

Successful student activism in contemporary Italian universities

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This article assesses the strategies that the Italian student activists adopted in order to influence the revision process of the governance structure of their universities in 2011. Which kind of strategy has enabled these activists to influence more successfully this process? I argue that the joint pressure of insiders and outsiders allows student activists to get their voice more effectively heard from the university leaders than when one of the two forms of pressure is absent. The ‘power of the streets’ exerted by the ‘outsiders’, combined with the institutional power of the ‘insiders’, produces a significant amplifying effect in the governing bodies. University leaders fear this kind of alliance, as they perceive that insiders with a strong tie with other actors are the expression of a collective voice that is difficult to neutralize. On the other hand, the outsiders are also aware that their collective strength is more likely to be translated into institutional power and action from their allies and/or representatives. To empirically probe this proposition, I have singled out three Italian universities (University of Turin, Sapienza of Rome, and Federico II of Naples), which witnessed high levels of student mobilization in the past years (2008–13), and where student activists and their organizations adopted the most different array of strategies. More specifically, while at the University of Turin the student activists were able to deploy simultaneously both forms of pressure, at the Federico II of Naples and Sapienza of Rome one of the two forms was lacking.

Keywords: Italy; social movements; education

Introduction

Social movement scholars have traditionally overlooked the study of mobilizations within institutions. Even less known are the effects that mobilizations within institutions provoke (Bosi *et al.*, 2016). Exploring the impact of student activism within contemporary Italian universities, my study provides an empirical case study attempting to fill this gap. More notably, by adopting a relational-strategic approach (Jaspers, 2015), my paper assesses the strategies that the Italian student activists adopted in order to influence the revision process of the governance structure of their universities in 2011. Which kind of strategy has enabled these activists to influence more successfully this process?

My argument is that the choice to build a coalition with other actors and/or to promote ‘institutional activists’ (Santoro and McGuire, 1997) within the governing

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boards and committees facilitates the adoption of student demands and, therefore, their influence on the process. The ‘power of the streets’ exerted by the ‘outsiders’, combined with the institutional power of the ‘insiders’, produces a significant amplifying effect in the governing bodies. University leaders fear this kind of alliance, as they perceive that insiders with a strong tie with other actors are the expression of a collective voice that is difficult to neutralize. These insiders act on the behalf of a collective group, which supports them politically and physically in the confrontation with the university management. On the other hand, the outsiders are also aware that their collective strength is more likely to be translated into institutional power and action from their allies and/or representatives.

In this paper, I argue that the joint pressure of insiders and outsiders allows student activists to get their voice more effectively heard from the university leaders than when one of the two forms of pressure is absent. To empirically probe this proposition, I have singled out three Italian universities (University of Turin, Sapienza of Rome, and Federico II of Naples), which witnessed high levels of student mobilization in the past years (2008–13), and where student activists and their organizations adopted the most different array of strategies. More specifically, while at the University of Turin the student activists were able to deploy simultaneously both forms of pressure, at the Federico II of Naples and Sapienza of Rome one of the two forms was lacking.

Besides the present introduction, this paper consists of other five sections. In ‘Influencing non-state institutions’ section, after reviewing the main works on the impact of social movements, I present the theoretical framework upon which my study on the influence of student strategies within Italian universities relies. In ‘Activist strategies within non-state institutions’ section, by drawing on the existing studies on the subject, I illustrate and discuss the different array of strategies that members of organizations and/or institutions have at their disposal to influence the decision-making processes. By specifically referring to the case of student activism within universities, I also present more extensively the argument and expectation of my study. In ‘Case selection and methodology’ section, I present the rationale of my research design and the methodology that I adopted. In ‘Assessing the strategies of the Italian student activists’ section, I exhibit and discuss the main findings of my study. In ‘Concluding remarks’ section, I summarize my findings by highlighting some further aspects of investigation to address in future research.

Influencing non-state institutions

Mobilizations within institutions do matter. They produce a visible, as well as invisible, impact that can be investigated and assessed (Davis *et al.*, 2005). Although with different approaches and, sometimes, with even conflicting findings, social movement scholars have actually contributed to broadening and confirming the meaning of the aforementioned proposition. In essence, for these studies, mobilization produces change. However, the major matter of disagreement among

social movement scholars concerns the way this change is produced. The first and seminal studies of this sort highlighted the presence of specific movement characteristics [Bosi *et al.* (2016) call them ‘movement-controlled variables’], whose strength was crucial in bringing about the desired change. Their disagreement relied precisely upon the kind of characteristics needed for the movement to win. Gamson (1990 [1975]), McCarthy and Zald (1977), for instance, regarded the movement organizational strength, such as the number of its adherents and organizations, as the main factor determining the impact. For them, ‘the greater the organizational strength of movements, the stronger their impact on public policy’ (Giugni, 2004: 151). In Gamson’s view (1990 [1975]), the key organizational characteristic explaining the movement’s success was given by its degree of bureaucratization and centralization. For him, the most successful movements were, thus, those highly bureaucratized and centralized, as they tended to escape factionalism and, therefore, failure.

Criticizing Gamson’s argument on the importance of organizational characteristics for the movement’s success, Piven and Cloward (1979) argued, on the contrary, that high levels of bureaucratization and centralization were precisely the main cause of movement failure. For them, the process of organization building is, in fact, typically antithetical to the interests of the movement constituency and of their rank and file members. For a movement to be successful, the main important characteristic is its capacity of disruption. In their view, ‘disruption is the most powerful resource that movements have at their disposal to reach their goals’ (Giugni *et al.*, 1999: xvii). Disrupting actions make the day-to-day reproduction of institutional life where the movement acts impossible and, therefore, are meant to bring about change in the movement’s desired direction. Yet, as several movement scholars have more lately stressed in their studies (Kitschelt, 1986; Amenta *et al.*, 1992; Tarrow, 1998; Cress and Snow, 2000), the argument of disruption (as well as the argument of the organizational strength) is too simplistic, in that it guiltily does not take into account the contextual factors, which are equally responsible for and concur to the movement impact. The presence of elite divisions and/or institutional allies, the type of electoral system, the centralization/decentralization of political powers, among several other factors, are all kinds of environmental factors that help or inhibit the movement change [Kriesi (2004) and Bosi *et al.* (2016) call them ‘political-institutional context’]. Social movement literature has defined these contextual political factors as political opportunity structures and the theoretical models, which account for them in explaining movement impact, as ‘political mediation model’ (Giugni, 2004). These scholars maintain ‘the impact of movements is mediated strongly by political conditions’ (Amenta *et al.*, 1992: 335).

More notably, for many of them, what makes a movement impact significant is the ‘institutional vulnerability’ of the movement targeted institution (Moore, 1999). Among several other aspects, this vulnerability is identified with the presence of powerful institutional allies, willing to support the change in the direction desired by the movement (Tarrow, 1998), the unfolding of a strong elite division (Kitschelt, 1986),

opening a window of opportunity for external challengers, or even the formal distribution of political power along the axis decentralization/centralization, which makes the institution more or less open to movement demands. More generally, all the ‘political mediation model’ theorists share the hypothesis that ‘the more open the target institution is to change, the more effective the mobilization of the movement will be’ (King, 2008: 396). In this sense, for them, ‘mobilization and collective action are usually insufficient for policy changes’ (Amenta *et al.*, 1992: 312).

Even though I do share most of the assumptions underlying the political mediation model, I depart from it in two specific but significant respects. The first has to do with the kind of institution that traditionally is investigated and taken into account by these studies, the second has to do with the kind of ‘causal mechanism’ (McAdam *et al.*, 2001) that is generally adopted to explain the relation between movements and institutional structures and, more especially, how the former affects the latter. The type of institution in which the mobilization takes place has, in fact, significant implications for the kind of strategies that challengers adopt, the type of institutional responses that authorities deploy and, above all, for the logic of their interaction. In addition, and as for the second remark, these theorists tend to conceive of the environment in which the mobilization takes place as a fixed and relatively static structure (McAdam *et al.*, 2001; Jasper, 2006; Goodwin and Jasper, 2012) rather than as a dynamic and living entity, made up of people with their own interests, norms, and strategies. This sort of structuralist understanding prevents them from understanding the very dynamics of interaction at play when two distinct groups of actors confront each other, as it is in the case of the dynamic interplay that takes place between student activists and university leaders.

As Walker *et al.* (2008) suggest, non-state institutions show three vulnerabilities when facing internal mobilizations that states do not have. First, non-state institutions are less open to influence; this makes them less prone to internal demands for change and, thus, when the latter show up, these institutions are less ready to deal with them. Second, non-state institutions are more vulnerable to internal de-legitimation. Given the fact that working, living, and being members of institutions such as a firm, university, or a religious association entails a greater personal and collective symbolic involvement to feel part of it. These organizations need to rely upon a greater legitimacy than states. In other words, some relatively minor changes in the legitimacy of a company or university can have severe consequences for that institution. Finally, non-state institutions are more vulnerable to non-participation than states. Not taking part in the activities of a school or firm has a more disruptive effect than not participating as citizens in the state activities (i.e. voting).¹

¹ Even though social movement scholars investigating the dynamics of mobilization within non-state institutions tend to see firms, religious associations, and universities as showing the same types of vulnerability (Walker *et al.*, 2008; Balsiger, 2014), such institutions exhibit significant differences in terms of organizational structure. Universities are in fact loose-coupling organizations, while firms and religious associations are tight-coupling organizations. Loose-coupling organizations are less vulnerable to

To summarize, as states have a greater capacity for repression, facilitation, and routinization and as they are more open and less vulnerable to de-legitimation and non-participation, as a consequence one expects that events that target non-state institutions ‘should be significantly more radical and disruptive than those that target the state’ to be effective (Walker *et al.*, 2008: 43–44, see also King, 2016). A mobilization within a university is more likely to produce effects and set in motion the reaction of other actors, when it generates disruption (Arthur, 2011). The students who occupy a department by preventing it from performing its daily seminars and classes, or researchers who refuse to run assigned courses are two instances of action that put in crisis the core institutional activities of the university. This kind of action can heavily affect the internal life of such an institution by paralyzing several of its activities (Piven, 2006). Negatively or positively, the authorities responsible with tackling these challenges are forced to offer a response in order to restore and/or modify the conditions of the institutional situation that is under contestation.

However, this is not the whole story. In my research, I look at processes and dynamic interactions activated by opposing actors rather than simply mechanistic and deterministic relations between actors and contextual factors (McAdam *et al.*, 2001). More specifically, I see the impact of the mobilization process as the result of the dynamic interplay between challengers and challenged (Jasper, 2006; Piven, 2006; Goodwin and Jasper, 2012; Jasper *et al.*, 2015). In other words, the impact of a mobilization within a non-state institution can be better explained and assessed if seen as the result of an interaction between actors whose strategies and conducts are strongly shaped and influenced by the same institution in which such an interaction occurs (Davis *et al.*, 2005).

With particular reference to my analysis, I explain and assess the impact of student activism within universities conceived as the outcome of a ‘strategic interaction’ between opposing actors. A strategic perspective is, in fact, able to give ‘equal and symmetric weight to protestors and to the other players whom they engage, [...] by focusing equally on players and the arenas in which they interact’ (Jasper, 2015: 9). Scharpf defines this approach as ‘actor-centered institutionalism’, as it refers to a way of investigating which is especially ‘focused on the interactive strategies of purposive actors operating within institutional settings that, at the same time, enable

non-participation and to de-legitimation than tight-coupling organizations. This makes a difference in terms of successful strategies of mobilization. Student activism within the university campus can be in fact relatively successful, to the extent that other members are not heavily and negatively affected by such activism, prompting them to counter-react. By contrast, given the tight-coupling structure of firms and religious associations, mobilizations within them involve necessarily all the members, which can feel forced to oppose the challengers’ action if the latter is considered as a threat. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers to provide me with such an insight shedding light on this difference. Bearing this difference in mind, I still group universities, firms, and religious associations in the same category, because they react more similarly in terms of counter-strategies than state institutions when facing up to internal mobilizations. In other words, such a difference does not change the main results of my article.

and constrain these strategies' (1997: 36). In the same vein, Jasper suggests 'a careful examination of players and arenas, accompanied by theorizing on the strategic interactions among them' (2015: 9). 'From a strategic viewpoint, the main constraints on what protestors can accomplish [...] are imposed by other players with different goals and interests operating in the same arenas' (Jasper *et al.*, 2015: 399). The 'relational-strategic approach' (della Porta, 2015; Jasper, 2015) is precisely the epistemology that I take on in order to answer the research question and the related expectation of my investigation.

Activist strategies within non-state institutions

Actors who normally possess a scant amount of economic and political resources tend to employ alternative and less costly resources to achieve their desired goals (Cloward and Piven, 1979; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). This is also the case of students and junior academics. They are generally at the margins of academic decision-making. To fill this gap of influence, these actors have often adopted unconventional and/or non-institutional forms of action such as university occupations, blockades, sit-ins, rallies, demonstrations. In doing so, they aimed to resist and/or favor some university policies. Social movements are faced with a variety of strategic decisions that shape the way they approach their targets.² Primary among them is the consideration of how assertive tactics should be. More specifically, literature on social movements traditionally distinguish between conventional and unconventional repertoires of action (Tarrow, 1998), assertive and non-assertive tactics of contention (Arthur, 2011). Some movements, such as the pacifist movement, mostly adopted non-assertive strategies of influence, while others, such as the youth movement, preferred assertive ones. Some others, such as the labor movement, displayed both disruptive and non-disruptive action strategies (della Porta and Diani, 2006).

This 'strategic dilemma' (Jasper, 2006) is especially cogent for movements and activists aiming to influence the decision-making processes of non-state institutions such as economic corporations, non-profit and civic associations, and cultural religious organizations (Pettinicchio, 2012). Unlike democratic state institutions, which have routine pathways for expression of grievances and political influence, these organizations are closed polities that have few 'conventional access channels' (Weber *et al.*, 2009: 122) and that exclude most members from key decision-making processes. In this respect, the decision to adopt a more or less assertive array of strategies depends also on the capacity of the challengers to tackle successfully the reaction of the challenged and of the non-active members of the organization (Cini, 2016a). It follows, then, that these movements 'are effective to the extent that they can mobilize sufficient people to disrupt the primary means whereby

² Yet, (even bounded) rational strategies are not sufficient to explain the actors' practices and the extent of their disruptiveness. The action repertoire of a protest group is, indeed, inherited from the past protest experiences of the group itself. This heritage affects and constraints their present action repertoire.

organizations accrue resources' (King, 2016: 218). If they can attack the organization where it is most dependent for its survival, then the target is more likely to respond (Piven, 2006).

Applied to my case study, this means that student activists are constantly faced with the decision to choose between disruptive and non-disruptive strategies as well as a mix of them (Cini and Guzman-Concha, 2017). Disruptive strategies foster those forms of action aimed at disturbing and/or interrupting the ordinary course of the university life, such as building occupations, academic blockades, interruption of authorities' official meetings and decision-making. Non-disruptive strategies do not aim to disrupt academic activities but only to convey some public concern, which can be materialized in the action forms of letter-writing campaigns, teach-ins, sit-ins, and rallies. When a group is determined to act, mobilization can fluctuate between the adoption of purely disruptive means and purely lobbyist means. The employment of certain means can also vary over time, as some means are regarded more appropriate for initial stages and others for later phases of mobilization. Most political campaigns start with lobbying (meetings with authorities, declarations, petitions) that allow the movement to consolidate a consensus and gain momentum for the initiation of a phase of more open confrontation with authorities. Sometimes, in spite of the intentions of the core group of activists, campaigns do not reach the level of open confrontation, and continue using mostly lobbyist means.

Drawing on the above distinction between disruptive and non-disruptive strategies of action, the activists, who are members of organizations and/or institutions and who aim at influencing their decision-making processes, rely upon three main strategies: lobbying, disruption, and 'coalitional building' strategies (Cini, 2016b).

Lobbying

Mobilizations and protest campaigns are not necessarily or automatically disruptive in their means and objectives. The main goal of student activists is not always to withdraw cooperation from the formal or informal channels of participation with authorities. Students formally engaged in university politics, such as student unionists and representatives, view their role and activities as a daily involvement in all the institutional forms of politics characterizing the field of higher education. Drawing on political economy literature (Culpepper, 2011), I call this understanding and practice of politics 'lobbying'. Examples of this include promoting and launching media campaigns, organizing public debates with different stakeholders, and taking part in meetings with public authorities, representatives, and officials.

By definition, lobbying is an activity limited to communicative actions generally pursued by small groups, where rank and file students remain as spectators, in passive roles. Students who prefer lobbyist practices regard mobilizations and, more generally, mass politics as problematic and even damaging for the purposes of students. According to this view, the unpredictable and ever-changing nature

of protests would entail more risks than benefits. For those who prefer lobbyist strategies, the best way of doing university politics is through small and knowledgeable groups of people and formal organizations (such as the official student unions). This is because only small groups of students and student organizations can effectively engage with the tasks of lobbying academic institutions and authorities.

Disruption

The most popular strategy that (and by definition associated with) movements have historically adopted to exert leverage on institutions is disruption (Kolb, 2007). The disruptive power of movements lies in the threat of halting some processes that their opponents value. More specifically, disruptive power is the power activated from below through the withdrawal of contributions to social cooperation by people at the lower end of hierarchical social relations (Piven, 2006). That power consists in their ability to disrupt a pattern of ongoing and institutionalized cooperation that depends on their consent. Disruption denotes, thus, the leverage that results from the breakdown of institutionally regulated cooperation. A mobilization is disruptive when most of its actions aim at affecting the life of communities and institutions by paralyzing or seriously disturbing their core functions. For instance, students who occupy a department by preventing it from performing its daily seminars and classes, or researchers who refuse to run assigned courses, are two examples of actions that withdraw cooperation and put in crisis the core institutional activities of the university.

Coalitional building

Social movement literature has shown how the presence of political allies in political institutions, in key decision-making bodies, in media, and, even more generally, in the public arena is one of the main factors determining or, at least, facilitating the success of a movement (Kitschelt, 1986; Amenta *et al.*, 1992; della Porta and Rucht, 1995; Cress and Snow, 2000; Kriesi, 2004). Historically, ‘natural allies’ of movements have been left parties or unions (della Porta and Rucht, 1995). More broadly, protesters may realize that the only adoption of disruptive tactics cannot suffice for the pursuit of their goals. When this awareness rises, their political strategy can significantly change. Besides disruptive actions, activists can decide to make alliances with institutional insiders or even try to directly access the institutions.

Within non-state institutions, such as firms, NGOs, universities, occasionally activists build coalitions and make alliances with insiders that are more powerful than members of the decisional bodies. Moore (1999) calls the latter ‘mediators’, Santoro and McGuire (1997), Pettinicchio (2012) institutional activists, while more recently Meyerson and Tompkins (2007) have adopted the notion of ‘tempered radicals’. Mediators, who occupy this middle ground between institutions and

movements, are in a good position to translate the claims of protesting groups into changes in practices, norms, and members (Moore, 1999). This joint pressure exerted over the decisional organs and actors seems to be crucial in producing some positive impact for student activists.

If it is true that universities are much more vulnerable to internal de-legitimation and non-participation than state institutions (Walker *et al.*, 2008), then the formation of a movement coalition or alliance ('insiders' and 'outsiders') is meant to exert a significant influence within this setting. The relations between the outsiders and the insiders of the university governing bodies turn out to be institutionally, politically, and personally very tight and the withdrawal from or betrayal of these relations is very difficult to undertake (Cini, 2016b). Student representatives, especially those who speak on the behalf of a group, are not allowed to change their mind and, thus, betray their political mandate. If they did so, they would be hostage of the political, social, and emotional accusation of their student base with which they have a daily relation. These representatives seem to enjoy *de facto* an 'imperative mandate' within the university governing bodies.³

In light of the above discussion, it is possible to reformulate the research question and the related expectation of my paper:

Which strategy has enabled Italian student activists to influence more successfully the revision process of the governance structure of their universities?

Expectation: *the joint pressure of insiders and outsiders allows student activists to get their voice more effectively heard from the university leaders than when one of the two forms of pressure is absent.*

I contend that to be significantly influential within the university setting, student activists need to seek for allies and/or to adopt, besides disruptive strategies, also institutional action forms. In other words, to have a successful impact on the university bodies, students must be able to adopt and carry out a 'coalitional building' strategy. To this end, one of the main political tasks of activists is to find allies, even better if more powerful and with institutional access (Santoro and McGuire, 1997; Moore, 1999; Meyerson and Tompkins, 2007) willing to join the mobilization. A coalition⁴ of actors in mobilization, with a larger variety of tactics and strategies at their disposal, can avail a larger set of action options to exert institutional influence by changing them in proportion and according to the target and goal to achieve. Moreover, insofar as one of these actors has a greater institutional access or performs a core institutional activity, such a mobilization is

³ As counter-argument, think of the loose relations between party activists and party leaders sitting on state political bodies. In such a context, one can expect that the 'representatives' are institutionally much freer to change their mind and political position.

⁴ Here I take on Scharpf's definition of coalition as 'semi-permanent arrangements among actors pursuing separate but, by and large, convergent or compatible purposes and using their separate action resources in coordinated strategies' (Scharpf, 1997: 54). See also Mccammon and Moon: 'social movement coalitions occur when distinct activist groups mutually agree to cooperate and work together toward a common goal' (2015: 326).

more likely to produce a larger institutional impact. A coalition, made up of both institutional insiders and outsiders (of the governing bodies, for instance), can indeed adopt a dual strategy of action by exerting pressure on the institutional decision-making process through mass mobilizations outdoor and, at the same time, by playing the role and the game of the institutional actor indoor. External pressure and internal participation amplify the strength and the influence of these actors over the institutional decision-making.

Case selection and methodology

Assessing the impact of challengers' strategies is one of the most difficult tasks for social movement scholars (Gamson, 1990; Giugni, 1998; Bosi *et al.*, 2016). Even more challenging is to depict the causal mechanisms that connect these strategies with their actual outcomes (Kolb, 2007). The methodology that I adopted to identify the causal mechanism underlying the impact that the strategic choices of student activists have produced in their confrontation with the university leaders is 'process tracing' (Bennett and George, 2001). Process tracing is in fact the research procedure 'designed to identify processes linking a set of initial conditions to a particular outcome' (Vennesson, 2008: 224). Its adoption allows one to identify the 'chains of interaction that filter structural conditions and produce effects' (della Porta, 2013: 24). Exploring them in the study of social movements, Bosi *et al.* (2016: 24) define causal mechanisms as those 'processes connecting movement actions to observed outcomes'. Taking on a 'strategic approach' (Jasper, 2015) where the focus on the forms of relation and interaction between actors is central, I prefer to call them 'mechanisms of interaction'. My analysis aims to identify such mechanisms by looking at the dynamics of interaction at play between student activists and university leaders during the revision process of the statutes of some Italian universities in 2011.

In order to trace the process of this interaction, I interviewed 30 student activists belonging to all the political organizations involved in the protest, as well as 15 Italian academics holding leadership positions in the three universities under investigation. In interviewing the students, I was interested in knowing which strategies and tactics they adopted in the attempt to influence the decision-making processes of their universities. I then interviewed key university leaders to collect information about their ways of running the institution and their reaction to the student mobilizations of which they were the target. Alongside this, I analyzed the various proposals of statute reforms discussed by the *ad hoc* committees as well as the counter-proposals of the student activists (where present).

As for the rationale of my case selection, building on a 'most-similar systems design' (Lijphart, 1975), I chose to focus on three Italian 'mega universities' (Capano, 2008), which have historically shown high rates of student activism, namely, the University of Turin, Sapienza of Rome, and Federico II of Naples (Cini, 2016a). In doing so, I intend to 'minimize the variance of the control variables'

(della Porta, 2008: 214), that is, the institutional setting on which the student activists exert their pressure, in order to ‘maximize the variance of the independent variables’ (della Porta, 2008), meaning, the repertoire of student strategies. What is more, the three cases of student activism cover all the student organizations and related action strategies that have populated the Italian student movement field (Crossley, 2003) during the most recent protest years (2008–13). More notably, if the student activists of the Federico II of Naples *a priori* rejected to adopt a more institutional repertoire as well as to make alliance with other university actors, the activists of the Sapienza of Rome and University of Turin instead openly carried out a ‘coalitional building’ strategy to impact on their respective universities. However, while the students of the Sapienza of Rome succeeded neither in accessing the university governing bodies nor in making a stable coalition with other actors, the students of the University of Turin successfully achieved both these objectives (Cini, 2016b). Finally, I analyse three cases of student activism addressing the same issue (revision of university statute) and targeting the same authority (local university leaders). Keeping these two characteristics constant allowed me to better analyse the impact that the kind of student strategies produced on the university governing bodies.

Assessing the strategies of the Italian student activists

In December 2010, the Italian government passed a higher education reform (Law 240/2010), which aimed at modifying the institutional governance of universities in the direction of a managerial pattern, fostering the centralization of the university leadership, the managerialization of decisional bodies, and the reduction of power of the collegial organs (Regini, 2014). In order to implement this modification, the law provided for a process of statute revision that each university was obliged to accomplish locally in the following 6 months (January–June 2011). The establishment of *ad hoc* committees for the revision of the university statute triggered processes of student activism and of researchers’ mobilizations,⁵ aiming to oppose locally the

⁵ Law 240/2010 also established the extinction of the role of researchers (until their depletion), and simultaneously the introduction of a new figure of fixed-term researcher [‘Tempo Determinato’ (TD)]. In the plan of the government, the fixed-term researcher should have gradually replaced the researcher with position, more expensive and unmovable. As Piazza remarks: ‘at the termination of the fixed-contract, the “new” researchers should have been competing with the “old” researchers to advance their careers (to become associate professors), and, for this reason, the TD researchers gained more chances to win the competition, as otherwise they would have been expelled from the university, where the old researchers were anyhow able to maintain their position’ (2014: 66).

Facing this blackmail, the researchers rejected what was regarded as ‘a race at the bottom’ and started organizing and mobilizing from the early months of 2010. To this end, they gathered in Milan on 29 April 2010 to officially find a national coordination of researchers, ‘Rete 29 Aprile per una Università Pubblica, Libera e Aperta’ (R29A), aimed at opposing the Gelmini reform. The first act that the researchers of the neo-born R29A carried out was to announce the ‘unavailability to teach’ for the academic year 2010/2011. In doing so, the political strategy of the R29A aimed to show how Italian researchers were indispensable for the academic programs and curricula, in that without them universities would have been meant to shut

managerialization of the academic governance and to demand its democratization (Cini, 2017). This was also the case of the three universities under investigation, where the creation of these committees gave rise to mobilizations of students and researchers as well as the reactive response from the university leadership.

In the university committees for the statutory revision, the stake at play was not only the design of the future university governance, but also and, above all, the power relations that would have been structured in the new model of university governance for the years to come (Cini, 2016a). All the professors sitting in the committees of statutory revision were well aware of it and acted accordingly depending on the type of strategy adopted by the students and researchers in their effort to influence the decision-making. While the university leaders were often able to pre-empt the demands and co-opt the student organizations adopting lobbyist strategies of influence, they felt instead forced to tackle more seriously the students showing a militant attitude by intensifying their tactics of repression. Yet, in neither of both cases, students were able to successfully impact on the decision-making process of their universities (Cini, 2016b). The mere adoption of only one of the two strategies (lobbyism or disruption) separately did not allow students to get their voice sufficiently heard from the university management. In other words, my analysis on the Italian case shows that the joint pressure of insiders and outsiders makes student activists more powerful in the confrontation with the university leaders than when the two forms of pressure are exerted separately. In short, my expectation on the greater efficacy of a ‘coalitional building’ strategy of influence seems to be confirmed.⁶

Lobbying

Student representatives adopting a lobbyist strategic orientation were rarely able to affect the decisional process of the committees, as their distance from the student

down (researchers held more than 30% of university classes and seminars). What is more, the R29A intended not only to put pressure on the government, by trying to compel Mrs Gelmini to withdraw her bill, but also to exert power on the professors and academic authorities to make them understand that without researchers they would not have been able to run none of the Italian universities (Cini, 2016b).

⁶ Needless to say that for the students to adopt a ‘coalitional building’ strategy, the presence of potential allies is needed. In this respect, the situation appeared very different in the three universities under investigation. While at the University of Turin there was a strong and participative movement of researchers related to the R29A, at the Federico II and Sapienza there were only few groups of researchers active in the national mobilization (Cini, 2016b). Both in Naples and Rome, the majority of researchers mobilized occasionally by showing a corporatist attitude. A mostly corporatist motivation as triggering the researchers’ protest appeared to be the case of Federico II. A member of the administrative board seemed allude to it in his interview: ‘the protest campaign against free teaching was a proper blackmailing tool. Anyway, here at the Federico II all the protest immediately fell apart when we recognized 1000 euros extra for their teaching activities’. By contrast, in Turin, researchers had already shown a more militant attitude since the second half of 2009, when they started to organize the first meetings with some student groups (‘student indipendenti – LINK’) to explore the possibility to build a network and/or alliance to oppose both the upcoming national process of reform and the policies of the university management locally. See the website of the ‘Coordinamento Unito’ for a detailed story (<https://coordinamentounito.wordpress.com/>; retrieved 30 January 2017).

body made these representatives politically insulated and without a real bargaining power in the confrontation with the university leaders. These representatives regard mobilizations and, more generally, mass politics as highly problematic and even damaging, because student movements, whose action forms and political goals are unpredictable and ever-changing, are difficult to govern and to lead. According to them, the best way of doing university politics is, indeed, through small and knowledgeable groups of students and student organizations. This is because only small groups of students and student organizations can effectively comply the tasks of lobbying academic institutions and authorities. Yet, the negative effect of this conception of student politics comes out in periods of student mobilization. The student protesters accused these almost 'self-co-opted' students of being part of the 'casta' of academia. Reporting on the role played by the student union UDU ('Unione degli Studenti') in the process of statute revision at the University of Turin in 2011, Andrea, member of LINK (a more militant organization), expressed in these words such a hostile feeling:

[...] so talking about the UDU. They simply were not there. They were just three students present in the mobilization of Law department, who after only two weeks decided to give up everything, because they were perceived as the casta. They were fully repelled by the movement.

The main corollary of their political insulation is the lack of credibility *vis-à-vis* the university leaders and, thus, their incapacity to affect the decision-making process. The political inefficacy of the lobbyist strategy of influence is well depicted by Chiara, a student activist involved in the mobilization at the University of Turin in 2011, when compared with the greater political influence that student organizations and activists also adopting disruptive action forms had. She told me that, 'representation without movement has serious problems. The strength of representation is determined by the strength of the base (which is out of the institutions) that you manage to mobilize'. She was even more explicit in assessing the high value to adopt a mixed strategy of influence, when describing how the student mobilization succeeded in affecting some decisions of the *ad hoc* committee for the statute revision. She claimed that

Without the pressure of the streets, we would have not been able to gain anything. Without students in the hall of the Rectorate while we were discussing the reform, there would have not been any student success. Four student representatives without the bargaining power of the streets do not obtain anything.

Disruption

Disruption is a very effective protest tool when the disruptors have a strategic position in the production and reproduction of the organization in which they act (Silver, 2003) or when they are able to make an alliance with actors who have such a strategic position. If both conditions are missing, it is more likely for

a disruptive action to produce disadvantages than benefits for its initiators. In the latter situations, the reaction from authorities or opponents can be very confrontational by making the life of the protesters impossible and their demands inadmissible. The student mobilization at the Federico II of Naples represents a very exemplificative case of this sort. The principal student groups involved in the mobilization professed a Marxist Leninist orientation, whose main goal is to transform the university into a field of radical and never-ending (class) struggle (Cini, 2016b). For them, student politics is not institutional mediation but only conflict and antagonism.

The university management of the Federico II of Naples showed a very repressive attitude toward the actions of these students, more specifically when the latter attempted to disrupt the official meetings of university authorities and block their institutional activities. An executive member of the Department of Hygienics was very explicit in claiming that the reaction from hers and her colleagues was ‘always firm and inflexible’. Both the academic senate and the administrative board of the Federico II of Naples always rejected to come to a deal and recognize the demands of the most radical student collectives and groups. The Neapolitan student activists of various political groups confirmed to me this very negative picture stemming from their struggles, especially when a key decision on the restructure of the university governance was at stake in the committee for the statute revision. Roberta, from a leftist student group, confided to me that they did not have ‘influence in the committee. Also because we had the taboo regarding representation. At most, we occupied the rectorate. Yet, we never had a significant impact on the committee’s decisional outcomes’. Giovanni, belonging to a more radical group, was equally honest in admitting that student disruption never changed anything at the level of institutional politics of the Federico II of Naples: ‘nothing within the academic organs. Only free of acting at the political and social level outside of the narrow scope of the institutional university politics’.

Speaking of the incapacity of the Roman movement to exploit its high mobilization in order to influence the reform of the university statute, Luca, from a student group of the Sapienza of Rome, pointed out that the major limit of the students was precisely ‘political’, namely, their incapacity and unwillingness to ‘frontally deal with the issue of institutional power within the university’. He claimed that

The movement had a limit, which was the limit of the political form. We had launched the slogan ‘no one can represent us!’ meaning, a slogan that denounced the lack of representativeness of institutions and of political bodies. Yet, we did not pose the question of how to build alternative forms of power, how to give a continuity to the movement. We were not able to find a mechanism maintaining our mobilization capacity and, at the same time, giving an organizational continuity to take over the institutional power of the university. This was our main problem. Our incapacity to build an organizational and political form able to reproduce and use the high mobilization capacity of the early moments of the movement.

Likewise, other university actors involved in the mobilization opposing the managerialization of the university governance reckoned that the only participation in protest events was insufficient to bring about a significant and favorable change within the governing bodies. In this respect, the case of the mobilization of researchers at the Federico II of Naples in 2011 was again very exemplificative. The Neapolitan researchers regarded the absence of a strategic alliance with the students as one of the main factors explaining their incapacity to be effective in the revision process of the university statute. Alessandro, junior academic in History of Political Thought and activist of the national researchers' political group 'Rete 29 Aprile' (R29A), blamed especially the students for not having been willing to ally with the researchers, because 'students were too radical and antagonist'. He kept going by claiming that

They did not want to make a political alliance with us because they thought we were too moderate and corporatist. A priori. In addition, the student lists running for elections were all linked to the Rector. Thus, there is no way to politically cooperate with them. For all these reasons, we could not structurally count on a stable project of political collaboration with the students, who are more interested in doing politics in other social spheres, which have nothing to do with university politics. As a result, we could not count on an important political ally as the students, who are normally capable of making pressure on the decisional bodies both from inside and outside. Our mobilization was not always enough to give credibility to our demands before the university authorities.

Coalitional building

By contrast, a coalition of students and researchers resulted victorious in several respects during the period of statute revision at the University of Turin. All the actors involved in such confrontation contended that such a coalition was the main factor empowering the mobilization and making it politically effective. The joint mobilization struck several professors in a very significant manner. In the words of one of the four professorial members in the committee for the statute revision:

The Law 240 set in motion a significant resistance from the students and from the junior academic staff – the researchers – and, for this reason, there was a big political hostility towards us; in the sense that we had, at the University of Turin, a very effective organization capable of disrupting our lessons and boycotting several other institutional activities. It was a mass movement of students and researchers against the enactment of the reform. Honestly, this mobilization was totally unexpected [for us] for its high participation. We [the professors] had somehow the feeling that we could not but consider them.

The professors felt objectively threatened by this politics of coalition. Many of the university managers I interviewed explicitly remarked the capacity of such a coalition to be significantly effective within the governing bodies. A professor with an executive role in the board of administrators argued that the formation of the

coalition of students and researchers gave them a formidable substantial power at the University of Turin. ‘All the weakest components of our university are united now. Even though they have different interests, students and researchers have managed to build a common coalition. This is producing a common interest, which is bigger than all the other interests, also than the most powerful ones. The weak actors of our university are together and are doing politics’. According to her, the presence of such a coalition increased enormously the influence of students and researchers within the university committees and governing bodies. Again in her words

In only two years we have had a student as President of the Didactic Committee [Giuliano Monticiello], and now we have Silvia Pasqua [a researcher in Economics] as President of the Staff Committee, which decides all over the issues concerning the strategic planning of the academic staff (full professors, associate professors, and researchers) and non-academic staff of this university. At the University of Turin today most of the power is in their hands. The alliance between researchers and students has an explosive potential.

Also the researchers of the University of Turin I interviewed stressed the importance of using a ‘coalitional building’ strategy as the best way to influence the governing bodies. In addition, many of them also highlighted how the ability to make a stable coalition with the students was crucial to be politically effective. Bruno (researcher in History) contended that it was precisely this alliance with the students which broke down the old dichotomy of the ‘either you stand outside or inside, *tertium non datur*’. In his words

This thing of being inside and outside and of thinking that the outside affects the inside (when inside there is a bit of the outside) has broken down the existing mechanisms of influence. When the students and we [the researchers] jointly occupied the Senate (it happened more than one time), when we reckoned that the Senate was taking a wrong decision, we often succeeded in obtaining what we wanted. ‘We do not go out until we do not get what we want!’ The movement is essential. The capacity to disrupt a meeting of the Senate or Board of the Administration, aware of the fact that with us there are thousands and thousands people, gives to those of us who are inside the institutions a unique and incredible power. You are inside to represent the people who are not there. We are there and we account for the people who are outside.

In Alessandro’s words, researcher in Physics, one of the founders of the R29A and member of the university committee for the statute revision at the University of Turin

With LINK [a national leftist student group] we launched the ‘Other Reform’ from which we have drawn some proposals for the new Statute. For instance, we aimed at obtaining an elective administrative board. In Turin, at this point we said: let’s try! We started to work with the student representatives in order to impact more effectively on the process of statute revision. Even participating in that committee

wasn't obvious given that there were no criteria of selection for the formation of the committee. At the beginning, only two students were included, but no researchers. So, we made a big mess to have at least two researchers (to this end we collect more than 500 signatures). They conceded us only one researcher (that is, myself) and one [researcher] 'auditor' with right to speech (but not to vote), Bruno Maida. Composition of the committee of 15 units: 1 researcher, 2 students, 2 administrative personnel, the rest was professors (the Rector included). We were in total minority. However, we managed to break their balls. The committee was appointed in February 2011, its work terminated in September 2011. We gained some things: the election of the Rector also with the votes of precarious researchers. Now the precarious researchers have our same rights to vote. We managed to have a presence of researchers in all the committees of the Academic Senate. And we also managed to increase the number of representatives of the administrative personnel: from 2 to 3. On the other, we managed to reduce the number of professors in all the representative organs. We started to jointly work and cooperate with the student reps. They helped us to make approve a good (for us) didactic regulation, and we helped them to make approve a good student fees regulation. We also obtained the streaming of all the meetings of the Academic Senate. The barons now are shitting their pants. They feel observed. We are the watchdogs of democracy. So, every time they make a mistake, they find themselves pilloried.

The effectiveness of this way of doing politics within the university is ably expressed by Elena, a student activist at the Sapienza of Rome, but also member of the national executive of LINK

We as LINK believe that there are 3 tools which jointly successfully affect the university policies and are: adaptive claims ['vertenza'], representation, and conflict. They cannot stand separately. Representation works only if we have concrete demands to pose, meaning if we seriously study the university policies and regulations and then we come out with alternative proposals. Anyway, representation and counter-proposals do not work without conflict, because if outside there are no students to make pressure, this thing doesn't work. These three things [adaptive claims, representation, and conflict] are the pillars on which we have built LINK. What we do not like of the UDU is that they think that one can raise demands only through representation. What we do not like of the [antagonist] student collectives is that they think to win things only through conflict and without representation; and actually very often even without the demand itself. The conflict for the conflict. For us, these three things must be linked together for the university politics to be effective for the students.

The comparison between the student mobilization of the Sapienza of Rome and that of University of Turin was explicitly taken into account by Elena, when speaking of the difference in terms of student capacity to affect the process of statute revision between the two universities. Elena contends that the Roman students did not succeed in significantly influencing the process of revision 'because we weren't in the governing bodies and thus we did not take part in that process like in other cities such as Turin. One cannot impact only from the outside. If you are not in the

representative bodies, no game can be even played. Only with the mobilization it is hard to win something'. This dynamic of the 'inside' and 'outside' is indeed well explained by Alice, who was the only student representative in the committee for the statute revision at the University of Turin in 2011. According to Alice, it was precisely the fruitful relation between representation and mobilization, between 'the inside' and 'the outside', making a difference in terms of student impact. Without forgetting that adopting an 'inside strategy' entails also the capacity to look for (and find) institutional allies. As Alice clearly argued in this passage of our interview:

Our strength within the committee was little, but we had a huge strength outside. This has always been our action strategy: mobilization outside, and action inside. This 'outside' has mattered a lot for the 'inside,' scaring to death the barons. However, the effectiveness of the institutional action was also determined by the fact that we always managed to create a unitary front with the researchers and often also with the non-academic staff, trying to avoid the game of the particularistic interests and thus undermining the power of the barons.

To confirm this, the Pro-Rector to Research and leader of the researchers at the Sapienza of Rome, Dr Azzaro, told me that he succeeded in taking over the position of Pro-Rector to Research of the Sapienza of Rome precisely because the researchers carried out several mobilizations and made a temporary alliance with the students:

The moment of mobilization was essential. If there is not a direct link with the rest of researchers, one runs the risk of only playing the institutional game, which does not give you a general view of the things. In this respect, it is important to develop a relationship with the students for, at least, two good reasons: (1) the mission of the Sapienza is the student; (2) students produce and often manifest an intellectual vivacity and capacity of mobilization that help universities to be aware of their problems in a very dialectic way.

The adoption of a 'politics of coalitions' turned out to be more effective in terms of impact achieved within the university than the mere adoption of protest politics and/or of lobbyist pressure. The university leadership was more prone and willing to collaborate with students and researchers, when the latter acted as a political coalition rather than separate groups. When the internal threat to the institutional order was perceived as highly credible as it was in the case of the coalition between students and researchers in Turin, university leaders felt more inclined to reach cooperation in order to avoid a potentially dangerous conflict escalation.

Concluding remarks

My analysis on the impact of student activism in the university shows that the presence of institutional allies or sympathetic actors within the governing boards, where such decisions are taken, is crucial to facilitate the adoption of student demands. The 'power of the streets' exerted by the 'outsiders', combined with the institutional power of the insiders, produces a significant amplifying effect in the

governing bodies. University managers fear this kind of representation, as they perceive that student representatives with a strong political orientation and a strong tie with the student body are the expression of a collective voice that is difficult to neutralize. These representatives act on the behalf of a collective group, which is poised to politically and physically support them in the confrontation with the university management. On the other hand, the students, who are out of the institutional organs, are also aware that their collective strength (expressed, for instance, through protest activities) is often transformed into institutional power and action from their representatives.

This strategy of influence worked pretty well in the process of statute revision of the University of Turin. There, the presence of a coalition of students and researchers was able to obtain several things that, without such a strategy, would not have otherwise been able to obtain. In such a situation, the amplifying effect of the ‘power of the streets’, exerted by the ‘outsiders’ combined with the institutional power of the insiders turned out to be politically enormous. By contrast, where such institutional allies or sympathetic actors did not show up, the capacity of the students to affect the policy process of their university remained very low (Naples and Rome).

My study aims at contributing to the literature on the impact of activism on non-state institutions and organization (Walker *et al.*, 2008; Pettinicchio, 2012, 2017). My analysis illustrates that the joint pressure of insiders and outsiders is crucial in producing some positive impact for student activists within the organizational setting of the current Italian universities. In line with the most recent works in the field (see especially Pettinicchio, 2017), I contend that the dichotomous understanding of reality based upon the framework of ‘movements vs. institutions’ needs to be overcome. More notably, my article shows how (and why) movements can become institutions and part of institutions to the extent that institutions encompass movements and can transform themselves into movements. In other words, time seems to be ripe for social movement scholars to start to investigate more deeply the institutional settings and mechanisms in which social movements are involved and vice versa. To this end, further empirical studies need to be carried out and theoretical frameworks need to be further developed and refined.

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Conflicts of Interest

None.

Supplementary material

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