,28***	0,28***	-0,37***	0,37***
Old people	R.c.	R.c.	R.c.	R.c.	R.c.	R.c.
Young	0,79***	0,96***	0,06	0,43***	-0,17***	0,16*
Adult	0,37***	0,38***	0,49***	0,78***	-0,04	0,12
High education	0,53***	0,53***	0,80***	0,80***	0,51***	0,52***
High income	0,42***	0,41***	0,23**	0,22**	0,13***	0,12***
Info by media	0,23***	0,23***	0,38***	0,39***	0,35***	0,35***
North	0,67***	0,81***	0,44***	0,79***	0,66***	0,88***
South	-0,21***	-0,20***	-0,69***	-0,38**	-0,44***	-0,30***
F1 - Control	0,14***	0,14***	0,04**	0,04***	0,08***	0,08***
F2 - Trust	0,16***	0,15***	0,18***	0,17***	0,16***	0,16***
Constant	-2,65***		-2,42***		-2,68***	
Old people * North		R.c.		R.c.		R.c.
Young * North		-0,33		-0,60***		-0,52***
Adult * North		-0,06		-0,45***		-0,25*
Old people * South		R.c.		R.c.		R.c.
Young * South		-0,08		-0,52***		-0,39**
Adult * South		0,05		-0,42***		-0,14
Constant		-2,71***		-2,64***		-2,83***
<b>Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients</b>						
Block	21,19		58,19		23,63	
Model	3292		3059		1564	

Source: Own elaborations on EVS data (\*\*\*=sign 0,001 \*\*=sign 0,01 \*=sign 0,05)

*Profile 5: Political Associations (trade union, professional associations, parties)*

Traditional forms of political involvement are overall not very widespread. Variables which best explain this type of involvement are structural and, in particular, this propensity increases with higher levels of education and in the context of the European North, while it decreases in the areas of Southern Europe. The most important predictor is, however, the level of instruction, which produces an increase of the probability to participate by about 20 percentage points. Living in the South produces the opposite effect. The introduction of interaction effects implies an improvement of the explanatory power. Compared with the older cohort resident in Northern Europe, the probability increases by 5 percentage points for young people in the same area, 8 points for adults. This is particularly useful since northern Europe is the area with the highest propensity towards participation. Conversely, young people living in southern Europe



(the area with the lowest propensity to engagement) have a chance to participate that decreases by 22 percentage points compared to the elderly (the most active cohort for this area).

*Profile 6: post-material involvement (environment, ecology, politics for emancipation)*

This type of participation, particularly widespread among young people in the Nineties, is now less significant and in some way subsumed by the individualized dynamic and self-reference of the choices. The propensity towards this type of involvement is higher among knowledgeable subjects and in northern Europe. Equal propensity (weak but positive) results from higher income levels or a pro-social attitude, while the probability of involvement is lower among those living in the south. Young people in Northern Europe have a probability to participate about nine percentage points higher than the elderly. This probability is reduced by two percentage points for young people living in Southern Europe.

## **6. Conclusions**

The process of individualization is attributed by some authors to the emergence of a new "era" in which previous conditions are vanishing and structural constraints are less relevant predictors of individual behaviours. On the contrary, recent studies notice that individualization describes not a reduction of structural constraint but an increase in rules and guidelines shaping young people's lives. Many studies show results that converge on this point. If self-realization and individual responsibility are more and more important traits, at the same time, young people need for structural support (Nugin 2013). Furthermore, young people with a greater number of resources do not need to deal with the growing demand for actively shape their biographies but these demands are addressed to young people with fewer opportunities and with few structural resources (Woodman 2011). The study converges with this second position. The main hypothesis is that the individualization process does not lead to an overall redefinition of participation trends.

However, this does not imply the irrelevance of individualization dynamics in the participation process. Significant changes on the macro level are, for example, the emergence of self-referential youth participation at the expense of the traditional patterns of organization (Van Ingen and Dekker 2011). However, structural predictors

seem the most important in seeking to explain the individual choices of participation, both for young people and adults. We test this hypothesis on European data (EVS).

The next part of the work is dedicated to the specific types of participation. It shows potential specificity compared with the cohort. Two levels of analysis are distinguished. The first refers to youth participation. Our results confirm Beck's thesis. Young people are less interested in the traditional political dimension, also when the data is looked at longitudinally. Confirmations of these findings also emerge in several other studies.

This does not mean that young people do not act in a politically meaningful way, but they do so by linking their actions to specific issues, often related to the intimate sphere or that of everyday life. This dimension is today particularly evident. The self-reference is an important trait of the current youth world. The hypothesis relative to the incidence of structural constraints is, however, confirmed, whether these are related to contextual elements or to socio-economic factors.

A second level of analysis focuses on intergenerational investigation, pointing out that aggregate data does not always underlie uniform dynamics. Among young people the choice to participate is higher than among old people or adults, but these last are those most involved in more than one organization. Involvement is less common in Southern than in Northern Europe. Overall, structural and contextual dynamics are more relevant compared to motivational traits such as ethical choices, the perception of having "control of their lives" and hetero-determination.

Political protest actions are forms of behaviour in some way related to the traditional political sphere. The predictors (comparatively) higher - in addition to the usual structural features - are political information from the media, while the importance of motivational dynamics is lower. Young people in Northern Europe have a much higher propensity for involvement compared to the elderly, and this trend is similar but less strong in southern Europe.

Instead, the interaction between cohort and context is not statistically significant when seeking to explain the youth involvement in self-reference associations (such as youth work, culture, sport). Currently, these organizations are those most selected by young people. Nevertheless, the most important predictors are again those related to structural features: residence in Northern Europe, high levels of education and income. No interaction effect emerges, while the interaction effects between cohorts and context can explain traditional forms of political participation. Northern Europe is the area with the highest propensity of young people towards participation. Conversely, young people living in southern Europe (the area with the lowest propensity to engagement) have a decreasing chance to participate compared to the elderly (the most active cohort for this area).

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