

## Research Article

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# Not only students, but also not enough: the waves of protest in the higher education in Italy

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**Abstract:** In time of economic crisis, since the 2008 credit crunch, many Western and European countries entered in the “age of austerity” characterized by the imposition of unprecedented large cuts in welfare state provision. Even the public education institutions have been affected by government policies characterized by budget cuts, neoliberal private-oriented reforms and increase in tuition fees for students. In reaction to this, in the following years, various global waves of protests have arisen in many countries all over the world. Differently from the past, not only students have promoted these mobilizations, although they are majority, but also the education systems workforce: from professors/teachers to permanent and precarious researchers, from temporary workers to technical-administrative employees. Although these mobilizations have had specific characteristics related to the national contexts, they have shared common aspects as the defence of public education and the refusal of the commercialization/marketization and privatization process. In this paper I focus on the mobilizations in the higher education system occurred in Italy. The most important waves of protests were in 2008-2010 against the budget cuts and the university neoliberal reform promoted by the former centre-right Education Minister Gelmini. If in the 2008, students and precarious workers mainly promoted the Anomalous Wave movement, so called for its unpredictability, in the 2010, beyond the students, the open-ended researchers were the main protagonists. Notwithstanding the mass participation and the sympathy of part of the public opinion, the reform and the cuts were approved and then, the mobilizations decreased and seemed to be completely finished. I argue that these mobilizations were unsuccessful not only because of the fragmentation of student organizations and because of the low salience of higher education in

Italian public opinion, but also because protesters were not supported by most university staff and hindered by the academic authorities (deans and rectors).

**Keywords:** social movements, student mobilizations, researchers protests, university, Italy

## Introduction: global crisis and transnational protests

In time of economic crisis, since the credit crunch of 2008, many Western and European countries entered in the “age of austerity” characterized by the imposition of unprecedented large cuts in welfare state provision. Even the public education institutions, schools and universities, have been and are affected, in many countries, by government policies, - both conservative and progressive - characterized by budget cuts, neoliberal private-oriented reforms and increase in tuition fees for students. In reaction to this, in the following years, various global waves of protests have arisen in many European countries (France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Greece, UK, etc.), in North and South America (USA, Canada, Mexico, Chili) (Cini & Guzman-Concha, 2017), and in Asia (South Korea, India, Indonesia) and Africa (Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa) (Brooks, 2016; Klemencic, 2014). Differently from the student movements of the sixties and seventies, not only students have promoted these mobilizations, although they are still the majority component, but also those who work in the education systems: the academic staff, from professors/teachers to permanent and precarious researchers, from temporary workers to technical-administrative employees and, sometimes, even parents (Piazza 2014). Although these mobilizations in the education systems have had specific characteristics related to the different national contexts, and have been triggered by specific policy and/or academic decisions, they have had a transnational dimension as one of the main features. In fact, they have shared common traits

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and targets, like the defense of public education accessible to everyone and the refusal of the commercialization and privatization processes, independently from the country where they occurred, and even thanks to the attempts to build transnational networks of activists.

However, these processes – negatively considered by the protesters – have begun many years before, although they were made more visible by the acceleration due to the crisis. In fact, according to Immanuel Wallerstein (2012, pp. 1-2), these processes originated after about 1970s when the world-economy entered its long stagnation, first in the USA and then in the other countries, leading to a reduction of the money that the universities received largely from the states, while at the same time, the costs of university education had continued to rise. Public universities have coped with what was called ‘privatization’: universities began to transform themselves into more business-like institutions, seeking and obtaining money from corporate donors, which in return began to intrude in the internal governance of the universities and to exploit patents for work that university researchers had discovered or invented. Moreover, there began to be evaluations of whole universities and of departments within universities in terms of their output for the money invested, intellectual life was being judged by pseudo-market criteria, and the universities began to come under attack as a critical institution of dominant groups and dominant ideologies.

These processes arrived later in Europe and the government policies aimed at ‘reform’ the education systems, which have become also the targets of the protests, coupled the financial cuts. Research on European higher education systems, have identified these common aspects (Moscato, Regini & Rostan, 2010): the combination of centralization of decision-making powers at the top of single institutions with the growing financial autonomy of the same; the introduction of a competitive and market logic (according to the school of the New Public Management), external financiers and private stakeholders, the performance reward mechanisms, both individually and as a system, for evaluation and accreditation of courses, departments and universities. Not so much differently, Klemencic (2014) has identified a process of “marketization” of higher education characterized by: the introduction of mechanisms of competition between Universities; the integration of public funding sources of universities with private sources, particularly the tuition fees; the granting of larger institutional autonomy by the government.

The mobilizations in Europe were thus read by some scholars (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) – and the demonstrators – as a reaction to the so-called ‘Bologna

process’, - which takes its name from the city where the first meeting took place in 1999 - wanted by the European Union to plan and standardize the educational systems of the continent. It is a very controversial issue, which has been framed differently by other authors, underlying the social dimension of this process based on equality of opportunity (to deepen, see: Corbett 2011; Zgaga 2012). Nevertheless, it was interpreted by the protesters as a process of corporatization of public universities, an attack to the right to education considered as acquired, and a contemporary divestment in the future of young generations by the various governments (Caruso, Giorgi, Mattoni & Piazza, 2010b, p. 41).

In opposition to these processes framed as privatization and marketization, the mobilizations have showed similar actors involved, goals, and repertoires of action: “Students occupied classrooms and universities, promoted sit-ins, demonstrations, and other high-impact media protests. Researchers and professors have suspended the lessons, examinations, and seminars. Blogs, mailing lists, forums, groups on social networking platforms and online petitions were born” (Caruso et al., 2010b, p. 39). It is precisely from one of these online platforms that students (and not only) have tried to build transnational networks and organize simultaneous collective protest actions. One example is the ‘International Student Movement’, an open transnational platform launched by Marburg university students, and then spread globally, involved in the struggle to reclaim free and emancipating education, which called for several Global Days and Weeks of Action for Education in the last years. The first appeal was launched for a global day of action on November 5, 2008, with the slogan ‘One World - One Struggle, Education is not for sale’. It was the ‘International Day of Action against the Commercialization of Education’, during which protest actions were recorded in 20 countries on 5 continents: (ISM, 2008). A second wave of transnational protests took place in the spring of 2009, between 20 and 29 April, with the first ‘Global Week of Action - Reclaim your Education’, in which the mobilizations against the “neo-liberal reforms of the public education systems” affected 52 countries around the world (ISM, 2009). In 2010, numerous protest actions took place during the ‘International Day of the student’ (ISM, 2010). In 2011: there was the ‘Spring of Resistance’, and in November the ‘Global Weeks of Action for Education’ (ISM, 2011). The stated aim of ISM activists was to open the mobilizations to the rest of society, and connect with the struggles of workers. Same spread of protest actions in 2012: in June, the ‘Education Protests Worldwide’, 18 October the ‘Global Day of Action to Reclaim Education - Direct Democracy

Now' and, in November, was held the first 'Global Education Strike', contemporarily - the 14/11 - with the European strike against the austerity policies. The claims of protesters ranged from the cancellation of student debt to the refusal of cuts and student fees, from the opposition at the entrance of multinational corporations to the creation of a real democracy in Educational institutions. A request from a global strike was based on the awareness that only the union and coordination between all the struggles in different countries can "stop the process of commodification and privatization of Education and make it free and open for all" (ISM, 2012). On 17-22 November 2014, there was another Global Week of Action, with the slogan "Students Not Customers". Then the coordinated actions diminished in the following years, until very recently when the ISM launched a Transnational Coordination of Action for May Day 2017.

Also in Italy since 2008, there have been massive waves of protest in defence of public education, against financial cuts and neoliberal reforms, although not very organizationally connected to the mobilizations and attempts of transnational coordination, but with similar players, targets, claims and forms of action. In fact, the mobilizations in higher education in Italy can be considered placed in the framework of the global waves of protest at transnational level, indeed they have preceded and anticipated them. And, as some protest campaigns in other countries they were not able to get the main goals and to substantially affect and modify the government policies in higher education, like the unsuccessful mobilization against the increase of tuition fees in England in 2011 (Ibrahim, 2011).

In this article, I argue that the movements in higher education in Italy were made not only by students, but this large and variegated participation was not enough to be effective and successful. In fact, the Anomalous Wave in 2008, the permanent researchers' movement in 2010 and the other protest campaigns, have been substantially unsuccessful, despite the high participation rate and the variety of players involved, not only because of the factors recently pointed out in literature. According to Cini, in fact, the two mobilizations in 2008 and 2010 did not manage to alter the course of political events because, "despite a high rate of participation ... the absence of a nationally recognized student organization leading the protest, coupled with the low political attention paid to higher education policy constitute the main factors explaining such a lack of impact" (2017a, p. 308). In my opinion, the low level of relevance of higher education in Italy and not being the education workers the constituency of the center-right governments in charge in those periods, are

important explicative dimensions but not sufficient. Less important, in my opinion, the political-organizational fragmentation of students and the lack of their strong unitary organization. Protest campaigns have been defeated even, and above all, because of the substantial lack of support from most university teaching staff in 2008, professors and academic authorities towards researchers in 2010, and the passivity of the 'silent majority' of the university community in subsequent protests promoted by minorities of professors and researchers.

## Methods

The reconstruction and the analysis of the mobilizations in the higher education in Italy are based on previous research (Caruso et al., 2010; Piazza, 2011; Cini, 2017a), some books self-produced by the activists, in particular the permanent researchers (Maida, 2011; Drago, 2012), and other different sources. First, the participant observation during all the periods of the mobilizations, favored by my different positions within the two main protest waves and the less relevant others, that made me easy access to information and to internal relational dynamics at local and at national level. During the 'Panther' movement in 1989-90, I participated as a graduated activist and one of the delegates of my university (Catania) at the national assembly in Palermo, as well as a precarious researcher in the 2004-5 mobilization against the Moratti Bill. In the first Anomalous Wave of protest in 2008, I coordinated as a researcher and lecturer a Study Group composed by Political Sciences university students, which carried out a self-research on the movement in Catania (Piazza & Genovese, 2010). During the second Wave in 2010, I participated in the open-ended researchers' movement since the spring. I was elected as R29A network (*Rete29Aprile*) delegate for the Catania University in July, then member of the National Coordination; between November and December, I participated in the "climbing on the roofs" of the Faculty of Architecture in Rome, and in May 2011, I was elected as one of the R29A national spokespersons. After my exit from R29A in 2012, I continued until now to be part of Unique Coordination of Professors and Researchers of the University of Catania (CUdA), founded in 2010, and then to be involved in all the following mobilizations and campaigns in the higher education in Italy. The second is the daily press, which chronicled the events of mobilizations and the public discourse of key-actors. Third, I integrated the analysis in the daily press (often limited and distorted) with a systematic reading of materials produced by the main

protest actors (documents, press releases, resolutions, flyers, etc.) obtained directly from activists and/or from their websites.

In the following pages, I have analyzed the main mobilizations in the higher education in Italy, rebuilding the key events, the actors involved, the targets and claims, the forms of action and the outcome of these waves of protest. Then a brief discussion on the explicative factors for the outcome of the mobilizations in the conclusion.

## The Waves of protests in Italy

Since 2008, the mobilizations in the schools and universities in Italy have taken on the characteristics of real waves of protests, with large participation of students and other categories (teachers, researchers, precarious/temporary workers, employees, parents, etc.). The targets were the financial policies and the neoliberal reforms of public education system by various governments: from the center-right Berlusconi government to the technician Monti and the more recent center-left governments led by Renzi and Gentiloni. However, before these, other mobilizations had affected the Italian public education system in previous years.

In fact, the student movement of the so-called ‘Panther’ of 1989-90 can be seen as a distant forerunner of the more recent mobilizations. The student protests were triggered by the ‘Ruberti reform’ (the then Education Minister), which introduced the university autonomy and collaboration with private business. Thousands of students occupied almost all the universities, first in Palermo (Sicily) in December 1989 and then, in January 1990, the occupations spread to other cities like Rome, Turin, Naples, Milan, Catania, Cagliari, Florence, Pisa, etc. The protesting students expressed a strong criticism to the privatization, commodification of culture and knowledge, the subordination of the educational and research system to the special interests, the attack on the right to education, placing these processes already in those times in the overall framework of neoliberal modernization and the attack on the welfare state (Taviani & Vedovati, 1991, pp. 244-245). In those days, a panther was sighted on the streets of Rome but never found, so the wild animal was taken as a symbol of the elusiveness of the protest. After two great national assemblies with thousands of participants (1<sup>st</sup> February in Palermo and 1<sup>st</sup> March in Florence), the mobilization ended with a national demonstration of 50.000 students in Naples, on 17 March 1990. In fact, after that, most students demobilized and the Ruberti reform was approved (Law n. 341/1990). Other anticipatory protests were the most

recent two-year period of 2004-2005 against the Moratti Bill (the then Education Minister), which introduced the abolition of the permanent position of the researchers. Besides the participation of students, also the precarious researchers (PhD candidates and graduates, postdocs and fellows, etc.) mobilized, thus taking on the job insecurity as a central node of the protests (Mattoni, 2009). It was the first time that not only students participated in the protests and that the casualization of teaching and researching positions become a controversial issue in higher education. The mobilization culminated with a large national demonstration in Rome October 25, 2005, when the Bill passed in a parliament besieged by more than a hundred thousands of protesters (Caruso et al. 2010b, p. 19).

## The Anomalous Wave of students (and others) against cuts to funding public education

In 2008, the Anomalous Wave was so defined because it was a mobilization, which arose unexpected and seemed to spread and overwhelm everything just like a sudden wave. It involved hundreds of thousands of Italian students (the enrolled were about 1800,000 in total) and originated by their reaction (and of other categories) to the announcement by the centre-right Berlusconi government of the Bill n. 133 and n. 137 of 2008, then approved by the parliament. These legislative measures foresaw significant cuts in funding for public education – strongly wanted by the Ministry of Economy, Tremonti – and organizational changes concerning both primary and secondary schools, and universities, including the reduction of the professors’ turnover and the possibility to turn state universities into private foundations. The reasons for the protest were not only purely economic, but they referred “to the preservation of the public education system, of which also they asked for a reform and the fear for the future in terms of employment, reaffirming the will of criticism and political influence” (Caruso et al. 2010b, 20). The attempt to frame the protest in a more overall way, and within the more general neoliberal political and socio-economic context, was synthesized in the most common slogan ‘*We do not pay for the crisis*’, launched by the most politicized activists, but not always taken up by other participants. In fact, if according to various scholars, this slogan indicated the refusal to undergo the process of social downgrading of their generation (Cini, 2017a, p. 307; Raparelli, 2009; Roggero, 2010), for others, “in some local contexts it was

not adopted by all the participants in the mobilisations” (Caruso et al. 2010b, 20). According to the latter, indeed, many but not all students had understood the impact and extent of the worldwide crisis just broken out, and the consequences it would have had in the following years.

In an empirical study on the mobilization (Caruso et al. 2010a), the temporal and geographical frame of protest events was defined, using a musical metaphor, as a combination of ‘*syncopated rhythm*’ and ‘*basso continuo*’. On the one hand, at national level, the rhythm was punctuated by great and visible events in Rome like the large demonstrations organized by mainstream and grassroots unions in autumn 2008, (some hundreds of thousands of participants on 17 and 30 October), and the Wave national assembly on 14 November. On the other, the ‘*basso continuo*’ was locally marked by the less visible but almost daily protests in several university cities. From the parades to the lessons in the streets (one of the new forms of action), from the seminars to the debates, from spontaneous demonstrations to unauthorized marches (*manif-sauvage*) and direct actions, all within and around the universities and the central squares of the cities (Caruso et al. 2010b, pp. 24-28).

Unlike the student movements of the past, the composition of the Wave was intergenerational and socially variegated. If the parents and teachers of nursery and primary schools organized the first protests, high school and university students formed the majority component. The protest campaign was launched by the first ‘protest entrepreneurs’, the activists of student collectives and organizations close to radical leftist parties (*Atenei in Rivolta*) and to squatted social centres (*Uniriot*). Then the mobilization suddenly took on the massive size with the entry of a large amount of students without associative links, but that they had already had, for the most part, previous experiences of participation in protests (Piazza & Genovese, 2010). Indeed, the main traditional student union, the UDU, linked to Democratic Party and CGIL (the main leftist union), was marginal in the organization of the protest, as it was accused to be too moderate by the other student groups (Cini, 2017, p. 318). Moreover, the representatives of students in various university bodies (academic senate, board of administration, faculties, etc.) were largely ignored and overtaken by the students of the movement, who criticized their lack of real representativeness. Indeed, another widespread slogan was: “*none represents us*”, claiming direct participation and mistrust in delegation. Far right students tried to be included and legitimized in the movement but they were immediately expelled or isolated by the other students’ groups and associations.

Moreover, the technical-administrative employees and the precarious researchers formed the other two major components. The former, for most unionized (FLC-CGIL) and then get used to more traditional claim-making models, had difficulties in relations with the students more disposed to non-conventional participation. The latter, who acted more independently and less confrontational, they built local and national coordination networks, but had difficulty to mobilize their colleagues because of their condition of atomization and employment blackmail, in a work environment based on individual competitive dynamics (Caruso et al. 2010b, pp. 22-23).

Organizationally, the Wave movement was structured as a network of local nodes, heterogeneous and fluids, both individual and collective, also and above all by means of new information technologies, such as platforms on the internet, from the mailing list to websites, the use of blogs and social networking (Facebook). However, the on-line participation was often complementary with that off-line, through direct interaction during the assemblies and demonstrations. Moreover, the various movement networks not always cooperated and the field of the protest indeed was defined as highly fragmented, without a unitary actor and with the main movement organizations – above mentioned – competing against each other for the hegemony of the Italian student movement, and so fostering internal tensions (Cini, 2017, p. 319). From a political point of view, research has shown that most of the participants was located on the left, while expressing distrust towards the parties and claiming autonomy and independence from them. Therefore, not a rejection of politics, but “the demand for adequate institutional representation, on the one hand, and the need to experiment with new forms of ‘grassroots democracy’ and political participation, on the other” (Piazza and Genovese 2010, p. 114). Despite the wide and extensive participation of students and other categories as temporary researchers and unionized education workers, the other components of the university community did not mobilize. Only very few professors and permanent researchers supported the protest, while the great majority of the academic staff and the authorities did not react, despite they were in disagreement with financial cuts to public education. In fact, while university leadership dissociated itself from the protest and passively accepted the policies of the Berlusconi government, the latter did not want to have any contact or negotiate with the protesters and largely ignored their claims (the law was only slightly amended). In fact, the protesters were defined by Berlusconi as “troublemakers” and “extremists” ([www.repubblica.it](http://www.repubblica.it), 24/10/2008). Therefore, the failure to achieve the main

goal, namely to prevent the approval of the cuts and legislative measures, led to the demobilization of the Wave in late December 2008, with a brief upswing of the protests in March 2009 on the occasion of the ‘counter-G8’ of the universities in Turin. However, the Wave left the legacy of a new network of student collectives and a new awareness among the participants, who set up part of the backbone of the following waves of protests.

## The second wave: researchers, students and teachers against the Gelmini Bill

In the spring of 2010, however, the new wave of mobilization was not born by the students, who joined only later, but by a new collective actor, the permanent researchers who opposed the ‘Gelmini’ reform, from the name of the then Education Minister of the centre-right Berlusconi government. The Bill (DDL) 1905/09 (then approved as Law 240/10) provided for: a) the entry of private stakeholders in the university governance, i.e. in the Administrative Board with more powers than the Academic Senate (the representative body); b) the increased powers of rectors and full professors; c) the introduction of honor loan for low-income students; d) a “tenure track” recruitment system with no guarantee of funds; e) the extinction of the open-ended researchers’ role and the introduction of the new fixed-term researchers. As a sign of protest, permanent researchers declared themselves “unavailable” (more than 10.000 out of about 25.000), i.e. refusing to take on teaching assignments they had always taken voluntarily and freely (they were not formally on strike, because they were not legally obliged to teach), leaving many courses without teachers (Drago, 2012).

In doing so, the open-ended researchers, who are at the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid of the

permanent staff<sup>1</sup>, challenged not only the Minister and the Government, but also the academic elites (rectors, deans, full professors), putting into question the way in which they had governed and managed the universities. In fact, for them, being “unavailable” was not only a form of protest to make pressure on Government in order to modify or withdraw the contested Bill, according to the logic of damage (della Porta & Diani, 2006). It was also a mean to show their “unavailability” to continue to be subjected to the internal hierarchical relations of the university system, a conscious act of disobedience. As a result, the movement of researchers adopted a networked horizontal organizational structure. Not surprisingly, the main movement organization was called ‘*Rete29Aprile*’ (Network29April), from the day in which was held in Milan the national assembly from which the movement spread throughout the country, in order to highlight the reticular character (Maida, 2011).

At stake, it was not only the defence of the state public university and of the rights of students and researchers, but also the role that research, education and knowledge should play in the society, the way in which they are produced and transmitted. The strong criticism of neoliberal policies in higher education and of that model of university based on centralization of decision-making power, commercialization of knowledge and competition for resources, was clear from the beginning. In fact, the movement drew up alternative proposals to reform the university. The permanent researchers, for example, did not claim corporate and sectoral goals, or only protested against cuts to economic resources, but demanded a set of measures as: the right to education for low-income students, guaranteed by state funds, a short-

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<sup>1</sup> The academic staff in Italy is structured as a hierarchical pyramid. At the base, there are precarious researchers and teachers that are employed under different typologies of short-term contract (e.g. PhD fellows, post-doctoral fellows, research fellows, fixed-term researchers and professors, etc.); they are estimated about 65.000-70.000 (there are no official figures) and are more than the permanent staff. The latter is articulated in three levels. The first level is set up by the open-ended researchers (similar to assistant professors) with the tasks to do research and to support professors in teaching. The position was accessed by winning an open competition, but after the ‘Gelmini Reform’ the role is exhausting (they were about 25.000, the 43% of the permanent staff, in 2010, but now they are about 15.000, declined to 32%). At the second level there are the associate professors, with the tasks of doing research and teaching, i.e. giving lecture courses (about 17.000, the 29% in 2010, now are about 20.000, increased to 41%). At the top there are full professors among which are selected the leadership and management staff of the university, e.g. rectors, deans, department directors, etc. (about 16.000, the 28%, in 2010, now are declined to 13.000, the 27%).

recruitment system with guaranteed funds, the single role of professorship and a more democratic university governance. The latter was closely correlated with the previous, since the introduction of the professorship unique role would eliminate the hierarchy between professors and researchers (at least formally) by extending to all the decision-making powers (on the contrary the reform entails the concentration of powers in the hands of few full professors, who were the 28 % of the permanent academic staff). In addition, more democracy from below, powers to the representative bodies, more representatives of students, precarious researchers and technical-administrative staff within them were demanded, while they were – and they are – very marginal and minority.

Differently from the Anomalous Wave of 2008, in this case, a relevant part of the remaining academic community seemed to support, at least apparently, the protest against the Gelmini Bill and the researchers' claims. However, some academic authorities were opposed to them by sustaining government policies, others declared themselves in favour of the protests, but actually disempowering them (for example, most of the deans of faculties moved the lessons that should have been held by the unavailable researchers in the second semester, making the protest less effective).

In autumn, the protest became more visible to the public and was covered by great national and international media. In fact, almost simultaneously the researchers of Rete29Aprile 'went up' on the roofs of the main universities, while the students blocked the streets of the cities and 'climbed on' the most important Italian monuments (the Leaning Tower in Pisa, the Coliseum in Rome, the Brunelleschi's Dome in Florence, the S. Marco Basilica in Venice, etc.). On the one hand, the climbing on university roofs was not only a means of gaining visibility, media coverage and attention from institutions, but also a way to demonstrate a strong commitment to a cause deemed vital for society and its future, according to the logic of bearing witness (della Porta & Diani, 2006). For example, researchers remained on the roofs of Architecture in Rome for about a winter month with cold, rain and snow (Piazza, 2011). On the other side, the students with their high symbolic impact actions intended to express their desire to 'reclaim' culture, climbing on the monuments, and defending from the attack of the state against public education, freedom of thought and expression, through the invention of the "book block". They was a sort of 'books shields' or 'literary shields' of coloured rigid foam with the classic titles of literature, with which the first rows of the demonstrations were trying to protect themselves from police beatings. Just the 'book block'

was subsequently adopted as a form of action by other mobilizations abroad, such as that in England in 2011, through a diffusion process which can be considered as an indicator of the transnational dimension of the protest in higher education. However, the Italian movement and its leading organizations have never taken care so much of this dimension, so the transnationalization of the protest did not have a great impact on the mobilizations and their outcome.

Moreover, compared the previous wave of protest, the student organizational field of action was furtherly fragmented, because another two groups/networks were protagonist, with the others: Link, which had emerged from a split to the left from UDU, and Red-Net, a radical network of Marxist Leninist groups (Cini, 2017, 320). Notwithstanding divergences and tensions, most relevant political groups were able to cooperate, at least in the greatest university, 'La Sapienza' in Rome, where they were united in a single network "*La Sapienza in mobilization*". Nevertheless, like two years before, the Berlusconi government rejected the protesters' requests and refused any negotiations with them. The Minister Gelmini accused the protesting students and the researchers of not wanting a reform that promoted "merit" and fought the "Barons"<sup>2</sup> (Tabusi 2011, 191). They replied trying to unmask the real meaning of the keywords of governmental media campaign, arguing that the reform favored the Barons by concentrating all the powers in the hands of full professors, because "if not all full professors are Barons, it is true that all Barons are full professors" (a R29A researcher during the talk show *L'Infedele*, La 7, 29/11/2010). In November, only the "researchers on the roof" in Rome came into contact with the opposition political leaders and a majority group that was about to go to the opposition, hence determining for the law's approval; researchers tried to convince them not to vote for the Gelmini "reform" but without success.

The mobilization reached its climax with the demonstration in Rome on December 14, the day of the 'failed non-confidence vote' to the Berlusconi government, whose fall would have meant a halt to the Gelmini Bill and the victory of the movement (instead, three former members of the opposition voted in favour of the government by ensuring its standing in office). Then, the rally (more than one hundred thousand demonstrators) ended in clashes between the disappointed and outraged students and the police (the 'battle of *Piazza del Popolo*', the famous square where they mainly occurred), and the

<sup>2</sup> University professors who abuse their power and authority without control, often for personal gain.

mobilization declined after the approval of the Law 240/10 on December 23. Subsequently students and most of the ‘unavailable’ researchers demobilized, they returned to teaching, although few activists continued to oppose the implementation of the reform at the local level. The researchers’ national network was gradually frayed, lessening more and more the confrontational dimension of social movement organizations to accentuate that of institutional pressure of the interest groups. However, over the years R29A has continued to be one of the few critical voices in the Italian Academy, providing counter-information, keeping in touch the local knots and fostering the recent mobilizations against the new evaluation system and in defence of the public university.

## More recent protests in the schools and universities

After the defeat of 2010, the universities in Italy were not affected by other relevant protests for some years at national level, but a series of attempts, seldom successful, to influence the implementation process of the Gelmini reform at the local level, by students and researchers (Cini 2017b). Differently, in autumn 2012, there was another wave of protests in the secondary education, but less wide, participated and conflictual than the previous ones, excluding the demonstrations of November 14, coinciding with the European Strike against austerity policies and for the right to education. It has been one of the few times that education protests in Italy have been linked to those at the transnational level, such as those initiated by the ISM. Unlike previous mobilizations, the main protagonists were indeed the high school fellows, who occupied dozens of schools, and their teachers. They protested against the policies of de-funding of public secondary education by the Monti technician government and the Aprea Bill (from the name of the MP proposer), which provided for the entry of private stakeholders in the boards of schools (La Repubblica, 23/11/2012). After that, the mobilizations in secondary education decreased and restarted in the recent years against the “*La Buona Scuola*” (The good school) reform of the high school proposed in 2014 and approved in 2015 by the Renzi centre-left government. The protesters – teachers and students – criticized in particular the powers given to the headmasters of high schools to hire and dismiss teachers, whereas until then the selection was made through public competitions.

Only very recently, other protests have arisen in the Italian higher education, but involving almost exclusively the university teaching and research staff. Indeed, in

2016 some groups of professors and researchers who were protesting the implementation of the reform and the wage discrimination have (unsuccessfully) attempted to boycott the ministerial evaluation system (the ‘StopVQR’ campaign). Also in the case of the boycott of the evaluation procedure, adopted by professors both as a means of pressure on government for wage claims and as a criticism of a quantitative system considered wrong and unfair, most of the teaching staff seemed to adhere the protest. However, on the ‘advices’ of some department directors and rectors and the ‘threats’ of others, many of them have given up the mobilization and the boycott campaign. Then, the newborn Movement for the Dignity of University Teaching organized a strike of examinations against the progress wage block and discrimination, for September-October 2017, which resulted in a good participation (about 11.700 strikers on 48.000 professors and researchers). Following this, researchers, professors together with some students groups and associations attempted to generalize and extend the mobilization, holding a national assembly in Turin on 6 November: “Together for the redemption of the public university”. In December, the government has responded to the protests with some measures in the budget law which provide for a slight increase in funds for the university, but which have been judged largely insufficient and inadequate by the promoters of the mobilization, who intend to re-launch it. A new strike is called for the 2018 exams summer session.

## Concluding discussion

In conclusion, the mobilizations in the higher education, but also in the secondary schools, in recent years have taken on characteristics largely different from the student movements of the past decades. First, not only students were the protests’ actors, although they are still the majority, but also those who work in secondary and higher education systems: professors, teachers, permanent and precarious researchers, technical-administrative employees, and sometimes even the parents. Although connected often to specific contexts and public decisions, the waves of protests have taken place in many countries in both Western and the economically emerging or least developed countries, sometimes isolated, sometimes simultaneously through attempts of transnational coordinated mobilizations. Thanks to new information technologies, the activists have used online networks and are organizationally structured as networks. They resumed forms of action by the tradition of student struggles, such as parades, assemblies and occupations, but also



innovated by focusing on spectacular tactics with high media impact (the ‘climbing’ on roofs and monuments or the ‘book block’). The mobilizations have been largely reactive and defensive, even when they have been able to elaborate alternative proposals. The masterframe was more or less the same at different latitudes: the defense of public education, the right to education accessible to everybody, the opposition to privatization, corporatization of education and commodification of knowledge, a demand for more participation and democracy from below in the management of education systems, as well as a higher real influence on policy-making processes. The attempt to extend the mobilizations to other issues and other social groups equally affected by the economic crisis and neoliberal policies of attack on the welfare state.

As we have seen before, even in Italy the waves of protest in favour of public education, against financial cuts and NPM reforms, can be considered inserted in the framework of the mobilizations at transnational level against the neo-liberalization and commercialization of higher education. Actually, the Italian protests have in some way anticipated – and then they took place at same time – those in other countries, though they have not been so much linked organizationally to them and to the attempts of transnational coordination (the ISM, for example). Movements in Italy have often shared similar actors (not only students), targets, claims and forms of action with those abroad, but that was not enough to be effective and successful as in other countries. Therefore, we can say that the transnationalization of the protest did not have a great impact on the Italian mobilizations and their outcome.

In fact, despite the large diffusion and the cyclical nature of the protest, the mobilizations in different countries have rarely been able to achieve the main goals, like the 2012 successful opposition of Canadian students against the government tuition fee hike, called ‘Maple Spring’ in Quebec (The Guardian, 2/5/2012). In many other cases, the waves of protests have been unsuccessful in halting or substantially modifying governmental policies on higher education, like the above-mentioned mobilizations against the increase of student fees and the neo-liberalization of the English education system (Ibrahim 2011; Cini & Guzman-Concha, 2017).

In Italy, as well the recent mobilizations failed to produce any policy impact on the field of higher education (Cini 2017a, p. 308) because they were not able to stop the contested legislative and financial measures. According to recent research, the Italian protesters in 2008-2010 did not achieve any significant policy goal, despite their large mobilization, because “organizationally and politically

fragmented protests are not able to influence policy issues that have a low public relevance, especially in periods of economic crisis and political austerity ... even though Italian students were able for a certain period to increase the public attention on the cuts on higher education funds and on the managerialization of university governance, they did not manage to persuade the government that such an increase of attention was also related to a shift in terms of public support towards the student protests” (2017a, p. 317). Moreover, the then center-right Berlusconi government “did not have any interest in engaging in negotiations over an issue, that of higher education, which not only did not represent a priority for the Italian public opinion ... but was also a policy field closely relatively to the Italian left and its traditional voters” (2017a, p. 327). This aspect in particular is one of the explicative factor of the government closure towards the protesters’ claims. However, we cannot ignore that the main center-left party (PD – Democratic Party) did not hinder seriously those policies when it was in opposition and, when it went to the government since 2011 until 2018, it has never basically changed them, or even has implemented them in the same direction. In fact, the recent protests of university professors against wage discrimination and evaluation system had the government policies lead by the PD as targets.

Therefore, these explicative factors are not sufficient, in my opinion. In Italy, the mobilizations in higher education have been unsuccessful even, and above all, because of the lack of support from most university teaching staff in 2008, from most professors and academic authorities towards researchers in 2010, and the passivity of the ‘silent majority’ of the university community in subsequent protests promoted by minorities of professors. If the presence of permanent and precarious researchers, and professors was the novelty of these waves of protest, this has not been enough. The university community was not united and cohesive, showing its weakness and fragmentation. On the one side, most academic authorities (rectors and deans) decided not to really oppose to the government policies or supported them, hoping to obtain minor damages or selective benefits from the different governments. On the other, the “silent majority” of the teaching staff, not accustomed to protesting, accepted the decisions of governmental and academic authorities for both living quietly and in the hope of gaining individual career benefits. In fact, only a strong and cohesive opposition of most university staff, coupled with the massive protest of students and their large participation – also fragmented – could have greatly increased the chances of success in blocking

cuts and neoliberal reforms or making them ineffective in their implementation phase. It is difficult to approve and implement a reform of a public administration sector without the consent of the majority of its leaders. In fact, the center-right Berlusconi government ignored the protesters' claims not only because it considered them a constituency of the center-left parties, but also because it could count on the support or non-opposition of most of the staff and academic authorities. Some years after, the massive participation of professors at the recent strike in the fall of 2017 could be a real change of the trend, though it is too early to say it (and I am not so sure it is). Anyway, currently some groups of professors and researchers, together with groups of students active in the protest in higher education, try to mobilize their colleagues not only for wage reason but also for the defence and future of the Italian public university system.

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