

Introduction: Italian young people in a meta-study of European youth

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This study of young Italians constructing their political identities in Europe was made as part of a wider study I am making of young Europeans across the continent (Ross 2018). By focussing specifically on the Italian response, my colleagues Sandra Chistolini, Emilio Lastrucci and Andrea Porcarelli make an important and invaluable contribution to our understanding of these processes. My role has been to act as the naïve outsider, who can act at the outsider posing questions that appear innocent and thus provoke observations and explanations that assume the questioner knows very little: my colleagues bring the insider perspective to the analysis of the Italian context. In a similar way, colleagues in Lithuania (Ross and Zuzeviciute, 2011), Finland (Lestinen, Autio-Hiltunen and Kiviniemi, 2017) and Croatia (Ross, Puzić and Doolan, 2017) have very effectively analysed similar data in those countries.

So the purpose of this chapter is not to provide the detailed and layered ‘insider’ perspective that the Italian authors - and only Italian authors - can provide. My purpose here is to set out the broader context, perspective and methods of this study. The thesis of the study is that political identities, like any other identities, are multiple narratives, constructed and re-constructed around contingencies and contexts. The study examines how young people perform these narratives as they re/creating their political identities within and beyond various European states. I examine contingencies that arise from the narratives of rights in general, and the specific discourses of diversity, migration, racism, often set in the context of the migration of refugees in 2014-16. I analyse the range of potential influences that may impact on this narrative-construction process – the family, friends, media, etc. And I examine the contexts in which identity narratives are constructed, those driven by political locations of settlement, province, country, continent, settlement: these provide political and cultural narrative frames for identity construction. I argue that the contingencies of events and the contexts of location provide a set of lenses used by young people to construct dynamic and kaleidoscopic identities situated in contemporary Europe.

Identities

A variety of models have been used to characterise the plasticity of social construction of political and locational identities, from Bauman’s use of the term liquid identities (1995), through Balescu’s (2009) description of identity as a palimpsest – a succession of configurations, each being written over earlier versions, with traces of these visible through the superimposition (2009), to Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Collins (2015) use of intersectionality, that describes multiple identities as reciprocally supporting constructions which that explain systematic forms of oppression and advantage. I have gathered empirical data of how young people talk about these issues, and how their constructions shift contingently as the lens through which they focus on them is changed. I draw on 324 conversations that I have had with small groups of young people in 29 different European states, carried out between 2011 and 2016. Two thousand young people were spoken to, scattered across a hundred different towns and cities, about their sense of political and social identity – with their locality, their country and with Europe and the world. Twenty discussions, with 137 young people, were carried out in five Italian towns in January 2015. Not a statistically representative sample, it nevertheless reflects the diversity of views in the various countries: not just of the indigenous population, but also of migrants and settlers, and the hybridities that are increasingly becoming characteristic of European societies.

One of the striking findings was the way in which many young people expressed their concerns about values of rights, solidarity and equalities, both in the context of their own country and in Europe. The context of this for many groups was the increasing diversity of these societies. Migration (from with and without Europe), wars and boundary changes have led to situations where many find themselves growing up in plural societies, and this study traced the views and reactions of both indigenous young people and those of different origins. Many young people have developed identities that they see as very different to those of older generations - which many of them characterise as overtly racist and nationalistic. This generation, I suggest, is developing a new and different availability for political mobilisation, rather as Fulbrook’s analysis of 20th Century German young people showed ‘crucial times

of transition with respect to the ways in which people can become involved in new regimes and societies' (Fulbrook, 2011: 488).

Identity is a much used and variably defined term, with elusive meanings (Buckingham 2008; Duchesne 2008, Wallace and Strømsnes 2008). Identity can mean to have a similarity with, to be the same, or to be different from and distinct. Identity can be seen as something that is unique to the individual (and relatively consistent over time) and it can also –simultaneously – mean a relationship with a broader collectivity or social group. National identity, gender identity, or social identity all suggest that the members of a particular group share some common characteristics, and have some degree of affinity with other members of the group. Identity theft, on the other hand, suggests that one's *individual* identity has been misappropriated. Identity cards both mark one's membership of an identity group and are unique markers of one's individuality (Jenkins 2004, 4).

Bauman (2000) wrote of 'liquid modernity', suggesting identity is constructed in contingent and temporal relationships: the past, present, future and place disturb our practice of identity as we ask who we are and who we intend to be:

One needs [freedom] to be oneself; yet being oneself solely on the strength of one's free choice means a life full of doubts and fears of error. There are many ways in which one can respond to the task of constructing self-identity. To be adequate to the task, however, selected ways must include some criteria by which the success of the whole enterprise can be appraised, and the outcome of self-construction approved. Self-construction of the self is, so to speak, a necessity. Self confirmation of the self is an impossibility.

(Bauman 1988:62)

Bauman further (2004) indicates that the establishment of an individual's identity has become more problematic, and more important, in contemporary times: globalization, greater social and physical mobility, the relative decline of the welfare state, more 'flexible' employment regimes and uncertainties in personal relationships all contribute to fragmented and fluid identities, constantly negotiable and being 'worked on' (2000, 2004). Anthias (2002) has suggested that the term identity has a limited use, and suggests instead the use of narratives of location and position when referring to identity groups: 'the claims and attributions that individuals make about their position in the social order of things, their views of where and to what they belong (and to what they do not belong) as well as an understanding of the broader social relations that constitute and are constituted in this process' (Anthias 2002, 491). Many of the narratives that will be explored in this book are translocational in nature, though the narratives themselves frequently employ more conventional identity labels (Anthias 2012).

Identification with a nationality or a nation is problematic. Connor (1993) describes the nation as 'terminological chaos' (112). The assumption that 'the nation' and 'the state' are coterminous developed from the time of the French Revolution over the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries. Halle (1952) claimed that 'a prime fact about the world is that it largely composed on nation-states' (1952:10) - but the 'nation-state' barely exists. The great majority of modern states contain significant national minorities: Connor in 1978 (1978 382) referred to a 1971 survey of 132 'entities generally considered to be states', which suggested that 120 of them had national minorities of 10% or more, that 53% of all states had over 25% minorities, and nearly 30% had more than half the population as 'minorities'.

An alternative, social constructionist, standpoint is that identity - including national identity - is a matter of political choice, and is not a natural given. The social constructionist view of national identity sees it as a subjective term, used to create a distinctive category. National identities become the construction of bonds based on what are presumed to be shared group ideas, cultural artefacts and emotions. Anderson (1991) describes such national identities as *Imagined Communities*, inventions or constructions of rational essentialism that had their own particular narrative power (Anderson 1991).

The nation thus becomes a narrative: Bhabha (1990) suggests that

despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality. The nation's 'coming into being' as a system of cultural signification, as the

representation of social *life* rather than the discipline of social *polity*, emphasizes this instability of knowledge.

(Bhabha 1990: 1-2)

European identity is something rather different. Delanty and Rumford (2005) argue that seeking to establish something that mimicked a national identity was inappropriate for a supra-national institution in a globalizing environment. The emergent salience of a European social and cultural space, as distinct from an institutional space, suggested European identity be seen as a social identity, rather than a political one. Bruter (2005) differentiated two components of European identity:

A cultural perspective would analyse political identities as the sense of belonging an individual citizen feels towards a particular political group. This group can be perceived by him [sic] to be defined by a certain culture, social similarities, values, religion, ethics or even ethnicity...

A civic perspective would see... the identification of citizens with a civic structure, such as the State, which can be defined as the set of institutions, rights, and rules that preside over the political life of the community. (Bruter 2005:12)

He suggested that both components exist in parallel, but they can usefully be analysed separately: the individual may have stronger civic or cultural elements to their (European) identity, with differences between individuals, countries, and over periods of time

It is not only identification with Europe or a nation that can present problems: the very basis of identity categorisation itself raises issues of what the various categories employed mean, both in the minds of those of those asked to categorise themselves, and in the minds of those who take the responses and may attach different 'meanings' to the categories. Asking someone if they feel themselves 'to be German', or 'how much they feel that they are German', for example, will be contingently interpreted by each respondent, and the replies will be dependent on who is asking the question, where the question is being asked, when it is being asked, why the respondent thinks the question is being put, and what the respondent thinks the category 'German' means. It may well depend on what the person being questioned thinks of Angela Merkel's comments on the morning of the interview.

Modern states require the classification of their populations: Anderson pointed to their need to distinguish between 'peoples, regions, religions, languages' (Anderson 1991 184) in order to impose a 'totalizing classificatory grid' (184). Kertzer (2017) used a Foucauldian model of the surveillance of state (Foucauld 1977) to explain how 'the use of identity categories ... creates a particular vision of social reality. Everyone is assigned to a single category, and are hence conceptualised as sharing, with a certain number of others, a common collective identity: instead of situationally-determined complex social linkages, the reification process of identity categories creates neat boundaries between mutually exclusive groups (Kertzer 2017). This presumption that everyone will easily fit into such groups becomes increasingly unlikely as migration patterns in Europe are creating new diversities, as Vertovec (2007) has argued. The European population are coming from more diverse origins, and there are more people of mixed origins, making it increasingly difficult to use these identity categories.

Because of these issues, my study makes very limited uses of quantitative data. Instead, I attempt to analyse the ways in which young people in construct different and contingent kinds of identities, to explore their terms and definitions, rather than to suggest terms and categories to them. Social constructions have to be examined as a performance in a social setting: finding out how someone social constructs their reality is not amenable to questionnaires, but has to be observed in the contingent settings in which social interchanges take place (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Hacking, 1999; Elder-Vass, 2012). How an individual describes their identities is not fixed: it will vary, being dependent on the location, the setting, the time or period, the particular audience.

Discussion group methodology

So to examine this, I proffered a variety of potential lenses to small groups of young people, and invited them to discuss their identities in these contexts. This allows me to elicit several different constructions from the same group, but the point of significance is not simply that this happens, nor even what these different identities are, interesting though these may be. The various identities reported are, by their

vary nature, transient and may not be reproduced in future circumstances: the whole range of contingent circumstances surrounding each conversation could not be controlled or fully noted. Of more enduring significance is to understand the range of variables and resources used to make each construction, and how the individual and the group make apparently dissonant constructions compatible.

A complication in working with young people is that the school setting very often acclimatises them to closed questions. Questions used by teachers towards young people (and by many other adults too) tend to be designed to test or assess what young people know, or do not know (Alexander 2008, Hogden and Webb 2008). Students thus tend to think a question has a 'correct' answer, that they are expected to supply: they need to look for the 'right' response. The discussions I conducted were thus framed with non-directive, open-ended 'questions' that provoked discursive responses, rather than formal 'answers'. Similar approaches have been developed in German social science research over the past twenty years (Bohnsack 2000, Loos and Schäffer, 2001): *Gruppendiskussionsverfahren* ('group discussion method') has been described as 'an open interview intended to let respondents develop a topic in their own language, in their symbolic system and their relevance framework; this is the only way interviewers or observers can avoid projecting into single utterances meanings that are not appropriate ... researchers ... will learn more if this statement is put into a narrative context by the respondent and gives the respondent the opportunity to explain through a narrative ... in his/her own language' (Bohnsack, 2000 21, translated by Scheunpflug et al 2016). Scheunpflug et al (2016) write of it as a method 'in which respondents can set the structures and contents of the conversation by themselves,' thus exploring 'knowledge stocks that are not located on the surface of conscious and clear explicable attitudes and values, but which are beneath the surface' (2016 10).

These sorts of considerations determined my strategies.

- I began by saying that my questions would have no right or wrong answers: they should say what they thought; if someone said something that they disagreed with, they should say so, and give their view, or I would think that they all agreed;
- Wherever possible, I did not introduce leading terms (such as 'nation' or 'state'), but used words such as 'country'; only when terms such as nation, state, Balkan, etc had been first used by them did I use such words;
- Questions were very transparently open (such as – if one of them had said they were French - 'Why are you French?');
- I accepted all responses as valid, by gesture (nodding) or by saying how interesting the responses were; I maintained direct eye contact with each speaker wherever possible, indicating I was following what they said;
- My questions as far as possible were constructed to be in response to the answer just given, so that it appeared that the group were determining the subject matter, not me: it seemed to be their agenda;
- I tried to ask as few questions as possible, leaving spaces for disagreement, supplementary comments; but I did not ask anyone to respond: nor get everyone to respond to each question: it was a discussion, not a sequential interview;
- I often asked them to elaborate and explain their responses, and to provide examples; and
- I looped the conversation back to earlier comments, when this was useful.

These strategies were not always wholly successful: nearly every group sustained a conversation for more than 30 minutes (the normal timetabled target was 40 to 55 minutes). Most young people (about 94%) made more than a minimal contribution: 63% could be described as fully participant for the entire session.

The content of the conversations varied in focus and emphasis, and my questions varied as well, and the way that they were put, in order to maintain the mode as conversational rather than interrogatory. My prime objective was to establish a rapport that would be seen as empowering, with a discussion that was, to a substantial extent, at the direction and pace of the group members. I had a list of areas I wanted to explore, but did not refer to this in the conversation, or follow a particular order. This means that I cannot quantify most responses in any numerical way: I can describe tendencies and apparently

significant trends – but it is impossible to assert, for example, that “67% declared themselves to be European” – and even had I put an identical question to every one of them, the statistic would still be meaningless. But this is not to suggest that the conversations lacked structure, or did not have an agenda: I have outline by hypotheses, and had ‘instruments of construction’ (Bourdieu *et al.* 1991:248). I held up a series of lenses, which I describe here in some detail, before elaborating on the recruitment of my sample.

Wherever possible we sat in a circle. I began by introducing myself, as a professor from London, who was visiting about thirty European countries to talk with groups of young people, such as themselves, about their ideas. I was very grateful for them giving their time. I introduced my colleague – in the Italian conversations, one of the co-authors of this volume - from the university in the locality, who would help translate anything we needed. We established which language we would use: in about 65% of the cases we used predominantly English (very often wholly so), and in about 15% we used the local language, with everything translated. But my colleague was able, where necessary, to translate words, sentences or phrases, either way, where needed. With the group’s agreement, I recorded what they said, but made clear that all comments would be made anonymous, though I did note who said what, so I could examine their individual constructions.

My first question was to ask each of them to describe themselves, to talk a little about their identity. This was the only point where I asked everyone to speak, so that no one had to latter break the ice when everybody else had participated. From these openings, we were usually able to discuss their various ‘national’ or ‘ethnic’ identities, though I did not use these terms myself. Why were they Italian? How had they become Italian? Such questions frequently developed a discussion about parentage, ancestry and descent, birthplace, residence, language, culture and more, with various combinations being advanced.

Were there things about Italy of which they felt particularly proud, or pleased? When terms like culture and history were advanced, I would ask what did they mean by its culture? What aspects of its history? If the conversation moved toward the natural beauty of the country, for example, I would try and ask about Italian society and people.

I would move on to ask if there were aspects of Italian society of which they perhaps felt less proud, or that they would like to change. This very often provoked interesting debate and discussion – more so than the positive aspects – but my rationale was always, as a guest, to begin with the positive. I would ask for examples, for details to explain their points, and was able to a degree to be a naïve outsider (though by this stage I often felt that I had enough of their confidence to raise some local current counter-examples, if I knew of them and though they would provoke more comment (‘but President Bănescu was elected democratically, wasn’t he?’).

Did they think that everyone in Italy would feel the same about these issues? And I would often suggest ask if they thought that people their parents on grandparents, people of that age, would agree with them. And what about people in other parts of Italy? If they reported divisions – did they think this might be perhaps people living in the countryside, rather than townspeople? Different regions – a question that provoked much discussion in Italy.

After some twenty minutes, I would ask if, in addition to feeling Italian they sometimes also felt European in some way. Sometimes I would be able to say that earlier that Marco had said he felt he was European: did any of the others in the group feel this?

From this, it became possible to revisit the lenses we had used about the country with a focus on Europe. Often the distinction between Europe and the European Union would be raised, but not by me. Sometimes I would ask which countries they thought of first when Europe was mentioned, or if they thought than some countries, geographically in Europe, were not ‘really’ European (with gestured quote marks).

Towards the end of the conversation, I would generally ask a couple of direct questions: ‘Italy is a member of the European Union. What would you feel if another country – say (a pause, to suggest I was plucking an example at random) - Russia asked if it could join. Would you think that would be a good thing, a bad thing, or would it not matter?’ This lens often provoked a rather different view of Europe and the European Union than had been expressed before, which I might probe. And I would

sometimes ask the same about Turkey, or an adjacent country that might have some contentious issues with country I was in.

Finally, I would thank them all again for a most interesting discussion, and wish them well for their future studies and lives. Did they discuss things like those we had been talking about with their friends? With their families? With their teachers in school?

This account of my approach shows the discursive and very lightly structured nature of these conversations: they were what Boddy (2005) would describe as a focus group discussion, rather than a focus group interview (2005 251-2). This was not serial questioning, nor did it have the structuring advocated by Marshall and Rossman 1999.

Subjectivity and the researcher

Qualitative research carried out by a lone individual raises issues of subjectivity and interpretation: I argue that the interpretation offered is consistent, simply because it has been carried out by a singular objectivity. But a study of identities will need to be understood in the context of the researcher's own identity (Archer 2002, Chadderton 2012). I'm a white heterosexual male in my late 60s at the time of my fieldwork, married, with adult children and grandchildren. I was born in London, and have lived there for most of my life, with a Scottish father and an English mother: so I have been conscious from an early age of both Scottish and English roots, and generally describe myself as British, rather than Scottish or English. I am also sometimes a Londoner, and sometimes a European. These locational identities have changed over time: in particular, my European identity has come to the fore as I have travelled and worked extensively with European colleagues over the past twenty years. But I was also aware of being 'a European' (not simply a Briton). My age may also be germane: I grew up aware of being a post-war child, where nearly everyone older than me had experienced the war. My analysis of the data was partly grounded in the data itself in an iterative, inductive and comparative process (Glaser and Straus 1967, Charmaz and Belgrave 2010), but also drew extensively on the literature cited earlier, and some country-specific literature, which were combined into a meta analysis (Rabiee 2004 657).

The sample for this study

How did I recruit my groups? This was a one-person study, which I began when I semi-retired in 2010. I had been made *ad personam* chair in citizenship education in Europe by the European Commission as part of its Jean Monnet programme to foster European integration. This arose partly from my work between 1998 and 2008 in establishing an Erasmus Academic Network, Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe (CiCe), also supported by the Commission. This linked some 250 academics from universities across 28 countries of Europe, all sharing an interest in issues of young people's identities and sense of citizenship. This network became my supporters and enablers in carrying out this project, and the Jean Monnet chair supported my travel expenses for the period 2010 to 2012. Thereafter I had a small grant from my University for 2014, but was otherwise self-funded. My University also approved and monitored my research ethics plan: informed consent was obtained in all cases, anonymity assured, and post-interview support, if necessary, to be provided.

My first phase of fieldwork (2010 – 2012) covered the countries that had joined the European Union after 2004 (Ross 2015). A second phase (2014 – 2016) added many of the pre-2004 European Union members and two non- EU members (Norway and Switzerland). I intended to cover the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland together (because of the border issue) at another time: the Brexit decision of 2016 has further postponed this. My intention was to visit at least two different places in each country, more in the larger counties. I was aware that much empirical social science research has been criticised for drawing subjects from a very narrow base: one estimate is that 80% of the non-USA studies are drawn from psychology undergraduates in the capital city of a country (Arnett 2008), which are then extrapolated to be representative of the country's inhabitants in general (Rozin 2001). One study (Gosling et al 2004) found that a sample of social science research articles consisted of 85% students samples, 71% of the participants were female; over 80% were white, and the mean age was 22.9 years.

Rochat (2010) points out that in research ‘universality claims get more attention because they are cleaner and sharper, encompassing control and predictive power ... [with] greater impact and appeal. This tends to relegate diversity to noise rather than as a primary object of study (Rochat 2010 107). This study was *intended* to be noisy, reflecting the diversity of the populations of these countries: hence the emphasis on different locations, and avoiding an over-emphasis on the capital city. Within the constraints that the population being sampled was of young residents of these European countries (largely industrialised, democratic and comparatively rich), the recruitment process was designed to avoid the pitfalls analysed by Henrich et al (2010). In each location, I asked my colleagues to identify one school in a middle-class or professional area, and another in a more working-class area. In each school I asked them to recruit two groups of approximately six students, one ideally in the 12 to 14 age range, one in the 15 to 18 age range. I specified that I wanted to include young residents of each country, not just citizens, and tried to include some young people from significant minority groups.

In conclusion

Young Europeans construct themselves as a different generation than their elders: a cohort defined by significant changes that have made their experiences different from those of their parents and grandparents. In some parts of Europe, this has been particularly marked by an event, the sudden collapse of the hegemony of the USSR, epitomised in the fall of the Berlin Wall. In other parts it has been rather more gradual changes, particularly the rise in non-European migration from the mid 1980s, and the acceleration of this in the early 2000s. Two particular events provided the context for many discussions in western Europe in 2014 – 2016: the refugee migration of 2015 (just after the discussions in Italy) and the rise of ISIS-related terrorists attacks across Europe (where the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris took place just four weeks before the Italian conversations). Another significant change for these young people was the creation of the world wide web and the growth of social media using the internet: it was the first generation to have been grown up with these phenomena.

So many members of this generation sees themselves as very different to their grandparents and parents. In the former Warsaw Pact countries, they understand the nationalism that sustained the independence movements earlier generations through communist rule, but no longer feel constrained to maintain this. In western Europe, there is a widespread rejection of what they see as the racism of earlier generations, and a greater acceptance – an embracing – of diversity, and particularly a welcoming to the refugees from Syria and the middle east. Nationalism, to many of them across the continent, is *passé*: European attempts to codify and apply human rights through supra-national mechanisms appeal to them – and distinguish them as Europeans, different from the social conservatism and authoritarianism of Putin’s Russia, and the racism and individualism that they see in much of the United States. And they are social media-literate, in a way that they feel their parents are not, and many of them are adepts at multiply sourcing their news sources.

Italians are, by and large, like all of this, but are different – and the same statement could be made of any of the 29 countries in the study. There are particular social and political contexts that contribute to the constructions of young people in each state, alongside the European and globalised elements. In Italy, I (as the outsider) was struck by the emphasis on regional differences across the country, and the vibrant was in which the relationship between the sense of a country was related to the history of the peninsula: while some young people referred back to back to pre-unification periods (the Roman Empire, the Renaissance), more often the key period were seen as unification and particularly the establishment of the Republic in 1946. This study combines both strands, with particular insights into the Italian construction. I am indebted to my colleagues, the principal authors of this volume, for invaluable contribution to the study.

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