

Born in '89

The burden of the past and the biographical
construction among European young people.
Twenty-year-old youngsters from two European cities:
Milan and Sarajevo confronted.

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Our enquiry was inspired by one of the main questions nominated in the introducing text of the Conference:

Is there a truly transnational and European set of experiences of growing up in terms of chances and uncertainties as well as life styles and inequalities?

Our analysis is based on a pilot research dealing with historical and biographical memory, self-perception and attitudes of youth born in 1989.

Memory here is considered as a social construction that constitutes a strategic dimension of definition of identities and, at the same time, direct expression of continuity/change dialectic. The relationship that youngsters entertain with memory refers, as the consequence, both to the connection with historical time and implicitly with a certain vision of the future.



A field work was organized in two European cities with quite different historical, political and social background:

- Milan - as a cosmopolitan European city with a central position concerning EU institutions;
- Sarajevo, non only situated in European periphery, but representing a symbolic paradigm of violent conflictual post-communist transition, characterized by extremely difficult process of consolidation of peace and democracy in post-war period.

As for the moment, in each city, 5 young men and women, born in '89, were interviewed (ten narrative interviews); other interviews will be organized in the next months, including also a focus group with youngsters from Milano and a few students from Sarajevo living temporarily in Italy.

Studies and researches conducted in these fields depict youths that are strongly presentified, lacking in profundity and depth, empty and unable to imagine their future and to connect the past to the present. An outcome of this 'biographic destructurement' (Cavalli-Galland 1996) is the difficulty, on behalf of youths, in developing their lifetime in linear terms, linking memory and project (Rampazi 2005).



The first interviewees, made with *youngsters from Milan*, testify a difficulty reflecting on the past:

- they primarily concentrate on the present, to the detriment of the future, whose time-planning results as rather weak;
- these young people are urged into short-term forms of planning, due to a number of factors including the following:
 - the uncertainty that characterize contemporary societies,
 - the increasing flexibility required to enter the job market,
 - the provisional character of the majority of decisions, taken as they are in full awareness of their precarious nature
 - the unpredictability of both one's own inner life and external context is strongly internalized by young people).

In this sense young people, both boys and girls, seem to be oriented towards a pragmatic, at times even disenchanted, approach to their life. These youngsters express a flexible form of planning, that extends over a limited time-frame, thus preferring short to medium term projects.

Nevertheless, the past still retains a crucial significance for young people identitarian construction. As far as related to the knowledge of historical events, it is scarcely recalled by the majority of interviewees.



However, their memory seems to be built on other factors. A large part of interviewees constantly look back on their past. In fact, few of the interviewees knew something about the fall of Berlin wall and the ‘iron curtain’; this might depend more on a shortage of information shared by the so-called Italian ‘civil society’, than on a direct responsibility of school institutions. However, these first interviewees have shown an authentic wish to study and learn about history, in particular those who were born, as in this case, in such a symbolic date/time of the *short century*.



For *Sarajevo youngsters* the meaning of the Fall of the Berlin Wall is different
→ change has been perceived as a *crash* with the life-world of the past →
they retain that the distance past/present is quite deep, with just a few
solutions of continuity;

- hard infant experience of the war – they were war migrants as IDPs, refugees and then returnees, or they were in the besieged city during the war (April 1992 – December 1995).

- post-war period in a transitional post-communist country – lower quality of life; major level of violence in the everyday experience



dimension of context as a space of difference

- different space of experience: more violent in today's Sarajevo, not only in the war-past, in comparison to Milan; high extent of the violence among youngsters, high level of the micro-criminality, but also of a visible forms of organized crime;
- anyhow, if the presence of the violence has a strong influence on the perception of the past and of the present, it does not influence the perception of their future;
- they don't remember war more than in spots and fragments; sometimes they talk about stories narrated by other members of their family and other significant adults that became their own memory;
- if they have not demonstrated much or any trust toward the society, they feel themselves rather self-confident – they do not trust the society, but they do trust themselves;
- no frustration regarding a lack of certainty among the SA youngsters;
- high level of individualism, but great importance of friendship.


A kind of a contradiction: context as a *space* of difference but not a *place* that generate different ways of life → many similarities in the answers of both groups regarding:

- organization of time
- ways and means of communication
- perception of their perspectives
- consideration of the future and uncertainty
- lack of the confidence toward the adults out of the family
- no trust into the social institutions and political elite

- what they are talking about is a “normal life” – for both Sarajevo and Milan youngsters
- Ken Roberts → ‘middle class’ model as a desirable model
- Western middle class model → but it was also a typical way of life of a socialist middle class in Yugoslavia that was more liberal than other communist countries: job, family, children, some certainty
- the generations of their parents: born from '46 to '68 – glorious 30ties in the West, but also decades of economical progress in the communist Yugoslavia and a certain level of the social and political liberalization of it's society
- anyhow, if we put away political differences and take in exam social and welfare systems, models of modernization, industrialization, urbanization → many similarities in a socialization patterns of the parents;
- nowadays, both Western and Eastern welfare state models are in crises
- in that sense there is no surprise about outcomes that are similar in many points, although the young boys and girls from Sarajevo witnessed in their lives the worst kind of experience a life may contain.

Differences in consideration of Europe and of the European Union institutions:

Milano youngsters do not perceive Europe as something immediate, it is something almost ‘taken for granted’;

- the perception of the distance might make us thinking about “fortress Europe” – a faraway highly bureaucratized institution, the meaning and significance of which is not, anyhow, an object of questioning;
 - they recognized the advantage to be part of the Union: no frontiers, free movement among the member states, possibility to have educational experiences like Erasmus;
 - it is a wider space of experience, but not as much a space of opportunities.
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Sarajevo youngsters perceive Europe mostly in a symbolic way: it is not a physical 'place of desire', it represents more a system of values like peace, freedom, liberty of movement and of the individual choice;

- interviewed young men and women did not expressed a desire to go away; on the contrary, they all have said that they perceived themselves and their future related to Sarajevo, (more than to Bosnia) - travel and study abroad, but no wish to abandon their home city;

- they all feel themselves as Europeans but they also feel that they are not fully recognized as that.

Instead of the conclusions:

- label of “looser” – only if we want to consider their lives measured by the middle class Western model of life;
- maybe the desire to turn back to the certainty of this type of society regards more us as adults; they do not look backward, they are creating their future facing day by day their present;
- ethnocentrism of West/East approach, but also our adult point of view should be challenged in a better way;
- anyhow, preserving the conquests of the European societies in the XX century in terms of civil rights and social justice remains an important goal for the new generations, in the conditions of globalizing uncertainty.



Thank you for the attention!
Tatjana & Letterio



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