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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'I GENERALLY... PARTICIPATE FOR A CHANGE'. An analysis of everyday political practices

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ABSTRACT: In a context of growing inequalities and institutional disaffection, young women in Italy are redefining political subjectivity through everyday practices of care, solidarity, and commoning. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted from 2019 to 2022 within the PRIN project "*Mapping Youth Futures: Forms of Anticipation and Youth Agency*", this contribution explores the experiences of 20 women aged 25–34 from Milan, Naples, Cosenza, and Cagliari. Through an intersectional lens, it highlights how they build new political subjectivities in extra-institutional spaces, centres of daily life and meaning-making. Participants transform the margins into feminist commons, into spaces of political experimentation. Their prefigurative practices contest the neoliberal enclosures of care and time, revealing a shift from institutional allegiances to life-making as a form of politics. The article contributes to debates on youth participation by showing how gendered and generational inequalities can act as catalysts for insurgent agency.

KEYWORDS: Agency, Social Inequalities, Italy, Political Participation, Gender.

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1. Introduction

In a historical conjuncture shaped by institutional disaffection, neoliberal individualization and the crisis of social reproduction, young Italian women are reclaiming politics through solidarity, care and everyday

commoning. This paper investigates how these practices unsettle dominant political imaginaries by generating situated forms of resistance and reappropriation.

The analysis focuses on the experiences of twenty young women activists, aged 25–34, from various Italian cities and with diverse levels of education, social and cultural capital. Their political engagement takes shape in extra-institutional spaces such as associations, informal collectives, solidarity-based economies, and social movements. While the geographically distributed sample allows for territorial variety, two key limitations must be acknowledged: first, the study includes only activists, excluding the perspectives of peers not involved in associational networks; second, it is limited to urban contexts, leaving out rural or peripheral dynamics where participatory practices may take different forms.

Through an intersectional lens, this article explores how these young women construct their own horizons of meaning and rework political subjectivity outside formal institutions[1]. Their narratives also reflect a strong intergenerational tension: participants describe an experiential gap with adults and elders, often expressing frustration at older generations' inability to understand contemporary social precarities, the fraught transition to adulthood, and the ethical-political priorities they consider central to a "good life".

Drawing on feminist materialist and ecofeminist approaches, this paper reframes everyday practices not as marginal or compensatory, but as insurgent forms of political agency. Scholars such as Federici (2018), Salleh (1997), and Mellor (2000) emphasise that care, mutuality, and the reproduction of life are not apolitical domains, but constitute key sites of resistance to capitalist and patriarchal logics. From this perspective, young women's actions, whether organising solidarity networks, creating safe relational spaces, or engaging in mutual support, can be read as acts of commoning. These practices challenge neoliberal enclosures of care, time, and imagination, offering prefigurative strategies for alternative futures.

Extending this theoretical lens, the article investigates how young women's political practices emerge from their situated experiences and relational contexts, and how they enact new forms of subjectivity, resistance, and collective meaning-making in response to overlapping social, economic, and institutional crises. As Pleyers (2023) and Fians (2023) argue, prefigurative politics is not merely anticipatory, but actively enacts alternative values, such as horizontality, care, and inclusiveness, in the here and now. These practices do not operate as supplements to institutional politics but as autonomous, embodied responses to disillusionment and democratic fatigue, rooted in concrete experimentation (Pitti & Tuorto 2021; Martuccelli 2021). In this sense, prefiguration can be understood not as an abstract ideal, but as a mode of everyday resistance grounded in material realities. As Lara Monticelli (2021) powerfully asserts, prefigurative politics embodies a "holistic approach to social change that digs its roots in feminist and ecological thought and focuses on social reproduction and the preservation of life rather than solely economic production" (p. 99). Her work situates prefigurative action within an ontologically and epistemologically different conception of the political, one that foregrounds embodiment, experimentation, and the transformation of lived relations. Rather than aiming for rupture or conquest, these practices seek to erode dominant configurations of power "from within," generating what Monticelli calls "karst-like" processes of slow, material transformation (p. 112).

[1] We understand subjectivity as the autonomous construction of one's self and personal biography. It entails the rejection of pre-established models and imposed identities. To clarify this concept, we can refer to what Max Frisch (1957, 1964) defines as "the art of being oneself": the deliberate refusal of externally imposed definitions and identities, whether overtly enforced or subtly suggested, and the counter-current stance of resisting the stifling grip of the impersonal. This concept has been, and is, central to feminist movements. For instance, the 24-hour strike organized by *Non una di meno*, starting on March 8, 2017, exemplifies a practice of subjectivity: on March 8, we cross our arms and withdraw from an institutionalized system of social practices. We suspend all productive and reproductive labor. We refuse to accept working conditions inferior to those of men, or lower pay for the same work. In so doing, we assert the power of those who sustain the world through both paid and unpaid labor.

Prefigurative practices, then, are not utopian retreats but strategic forms of resistance grounded in everyday life. They simultaneously critique and transcend capitalist forms of life by fostering alternative modes of being, rooted in care, cooperation, and shared reproduction. In this way, they contribute not only to the construction of more just futures but to the radical redefinition of the present.

Within these theoretical lenses, young women's political practices can be understood as emerging from situated experiences and relational contexts, enacting new forms of subjectivity, resistance, and collective meaning-making in response to overlapping social, economic, and institutional crises.

2. Young Subjectivities in Italy: Structural Challenges and Emerging Horizons

Italian young men and women are navigating a complex landscape marked by intersecting socio-economic and cultural challenges that have transformed the transition to adulthood into a precarious and uncertain journey. As early as the 2000s, scholars like Ranci identified a "new social question," where the erosion of stable life trajectories was less apparent in macroeconomic indicators and more evident in the affective and organizational disorder of daily life (Ranci 2002). This "uncertainty of status" (ibidem, 13) now characterizes the lives of a generation faced with fragmented work histories, delayed autonomy, and limited access to full citizenship (Paugam 2018).

In Italy, these challenges are particularly acute (Rampazi 2009; Leccardi 2024). The youth unemployment rate stood at 20.1% in December 2023, significantly higher than the national average of 7.2% (ISTAT 2024a). Although the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rate among 15–29-year-olds decreased to 16.1% in 2023, it remains one of the highest in the European Union (Orizzonte Scuola 2024). High levels of education, historically seen as a vehicle of social mobility, no longer guarantee secure employment or civic recognition. University graduates aged 25–34 earn on average just 10% more than their non-graduate peers, a stark contrast to countries like France (where they earn 45% more than their non-graduate peers) or the UK (where the percentage is 35% more) (ISTAT 2023). The social figure of the "graduate without a future" is becoming increasingly central in contemporary Italy. Despite high levels of education, many young adults are unable to convert their skills into stable jobs or meaningful social inclusion, let alone mobility. Several participants in this study describe how their sense of belonging emerged not through institutional pathways, but from a shared experience of marginality, as one of them called it, "a community built on instability." Their life trajectories are shaped less by integration into public and professional life, and more by mutual support, resistance, and everyday survival.

The Campania Region, situated in the South of Italy, for example, continues to show one of the highest NEET rates in Italy, especially among young women. Southern cities more generally are also marked by a lack of youth policies and public investment. This contributes to a strong sense of institutional abandonment and civic disconnection voiced by many of the women we interviewed in Naples and Palermo. "We feel like we've been forgotten," said Federica, 26, from Naples. "There are no spaces, no opportunities, and no one listening."

When examining the role of employment in the transition to adulthood pathways, many studies (e.g. those initially conducted by the IARD Institute first and now by Toniolo Institute) have shown how work is gradually losing its function as a final and irreversible stage for those leaving the education system. Rather, it represents an experiential space characterised by short periods of time and occasional conditions interspersed with moments of inactivity (Chiesi 2002). An increasingly widespread precariousness of employment, the product of a misinterpretation of the principle of flexibility by companies, has thus been grafted onto certain emerging features of youth culture, which is increasingly oriented towards presentism and the reversibility of choices (Buzzi 1997), giving rise to an existential precariousness that has profoundly marked the process of transition to adult roles. Gender disparities further exacerbate these issues. Women in Italy earn on average less than

men: the pay gap in Italy is 16.9% in favour of men, with an average net salary of €1,715 per month compared to €1,467 for women. This income gap is compounded by the greater likelihood of women being employed in precarious jobs (Odoardi et al. 2022) or, as already mentioned, experiencing periods of inactivity. Young women, especially in the South, are overrepresented in precarious, underpaid sectors and disproportionately affected by the NEET phenomenon, particularly those burdened with unpaid care work and lacking affordable childcare services (ISTAT 2024b).

This socio-economic marginalization is further compounded by a cultural disconnection from formal politics. While public discourse often frames young people as apathetic, recent data paint a more complex picture. In 2023, only 37.6% of adults aged 25–64 engage in political participation, down from 52.7% in 2003 (ANSA 2024). Among youth, political detachment is highest: nearly 50% of those aged 14–18 and 30% of those aged 18–34 report disengagement from political discussions (ISTAT 2020a; 2020b; Eurobarometer 2019). The 2019 Eurobarometer survey further confirms a generational gradient in electoral participation: while 58% of Millennials voted, only 43% of Gen Z did, often citing the absence of proposals addressing key youth concerns such as climate justice, gender equality, and economic insecurity.

Therefore, understanding youth participation today requires a reframing: not as a decline in political values, but as a redefinition of what counts as political. Young people are not abandoning politics; they are disenchanted with its institutional form. Data from the Flash Eurobarometer (2020) reveal that political participation among young Italians aged 15–24 is significantly lower than the European average, with electoral abstention often linked to disillusionment with traditional party politics and the lack of resonance with youth concerns. The 2024 survey confirms that young people are particularly active on issues related to human rights (34%), climate change and the environment (33%), health and wellbeing (29%), and equal rights (29%) (Eurobarometer 2024). These trends are shaped also by regional inequalities: young people in Southern Italy, who face greater socio-economic barriers, report lower civic and political engagement compared to their peers in the North (Kitanova, 2019).

Gender differences add a further layer of complexity, even if the emergence of new forms of political participation might reduce age- and gender-based inequalities (Stolle & Hooghe, 2011). While young men are more likely to participate in conventional political acts such as party membership or protest, young women engage disproportionately in non-institutional forms of activism, including volunteering, community organizing, and issue-based advocacy, especially in areas related to gender rights and social care (Council of Europe, 2020). These forms of engagement reflect a broader transformation of political participation from formal institutions to informal, everyday practices rooted in care, solidarity, and shared lived experience. "I wanted to do politics," said Carla, 29, from Naples, "but without joining a party or wearing a uniform. I wanted to do something that made sense to me and the people around me. That's when we started organising self-managed events in our neighbourhood. It was small things, like debates, music nights, dinners, but they made us feel powerful".

What emerges is not political apathy but a reconfiguration of civic engagement. Especially among young women, marginality becomes a site of agency: political subjectivities are forged through networks of mutual aid, feminist collectives, and local movements that challenge dominant paradigms and experiment with alternative forms of social organization (Grasso & Giugni 2021). "Politics for me is not in Parliament," said Giulia, 27, from Bologna. "It's in how we support each other when someone loses their job or gets evicted. It's in the WhatsApp group where we share food and job alerts. That's where I feel change happens."

These theoretical coordinates, centring care, prefiguration, and embodied resistance, not only illuminate young women's redefinitions of politics but also inform how we approach the field itself. The following section details how these principles shaped our methodological choices, from sample construction to interpretive strategies, and how they enabled us to attune to participants' own situated epistemologies.

3. Methodological Approach and Research Design

The reflections presented in this article are based on empirical data collected between 2019 and 2022 as part of the PRIN research project *"Mapping Youth Futures: Forms of Anticipation and Youth Agency"*.

Epistemologically, the research is grounded in feminist materialist approaches, which acknowledge embodied, situated knowledge as a source of political insight (Salleh, 1997; Federici, 2018). From this perspective, political subjectivity is not confined to institutional forms of participation but emerges through the everyday reproduction of life in gestures of care, resistance, mutuality, and commoning. This orientation informed both the construction of the field and the interpretation of the data, recognising young women not as abstract subjects but as social actors embedded in concrete, relational contexts of precarity and marginality.

The research carried out by the University of Milano-Bicocca research unit focused on young men and women aged between 25 and 34 who were involved in unconventional forms of political participation, such as associations, solidarity-based purchasing groups, informal collectives, occupied spaces, and social movements.

During the fieldwork, 42 narrative interviews were conducted (22 with men and 20 with women) in four Italian cities, corresponding to the locations of the research units involved: Milan, Naples, Cosenza, and Cagliari. This article focuses on a subset of 20 interviews conducted with young women. Fieldwork was initially carried out in person and, from March 2020 onward, was adapted to an online format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The sample was constructed through snowball sampling, leveraging the availability and relational networks of activists already involved in the study. The different research units collaborated by exchanging contacts, knowledge, and support in a cooperative construction of the field, which enabled access to a wide range of local experiences, including some that are often hard to access. The interviews followed a flexible guide structured around three interpretive axes: temporality (past, present, and future), relationships (social, institutional, inter- and intra-generational), and agency. Participants were also invited to bring one or more images that represented their idea of the future, which were used as a narrative prompt. This strategy enabled a deeper exploration of the link between personal life projects and collective imaginaries of change.

All interviews were fully transcribed, anonymised, and analysed using MAXQDA software, following a rigorous and collaboratively developed protocol. Through an intersectional perspective combining gender, educational background, territorial context, and social and cultural capital (Anthias, 2013), it was possible to observe both specific forms of reaction and distinct social positions. The comparison across territories also highlighted how the challenges faced by young people - from precarity to urban marginality, from inequality to institutional exclusion - take on diverse forms and elicit equally diverse responses.

The analysis presented in this article was guided by four main research questions, developed from the trajectories of the young women interviewed:

1. How do young women reconfigure the very idea of politics through extra-institutional practices?
2. What role do personal and collective relationships with the future play in shaping their political and biographical trajectories?
3. How do gender and generational dynamics influence the forms and meanings of youth political participation?
4. To what extent do territorial inequalities, particularly between Northern and Southern Italy, affect young women's modes of political engagement?

These questions guided both the construction of the field and the interpretation of the data, with the aim of bringing to light the situated and embodied meanings of youth political subjectivities, the tensions they navigate, and the creative forms of resistance, care, and reappropriation they develop in response to contemporary challenges.

Through these situated, narrative encounters, a different image of youth political engagement begins to emerge: one grounded not in ideological abstraction, but in the lived negotiation of precariousness. The next section examines how this uncertainty becomes a fertile ground for resistance, creativity, and insurgent forms of political subjectivity.

4. Coping with uncertainty

Faced with deepening inequalities and the imperative to construct biographical paths in the absence of institutional support, young people demonstrate a wide repertoire of creative strategies and active negotiations with social, political, and economic structures. Rather than adopting exclusively adaptive behaviours, they engage in acts of resistance, mobilising personal and collective resources to navigate and reshape the contexts they inhabit.

In particular, as the following analysis will show, they have: (a) redefined political practice in light of lived inequalities; (b) developed a politics of the everyday as a response to institutional disaffection; and (c) approached activism as an experimentation with concrete solutions to improve personal and collective conditions.

Experiences of marginalization, exclusion, and misrecognition generate alternative forms of political engagement, often marked by novelty, relational depth, and conflictual approaches (Norris 2002; Tilly & Tarrow 2012; Della Porta & Portos 2020). These conditions do not inhibit political subjectivity but rather act as catalysts for it. As Pitti (2022) observes, this resonates with bell hooks's concept of the margin as "much more than a place of deprivation". Marginality, hooks argues, can be a space of critical consciousness and creativity, where one learns to "look both from the outside-in and from the inside-out" (1989, 21). In this view, the margin offers a radical perspective - a vantage point from which to see and to create, to imagine new worlds.

Young people in Italy are thus grappling with the paradox of being formally included and substantially excluded. Growing up in a country that has often failed to support them, they have distanced themselves from traditional institutions, cultivating instead a politics rooted in proximity, horizontality, and direct action (Giddens 1991; Bennett 2003). "For me, politics is in what we do every day," said Sara, 29, from Naples. "Not in big slogans. It's in organising a shared kitchen, it's in defending a friend from eviction, it's in not letting go of each other when things collapse." Their political practices emerge in relational spaces that challenge normative expectations and neoliberal logics.

Young women in particular have emerged as central agents of socio-political innovation. As several studies have shown (Stover & Cable 2017; Grasso & Smith 2022), they experience institutional politics as distant and unresponsive to the core issues shaping their lives. In response, they take the lead in developing informal, relational, and care-oriented forms of participation through social movements, spontaneous collectives, and community initiatives[2]. Their citizenship becomes increasingly cultural and everyday. Drawing on what Zamboni (2006) calls "women's surpluses" and Melucci's (1996) notion of "unforeseen subjectivities", these young women articulate demands for change grounded in their lived experiences centred on job insecurity,

[2] Numerous studies have shown that men are more likely than women to engage in institutionalised forms of participation, such as joining a political party, participating in electoral campaigns, or directly contacting a politician (Burns et al., 2001; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). By contrast, women tend to be more involved in informal, less confrontational, and often less visible modes of participation, frequently acting individually and in ways embedded in everyday relational contexts (Schneider et al., 2016). Furthermore, women are more inclined to choose forms of political engagement that connect politics to their daily lives — such as boycotts, political consumerism, petition signing, or making donations (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010).

wage discrimination, care burdens, and the retreat of spaces of freedom but also in the re-existence practices they enact.

Severely penalised by recent socio-economic crises, the young women interviewed respond with increased engagement, diversified participation, and the politicization of precariousness. They are aware that any achievement, particularly for marginalised groups, is provisional and must be continuously defended. The emphasis on everyday practices, subjective affirmation, and the struggle for full (female) citizenship provides a useful lens to understand how young subjectivities mobilise the social, cultural, and political resources at their disposal (Merico 2010). As Bourdieu (1972) reminds us, practices carry worldviews, identities, and horizons of meaning. The capacity to act and relate across social spaces becomes the core of political agency and may perhaps be more relevant today than formal citizenship (Baglioni 2010).

> "What can I say? My doing politics has become a thing here, the fact of bringing forces together to bring about changes in our material conditions of existence... ours because I'm putting myself into it. To bring about changes that have the flavour of small victories, of small struggles... that does not mean circumventing even the broadest and most direct conflicts with those who create problems for us, but it means connecting, linking relationships between people who weren't expected to, or rather reciprocal indifference was expected. It means working to create connections where they were not foreseen and through solidarity. One takes care of others, of others but in a different way... away from the idea, precisely, that I take care of you so that tomorrow you can go to work, to be exploited in alternating school-work or unpaid in internships, etc. etc. I take care of you so that tomorrow, together with me, you can go and ask your employer for the money he doesn't give you or things like that." (Fara, 32, Milan)

As Fara puts it, her way of "doing politics" is rooted in small acts of solidarity and resistance that emerge from the fabric of everyday life: "creating connections where none were expected," building relationships that challenge isolation, and caring for others not to restore them to productivity, but to empower collective action.

The everyday actions described by participants such as cooking together, organizing local initiatives, sharing resources, creating spaces of relational safety, reflect what Silvia Federici (2018) calls *feminist commons*: collective practices of care and self-organization that resist the neoliberal enclosure of social life. These are not simply coping strategies but forms of political reappropriation, grounded in what Salleh (1997) defines as *embodied materialism*: the idea that those most involved in sustaining life (often women at the margins) also hold crucial epistemic and political power. In this sense, these practices constitute a redefinition of politics itself - one rooted in life-making rather than institution-seeking.

> "I wanted to do politics but without joining a party, I wanted to learn how to defend myself... so activism had become a means of survival. And I have to say I would have lived a completely different life if I hadn't started doing activism." (Carla, 25, Naples)

This way of politicising everyday life contradicts long-standing narratives that depict young people as narcissistic, apathetic, or depoliticised. The mythologising of the 1968 generation, and the marginalization of those who followed, has distorted the analytical lens through which youth political engagement is viewed (Pirni & Raffini 2022). In the early 2000s, following the Genoa G8 summit, the individualization paradigm again positioned youth as disengaged (Stoker 2006). But, like a phoenix rising from collective devastation, youth political engagement has been reborn (Norris 2002), transforming, hybridising, and adopting new tools to redefine the motivations and practices of participation. Unconventional activism, which combines protest with direct action, mutual aid, and self-managed services reflects a radical shift. This transformation was acknowledged by *Time* magazine, which declared 2011 the "Year of the Activist" (Kelly et al. 2018). From the Arab Spring to Occupy, from the Indignados to student protests, a generation is rearticulating its political subjectivity through emotion, creativity, and collective experimentation. The orientation is profoundly

prefigurative. As Pleyers (2023) and Fians (2023) argue, prefiguration entails changing the world on a small scale by enacting alternative values such as horizontality, care, and inclusiveness, in the present. These practices do not supplement institutional politics but emerge as autonomous responses to disillusionment, grounded in concrete experimentation (Pitti & Tuorto 2021; Martuccelli 2021).

It is precisely this form of politicised experimentation that characterises the experiences of the young people in our study. Their political engagement is not an abstract ideal but a lived practice, a way of "doing, feeling politics" (Gallino 1993) through identification with collectives that combine personal and public good. It is a politics rooted in *re-existence*, in adaptive and exploratory repertoires, in what Dominijanni (2014) calls "the otherwise of women's politics."

> "We decided to start this group because we had started to realise how the university was becoming a kind of... they didn't really care about the students, but it was all about numbers all the time... I was with the old system and still and I wasn't paying that much, but now a student was paying up to nine thousand pounds a year. And, so we said, "Ah, why don't we start experimenting with... new, different methods of how to learn architecture in real contexts, doing maybe... starting with workshops, a week somewhere and we ask the professors who had instilled this vision in us a little bit to come with us". And, so in 2016 we arrive in Calabria, in this small village. I had been missing for almost ten years. Since we were an informal group, a group of architects who had gone to Calabria to... We didn't have a plan, a long-term programme, for us it was also that week of post... venting a stressful situation within the university. We were happy to spend this almost experimental week with these professors... we put a group of architects, to which other professionals were added, who acted as mediators, pioneers in activating mechanisms that in marginal areas, such as these semi-abundant historic centres, can... create, reactivate these marginal areas, trying to restore basic welfare. New Year's Eve 2020 was celebrated in this small Calabrian village, and forty young people came from all over Italy, all young professionals who could have gone anywhere, gone on holiday wherever they wanted, but instead the idea of being together... they preferred, in fact, to spend it in this small village with two bars, without doing anything much, except being together, having a certain type of conversation, imagining a certain vision... that is, we are beginning to understand that there is also this interest of our generation to find a solution to what are a bit... also the results of the 2008 crisis. Now I don't know what the results of the coronavirus crisis... it's all very evolving, and also all very, emotionally complicated, complex because then we are, let's say, people who are directly involved in this process" (Ludovica, 30, Cosenza)

Ludovica and her collective embody a broad and innovative conception of politics that takes shape across plural and interdependent social spheres, well beyond the confines of institutional engagement. Their participation is not a bureaucratic commitment but a process of lived transformation, where individual trajectories, emotional experiences, and collective imagination are entangled in a dynamic of political subjectivation (Alteri & Raffini, 2007). As Ludovica recounts, the group emerged in response to the growing commodification of university life and the frustration with a system increasingly structured around "numbers." Their decision to initiate alternative learning practices, by organizing workshops outside academic settings, in marginal areas, and in dialogue with critical professors, constitutes a concrete example of prefiguration as experimentation. This initiative, initially conceived as a temporary escape from academic stress, gradually developed into an intentional and materially grounded project. Their presence in a small Calabrian village, chosen not as a political symbol but as a relational space linked to biography, memory, and marginality, became the site for reimagining collective life. It was not only about architecture or regeneration, rather about the reactivation of shared desires and social infrastructures. As Ludovica reflects, what mattered most was not the absence of a plan but the intensity of being together, of "imagining a certain vision" and affirming another way of inhabiting space and time.

This resonates with what Lara Monticelli (2021) defines as the "karst-like" logic of prefigurative politics: a slow, subterranean transformation that emerges from everyday practices and embodied alternatives. These

practices are not supplementary to political engagement; they are its very texture. They produce new relational grammars, redefine temporality, and make space for collective meaning-making outside dominant frames. Crucially, such forms of activism engage in what Joel Kovel (2007) calls a "denaturalization" of capitalist society. In his view, prefigurative communities aim to dismantle the underlying belief systems that sustain capitalist hegemony, cultivating shared intentions capable of resisting the power of capital's force (Kovel, 2007). These intentional communities reorient their practices around values that resist commodification, prioritizing what Kovel calls the "qualitative side of things," including subjectivity, beauty, pleasure, and spiritual meaning (Kovel, 2007: 213, Monticelli 2021). Ludovica's account of dozens of young professionals choosing to spend New Year's Eve in a remote village with "two bars," not for leisure or spectacle but simply "being together," speaks directly to this ethos. It marks a shift from instrumental rationality toward an ethics of presence, care, and co-imagination.

Such acts are not marginal or utopian retreats but deeply political practices that redefine what counts as political in the first place. By reclaiming marginal spaces, refusing institutional scripts, and privileging collective experimentation, these groups challenge the ossified configurations of capitalist life. They offer embodied critiques and liveable alternatives that arise within and against the very structures they seek to transform. In this sense, Ludovica's collective, like many others we encountered, is not escaping from politics, but enacts a form of politics that is both ontologically and epistemologically distinct. It reflects a political imaginary long articulated within feminist and anarchist traditions, rooted in shared affect, place-based practices, and a desire to inhabit the world otherwise. Their ideas on social change, inclusion, minority rights, gender equality, and environmental justice are clearly articulated. Building on these orientations, participants experiment with concrete practices aimed at improving their personal and collective conditions of exclusion and misrecognition, while developing forms of action that connect individual trajectories with collective dynamics.

"I do activities within feminist contexts. I am part of a small collective here in the city I live in... which is really my collective, my little group, and then it is also part of *Non una di meno,* so there is also this piece here. And in all of this I try to bring this stuff that I do also then into my dimension of work, so I also deal with feminist philosophy etc. (...) that shifted my research areas a bit and changed my ways of doing politics'. (Mara, 34 years old, Milan)

As both Ludovica and Mara illustrate, joining a group or system of relations, as Fara also suggests, is not merely a matter of affiliation, but a political gesture that connects personal trajectories to collective horizons of meaning. For the young women we interviewed, political subjectivity emerges from this alignment between practices and values, where individual and collective transformation are deeply interwoven.

Their way of "doing politics" is not grounded in institutional loyalty or ideological identity, but in everyday acts of coherence that link what they believe, what they do, and how they relate to others. This convergence reflects a prefigurative orientation: these women are not waiting for permission to act politically, they are already building, in the present, fragments of the world they imagine. These collectives, networks, and circles of mutual care function as affective commons: places where subjectivity, creativity, and care become political resources for resisting isolation, precarity, and institutional disaffection.

Yet, these insurgent practices unfold within a generational landscape marked by dissonance, where young women confront not only institutional abandonment but also the conflicted legacy of previous generations. The next section explores how this tension shapes their political imaginaries, producing both conflict and creative rearticulations of memory, responsibility, and dissent.

5. Political Relations with Other Generations

A recurring thread in the interviews concerns a deep sense of rupture with older generations. The young women we spoke with often describe an *epistemic and experiential distance* that feels unbridgeable, based not simply on age, but primarily on values, priorities, and worldviews. Adult generations are frequently perceived as incapable of grasping the contemporary condition of precarity, of understanding the material and symbolic challenges facing young people, or of supporting meaningful transitions to adulthood. This gap is not only social, but political (Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Leccardi, 2005, 2024; Milkman 2017).

The knowledge of older generations, traditionally associated with guidance or institutional continuity, is often deemed inadequate or irrelevant. In some cases, it is experienced as infantilising: a way of withholding recognition and reinforcing generational hierarchies (Jones, 2009; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). For Carla (25, Naples), this manifests in anger toward a generation perceived as economically privileged and politically disengaged:

> "I see that my generation is more responsible… We're super precarious, and it's a struggle. I'm very pissed off with the generations… I guess I'm pissed off with my parents, so I'm pissed off with everyone!"

This experience of generational rupture echoes the findings of Ruth Milkman (2017), who argues that the post-2008 generation has developed a distinct political identity shaped by the collapse of economic security and the failure of older institutions to protect younger cohorts. Drawing on Mannheim's theory of generations, Milkman identifies Millennials and Gen Z (we add) not simply as a demographic group, but as a political generation formed through shared historical experiences, most notably, the 2008 financial crisis and its enduring aftermath. These formative conditions have not only exposed young people to unprecedented levels of precarity and debt but have also intensified their skepticism toward the ideologies and institutions that earlier generations once trusted. In our interviews, this distance is often described in emotional terms: not just frustration, but exhaustion, cynicism, and a persistent sense of being misunderstood. Milkman's work helps contextualize these feelings as structurally grounded. She shows that the erosion of the postwar social contract, once taken for granted by former generations, has led to the deterioration of the symbolic and material bridges that once connected youth to adulthood. In the absence of stable employment, accessible housing, or functional welfare systems, the very pathways that once structured life trajectories have disintegrated. For many of the young women we interviewed, this breakdown renders the advice and expectations of adult generations not just irrelevant, but alienating. Others, like Stefania (26, Cosenza), acknowledge a transmission of political values but also emphasise the need to break away from the form and style of that inheritance:

> "My parents gave me left-wing values, but in a bourgeois style… At a certain point, I needed different emotions, a different direction."

This generational break is not merely expressive of personal frustration, it is political: a refusal to inherit uncritically, a desire to build new grammars of participation (Nilan & Feixa, 2006; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015). Younger generations' accounts of disengagement do not have to be read as apathy, but as refusal: a conscious rejection of the frameworks and languages through which adult generations have historically defined politics. Several young women explicitly framed their own political practices as attempts to reimagine politics from the margins, beyond party affiliation or institutional allegiance. In this sense, the generational rupture they describe is not simply a lack of communication, but a clash of epistemologies: between a politics of delegation and one of prefiguration; between stability and improvisation; between legacy and reinvention. In this way, intergenerational relations become a contested terrain, where power, legitimacy, and recognition are constantly negotiated.

This is particularly evident in debates around labour and autonomy. As Mara (34, Milan) explains, within her feminist collective and *Non una di meno*, generational clashes emerge over the meaning of work itself:

> "For many of them, work is emancipation. But for us, work often comes loaded with gendered expectations… So we demand an income for self-determination. Maybe if we weren't forced into miserable jobs, we'd choose other things."

These positions reflect a broader feminist critique of the neoliberal valorization of work as self-realization, a critique that reclaims care, autonomy, and time as central to a redefinition of emancipation (Federici, 2018; Duffy et al., 2013; Fraser, 2016). Further, the older generations' relative material security, through historical configurations of labour, housing, and welfare, often obscures their ability to recognize the structural transformations that have reshaped the present. This generational myopia (Milkman 2017) is frequently named in the interviews, where participants speak of being judged by standards that no longer apply. Carla's anger, for instance, is not simply a reaction to intergenerational misunderstanding, but to a felt injustice: the persistence of generational authority in a context where its legitimacy is no longer clear.

Several participants also referenced the long shadow cast by the 1968 generation, whose political legacy is simultaneously acknowledged and contested. While 1968 is often celebrated as a symbol of radical change, many interviewees viewed it as an unattainable, even oppressive benchmark. As Giulia (28, Naples) stated: "They always tell us to be like them. But their movements were also patriarchal and closed. We want to build something different". Also the memory of the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa surfaced as a moment of rupture in the political imaginary of Italian young activists. Though few had direct experience of the event, its legacy of police violence, repression, and disappointment shaped their understanding of the risks and limitations of mass mobilisation. "We grew up after Genoa," said Martina (33, Rome). "Our memory of that moment is filtered through fear, repression, and a sense of impossibility". Yet this rupture does not necessarily lead to isolation. In some cases, interviewees describe attempts to create alternative intergenerational alliances, not based on authority or experience, but on vulnerability and mutual recognition. These efforts point to what we might call emergent commons of generational care, rooted not in nostalgia or continuity, but in the shared labour of imagining and enacting other possible futures (hooks, 1989; Dominijanni, 2014; Federici, 2018).

Still, ambivalence remains. "They opened spaces for us, yes," said one activist. "But they also want to decide how we use them. There's generosity and control mixed together". This illustrates that beyond ideological divergences, intergenerational politics is a matter of negotiating space, memory, and authority. As Carla (30) puts it: "Memory is a political battlefield. If we don't tell our story, they will tell it for us—and it won't be true". In this view, remembering becomes a political act, a means of reclaiming narrative agency and refusing imposed historical frames.

These generational tensions expose more than interpersonal misalignments: they surface competing political grammars and diverging imaginaries of autonomy, care, and struggle. In the concluding section, we draw together these threads to reflect on what these practices reveal about the future of political agency and the spaces where citizenship is reimagined from below.

Conclusions

The young women we met are confronting some of the most pressing issues of our time, ranging from precarious work to climate injustice, from gender inequality to the erosion of democratic spaces, and they are doing so not by appealing to institutional channels, but through direct and conflictual reappropriations of politics from below. Their practices unfold across a plurality of social spaces, where care, creativity, and

collective responsibility become key political resources. These are not residual or marginal forms of engagement, but central expressions of a political subjectivity grounded in lived critique.

Rather than reproducing canonical models of activism, these women construct what Federici (2018) defines as feminist commons: spaces of shared care and resistance that explicitly challenge the neoliberal enclosure of life. Their actions revalue reproductive labour, transforming it from invisible drudgery into a site of collective agency and conflict, whether through communal kitchens, reclaimed urban spaces, or care networks that refuse the logic of exploitability.

This political creativity emerges from the paradox of their exclusion: formally recognized as citizens yet materially abandoned. As Pleyers (2017) notes, their prefigurative practices are not utopian escapism but a present-tense confrontation with systemic failures. "We're not waiting for change," one participant remarked. "We're building it now, even when it's exhausting."

Inhabiting what bell hooks (1989) called the margin as a vantage point, these women enact what Italian feminist theorist Ida Dominijanni (2014) terms the otherwise of politics: a mode of engagement that prioritizes relational transformation over institutional validation. Their everyday citizenship (Bennett, 2003) combines gritty realism with radical imagination, a duality that institutions persistently fail to grasp.

This reimagining of politics is also marked by a deep intergenerational fracture. The political engagement of younger generations today cannot be understood without acknowledging the historical rupture that separates them from their predecessors. The young women in this study articulate not just a divergence of political styles or priorities, but what Milkman (2017) identifies as a *generational shift in political subjectivity*, a redefinition of what it means to act politically in an age shaped by systemic betrayal. The epistemic and affective distance they express is more than personal disillusionment: it reflects a structural realignment of social expectations, economic realities, and political imaginaries. Where older generations may still perceive politics through the lens of institutional participation, these women operate from the recognition that those institutions have failed to secure even the minimal conditions of stability, dignity, or voice. Their practices reject inherited scripts of adulthood and citizenship, insisting instead on forms of political being forged through precarity, institutional anger, and relational care. In this sense, their political subjectivity does not evolve *despite* generational distance, but *through it*: it is a critique of a past that no longer holds and a collective wager on futures yet to be assembled. That critique, however, is not articulated in abstract terms, but is deeply shaped by persistent existential and territorial inequalities that continue to structure the Italian context. While this study does not allow for a systematic comparative analysis, the empirical material points to differentiated patterns of political engagement across the country. Collective action experiences narrated by participants from Southern contexts appear more anchored in long-standing local struggles, informal networks, and territorially situated forms of solidarity. In Northern contexts, political engagement more often takes the form of fragmented, project-based initiatives. These patterns should be read as exploratory rather than conclusive, highlighting the need for future research explicitly designed to address territorial inequalities through a comparative lens.

Naomi Klein (2019) is right: in an era of collapse, care is the most radical act. But as these women show, it is care as confrontation, care that resists being cheapened, care that organizes against the systems that make caring so hard. Their experiments, though fragile, expose the bankruptcy of institutional politics while prefiguring viable alternatives. These women's practices force us to confront a foundational question: When institutions no longer serve life, where does politics begin? Their answer is unequivocal: in the streets, in the homes, in the cracks: wherever people dare to live differently.

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