JRAI Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

Fluctuating futures: coming of age in the biggest social housing neighbourhood in Milan

Paolo Grassi *University of Milano Bicocca*

This article – part of a six-year ethnographic research project – aims to deconstruct and 'decolonize' essentialized notions of adolescence and youth, primarily through the application of the category of intersectionality. The research focuses on a series of educational initiatives implemented in San Siro, one of Milan's largest public housing neighbourhoods, where half of the population comprises large families with migratory backgrounds, mainly from North Africa. Following a prolonged period of youth policy vacuum, San Siro has recently re-emerged in public discourse due to the national and international success of a local group of rappers, which simultaneously contributed to a surge in social fear. In response to this fear, public institutions decided to allocate new funding for youth welfare. The research, conducted among a group of teenagers within and outside of schools, as well as within some social services, demonstrates the fluctuating attachments these young people have to their neighbourhood and their varying aspirations towards the future. Their narratives suggest a relativistic construction of the notions of adolescence and youth that can account for the diversity that characterizes San Siro, between individual agency and structural constraints.

Introduction: building up an educational issue

San Siro is one of the largest, public housing neighbourhoods in Milan, consisting of 6,146 dwellings, 77 per cent of which are still owned and managed by the Lombardy Region through the ALER company.[1] The neighbourhood's housing stock is quite run down with substantial vacancy rates. Informal living practices implemented by individuals and households in extremely precarious conditions are widespread. The neighbourhood has a high concentration of fragile populations – including elderly people (36.3%), many of whom live alone and are unemployed – and families at risk of poverty. Around half of the inhabitants of San Siro are large families with migratory backgrounds, with 84 different nationalities in addition to Italian and a prevalence of people from Egypt (37.2%), Morocco (10.4%), and the Philippines (9.5%). Moreover, San Siro is characterized by the presence of a large population of children, between 0

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) **00**, *1-18*

and 18 years old (18.4%), which is higher than the average for Italian cities (Cognetti & Padovani 2018).

Since 2018, a rap scene has emerged among young people in the neighbourhood, which has enjoyed national and international success. Six young boys – all of whom grew up in the neighbourhood and are now in their twenties – constitute the most iconic representatives of that scene, gathered around the Seven 700 collective (whose name evokes the number of the Milan municipality which San Siro belongs to). The crew has gradually attracted the attention of the media and local politicians, not least because of their video clips shot in the neighbourhood, often depicting grotesque scenes of street life and violence, drawing from a *gangsta* rap imagery (Grassi & Sánchez 2021). The climax of this dynamic was reached in April 2021, when, still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a rapper from the crew together with another rapper from a neighbouring city attracted around three hundred youths in the public space, causing some tensions with the police. The incident was particularly stigmatized, fomenting a wave of social fear (cf. Saitta 2023). That wave grew with each passing day, fuelled by media narratives and a massive police operation affecting the rappers featured in the video and the youth of San Siro more generally. Thanks also to these episodes, San Siro has increasingly been seen as a delimited space in which fears are growing concerning a young population with a migratory background (cf. Toubon & Messamah 1990), often excluded, discriminated, and perceived as a threat to the status quo.

On the other hand, Milanese institutions also took actions at the social level. Following a meeting between two rappers of the Seven 700 and Mayor Giuseppe Sala (Melley 2021), the municipality approved a resolution, which sanctioned a memorandum of understanding between ALER Milan, the prefecture and the municipality. The memorandum was signed in October of the same year. The protocol explicitly mentioned the rappers' videoclip and set up a series of projects, some already financed, others to be devised, for the 'regeneration of the San Siro neighbourhood'. Many of the socio-educational interventions carried out in the ensuing months at San Siro followed in the wake of that initiative, including, as I will explain, the research that led to this article.

In the following pages, I will analyse this institutional shift with a main objective in mind: to question how the ideas of adolescents and youth in San Siro were constructed in a specific historical moment by external normative representations that risked homogenizing individual paths and crushing them into stigmatizing or essentialist analyses. On a theoretical level, the article combines literature referring to the concept of intersectionality (cf. Collins 2015; Colombo & Rebughini 2016; McCall 2005) with contemporary studies on youth cultures (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004), characterized by glocal and transnational dimensions (Appadurai 1996; Robertson 1995). This interlace will be useful for analysing the complexity of highly varied individual trajectories and aspirations (cf. Appadurai 2004; 2013; Maffesoli 2004 [1988]; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan & Gale 2015) while also being conditioned by common forms of oppression. Race and social class will emerge as the two preponderant dimensions in defining differentiated constraints and opportunities along those individual trajectories of the young people of San Siro (see Anthias 2013; Domecka & Spanò 2021). On the one hand, as highlighted in other Italian contexts, despite the presence of greater ethnic heterogeneity, the racial dimension defines a rift along a 'colour line' that pits 'the Italians' against the so-called second-generation children who often do not see their rights as citizens recognized. On the other hand, class establishes social hierarchies

based on the possession of economic resources (Merrill 2011). Ethnographic data will make it possible to articulate the relationship between these two dimensions, also with respect to the spatial component of the neighbourhood.

The notion of intersectionality, which is well known – first coined some thirty years ago by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) to describe the oppression of African American women in the United States – is based on the idea that marginalization is caused by the confluence of multiple identity factors (Colombo & Rebughini 2016). As stated by Collins and Bilge:

> Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytical tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity, and age – among others – as interrelated and mutually shaping one another (Collins & Bilge 2020: 2).

While intersectionality has obtained huge success in an international academic context, there is no shortage of problematic issues. First of all, there is no unambiguous definition of the concept. The sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, for example, explains in a 2015 article how intersectionality indicates a field of study, but also an analytical strategy for examining social phenomena and a critical praxis related to the struggle for social justice (Collins 2015). On the other hand, the widespread use of the term carries with it the risk of its depoliticization. Some scholars and activists argue that in this regard, the concept of intersectionality should be used with exclusive reference to groups of the oppressed and not as a generic interpretative lens, to prevent distorting its original meaning (Bilge 2013).

It is also unclear how intersectionality can be investigated. McCall, for example, states that 'intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies … has made so far', but at the same time observes that little attention has been paid to 'how to study … [it], that is, its methodology' (2005: 1771). Starting from this observation, the author proposes three different approaches. The first is called anti-categorical and is based on a deconstructive mechanism. Following this logic, social life is considered to be too complex to be pigeon-holed into categories. In this case, intersectional analysis takes the form of a critique of overly rigid and hypostatized descriptions of reality. The second approach, termed intra-categorical, is concerned with the study of a 'particular social group at overlooked points of intersection' (McCall 2005: 1774). In other words, authors following this orientation tend to focus on people whose identity 'crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups' (Dill 2002: 5, cited in McCall 2005: 1774), to reveal the multiplicity of lived experience. The third approach is inter-categorical. It uses analytical categories to document asymmetric relations between social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions, while maintaining a critical stance towards them. In short, the categories are recognized and used in an analytical key, while avoiding their absolutization. In this article I will try to adopt this third approach in order to comparatively analyse the connections between certain categories and the social group under investigation, namely the adolescents and young people of San Siro.

The article is structured as follows. The next section describes methodological notes on data collection and introduces the idea of youth used by the project I worked for. The third section proposes a qualitative-quantitative picture of the condition of young residents in San Siro, compared to the Italian national context. The fourth section reflects on socio-cultural dynamics that portray adolescents in the neighbourhood,

taking up the academic debate on intersectionality and focusing on the analytical dimensions of race and class. The fifth section deepens this debate by considering transnational and glocal dimensions. Finally, the sixth section attempts to reconstruct, from the ethnographic data collected, the aspirations of the adolescents of San Siro – understood as social facts deeply connected to positioning determined by intersectionality – while also deconstructing the idea of the future that adults (including social workers and researchers) often apply when writing about young people.

The results of the research show fluctuating attachments to the neighbourhood exhibited by these young people and varying degrees of projections regarding their future. The collected narratives contribute to 'decolonizing' (Mignolo & Walsh 2018) the very idea of adolescence and youth socially promoted through educational policies and social projects, proposing instead a relativist construction of the concept that can account for the diversity that characterizes not just San Siro.

Methodological notes

I have been conducting ethnographic research in San Siro since 2017, focusing in particular on the relationship between urban space and violence. I accomplished this first as a postdoctoral researcher, then as an assistant professor, through a collaboration with Mapping San Siro, an Action-Research group affiliated with the Polytechnic of Milan, formed by urbanists, architects and other social scientists, established in the neighbourhood since 2013 (Grassi 2024).[2] It is thanks to this relationship that I have been able to cross different educational spaces over the years – such as primary and secondary schools, youth centres, and parishes – forging relationships with some young people. From 2019 to 2023 I also collaborated with a European project entitled 'Transgang'.[3] This project, which focused on the analysis of street gangs in the Milan metropolitan area, included fieldwork in San Siro and investigated the then growing rap scene (Grassi 2023).

At the start of 2023, I was invited to collaborate with a local project – promoted within the interinstitutional memorandum described above – entitled 'Reinventing citizenship. Capacitating social networks and groups in San Siro', coordinated by the Prefecture, involving three Milanese universities – Bicocca, Polytechnic and Bocconi – and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The project aimed to support the growth of the adolescents and young people of San Siro – in particular those of 'non-Italian origin' – by promoting 'a citizenship model', strengthening 'the capacity to respond to the emerging needs of local subjects', improving 'intergenerational and intercultural relations in the neighbourhood', supporting empowerment and participation of young people, and stimulating integrated actions for the care of the most marginalized subjects (quotations are taken from the project documents).

Specifically, I was asked to develop an ethnography to investigate the aspirations of young people living in San Siro, thus enhancing the understanding of their needs by local organizations. This specific phase of my research lasted three months – from May to July 2023 – and was based on participant observation (see DeWalt & DeWalt 2011). I made my observations mainly during leisure and educational activities in the public space of the neighbourhood. In addition, I followed five local NGOs engaged in educational activities with pre-adolescents and adolescents. In particular, I attended a youth centre managed by one of them and actively supported some workshops conducted within the 'Reinventing citizenship' project by a professional photographer. These workshops were implemented at another youth centre that worked with

young people flagged by social services for deviant behaviour or problematic family situations.

In total, I talked with about thirty young people, aged between 11 and 19 (but with some exceptions involving 20-year-old boys and girls). The interactions between me and my interlocutors took place largely through dialogues involving the use of informal conversations rather than structured or semi-structured interviews. I always made my role as a researcher explicit, explaining that I would write a research report for a project in which I was collaborating. All the information I collected was recorded in a diary, anonymized and later reprocessed.[4]

The research materials collected within the project 'Reinventing citizenship' were compared with others from previous research experiences. The cross-references to interviews and focus groups carried out before 2023 – displayed throughout the article – made it possible to partially recover a temporal depth that could not otherwise be explored.

Young people in San Siro: a provisional picture

Who are the 'adolescents' and 'young people' referred to in the 'Reinventing citizenship' project? This was one of the first questions I approached the field with. On the one hand, the life trajectories of the young people of San Siro often straddle several countries, different places connected along transnational networks. Therefore, defining their 'condition' means considering a multiplicity of dimensions, primarily spatial (Çağlar & Glick Schiller 2018). On the other, the terms 'adolescence' and 'youth' themselves require some clarification. They are both universal and specific categories, describing a collectively recognized stage of life, but at the same time deeply dependent on local contexts (Wyn & White 1997).

In Italy, the term 'adolescence' precisely delineates an age group (11-19 years); however, this accuracy does not extend to the concept of 'youth'. The boundaries of 'youth' are more ambiguous and have broadened in recent years due to the gradual shift in the age of transition into adulthood. According to the latest classification by the Italian Institute of Statistics, individuals up to the age of 34 are still categorized as 'young', with the lower boundary set at 15 years. These evolving definitions underscore the significant role of institutions in determining who is considered 'young'. As Johanna Wyn and Rob White note, 'young people do experience many things in common because of their age, especially because of the way in which they are treated by institutions' (Wyn & White 1997: 10). Among institutions, it is also worth mentioning universities and research institutes, which help define concepts through which policies are implemented. By referencing recent Italian publications, I can proceed through concentric circles, beginning with a national perspective and culminating in San Siro, via the city of Milan.

In general, Italian adolescents and young people seem to be going through a critical historical period, conditioned by uncertainties and fragility. The 2023 Youth Report (*Rapporto giovani* in Italian) published by the Giuseppe Toniolo Institute (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo 2023), for instance, depicts a quite bleak panorama: high school drop-out rates among the highest in Europe, a percentage of Neet (not in education, employment or training) in the 15-24 age bracket amounting to 15 per cent (5 percentage points above the European average), a general 'worsening of the psychological and emotional condition and an impoverishment of social skills'[5] (Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo 2023: 8-9) linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, an evident

mismatch between labour supply and demand caused mainly by the demographic reduction of the new generations and weak training.

The Cariplo Foundation's Inequalities Report (2023) seems to be on the same wavelength and allows for a better articulation of this scenario. Thus, it turns out that the socio-economic conditions of young people living in Italy vary widely and that these influence learning and career paths (albeit to a lesser degree than in other European countries). On average, *liceo*[6] students have more educated parents and score better in reading tests. Economically and socially 'disadvantaged' students who are concentrated in schools that are considered less prestigious feel less connected to the educational institution and have lower motivation. Moreover, students from a migratory background struggle more than others (Fondazione Cariplo 2023). The Italian school therefore seems unable to fulfil its function as a 'social lift', instead reproducing divisions and inequalities, operating a social selection based on the cultural criteria of the middle and dominant class (cf. Bourdieu & Passeron 1972 [1970]).

On an economic level, Oxfam Italia's Disuguitalia Report (2021) illustrates how in the twenty years between the beginning of the new millennium and the first half of 2019, the shares of net national wealth held by the richest 10 per cent and the poorest half have shown a diverging trend (+7.6 per cent for the former, −36.6 per cent for the latter between 2000 and 2019). In essence, rich Italians have become increasingly richer, while the poor have become increasingly poorer. This trend has favoured the polarization of Italian society, with spatial repercussions that have affected cities in particular, exacerbating the division between 'centre' and 'peripheries'.

A Caritas[7] report on poverty in the area of Milan (2022 data) also confirms the situation of general economic impoverishment, which began in 2019, worsened with the pandemic, and was further deepened 'with the socio-economic crisis that [arose] as a result of the conflict in Ukraine, the rise in the cost of raw materials and the consequent increase in the cost of living' (Caritas Ambrosiana 2023). The report also shows how economic problems affect the youngest people disproportionately. In this regard, Milan is the Italian capital of inequalities, as highlighted by a study conducted by Unione Italiano del Lavoro (UIL) in cooperation with the EURES study centre in 2022. Indeed, the Lombard capital records the greatest social polarization between rich and poor neighbourhoods (UIL & EURES 2022). The latter are concentrated in suburban areas or in public housing districts such as San Siro.

Minors and young people in San Siro are characterized by varying degrees of fragility. Some have just arrived in Italy and live in extremely precarious conditions; others with a migratory background are still affected by their parents' difficulties (Cognetti & Padovani 2018). In fact, under Italian law, children of parents with a migratory background born in Italy cannot obtain citizenship until they reach the age of 18 (if they prove ten years of uninterrupted legal residence). This causes problems with the recognition of young people's rights and difficulties with their inclusion. A public debate on this issue has been ongoing for years and, to date, has not yet led to any concrete results. A 2020 study conducted by the Codici research agency (2020) helps to describe this young population in more detail, as well as their families, confirming some national trends. The economic availability of San Siro's households is limited, severely in many cases. Their education levels are 'far below the city average' (Codici 2020: 41). The research also notes a substantial number of young people outside the labour market or education. In contrast, San Siro offers sectoral cultural

and educational proposals, often in response to specific problems. Services dedicated to minors and young people are lacking in the neighbourhood (Codici 2020).

Added to this is a heavy territorial stigma (Wacquant 2008) that tends to negatively portray San Siro through biased and stereotyped images, such as 'Milanese kasbah', 'urban ghetto', or 'favela'. Far from constituting ephemeral narratives, such representations have the power to sediment and produce real tangible effects. Growing up in San Siro means suffering the shame of that stigma: this is when people are labelled as deviants in public space, or are stigmatized in job interviews precisely because they come from a poorer neighbourhood (Garbin & Millington 2012; Lapeyronnie 2008; Pinkster, Ferier & Hoekstra 2020; Wacquant 2023).

Within this framework, many schools around San Siro experience problematic situations. For example, two of Milan's primary schools located in San Siro are among the top ten for school segregation in Milan (Grassi & Cognetti 2021). The fieldwork revealed similar complexities regarding higher education institutions. The head of a local secondary school, for example, in a training meeting related to the project 'Reinventing citizenship' held in San Siro on 13 May 2023, spoke of a tired and fatigued teaching staff, struggling to manage students, who often come from 'disadvantaged' families.

Thus, San Siro coagulates and exacerbates a number of problematic trends for young people that can be traced nationwide. Research portrays that young people in San Siro have, on average, fewer economic and social resources than the average of their peers living in other areas of the city. This is the analytical framework on which the 'Reinventing citizenship' project and thus my research were grafted. The following sections will help to problematize it in relation to the everyday experience and processes of identity construction of the young people encountered.

Reading complexity: the analytical dimensions of race and class

The biographies of the young people of San Siro are characterized by an intertwining of racial, class, gender, and generational dimensions on which, to some extent, their aspirations also depend. In this regard, a concept capable of holding them together, avoiding reductionist and simplifying attitudes, is surely that of intersectionality (McCall 2005).

The two primary analytical dimensions that emerged from the narratives of my interlocutors were race and social class. Other categories were less prominent and not significantly problematized by them. For instance, the age factor surprisingly remained an implicit 'given' that was not subjected to reflection. Similarly, the fieldwork regarding gender dynamics served to dismantle some stereotypes rather than emphasize asymmetrical relations. Thus, despite exhibiting a conventional form of hegemonic masculinity characterized by heterosexuality, toughness, and an ideal of economic independence (Donaldson, Hibbins, Howson & Pease 2009), the boys utilized the youth centre to establish a protected space for dialogue and interaction, questioning those stereotypical features, facilitated by the mediation of social workers. Conversely, girls expressed their femininity by using the youth centre to meet boys of their own age, transcending the presumed 'cultural constraints' imposed by their families.

Race was instead one of the main factors in determining the inequality experienced in the neighbourhood by adolescents. Blackness is generally surfacing in Italy as an element of differentiation from whiteness. The ways in which individuals with migratory backgrounds perceive themselves, engage with others, and arrange their daily

activities are progressively shaped by racialized interpretations of collective identity (Merrill 2011). According to my interlocutors, race emerged especially in the school context, where youngsters with migratory backgrounds – crossing language barriers – came up against an institution that was effectively inadequate for enhancing their cultural richness. In other words, language difficulties marked racial differences. The following fieldnote is significant in this regard:

> There are three exercises to be done. Babacar[8] patiently copies the text with a pencil in a notebook. The first two exercises deal with polynomials, the third is an equation. I try to dictate the operation to him, but Babacar struggles with the exponentiations. He does not understand the process in Italian, he gets the operations wrong (Fieldnotes, 29 May 2023).

Babacar, who arrived in Italy from Senegal around 2020, was confronted with exercises that would make sense for a boy of his age but were too difficult for him. His level of Italian was still poor and was insufficient for understanding the text. When confronted with a language level that was too high, Babacar felt a sense of inadequacy and 'inferiority'. Another case concerned Saïd, a 13-year-old boy whose parents are from Egypt, who was preparing for his eighth-grade examination:

> For each subject, Saïd has chosen an illustrious Italian character that he will then have to present in the oral exam. For French, he has chosen Leonardo da Vinci. He opens an old laptop, searches on Wikipedia for a page on the Mona Lisa, then copies and pastes it into Google translator. He puts the translation into a Word file to be corrected by the teacher. Task finished (Fieldnotes, 29 May 2023).

Saïd tried to learn information about a national historical figure in a third language other than his mother tongue (Egyptian Arabic) and Italian. What was striking was not so much the type of activity as the mechanics of its execution related to poor language skills.

Sometimes the language gap passed through procedures undoubtedly designed for Italian users. This was evident in the IT field: technological devices reveal their ineffectiveness when applied superficially to any type of learner, without taking into account individual needs and personal biographies.

> I help Salma with her English homework. She is Egyptian, she is 11 years old, she has to go to the seventh grade. She arrived in Italy six months ago, she lives in San Siro with her parents and has a younger brother and sister. She speaks Italian quite well. She also studied English in Egypt. She shows me some exercises that we correct together. The text of the activities is written in Italian. Salma therefore has to read the instructions in a language that is not her own, to complete activities in yet another language. Some exercises involve listening. An app has to be downloaded onto the phone and then accessed via an e-mail address. Salma calls her mum on the phone and asks her permission to get the app. When she gets it, the app asks for permission from a parent, via an e-mail address. Salma tries to call her mother back, but she does not understand what to do. Salma eventually fails to listen to the recordings. I wonder at the extent to which these digital solutions serve only to produce new mechanisms of exclusion (Fieldnotes, 10 July 2023).

Racial divisions, reproduced by the school system, were sometimes incorporated by students with a migratory background through the exercise of symbolic violence, as another girl showed:

> Umayma arrived in Italy exactly ten years ago and every summer, with her family, she returns to her hometown of Belem, near Cairo. She is in her first year at a high school: 'At school we are all Egyptians. In the technical schools there are practically only Arabs; instead in the Lyceum you only see Italians.' She then adds: 'I have always been unlucky. In class I've always had only Egyptians. The problem is that Egyptians are always fighting and shouting, so there is never peace in class. … On top of that, in

class the teachers tell us not to speak Arabic, but my classmates always speak it, so they then punish us' (Greta Bongiolatti's Fieldnotes, June 2023).

Without wishing to downplay the importance that the schools can play in the process of including young people (with respect to the specific case of San Siro, see Cognetti 2014), the episodes cited above show how they can also emphasize different racial elements, thus producing the opposite effect. The young people in San Siro experienced their marginalization mainly through their relationship with the school, thus defining their identity in opposition to that of their 'white' peers and teachers. The non-recognition of their citizenship adds to this dynamic, exacerbating their perception of themselves as 'foreigners'.

Second, the data collected indicate how the class dimension emerges above all in young people's relationship with elements outside San Siro (Bourdieu 1987). Below is an excerpt from an interview collected in 2019 during my previous research in the neighbourhood that relates to a school located outside it, in which families with different levels of income interact:

You went to the primary school in Via Paravia. What memories do you have?
I went from first to fourth grade and they were all Arabs. But there wasn't a problem of racism, on the contrary. Being children, you don't have prejudices. Adults have prejudices. When you are a child everything is the same for you.
How many of you were in the class?
About twenty-five.
From Egypt, from Morocco…?
Egypt, Morocco and that's it. We were two Filipinos and two Peruvians. Zero Italians. The most surprising thing was when I went to fifth grade. My mother sent me to Via Zamagna, which is nearby. Do you know it? There are nuns there, some are Filipinos, some South Americans. My mother thought I would be better off there. …
But you didn't get on well?
No, I got on well, but in educational terms … My mother … you know mothers … then she sent me there. But I only did one year. It was different there, because the boys lived in [the rich area next to the social housing neighbourhood]. We were two from Selinunte [the main square of San Siro], me and my Chilean friend, because our mothers already knew each other … This school was another world, I felt bad there [laughs]. It was a more social difference.
Why?
I didn't really feel bad in the end, because being a child you are innocent anyway. I felt bad more in economic terms. I felt a difference. For example, we would get off from school at 4 o'clock and you would see the other parents arriving early. I always stayed in the waiting room, me and my friend, because our parents alternated between two jobs. That was the only difference (Interview, 6 February 2019).

The interviewed boy problematizes the analytical dimension of race and relates it to that of social class, establishing that the latter characterized his school experience more than other analytical dimensions such as ethnicity or nationality. He felt different from his classmates because of a *social disparity*, mainly imposed by varying levels of economic capital, as he stated.

It is difficult to understand which analytical dimension was predominant among the young people of San Siro. The academic debate in recent times has particularly questioned the role of race and class in the dynamics of urban segregation. After the prevalence of post-modern positions that looked at the issue of suburbs through cultural and racial lenses, the social and class question is now being put back in the centre of some studies. For example, Bugliari Goggia (2022; 2023) has worked in this area with reference to the context of the French banlieues: 'Ethnicity and/or race … are

secondary elements because the *banlieues* are not only inhabited by French people of foreign origin … We can safely say that one lives in the banlieues not because of ethnicity but because one is poor and assigned to certain types of work' (Bugliari Goggia 2023).

The sociologist Roberto De Angelis seems to be on the same wavelength when, echoing Wacquant, he describes San Siro itself in terms of a banlieue, that is, a reality characterized by low levels of segregation, a lack of demographic coherence and cultural unity, and a reduced structuring capacity of its organizations, whose demands are essentially social, linked to citizenship (De Angelis 2021).

Indeed, field research has shown how, in relations among young people, inside and outside San Siro, the racial dimension sometimes takes second place. Thus, for example, in the youth centre, or within the other NGOs' projects, young people often demonstrated a high degree of mixing and interaction. The same assimilation was discernible in the public space of the neighbourhood, where young people with different migratory backgrounds used to spend their free time together. Race does not disappear altogether from such processes of subjectivation but is strategically mobilized with respect to specific dynamics (Mansilla, Grassi & Queirolo-Palmas 2022), fading into a 'colour line', thus opposing *all* whites to *all* blacks (Du Bois 2010) or interacts with other dimensions.

However, the model to which the 'Reinventing citizenship' project aimed did not seem to take this complexity into account. On the contrary, the research called for a shift in the focus of the intervention, also considering that these analytical dimensions had to be linked to another determining factor in the construction of the San Siro adolescents' identity and their aspirations. I refer to the globalization of their imaginaries and the transnational dimension that characterizes many of their lives.

Intersectionality between local and global

Race and class were the two main dimensions that combined to define the identities of young people in San Siro. However, these social constructions could not be essentialized (as the 'inter-categorical' perspective on intersectionality described in the introduction suggested). Rather, they emerged as partially malleable and changeable, relationally produced categories. Moreover, they were also welded to a spatial component, namely to a differential attachment to the neighbourhood and the city of Milan. Whereas some young people claimed their affection to San Siro, making it a source of pride or the object of their claims (like the rappers mentioned in the introduction), others associated the context in which they lived with the main cause of their marginalization.

These different levels of attachment were also conditioned by the extent to which young people in the neighbourhood did or did not have relationships with other social spaces, both at 'virtual' and 'real' levels. Referring to the former, it is worth considering the following fieldnote:

> Outside the youth centre I meet a boy. He is 16 years old, wearing a tracksuit, 'paid 80 euros', he points out. He faces the inner hall, looks at the people there and asks me if the space is now only frequented by kids. He says he is going to Egypt next week, first to Sharm El Sheikh, for a week, with an uncle, then 'to his country', with his family. He is studying at a professional school to become a mechanic, but he wants to change school, to an IT course. He tells me that he lives near Piazza Segesta and that he arrived in Italy a few years ago. The boy then sits down next to me, on a bench in the courtyard. He starts playing PUBG, a shooter game, on his phone. The boy moves his fingers quickly as he explains the main rules to me. It is an online challenge with other players connected from other parts of the world. Meanwhile, in another corner of the courtyard, some boys listen to music from a Bluetooth speaker while watching videos on TikTok (Fieldnote, 24 July 2023).

The positioning and aspirations of young people in San Siro pass through relationships and imaginaries that transcend the neighbourhood, linking cities and nations through the physical movement of people and digital media (see Ritzer 2003). This fieldnote reports a prototypical situation: a boy is thinking about the upcoming holidays in his home country, while playing connected to other kids scattered elsewhere. Next to him a small group of teenagers are listening to music and socializing, while simultaneously thinking of themselves there and in other places. As with most boys and girls, young people in San Siro enjoy artistic and cultural productions from different territories. They thus build spatial and mental maps, creatively and imaginatively defining their own identity and future.

This symbolic dimension is often accompanied by a second level of relationship with other social spaces, linked to a physical, concrete mobility experienced from a young age. Many of the adolescents encountered during the research have family members abroad with whom they continue to maintain relations, including work relations. Take, for example, one of my first interviews with a boy living in San Siro with Moroccan parents:

> *Is your dad working now?*
> No, he only works in the summer, at the seaside, then in the winter he goes to Morocco, he's a driver for a couple of months.
> *So, you always go back and forth.*
> I got back from Spain today! An hour ago.
> *Where were you?*
> In Alicante. I was working there with my cousin.
> *As a welder?*
> No, I am a welder, butcher and I can also cook: kebabs. And I'm a mechanic.
> *What did you do in Spain?*
> From eight in the morning until noon I worked at the butcher's and from one until nine, I went to make sandwiches…
> *Kebab?*
> Kebabs.
> *Did you like it?*
> Yes, but too much work, heavy (Interview, 20 January 2017).

The young people of San Siro thus frequent transnational landscapes (Appadurai 1996), feeding a traffic of symbols through their movements and their telephones. Those scenarios are re-appropriated locally, in a creative dialectic capable of producing ever new meanings. The Internet allows the consolidation of hybrid communities (acting on a physical and digital level) with a double action, local and global (Robertson 1995).

The dimension of intersectionality investigated in the previous section is complexified here, or rather acquires a greater dynamism that actually was not considered by the 'Reinventing citizenship' project. Instead, in the wake of a conspicuous literature related to so-called post-subcultural studies (Bennett & Kahn-Harris 2004), it is possible to emphasize the individualization of biographical paths and the fluidity of identity constructions of the young people of San Siro (Maffesoli 2004 [1988]). The boys encountered at the youth centre, besides being the same age, have similar migratory backgrounds and economic conditions. Yet, they structured specific definitions of their selves, exploiting their interests and passions, connecting with other young people from within and outside the neighbourhood.

On the other hand, this does not mean completely neglecting the collective dimension. As Italian sociologist Leccardi puts it, 'identities are indeed hybrid, but

also because they mix individual and collective: collective identities, in other words, continue to matter. The mixing of local and global does not completely erase the first dimension: local identities remain important, albeit in an increasingly transnational framework' (Leccardi 2020: 144).

Therefore, we can argue that in San Siro local and global dimensions coexist with racial and class affiliations. Young people relate to the neighbourhood ambivalently and through different levels of attachment: moving away from it and approaching it, rejecting it and at the same time claiming it. It was from those positionings – conditioned by ingroup and outgroup representations – that they also defined their aspirations.

What future? 'Doxic' aspirations and the power of liminality

Temporal conceptions – always flexible, changeable and permeable – can be thought of as a triangular relationship between perception of reality, memories, and anticipations of what is to come (Gell 1992). Perception belongs to the present, memory to the past, and anticipation to the future. The aspirations of young people in San Siro are thus linked to a temporal conception informed by inputs, links, interconnections, 'world maps' that orient their actions (see Appadurai 2004; Bryan & Knight 2019; Suckert 2022). It is open to question whether there is indeed a specific temporal conception relating to a slice of the population in a single neighbourhood. In this sense, fieldwork has helped to perform a deconstructive operation. In the same way as stated with respect to the concepts of 'adolescence' and 'youth', the ethnographic material showed different ideas of the future, thus blurring the assumption of a uniform and homogeneous collective representation taken for granted by the project I was working on. Yet, it is also possible here to identify some interpretative lines.

The interviews and informal conversations revealed a variety of plans and aspirations, more or less anchored to the socio-economic reality experienced by the adolescents of San Siro, with varying degrees of awareness. Some fieldnotes portrayed a multifaceted scenario. Sometimes adolescents imagined a future linked to the dimension of care, idealizing socially recognized professions, as in the case of Afifah (14 years old):

> Afifah has several dreams: she would like to be a policewoman, a photographer or a kindergarten teacher. She would like to be a policewoman to 'put the bad guys in their place: there are a lot of people who need a scolding'. Photography is a passion she has had since she was little, in fact, one of her hobbies is wandering around Milan taking pictures of her friends. Being a kindergarten teacher, on the other hand, is a recent interest, which arose when she had to look after her friend's child.

Or in the case of Inaya (15 years old):

> When she grows up, Inaya wants to be a doctor. This vocation was born in her when, as a child, she saw her maternal grandmother fall ill and suffer from a very rare disease. This situation made her feel helpless and the desire to help people emerged in her (Greta Bongiolatti's Fieldnotes, June 2023).

These narrations could be associated to what some authors defined – drawing on Bourdieu's theory – 'doxic aspirations', i.e. those aspirations related to logics that 'carry a power of symbolic violence since they codify the norms, and so select for the success, of those in relatively powerful positions, yet hold sway among others – whose lack of success thus appears justified as the result of 'deficits', or 'lacks', of aspiration or aptitude (Zipin *et al.* 2015: 231). By leveraging personal initiative and the idea of success, some of these doxic aspirations reached hyperbolic levels:[9]

> I play ball with Ndione in the courtyard of the youth centre. We spend half an hour kicking the ball around, without talking. However, during the breaks I try to ask him something: he has almost finished his eighth-grade exams, even though he is 16. Next year he still doesn't know what school he will attend: 'It depends on my father', he says. I ask him what ideas he has for the future, what he wants to do when he 'grows up'. He replies that he does not know. But then he asks me if there is still time to enrol in a football school: 'I would like to be a footballer' (Fieldnotes, 20 June 2023).

Similarly, following the success of the Seven 700, many expressed their desire to 'break through' in the music industry, yet they merely replicate familiar imagery and artistic languages without recognizing that they are entering an already saturated market.

Such projects detached from reality are, in some respects, indicative of places that offer no concrete possibilities. Imaginative but unrealizable plans at least allow one to think oneself elsewhere. Some young people 'have made it', which legitimizes this type of narrative. The life trajectories of marginalized young people thus become presentable (cf. Fava 2008). However, reconsidering Ndione's words, it is also fair to ask what else a boy who arrived in Italy a few years ago, without a mother and without knowing Italian, could imagine more concretely.

The data presented above show a neighbourhood whose population presents varying degrees of fragility. In this regard, the testimonies collected within the youth centre that worked with young people, flagged by social services for deviant behaviour or problematic family situations, attested to the most difficult trajectories:

> In this second photo workshop run by the photographer of the project, the boys have to edit selected shots with markers, explaining what represents them and how they see their future. Joseph writes 'Imagination comes to life.' He draws sheets around his figure, which he surrounds with flames … Reda, the eldest of the three, struggles to stay in the activity, but, with the support of a social worker, he eventually selects a few sentences: 'You should not regret your past. We don't have a space to stay. Today I have matured.' I look at these three very different boys leaning over the photos and holding black and white markers. All three, at different ages, write in block letters and in an ungrammatical manner. I wonder what future this city has in store for them (Fieldnotes, 6 July 2023).

These stories – often only hinted at – reminded me of how difficult it was to grow up in San Siro, or rather what makes it more difficult than in other neighbourhoods of Milan. Yet, it is striking to recognize how the aspirations expressed by those adolescents often disregarded the structural constraints that conditioned their existences. The adolescents of San Siro sought to climb the social hierarchy in which they had been placed. Taking up a categorization proposed by the sociologist Merton, it could be said that they aimed at shared social goals using legitimate means (Merton 1949). Informal conversations rarely revealed renunciatory or rebellious attitudes (which would involve the definition of alternative social goals and the use of illegitimate, hence illegal, means).[10]

The adolescents of San Siro conformally dreamt of becoming doctors, computer technicians, or entrepreneurs. Where the complicated socio-economic context was more recognized, the aspirations became more concrete, but no less ambitious: the boys of the youth centre that worked with young people flagged by social services, for example, saw themselves engaged in the food industry, which became a sector in which they could still make 'their way', that is, make money and a career.[11]

> I talk to Giovanni for a while. He tells me that he has just finished hotel management school (*Scuola alberghiera* in Italian) and is looking for a job. For him it is simply a matter of choice, given the great demand in the sector. He does not know whether to stay in Milan or leave for a while. He shows me messages on WhatsApp from kitchen managers who are contacting him (Fieldnotes, 22 June 2023).

Finally, there were also those who, more silently, could not find answers:

> The educator in charge of the centre asks me to help Mohamed write his CV. He is 17 years old. He attends a technical institute; he has no experience of any kind. I ask him what he wants to do when he grows up, he says he doesn't know; he says: 'I really don't know.' He looks at me bewildered, as if asking me to answer for him, to give him a perspective (Fieldnotes, 24 July 2023).

The spectrum of possibilities is so broad that it is difficult to make generalizations. On the one hand, one must wonder what actual opportunities these young people will be faced with in their immediate future, despite the economic and social difficulties they have experienced (Bourdieu 1973). On the other hand, individual agency always leaves margins of unpredictability and uncertainty, opening up even the most radical possibility of breaking out of such patterns of thought (Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016):

> Today Morad and Simone also arrive at the youth centre. I try to give Morad a hand with some business economics homework. We do three exercises, but the results don't add up … We work on sheets torn from my notebook, doing the calculations with the phone. Around the table, other boys joke and shout, play games and chat with the social workers … I try to ask Simone what his favourite subject is. He answers: 'I'm not interested in school. Well, let me tell you: my favourite subject is the break!' (Fieldnotes, 5 June 2023).

This mocking response made me reflect on the very object of my research. Did investigating the aspirations of young people in San Siro risk implying a preconception? Did it risk taking for granted the fact that these young people must necessarily have aspirations? A brief autobiographical note may help to develop this consideration in a comparative manner:

> I think for a moment of my adolescence as a boy growing up in a small province of Northern Italy in the 1990s. School was a given, something incontrovertible. I used to spend my afternoons studying – because that's what you had to do – and fantasizing. I listened to music, watched video clips on MTV. If I think about it, I used to watch a lot of television, perhaps like today's kids watching things on their mobile phones. I certainly did not engage my time in 'useful', planning activities. My future was either a narrow horizon, close to my everyday life, or too wide, completely detached from it. School, love affairs, my town (smaller than a Milanese neighbourhood) and my motorbike on the one hand, or the fantasy of being able to live off music on the other. What fantasies should my interlocutors have then? Why or for whom should they have them? (Fieldnotes, 5 June 2023).

Without wishing to burden Simone's mocking response with too much interpretative value, it reminded me how much adolescence also means escaping: from adults, from impositions, from those who demand at all costs to think about their future. The aspirations of the young people of San Siro were many and varied. They were an intimate space concerning aspects of their identity to be preserved, thanks to which they sometimes escaped from imposed social constraints (see Brannen & Nilsen 2002).

In this sense, it may be useful to look at such aspirations through a relativist, if not even a 'decolonial' (Mignolo & Walsh 2018), that is, a non-Eurocentric, gaze, challenging the Western cultural hegemony that is based on the ideas of planning and success (ideas that deeply condition the public narratives of the same adolescents met at San Siro).

Simone's words thus become a starting point for definitively deconstructing some of the categories taken for granted by the project that I was working for. There are many possible futures, more or less imaginative aspirations. There is also the possibility of escaping a compulsorily project-oriented thought, being in the liminality that is sometimes established by adolescence.

Conclusion

The case of San Siro certainly has value in its specificity, but it helps to reflect more generally on the intersection between educational policies, external representations, and everyday practices. By examining how these elements interact in the neighbourhood, it is possible to gain some insights into the broader dynamics at play in diverse educative contexts.

While displaying common characteristics, the adolescents of San Siro composed a kaleidoscope of stories and profiles. This article has proposed some keys to understanding this complexity, avoiding reductionist or selective attitudes. In this sense, the concept of intersectionality helped to read that complexity, while at the same time attempting – from an 'inter-categorical' perspective – to define some more general interpretations. Adolescents in San Siro expressed varying degrees of planning and levels of attachment to the neighbourhood. They built their individual and group identities by drawing locally and globally on changing economic and symbolic resources. Their aspirations mirrored (sometimes in a 'doxic' way) those of their peers living in other neighbourhoods, but they were influenced by several forms of oppressions, differential opportunities, and processes of stigmatization that affected them as inhabitants of a certain urban context represented as poor, deviant, and dangerous.

Talking about adolescents in San Siro also prompts one to observe how institutions and private social actors interface with them, the action plans and projects that frame them, as well as the lens of their policies. The institutional response described is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it shows a process that basically started from below – the adolescents themselves – in response to a gesture perceived by public opinion as aggressive. In spite of the emergent tone of many media narratives, some artistic practices had unexpected political repercussions. Paradoxically, thanks to adolescent rappers labelled as deviant and dangerous, youth policies were finally implemented in San Siro. On the other hand, this institutional response highlights various problematic aspects. It played on a partly unjustified social anxiety, proposing emergency responses designed to alleviate it in the short term. The resources allocated were limited and also favoured competitive logics between private social actors who needed to hoard them. Educational interventions were accompanied by massive repressive actions that partly criminalized a section of the population, creating generational, racial, and social asymmetries.

On the other hand, fieldwork invites the application of a relativist, deconstructive, and decolonial approach. Even with respect to the project objectives from which this research started, it is possible to formulate some shifts in perspective. Instead of the development of a single model of intervention ('a citizenship model'), the adolescents of San Siro allow us to consider the possibility of pluralizing it: there are multiple alleys of belonging that bind individuals to neighbourhoods, cities, and nations. Rather than advancing projects centred on interculturality (promoting 'intergenerational and intercultural relations in the neighbourhood'), the adolescents of San Siro compel us to acknowledge the presence of hybrid spaces. These are already existing spaces, fostered by the adolescents themselves by intersectionally combining their social, racial, and gender positions, through their practices and imaginaries in and out of the neighbourhood. Finally, the necessary support for their empowerment and participation must be accompanied by a careful analysis of the structural constraints

that currently prevent them. Only by intervening in the latter will it be possible to also affect the former.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the boys and girls of San Siro who contributed to this research and the local organizations that supported it. I thank the reviewers and the editorial team of the JRAI.

Open access publishing facilitated by Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca, as part of the Wiley - CRUI-CARE agreement.

NOTES

[1] ALER data reprocessed by the Mapping San Siro action-research group (see Methodological notes section).

[2] For an overview of the projects implemented by the group, see www.mappingsansiro.polimi.it.

[3] 'Transgang. Transational gangs as agents of mediation', coordinated by Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona.

[4] Where indicated, the research availed itself of the collaboration of Greta Bongiolatti, a graduate anthropologist at the University of Milan Bicocca who, as part of a volunteer activity carried out in the neighbourhood for the Mapping San Siro group, helped a group of girls with their homework.

[5] All translations from Italian are my own.

[6] High schools oriented to university.

[7] A pastoral organization of the Italian Bishop's Conference.

[8] In order to guarantee the privacy of the interlocutors, all names are pseudonymous.

[9] These hyperbolic aspirations are defined by Zipin *et al.* as 'subcultural doxic aspirations' (Zipin *et al.* 2015: 235).

[10] The position of those who aspire to become rappers is instead more articulated. Success (the shared social goal) is attainable through music (the legitimate medium), but at the same time justified by a deviant path (or at the limit of 'redemption') to be told in one's rhymes (Saitta 2023).

[11] In this sense, my research recorded very few aspirations that Zipin *et al.* would describe as 'habituated', i.e. aspirations that incorporate 'the possibilities-*within-limits* of given social structural positions' (Zipin *et al.* 2015: 234).

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Futurs fluctuants : passage à l'âge adulte dans le plus grand quartier de logements sociaux de Milan

Résumé

Le présent article, qui s'inscrit dans un projet de recherche ethnographique de six ans, s'attache à déconstruire et à « décolonialiser » les notions essentialisées d'adolescence et de jeunesse, en recourant principalement à la catégorie de l'intersectionnalité. La recherche est axée sur une série d'initiatives éducatives entreprises à San Siro, l'un des plus grands ensembles de logements sociaux de Milan, où plus de la moitié de la population se compose de familles nombreuses issues de migrations et principalement originaires d'Afrique du Nord. Après des années d'absence de politiques pour les jeunes, le succès national et international d'un groupe de rappeurs du quartier a ramené San Siro sous les feux de l'actualité, suscitant par la même occasion une recrudescence d'inquiétude sociale à laquelle les pouvoirs publics ont répondu en votant de nouveaux financements en faveur de l'action pour la jeunesse. Les travaux qui ont été menés auprès d'un groupe d'adolescents dans et hors du cadre scolaire, et au sein de certains services sociaux, mettent en évidence l'attachement fluctuant de ces jeunes envers leur quartier, et leurs différentes aspirations pour l'avenir. Leurs récits suggèrent une construction relativiste des notions d'adolescence et de jeunesse, qui peut expliquer la diversité caractéristique de San Siro, entre agencéité individuelle et contraintes structurelles.

Paolo Grassi is an assistant professor at the University of Milan-Bicocca ('R. Massa' Department of Human Sciences for Education). He is an anthropologist who has conducted research in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, and Italy in the field of urban anthropology, focusing on the relationship between urban space and violence, gangs and street groups, urban regeneration, and socio-economic marginalization dynamics.

University of Milano Bicocca, 'R. Massa' Department of Human Sciences for Education, Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo, 1, 20126 Milan, Italy. paolo.grassi@unimib.it