

‘Moving the Apocalypse a Little Further Away’: Young Italian Activists Between Future Crises and Everyday Utopias

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Abstract

The relationship that contemporary youth have with the future is marked by the intersection of multiple crises that affect their everyday experiences and future aspirations. In the face of this unfavourable socio-economic and existential condition, studies show that young people not only succeed in coming to terms with uncertainty and precariousness but also look to the future in terms of possibilities and hope. Within the framework of a more general reflection on the crisis of the future in contemporary societies, understanding the connection between agency (political agency, in particular) and the future in the experience of youth becomes central.

Starting from the analysis of 42 narrative interviews with young people engaged in unconventional political practices in Italy, this article focuses on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on youth political activism, paying particular attention to the temporal dimension. The results show that young activists re-signified the crisis in terms of an unexpected opportunity to reshape their repertoires of action as well as their ways of relating to the future. This re-signification has taken the form of real utopias that, while unfolding in the everyday, also take on an active idea of the future.

Keywords

Youth activism, future, multiple crises, temporality, everyday utopias

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Introduction

In the field of youth studies, research investigating young people's relationships with the future has intensified over the last 20 years (Leccardi et al., 2023). On the one hand, their link to the future has been investigated within a more general interest in transformations of transition paths to adult life. In fact, the redefinition of the stages of transition and their sequence as a result of structural changes is linked to new forms of biographical planning (Biggart & Walther, 2006; Leccardi, 2005; Thomson & Taylor, 2005; Wyn et al., 2020). On the other hand, young people's connection with the future has also been analysed through the concept of 'orientations to the future' (Woodman, 2011), articulated in terms of aspirations (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016), imaginaries (Thomson & Holland, 2002), narratives (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2015) and hopes (Arnett, 2000; Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Nunn et al., 2021).

These studies investigating young people's orientations towards the future highlight how, in the face of a framework of job uncertainty, precarious psycho-physical well-being and general existential uncertainty, they not only know how to navigate this condition but also look to the future in terms of possibilities. It is precisely today's intersection of multiple crises in young people's experiences that has prompted us to investigate their connection with the future, between their agency and possible futures (Mandich, 2020). In this article, we investigate this situation with particular reference to young people's political activism. Indeed, the relationship between youth activism, contemporary temporal horizons and the temporality of activism has so far been little investigated except for some recent studies on climate activism which primarily focuses on the sense of the limit and finitude of the species inherent in youth activism of this kind (Bertuzzi, 2019; Bowman & Starzak, 2024; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2022). Instead, we ask: How does the condition of multiple crises (health, climate, war) affect the expression and temporality of political engagement? How do sudden historical ruptures, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, break into the everyday life of young activists? How have they changed their narratives and imaginaries? How are the processes of presentification (Alteri et al., 2016) and the crisis of the open future reflected in youth activism?

Many interconnected factors influence new forms of youth activism. For example, neoliberal structural changes have been particularly unfavourable for young people in Italy in terms of their educational choices and employment opportunities (Bertolini et al., 2024). Young people are affected by the loosening of the reciprocal bonds between the nation-state (and its representative bodies, including political parties) and its citizens. They are also impacted by changes in the transition to adulthood and by the changing composition of intergenerational and intragenerational relationships (Wyn et al., 2020). Against the backdrop of these changes, social and solidarity ties have become increasingly vulnerable and processes of recognition have been undermined, combined with an insidious pushing of collective scenarios towards individualism (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Elliott & Lemert, 2009). Moreover, the acceleration of these transformations (Rosa, 2013) has fuelled a sense of social uncertainty and risk, pushing towards the presentification of action (Alteri et al., 2016). However, it has also reconfigured the relationship with temporality and with the possibility of thinking oneself ontologically as a subject with a specific biographical and temporal coherence (Adam, 1995; Leccardi et al., 2023). It is

precisely the temporal scope and implications of being social and political actors that is increasingly relevant in the study of youth activism in terms of redefining social ties and bonds of solidarity and re-imagining social horizons for the future.

The aim of this article is to illuminate the forms of youth activism with respect to configurations of contemporary time horizons, especially in light of a scenario of multiple crises, of which the COVID-19 pandemic remains perhaps the most emblematic. The perspective that we adopt is a temporal one. In particular, we focus on the extent of what has been called the crisis of the open future (Adam, 1995; Tutton, 2023) as well as the spaces for redefining and re-imagining the future that it nevertheless opens up. These spaces for redefining and re-imagining the future pass through a type of political involvement that looks at civil society, social relations and relations of solidarity in a new way. Last but not least, we highlight how this possible political redefinition of the future affects the meaning of young people's biographies, shaping their present and their everyday lives.

Starting from the analysis of 42 narrative interviews carried out during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2020–January 2021) with young activists aged 25–34 in four Italian cities (located in the country's North, Centre, South and Islands), we focus on the consequences of the pandemic crisis on the forms and meanings of youth engagement, paying particular attention to the temporal dimension. The results show that, despite an initial moment of strong disorientation, young activists re-signified the crisis in terms of an unexpected opportunity to reshape their aims and repertoires of action through the development of new forms of mutualism and solidarity. This re-signification has taken the form of real utopias (Cooper, 2014; Wright, 2010) that, while unfolding in the everyday, also take on an engagement with the future (Mandich, 2020). In this way, it seems to be reshaping the relationship between the vision of a personal future (marked by structural and institutional uncertainty) and the vision of a collective future.

This introduction is followed by the theoretical framework from which we set out. The theoretical path is twofold but interconnected: The debate on the new forms of youth activism is intertwined with that on the relationship between activism and temporality. After a methodological note, the article presents the results which highlight the relationship of the young activists interviewed to the future and its crisis, the impact of the pandemic on the forms and meanings of activism and the utopian and dystopian dimensions of activism. The conclusions reconsider the relationship of young people to the future, shedding light on their ability to remain open to the future and active in its realization, somewhere between hope and utopia.

Contemporary Youth Activism

The beginning of the 2000s was a period in which many scholars began to investigate the reasons for the supposed lack of political engagement on the part of the younger generation (Delli Carpini, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Studies hypothesized that young people were less interested in traditional politics, less inclined to stay up-to-date and less willing to be part of associations and groups (Delli Carpini, 2000). Nevertheless, as pointed out by other studies, the main political form of youth engagement is activism. Dalton (2009) pointed out that, far from being

‘disengaged’ and ‘disinterested’, young people sought to draw lines of differentiation from previous generations of political participation. Young people have embraced a model of ‘engaged citizenship’ through volunteering and solidarity (Sveningsson, 2015), but also through explicit protest, while incorporating politics into their everyday lives (Harris et al., 2010). Participatory politics constitutes a horizon of meaning and collective action in which young people express visions of the world, sharing and challenging them, increasingly using the Internet and social networks (Cohen et al., 2012).

Studies focusing on contemporary youth activism emphasize its ‘unconventional’ traits (Earl et al., 2017; Pickard, 2019; Pickard & Bessant, 2018) whose essence lies in the processual character (*doing*) of activism rather than the outcome per se. Beyond the specific instruments of action (such as protest and dissent), studies have also explored the processuality and shared elaboration of the instruments of action (Pitti, 2018) and the everyday unfolding of political practices (Harris et al., 2010). Furthermore, youth activism has been investigated in terms of its creativity and innovation (Pickard, 2019), exploring not only the new centrality of technology in forms of activism (Loader et al., 2014) but also the relationship between online and offline actions (Livingstone et al., 2005). In this respect, scholars expressly refer to digital activism to highlight the increasingly close link between digital media and activism (Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Mattoni & Treré, 2014).

The attention of scholars has not been limited to repertoires of action but has also been directed towards the places and spaces of collective action. Thus, the forms of occupation and places of practice are objects of investigation (Maeckelbergh, 2012), and spontaneous and informal groups (i.e., NGOs) are also considered. The unprecedented relevance of consumption to contemporary life has not spared the political sphere, where it has become an instrument of political action. In this trend, some studies have glimpsed a further trait of the ‘unconventionality’ of youth activism related to the relationship between activism and lifestyle, a relationship that has been defined as one of political consumerism (Forno & Graziano, 2014; Micheletti & McFarland, 2010; Ward & de Vreese, 2011) or recreational activism (Milan, 2019). Analysing the role of emotions (especially indignation, anger, hope) in youth activism also constitutes an additional perspective (Halstead et al., 2021; Nairn, 2019).

The Temporality of Youth Activism

Starting from Durkheim’s seminal studies, sociology has gradually demonstrated the relevance of time for social analysis (Adam, 1990; Elias, 1985). The way in which time has been analysed in the sociological debate is highly articulated. While, thanks to Halbwachs (1950), a focus on memory and the past played a central role from the outset, the analysis of the future—first as a time of ‘planning’ and then in terms of the ‘crisis of the open future’—took shape at a later stage (Leccardi et al., 2023). Moreover, intertwined with the rise of constructivist, phenomenological and ethno-methodological perspectives, the time of the present and everyday life has, in turn, emerged as decisive for social analysis (Adam, 1990, 1995). Often ‘suffocated’ by the greater emphasis on space, during the 1990s, time became definitively established as a crucial dimension for social analysis in what has been termed ‘a temporal

turn' in the social sciences (Hassan, 2010). The sociology of time, on the other hand, developed fruitfully from Mannheim's concept of generation (1952) as well as those of age cohort and life course.

It was precisely these latter concepts that initially entered the debate regarding social movement studies, especially with reference to young people who are traditionally considered to be bearers of change and innovation (Andretta & Della Porta, 2020; Gillan, 2020; McAdam & Sewell, 2001; Siročić, 2024). Some research has supported a link between young people's drive for activism and their greater availability of time and flexibility in dealing with it (McAdam, 1989), while other research has found reaching the milestones marking the transition to adult life to be irrelevant to political activism (Passy & Giugni, 2001). The temporal dimension also runs through research on variation in participation levels over the life course of activists (Bosi et al., 2022), also due to processes of political socialization (Earl et al., 2017). The temporal dimension also comes into play in analyses of occasional and time-fragmented forms of activism (Milan, 2019), the alternation between peaks of protest and latent phases (Mattoni & Treré, 2014) and the role of memory as an activator of activism (Cheng & Yuen, 2019; Daphi & Zamponi, 2019).

Broader in scope, however, is the reflection around the concept of the 'political generation' (Whittier, 1997) that the activism of the youth movements of the late 1960s first unveiled (Inglehart, 1977) and that today's environmental movements have brought back into vogue (Bertuzzi, 2019). Here, an interesting link is made between the dimension of the future and the concept of political generation. While it is true that scholars of the so-called new social movements had already noted the relevance of the future for young activists,¹ the contemporary environmental and climate crisis, combined with other crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and war-related crises (e.g., the Russian-Ukrainian conflict), has further emphasized this link (Bowman & Pickard, 2021; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2022). Recent research has foregrounded the role of orientations to the future in movement strategies (Ting, 2017) and the centrality of present crises to the construction of alternative futures (Juris & Pleyers, 2009). Future orientations are conceptualized from a transformative perspective, investigating how such orientations, especially in times of crisis, concretely shape participatory practices and political activism (Siročić, 2024) and how these future orientations are, in turn, reconfigured by the activism of the present and the here and now (Ting, 2017). Attention has also been focused on how the relationship with time and the future connotes an affective dimension (Knops, 2023), where it is hope (for a better future) that is the most shared sentiment (Gokmenoglu & Manley, 2023; Nairn, 2019; Nunn et al., 2021). Within this framework of a renewed centrality of the future for political activism, utopia becomes its backbone (Friberg, 2022). Youth activism fits within a prefigurative vision of society that aims to disempower and even completely rethink neoliberal and capitalist policies by utilizing everyday and real utopias (Cooper, 2014; Wright, 2010) as a political tool (Monticelli, 2022).

Data and Methods

The results we present in this article are part of a wider national mixed-methods research project aimed at identifying young people's visions of the future in Italy.²

Part of this research has focused on young activists in order to understand whether and how political engagement shapes their temporal horizons, their biographical paths and the temporality of activism itself.

To achieve this aim, we carried out 42 narrative interviews³ with young adult activists aged 25–34⁴ in different Italian cities (Milan, Naples, Cagliari and Cosenza).⁵ We selected the interviewees through the snowball technique, taking into account the national landscape of youth mobilization (Andretta & Della Porta, 2020; Bertuzzi, 2019; Lo Schiavo, 2023; Pitti, 2018). We selected young adults engaged in solidarity purchasing groups, cultural and civic associations, and in social movements advocating for climate justice, gender equality, racial justice, demilitarization, LGBTQ+ rights, and housing rights. These groups manifest differences in terms of political instances and repertoires of actions, depending in part on contextual/territorial factors and on their own traditions of struggle. However, they all share both a generalized rejection of traditional forms of political participation and a widespread disillusion towards state-based institutions and their functioning (Martuccelli, 2015). Furthermore, they all use direct social actions (Zamponi, 2023) in trying to directly transform particular aspects of society through the action itself (e.g., through practices such as mutual aid, alternative cultural activities, critical consumption and so on).

We were able to reach these young people thanks to gatekeepers who provided us with contact details. We presented ourselves as a research team composed of female researchers who take an intersectional approach to research and have established a research track in the field of young people and their relationships with temporality. Our positioning was expressed in the informed consent and nurtured a relationship of trust with our interviewees.

Although the research design had been developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research was conducted during its first year (January 2020–January 2021). On one hand, this turned out to be an unforeseen methodological event that forced us to conduct interviews using digital platforms such as Zoom or Skype due to the restrictions imposed on in-person meetings. The pandemic, therefore, presented us with new methodological challenges but also with opportunities, especially in terms of a shared reworking (with activists) of the research design.⁶ On the other hand, the pandemic was also an unexpected opportunity to observe how these groups redefined their political instances and actions in time of crisis as well as how they coped with such collective discontinuity, looking to the future in order to avoid the risk of presentification and perceiving themselves as subjects with a biographical coherence. Finally, with respect to the analysis of empirical material, we rigorously transcribed and anonymized all interviews, proceeding with a thematic analysis using MAXQDA software.

Resisting the ‘Crisis’ of the Future

My peers’ generation is impoverished compared to that of their parents ...there were stable, permanent jobs ... that created social security. ... But this sense of insecurity about the future is not something that upsets me. I think it’s more a generational thing. ... It doesn’t bother me personally, in the sense that I still feel I have various possibilities. (Giulio, 25, Cagliari)

The young people interviewed appear to be aware of the impracticability of socially predictable biographical paths and of the difficulties of projecting themselves confidently into the future. This awareness is expressed through comparisons with previous generations who lived in a more favourable context from a structural and institutional point of view. Not only have these changes significantly affected young people's transition to adulthood (Bertolini et al., 2024; Wyn et al., 2020), but they have profoundly redefined the ways young people look to the future (Leccardi et al., 2023). However, young people frame this 'crisis of the future' and the uncertainty it brings with it as constitutive aspects of the new generations and, as such, are interpreted as elements that are independent of individual capacities and choices. Although their biographies are uncertain, this does not mean that they renounce the possibility of realizing and projecting themselves into the future. The possibilist attitude that emerges from the interview excerpt above is, in fact, an element that unites the narratives on the personal futures of these young people. It is a way of coping with the difficulties of the present and the uncertainties of the future that relies primarily on the individual's capacity for agency and on an 'active' vision of the future. Indeed, it is a future in which the dimension of hope (Arnett, 2000; Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Nunn et al., 2021) has not declined towards a fatalistic sense but is rather a desire to regain 'the ability to affect the future', a need to 'build the future' one day after the other, as Chiara and Viola underline:

We are a generation that is very used to living with precariousness, uncertainty, doubt, insecurity in many ways. ... As a generation, we are very unaccustomed to thinking that we can build this future, that we can take it back in the sense of regaining possession of the capacity to move into the future, to build it for ourselves. (Chiara, 25, Naples)

This total uncertainty, I think, really destabilizes us and generates a lot of confusion, a lot of anxiety and so on, but the future is there, it's there, and so we have to try to build it slowly. (Viola, 26, Cagliari)

'The future is there, it's there by necessity', says Viola, almost as if to say: the future is there despite the absence of favourable structural conditions and despite the inability of institutions to intervene responsibly to mitigate the forms of biographical uncertainty that are looming. Our interviewees have learnt to understand the risks that lie behind rigid, long-term forms of planning. Young people are ready to change direction, to revise their objectives and aspirations in the name of flexibility, understood as a resource for managing instability and uncertainty, as in the case of Francesca:

We are able to say 'let's learn to manage this instability, let's make it a strength in some way'. We take this precariousness, and as beautiful as precariousness is not however ... in the sense, we try to come to terms with it, to understand how to turn it around somehow. (Francesca, 26, Cagliari)

Although these young people's tendency to adopt an active and possibilistic attitude towards the future can be considered a direct consequence of the very choice to engage in collective activities and projects, a particular configuration of the relationship between personal and collective futures seems to emerge from the interviews.

Unlike previous generations, and although the centrality of the political dimension remains, the personal sphere seems to take on an unprecedented relevance due to the difficulties of realization in the work sphere. The majority of these young people pour their professional skills and competences into the various forms of activism in which they are engaged, skills and competences that they are unable to make use of in a labour market which is incapable of incorporating and valourizing them adequately. In this sense, therefore, while confirming the presence of a particular form of activism that involves a ‘professionalization of participation’, the interviews highlight its ambivalent outcomes. On the one hand, individual skills and competences shape the form of participation these young people engage in (as in the case of Piero); on the other hand, the activities they perform become a resource for developing new professional skills and competences that may possibly contribute to obtaining a profession (as in the case of Lucia):

When the MP I was working for finished his term and stood for re-election, I was able, having chosen to return to Cosenza, to take care of his election campaign and this allowed me ... to get to know my city in depth. Once this experience was over, and given the extreme degradation of the city, I decided to set up a committee of activists to fight for the social, as well as the physical and cultural rebirth of Cosenza’s historic centre. (Piero, 30, Cosenza)

I’d like to work in the field of communication because, being part of the movement [Editor’s note: Fridays for Future], I started to deal with social media and I realised that it’s something I’m good at, I don’t know, I could do that as a job ... I’ve done a lot of things that I would never have done at university. I had to learn how to speak in public, how to deal with journalists, how to more or less manage a sort of press office. (Lucia, 25, Milan)

These young people’s ways of coping with the ‘crisis of the future’ appear very distant from public and national media representations that have often portrayed them as lazy, *bamboccioni*, ‘choosy’.⁷ On the contrary, these young people do not give up on the possibility of realizing themselves and attaining autonomy. Moreover, they circumvent the risks of presentification that the uncertainty of the future brings with it by leveraging both their own capacities for agency and the resources they draw from their commitment to forms of collective action and planning.

An Unexpected Opportunity: Youth Activism During the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the precarious and uncertain conditions experienced by young people. From a temporal perspective, there was a risk that such a collective discontinuity would result in a new push for processes of individualization and presentification of action, further contracting young people’s time horizon. In this regard, from the accounts of our interviewees it emerges that the pandemic generated profound uncertainty and disorientation due to the sudden, and in some cases drastic, changes in their daily habits as well as the impossibility of predicting the evolution of the health emergency in either the short or long term. However, the risks that this situation brought with it were removed from the possibility of engaging in forms of collective action and planning. If, on a personal level,

the effects of the pandemic were partly stemmed by collective commitment, on the other hand, at the level of political participation, the pandemic soon took shape as an unexpected opportunity for political revival, marking a profound break with the past in terms of both discourse and practice. Ada's and Carlo's testimonies point in this direction:

The issue of the pandemic launched us ... it really motivated us and it came from a need of our own ... being locked in the house, being separated triggered something in all of us At a certain point we said 'It's now or never', in the sense: When will it be time to get pissed off? When will we even have the means and the time to do it in this way here? (Ada, 26, Cagliari)

It was something [Editor's note: the pandemic] that slapped us in the face, and so we had to take note of what was dying, that is, all those discourses already widely in circulation in which the political collectives ... were wallowing and reproducing themselves in a referential manner, were practically dead. (Carlo, 32, Cagliari)

Carlo's interview goes on to specify which modes of action made it possible to turn the crisis situation into an opportunity for reflection and the revitalization of political commitment:

for the first time, we had to talk to a city we did not know, and mutual aid helped us to do this. ... We really had the opportunity to crash into those neighbourhoods we had always talked about—suburbs, working-class neighbourhoods—with our movement slang and finally get in there. And so the pandemic was not so much an obstacle. It was more a litmus test of what we had done before and what we had to do then, at that moment. (Carlo, 32, Cagliari)

This revitalizing drive for collective action took concrete form in the implementation of practices strongly marked by solidarity and mutualism. They engaged, for example, in the distribution of primary goods (food, clothing, medicines and medical devices) and technological devices (PCs, tablets), as well as in the production of podcasts and webinars aimed at satisfying the need for confrontation, exchange and in-depth analysis aroused by the emergency situation. In other words, by leveraging direct social actions (Zamponi, 2023), these young people resisted the risk of marginalization and political irrelevance posed by the advent of the pandemic, which no longer allowed for the adoption of more traditional forms of protest and engagement (assemblies, flash mobs, demonstrations, marches, etc.).

The effects of the pandemic crisis on youth activism, therefore, did not result in a renunciation of the possibility of participating and actively contributing to the desired change processes. Moreover, the ability to abruptly revise participation practices to assist and support the weaker segments of the population seems to have had a twofold outcome. On the one hand, by acting on a more instrumental and pragmatic dimension, they made up for institutional shortcomings in responding to the health and socio-economic emergency generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, from an identity perspective, the ability to abruptly revise objectives and practices was configured as an element of confirmation of their ability to act and produce changes in the desired direction, thus reinforcing their will to commit and participate. Teresa's testimony paints a clear picture of this:

During Covid, we neighbourhood co-workers, at one point, launched a community fund and raised 55,000 Euros ... from the beginning, we realised that the food parcels from the municipality were not enough ... thanks to a whole series of operators, volunteers, trainees, you name it, we started to call all 200 families on the phone who we then helped. (Teresa, 32, Milan)

The Transformative Power of Collective Utopias

Because of its exceptional and disconcerting character, the pandemic crisis of COVID-19 constituted the revelatory event of an already ongoing rethinking of young people's relationship with activism. This rethinking has been underpinned by a critical examination of their condition as temporal subjects in a historical time in which the projects of modernity have revealed their limits, especially in terms of the persistence and widening of social inequalities. Awareness of the failure of the political activism of previous generations who were trapped, according to the young activists, in imagining distant utopian projects goes hand in hand with an unprecedented way of linking the present with the future, everyday practice and hope for the future. The main feature of this political practice is ambivalence. Their vision of the future is rooted in a tension between its uncertain, even dystopian unfolding when viewed from the present, and its potentially infinite possibilities which make it worthwhile to be active in the present. What appears to be a contradiction is, actually, the keystone, the impetus to get active. Ambra gives us an account of this:

I basically think that the biggest changes ... will come from geo-political processes, not from below And you'll say: 'Then what the hell are you doing if you think that nothing can be changed from below?' It's just that, in my opinion, you have to try in the hope that in the future things will change, that movements will grow and movements will be able to have a weight. And so, if you have to look at it from the practical side, today we have no chance, in my opinion, to change things from below, but you have to work so that in the future it will be possible. (Ambra, 32, Cagliari)

Here, we can grasp the meaning of the everyday dimension of utopia, an idea which has been reformulated on a conceptual level since the early 2000s, first by Wright (2010) and then by Cooper (2014) and Levitas (2013). The everyday utopia is configured as the privileged sphere for the possibility of prefiguring the future through practices—especially political practices—although there is always the risk that it becomes a trap, crushing the present and compromising the 'possible' of the future (Mandich, 2020). Situating utopia in the minute and apparently banal practices of the everyday recalls the dimension of hope and its elaboration—both subjectively and collectively—found in micro-experiences (Arnett, 2000; Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Cook, 2018; Nunn et al., 2021). Ambra expands on the meaning of her political action in the present by looking to the future, highlighting the capacity of being poised between pessimism and hope, between utopias and dystopias:

[With respect to a collective future], I am not optimistic at all! ... If I imagine a future, I absolutely imagine a dystopian future. I don't know how horrible it could be, but I certainly see little room for these changes I'm hoping for. But something has to be done to

at least try. To plant seeds that might germinate in the future and then, even further in the future, lead to something. (Ambra, 32, Cagliari)

The everyday utopia to which Ambra refers not only re-establishes a temporal unity of society, reconnecting the present and the future, but is also the instrument through which to reconsider the link between intermediate bodies (activist associations) and political institutions, between micro-communities and the social structure. Matteo, for example, recounts his vision of activism by emphasizing the need to continue to imagine possible and alternative futures, starting from unprecedented forms of community life. However, in order for the practice of imagination associated with the practice of present commitment (of solidarity, mutualism and sharing) not to be thwarted, a new relationship with political institutions must be hoped for. There is a need to experiment with new languages, to open up spaces for dialogue, even conflictual dialogue, and negotiation. Here is his sense of the collective future in which we should continue to believe, and which is also a resource for ‘moving the apocalypse a little further away’:

[With respect to the future, I imagine] certainly the construction of different forms of community, of practices, maybe even an alternative to the capitalist way of life. ...I think that in my future I will try *N* times to imagine and to construct laboratories, large or small, and if there is also the possibility of using institutions, that would certainly make it easier to construct this type of laboratory for experimentation from the outside. And I imagine my future as *N* attempts to find the languages, to find the tools, to build those opportunities and, in the meantime, to try to avert, or at least to move the apocalypse a little bit further away. (Matteo, 29, Cosenza)

Conclusions

Starting from the analysis of 42 narrative interviews with young adult activists based in different Italian cities, we focused on youth activism within the configurations of contemporary time horizons. In particular, we analysed youth activism in relation to the dimension of the future, a relationship only seemingly compromised by a scenario of multiple crises.

Some significant elements have emerged from our data. First of all, far from being a ‘presentised’ commitment, youth activism is nourished by a confrontation with the both past political visions of previous generations and future horizons. Their vision of the future is a generational vision that includes at least two central elements: an inextricable intertwining, even a mutual nourishment, of the personal/individual dimension and the collective dimension. Moreover, the young activists’ visions of the future reflect the late-modern *Zeitgeist* and crises with their unpredictable contingencies and uncertainties. It is precisely towards the space between apocalypse and regeneration that young activists aim at this ‘possible’, aware of the risks and failures, but drawing strength from the fact that they have no other choice (Haste, 2022; Leccardi et al., 2023). Their vision of the future is strongly rooted in the present and in the everyday: the space-time of the everyday is the space-time to practise and revive care, solidarity, hope and mutualism (Bryant & Ellard, 2015; Monticelli, 2022) while looking towards and sensing the future (Mandich et al., 2024).

In addition, there is a second key element that is related to the capacity of these young people to think of themselves as actors capable of bringing hope and change, as activators of everyday utopias and re-imagining their relationship with the future within an apocalyptic scenario of multiple crises (Bowman & Starzak, 2024; Cooper, 2014; Mandich, 2020; Nunn et al., 2021; Wright, 2010). Understood as instruments of action for the staging of the possible, the utopias to which these young people refer are not temporally distant. Rather, they are anchored in the everyday and the concrete while looking towards a viable and practicable future. The centrality of everyday action should, therefore, not be understood as the result of a kind of renunciation of imagining possible and alternative futures. Instead, it is a unifying dimension (capable of holding together the past, present and future; individual and collective; action and structure) in which the construction of possible futures unfolds. The transformative power of the utopian/dystopian appears particularly clear in situations of crisis and emergency that generate strong collective discontinuities. It is precisely in such situations that we can witness the emergence of unprecedented possibilities of reaction that cannot always be deduced from the previous (pre-crisis) context. In this sense, everyday utopias prefigure themselves as effective analytical tools for understanding and explaining processes of social change.

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Notes

1. We refer to Melucci (1996), who identified young activists as prophets of change, literally 'those who predict the future'.
2. PRIN—Research Project of National Relevant Interest: 'Mapping Youth Futures: Forms of Anticipation and Youth Agency'.
3. The interviews had an average duration of an hour and a half.
4. We selected people aged 25–34 because of the peculiarities characterising the transition processes to adulthood in Italy. Indeed, young Italians reach full independence from their families very late, more and more often after the age of 30, because of both the general process of de-standardization of youth biographical pathways and the greater difficulties that young Italians encounter along the various transition regimes (in particular, from school to work) compared to other European countries (Bello & Cuzzocrea, 2018; Biggart & Walther, 2006).
5. The choice of these cities was due to the need to balance the group of interviewees as much as possible not only in terms of gender and education level but also to take into

- account the diverse territorial characteristics of their areas of residence. To understand how specific contexts and different social and transition process positionings relate to orientations towards the future, we chose three metropolitan cities—Milan, Naples and Cagliari—located, respectively, in the North, South and on a major island of the country, along with a smaller city in the South, Cosenza. Indeed, these regions exhibit different levels of youth political engagement and pathways to adulthood, the latter of which are largely influenced by enduring historical socio-economic disparities.
6. On this point see, for example, Arya and Henn (2021).
 7. We refer, in particular, to the terms used by two government ministers: the term ‘*bamboccioni*’ (a mocking term for young people who only think about having fun) was used by former Minister of the Economy Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa in 2007; the term ‘choosy’ was expressly used in English by former Minister of Labour and Social Policy Elsa Fornero in 2012 to indicate how young people delayed entering the labour market by refusing job opportunities that were not attractive to them.

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