

# Disadvantaged young people, family and the lack of big brothers. An interview with Alessandro Cavalli

*Edited by Andrea Pirni*

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*Some of his publications on the condition of youth: Gioventù: condizione o processo?, in «Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia», XXX, I (1980); (with V. Cesareo, A. de Lillo, L. Ricolfi and G. Romagnoli) *Giovani oggi. Indagine Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia* (1984); (with A. Calabrò et al.) (ed.) *Il tempo dei giovani* (1985); (with A. de Lillo) *Giovani anni 80. Secondo rapporto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia* (1988); (with A. de Lillo) (ed.) *Giovani anni 90. Terzo rapporto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia* (1993); (with O. Galland) (ed.) *Senza fretta di crescere. L'ingresso difficile nella vita adulta* (1996); (with C. Buzzi and A. de Lillo) (ed.), *Giovani verso il Duemila: Quarto rapporto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia* (1997); (with C. Buzzi and A. de Lillo) (ed.) *Giovani del nuovo secolo: Quinto rapporto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia* (2002); (with C. Buzzi and A. de Lillo) (ed.) *Rapporto giovani: Sesta indagine dell'Istituto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia* (2007); (with O. Galland and V. Cicchelli) *Deux pays, deux jeunesses? La condition juvénile en France et en Italie* (2008); (with C. Leccardi) (ed.) *Le quattro stagioni della ricerca sociologica sui giovani, in «Quaderni di Sociologia», LVII (62), fascicolo speciale, Per capire la società che cambia: scritti in ricordo di Antonio de Lillo* (2013).*

*Professor Cavalli, in the last decades there has been a large development of sociology of newer generations in Italy and in Europe: why has the interest in youth grown so much? Is it forecasting to study youth?*

I do not believe that studying youth is forecasting. To better explain myself, if you want to make previsions you should not study them to understand how they will be once they are adults. Then why is it that we study youth now much more than we did in the past? The question surrounds not the object of the research, but he who studies: we live in times of great uncertainty, and in uncertain times one questions himself more. The growing interest towards youth, is in fact connected to the need of knowledge of a generation – of not only researchers – and, in general, of a society that undergoes rapid and unseen processes of change. We study youth looking for the directions of the transformations in act, as today they appear more obscure and uncertain than they did in days past.

*The Italian sociology of young generations is, therefore, refining itself as a specific perspective study on the foundations of the growing uncertainty of contemporary society. Your studies have taken you in many countries, bringing you in touch with many research perspectives: which are the specificities of Italian sociology on the subject of youth compared to other positions in Europe?*

The specificity is that those who have studied youth realized that in Italy, in particular, it consists of a particularly extended period of one's life; and it is this, in the end, that differentiates southern European countries from northern European ones: a prolonged extension of the juvenile phase that comes from a series of complicated and broader factors. At the beginning of the 80's we started asking ourselves why in Italy one lived for such a long time with his/her family. It is the attempt to answer this question that partially defines Italian sociology on youth. I remember for example that throughout our collaborations, Olivier Galland was very interested in this subject and in the reasons for which in Italy young people stay within their own families for such an extended time while in France and in other countries this phenomenon was noticed with a much more modest intensity.

*It is at the beginning of the 80's that you wrote an article on the «Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia» in which you presented youth as a new social entity product of the industrial society: this new entity that resulted from the transformation of the structures of the educative system and many other factors, did not establish an actual group as there were no historical events significant enough to activate a collective emotion and it did not even represent a generation in the mannheimian sense of the term. Today the period of life that represents youth is very extended – also as a result of the typically Italian phenomenon just previously mentioned – and it is object, at times, of a stigmatization that takes place because of the delay younger people are showing at building their own families, at starting their own careers, and at political participation... in other words: in the development of typically adult roles. In this scenario – in which we must insert the economical crisis – do you believe in the possibility of the formation of a new generation that will exercise a significant role in social change?*

Generations are always composite, never homogeneous; they have a common element, which is being exposed to one historic situation but with great internal differentiation in the reaction and in the perception of that same situation. As an example some cohorts form a generation, with reasons tied to a historical circumstance: those born from 1896 to 1899, males of that age have all been to war. War created an experience that uniformed youth from officer cadets to simple infantry; these are however absolutely unrepeatable situations. In this case you can say that young people created a generation. There was such a strong uniforming factor that it put the young college graduate and the illiterate farmer together. There hasn't been another situation like this. Mannheim reflected on youth movements of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were radically right wing on one side, radically left wing on the other, and were in strong opposition. It is quite possible that something similar might manifest itself soon, some of the conditions are already there. But they're not enough. You never know when a movement is going to be born and when one is going to die. Sometimes the conditions are there for it to be born, but it doesn't happen because it would depend on a series of unrepeatable constellations of factors that occurred at the same time in other phases. Furthermore, these movements have a strong contagious component, they are not tied to societies and national histories. It is possible that there are some situations on a global level that favour these dynamics. The Vietnam war, for example, was also important in Europe as it produced phenomena of collective emotion. The same thing did not happen in 2001. 1989 was very important for eastern Europe, and generations are present there. And very vividly. I spend about a quarter of the year in Berlin and the differences are very clear between who group before, after, or during the events of 1989, generations are heavily marked by it, in a way that has not happened to us. There are dynamics that spread worldwide, especially in the industrialized world, related to the growth of education. This is a general phenomenon, maybe for us it is slightly feebler, even if the main element regarding the extension of the years related to youth is exactly this: a lengthening of school attendance.

It seems to me that a certain fracture is developing between Mediterranean Europe and Central-Northern Europe: young people are proof of this as, for instance, the youth unemployment rate carries a much heavier bearing in Italy and in other countries of Mediterranean Europe – such as Greece or Spain – than elsewhere, due to reasons strictly connected to the functioning or malfunctioning of the labour market. Youth unemployment rate at 40 and more % is an unknown phenomenon beyond the Alps. Now this is something that gravely affects the state in which young people find themselves. I agree with demographic researchers such as Alessandro Rosina, Massimo Livi Bacci, and economists like Tito Boeri, that have been recently affirm-

ing that there are a series of structural elements in these societies that hinder younger generations, delaying their entrance in adulthood, therefore holding them down in this long phase dominated by precariousness, by uncertainty, where they are disadvantaged by a series of other phenomena. I do believe that young people in southern Europe are disadvantaged.

*This disadvantage is then a structural phenomenon in Italy. What elements affect this phenomenon and how do they operate?*

There is something that allows this disadvantage to take place: the fact that, for better or for worse, families are able to maintain this situation of minority. I believe this to be an Italian peculiarity. Redistribution of resources at a social level, in Italy, takes its place within the family; not through social mechanisms, but family ones, keeping youth in condition of inadequate independence. If redistribution takes place within the family, it clearly has an impact on one's independence. Many young people manage to hold up because their grandparents have a good pension, because their parents have good pensions, something that would be inconceivable in Denmark. There are some 30-year-olds, if not older, that still don't know what they want to do with their lives. In some ways this is absolutely positive, in the sense that in a dynamic society you do not become an adult just to start waiting to grow old. From this point of view even adulthood has to acquire some elements of flexibility. The subject of flexible biography concerns the willingness to change the entire course of our life. This is certainly an important aspect of the juvenile phase, however in our society youth is kept in a situation of limited independence. Youth today, for the time being, seems incapable of producing change. They might be able to go back to the leading role in certain historical phases. I've asked myself if the Renzi-phenomenon or the Grillo-phenomenon might be read in this key. They are interesting phenomena. The traditional electorate of the Partito Democratico (Italian Democratic Party) has a higher age average than others, and probably so does Forza Italia's. It seems to me that among Renzi's and Grillo's electorate the average age is lowered. This could mean that the conditions are met for a new phase of youth protagonism. Just as we could not foresee what happened in 1968, it is possible that we are simply unable to predict these new forms of youth protagonism. Ours is a gerontocratic society and in a society of this kind it is possible for tensions between generations to grow strong enough to favour some movement. I wouldn't be surprised – and I'm not saying that it is foreseeable – if new youth movements developed in a society that has been so heavily gerontocratic for such a long time... not to talk about the universities.

*Since the 80's Italian society has radically changed. Have its structures also changed? For instance, have the educational institutions – looking at the reforms of the past decade –*

*modified how they operate considering the changes in society and in new generations?*

In some societies they have, in some others less. There are societies in which these implications are less fluid and find it more difficult to reconnect with the transformations of their student population: from this point of view I believe that in our country the forces holding back change in these institutions are, and have been, very strong. Our school has not changed very much. In spite of the various reforms. Having conducted numerous researches on teachers, it seems to me that the turnover in the population of teachers has been – righteously – halted. There had been a bubble in the 70's and 80's for which there was particularly extend quantity of teachers in the population. This blocked the turnover for at least ten years. In the next ten years there will be a great deal of teachers that will be leaving schools, and there will have to be a strong replacement. Today the Italian teaching body has the highest age average in Europe. This means that sooner or later some kind of turnover will have to take place. There is a great distance, even chronologically, between generations, and we are dealing with young people confronting themselves with adult figures where there are no older brothers. There are fathers and grandfathers but there is a lack of big brothers that carry out that important role of connection between the two. We are talking about school: but in almost all institutions in Italy there is a turnover problem. When we talk about gerontocracy it essentially means this. It is clearly noticeable within the teaching body. I believe this to be a specifically Italian situation, the phenomenon is very clear in universities, which have been carrying this “hump” since the 70's, when my generation arrived. This was a long-term feedback from 1968, because in '68 there was a great expansion of the student population and of the teaching staff of universities. Furthermore, such an expansion in a limited amount of time usually brings limited selectivity, so a little bit of everything flew into universities in those days. This “hump” is now moving forward and out but, because it will leave an emptiness, it risks creating another “hump”, of smaller dimensions: these situations occur in institutions that don't have a physiological turnover. The generation of the 70's is exiting the universitarian teaching body and is leaving an emptiness that is not being filled yet, because in times like these, that suffer from the economical crisis, it seems convenient not to reinstate public positions. Following a drastic reduction, however, in the long run, it is possible to witness consistent new entries. So there are some privileged generations and some disadvantaged ones. I'm part of a generation that might have been the luckiest in Italy's history, since it's unification. I'm sorry to say this to you since you're younger, but I unfortunately believe that this generation, mine, will be a singularity in this country's history. We lived our childhood and teenage years in the post-war period, which was very tough, but filled with hope, emotions and strong idealistic tensions,

the economic development took place during a phase in which society as a whole was shifting, instigating tension and conflict. But also breeding great hopes of change. Especially privileged were those that entered educational institutions in the moment of their great expansion. I studied Economics. As soon as I graduated I received at least 20 job interview proposals. Currently a neo-graduate sends around 200 letters with his curriculum and nobody even answers. There is a striking difference. The generation to which I belong is, however, also the one that took office in most kind of institutions, not only the educational ones, and somehow did not favour the turnover. These situations do not reproduce themselves, they are exceptional historical conjunctions. This is also addressed to all those of my same age, who are complaining about how low their pensions are: they are low because they retired after working for 20 years but have been receiving a pension for 40. They subjectively don't perceive this as a privilege, but they are objectively privileged. They lived an exceptional phase of this country's history, for which later generations are paying the price. Societies that amass public debt, are societies that have later generations pay for their wealth. This is the real objective element of generational conflict. Another matter is if these become subjective and turn into real conflict, but the conflicts between generations are already there. However, they hardly also become conflicts on a subjective level.

*What is it that intervenes to soften these conflicts? What dynamics, or which actors don't allow these to become conflicts on a subjective level, therefore on a group one?*

Society's great institution for integration, the family. Generational conflicts also, and especially, happen inside of families. And conflict internal to the family is hard to accept. This happened for instance in Germany in the 60's. The study of German movements from the 60's and the 70's is interesting because it had a very strong political meaning in the opposition between sons and fathers that lived through and accepted Nazism: there, conflict manifested itself inside of families in a sometimes very painful way. I know some people my age that cut all relationships with their parents and left Germany because they could not bear to live in a society that was carrying such a weight on its shoulders. From some points of view it is a good thing that families reduce conflict: where institutions do not have a unifying function it is a good thing that there is something that keeps society together. And family certainly has this role. Where can we notice, above all, the strong points of family? It is where institutions are weak. The weakness of institutions strengthens primary relations. The strong point represented by the family shows itself in its ability to adapt, which is much stronger than that of institutions. It fundamentally represents a place where solidarity can emerge and some bonds are created that are stronger than others. This compensates for the weaker bonds with the institutions.

*Under some points of view youth self-develops, young people develop their own identity but there is also a process of other-development, as it is others that contribute to the elaboration of that specific condition. Even teachers contribute. Could the generational turnover of teachers be the bearer of a different representation of youth and contribute to its modification?*

I believe so; if we now allow people in their 30's to enter the schooling system, this will probably modify the way in which youth is represented. An average age of 50 within the teaching staff is too high; the introduction of 30-year-olds should definitely change something. There is also a parallel phenomenon which is rather negative: an excessive feminization of teaching staff in school. This is especially harmful for males that need to have valuable adult male figures and will have a hard time maturing if they do not find them. Gender mainstreaming remains very important. The feminization process in educational management is instead, in my opinion, rather positive. The fact that there are women in schools directing the institute, is an important thing, especially if it raises the autonomy of the school, I believe it improves scholastic life as women who decide to become head teachers are not usually frustrated teachers, but rather teachers that have accumulated a great deal of experience. Often, in the past, head teachers have been male teachers, wore out from teaching and therefore terrible managers. In this sense it is important that there has been a taking in consideration of a different gender perspective in the analysis of youth related to education, to healthcare and to politics; my generation struggled to focus on gender mainstreaming, while it is very important. It is extraordinarily difficult to keep the various aspects of the youth condition together and in fact, for instance in the Iard researches we tried to break up the object, but in the end there was always someone looking at politics – like Luca Ricolfi or Ilvo Diamanti – and the specificities re-emerged: we tried to keep them together but were not always able to.

*The Iard researches represent a very important asset for Italian sociology of young generations. You have given life to and coordinated the Iard researches, and with you Antonio de Lillo to whom this issue of «Società Mutamento Politica» is dedicated.*

Antonio and I have walked a long path together. I have to say that we complemented ourselves very well, he had a vastly superior methodological education than mine, as my background is mainly historic-economical. He instead had a more lazarsfeldian education with Vittorio Capecchi. We complemented ourselves very well because we had different proficiencies. Collaborations also work well because you encounter different kinds of personalities that allow you to work well together. Expertise is not enough, you need different aspects of personalities, and our personalities, however different, completed each others well.

*For instance in what?*

When differences emerged, the way in which one would discuss to try and convince the other; at times it was him convincing me and at times it was me convincing him. Antonio, I recall, came to Iard while I was working on a project directed by a psychologist, Professor Ornella Andreani of the university of Pavia, on social class, intelligence and personality, research for which I especially curated the sociographic aspect. At a certain point Professor Andreani asked me if I knew a good statistician because there was a ton of data to elaborate. So I then asked Vittorio Capecchi who was a classmate of mine at Bocconi University – Vittorio is also from Bocconi –. Vittorio told me: “Yes, there is Antonio de Lillo, trust him he’s very good”. So he also joined Iard and we worked together from the end of the 60’s until when he passed away. For 40 years. And I must say it was a great team. We were a truly tight-knit couple and we were very close. When we had different ideas comparing them was really a way of growing instead of arguing. Antonio truly passed away to soon.

*Your experience with Iard was structural for the deliberation on youth condition, the lack of this type of systematic work is now very noticeable. What elements should be proposed again? Which job coordinates should be taken from the Iard experience?*

I hope that these kind of things are reproducible, although I understand that it is not easy. Iard was very peculiar. It came from the Rotary Club, to help talented young people that lacked economic resources. A sort of philanthropic endeavour. And with time it transformed itself. The element of continuity was its president, Franco Brambilla, that truly gave life to it. He came from the Pirelli world, he was part Milano’s middle class, very tied to the industry, not finance, but industry, not to fashion but factories; it was an enlightened middle class, well aware that its privileges were also responsibilities and duties. An ethic of this particular part of Milan’s middle class that was subsequently lost with what came after, berlusconism, a fraction that did not culturally belong to this type of middle class. Iard was born and grew because this person was trying to create the right conditions to make socially useful actions. You can well imagine that from a researcher’s point of view working in a place where somebody is trying to find the resources that allow you to do your research means finding yourself in the best possible environment. When I told you that mine was a lucky generation: I had a lot of luck! And with Antonio we worked very much at this endeavor: it wasn’t too easy because, for instance, we had to slightly reduce the importance of educators and psychologists that were initially very prominent in Iard. This brought some animosity towards us. But without this enlightened entrepreneur there wouldn’t have been any Iard; Antonio and I contributed to its success because he was there, without him we

couldn't have done anything. And having a favourable situation allowed us to reach many goals; for instance, it allowed me to work within Iard – but also outside of it – with the same research team for at least ten years.

*In closing, what suggestions could you share with those who wish to start pursuing sociological studies on new generations?*

Disciplinary specialization is essential, it has very high costs and this unfortunately brings grist to the mill of those who believe that novelists better understand the society of which they write about rather than social sciences. The issue is how to sum this up. And this depends very much on ones education. I believe that more your education is wide and diversified the better it allows you to have a wider view. My argument toward young sociologists is that they are too hyperspecialized from the start. They know too little of the related disciplines and regarding sociology they know everything concerning their problem but they don't read the fundamental classics, my generation was shaped on the classics. This is also a sign of crisis within the discipline. This also explains why many conscious mind are looking at philosophy. Maybe because they find readier answers and not fragmented visions. For a good sociological research you have to be willing to “get your hands dirty”. The challenge that youth sociology faces is the specialization of generalists.

*Thank you, Professor.*

