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Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea  
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Rebughini, Paola

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## A VULNERABLE GENERATION? YOUTH AGENCY FACING WORK PRECARIOUSNESS

*¿Una generación vulnerable?  
 La agencia juvenil frente a la precariedad laboral*

**Paola Rebughini**  
 Universidad de Milán (Italia)

<p><b>Keywords</b></p> <p>Agency          Italy          Vulnerability          Work          Youth</p>	<p><b>ABSTRACT:</b> Agency and vulnerability are not alternative terms; rather, their encounter designates a distinctive characteristic of agency: that of the «weaker» struggling between constraints and the discovery of new opportunities. After theoretical discussion of the relation between agency and vulnerability, and of the transformations of subjectivation processes, this article focuses on the specific situation of vulnerability in the job market experienced by the current generation of young people. It analyses the limits and potentials of young people's agency as a duty in regard to work precariousness with the help of research conducted in Italy from 2013 to 2017. The aim is to highlight how agency and vulnerability—more than being intrinsic characteristic of the individual—are related to temporary positions, as an intersection of categorizations and resources, in relational and situated conditions.</p>
<p><b>Palabras clave</b></p> <p>Agencia          Italia          Vulnerabilidad          Trabajo          Juventud</p>	<p><b>RESUMEN:</b> Agencia y vulnerabilidad no son términos alternativos; al contrario, su encuentro hace emerger una característica distintiva de la agencia: la del «débil» que se enfrenta con dificultad a las restricciones y que descubre nuevas oportunidades. Tras una discusión teórica en torno a la relación entre agencia y vulnerabilidad y de las transformaciones de los procesos de subjetivación, este artículo se centra en la situación específica de vulnerabilidad en el mercado de trabajo que vive la actual generación de jóvenes. El texto analiza, apoyándose en una investigación realizada en Italia entre 2013 y 2017, los límites y potencialidades de la agencia de los jóvenes como una obligación en un contexto de precariedad en el trabajo. El objetivo es recalcar cómo agencia y vulnerabilidad—más que ser características intrínsecas del individuo—han de entenderse en relación con posiciones temporales, en la intersección de categorías y recursos, en condiciones situadas y relacionales.</p>

**Correspondence to:** Paola Rebughini. Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan. Via Conservatorio 7, 20122 Milano. Corresponding author: [paola.rebughini@unimi.it](mailto:paola.rebughini@unimi.it) – <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5563-8202>.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Agency and vulnerability are not alternative terms, even though they seem to go in two opposite directions. Indeed, vulnerability is usually defined as having a decreased capacity of action and self-protection: a momentary or definitive loss of strength and self-determination. While a person defined as vulnerable is someone unable to protect him/herself from harm and forms of domination, agency is usually identified with autonomy, intentionality and decision-making, as well as with the capacity to resist forms of domination.

This article analyses the intertwining of the notions of agency and vulnerability through the experience of young people in coping with the difficulties of finding a job and developing a personal autonomy. The aim is to highlight how vulnerability—more than being an intrinsic characteristic of the individual—is related to a position, as an intersection of categorizations and resources; it is both a relational and situated condition. Conversely, agency corresponds to the possibility to deploy and combine personal resources in that specific situation. With the help of a research conducted in Milan from 2013 to 2017, the article highlights the intertwining of agency and vulnerability in the processes of subjectivation.

The research was conducted from 2013 to 2017 and it was based on 75 in-depth interviews with young people, of different social and professional status, living in Milan and its suburbs plus 10 interviews with university students members of a political and cultural association in Milan. All the interviewees had completed, interrupted or started their studies after 2008 and entered or tried to enter the labour market when the effects of the crisis were already present; the 10 interviews carried out in 2017 included only university students without a stable job. Overall, 35 respondents had lower education, were aged 18 to 26 (18 males, 17 females); 10 interviewees were university students aged 21 to 24 (5 females and 5 males); 40 interviewees had higher education (degree), were aged 25 to 31 (20 males, 20 females). Among the young adults with lower educations, 9 were unemployed, 11 were employed, 3 were self-employed and 12 were doing a work experience placement or an apprenticeship. Among those with higher education, 2 were unemployed, 21 were employed, 8 were self-employed, 6 were professionals, and 3 were doing a work experience placement. The interviews were mainly concentrated on: (1) work and professional experience, school-work transition, expectations and aspirations for the future; (2) lifestyle and consumptions; (3) social participation, forms of generational identification, interests and involvement in politics and voluntary work, representation of social rights and duties; (4) representation of the current economic and social situation, its constraints and opportunities<sup>1</sup>.

The first section of this article discusses the connections between agency and vulnerability; the second section analyses some specific forms of vulnerability related to the neoliberal economic framework; while the last three sections analyse how the connections between agency and vulnerability are present in the everyday tactics of young people looking for a job in the city of Milan.

<sup>1</sup> Part of the research has been already published in: Colombo, Leonini, Rebughini (2018) and Rebughini, Colombo, Leonini (2017).

## 2. THE AGENCY OF THE WEAKER AND THE END OF THE SOVEREIGN SUBJECT

From an analytical point of view, a short definition of both vulnerability and agency seems necessary to analyse the possible «agency of the weaker». The conceptual tension between vulnerability and agency is mainly related to the «modern» idea of the latter as the possibility to handle reality with intentionality, rationality, imagination, linguistic and symbolic activity, material practices, for example as a person's capacity to act autonomously and to overcome a status of «self-incurred immaturity» (*Unmündigkeit* in the words of Kant), (see also Touraine, 1988; Habermas, 1996; Foucault, 1997b). Agency is the creative capability to cope with the constraints of social and economic forces. Indeed, the meaning of agency is slippery in the history of the social sciences, but there is a general agreement on its definition as the encounter of the individual with the constraints of the social and material environment, and as a temporal dimension embedded in the context of social relations (Giddens, 1979 and 1984). This conceptualization is also related to a political idea of agency as the capacity to exercise will and intention and to act in concert with other individuals (Arendt, 1958). In this interpretation, the individual becomes vulnerable when s/he becomes hetero-determined by other individuals, by objects, from habitus and other forms of dependence; for example, when s/he loses her capacity to react to what Bourdieu (1984) called the *social gravity*, the capacity of social processes to empty individual will. In this respect, it is evident that the opposition between agency and vulnerability relates to a conceptualization based on the active/passive dynamic, control or lack of control over processes of change that affect an individual.

Recently, this classic conceptualization of agency has been challenged by other epistemic approaches. On the wave of the critique developed by postmodernism, post-structuralism and deconstructionism, different uses of the notion of agency have arisen from other fields of research, such as gender studies, postcolonial studies, and science technology and society studies (STS), as well as from the interconnections among them. Gender studies have a fundamental role in the discussion of agency. They have underscored the role of the body and emotions in subjectivation processes, the limits of agency, and the ambivalences of emancipation processes (de Lauretis, 1999; Butler, 1990); they have fostered intersectional studies on the issues of colour and race, of health and technology, of economic inequalities and interpersonal relations (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016).

Postcolonial perspectives have underscored the Eurocentric origin of the emancipatory notion of agency based on an exclusive Euro-American history of conceptualization of autonomy and rationality (Chakrabarty, 2000). With historical research on colonial rule, the postcolonial perspective on agency stresses the interplay between agent creativity and possibility of choice within the structural constraints of social categorizations and social positions. On the one hand, this literature criticizes the self-referential idea of the autonomous subject rooted in western culture; on the other hand, it underscores other possibilities of agency, characteristic of the subalterns and rooted in the valorisation of difference (Prakash, 1999).

The epistemic challenges raised by the critique of anthropocentrism carried forward by STS studies, materialist anthropology, and more generally «ontological turn» perspectives, with their attempt to highlight a horizontal politics of «becoming» —beyond «recognition» and «emancipation» as central notions of Western industrial modernity— are even more radical (Latour, 2004; Braidotti, 2013). By contesting the separation between nature and culture,

these approaches support a different interpretation of agency, where sense-making is no longer the main object of study of a researcher living in a separate *sui generis* entity, such as «society». These approaches claim to supersede modern anthropocentrism with an interpretation whereby the centre becomes «life», and not exclusively the human, and where vulnerability concerns all living beings (Morton, 2013). In addition, agency and vulnerability are considered from an ontological perspective as the capacity to affect and be affected in an emotional and material way (Terada, 2001). This perspective extends the ideas of both agency and vulnerability far beyond the domain of the social actor in order to associate agency with material practices, becoming and connections, as an alternative to the active/passive dynamic of the subject/object dichotomy. In this respect, agency and vulnerability are not necessarily seen as alternative and structurally stable, but rather as a change of status in different situations and processes that are contextualized and contingent. Hence, both postcolonial and anti-anthropocentric approaches suggest a situated and decentred approach to agency where vulnerability is not automatically associated with passivity.

By contrast, the classic literature on vulnerability insists on conceptualizing it as a lack of self-determination, exposure to risk, violence, poverty, inequality, subalternity. Moreover, this is often associated with research on the situations of specific social groups such as women, migrants, children, indigenous people, poor people, considered more vulnerable than others to becoming what Foucault called «disposable lives» in relation to the neoliberal notion of «human capital» (2008: 153). While it is evident that some groups of people are more at risk of becoming vulnerable, and that such risk is unequally distributed, it seems more problematic to associate vulnerability with passivity, rather than with a temporary lack of a certain range of resources (but not every kind of resources). If the «weaker» is associated with the need to be helped, with a sort of victimhood, rather than with the capacity to react and to organise oneself, it is likely that vulnerability will be associated with an ethical attitude rather than a political one (Ferrarese, 2017). As a result, agency will be dissociated from vulnerability, and the vulnerable individual will be considered as unable of political action.

This impasse had already been underscored by Michel de Certeau (1984), with his idea of tactic as «art of the weak». In his characteristic criticism of the Enlightenment's faith in the agency of the emancipated subject, de Certeau refers to agency as an «art of doing», «ways of operating», «knowing how to get away with things», «make do with what s/he has» (ibidem: 20). This means considering social actors as active and transforming agents, although their capacity for action is not necessarily —nor mainly— strategic and «rational». What de Certeau defines as tactical action is agency oriented to seizing the day, to taking advantage of contingency, in a constant struggle to respond to circumstances that constantly escape the control of individuals. Because in de Certeau's approach there is no redemption without resistance, we cannot identify weakness with passivity. Weakness qualifies a different intensity, a different content of action, not the incapacity to (re)act. Following Gramsci (1977), de Certeau associates agency with the capacity to act within the given structural conditions, in a given situation. There is not an opposition between subjective will and vulnerable passive position, because agency is related to the contextualized human capacity to survive.

This position is useful to de-moralise the notion of vulnerability, thus to avoid seeing the vulnerable person as a simple victim, and to underscore the capacity of living beings to respond to the challenges of their environment. In Foucault's terms (1997a), agency is connected to resistance, in a sense that there is not a position totally free from vulnerability and from

forms of domination: agency is «the art of not being governed like that and at that cost» (ibidem: 27). Agency always starts from some kind of vulnerability; it is not its alternative.

In a complementary way, as Judith Butler claims, there is always vulnerability in every form of resistance and agency; vulnerability should not be considered as a disempowering trait, but rather as a constitutive one, and as an antidote to any ambition of omnipotence (Butler, 2005; Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay, 2016). The idea that the autonomous subject can achieve full self-determination is a conceptualization related to the male-white-western idea of the subject, for which nothing can act against his/her will, «maturity» and capacity of knowledge. This promethean sovereignty and posture of control obviously sees agency as incompatible with vulnerability, while gender studies and postcolonial studies see in the historicization of vulnerability of women and colonized people a key to dissociate agency from the modern illusion of a radical autonomy, and vulnerability from the retirement of the victim.

In this respect, vulnerability is part of agency, because the process of subjectivation comes about through the sad and melancholic acknowledgment of the impossibility of a full emancipation. The self is involved and compelled (Butler uses the Althusser's notion of *interpellation*) by temporality and contingencies that go beyond personal capacities of giving an account of one's emancipation (Butler, 2005: 15). Agency, also in the case of political activism, is never an exclusive property of the «strong» subject whose moral duty is to defend the rights of the «weaker». Critical and political agency is not immune from fragility, and weakness can be used as a political tool, for example in the case of non-violent resistance with consequent bodily exposure. In this case, vulnerability can be «imagined as one of the conditions of the very possibility of resistance» (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay, 2016: 1). Vulnerable actors are able to mobilize not because they are heroes, but because agency and vulnerability are intertwined, and vulnerability is not necessarily something to be overcome. Moreover, the acknowledgment of such intertwinement can prevent opportunist positions of paternalistic powers, such as those of men who claim to be «weak» in front of feminist activism, or western citizens who feel themselves vulnerable amid immigration flows (ibidem: 11). These are opportunist positions whereby inscribing oneself in a «vulnerable group» can be a strategy for an aggressive behaviour or to be successful in a competition for public resources. Indeed, a social group can declare itself vulnerable in order to demand rights and protection. On the one hand, this can enhance a paternalistic attitude—for which those who suffer discrimination, exploitation, or violence are unable to defend themselves—; on the other hand, this can foster forms of rivalry among vulnerable categories or, again, instrumental uses of this categorization to cumulate forms of power. As a result, also in this case, vulnerability can be considered as a situated position more than a subjective disposition, and can no longer be opposed to an idea of agency based on the model of the sovereign subject.

### 3. VULNERABILITY AND NEOLIBERALISM

Analytical reflections on the link between agency and vulnerability have to be historically situated. Today this means contextualizing them in the historical framework of neoliberal societies, where individuals confront uncertainty, perform everyday forms of resilience, are called to adapt themselves to the rapid change of situations. In this case, vulnerability seems more easily acquired as—at least temporarily—inevitable in front of unpredictability, while

agency becomes an individualized injunction to be able to face any kind of social challenge, recalling the foucauldian notion of «self-government» (Foucault, 2008).

Nowadays it is evident that neoliberal politics have fostered new forms of uncertainty and social vulnerability, as various forms of material and relational poverty, psychological fragility, incapacity to adapt oneself to social change (Castel, 1995). What Robert Castel describes as «the rise of uncertainties» (2016) is a new social landscape where the metamorphosis of capitalism has transformed all previous forms of social organization typical of industrial capitalism and its association with a welfare state system. The deregulation of the labour market has produced new forms of personal and social vulnerability and disaffiliation, mainly associated with the precariousness of work, especially for young people, and with the reduction of public social protection (OCDE, 2016). The shift from the centralized and hierarchized system of work, typical of the industrial society, to the scattered and flexible post-fordist one, includes not only precarious employment conditions but also a growing importance of immaterial economy, where knowledge and competences, social relations and personal initiative, affective labour and personal capacities—that is, the traditional forms of agency and autonomy—become resources for the economic system itself, and they can become also a new mode of political action (Lorey, 2015). Many scholars have underscored that the production of subjectivities now corresponds to the production of economic value (Hardt and Negri, 2004; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015). Vast sectors of digital economy and digital communication produce economic value by using the creativity of individuals, investing in their desire for agency (Cingolani, 2014; Kelly, 2013). While only a part of this economy is based on the art of «selling oneself», it is evident that becoming subject through agency is no longer an exclusive matter of personal emancipation from an evident domination of social and productive systems, but a requirement of the economic system (Rebughini, 2015). As Isabell Lorey (2015) suggests, the dimension of the «precarious»—and not only that of «precarity» and «precariousness»—has to be questioned as the core historical pillar of neoliberalism.

Vulnerability does not correspond only to class inequalities in access to and position on the labour market, but also to the capacity of the current immaterial economic system to instrumentalize the agency capacities of individuals: that is, the production of knowledge and information, cultural representation and systems of recognition. In a wider definition, all subjects are vulnerable to the risk of seeing their agency instrumentalized by new practices of self-management, as new avatars of foucauldian self-government. As a matter of fact, besides Marxism and its idea of *general intellect* as a form of alienation, most of the criticisms of the current neoliberal structure of work draw on Foucault's idea of self-discipline (2008) to analyse new forms of self-exploitation fostered also by individualization and the desire for «independent work» so frequent among youth (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). The intuitions of Foucault (2008) on the biopolitics of the neoliberal system call for a particular definition of the vulnerability of the younger generation in the current economic system. While the economic, cultural and social capitals are still valuable indicators to measure the risk of disaffiliation and marginalization, a generational form of vulnerability can be identified for young people who in the past ten years have experienced the consequences of the economic crisis and the pitfalls of the immaterial economy.

This designates a new relationship between activity and passivity, between the capacity to construct reality and to be affected by it, between agency and vulnerability. Analysis of the agency of young people living in conditions of job precariousness—as a specific form of vul-

nerability— calls also for a reflection on the idea of emancipation and subjectivation in the frame of current labour market (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014). Yet the precariousness of work is not only a condition of material and psychological vulnerability. Emerging worker profiles among youth are not necessarily associated with surrender to current forms of job market conditions, but also with a reflection on the tactics with which to tackle these new forms of structural constraints and to find new forms of collective solidarity, cooperation, consumer practices, critique of environmental degradation, affective dimension of social relations, reputation and recognition (Cingolani, 2014; Kelly, 2017).

Young people involved in the *precariat* are often obliged to adopt forms of multi-jobbing, to develop a network of contacts, to care about their personal reputation (Standing, 2011). Stable jobs can no longer guarantee a stable social status, while individuals are obliged to construct themselves, their reputation and social status to multiply their opportunities to find a job. Hence, precarization is not only a matter of wages and pauperization; it also involves personal capacities of self-management to increase one's chances and opportunities in a competitive environment (Kelly, 2013; Bröckling, 2016). In this respect, the relationship between agency and vulnerability assumes a specific aspect that extends far beyond the simple active/passive poles. Agency, as the personal capacity to develop an autonomous action, is intertwined with the injunction to be performative. Here, agency is not opposed to an evident structural form of domination, nor is it a separate space of absolute freedom; it is instead expected, it is supposed, it is a necessity. Consequently, vulnerability is not simply related to a lack of resources, and to the impossibility of developing an autonomous action; rather, in the current economic situation, vulnerability is also related to the sort of social blackmail in which agency is entrapped: agency is not a choice, but a duty.

This condition is more evident when we analyse practices and everyday life. Grassroots resources and personal capabilities, need for concreteness, know-how and learning by doing, have been at the core of sociological research on agency since the 1970s, with the aim of studying the situatedness of agency as a practical response —rather than a mental and ideological one— to single, day-to-day, problems, beyond forms of explicit political action and criticism. Nevertheless, structural social conditions and the intersection of elements such as income, family resources, education, gender and ethnic origins, are still important to frame the situation in which such injunction to agency takes place. The following sections develop this analysis of practices and intersection of resources starting from an empirical research conducted in Milan among young people with different social backgrounds as explained in the introduction.

#### 4. ITALIAN YOUTH FACING PRECARIOUSNESS IN THE JOB MARKET

It is well known that the «Great Global Recession», which started in 2007 in the USA with the subprime mortgage crisis, had a huge impact on the western countries, and in the last decade literature on youth studies has widely investigated its consequences on younger generations (Furlong, 2009; Standing, 2011; Côté, 2014; Woodman and Wyn, 2015). The impact of economic crisis has been more evident on the Southern European countries, with a drastic worsening of job opportunities for young people (OCDE, 2016). In Italy, the effects of the crisis have been particularly severe since 2011, and this has become an ordinary experience

in youth existential and biographical horizon. Compared with their EU27 peers, Italian young people suffer a higher unemployment rate and more precarious employment, which affect their living conditions and their passage to adulthood (ISTAT, 2016). Moreover, inequalities and poverty rates have increased in a socio-economic context already suffering from the scarcity of opportunities for young people, even though the geography of this unfair situation differs according to the regions of the country: youth unemployment rates in the South amount to 50%, while they are 36% in the Northern regions. The research on which this article is based was conducted in Milan, one of the cities where unemployment rates for young people are among the lowest (18%), even though the instability of professional opportunities and the fragmentation of careers is still part of the everyday experience of young people.

Overall, since the beginning of the economic crisis, among Italian young people the risk of unemployment has been three times higher than for adults. Ten years of economic crisis have profoundly changed the generational and social structure of the job market, as well as its dynamics, and not only in Italy (Furlong, 2009; Blossfeld, Bertolini and Hofacker, 2011; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2015; France, 2016). In this situation, the perception and idea of «work» has also changed. The idea of work among the younger generation no longer follows well-established notions and behaviours related to previous generations and the previous working structures related to industrial society, and working appears as a scattered and polymorphous activity with conditions very different from those of the past.

Indeed, this process of transformation of the idea of work started some decades ago. The passage to a post-industrial society, the end of a situation of «full employment», the rise of new competences and new professions, the growing processes of globalization, already involved a generational turn from the 1970s onwards. Familiar social trajectories such as the linear transition from childhood to adulthood or from school to work, could no longer be taken for granted in the complex, intertwining and fast-changing new globalized context after the end of the golden full employment era of the 1960s. Yet, it is in the past ten years that such new generational features have become more radical with a process of *presentification* that has changed also the perception of one's agency and vulnerability among the younger generation<sup>2</sup>.

To analyse this, a generational perspective —focused on the specificity of the situation of precariousness characterizing the current generation of young people— can shed light on the ongoing work of construction of social reality whereby individual agency and structural constraints interact. With a perspective focused on the generational specificity, it is possible to see young people's experiences and relationship with a precarious job market as not only characterized by victimhood and vulnerability. Both agency and vulnerability can be analyzed in the continuous processes through which social actions and social meanings are produced, in a specific situation and historical context. The generational perspective —following the classic definition of Mannheim (1952/1928)— considers the generational framework as a heuristic tool where the meanings of different and changing experiences find a common ground. Generation is a reference whenever we try to make sense of the experience of individuals and groups that have to cope with situations in which the words, concepts, routines,

<sup>2</sup> Presentification is a notion recently used in Italian research on youth to underscore a lifestyle focused on the present and unable to imagine the future (Altieri, Leccardi and Raffini (2016); Colombo, Leonini and Rebughini, 2018).

and patterns of behaviour that they have inherited from previous cohorts are no longer satisfying or useful in the current historical conditions. Young people are engaged in a continuous work of translating and adapting the material, relational, and cognitive resources at their disposal to new and changing situations. Thus, the current generation of European youth cannot experience and give the same meaning to «work», as inherited from the past, and they are forced to exercise creative solutions in response to the unpredictability of the job market: new risks, new vulnerabilities, and new forms of work.

In this respect, it is useful to integrate the generational perspective with an intersectional one (Crenshaw, 1989; Anthias, 2013; Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016; Colombo and Rebughini, 2016) that takes into account the effects of the different social locations in shaping the space for agency and vulnerability. The effort to link generational and intersectional perspectives improves the capacity to consider young people's actions as the constant adjustment among the structural characteristics of the context, such as opportunities and constraints of the job market, situated interpretations of the situation, and again the intertwining of agency and vulnerability. The two main specificities that will be analyzed in the following section concern the «presentification of agency» and the normalization of the frame of the «economic crisis» as specific current forms of generational vulnerability.

## 5. NOSTALGIA FOR THE FUTURE

In the research conducted in Milan from 2013 to 2017, independently from gender, social origins or level of education, all the interviewees shared a sentiment of ordinariness in regard to what they called the «crisis». Indeed, this term did not have a specific meaning for them, it just described the normality of the historical situation in which they lived, and sometimes it was criticized as a way to justify the incapability —of single people and of the State— to react to the transformations of the job market. «Crisis» was a blurred notion, sometimes part of their family experience, sometimes a framework rhetoric that they had heard in the media and in everyday discourses. For the interviewees, more than lack of opportunities, «crisis» meant instability, unpredictability and never-ending change, for which it was difficult to distinguish the nature of the next step and to foresee what was going to happen in the following years or months. For that reason, crisis seemed to enhance presentification more than a feeling of vulnerability. While the risks of unpredictability are normalized, presentification means that it becomes impossible to follow consolidated and shared routines; uncertainty and rapid change discourage long-term plans, but they are not perceived as a form of personal or generational vulnerability.

Presentification is sometimes close to fatalism, especially among interviewees who declared themselves as «realist» and free from illusions and utopias. Long-life learning becomes a necessity, and if uncertainty is taken for granted, it is necessary to cope with it. Again, a hyper-realist attitude seems in contrast with a feeling of vulnerability:

«I take [life] as it comes (...). I've found so many jobs without having a diploma. Since 2004, when I left school, until today I've eaten, I'm still alive, I have no problems... I've got on by myself, I've done everything. If I've done it, so can others. I try to grasp opportunities, I don't let anything go... I live my life day by day, I'll see how it goes...» (Samuel, 25 years old, professional diploma)

In terms of generational attitude, it is evident that previous ways of life are no longer a guide. As Isabella university student in Milan explains, her generation feels «nostalgia for the future», because it is impossible to imagine it, and it is difficult to understand if what they have learned or achieved today would be still valuable tomorrow.

The difficulties in making long-term plans or foreseeing the effects of current choices recalls the tactical attitude of surfing on contingency, instead of openly confronting structural constraints. Instability and absence of strong structures seem to weaken not only the possibility of conflict but also the perception of one's vulnerability. Constraints are vanishing in everyday life and into agency itself; they cannot longer be reassembled by a central conflict with the «owner» or the «powerful», whose identities are almost unknown and uninteresting for this generation. If uncertainty has no alternative, and if it cannot be compared with an alleged stability never experienced before, it becomes a common background for actions, with a focus on the management of the present. Agency is mainly identified with this capability. Everyday choices, programs, and actions have to be inserted into this framework.

The necessity to choose among multiple strategies and unforeseeable perspectives is considered both as a risk and an opportunity; often in a situation of competition and waste of energies: «We know that a lot of intelligence will be lost in this process [of competition], we know that those unable to be active and quick will be discarded» (Anita, 21 years old, university student in Milan).

The overarching element of this disenchanted attitude is «work», as notion, practice and experience from which an individual could measure life transitions, social positions and social roles. Work becomes a blurred field made of plural activities, competences, networks, emotional investments, creativity. The common pattern followed by interviewees when they talked about work was to point out that the current situation was radically different from what their parents had experienced. A stable job is no longer considered as a probable horizon, and the main form of agency to be developed is the capability to seize opportunities:

«I decided to seize the opportunities that came to me. In the sense that now if I can't achieve my goal I try to grasp the opportunities that arise... I have the chance to do this, so it's fine. I'll set my goal aside until I have the means and possibilities to achieve it.» (Betty, 22 years old, professional diploma)

While having a job used to correspond to a quite stable social status, roles and identities, today working seems to have many overlapping meanings and functions, where full and part time, paid and unpaid activities, pleasure and pain, social roles and status blur and quickly change shape. Hence, social representations, expectations, aspirations, ambitions, goals and motivations tend to be contextualized in more precise space and time references that no longer involve the project of a lifetime, although «to work» continues to be meaningful in terms of personal achievement, self-esteem, or feelings of belonging (Heggli, Haukanes and Tjomsland, 2013).

Yet, such components of work became individualized and personalized and are no longer properties of work itself but only of the individual. Work has not only a structural role to achieve an aim (wages, personal autonomy, consumption, and so on); it is also an entity that has to be constructed by the individual. To look for a job means also being able to see it where others do not perceive it, in a self-entrepreneurial way. To work means constructing an activity where personal agency becomes paramount. Interviewees believed that

the current uncertainty could be managed and driven towards favourable directions by those with the «will» and «perseverance» to try hard, take action, and seize opportunities (Woodman and Wyn, 2015). In this interpretation, vulnerability means not being able to face these new forms of challenge. In some interviews the question of uncertainty was approached positively, almost as an opportunity; uncertainty assumed the face of the inevitable necessity to which one can only react by mobilizing oneself virtuously, putting oneself to the test:

«I think that [the crisis] is a phase that can have positive aspects. Because if you get disoriented, it means that you have to stop, consider, and start again. In this period I see disorientation in work and in my age group. Disorientation in life in general, in relationships, in having or not having a project. I don't know how many people of my generation have a real project or stick to a project. But don't get obsessed if you don't adjust to that path. Because you'll go crazy.» (Giuliana, 30 years old, university degree)

Uncertainty is normalized, but at the same time not fully accepted; rather, it is translated into a sort of «active resignation»: action must be taken because staying still means succumbing (Colombo, Leonini and Rebughini, 2018). The interviewees seemed to fully accept a personal responsibility for their lives, they accepted the idea that in an age of uncertainty, agency is first of all based on the capacity to understand the options available to them, it means being «smart and active», as one of the interviewees said; while vulnerability seems to be related to immobility and incapacity to recognize opportunities or to promote and create them. Because «nothing can be taken for granted» to stand still waiting for a better future, to be a dreamer, is often presented as the attitude of the «loser»:

«You have to see how it goes and look a little bit further, but not so much. (...) Excuse me, what are you doing here? You can't hope that (...) one day it will rain. Instead of waiting for it to rain one day, get moving, do something, fetch the water, don't wait for it to rain.» (Orion, 21 years old, professional diploma)

In these narratives, as Alain Touraine (2015) claims, the single subject —or the individual— «seems to be all that remains». The individual is alone in front of reality and his/her agency, more than being a response to clear and well-established constraints, became a tactical capacity to read and seize the sequences of situatedness. More than a realism considered as mere acceptance of «what is», with its inequalities, vulnerabilities, and power relations, this attitude seems to be based on the capacity to take decisions without the baggage of past examples and routines, on the capacity to navigate uncertainties. In the absence of structural opportunities able to reassemble claims or protests against inequalities and unfairness of the job market, in the absence of adequate vocabularies to frame one's situation, an individualized approach based on situated practices prevails.

## 6. PERSONAL CAPACITIES AND INTERSECTIONS OF OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

Young people interviewed feel the burden of their personal vulnerability mainly when they cope with the reduced chances to get an access to the labour market. As a matter of fact, be-

sides their insistence on their personal capacities to seize the right opportunity, their agency starts from different chances and resources, thus from different social positions, from the different intersecting of gender, education and family context in terms of economic resources, social relations and educational background. This means a different mix of opportunities and constraints, a different starting point in evaluating one's vulnerability and points of strength.

When our interviewees described their relation with the labour market, traditional class differences continued to play a significant role. Those from families with good economic, social and educational capital not only could rely on much broader and more composite resources, but they could also consider the necessity to accept jobs below their expectations as a temporary transition phase towards their goals. Conversely, young people with a lower economic and educational capital, who usually lived or came from families with also low economic, relational and educational resources, insisted even more on their current situation as a result of their personal capabilities or weaknesses with a higher form of personal responsabilization. Having a job is a fundamental resource of personal dignity and the more the situation in front of them was difficult, the more they insisted on their personal capacity to cope with it. Again, vulnerability is perceived as a form of surrender and agency as the capacity to react and tactically impose oneself.

Besides these general considerations, the narratives of men and women differed in some specific respects. Men tended to link the economic security given by the job to the ability to maintain autonomy in consumption and self-esteem. This is more evident among young men with lower education, belonging to a social stratum that we may still term «working-class». They continued to perceive themselves as «breadwinners» and future heads of the household. Hence, the relation with work was mainly instrumental. Agency was perceived as the capacity to be economically autonomous, while vulnerability was directly associated with a condition of unemployment or lack of economic independence:

«The heaviest aspect of the crisis is that it's difficult to find a job. If you don't have a job you can't do what you really want to do. How can you make a future for yourself and your family if you haven't saved anything?» (Federico, 21 years old, professional diploma)

«I like my job because I'm independent, I earn my money, I go around, I see people, I'm not shut up in an office. (...) Independence is the key thing, I've been able to buy a car, pay for my favourite hobbies, one day I'll start my own business without waiting to become a graduate, being forty years old and still spending my parents' money (...). Being an adult person means thinking about the future, having a family and being able to maintain it.» (Marco, 21 years old, professional diploma)

Also women of lower socio-economic status insisted on the dimension of independence, with justifications similar to those of young men. Yet, their narratives of agency and personal capacities were less instrumental, they seemed to have a deeper and personal meaning: a way to gain self-respect and human dignity, not only social recognition. They were aware that their agency was always interconnected to vulnerability. Finding a job and achieving economic independence was a personal trial, a challenge whose result is not given in advance. Almost all the young women with lower education that we interviewed considered themselves to be in a condition of potential social vulnerability. Low wages and precariousness were perceived as potential dangers for future plans:

«I don't want to be a desperate housewife, it can be difficult to find a job, but you have to try (...). For a woman, it can be more difficult, I have some friends who have already a baby (...) but you have to avoid a housewife destiny...» (Nicole, 20 years old professional diploma)

«Because my husband earns 2000 euros a month, yep, 3000? He tells me: Look you don't need to work, you can stay at home (...) but I'm a human being like everyone else, I have to break my back like everyone else, I have to earn my money (...) that's 2000 or 1200, it's always more money (...) OK we don't need 1200? That's as may be, but at least I show my son that you shouldn't let others keep you but you have to work as well.» (Sara, 22 years old professional diploma)

Gender differences were less evident among interviewees with a university degree and with a middle-class social background. For both young men and women, achieving a satisfactory professional occupation was a personal priority. This aim was directly related to personal agency, to self-esteem, meaningfulness of one's action. Most interviewees underscored the need to privilege a clear career pathway, capitalizing on accumulated professional knowledge, even though this was the result of «small jobs». Vulnerability was rarely perceived. The family remained an institution able to guarantee affective and economic security against personal weaknesses. The feeling of security related to family involvement in the professional pathways of their children was associated with proof of one's agency and capacity to pursue personal projects, to keep open paths of continuous development and improvement. Thus, agency seems to lie in the ability to keep open this process of development and positioning, rather than in the aspiration to achieve a stable and definitive position. Instability, change and a certain amount of uncertainty are accepted as inevitable but also positive elements to measure oneself with life:

«I've had the luck to do what I liked. That is, I've always made my choices thinking about what I wanted to do at that moment, what I felt like doing at that moment. And so things gradually came about, they happened.» (Emanuela, 28 years old, university degree)

«I have a very specific and clear objective: to continue my training growth. I don't know how it will evolve, if it will evolve within the firm where I am now or, more likely, somewhere else. Because today, given the situation, we are all more inclined to look around, and therefore also to have to look for a higher professional level and a very dynamic context. As a result, you must take everything as an opportunity to be evaluated and perhaps think about changing» (Alberto, 29 years old, university degree).

## 7. CONCLUSION

While agency and vulnerability are not alternative terms, analysing their intertwinement by observing the efforts of the current generation of young people to achieve autonomy reveals some specific characteristics. According to the young people interviewed, being in the position of «precarious» or «unemployed» does not mean being vulnerable, overwhelmed by the constraints, and being unable to develop one's agency. The interviewed seemed to follow de Certeau's definition of agency as «art of doing» and way to cope with the constraints of the situation developing a sort of problem-solving creativity. To the normalization of the current situ-

ation of crisis, or simply state of things in the neoliberal framework, the interviewees responded with the typical de Certeau idea that agency is «knowing how to get away with things».

This generation does not perceive the risks of foucauldian self-government, as a process of subjectification through the construction of skills, habits, and autonomy itself, while their lives assume the form of a continuous self-management of contingent resources. Paradoxically, the more they are individualized and isolated amid the difficulties of the job market, the more they trust their agency. It is interesting to notice that the intersectional perspective reveals that this is more evident among young men, while young women are more realistic in regard to their limits and the constraints of the context. Yet, few interviewees —most of them with high cultural capital— seemed aware that in the new forms of immaterial economy, agency becomes a producer of value for the economic system; it is not only a resource of the individual against the constraints. In this respect, vulnerability is related not only to the risk of social marginalization but also to the incapacity to read and detect social processes of instrumentalization of personal agency. This could be considered as a specific form of vulnerability, based on the injunction to trust one's capacities without the acknowledgement of the systemic use of such capacities. Even when a critical attitude is present, this is expressed acknowledging the necessity to work with and within the current economic and productive system, navigating among constraints that cannot be definitively overcome.

This is more evident in relation to the meanings of «work». The challenge of finding a job and constructing a professional career is always declined as a personal challenge, in the landscape of a generational and historical situation made of individualization and rapid changes in the production system. Hence, new vocabularies, new representations and new practices in relation to work, mark a generational shift where agency and vulnerability are intertwined. Agency is widely perceived as the capacity to seize the moment, to manage ambivalence, to translate from one code to another, to orient expectations in accordance with the expectations of the context, while vulnerability is related to the same characteristics of this context: unpredictability, instability and uncertainty. Personal vulnerability in relation to the economic system is «taken for granted», as flexibility and precariousness, but interviewees seemed to trust in their capacity to develop new skills and tactical abilities.

To conclude, a focus on the interplay between individual initiative and structural constraints, on the social locations characterized by gender, education, family background and unequal distribution of resources, can shed light on the overlapping of agency and vulnerability within this current generation of young people, intersecting everyday life-situated narratives with historical-structural data. If on the one hand, the days of the sovereign modern subject, and promethean agency, seem gone, on the other hand, young people seem to underestimate their vulnerability by normalizing it as a generational issue and by trusting in their capacity of adaptation as a new historical form of agency. The paradox of the excessive trust in one's autonomous capabilities as new form of current vulnerability is deeply different from the pride and self-confidence of the modern subject, whose vulnerability was recognized in external natural and social constraints. The form of vulnerability highlighted by this research on young people seems to reveal that the more an individual is in a situation of weakness, the more s/he supposes herself capable to compensate that situation by personal capacities of adaptation, readjustment, problem-solving. At least in the generation analyzed in this research, vulnerability is deeply intertwined with subjectivation processes that can be investigated in temporary positions and situations, as an intersection of resources and constraints.

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