



Scientific Paper

Young women and men of Arab Mediterranean background in Italy: Transnational involvement of second generation youth in the Arab uprisings

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Young women and men of Arab Mediterranean background in Italy: Transnational involvement of second generation youth in the Arab uprisings¹

Abstract

This paper examines the results of qualitative research with young people of Arab Mediterranean background living in Milan, Italy, and their experiences related to the so-called Arab uprisings and their aftermath from a gendered transnational perspective. Drawing on interviews and on the analysis of online sources, the case study explores the form and extent of the transnational engagement of these young people and their views of the uprisings and the current events unfolding in the region. The paper aims at highlighting the different ways these young women and men take part in the social, cultural and political changes in their parents' homeland. It also explores the impact of these key historical events on young people's projects and biography, on their political values and behaviours, on the construction of their identity and their sense of belonging. The analysis contributes to the debate on transnationalism, taking the perspective of the so-called "second generation" emerging from international migration.

Keywords

transnationalism, Arab uprisings, migrant youth, second-generations, youth participation

¹ The present article is the result of the authors' shared analyses and work. Ilenya Camozzi is the author of paragraphs 3 and 4.2; Daniela Cherubini is the author of paragraphs 1 and 2; Paola Rivetti is the author of paragraphs 4.1 and 5. Carmen Leccardi is the scientific coordinator of the research unit. She supervised the contents and structure of this text and revised its final version.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the experience and the role of young people with Arab Mediterranean backgrounds living in Italy in the Arab uprisings and their aftermath.² Drawing on the results of a qualitative in-depth case study, the paper develops a gendered and transnational perspective on the topic and introduces the views of young people of Arab descent on the so-called Arab Spring into the debate about transnational youth political engagement.

The paper discusses the results of qualitative research (narrative interviews and analysis of online documentation) with young people of Arab Mediterranean background living in Milan, Italy, which took place between September 2015 and April 2016.³ It explores these young people's transnational practices of participation, and their views on the Arab uprisings and the current events unfolding in the Arab Mediterranean region. Moreover, the research explores the impact of these key historical events on young people's projects and biographies, on their political values and behaviours, on their identity construction and sense of belonging.

The so-called "Arab Spring" and the events that followed it had global resonance and great impact on the "global youth" (Della Porta, 2014) and on migrants from Arab Mediterranean countries. The uprisings were followed by young people around the world, thanks to the global media, the internet and transnational mobility and networks (Gerbaudo, 2012). They have had an impact on the lives and the cultural imaginary of Arab communities and Arab youth living around the world, as well as on the European and southern European youth living through the financial crisis and engaging in anti-austerity movements (Fregonese, 2013; Aday et al., 2013). The paper explores these connections, elaborating on the voices and experiences of the sons and daughters of immigrant parents living in a southern European context. The paper also sheds light on the role of second-generation youth in the representation of these key historical events, and on the impact of the latter on the lives of young people of Arab Mediterranean origin living in Europe.

² In the paper, we will use the expression "Arab Mediterranean countries" not to homogenise Arab-majority societies, which are diverse and composed of Arab and non-Arab constituencies. However, we will use the expression "Arab uprisings" as his expression has been widely popularised and entered the public and scholarly language, although we are aware that non-Arab individuals and groups also participated in the mobilisations.

³ See section 3 for more details on the research methods and sample. The case study was carried out by the research team at the University of Milano-Bicocca, under the EU Project "Researching Arab Mediterranean Youth: Towards a New Social Contract (SAHWA)". The paper contributes to SAHWA Project Work Package 3 on "Youth Empowerment: Mobilisation, Social and Political Participation".

In order to address such issues, the paper builds on the scientific production that engages with transnationalism. The narratives and practices enacted by the young people involved in the research are part of (and are immersed in) the flows of images, discourses, representations and meanings arising from the popular mobilisations, which have circulated globally, crossed national boundaries and connected people living in diverse national and local contexts. This paper therefore takes into account the global dimension of the “Arab Springs” and their impact on transnational and global “scapes” (e.g. mediascape, ethnoscape, ideoscape, technoscape and finanscape; see: Appadurai, 1996). More in detail, this paper focuses on the dynamics of “transnationalism from below” (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998) and on the everyday practices through which social actors connect different social, cultural and political worlds across and beyond national frontiers, and produce and reproduce “transnational social fields” (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004; Guarnizo and Smith, 1998) and networks. It understands the interviewees’ practices of participation in the events unfolding in the region as examples and indicators of the transnational orientation of their lives (Levitt and Waters, 2002).

In order to achieve these objectives, the paper is structured as follows. The review of the literature engages with extant studies on the global dimension of the Arab uprisings and their impact on migrant communities and young people around the world (section 2.1). It also offers a synthetic and reasoned account of the academic debate on transnationalism, focusing on the new generations descending from international migrations, and on the issue of the transnational character of the practices and identities of young people with immigrant parents (section 2.2). It is followed by a discussion of the empirical findings emerging from both online content (section 3.1) and interviews (section 3.2). The fourth section analyses the findings and their relevance and implications for the scientific and public debates on the issue of transnationalism.

2. Transnational participation and the role of migrant Arab Mediterranean youth during and after the Arab uprisings: Review of the literature

2.1. The global dimension of the Arab uprisings: Research on transnational representations and connections

The so-called Arab uprisings have had a spillover effect well beyond the Arab world. The popular mobilisations and the sociopolitical change in North Africa and the Middle East had global repercussions and resonance that prompted European and North American protesters to occupy public squares and deeply affected migrant communities of Arab background.

Several contributions have reflected on such an impact, highlighting for instance the change in “Western” views of Arab societies and politics, challenging the narrative of authoritarian stability and popular political apathy (Salvatore, 2013). Nevertheless, most of the analysis and public discourse around the aftermath of the uprisings, with the return of authoritarian leaders and war erupting, still deploy “Orientalist” frames of analysis and representation (Teti, 2012; Alhaddad, 2012). Media representations in particular have been the object of extensive analysis, with both online and traditional media examined (Howard and Hussain, 2013; Khondker, 2011; Khatib, 2013). Less attention has been paid to other venues of representation, such as those emerging in the context of popular culture and youth cultures, with few exceptions (Nieuwkerk, Levine and Stokes, 2016). Different studies have analysed the impact of the uprisings on other social movements and waves of protest around the world. In particular, the relationship between the anti-austerity movements that have emerged since 2011 (such as the Spanish 15M, the Occupy movement and the Greek revolts) and the Arab uprisings has been examined (Fregonese, 2013; Ramadan, 2013).

The research on the impact and reception of the Arab uprisings in migrant communities with Arab backgrounds is still underdeveloped and more analysis is needed when it comes to the participation, role and contribution of migrant people with Arab backgrounds to the mobilisation and the political events unfolding in the region. Public and academic attention has been given to young people of Arab background joining ISIS from Europe (Franz, 2015), but engagement with migrants’ participation in the 2010-2011 protests is less developed. Both the involvement in transnational social movements and more fragmented, less organised participation practices connecting migrant communities with the civic society of the country of origin deserve attention. However, only a small number of studies exist. A

report edited by the International Labour Organization and the League of Arab States explores the impact on “expatriate communities” as economic actors and potential driving forces for development (AAVV, 2012). It provides an overview of the changes in remittances, propensity to invest in the homeland and involvement in local development projects, in relation to different receiving and sending contexts (Germany, Italy, UK; Iraq, Egypt, Maghreb). There are studies on the political behaviour of migrant people and their participation in institutional politics. Particular attention is paid to voting participation from abroad, in the case of post-Arab Spring elections, when the right to vote was extended to expatriate communities (Brand, 2014; El Baradei, Wafa and Ghoneim, 2012). Other studies focus on non-institutional politics, the role of transnational civil society (Abdelrahman, 2011; Anderson, 2013) and the internet (Severo and Zuolo, 2012) during the uprisings. The work by Lea Müller-Funk (2014) is an insightful example of in-depth study on transnational participation in diasporic contexts. The author analyses the participation of Egyptians living in Paris since 2011 in transnational social movements and networks. She focuses on women’s participation, taking into account the trajectories of activists of different collective movements and different ages. The study shows that the 2011 revolution led to increasing mobilisation and political polarisation among migrant people of Egyptian background, which also involved women activists, despite their low visibility. It also highlights the importance of cyberactivism in the case of women’s and young people’s transnational participation. Sarah Saey and Michael Skey (2015) have examined the political participation of second generation Egyptians in the revolution and subsequent events in Egypt. They highlight the shifting sense of belonging that these youths, originally residing the US, displayed as the protests descended into a spiral of violence and were ended by a reinstated authoritarian system. Saey and Skey highlight how “the youth” represented a symbolically charged element that the second generation would identify with, while the development of consequent events in Egypt caused their distancing. An interesting qualitative study comparing different generations of migrants from Egypt and Morocco has been conducted in Italy, in the city of Turin (Ricucci and Cingolani, 2014; Ricucci, 2015). The research shows consistent differences between the reaction and interests in the events of 2011 and onwards that the first and second generations of migrants have shown. For the second generation these events generated new reflections on their identity, renewed curiosity for their parents’

homeland and, in some cases, promoted active practices of transnational participation (more pronounced for Egyptians than Moroccans).

2.2 The debate on transnationalism

Transnationalism is a key perspective in contemporary migration studies thanks to the publication of the pivotal work by Nina Glick-Schiller, Linda Bash and Cristina Blanc-Szanton during the 1990s (1992 & 1994). The recognition of the importance of transnational connections among migrants and the interest in economic, cultural, social and political relationships between different places, people and institutions, crossing nation-state boundaries, are common elements in the current academic understanding of present and past migrations and of contemporary societies.

Among the burgeoning literature covering the topic, the main debates develop around a few axes. First is the relationship between transnationalism and integration/assimilation in reception societies (Vertovec, 2009: 77–84); second, we have the feminist critique which has contributed to enriching perspectives on transnationalism by highlighting the neglected gender aspects of transnational dynamics and by questioning the over-enthusiastic assessment that nation-states are gone (Pratt and Yeoh, 2013); and, finally, scholars have been trying to identify and single out the aspects that make up transnationalism. When it comes to this last issue, several contributions have classified the different forms and meanings of transnationalism.

A first classification focuses on transnationalism “from above” and “from below” (M. P. Smith and Guarnizo, 1998), where the former focuses on the patterns of exchange at the macro level involving nation-states, international organisations, global economic and financial institutions, while the latter centres on the everyday practices and relationships developed in trans-local social fields by individuals, social groups and grassroots collectives. A second relevant distinction is between transnationalism as actual practices and social bounds and transnationalism as imagined identity construction, which has a projected sense of belonging at its core.

Vertovec proposes a different systematisation of the extant “takes on transnationalism”, and examines transnationalism “as social morphology, as type of consciousness, as mode of cultural reproduction, as avenue of capital, as site of political engagement, and as (re)construction of ‘place’ or locality” (Vertovec, 2009: 4). Following this view, research in

this field can further develop along different lines of inquiry, such as diasporic community and the study of transnational networks and relations; the issue of belonging and the construction of identity; the practices of cultural production and consumption across national borders; and economic connections and the transnationalism of corporations, financial capitals and global elites. Another meaning refers to the emergence of a global dimension of politics, related to organisations and social movements establishing transnational connections and formulating global claims (e.g. human rights, anti-austerity, environmental issues). Political transnationalism also refers to the participation – which can take different forms – in homeland politics and civil society by migrants and expatriate people living abroad (Boccagni, Lafleur and Levitt, 2016; Guarnizo, Portes and Haller, 2003; Koopmans and Statham, 2014; Lafleur, 2005; Martiniello, 2006).

This overview shows how the debate on transnationalism has come to include both the social actors' concrete behaviours and symbolic processes in the economic, political, social, cultural and personal spheres. It has also progressively broadened its geographical references (from the US to Europe and other contexts) and the groups of subjects under study (e.g. different categories of migrants and refugees, the children of immigrant parents).

In this framework, the debate on the generational aspect of transnationalism has emerged along with the issue of the transnational political involvement of second-generation youth, which is the core issue of our research.

While mostly neglected until the early 2000s, second and third generations have become an important focus of international research on transnationalism. The debate first gained prominence in scholarship from the United States. More recently, it has developed in Europe and elsewhere too.

Empirical analysis of the issue seems to fall into two approaches: the “practice” and the “process” (Wessendorf, 2013). The first aims at measuring the extent of engagement in actual transnational activities among the second generation, comparing it with the trends of the first generation. The results of this approach signal a decline in transnational practices, with the exception of a minority and notwithstanding some continuity mostly related to the knowledge of the parents' language and some travels to the parents' country of origin (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc, 1994; Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004; Portes, 2001; Rumbaut, 2002). The second approach is “less interested in the extent of regular transnational activities and more in how the transnational lives of their parents and co-

ethnics shape the second generation's upbringing and their sense of belonging, as well as how members of the second generation go through different stages of transnational involvement in the course of their lives" (Wessendorf, 2013). The key idea is that growing up in a transnational setting provides a social and cultural capital that may be activated in different situations, although scholars have also recognised the potential of transnationalism to cause a sense of rootlessness and loneliness (Pollock, David and Van Reken, 2009). This capital can be deployed in their ongoing work of self-definition and identity construction, in the everyday interactions in multicultural environments, at specific biographical turning points or when responding to crucial events and social, economic and political changes involving both the context of residence and the parents' homeland. It follows that the transnational orientation of the second generation may change over the life-course and according to different circumstances (Somerville, 2007; R. Smith, 2002).

The scholars taking this approach therefore suggest developing a diachronic, longitudinal consideration of the issue (Levitt, 2009). Their analysis of identity and belonging highlights the process of identity formation rather than its (temporary) outcomes. They look at the process of "doing identity transnationally" rather than at a precise identification with ethnic, national and religious, etc. categories (Reynolds and Zontini, 2015; Somerville, 2008; Wessendorf, 2008 & 2010). Attention to differences and inequalities affecting young people's transnational orientations and behaviours is also important in these works, as it is, more generally, in the recent research in this area.

The impact of the individual profile and family background, as well as of the socioeconomic and political context, on the transnational performances of the new generations is a key issue in the scholarship. Research has shown how heterogeneous individual and contextual factors (such as class, level of education, age, citizenship status, gender, parents' country of origin and geographical distance, among others) differentiate opportunities and motivations for engaging in transnational activities.

Most of the research on the issue focuses on the interrelation of family ethnic and national background, social class and educational achievements, and tends to compare the "performances" of different ethnic/national groups. Recent contributions suggest moving on from this group-specific approach to develop a more complex and intersectional perspective. Their goal is to focus attention on the internal differences existing among young people with

similar socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Reynolds and Zontini, 2015; Somerville, 2008; Wessendorf, 2013).

These recent developments in the scholarship and the “processual” approach provide the conceptual framework for our analysis. From our point of view, they help us to consider the complex relationship between transnationalism and young people with migrant backgrounds in light of the relevant generational, gender and social position differences evident from the literature. They allow us to shed light on how the transnational experience of the young descendants of migrants may change over their life cycle, in correspondence with other heterogeneous turning points that can mark the individualised and fragmented transitions that characterise contemporary youth (Camozzi, 2013 & 2016; Leccardi, 2005 & 2013). Among them are the participation in the Arab uprising and the political and social changes in their parents’ country of origin.

3. The case study: Research subjects, methods and questions

As anticipated, this paper draws on qualitative research focused on young people with Arab Mediterranean background living in Milan, Italy and builds on evidence collected during research carried out from September 2015 to April 2016. The empirical research consists of:

- a) the analysis of documents and accounts collected from the internet (blog entries, personal diaries and reflections), representing the voices of publicly exposed young men and women of Arab origin living in Italy;
- b) nine narrative interviews with young men and women aged 18-26 who were born or raised in Italy, with at least one parent originally from Egypt.

The research explores the different forms and levels of transnational engagement in the Arab uprisings and their aftermath of young people of Arab Mediterranean background living in Milan. It also aims at understanding the impact of these key events on young people’s present and future projects, political orientations and identity.

The research questions we started from were:

- To what extent do these young people feel close to the events unfolding on the southern shore of the Mediterranean?
- Which forms and levels of engagement do they express across national boundaries?

- How does physical distance intersect with the sense of belonging and the contribution they made to the mobilisations?
- How do their transnational networks fuel and gain momentum from participation in these events?
- How does their direct or indirect participation transform their political practices and their views of the individual and collective future?
- What role do these young people play in the construction of a collective memory around the uprisings?
- Do they feel part of a generation that is marked by the experience of the mobilisations?
- Are they able to connect their personal experience with the broader, collective experience of the popular mobilisations?

The interviewees were selected to include variation in gender, age and religious background. Other variables, such as level of education, did not show such variation. All were university students, and were more likely to have high social and cultural capital which could allow them to deploy practices of transnational participation. The short profiles of the interviewees follow:⁴

- Emira, 19 years old, female, university student, Christian (Protestant);
- Mansur, 18 years old, male, high school student, Muslim;
- Nabil, 22 years old, male, university student, Muslim;
- Baha, 26 years old, male, university student, Muslim;
- Mona, 19 years old, female, university student, Muslim;
- Carol, 22 years old, female, university student, Christian (Protestant);
- Magda, 23 years old, female, university student, Christian (Protestant);
- Aida, 22 years old, female, university student, Muslim;
- Asma, 21 years old, female, university student, Christian (Protestant).

Blogs and internet sources were also searched in order to answer the question of whether a public discourse on the uprisings and their aftermath was articulated by young people of

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

Arab Mediterranean background living in Italy. The goal was to examine what opinion-leaders expressed about the events, looking for a narrative or multiple narratives. These are publicly exposed young people – some are activists, others are journalists, and all have a platform from which to express their opinions and views.

Blogs and internet websites were searched in order to identify relevant public articulations on the uprisings. In particular, the research identified blogs and websites that feature contributions authored by young people of Arab Mediterranean origin living in Italy, and manual research was conducted on the selected internet sources to find opinion pieces on the uprisings. No geographical limitation was imposed, so the contributions focussed on Arab-majority countries that underwent revolutions/mobilisations (Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco in particular).⁵

4. Second generation youth in Milan and the Arab uprisings

4.1 The young people's representation of Arab uprisings through the internet

After the aforementioned internet sources were researched, the first finding was that contributions on the topic of social movements, the uprisings and the events in the countries under examination are very scant. It seems that the debate around these issues does not feature prominently among the topics discussed on both personal blogs and collective websites. It is quite telling that the websites of the two biggest associations in Italy that unite young people with migrant backgrounds, namely the ReteG2 and the association *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia*, have no focus or contributions on the uprisings.^{6,7} This might be because of the orientation of these organisations towards Italian and European issues. In general, most of the associations and networks expressing Italian second generations' concerns focus their activities on issues such as access to Italian citizenship, social and cultural integration, change in the dominant representation of migrants, revision of Italian

⁵ This is the list of the internet sources selected. Some are websites, some are the blogs of individuals (journalists/intellectuals) who are likely to have expressed an opinion on the uprisings: Sumaya Abdel Qader's blog and contributions, diariodisiria.wordpress.com, Fouad Roueiha's blog and contributions, Susan Dabous' blog and contributions, sirialibano.com, Samia Oursani's blog and contributions, Khalid Chaouki's contributions, aljarida.it, Abdel Aziz's contributions, Babelmed.it, Rete G2 *Seconde generazioni*, *Giovani Musulmani d'Italia GMI* and *Yalla Italia*.

⁶ <http://www.secondegenerazioni.it/> Last accessed July 30 2016.

⁷ <http://giovanimusulmani.it/> Last accessed July 30 2016.

cultural and national identity, interreligious dialogue and religious freedom. Moreover, the controversial nature of the topic itself may have caused divisions and in-fighting. For these reasons, debates and discussion might have been postponed/not held/held in alternative settings.

As a result of the online search, seven posts were selected as the most relevant of those analysed:

- “La seconda rivoluzione egiziana e la confusione delle seconde generazioni” (The second Egyptian revolution and the confusion of the second generations), by Rania Ibrahim, July 3 2013, posted on La Città Nuova (last accessed July 8 2016). La Città Nuova is the weekly section of the Milan branch of the national newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, widely considered to be a moderate centre-left newspaper. Rania Ibrahim is a female journalist of Egyptian origin, 36 years old, brought up in Italy since the age of two. She was a parliamentary candidate for the centre-right party Scelta Civica in 2013. In the blog profile she describes herself as a Muslim who believes in a secular public sphere.
- “Caro Crozza, in Tunisia ed Egitto c’è del materiale per te ...” (Dear Crozza, you may find inspiration in Tunisia and Egypt ...) by Noor Gamyla (last accessed September 6 2016). Gamyla is a 31-year-old woman (born in 1985) originally from Egypt. She received a Master’s from Columbia University in Development Studies. She works as a consultant for international development NGOs operating in the Middle East. In the short biography on the website Yalla Italia, she is defined as a staunch atheist.
- “Per Qaradawi, la nuova era non fa rima con primavera” (For Qaradawi, the new era does not equate to a spring ... an Arab Spring), by Noor Gamyla.
- “Egiziani a Milano: i giovani e i loro desideri” (Egyptians in Milan: the youth and their desires), by Redazione – collective report.
- “Win hya at-thawra?! (Dov’è la Rivoluzione?) Voci dalla Tunisia tra cambiamento e instabilità” (Where is the revolution? Voices from Tunisia, between change and instability), by Oussmana Mansour. Oussmana is a 24-year-old (born in 1991) man of Tunisian origin. Born in Tunisia, his family moved to Carpi in central Italy when he was 6 months old. He studies Law at the University of Modena. He defines

himself on the Yalla Italia website as “passionate about politics, underground culture, volunteering, music, sports and books”.

- “Arab Idol: ecco perchè non tifo più per Dounia Batma” (Arab Idol: here’s why I do not support Dounia Batma any more), by Noor Gamyla.
- “L’Orientale: Università degli studi jihadisti di Napoli” (L’Orientale: Naples’ Jihadi Studies University) by Ismahan Hassen. Ismahan is a 28-year-old (born in 1988) woman of Tunisian origin. Residing in Naples, she is attending a Master’s programme at L’Orientale University. She describes herself as passionate about Italian pop music, Arab female literature, and the pizza margherita (from Yalla Italia website).
- “Occidente ottuso. La primavera araba fra Bush e Foucault” (Blunt West. The Arab Spring between Bush and Foucault), by Wael Farouq. Farouq is a university professor and public intellectual in his 40s. He was born in Egypt and co-authored a book with former Pope, Benedict XVI.⁸ Although he is not a member of the second generation (as he was born in Egypt), he is a frequent commentator on current affairs in Italy and is regarded as an important voice by young Arabs and young people of Mediterranean origin residing in Italy.

It is possible to single out three main lines of analysis to make sense of the contribution that the blogs and their authors have given to the debate around the uprisings. The first is the unveiling of the contested nature of the events and, therefore, the contentious memory-building process surrounding the events. Second, is the shifting positions of the authors vis-à-vis their country of origin, in particular Egypt. Third is the sense of belonging to a generation. As mentioned earlier, the uprisings have built a strong generational bond, which is also discussed by young people of Arab origin in Italy.

4.1.1 The contested nature of the uprisings and memory building

The heterogeneity of political allegiances and ideological orientations that one may find in Egypt is reflected in the community of Egyptians residing in Italy. Diverse opinions are expressed on the course of the uprisings and their aftermath. In particular, diverse opinions exist as to the role of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and their ascent to power.

⁸ <http://www.plough.com/en/authors/f/wael-farouq>,
<http://www.meetingrimini.org/default.asp?id=673&m=partecipanti&value=5730>.

Rania Ibrahim, for instance, writes in *La Città Nuova*, a weekly section of the Milan branch of the national newspaper *Il Corriere della sera*:

To be Italian and Egyptian is today very difficult, there is so much anxiety and pain and uncertainty on both shores of the Mediterranean. [...] I feel so frustrated to be far away from Egypt: I would like to be there to be part of the efforts and endeavour of the Egyptian people. As usual, however, I am deeply disturbed and disillusioned by the new, young Italian Muslims who grew up with democracy and macaroni, and who support the theocratic regime of the Brothers instead of their people [having never personally experienced the Brotherhood's rule]. [The Brotherhood] is evidently present in associations, pseudo-mosques and basements functioning as prayer rooms all over Italy. I hope they won't hate me [for saying so], but I think they are confused.⁹

This excerpt reflects a situation of contention both in Egypt and within the Egyptian community residing in Italy. In fact, the rise to power of the MB enhanced divisions. It is interesting to note how there is a distinction being made between “the people” (a central element in all mobilisations, usually described as young and with epic tones) and the MB. In fact, those who support the MB are described as “confused” and, crucially, seem to fall out of the group of “the people”, not being part of “the people” and not being supportive of them. A similar view is voiced by Wael Farouq, who criticised the “democracy” of Egypt, suggesting that it has been confused with “ballot-crazy”. His argument goes that the fetishism of democracy is in reality fetishism of procedural democracy, and elections in particular. No matter if the party being elected is inherently anti-democratic like the MB, according to Farouq, the crucial point here is that the electoral procedure is being respected.¹⁰ Although born in Egypt, Farouq is a frequent commentator on current affairs in Italy and he is regarded as an important voice by young Arabs and young people of Mediterranean origin residing in Italy.

⁹<http://lacittanuova.milano.corriere.it/2013/07/03/la-seconda-rivoluzione-egiziana-e-la-confusione-delle-seconde-generazioni/#.UdRwXmewCGE.twitter>, July 3 2013 (accessed July 8 2016).

¹⁰ <http://www.yallaitalia.it/2014/09/occidente-ottuso-la-primavera-araba-fra-bush-e-foucault/>, September 1 2014 (last accessed September 6 2016).

Noor Gamyla also echoes Farouq's reflections. In one of her posts, she calls on a famous Italian comedian, Maurizio Crozza, to check on Tunisia to find inspiration for his gigs. After the electoral victory of Ennahda, she laments the newly found centrality of religion to the political life in the country:

We need self-criticism. We wasted those precious slogans and ideals such as 'No religion matters – we're all Egyptians' as subsequent actions demonstrated. We have to recognise we have a problem with religion. We cannot make of it a private matter. We have to mark our religion on our IDs and we have to bring it into the palaces of power and into politics. Tunisia demonstrated it in a veiled manner, Egypt by betraying the ideals and values of the revolution.¹¹

Gamyla too refers to the political power gained by the moderate Islamist party Ennahda to put forth a critique of the events in Tunisia. A contraposition is constructed here between the revolution and Ennahda's victory, which recalls the contraposition between "the people" and "those who support the Egyptian MB" as put forth by Ibrahim and implicitly by Farouq. Likewise, Gamyla writes in another post:

According to Sheikh Qaradawi, who is well known for his preaching activity on the Qatar-based TV channel Al Jazeera, "Egypt is now ready to lead the Islamic nation". He also invited his followers to "spread propaganda among the disenfranchised and disillusioned youth, telling them that we are entering a new era". Evidently, the sheikh did not capture or understand the true nature of the uprisings. The new era he is thinking of does not fit with the Arab Spring. According to him, the new era does not equate to a spring ... an Arab Spring.¹²

It is possible to detect in these interventions an Orientalist view of Islam and political Islam, as the arguments revolve around the supposedly anti-modern or anti-democratic nature of both the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda.

¹¹ <http://www.yallaitalia.it/2011/06/caro-crozza-in-tunisia-ed-egitto-ce-del-materiale-per-te/>, June 28 2011 (accessed July 8 2016).

¹² <http://www.yallaitalia.it/2011/09/per-qaradawi-la-nuova-era-non-fa-rima-con-primavera/>, September 9 2011 (accessed July 8 2016).

4.1.2 Shifting positionality vis-à-vis Egypt

The uprisings have been a game-changing element in the lives of many second generation Egyptians living in Italy, and their relationship to Egypt reflects that. Many blogs and contributions underline a shifting positionality vis-à-vis Egypt and, in particular, a re-ignited enthusiasm for the events in North Africa when compared to the situation in Italy, and the willingness to contribute to the events.

Heba Madkour, a young Muslim woman from Milan, discusses the results of a workshop attended by second generation Egyptians residing in the city. She reports that:

Another element that stands out is the relationship with the country of origin [Egypt] ... the presence of an active community [voice] outside of Egypt yet able to comment what happens in Egypt, a community interested in what happens in Egypt, who does not self-limit to watch soap operas from the country or to listen to Amr Diab, but who has a relevant role to play in the construction of a new Egypt [...] The Arab Spring continues, in Italy too.¹³

This excerpt suggests two things. First is the moral obligation to act as a sort of bridge between two countries, given the peculiar standpoint young Egyptians residing in Italy have. This echoes what Anastasia Christou found in the case of Greek-Americans returning to Greece, who felt the need to stress and enhance their “ethnic and cultural value” (2011: 103). Although none of the authors or the respondents to the workshop returned to Egypt, there seems to be a correspondence here because of the insistence on the “contribution” that young Italians or second generations of Egyptian origin can give and their readiness to do so. Secondly, the author also states that “The Arab Spring continues” in Italy. This statement does not only suggest that there is a strong link between the community residing in Italy and Egypt but also that the community residing in Italy is an agent of change that parallels the “original” Egyptian community, reclaiming agency and a degree of independence.

Oussmana Mansour, a university student in his 20s, in his post titled “Where is the revolution?” describes his mixed feelings while watching a TV report about the murder of the left-wing politician Mohamed Brahmi. Brahmi’s killing followed the political murder of Chokri Belaid, another left-wing politician, in the same year.

¹³ <http://www.yallaitalia.it/2012/05/egiziani-a-milano-i-giovani-e-i-loro-desideri/>, May 28 2012 (accessed July 8 2016).

[When asked about politics, Tunisians’] declarations and answers were full of political apathy, like one of those documentaries about Italy in the sixties. People look for those who are guilty [...] they blame Ennahda, the Islam-inspired party in government. They are not used, I think, to freely expressing their opinions in the daylight, without fear. I take the typical perspective of those Westerners who, from the outside, assess people’s feelings with scant knowledge and without ever understanding them fully. Because Westerners do not really feel for Tunisians.¹⁴

The accusation of Orientalism that Oussmana mounts against Westerners is, interestingly, also self-directed as he argues that he operates within the same ideological framework. This suggests a possible shift in the relationship to Tunisians and Tunisia whereby a sense of duality is expressed.

4.1.3 Belonging to a generation

The building of a generational bond is one of the most discussed topics in the blogs under examination. Authors and contributors voice a feeling of shared identity and belonging. Noor Gamyla, in one of her posts, writes about the famous singing contest Arab Idol and sends this message to Dounia Batma, a Moroccan singer taking part:

I have always been your fan. But I was really disappointed by your latest declaration [...] “*3ach* (long live) the King of Morocco”, while you were weeping and crying, you could have spared us this. Look, you’re young and you deserve to be successful because you’re talented and you worked hard for fame, you’re such a wonderful symbol for the new Arab era! You’re a young woman, you’re talented and competent, you work hard and send an amazing message to young Arab people who tolerate injustice every day because they are poor, gay, sons or daughters of single mothers, because they have no contacts in the palace or the bureaucratic system. [...] your praise for the leadership of the Moroccan king (a leader who got it all with no effort) you advertised the old era, you advertise everything that the Arab

¹⁴<http://www.yallaitalia.it/2013/07/win-hya-at-thawra-dove-la-rivoluzione-voci-dalla-tunisia-tra-cambiamento-e-instabilita/>, July 29 2013 (accessed July 8 2016)

Spring wants to get rid of ... and you did this in front of a public of young people.¹⁵

This excerpt suggests a number of things. First of all, it defends a generation that had the courage and brazenness to challenge the system of power she is referring to in her post. Secondly, there is an explicit construction of “a generation” as revolutionary, young and disadvantaged for some reasons. At the same time, there is also the construction of what the Arab Spring is and what it sought, as Gamyla lists the injustice against which the Arab youth mobilised. Third, it is interesting to note how cultural consumption here is turned into a politically salient element. Not only is Batma described as a potential symbol of the Arab Spring and of the generation that carried it out, but also Arab Idol is the instrument of political awareness that allows for both the conceptualisation of the revolutionary generation and the criticism of Batma as an ally of the “old era” of Arab politics. This recalls Asef Bayat’s (2010) notion of “everyday politics” and the “calm encroachment of the ordinary people” who can find political meaning in apparently apolitical TV shows such as Arab Idol. Ismahan Hassen also echoes feelings of closeness and belonging to a revolutionary generation:

Two years of Arab Spring while here [in Italy] it is winter. [...] this is not praise for a revolution we consider accomplished ... actually [...] we admire the brazenness and courage of Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Syrians, Yemenis – the courage they had and continue to have – to rebel against a system that suffocated human dignity, life and freedom.¹⁶

The excerpt suggests the strengthening of belonging to a newly-emerging generation, the brave revolutionaries that rebelled against injustice.

¹⁵ <http://www.yallaitalia.it/2012/03/arab-idol-ecco-perche-non-tifo-piu-dounia-batma/>, March 20 2012 (accessed July 8 2016).

¹⁶ <http://www.yallaitalia.it/2013/02/striscione-che-scriviguarini-che-trovi/>, February 11 2013 (accessed July 8 2016).

4.2 Young people with Egyptian backgrounds in Milan and their views on the uprisings

4.2.1. On the experience of the Arab uprisings

This section focuses on the interviewees' narrations of both their experience of the Arab uprisings and the Egyptian revolution, and their involvement in the current events unfolding in their parents' homeland (Egypt) and the Arab Mediterranean countries. In particular, we will examine from a transnational perspective their participation in the events that occurred in 2011 in Egypt and their political and civil involvement in the aftermaths of those events. This section engages with both activists and non-activists, and tries to single out what the experience of the uprisings has been at the micro and individual levels.

In this respect, the first important element to be pointed out is that all our interviewees have been touched by and involved in the events, yet at different levels. Most of them experienced the Arab uprisings while in Italy.

For the majority of those who were in Italy, the Arab uprisings generated a very strong sense of involvement from the beginning. The exceptions were the two youngest interviewees, who were only 14 years old at the time (Mansur and Emira, now both 19), and whose participation and sense of involvement in the events was only superficial.

For those who were in Italy the main sources of information about Egypt during the events were the internet, television and relatives living in the country, with whom they were in contact through Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber. In general, Arab television stations (in particular Al Jazeera, Al Arabya and Al Kahera) were preferred to the Italian television because the events were analysed in detail and because of the attention devoted to the events in the daily timetable.

Facebook was used by most of the interviewees to keep in contact with relatives, and to read news on the events. One interviewee, Carol (22 years old), used Facebook to take part in some groups that organised public discussion and forums on the Arab uprisings. In addition, the interviewees' parents played an important role in providing and deciphering news from Egypt especially for those who do not know Arabic. Overall, the uprisings were the occasion for reflecting on the reasons why their parents emigrated, but time and room for internal discussion on the causes of the revolution were also granted.

Two interviewees (Nabil and Aida) participated directly in the events. They said that they were accidentally in Egypt and decided to take part in the protests out of curiosity. Nabil –

who was in Egypt between 2011 and 2013 – spent time in Tahrir Square in January and February 2011 and experienced the violent action of the military forces against the protesters. On the contrary, Aida was in Egypt in the summer 2013 and spent time at the sit-in supporting Morsi in Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. She witnessed the repression of the pro-Morsi forces by the military. Like Nabil, she was curious and willing to be part of a revolution she wanted to experience directly without mediation. She was motivated by her desire to know the protesters' motivation.

4.2.2. The aftermath of the revolution: Discovering the real Egypt

This section focuses on the effects of the uprising on our interviewees and in particular on their view of and relationship with Egypt and, in general, transnational participation.

The two interviewees – Emira and Mansur – who were least involved in the Arab uprising perhaps due to their young age, reported that they were not particularly affected by the aftermaths of the events in Egypt. On the contrary, the other interviewees experienced different kind of effects and reactions. Magda (23 years old), Asma (21 years old) and Aida, for instance, declared they felt more mature and aware after the events in Egypt. The events allowed them “to open my eyes” (Asma, Aida) or in general “to have a personal opinion of the facts” (Magda). This new condition is associated with the curiosity to learn about what is going on in Egypt and follow the political events in the country (Nabil) and even in the whole world (Carol).

This new awareness about the Arab uprisings and the Egyptian political events affected in particular their relationship with their origins and their parents' homeland. In this regard, Nabil and Aida declared they felt, for the first time in their lives, a sense of belonging and pride for the Egyptian population that had the courage to oust Hosni Mubarak after so many years (Asma). Their relationship with the country has also changed considering this new perspective of the country.

Considering the effects of the Arab uprisings on our interviewees' sense of belonging and transnational participation, we can distinguish two trends. The first consists of an immediate, strong enthusiasm for the revolution that ended in great disillusionment and cynicism (Baha, Nabil, Aida). The initial enthusiasm was associated with a sense of pride for Egypt, a renewed sense of belonging to Egypt, and an intense hope for change for the country in the future (Baha). The second trend consists of an initial, limited curiosity and moderate

enthusiasm toward the revolution but, contrary to those who subscribe to the first trend, it left behind a great curiosity about the country, despite the disappointing trajectory of the revolution and renewed authoritarianism. The young people that describe this second trend have progressively taken an interest in the developments unfolding in the region and in the uprisings, avoiding the strong initial enthusiasm that characterised the first trend and, following the events on the TV and Facebook, participating in family discussion (Magda, Asma). They were able to transform the failure of the revolution from a limitation into a resource (the opportunity to look at the country from a new perspective with new curiosity).

4.2.3. Transnational identities

The Arab uprisings and their aftermath affected the sense of belonging and the identity of many of our interviewees. We will now describe the identities emerging from their narrations, taking into account their relationship with Egypt and the Arab uprisings, their relatives, the Arabic language, the overall Egyptian culture (music, movies, books, and so on) and their transnational practises.

We may distinguish three main profiles: the sense of belonging to Egypt, the sense of belonging to Italy and the absence of a sense of belonging. In the first case, the interviewees firmly declare “feeling Egyptian” even though they were born and raised in Italy. They report “a strong feeling and bond to Egypt” (Asma), a “deep love” (Magda) for the country. Asma and Magda both distinguished between the everyday life in Italy where they are studying, working and conducting their practical life, and their affective and emotional life in Egypt. They both like the Arabic language.

The second identity profile is based on a strong sense of belonging to Italy. Though Emira and Baha recognise that their origins are Egyptian and they feel a deep connection to the country, their homeland is Italy. Emira, who does not know Arabic and is not interested in studying it, feels anxious when she spends holidays in Egypt, due to communication problems. Baha, who knows Arabic, makes a list of priorities and places Italy at the top, followed by Egypt, as his countries of belonging: “It’s my parents’ country, and Italy is my country”.

The third identity profile is the most complicated, because it suggests an ambivalent and troubled relationship with both Egypt and Italy, presenting different kinds of relationship with the two countries. The interviewees falling into this profile do not feel Egyptian or

Italian. Some interviewees (Mansur and Aida) state that when in Egypt they have always experienced (and still do) the embarrassing condition of feeling like foreigners. Other interviewees experienced feeling Egyptian only during the Arab uprisings, but the failure of the revolution put them again in a condition of not belonging (Nabil). Finally, Carol experienced a third kind of troubled relationship with Egypt and Italy: she is particularly aware of having a troubled relationship with her origins and she is still trying to put them in the right perspective.

4.2.4. Youth conditions and future plans: A gendered perspective

We will now examine our interviewees' narrations from a gendered perspective. An important result is that no specific gendered aspect emerges when it comes to the way in which our interviewees addressed the issues we previously analysed. In fact, both young women and young men experienced the uprisings and their aftermaths in a similar way. They both experienced the revolution directly or whilst in Italy, they both obtained updates and news from the internet and the television. Their sense of belonging and the impact of the events on their take on Egypt do not differ if considered from a gendered perspective. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the interviewees report different perspectives and experiences according to their age, family background and level of political involvement in the events. However, gender differences emerge if we consider their view of the condition of youth in Egypt and their biographical future projects.

First, when asked about their views of the condition of youth in Egypt, young men never mentioned any gender issue, either related to women's conditions or to the specific situations of young men in Egypt compared with young men in Italy. They just noted differences between young people in Egypt and Italy with respect to job opportunities and future projects in general. In Egypt, as Nabil points out, "all is complicated and limiting". On the contrary, although young women agree with the young men that Egyptian young people have a harder life, they also spontaneously observe that unfair differences are very evident between women and men in terms of educational/professional/family opportunities, despite the modernisation occurring in the country, which is also in part changing women's conditions. In brief, according to the young women we interviewed, traditional roles are still persistent.

A second aspect where gender differences emerged is the future prospects of the interviewees. When asked if they think of and plan their future and what kind of emotions they feel while doing that, they all answered that the future is a temporal dimension they consider above all in terms of professional fulfilment. In addition, they all have different plans in case their main projects fail. Nevertheless, while young men, if asked by the interviewer, refer briefly to their private life and the project of a marriage, young women spontaneously also include forming a family in their plans.

5. Conclusions

This paper has explored the experiences of young men and women of Arab Mediterranean background living in Italy and their views on the Arab uprisings and their aftermaths. It has taken into account both the discourse advanced by activists and publicly exposed second generations on blogs and websites, and the individual narratives of young people of Egyptian background collected through in-depth interviews. The paper contributes to the debate on the global dimension of the Arab uprisings; it enriches the current knowledge of the role of young people of Arab descent in Europe on the events unfolding on the other shore of the Mediterranean.

The interviews have shown that most of the young men and women we considered participated in the Arab uprisings: the majority followed the events from Italy, obtaining news and updates from the internet and Arab TV channels and media outlets. The role of their family (in Italy and Egypt) has also been crucial in following the events. The aftermaths of the revolutions, in particular in the case of Egypt, proved to be crucial in engendering a new vision of the country. In fact, all our interviewees had an idealised image of their parents' homeland that originated from their summer holidays in Egypt. On the contrary, the political events that occurred in 2011 and the subsequent transformations changed their perspective and allowed them to discover the real social and political conditions of the country, which generated multiple emotions: curiosity and hope but also cynicism and negativity. The events affected their sense of belonging too. In the case of some interviewees, the Egyptian revolution reinforced their sense of belonging to the country; in the case of others, the aftermath of the revolution strengthened their sense of belonging to Italy. In other cases, the events contributed to fostering their identity limbo. No

gendered narratives of the uprisings and their aftermath emerged, as both men and women reported similar experience and feelings. However, gendered accounts emerged when the interviewees reflected on the living conditions of Egyptian young women and men, and when it came to their own future plans. While young women notice the unfair social differences in the way young men and women in Egypt live, enjoy job opportunities and plan their future, young men seem blind to such inequalities. Another difference emerged as young female interviewees, when talking about their future plans, mentioned both professional fulfilment and the establishment of a family while young men seemed to be solely focused on their professional self-fulfilment.

This paper makes a contribution to the academic debate on the transnational lives and identities of young descendants of immigrant parents (Levitt, 2009; Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004; Kasinitz et al., 2002; Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton-Blanc, 1994; Portes and Rumbaut, 2005; Rumbaut, 2002; Wessendorf, 2013). The research shows that second generation youth also experience transnationalism, which then goes beyond the first-generation. Young people involved in the research deploy their transnational ties and networks and their transcultural competences in their everyday life as well as under special circumstances, such as the outburst of the uprisings and the subsequent period of political instability and contention. These events strengthened the connection with their parents' homelands, either through increased social interactions, communications and exchanges of information, or through emotional attachment and a re-ignited sense of belonging and curiosity towards the country. The events propelled these youths to reconsider their identity again, as for many they represented a turning point in their biographies. Their direct and indirect participation in the events was made possible thanks to pre-existing social and cultural capital rooted in their socialisation in transnational families, which was, in turn, reactivated and transformed by these experiences.

The results of the analysis also suggest that the public debate around young people with migrant backgrounds living in Europe and southern Europe should shift its focus from security and identity dilemmas to a more complex perspective. While the public attention on the second generations in Europe has grown over the last decades, the debate has tended to focus on the relation with the society of residence. Most of the debates address the issue of cultural belonging and the social, economic and political assimilation/integration of the children of immigrants. There is little consideration of or interest in their transnational ties,

imaginaries and practices. This debate is underpinned by the issue of “loyalty” to the national identity of the country in which second generation youth reside. An implicit concern or “suspicion” is projected onto their transnational connection – even stronger in the case Arab and Muslim youth in the context of growing Islamophobia both in the EU and North America. Multiple belongings still tend to be perceived as problematic and dangerous, while cultural and national identities are thought of as exclusive and mutually incompatible. For all these reasons, we consider it highly relevant to highlight the practices, imaginaries and relationships that these young people may construct and maintain, transcending national and European borders, across the two shores of the Mediterranean, which at this historical moment, are characterised by the closing or strengthening of these borders.

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