
Introduction: Youth, thresholds, and temporalities

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Andrea Buchetti



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Entre los jóvenes, las utopías revolucionarias de los setenta, el enojo y la frustración de los ochenta, han mutado de cara al siglo veintiuno, hacia formas de convivencia que, pese a su acusado individualismo, parecen fundamentarse en un principio ético-político generoso: el reconocimiento explícito de no ser portadores de ninguna verdad absoluta en nombre de la cual ejercer un poder excluyente¹ (Reguillo 2000: 14).

- 1 In turbulent contemporary Western democracies, 'young people' and 'youth' are conspicuously absent from administrative agendas and underpinning the discourse of new 'sovereignties'. In both the more common form of «souverainism», which insists on «protecting local cultures from the degrading order of globalisation» (Giancristofaro 2025: 488)², and in political praxis aimed at reinforcing the boundaries of moral, political, and social sovereignty, young people often serve as a redundant counterpoint. Italy is a prime example of this. On the one hand, they are seen as 'corrupting' the national identity due to ethnic and migratory backgrounds (Grassi 2025); on the other, they are regarded as "dangerous" presences to adult national morality, to be managed through concrete disciplinary measures. At the same time, their recognition as a collective subject seems to find little room within the 'conservative' frameworks of the political agendas and administrative structures of the mentioned democracies.
- 2 Far from stemming the much-discussed global drift of youth, such national approaches are linked to a long-term historical and economic trend which, on the whole, is now leading to an expansion of the concept and self-perception (whether chosen or imposed) of 'youth' as never before in Western history. As many canonical works on the

subject often point out, youth and adolescence – and thus a certain version of adulthood (Blatterer 2007) – are demographic inventions of post-Second World War mass society. This occurred during a period of historical transition, when consumption, welfare, employment and education established themselves as new drivers of social mobility and the reorganization of domestic and public roles. In this context, work, leisure and one's position in care relationships were categorised according to specific life stages and social developments.

- 3 Today, amidst the ruins of that prosperity, these 'stages' seem to have lost some of their coherence as ideal social careers. It is often said that youth has become a prolonged transitional phase with uncertain horizons, where the boundaries between previous roles are blurring once again, but in opposite directions. Whereas before the economic boom the overlap between social and biographical statuses was reflected in the image of a productive childhood within family and work environments, today, as youth becomes increasingly divorced from social mobility, positions that are chronologically 'adult' rarely coincide with society's (re)productive ideals. In both cases, boundaries are blurring as social expectations, care roles, aspirations trajectories of fulfilment (personal or collective), and structural political and economic conditions are reorganised into new configurations.
- 4 Post-industrial capitalism presents us with the paradox of a «biocultural transformation that is turning large segments of the human population into a "younger" species – younger in looks, behaviours, mentality, lifestyles, and, above all, desires» (Pogue Harrison 2014: x) alongside an ageing population that is prevalent in much of the Western world. In response to this oxymoron, less sagacious public figures perpetuate stereotypes of 'apathetic youth' and 'immature adults' – *I bamboccioni* [the big babies], as an Italian minister responsible for 'growth' put it years ago. The same stereotype of laxity then transforms into a grim moral panic when the spotlight is on publicly active young people defined by ethnicity, gender, or political and cultural activism. Such discourses have generally adopted certain tenets of the 'strong' academic theories on youth from the late 20th century for conservative ends – paradoxically, the most critical ones. «Nobody seems to want to grow up any more, especially not the young» Peter Beilharz (2007: 8) noted ironically in the same year that the aforementioned minister delivered his speech. Meanwhile, a well-established school of thought in the social sciences – Richard Sennett in the USA and Zygmunt Bauman in Europe, still within the Northern Hemisphere – identified in young people the triumph of liberal individualism instilled by the market (Bauman 2000). While such theories have helped to identify and deconstruct the structural forces affecting the contemporary experience of youth (assuming it can be discussed in the singular), they have done little to capture how real individuals make, unmake and remake their subjectivities as young people within the myriad local configurations lying between biographical dating and social values (Simonicca 2009).
- 5 Yet even before comparing with 'other' cultures, the supposed blurring of categories (biographical and social) offers fertile ground – if stripped of essentialism – for a critical and culturally sensitive investigation into the 'becoming' of young people today. Although anthropology has remained in the quantitative minority on this topic compared to sociology and cultural studies, its qualitative distinctive feature – its sensitivity to discrepancies and continuities between biological transitions and the culturalisation of biographical development – makes it particularly well-suited to

addressing such scenarios. This is not only because evidence from all corners of the globe seems to challenge the rhetoric of Western youth individualism, but also because the clear correlation between life stages and social roles, which shaped the last century, has been reassessed.

- 6 Early comparisons between cultures with different social norms surrounding childhood and adolescence led anthropologists to examine the multifaceted relationships between biological development and the formation of social identity through distinct 'stages' (Mead 1928; Malinowski 1929) and 'thresholds' of progression (Van Gennep 1960). Despite their originality, such seminal studies only achieved modest success in opening a dialogue with Western research during the same period, when 'the youth question' was being established within the sociology of deviance (Thrasher 1927). Furthermore, and perhaps concurrently, limitations emerged from an approach that framed adolescence solely from an adult perspective. Highlighting teleological transitions through clear phases resulted in the internal logics of youth cultural productions being relegated to the background (Bucholtz 2002). Since then, early anthropological perspectives have not only been updated (Eickelkamp 2011), but have also been gradually reapplied to 'familiar' contexts, revealing unexpected implications for even the most ordinary youth practices concerning bodies (Diasio, Vinel 2017), consumption (Chin 2001), and sociality (Reguillo 2000), among many other fields.
- 7 In this regard, the encounter with decolonisation represented a moment of radical transformation (Cole, Durham 2008; Hansen *et al.* 2008). The 'discovery' of young people's lives – which have been shaken by the cosmological upheavals brought about by the same global neoliberalism, yet which are armed with cultural responses derived from other local configurations of the 'biographical development' and 'social value' dichotomy – has led to three interdependent theoretical reorientations. First, the adoption of an 'internal' perspective on youth cultural creativity has enabled key concepts of globalisation, such as "popular culture" (Weiss 2009), to be critically and ethnographically rethought through a mutual construction between local and global repertoires (Luvaas 2009). Secondly, it has complicated the dominance-resistance and individualism-conviviality dichotomies through which young people in the West had previously been conceptualised in relation to the latter. Finally, the synthesis of the two preceding points: a rearticulation of the foundational concepts of the sociology of youth – deviance, crisis, transition – beyond Western boundaries and in direct relation not only to youth cultural productions, but also to their use in the socio-political demands arising from the cracks in the colonial order (Comaroff 2006). Such contexts, including contemporary neocolonial ones (Miceli 2023), have presented anthropologists with the complex interplay between the micro-practices of young people, their ethnopolitical consciousness, and the global macro-structures of power. This has led to the breakdown of previous ideological approaches to youth culture consumption and production (Hall, Jefferson 1976), and the re-articulation of the two main origins of the emergence of 'youth' as a sociological question until the 1970s (Magaña 2020): moral panic first, and the involvement of this new biographical category in post-war social movements later.
- 8 The epistemological legacy of such postcolonial cross-disciplinary ventures has transcended disciplinary boundaries, giving rise to a wealth of urban and geographical studies which are now finding in young people a lens through which to reinterpret certain paradoxes of the global present (Thieme 2025; Di Nunzio 2019; Esson *et al.* 2021).

However, the cross-pollination between these approaches has not always had the opportunity to develop in depth. Opening and closing this monographic dossier with an introduction by an anthropologist and an analytical afterword by a geographer, respectively, aims to initiate a dialogue in this vein.

- 9 Amidst the myriad developments surrounding the global concept of youth, the original tension between moral panic and political protagonism remains unresolved. In fact, it appears to be 'returning home' in a new guise after long and complex global wanderings. Alongside the aforementioned ethnic and generational alarmism, the emergence of Generation Z as a new global political subject in the last year has been the first sign of cross-cultural criticism of the spread of new 'democratic' authoritarianisms. From Asia – via Madagascar, Kenya, and Morocco – the emblems of the movement (should the concept be applicable to this phenomenon) have travelled through Latin American capitals, finally reaching Europe and North America more modestly. It is no coincidence that it is more appropriate to speak of symbols than of specific political programmes in the case of a plural anti-ideological movement united by a general call for direct political participation. Depending on national priorities, this has resulted in the overthrow of corrupt political classes (e.g. in Nepal) or been co-opted by conservative forces against progressive governments in power (e.g. in Mexico, see Mondragón 2026: 37). Nevertheless, even in the latter cases, old, discredited reactionary parties appropriating the 'youth' banner to relaunch themselves on the national stage confirms the prominent role that young people are playing in a new vision of global activism that remains to be fully understood.
- 10 Between the two extremes of this newly discovered dual nature, a vast array of cultural phenomena and small-scale youth social interactions proliferate, in which the two poles intertwine to give rise to original configurations. Examples abound. From new forms of festive asceticism, which challenge the long-stigmatised image of youth gatherings by demonstrating sophisticated socio-political awareness regarding consumption, altered states of consciousness, and intersectional inclusivity (Hill *et al.* 2022); to forms of public grouping, long ignored (Reguillo 2000), through which young people extend into the streets values and codes derived from formal socialisation institutions. A growing range of seemingly counterintuitive forms of sociability that offers a valuable opportunity to challenge the theoretical assumptions of last century's theories, in a joint effort to move beyond the «mythical extremes» (Blanch 1980) with which young people have always been described, caught between a resistant «aestheticization» and a security-oriented «epidemiological view» (Reguillo 2000: 16).

Crossing the threshold: The articles

- 11 The monographic dossier that the reader is about to explore is the result of reflections arising from a study day held as part of the PhD seminar in History, Anthropology and Religions (anthropology programme) entitled *Life Thresholds, Global Thresholds. The Margins of Youth at the Centre of Modern World-Making*, organised at La Sapienza in October 2024. The urgent need to initiate an in-depth debate extending beyond national contexts, building on shared research interests among young scholars at the University of Rome, led to the establishment of a diverse and theoretically influential group of experts – primarily anthropologists, but also geographers and sociologists –

united by a shared perception of a shift in youth-related phenomena within contemporary global scenarios.

- 12 However, from the outset, the concept of ‘threshold’ – the theoretical proposition at the heart of the title – began to falter under the weight of the detailed case studies of young people’s ‘world-making’ – the other extreme of the proposition – in relation to the structures of the State, gender, mobility, memory and space addressed in each contribution. Conversely, a processual dimension emerged with determination – one that was by no means progressive or attributable to defined breaks – upon which the supposed values, ethics, practices and boundaries that determine what is understood as ‘youth’ in every ethnographic context were played out and played with. Although the concept of ‘threshold’ was initially proposed on the basis of the third and intermediate possibilities that it would open up between social statuses, it remained steeped in a long-standing determinism that risked transposing a postmodern discontinuous approach to historical development onto a generational basis – an approach that had already been criticised in anthropology (Graeber 2011: 79-106). The concept of generation associated with ‘threshold’ remains relevant for several reasons. It is often used emically for political and self-representation purposes, while building upon the productive ambiguity between uniqueness (compared with the past) and continuity with the broader cultural landscape it reflects (Villalpando 2026). However, ‘generation’ falls short of explaining how youth – as an ascribed status, customary, bureaucratic, or kinship category – is experienced, challenged, criticised, distorted, and rethought to situate oneself within the uncertainties of complex global scenarios. The bidirectional movements between the «invisible concepts» of adulthood and youth «are neither a matter of crossing a threshold nor passing a rite of passage» (Blatterer 2007: 8-9) or, as Tatiana Thieme puts it in the afterword of this dossier: «Everyone, at one stage of their life, is in some sense a “youth.” And what these articles do show us, in conversation with wider youth scholarship, is that moving out of this phase of life is more than ever unobvious». Instead, it involves constant navigation between individuality, institutions, public policies, memory, gerontocratic roles, and global consumption styles and codes.
- 13 Indeed, what scope was there within these ‘thresholds’ for the relationships that define any biographical condition, whether static or transitory, between and within generations? To what extent could the concept capture continuities and ruptures with ‘other’ forms of youthful uncertainty across different times and spaces? What advantage did the concept offer us in understanding the counterintuitive practices through which youth is not merely experienced as a temporal category, but appropriated by individuals of different ages to intervene in the temporalities of their own lives and access symbolic, political, social and spatial resources? Rather than teetering on a threshold, the young people encountered during the study day seemed to be grappling with temporalities structured from above, or with the construction of coherent temporal orders through which to shape community, belonging, sharing, and original collective representations. More often than not, as emerges throughout this dossier, the three planes intertwined seamlessly. In a very general sense, the specific spatial orders, cultural productions and ethical proposals presented in the various contributions of the day emerged from such collective efforts of play, creation and management of temporality. A material and symbolic undertaking of temporal agency which required time in its own right to be realised.

- 14 «It takes a long time to become young», Pablo Picasso claimed almost a century ago. All the contributions in this dossier address or allude to the tension between the ‘temporal labour’ of youth and the ‘temporal frameworks’ – both imposed and creative – that culturally mark the rhythm of specific social developments throughout biographical time. Contributions range from those who revisit their previous research in light of time passing and their evolving relationship with their former young interlocutors (Dattatreyan in this dossier), to those who focus on the ways in which young people create spaces and times for themselves, outside of the gerontocratic hierarchies that determine socio-political roles in New Caledonia (Gallo in this dossier). Others reverse the relationship, showing how bureaucratic structures through which the State establishes clear boundaries between youth and adulthood are diverted by subjects to determine their position in Ivorian society’s moral and political landscape (Cutolo in this dossier). There are those who examine the moral economies through which young people in Mexico use consumer goods to manage the coming of age from below across different generations and beyond the family institution (Buchetti in this dossier), and those who observe the slow, meticulous strategies of settlement among young Italian migrants within the English colonial housing system (Barone in this dossier).
- 15 In any case, the study day was guided by two principles: a strong ethnographic focus and a wide range of case studies exploring the current possibilities of youth, set against the backdrop of tools for cultural production and the structural constraints of our global present. The contributions collected here are written accounts of the individual case studies presented and reworked in light of the collective debate that characterised the day. In some cases, these are the first accounts of recent research currently underway or just completed in New Caledonia (Gallo 2022), the United Kingdom (Barone 2025), and Mexico (Buchetti 2025), which the seminar discussion provided with new insights. One case involves updating an influential work on the international debate concerning youth, gender and digital media in India (Dattatreyan 2020), while another provides an in-depth analysis of a recently published study on the hijacking of civil registry bureaucracy for the moral management of age in the Ivory Coast (Banégas, Cutolo 2024). Finally, in the form of an analytical epilogue, a comparative reflection reconstructs the theoretical contribution of the presented studies in dialogue with the author’s most recent work (Thieme 2025). It should be noted, finally, that the theoretical cross-pollinations underpinning this issue would not have been possible without the contributions of papers that shaped the study day but could not be included in this dossier. Nevertheless, their influence is evident throughout, providing starting points for rethinking the relationship between revolutionary exceptionality and the ethical ordinariness of youth (Aly 2024), and the role of youth cultural productions in models of global value circulation between private property and sharing (Stern 2014).
- 16 The dossier opens with Dattatreyan’s contribution, in which he revisits and reworks his concept of «the globally familiar» (Dattatreyan 2020) years on. He draws on an ethnographic return to the young hip-hop artists in Delhi whom he had previously encountered in earlier research. The article demonstrates how aesthetic and media practices, inspired by global Black culture and initially adopted to imagine oneself and the urban space, transform over time into a prism through which to interpret the evolving nature of masculinity in India. By tracing the biographical trajectories of individuals marked by transitions to adulthood, economic insecurity, and the

mainstream expansion of hip-hop, the author illustrates how aspirations, anxieties, and family responsibilities reshape the relationship between creativity, work, and gender within the context of contemporary capitalism.

- 17 In his article, Gallo analyses the bodily and stylistic practices of young Kanak people in rural Kanaky-New Caledonia, focusing particularly on the spread of the *capuche* phenomenon, in terms of both its practical and stylistic aspects. By contextualising these behaviours within a framework of socio-economic marginalisation, gerontocratic hierarchies, and media narratives surrounding the 'youth crisis', the article illustrates how young individuals adopt and adapt such narratives through aesthetic and performative expressions. Face-covering, tattooing and tagging practices thus emerge as creative responses to dual marginalisation, negotiating respect, subordination and self-assertion while transforming stigmatising stereotypes into resources for constructing situated collective identities.
- 18 Geographically shifting focus, Buchetti reconstructs a moral and material economic circuit through which a youth community in Tijuana, Mexico, manages social 'growth' from below. Conceived as the development of the conceptions of value surrounding discarded commodities, 'growth' occurs within a context of family fragmentation and exposure to the material undertows of border capitalism. Through an ethnography of consumption and exchange practices involving second-hand goods returning from the United States, the author shows how such objects are de-commodified and transformed into gifts within peer networks. These forms of altruistic consumption are central to navigate the transition from childhood to young adulthood, revealing the active role of young people in creating gift economies that redefine the boundaries between the market and reciprocity, the street and the household, thereby inventing new forms of social reproduction and kinship.
- 19 Cutolo examines the widespread practice in the Ivory Coast of lowering one's registered age through a «bureaucratic rebirth», known as *René Caillié* in the vernacular. By re-registering illegally with the civil registry under a new name and date of birth, individuals can align their legal and social ages, thereby circumventing the restrictions imposed by administrative procedures on access to education, employment, and career progression. The author demonstrates that these arrangements are not merely legal violations; rather, they form part of a popular appropriation of the State in which the legal construction of identity is hybridised with the moral values of Ivorian civil society – particularly the authority of elders and kinship hierarchies. In this context, identity documents circulate within families as moral resources, and the lowering of age restores a congruence necessary for the social development of the individual, taming bureaucratic abstraction.
- 20 Barone then 'brings home' the ethnographic focus by actually analysing the homing practices of young adults from southern Italy who have migrated to northern England. They combine aspects of their places of origin and destination to create a sense of home, which Barone shows mediates both their transition to adulthood and their varied integration into the host society. Success as both adults and migrants is associated with hard work, putting down roots, and adhering to the British meritocracy, which leads to the stigmatisation of migrants deemed failures. Barone argues that this conception is steeped in coloniality and adapts migrants' values and practices to the neoliberal organisation of North-South European relations. Nevertheless, this adaptation remains imperfect and precarious, with the ethnic

conceptions of ‘home’ and ‘adulthood’ reflecting unresolved ambivalences and contradictions.

- 21 The dossier concludes with an afterword by Tatiana Thieme, in which the author revisits and refines some of the points also raised in this introduction while offering additional key insights. Returning to the «tension» emphasised by Ramy Aly during the 2024 conference, Thieme refocuses attention on the pitfalls and creative possibilities revealed by young people’s lives amidst the contemporary world’s breakdowns. These breakdowns evoke fractured futures and systemic uncertainty. More importantly, however, ethnographically observing the forms of life that emerge in such cracks invites us to reconsider our current dominant assumptions, and in this respect, young people’s cosmologies often serve as exemplary models. Could it be that it is precisely within the current breakdown that we can overcome the aforementioned «mythical extremes» that young people have always inhabited in studies? Not favouring either of the two poles but starting from the dilated spaces and times of being in the cracks we can rethink the very hegemonic categories that have historically led to the formalisation of these exclusive extremes. Eventually, Thieme concludes by shedding light on the “great absentee” – silent yet loud in every article – of the dossier. The ever-present gender lens reminds us, without stating it explicitly, that studies on youth and creativity in times of crisis are often tinged with masculine traits. Moral anxieties and the inventive tactics devised to address them appear to be influenced by androcentric expectations, priorities, and habits. Beyond merely highlighting a void – which we hope this dossier will encourage filling in the future – Thieme identifies the fragility of male social formations during breakdowns. Here, masculinity itself becomes a terrain that must be constantly reconstructed and made coherent in the face of constant threats to its supposed cultural solidity.

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NOTES

1. As I sit down to write these lines, we have received news of the passing of Rossana Reguillo Cruz. Professor Emerita of Social Anthropology at ITESO – Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara (Mexico). Her contributions to the study of Latin American youth have been an inspiration to an outstanding generation of researchers who have skilfully positioned themselves on the threshold between cultural depth and social critique, a theme explored in this introduction. This monographic dossier of *Archivo Antropologico Mediterraneo* is dedicated to her imposing intellectual legacy.

Translation of the epigraph: amongst youth, the revolutionary utopias of the 1970s and the anger and frustration of the 1980s have, at the dawn of the 21st century, transformed into forms of coexistence which, despite accusations of individualism, appear to be founded on a generous ethical-political principle: the explicit recognition of not being the holders of any absolute truth in the name of which to exercise exclusive power.

2. All bibliographic quotations published in languages other than English have been translated by me for this article.

AUTHOR

ANDREA BUCHETTI

Università di Padova - Dipartimento FISPPA, andrea.buchetti@unipd.it