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INTERGENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES AND CONFLICTS DURING THE PANDEMIC CRISIS IN ITALY

DIFERENCIAS Y CONFLICTOS INTERGENERACIONALES DURANTE LA CRISIS PANDEMICA EN ITALIA

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Abstract

Introduction. The health, economic and social crisis caused by the Covid 19 pandemic in Italy has produced a wide range of consequences and reactions. It has favoured the re-emergence of intergenerational conflicts that had long been latent. The present article focuses on this phenomenon in depth and analyses the most salient results of a study conducted in the Emilia Romagna region. In this study, different generational groups were interviewed, from adolescents to adults and the elderly.

Methodology. The study was performed in November 2020, in the days immediately after measures to contain the epidemic were introduced via governmental decree. Strict limitations to individual behaviour, school attendance and the possibility of exercising certain professions were announced. The opinions of young people, adults and the elderly were collected regarding: the Italian government's decisions; the concept of health; social life; and behaviours relating to the respect or not of the restrictions. Based on the gathered data, the present work sought to highlight the generational specificities, commonalities and, above all, the elements of intergenerational conflict. **Results.** A picture emerged in which, alongside the shared

Resumen

Introducción. La crisis sanitaria, económica y social provocada por la pandemia de Covid 19 en Italia ha producido un amplio abanico de consecuencias y reacciones, favoreciendo la reaparición de conflictos intergeneracionales que han estado latentes desde hace mucho tiempo. Este artículo pretende ofrecer un estudio en profundidad de este fenómeno, presentando un análisis de los resultados más destacados de una investigación realizada en la región de Emilia Romagna, mediante entrevistas a una muestra de personas pertenecientes a diferentes grupos generacionales, desde adolescentes hasta personas adultas y ancianas. **Metodología.** La investigación se llevó a cabo en noviembre de 2020, en los días inmediatamente posteriores a la emisión de un decreto gubernamental que introdujo medidas para contener la epidemia entre las que figuraban severas limitaciones relativas al comportamiento individual, la asistencia a centros educativos y la posibilidad de ejercer algunas profesiones. Mediante el análisis de las opiniones de personas jóvenes, adultas y ancianas sobre las decisiones del gobierno italiano, el concepto de salud, la vida social y el comportamiento de las personas en relación con el respeto o no de las restricciones, el artículo tiene como objetivo

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admission that health – understood in its broadest sense of physical and psychological well-being – must be protected and defended, each generational group also considered its own demands as a priority. These demands were linked to the enjoyment of social life, to work needs and to their own specific health requirements. They also presented themselves as victims of rules and behaviours that were not very protective and that favoured, above all, other age groups. An excess of self-referentiality, which cut across all age groups, led to closing in on themselves and implosions, arousing conflicting positions. *Discussion and conclusions.* The reported opinions testify to the re-emergence of a hitherto underlying intergenerational conflict, stemming from the new generations' difficulties regarding social mobility, but also from a culture of selfish hedonism. Until the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, this hedonism had been manifesting itself as a consequence of an ultraliberalism that puts the dimensions of «having» before that of «being», and the «individual» before the «community».

Keywords: Pandemics; Intergenerational conflict; Health; Hyperobject; Vulnerability

resaltar las especificidades de cada generación, los aspectos en común y, sobre todo, los elementos de conflicto entre generaciones. *Resultados.* Surge un cuadro en el que, junto a la aceptación compartida de que la salud, entendida en su sentido más amplio de bienestar físico y psicológico, debe ser protegida y defendida, cada grupo generacional considera también como una prioridad sus propias demandas vinculadas al disfrute de la vida social, a las necesidades laborales y a las especificidades del estado de salud de cada grupo, presentándose como víctima de normas y comportamientos poco protectores, dirigidos sobre todo a favorecer a personas de otros grupos de edad. El exceso de autorreferencialidad, transversal a todos los grupos de edad, conduce a cierres e implosiones, favoreciendo la aparición de posiciones conflictivas. *Discusión y conclusiones.* Las opiniones recogidas atestiguan el resurgimiento de un conflicto intergeneracional que antes permanecía sumergido e implícito, y que tiene sus raíces en las dificultades de movilidad social que enfrentan las nuevas generaciones, pero también en una cultura de hedonismo egoísta que, hasta la propagación de la epidemia de Covid 19, se estaba manifestando como consecuencia de un ultraliberalismo que antepone las dimensiones del «tener» a las del «ser» y el «individuo» a la «comunidad».

Palabras clave: Pandemias; Conflicto intergeneracional; Salud; Hiperobjeto; Vulnerabilidad

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid 19 pandemic hit like a tsunami in the Italian political, economic and social fabric, causing consequences that, linked to the health situation, amplify its catastrophic impact. According to data from the Bank of Italy (2021), in 2020 the Italian GDP recorded the heaviest decline since the Second World War (-8.9%). The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were transmitted through various channels: the fall in global activity, exports and tourist inflows; the reduction of mobility and consumption; the repercussions of uncertainty on business investments.

While consumption (which fell by 10.7%) was affected by the restrictions on economic activity, the pandemic crisis had a heavy impact on the labor market: in particular, between December 2019 and June 2020, the number of employees decreased by 559 thousand units and the number of hours worked on average per week decreased from 34.3 to 30.6 (Istituto nazionale di statistica [ISTAT], 2020). Employment fell by 7.1% among young people, by 2.5% among workers aged between 35 and 49, but increased slightly among those aged 50 and over. Mainly due to the effect of the sectoral composition, the decline affected women more than men, while income from work fell more among low-income families (Carta and De Philippis, 2021).

Between February and November 30, 2020, 1 million 651 thousand 229 positive cases of COVID-19 were diagnosed and, among these, 57 thousand 647 deaths were recorded. Life expectancy fell to 82 years, that is 1.2 years less than in 2019, and there was a collapse in marriages, 97 thousand less; the new historical minimum of births from the Unification of Italy and the maximum number of deaths since the Second World War have also been recorded (ISTAT, 2021). Loneliness, marginalization and fear characterised the experiences especially of boys and girls (Cesvot, 2021); in particular, there has been an increase among adolescents in anxiety disorders, irritability, stress and sleep disorders, up to the extreme cases of self-harm and attempted suicide (Asta, Carpentieri, Minoliti, Scandroglio and Valotti, 2020). To seal this crisis scenario, on January 26, 2021, the political divisions within the government majority led Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to resign, causing the fall of his government and the establishment of the Mario Draghi government, on February 13, 2021.

In his work *A Philosophy of Fear*, Lars Svendsen (2007) defines fear as the feeling that arises from the impact with something foreign and unknown, often imagined with opposite characteristics to those we consider desirable; such an encounter would lead us to be afraid of losing what we are most attached to: freedom, dignity, health, our lives and those of the people who are dearest to us. During the Covid 19 pandemic, according to Bernard-Henri Lévy (2020),

for the first time in history the inhabitants of the entire planet have been united by experiencing a strong feeling of fear towards a single object and phenomenon, the manifestations of which prefigure worldwide scenarios and visions.

The predominant and generalised uncertainty is expressed in the various gradualities and manifestations of the many personal uncertainties, in the different ways of reacting to the blurred image of the future (Querzè and Pini, 2011) and in the resulting gaps of meaning (Jedlowski, 1994). Intense worries paralyse and make people fragile and helpless, inhibiting their thinking and creativity. Fear can intensify dependence and the expectation of external solutions, attitudes that increase closure and distrust (Martini, 2006). Fear characterises the spatial and relational contexts in which the narratives of this pandemic time are located. It is an almost metaphysical fear, which makes us powerless, weak, insecure and leads us to suspect and be wary of everything and anyone: not only of those who are different, distant and «traditionally» threatening, but also of neighbours and family members, even of ourselves. The fear of the other intersects with the fear of the future, which is part of the situation of insecurity that characterises the global age (Bauman, 1999a; 1999b): man is losing the ability to foresee, control, manage, even imagine such an uncertain and indeterminate horizon (Koselleck, 2007). On an individual and planetary level, the decline of the idea of progress and the inability to develop projects compromise trust in history and active involvement in a common destiny; on the contrary, men and women are increasingly inclined to close in on themselves, within the confines of their own personal events, which have now risen to separate horizons, while the ties with the lives of others are severed. The future is privatised, bent to the needs of well-being: illness and pain are the events to be avoided, while the other people become competitors in the struggle to grab the limited opportunities for the fulfillment and the immunity from contagion.

The shattering of community ties is manifested through the multiplication of forms of aversion, the spread of contact phobias, the withdrawal from exposure to the other, the concealment of one's vulnerability (Esposito, 2006). The Covid-19 pandemic has marked a point of exacerbation of trends that have already existed for some time, bringing out with unprecedented impetus the separations, conflicts, mistrust and hostility that are inherent in today's multicultural and age-old society. The different, the other, as well as a competitor and enemy, is now also a potential plague spreader, a vehicle for infection and contagion, an obstacle to the salvation and the realization of one's own narrow future.

In the difficult exercise of maintaining an acceptable balance between the personal needs and the needs of the community, individual frailties reveal also in generational manifestations: in the presence of the pandemic hyperobject, the belonging to an age group, with the relative commonality and similarity of experiences, problems, claims and contradictions, can constitute a consoling and support element and a starting point for narratives in which individual stories intertwine and converge in wider collective representations. Alongside the pandemic for each of us, it is thus possible to speak of different pandemics for children, adolescents, young people, adults, the elderly, generational narratives that chase each other converging and diverging, in many points conflicting.

2. METHODOLOGY

The Decree of the Prime Minister of November 3, 2020 introduced in Italy stringent limitations in social life and working activities, it constituted the umpteenth adaptation of regulations and restrictions that, since the previous March, have followed one another eagerly chasing the impregnable virus, causing significant changes in everyday life and in the perspectives of citizens.

The reactions to that Decree has provided an opportunity to investigate and analyse the points of contact, divergence and conflict in the representations and experiences of people of different age during the pandemic time. In this regard, it was decided to involve a sample of 180 individuals, residing in the Emilia-Romagna region and aged between 15 and 80, interviewed via Zoom virtual platform in the immediately following days. The semi-structured interviews were conducted orally, following the schedule below.

1. What are your opinions on the restrictions introduced by the DPCM issued by President Giuseppe Conte to face the health emergency? Do they find you in favor (why?) or against (why?)? Have they changed your habits, relationships and lifestyles?
2. The restrictions imposed by the DCPM intervene to protect the right to health, but limit the possibilities for socialising, leisure and work. From your point of view, are there hierarchies and priorities between the right to health, the right to social life and leisure and the right to work?
3. The needs of young people and those of the elderly seem to be quite different, perhaps opposed. What do you think about it? Do you think a balance is possible or do you think it is more appropriate to favor the needs of young people or those of the elderly?

4. If you were the Prime Minister, how would you intervene to stem the epidemic in Italy?

The questions were structured around four thematic units, with the intention of soliciting immediate answers, which could reflect the real convictions of the interviewees, before mechanisms of «adjustment» could take over, channeling words within the margins of the politically correct.

Following the qualitative approach of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the answers had been transcribed and analysed by distinguishing them by thematic nucleus: opinions on political choices, opinions on health, opinions and thoughts on social life and people's behaviours, intergenerational conflict.

The sample was composed considering three age groups (15-34, 35-54, 55-80), each made up of 30 males and 30 females, selected by a database of people that have previously given the consent to be interviewed, according to the ethical and legal obligations of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which came in to force across Europe on 25th May 2018. The participants were provided with detailed information about the possible future uses of their data and they expressed explicit permission; particular attention has been paid to the protection of the «special categories» of personal data (such as racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, sex orientation) and to the fully and irreversibly anonymisation of the data, complying with the data protection laws.

The 15-34 age group was populated by students and young workers, people who are preparing for (or have just started) a long professional future, bringing with them the relative load of expectations, uncertainties, enthusiasms and hopes; the 35-54 age group concerned those who are presumed to be in the midst of the working career, no longer seen as a novelty, and not yet as a path that is now close to being completed; finally, 55-80 age group consisted of those who have entered the final part of their career, or have already been retired for a variable number of years. Parallel to the occupational sphere, the subdivision into the three groups can broadly retrace the progression of private, emotional and family life: from youth experiences to the possible formation of a first family unit (first group), passing through the phase of hypothetical stability (but also, often, of sudden changes) and the growth of any children (second group), up to the age in which the latter, if any, are grown up and the couple's life, when it persists or is recreated, takes on new connotations (third group).

Reiterating the complexity, versatility, unpredictability and liquidity (Bauman, 2005) of the existential parables of the men and women of the twenty-first century is inevitably redundant, yet it must be specified that the choice

to establish the three age groups described above, albeit limiting, responds to the purely qualitative purposes of this study: in the heterogeneous affinity of private, professional and personal situations that show points of contact, or even only brief traits in common, we wanted to trace individual or shared narratives from which to draw ideas for reflections, analyses, reasoning.

3. RESULTS

3.1 *Opinions on political choices*

I do not envy the role of the Prime Minister, in his position I would not know what to do. (male, 19 years old).

How lucky not to be the Prime Minister! I would be more incisive, perhaps, but keeping the economy and health in balance, hindered by ignorant public opinion, is a magic that nobody has. (male, 40 years old).

I would never want to be in the position of the Prime Minister or even give advice. It's too difficult. (male, 77 years old).

The shared awareness of the enormity of the pandemic drama – and therefore of the impossibility of even thinking a definitively decisive strategy – can constitute a significant starting point for the analysis of the collected opinions and points of view. We are facing with a sort of admission of the limitation of the human being and of the scientific, political and administrative tools and resources, as well as with the inevitability of mistakes, disagreement, conflict, opposition of interests, needs, opinions and ideas. Young people, adults and the elderly are almost in agreement in recognising the extreme complexity of the tasks that political decision-makers have to face, and often manifest the apparent paradox of expressing solidarity, support and closeness, without however skimping on precise and strong criticisms.

The most contested choice concerns the excessive unscrupulousness with which during the summer it was decided to reopen activities and encourage mobility and conviviality between people; significant disapproval also affects the contradictory and untimeliness with which hospitals, schools and public transport were managed in autumn, as well as the ambiguity and fragility of the criteria on the basis of which openings and closures were determined. More widespread among young people is the complaint about the inconsistency of the controls designed to ensure compliance with the rules, which would have produced a widespread sense of insecurity and favored a common propensity to transgress, while among adults there is an intolerance towards laxity and the search for compromise at all costs, degenerated into excessive softness and the identification of scapegoats on which to lay the blame for the explosion

of phenomena – the pandemic – that nobody has been able to channel. The requests for economic support for the most affected categories, for bigger sanctions and controls, and the claims to strengthen public transport, schools and health facilities, perhaps listening more to experts, are transversal to the all the age groups. The widespread consent to distancing, hygiene and monitoring measures is flanked by some requests for targeted or generalised lockdowns and for actions aimed to empower moral values, whose unpopularity is perceived.

3.2 *Opinions on health*

The substantial intergenerational cohesion expressed in the evaluation of the choices and errors made by the government and local administrators in the management of the pandemic situation finds confirmation and coherent fulfillment in the affirmation that the rights to health and life constitute supreme values and their protection, especially in the contingency of the present pandemic moment, must have absolute priority and foresee the acceptance of sacrifices.

Preserving the health of citizens comes before anything else, and that is why we must be willing to sacrifice part of our freedom for a greater good: the well-being of the entire community. (male, 19 years old).

The protection of public health must always be preserved even at the cost of some sacrifices. (female, 46 years old).

The period of the pandemic emergency is narrated as a time of strong unity and solidarity, of commonality of intent between people that have different ages and lifestyles, but are capable and willing to put aside individual interests to offer their contributions of good citizens to the heroic resistance against the invisible enemy. However, the observation that the concept of health does not correspond only to the absence of diseases, but also contemplates a broader consideration of the dimensions that contribute to the psycho-physical well-being of the individual – among which leisure, economic availability and sociality would be priorities – brings into play further narratives that seem to contradict, or at least weaken, the original one on the unity of purpose in defense of health as a priority good.

The right to health takes precedence but we must understand that health largely depends on the right to social life and leisure, as well as to work. (male, 21 years old).

Who determines what is the hierarchy between these rights? (female, 51 years old).

What is health? Everyone talks about health, but few really ask what it is. WHO declares that health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not the mere absence of disease or infirmity. So, we are in a strange situation: to promote an idea of health, health is denied. For fear of death, life is denied, or it is compressed by limiting various rights. (male, 42 years old).

3.3 *Opinions and thoughts on social life and people's behaviours*

The shared affirmation of the supremacy of the right to life and health is accompanied by a multiplicity of «buts», which are expressions of age differences, habits and existential perspectives that cannot be annulled. In particular, a significant number of adults declare that are very interested in the working issues and marginally involved in the changes of sociality.

I have not had any particular change in my way of life. (female, 51 years old).

The restrictions have given me a valid excuse for avoiding a social life that is in most cases very boring. (female, 51 years old).

On the contrary, changes in the forms, places and intensities of sociality are lamented with concern by young people, many elderly people and a significant minority of adults.

I was used to go out often in the evening, I miss evenings with friends and chatting lightly. I hope they will come back. (female, 53 years old).

Usually I would have met about fifty people a week, now I meet at most six. (male, 38 years old).

Habits, relationships and lifestyles are the same as before, only there is less: fewer nights out, fewer meetings, less chatter, fewer opportunities, less space, less air. There is less of everything, it is a life that is slowly subtracted. (male, 32 years old).

I cannot live the university experience as I would like and should and also life outside the university is very limited. (female, 20 years old).

Many friends are frightened and refuse to meet, others have holed up in their own family. (female, 30 years old).

The restrictive measures have changed social relations, they have eliminated them. (female, 58 years old).

They have changed my lifestyle because, especially on weekends, I was used to go out for dinner. I have friends and relatives in Rome, they can't visit me and I can't visit them. (male, 67 years old).

The tendency to adapt opinions on health and epidemic containment measures to their personal and generational needs, even putting aside scientific

objectivity, not always for disinformation, is common to all the age groups: for many young people, for example, gyms and restaurants would not be dangerous and should be opened, while some adults, perhaps parents, put schools at the center of the same reasoning. When it affects habits and personal needs, the virus becomes less dangerous than when it causes sacrifices to other people, as well as any advantages obtained thanks to the closures can also be sustained regardless of the pandemic contingency.

In an era like this one, university distance learning is an opportunity for those who are unable to sustain high costs for housing. (female, 20 years old).

I don't agree with the last DPCM, which provides for the closure of bars at 6 pm, the closure of swimming pools, gyms and museums, because they are the places with the lowest risk of contagion and have been closed. (male, 19 years old).

Why closing museums and not churches, for example? What annoyance would I have caused, during the lockdown, if I had done my jogging along the country roads? (male, 46 years old).

Whether young, adult or elderly, each one tends to absolve the behavior and the intentions of himself and of his generational group, in the face of the catastrophe of an epidemic that does not seem to stop. Representing themselves as victims of restrictions attributable to the fact that others are not behaving in an equally irreproachable way, many persons tell that a high number of Italians would not respect the rules and would behave irresponsibly, exhibiting an inability to self-manage and a lack of civic sense. In particular, some adults and the elderly point the finger at young people, but even the elderly are not exempt from accusations and observations, especially by adults.

Everyone has the right to satisfy the needs and privileges of his age, but it must be said that today's young people are not very reasonable. (male, 47 years old).

The elderly, unlike the young, are very responsible. Often young people are not very aware of their behavior and hardly follow the rules. (male, 77 years old).

The elderly must be protected from young people who don't always reason adequately. (female, 47 years old).

Everyone has the right to health, even if in any age group there are careless people who do not respect rules and put those around them at risk, from the boy who walks without a mask to the elderly who sits at the bar together with many people. (male, 19 years old).

I don't think the needs of young and old people are so different. I have seen elderly people arguing and opposing the police because they forced them to close their social center. I would rather say that, in a country where the population is very self-referential, everybody only look at the needs of his restricted

group or family. If a discourse or an event touches me or someone close to me I become active, otherwise I see it as something distant and imaginary. The balance lies in understanding and being understood: is it a utopia?. (male, 46 years old).

According to some young people and adults, the pandemic would have brought out the worst in people, in particular selfishness, self-referentiality, implosion in their own inner circles, and therefore polarizations and conflicts.

I believe that this pandemic has brought out the worst in many people and given yet another hard blow to the possibility of a critical discourse on the society in which we live (as well as on the situation we are going through, which in some way is a consequence of it), accelerating a polarization process that has been going on for some time, which may be good for Disney cartoons or a football match, but it's a disaster if you want to pursue a community life that isn't schizophrenic. (male, 32 years old).

3.4 *Intergenerational conflict*

Alongside the narratives of emotional and value-related closeness, transversal to generations, the coexistence of further narratives, perhaps more implicit, but equally strong and heartfelt, is now clear. These are characterised primarily by the opposition, the conflict, the identification of scapegoats and victims, injustices and favoritism, that populate parallel and irreconcilable universes. «Living together» is undermined by «living against», the propensity for mutual help falters under separatory, even segregating, pressures, motivated by the belief that the elderly would be required to «be elderly», allowing young people to «be young». Translated into operational measures, it would be a matter of imposing on the elderly, adequately cared, to stay at home: in this way, they would run less risk of being infected and would not force the youngest to sacrifice leisure, social life, school and work.

It would be appropriate to protect the needs of each person. From the young to the elderly. By keeping schools open as in the rest of Europe and trying to keep the elderly in quarantine at home. (female, 35 years old).

The sooner the virus is disposed of among the young, leaving the old people protected, the sooner we get rid of it! This implies the need for state funds to leave the old people in retirement homes or hotels for all those who do not live alone at home and funds to bring them food. (female, 34 years old).

The elderly, who tend to be more fragile, would be the main victims of the virus as a disease, while young people, who seem to have the inalienable right to fully experience the carefree nature of their age, would be the social victims,

the category that is most mortified by measures and restrictions which would be designed especially to protect the needs of the elderly.

There cannot be a balance. It is true that the elderly must be protected, but they are the past, and protecting them more than the young will only lead to a crisis that will not give young people a future. (male, 19 years old).

The fundamental problem is that young people have to protect the elderly, but no one does anything to entice them to do so. They are always pointed out as the infectors, but they are the category that is most affected by these restrictions. We should try to find a balance between the needs of young people and the needs of the elderly and not put the full weight of the restrictions only on young people who currently have no escape valves. (female, 22 years old).

It would be enough to divide the population by age group, to protect the elderly through bigger restrictions and to let young people be able to work and run the country. We need a government composed by young people and not by old people because old people will not ever vote to stay at home, they feel they are masters of the world and as always they carry weigh on the shoulders and the future of the youngest. (female, 34 years old).

Preventing the elderly from leaving the house would also be a way to consider the needs of young people: it is however natural to investigate what conception of the third age is behind these positions, which deny connotations other than survival, such as, for example, the need for sociability, affection, physical and emotional closeness.

4. DISCUSSION

Di Cesare (2020) notes that the coronavirus epidemic seems to have broken the atavistic pact between generations, and intergenerational conflicts that were previously submerged are now re-emerging. Specifically, the more mature generations, made up mostly of pensioners or guaranteed workers, blame young people for their provocative and reckless behavior; vice versa, young people, in the name of the right to work and study, the need for recreation and sociality, the need to fulfill themselves and envision a future, can be led to consider the elderly as direct or indirect causes of limitations and deprivations that in some cases portray as prevarications, going so far as to support forms of home segregation.

Research on old age, however, contradicts the representations of the elderly as lonely and transient people, who have already «lived their life» and who can resign themselves to remaining passively at home (Lidz, 1968; Castelli, Zecchini, Deamicis and Sherman, 2005). On the contrary, the elderly of our century, when are assisted by good health and are economically and physically

autonomous, continue to take on significant social roles, actively intervening in voluntary associations, attending places of conviviality, participating in cultural and recreational activities, dedicating themselves to their passions and caring for children and grandchildren (Fornasari, 2018). Compared to younger people, they master the emotional management of problems with greater skill and less conflict (Birditt, Fingerman and Almeida, 2005); for their part, young people, while proving to be more reactive and aggressive in their relationships with peers, tend to address the elderly with greater regard, implementing similar conflict avoidance strategies (Fingerman and Charles, 2010).

Despite the mutually conciliatory approaches, the divergence of perspectives that separates young people from the elderly remains clear: the former, future-oriented and open to innovation, retrace the need for continuity as a starting point in order to become protagonists of discontinuity and gain autonomy and independence; the latter, on the contrary, seek in the relationship with the environment in which they live the elements of continuity with previous affections and habits, a secure basis that can guarantee certainty and stability, and therefore security in the face of social changes and evolutions (Nuvoli and Casu, 2005).

Different and sometimes opposed needs are clashing in a restricted social field, contending a limited amount of resources, pursuing balances and mediations that are not always easy to maintain and respect. In recent decades, the idea of a markedly gerontocratic Italian society has emerged in public opinion: according to this representation, young people are kept on the sidelines, have few opportunities to satisfy their aspirations, little political and social power and few means for reversing this trend.

According to Stile (2010), intergenerational conflict manifests itself above all in the labor market and in the home market. The elderly, by postponing retirement, would continue to occupy privileged job positions, precluding younger people's careers, and for a significant number of people aged over thirty the choice to continue living with their parents is linked to an economic independence yet to be achieved. The conflict between the generation that has enjoyed the services «without paying the bill» and the one that «will have to pay the bill» without enjoying the services has not yet turned into open fight thanks to the compensatory mechanisms that, at the family level, rebalance the opportunities. This balance rests on too fragile foundations and risks falling in the presence of violent tremors, such as those that the pandemic is affecting. At the end of 2016, the report *L'Italia e gli obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile* (Italy and the Sustainable Development Goals), presented by the *Alleanza Italiana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile [ASviS]* (Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development)

(2016) as an operational expansion of the contents of the 2030 Agenda, recommended the concrete reduction of the generation gap, underlining how the issue of economic, social, gender, generational and territorial inequalities must be placed at the center of all policies.

Finding the most effective strategies for dealing with intergenerational conflict is nowadays more difficult also because the confines that separate one generation from another are fluid and lifestyles, within the same age group, are increasingly heterogeneous. For example, the answers to the interviews showed how controversial and multifaceted the topic of sociality is in the adult group, since some of the respondents claim the importance of social life, while for others extra-family and extra-work sociality is connoted as a dimension that is irrelevant, or in any case easily expendable. Such heterogeneous positions, in the adult group, are a sign of very diversified lifestyles, linked to complex and changing family and working statuses, which make it difficult to work out a definition of adulthood.

At the same time, especially in recent decades, we have witnessed the myth of the youth age as a golden age of omnipotence and light-heartedness as a right. The lack of responsibility and the hedonism of the young age have become valid rights, even separately from any paths of construction of one's adult self and active participation in public affairs. Carefreeness therefore becomes a quantifiable and necessary value, the lack of which, even due to extraordinary events such as a pandemic, requires compensation. Considering themselves the real victims of the pandemic, young people on the one hand confirm the importance of sociality, on the other they express egocentrism and self-referentiality: the limitation to the pleasures of their youthful age, from their implicit and not always confessed point of view, would be more relevant than the dangers to the health of the most vulnerable people.

Similar attitudes also unite adults and are located within an ultraliberal culture which, by enhancing the autonomy of the individual in pursuing personal goals, has given the collective dimension a primarily instrumental connotation (Todorov, 2014), leading to the affirmation of an «egocentric man» (Bertin, 1953) that pursue the experience of the world above all on the level of «having».

Some government choices bordering on irresponsibility, such as the opening of discos in the summer, as well as the dangerous instrumentality with which some political leaders have exhibited the non-use of the protective mask or have claimed the full reopening of restaurants even in periods of pandemic peak are expressions of precise strategic choices, aimed at leveraging (at the same time feeding it) the growing hedonism that characterises the younger

generations, but also their fathers and mothers: the disco, the restaurant, the bar, the gym are places of pleasure, celebrated to the point of forgetting, or at least underestimating, the risks and the need to safeguard community health. In the same way, the inability of some parents to see beyond the interests of their own family, even denying the possibility of contagion within school environments, is an expression of the same selfishness. Each person presides over the own interests, but the interests of one are often opposed to the interests of the other, both individually and as a group; presiding over the own interests, each individual/group constructs accommodated and manipulated narratives of reality, coming to question the objective relevance and truthfulness of medical and scientific evidences. The logic of opposition and conflict prevails, while solidarity and cohesion seem to be relegated to rhetorical manifestations or mass media celebrations.

The idea of leaving the elderly locked up at home, proposed and supported by many interviewees, constitutes the negation of that concept of health, understood in a holistic and multifaceted sense as a state of total physical, mental and social well-being, and not simply as absence of disease or infirmity (World Health Organization, 1948), which they themselves indicated as a priority. Represented as problems and scapegoats, the elderly would see themselves attacked in their dignity as persons, set aside in the name of a social Darwinism that considers the humans as functions of their current or potential productivity. In these terms, an intergenerational dialogue would not be possible.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The concept of *hyperobject*, introduced by Morton (2013) to indicate phenomena that are both «close» and «distant» to the human being, adheres to the pandemic situation. While belonging to the social and experiential space of people, hyperobjects exist regardless of whether they are recognised as such: the pandemic is heavily present in the daily life and in the thoughts of citizens of the current world, but at the same time it would exist, and would persist, even if they did not want or could not confirm its essence of being real. Hyperobjects are viscous, they know how to bind simultaneously to multiple contexts and spatial instants, changing shape according to how individuals react to their presence. They oscillate in historical moments according to a non-fixed temporality, never manifesting themselves in their entirety as complex and ontologically founded systems, produced by the action of several entities: we can only grasp the manifestations that describe them in certain space-time environments.

In 2020 and 2021, the pandemic hyperobject has pervaded every area and every space of the life of men and women, producing effects at any level, and continues to be characterized above all by the uncertainty that is generating. It is a complex and elusive phenomenon, which mercilessly lays bare the limitation of the forecasting and cognitive abilities of the twenty-first century's people. Thus the visions of the world that arrogated to men and women the illusory claim of being able to understand everything has entered into crisis, now startled by fear, that is the emotional state consisting of a sense of insecurity, bewilderment and anxiety in the face of a real or imaginary danger or in front of an entity or fact that is believed to be harmful (Bauman, 2006).

In a situation of unprecedented generalised fear and uncertainty about the future, even the immediate one, in which conspiracies and contradictory information, ambiguity and unpreparedness push people to reactions that are not always in harmony with expectations, needs, representations and values of other members of the same community, inevitably the contrasts between individualism and consideration of the public good, between selfishness and openness to others, belonging and rupture, make it more delicate to maintain balance and dialogue between subjects who, for intrinsic characteristics and physiological needs, seem to belong to increasingly distant and fragmented universes. Certain behaviors and positions taken by some young people can be interpreted as hostile, when not threatening and persecutory, by the older ones, and vice versa, similar perceptions and feelings can be experienced with reversed roles. In the precariousness of the emergency, atavistic stereotypes are consolidating; while the gap between young and old is widening and connoting in a conflictual sense, the spaces for dialogue, reciprocity and positive interdependence between generations are narrowing (Baschiera, Deluigi and Luppi, 2014).

In contrast to these destructive thrusts, it is necessary to promote the enhancement of old age as a dynamic phase that allows new planning and changes (Baldacci, Frabboni and Pinto Minerva, 2012), encouraging forms of intergenerational sociality. Tornstam (2005) finds in the transition from a purely materialistic and rational vision of life to a more cosmic and transcendent one, the element underlying the great educational potential inherent in the relationships that the elderly can establish with the younger persons. «Gerotranscendence» defines the attitude, typical of the elderly, to abandon themselves to a feeling of renewed communion with the cosmos and the spirit of the universe, which contemplates the rediscovery and redefinition of the limits of time, the resizing of spaces, now related to physical and bodily possibilities, the construction of a new vision of death and its relationship with life,

the experimentation of an unprecedented self-awareness, open to meanings not previously grasped.

The fears aroused by the pandemic have allowed everyone to experience emotional states that have restored the sense of our fragility and vulnerability. United by their own vulnerability and by the same condition/mission of facing the drama of the pandemic, people of different ages and backgrounds have the opportunity to realise the interdependence that binds individual destinies. It will be possible to consolidate empathic ties (Fabbri, 2008; Rifkin, 2010; De Waal, 2011), in the awareness that it is from the mutual recognition of the common vulnerability that it becomes possible to overcome the sterile contrast between selfishness and altruism, between «being for oneself» and «being for the other», to inaugurate the desirable perspective of «being with the other» (Pulcini, 2014). Fear generates isolation and distrust among people, but at the same time, if filtered by reasoned trust, it can act as a social glue. It is therefore necessary to educate to that reasoned trust that very often is hidden, overwhelmed by instinct, by anguish, by the fear of fear, by the difficulty in welcoming the other and the interpersonal differences.

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