RESEARCH ARTICLE

ITALIAN STUDENTS AS A POLITICAL ACTOR
The Policy Impact of the Recent Student Mobilizations in the Field of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: After decades of political passivity, Italian students have massively mobilized in the years 2008 and 2010 to protest the implementation of two political measures fostering a neoliberal conception of higher education. More notably, the *casus belli* of these mobilizations concerned the implementation of a financial measure cutting public funding for higher education in 2008, accompanied by a New Public Man-agement (NPM) reform of university governance in 2010. Despite a high rate of participation, none of the two mobilizations managed to alter the political course of events. The Italian government approved and implemented the two measures and the Italian student movement lost this political battle. In short, recent student mobilizations failed to produce any policy impact on the Italian field of higher education. Why was this the case? My argument is that organizationally and politically fragmented protests are not able to in-fluence policy issues that have a low public relevance, especially in periods of economic crisis and political austerity. I contend that this was precisely the case of the Italian student protests of 2008 and 2010.

KEYWORDS: Higher education, Italy, policy impact, political salience, student protests

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1.   Introduction

After decades of political passivity, Italian students mobilized in large numbers in the years 2008 and 2010 to protest the implementation of political measures fostering a neoliberal conception of higher education. In 2008, the casus belli of the mobilization was the implementation of cuts to the public funding for higher education, whereas in 2010 it consisted in the setting up of a New Public Management (NPM) reform of university governance. More notably, Italian students undertook two distinct protest campaigns in concomitance with the processes of enactment of two national laws, Law 133/2008 introducing significant cuts to the public system of funding, and Law 240/2010 providing for the restructuring of the university governance towards a managerial pattern. The first student campaign lasted three months (between October and December 2008), the second one two months (between October and December 2010).

"Noi non paghiamo la vostra crisi (We do not pay your crisis)!" This was the slogan chanted in the student protests, which took place in many Italian cities and universities since October 2008. More specifically, this slogan indicated the refusal by the generation of students that was attending Italian universities in 2008 to undergo the effects of the economic crisis, epitomized by the cuts affecting the sector of higher education provided for by the law 133 (1,5 billions of euro in 5 years). The main measures regarding the Italian university system provided for by the law 133/2008, and contested by the university students, were three: cuts to the fund for ordinary financing ("Fondo per il Finanziamento Ordinario"- FFO), the turn-over and recruitment of new professors, and the transformation of universities into private foundations. By chanting "we do not pay your crisis," Italian students tried to make manifest their willingness not to undergo a generalized process of social downgrading affecting the condition of their generation (Raparelli 2009; Roggero 2010).

Law 240/2010 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). Opposing such a process of managerialization, Italian students mobilized for the return to a more democratic universities in which the weakest academic components should have had the same decisional power of the traditionally more powerful components in the governing bodies. What is more, in 2010 the students were not the only university actors in mobilization. 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 (TD- "Tempo Determi-

nato"). In the plan of the government, the fixed-term researcher should have gradually replaced the researcher with position, more expensive and unmovable. 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.

Although both the student protests of 2008 and those of 2010 had the government as their main political target, a crucial difference between them rested on the combination and type of allies on which students could rely. If in 2008 Italian professors expressed a generic feeling of opposition to the cuts to higher education, in 2010 they had a more nuanced position towards the managerialization of the governance, bringing them in several cases to react negatively to the student mobilization. The researchers were completely absent in the mobilizations of 2008, while they played a crucial role in those of 2010. In short, whilst Italian professors held a passive and/or negative position towards the student protests of 2008 and 2010, the researchers got involved in those of 2010.

Despite a high rate of participation, none of the two mobilizations managed to alter the course of the political events. The Italian government approved and implemented the two measures and the Italian student movement lost this political battle. In short, the recent student mobilizations failed to produce any policy impact on the Italian field of higher education. Why was this the case, despite the large mobilizations of students? I argue that 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. To probe this proposition empirically, I have interviewed the principal actors involved in these events (student leaders, academic authorities and policy makers) and consulted statistical data concerning the public salience of various policy issues in Italy during the period under investigation.

1. Student organizing and higher education policy

The impact of student protests in the field of higher education since the last big wave of student protest – begun in 2008 – has received scant scholarly attention in the social sciences. This neglect, however, is not determined by a lack of scientific interest in issues of higher education. On the contrary, in the social sciences there are several disciplinary approaches and epistemological paradigms dedicated to understanding the field of higher education and the behaviours of its inhabitants. Sociology of higher education, public policy, political economy, and social movement studies (to list only the

most evident cases) represent various and distinct disciplines that explore how students affect and are affected by higher education institutions (HEIs). At the risk of oversimplification, it is possible to identify two distinct epistemological approaches to this field.

On the one hand, there are disciplines, such as the sociology of higher education, organization theory, public policy, and political economy, whose approaches aim at investigating institutionalized student behaviour and the formalized setting of norms and institutions in which this behaviour occurs (see Capano et al. 2017). On the other hand, disciplines such as social movement studies and contentious politics are more interested in exploring the causes and effects of non-institutionalized student behaviour (see della Porta 2010). In short, these distinct approaches tackle the issue of student behaviour in higher education by stressing and investigating different, and even alternative, aspects of it. This may explain the reason why the disciplines adopting these two approaches seldom speak to each other and even more rarely share common concepts and frameworks of analysis. More concretely, while social movement studies focus their attention mainly on student protests and contentious politics on campus, the sociology of higher education and organization theory are more interested in exploring the behaviour of students and their organizations in the daily life of university institutions.

This analytical distinction however reveals itself to be both unrealistic and limiting, particularly in the investigation of several real-world phenomena – such as the influence of non-institutionalized actions within formalized settings and arenas (Jasper 2015) – which lie at the intersection of the two epistemological approaches. In line with a recent strand of research combining social movement studies and organization theory (McAdam and Scott 2005, Soule 2013), this articles tries to build a bridge between these approaches, with the ambition of starting a debate capable, eventually, of yielding a shared analytical framework explaining the impact of student protests on the higher education field. More succinctly, the time seems ripe to attempt to set up a dialogue between social movement studies and the sociology of higher education (Cini and Guzman-Concha 2017).

This section sketches those features of student action and of the higher education field in which this action occurs that I see as crucial in explaining the impact, or lack thereof, of student protests. More precisely, I have singled out two characteristics, whose precise configuration affects the impact that student protests can achieve within the field of higher education. The first one concerns the forms of student organizing, while the second one the public salience of higher education policy. In the article, I will

illustrate how a specific configuration of these characteristics has shaped the impact of student protests in the field of Italian higher education between 2008 and 2010.

Sociologists of higher education have recently constructed typologies on the forms of student organizing. For instance, Klemencic (2012, 2014) looks at the forms of collective organizing that students establish in the higher education field to represent their institutional interest before local and national political authorities. The most innovative aspect of such a typology is its relational character. Klemencic accounts for the type of relations that student organizations entertain with public authorities, and especially with the state. Her analysis distinguishes between higher education fields in which relations between organizations which represent students and public authorities is "neo-corporatist," and those in which such a relation is defined, instead, as "pluralist" (Klemencic 2012). The neo-corporatist type of interaction involves a situation in which a small number of prominent student associations act as intermediaries and are formally involved in public decision making concerning student issues. Typically, such associations have compulsory membership and extend to the entire student body. In contrast, a pluralist type of relation characterizes a field in which there are several student organizations claiming to represent the student body and competing for access to policy making. Consequently, in such pluralist settings the state does not recognize a single legitimate interlocutor. Aiming constantly at incrementing the student membership within their ranks, these associations compete also to increase their public legitimacy and representation capacity before the student body.

This distinction between neo-corporatist and pluralist types of relation allows us to map out higher education fields according to the presence of nation-wide student organizations (and/or networks of student organizations) that are formally entitled to take part in public decision-making. In neo-corporatist fields, these actors are present, normally alongside more or less formalized structures of representation and influence vis-à-vis public authorities. In pluralist fields, instead, they are normally absent (see Klemencic et al. 2016). Based on this, one would expect neo-corporatist type of relations to grant to student organizations a certain influence over decision-making, one greater and stronger than what would be possible under a pluralist regime. In neo-corporatist fields, formally recognized organizations representing the student body are the only legitimate associations: only they are allowed access to political organs in which decisions on higher education are taken, and only they are allowed to participate in institutional meetings with state authorities. This proximity to decisional bodies and actors should grant to these organizations a greater potential for political influence than that of their counterparts in pluralist fields, where there is no permanent institutional access to decisional bodies.

Yet, this expectation is confirmed mostly in times on institutional stability, i.e. when the dynamics of interaction within the higher education field proceed according to consolidated norms and interests (see Bourdieu 1988). In conditions of institutional instability, the situation is different (Fligstein and McAdam 2013). This happens, for instance, when student protests occur and subvert the institutional order of university life (Cini 2016b). Protest can in fact be employed by students as an alternative resource, besides traditional institutional means, through which to face up to public authorities in the effort to influence and challenge them (della Porta and Diani 2006). When protest occurs, relations between students and political authorities can be significantly altered in terms of power balance. When protests occur, state-recognized student organizations are not always capable of maintaining their representative capacity, and consequently negotiating force *vis-à-vis* political authorities. In times of institutional crisis, this representative capacity seems to depend more on their centrality in the organization of protest than on their proximity with state authorities. To the extent that such a proximity is unfolded and/or perceived as a relation of dependency on state authorities, the political credibility of these organizations can decrease.

This may explain why the student organization leading the protest often obtains the greatest legitimacy and representation capacity within the student body and can consequently become the most credible political interlocutor for public authorities. From this perspective, we can appreciate how it is not only the type of higher education field (neo-corporatist vs. pluralist) which empowers student organizations, but also their political traditions and protest culture (della Porta 2010). Regardless of their institutional configuration, higher education fields in which students have a strong protest tradition are generally more open to student influence than fields in which such a tradition is historically low. Recent studies have for instance shown that the policy impact of political student organizations in periods of protest within a pluralist field, such as France in 2007 (Genicot 2012), is significantly higher than the impact of the same kind of organizations during protests within a neo-corporatist field, such as England in 2010 (Cini 2016a). Is therefore the distinction between neo-corporatist and pluralist fields of higher education of little use for assessing the policy impact of student protests?

With a number of amendments, I believe, the distinction can still be helpful. The principal amendment concerns the role of protest (or contentious politics). Although protest is not completely absent in Klemencic's original framework (see Klemencic 2012), it does not have a central position and, as noted above, this underestimation reduces the explanatory capacity and analytical scope of such a framework. Students' contentious activities and organizations are not taken seriously in consideration and, therefore, their influence in the higher education field is hardly understood and ex-

plained. To account for the role of protest one needs to focus on student organizations that are involved in protest activities, and one can distinguish between nation-wide and unitary ways of organizing protest and local and fragmented ones. The first scenario involves an organizational field of the protest (Crossley 2003) in which one hegemonic organization (and/or network of organizations) has the capacity to be the only legitimate political actor leading the student protest. This makes the organizational field of the protest unitary and equipped with a nation-wide scope of political action. By contrast, the other scenario involves protest field in which several organizations (and/or networks of organizations) are involved and compete for the leadership of the protest. Normally, this scenario depicts the case of locally-based networks of organizations connecting different subnational geographical areas and/or university campuses, which sometimes can be accompanied by the presence of a nation-wide organization having, however, a low degree of autonomy vis-à-vis state authorities and not taking part in the protest.[1] Either way, none of these organizations has the capacity to lead the protest and attain a nation-wide level of political intervention. As a result, this organizational field appears politically fragmented.

The modes of student organization cannot, by themselves, explain the impact that protests effect on the higher education field. Student organizations do not pursue their goals in an institutional void, but are forced to confront themselves with the political features of the context in which they act. In short, it is not possible to explain the policy impact of student protests without taking into consideration some specific contextual conditions within which these protests arise, develop, and produce impact (della Porta and Diani 2006). Social movement scholars maintain that "the impact of movements is mediated strongly by political conditions" (Amenta et el. 1992, 335). Social movement literature defines these contextual factors as political opportunity structures (POSs). The theoretical models that account for them in explaining movement impact are

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[1] This is where my framework, which embraces protest, distances itself most from Klemencic's. Her framework is primarily interested in investigating student representative organizations in their institutional relations with political authorities and bodies. By contrast, I look at student organizations in their relations with political authorities and bodies when and to the extent that protest plays a role. In short, I only consider those organizations that are involved in protest campaigns. This means that I do not take into account those student organizations that are formally recognized as the sole representative organizations but are completely marginalized in the organization of protest. This appears sometime to be the situation of nation-wide student organizations in neo-corporatist fields of higher education. Such organizations are the actors that entertain relations with political authorities in times of institutional stability but—given their high degree of state dependency—are completely marginal in the organization of student protest. If one aims to account for the role of protest in the relations between students and authorities, one needs to modify this excessively rigid distinction between neo-corporatist and pluralist fields of higher education.

known as "political mediation model" (Giugni 2004). According to this model, ''political opportunity structures influence the choice of protest strategies and the impact of social movements on their environment'' (Kitschelt 1986: 58). Social movement scholars have distinguished between ''open'' and ''closed'' structures, that is, "structures which allow for easy access to the political system or which make access more difficult" (Kriesi 2004: 69-70). The impact of protest is more effective when political opportunities are open, especially when allies emerge in the political system (della Porta and Diani 2006). The concept of political opportunity structure implies stability but it is useful to treat stability as a variable element, running from highly inert components that are more or less permanent features of the terrain to windows of opportunity that may be open only briefly (Gamson and Meyer 1996). The presence of divisions between the elites and/or institutional allies, the type of electoral system, the centralization/decentralization of political powers, the support of public opinion are, amongst several other factors, types of environmental conditions that help or inhibit movement change (Kriesi 2004).

More notably, research exploring the impact of social movements on public policies has highlighted the presence of a supportive public opinion and of a high mass attentiveness as key contextual factors explaining movement success (Burstein 1999, Gamson 2004, Luders 2016). According to Burstein's theory of democratic representation (1999), the most important conditions determining the victory or defeat of a movement are in fact a favourable public opinion and a high level of public attention on the targeted issue. In his view, social movements frequently "fail to get what they want because a majority of the public wants something else" (Burstein 1999: 9). This is explained by the fact that in order to be re-elected or not to lose electoral consensus, politicians are mostly interested in satisfying the public opinion's preferences on policy issues, which public opinion itself considers as a political priority (Gamson 2004). In short, social movements "are highly likely to succeed if public opinion is both supportive and attentive or fail if the reverse is true" (Luders 2016: 189).

Also public policy studies have regarded these two related conditions (i.e. a supportive public opinion and a high political salience) as crucial to make a policy issue more or less open to the influence of social actors (Laver 2001, Culpepper 2011, Capano et al. 2017). Laver (2001) has, for instance, shown that the influence of advocacy groups (i.e. interest groups, social movements, NGOs) on the political outcomes of a policy field depends on the political importance that such field takes on for that country. This seems to be particularly true in the case of social movements, whose low amount of institutional resources on which to rely means that high political salience becomes a potentially fundamental resource to influence policy decisions. Research in political

economy has in fact shown that the low salience of an issue seems to favour the interest and power of those actors that dominate its policy field. Culpepper (2011) has highlighted the presence of this mechanism by investigating the issue of corporate control. He showed (2011, 113) that "when issues are of low salience, the lobbying capacity of managers and the deference to their expertise by politicians and the press are important assets." Put more clearly, Culpepper found out that "the low salience of corporate control converts the expertise of managers into a powerful political weapon" (112). In this sense, the political salience of an issue can say much on the kind of social actor that is potentially able to influence a given policy field. For Luders (2016: 190), "under circumstances of low salience, there are multiple combinations that are predicted to coincide with other outcomes."

Applied to the case of student movements, this means that in countries where public opinion considers higher education as a politically salient issue, student protests are expected to be taken into more serious consideration by governments and, therefore, are more likely to influence higher education policy. This occurs insofar as not taking into serious consideration the concerns of a fraction of population (students and their families) whose policy field is perceived as socially relevant may bring the government to lose its political support. To avoid this, the government may thus be willing to make some concessions to the students. Yet, this latter outcome depends also on the political credibility exhibited by the student organizations in charge of the protest. In other words, it depends on the capacity of such organizations to be truly representative of the protests combined with their willingness to negotiate with the government in order to defend and put forward student demands. In short, student organizations have to be perceived as a credible political actor posing a realistic threat for the government and its agenda.

By crossing the two above features, namely, modes of student organizing and policy salience, it is then possible to illustrate hypotheses on the four possible situations associated with the impact of student protests on the policy of higher education (see *Tab. 1*).

A high public attention on higher education is more likely to bring the government to address the issues brought up by protest. A social dissatisfaction in a relevant policy field may soon transform itself into a politically serious issue, and this may induce the government to offer a prompt and positive response to the protesters' demands. However, such an outcome depends mostly on the protesters' capacity to be a credible political interlocutor *vis-à-vis* the government. This, in turn, requires a protest led by an organization having a high representative capacity and the willingness to engage in po-

litical negotiation with the government (top-right cell, *Tab. 1*). The latter can then decide to satisfy the students in order to prevent bigger political problems.

Table 1. The impact of student protests on higher education policy

		Salience of higher education policy	
		Low	*High*
Ways of organizing student protest	*Unitary and nation-wide*	Low	High
	Fragmented and locally-based	-	Low

Legend: **"-"= no impact, "Low"= low impact, "High"= high impact**

This does not seem to be the case when the student protest is fragmented and locally-based, as the plethora of competing organizations which characterize these situations generally fail to successfully represent the entirety of the student body and to present a unitary and clear political orientation before the government. Lacking a credible political interlocutor, the government can then successfully tame the protest by hijacking student demands and offering some marginal gains to the protesters (bottom-right cell, *Tab. 1*). An even worse impact (no impact) is expected to occur when a fragmented student protest takes place in a country where higher education has a low political salience. In this case, the government can in fact take advantage of the low interest that the public shows towards the issue to silence the protesters and to adopt and implement its full policy agenda. To do so, the government can appeal to the necessity of sacrificing the interests of these actors to produce greater benefits for other more important policy fields and for society as a whole (bottom-left cell, *Tab. 1*). I contend that this was precisely the case of the student protests in Italy in 2008 and 2010. Lastly, a low impact is expected to occur also for the case in which a low political salience of higher education is associated with the presence of a unitary and nation-wide organization leading the student protest. Although the student protesters constitute a credible political actor, the low salience of the issues concerning higher education makes the government not particularly willing or interested in coming to an agreement with the protesters. Higher education is not a political priority in the governmental agenda (top-right cell, *Tab. 1*).

2. Data and methodology

Broadly speaking, assessing the impact of protests is one of the most difficult tasks for social movement scholars (Bosi et al. 2016, Giugni 1998). The identification and representation of the causal mechanisms that connect protests with actual policy outcomes is even more challenging (Kolb 2007). The methodology that I adopted to identify the causal mechanism underlying the policy failure of the Italian students in their protest campaigns of 2008 and 2010 is 'process tracing' (George and Bennett 2005). Process tracing is a 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 means looking for those 'processes connecting movement actions to observed outcomes' (Bosi et al. 2016, 24). Following this lead, I adopted this methodology to attempt to identify those processes which, related on the one hand to traits of the protest and on the other to the Italian higher education policy, connect the former (i.e. protests, "movement actions") to the latter (i.e. "observed outcomes", in this case a lack of policy impact).

To collect all the relevant data and information allowing me to accomplish this task, I employed the following methods: in-depth interviews with the main actors involved; analysis of the student organizations' main political documents; and analysis of relevant statistical data on Italian public opinion. Concerning in-depth interviews, I interviewed several leaders and activists of the main student movement organizations. I was interested in knowing the political strategies and goals of their organizations as well as their inter-organizational relations. I interviewed several policy makers who were at the time committed to reform Italian higher education and several ministerial officials to collect information about their *modus operandi* and their reaction to the student protests targeting them. Furthermore, I interviewed several key stakeholders of the Italian higher education field (i.e., rectors and the presidents of CRUI, the national rectors' association) to know their stance both on the wave of reforms and on the student protests. Finally, I interviewed several experts working on Italian higher education policy, in order to gather a scholarly knowledge on it, on the logic of its evolution, and on the various reform cycles. As for documentary analysis, I collected and consulted the main political documents elaborated by the various student organizations in the two protest campaigns to know more about their political goals and their inter-organizational relations. Finally, I consulted the Eurobarometer data presenting the most politically relevant issues for the Italian public opinion in the years 2005-

20016 to assess the political salience of the issue of higher education in the Italian public debate.

3. The Italian student protests and their policy impact

Why didn't Italian students achieve any significant policy gain in their confrontation with the Italian government, in spite of their large mobilizations? My argument is that 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. The analysis of recent student protests in Italy seems to confirm this proposition. First, the Italian student movement was highly fragmented in terms of political and organizational structure. Secondly, Italian higher education is neither traditionally considered as an important policy issue by public opinion, nor did the recent student protests succeed in increasing this interest significantly. More specifically, I contend that 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 the 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. All in all, this peculiar combination of organizational and contextual factors has prevented student protesters from being effective in influencing the higher education policy of the Italian government.

The ways of organizing student protests in Italy have been historically associated with the fragmented and locally-based type. This was the case of the student mobilizations of the "long 1968" and of those of 1990s (Cini 2016b). The locally based nature and the political and organizational fragmentation seemed to be central characteristics also of the most recent student protests of 2008 and 2010 (Caruso et al. 2010). Speaking of these latter protests, Capano, Professor of Public Policy at the University of Bologna, argued in fact that they were connoted by a "high fragmentation of their political representation, which is very high especially among the leftist organizations "

According to several observers, this fragmentation is related to the highly ideological legacy of the Italian student groups, historically embedded in broader cycles of struggle. All the past generations of student activists were in fact immersed and influenced by larger protest cycles, strongly shaping their cultural repertoire of actions and discourses (Tarrow 1989). If the "1968" movement was part of a long protest cycle where the labour movement was by far the central actor, the generation of activists of the student movement of 1990 flowed into the movement against the Gulf war and into

that of the social centers (Mudu 2004). Likewise, the student activists of the movement of 2008/10 inherited, to a certain extent, the protest forms and claims from the activists of the "global justice movement" and, more especially, their demands for a more radical process of social redistribution. This peculiarity has always led Italian student activists to be more interested in joining the various political factions of the Italian left and movements than in attending to the higher education issues (Caruso et al. 2010). To this regard, Catalano, consultant of the university funding system for the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research in the years 1993-1998, was very critical towards the entirety of Italian student movements and their political goals, when he claimed, "I have never seen student movements capable of elaborating a credible cultural plan for the reform of higher education since I have started to work in the Italian university system. If, for instance, we had had politically credible movements, the issue of student rights would not be so tragic today."

Both in 2008 and 2010, the organizational field of Italian students consisted of several locally based groups exhibiting the ambition to be representative of the entire student body, even though they usually have different names in every city (Genicot 2012).[2] During the protest campaign of 2008 there were three student organizations (or networks of organizations) performing this role, while in the campaign of 2010 there were five. Founded in 1994, UDU is the largest Italian student group in terms of membership, and it is organized by an internal statute and formalized decision-making procedures. UDU is politically linked to CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, General Italian Confederation of Labor). Yet, it was marginal in the organization of the protests, as it was accused of professing an excessively moderate political orientation by other student groups, both in 2008 and 2010. In 2008, two other organizations were involved in the protest: Uniriot and Atenei in Rivolta. Linked to social centres (Uniriot) and to far leftwing parties (Atenei in Rivolta), these sub-national networks

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[2] The Italian landscape of student organizations is much more complex. One can assess the complexity of such a landscape by looking at the myriad of lists presenting candidates to the election of the CNSU (Consiglio Nazionale Degli Studenti Universitari [National Council of University Students]), which is a consultative council for the Italian Ministry of Education and Research, composed of 28 students elected every three years. In this sense, Italy is a typical case of pluralist field of higher education (Klemencic 2012). Unlike other countries, Italian law does not set any legal provisions: financing of students' unions is for instance completely dependent on student projects, membership fees, and more or less transparent partnerships with political parties, unions or interest groups (Genicot 2012). However, I do not consider these student lists and the institutional channel of the CNSU as relevant to explain the policy impact of Italian students. Italian students tend in fact to underestimate the role of formal student politics (as a clear indication of it, let us think of the traditionally very low level of turnout in university elections: between 5% and 15%) and of the institutional channels of representation.

of student were central in the organization of protests in many universities, and competed against each other with the ambition of becoming the politically hegemonic organization of the Italian student movement. Uniriot, close to the area of "Italian Autonomy" was present in the universities of Rome, Padua, Bologna, Milan, Naples, Turin, and Venice, while Atenei in Rivolta, linked to the national Trotskyist party of Sinistra Critica (Critical Left), in the universities of Bari, Bologna, Firenze, Milano, Reggio Calabria, Roma, and Trento. Although both networks of students aimed at radically transforming Italian higher education by opposing the neoliberal agenda of the government, they carried out different tactics of action and political strategies. This difference constituted one of the main causes of the split, and consequent failure, of the national assembly of the Italian student movement held at the University of Sapienza in Rome in November 2008. While Atenei in Rivolta intended to construct a national political organization of the movement with a formalized decision making structure, Uniriot preferred to maintain a movement-like type of organization, with a loose network of relations and informal decision making procedures. In the words of Luca, one of the leaders of Uniriot:

> Their [Atenei in Rivolta] way of conceiving the organization of the protest did not reflect the political potential of the movement. We believe that organization should not be an obstacle but a way to multiply the power of the movement. In our view, this cannot occur if we build a formalized coordination of student representatives according to the French model [of the 2007 student protests that Atenei in Rivolta aimed to adopt in the Italian situation].

A further consequence of the failure of the national student assembly in November 2008 was the establishment of two other sub-national networks of groups, Link and Red-Net, founded in early 2009. Both groups were in fact critical towards the organizations that had led the protest in 2008. More especially, they accused Uniriot and Atenei in Rivolta of being responsible of the failure of the movement to impact at the national level. According to them, both Uniriot and Atenei in Rivolta missed an opportunity to create a nationwide unitary organization voicing the concerns of students. As Lorenzo, one of the future leaders of Link, confided to me in his interview:

> In 2008, the movement did not have any organizational structure, neither locally nor at the national level. We did not manage to organize a politically credible actor capable of negotiating with the ministry and the government. At the national assembly in Rome, we argued with other student groups precisely over this issue: some of us wanted to create a national political structure of the protests. We failed. Because of this failure, the

movement was unable to entertain any kind of political or institutional relation with offi-
cial authorities for the remainder of the 2008 campaign.

Although sharing this view on the causes of the decline of the 2008 protests, Link and
Red-Net had a very different take on how to lead the student movement and on how
to reform Italian higher education. Link emerged as a split from UDU (which had been
accused of being too moderate) and put forward a trade unionist line whose goal was
to make Italian universities more democratic and participatory. This stance emerges
very clearly in the narration of Elena, a student activist and a member of Link's national
executive.

> We as LINK believe that there are three tools which, jointly, successfully affect higher
> education policy. They are: adaptive claims ["vertenza"], representation, and conflict.
> They cannot stand separately. Representation only works if we have concrete demands
> to put forward, which means that we have to seriously study university policies and reg-
> ulations and come up with alternative proposals. Representation and counter-proposals,
> in turn, do not work without conflict, because if outside there are no students creating
> pressure, this thing does not work. These three things [adaptive claims, representation,
> and conflict] are the pillars on which we have built LINK. What we don't like about UDU
> is that they think that one can raise demands only through representation. What we
> don't like about the [antagonist] student collectives is that they think it's possible to win
> things only through conflict and without representation; and actually very often even
> without a specific demand: conflict for conflict's sake. For us, these three things must be
> linked together for student politics to be effective.

Link was present in the university campuses of Bari, Bologna, Foggia, Lecce, Milano,
Napoli, Padova, Roma, Pisa, Salerno, Siena, Taranto, Torino, Trieste, and Urbino. In
contrast, Red-Net gathered all the student groups with a Marxist Leninist orientation,
whose main political goal was to transform higher education into a field of (class)
struggle. For them, student politics cannot be understood as institutional mediation
but as conflict and antagonism. In this sense, a student movement should 'develop an-
tagonistic and incompatible attitudes towards the system.' Student movements are po-
litical only to the extent that they are able to express incompatibility *vis-à-vis* the status
quo. They have to pursue 'an intrinsic politicization, exhibiting dissatisfaction for what
exists. This politicization is the expression of dissatisfaction and incompatibility with
the extant. The contestation of the system in which we live.' The main aim of a revolu-
tionary student organization is to politicize and socialize as many students as possible
to the new language of social conflict. Red-Net was active in the universities of Milano,
Padova, Napoli, Roma, Firenze, and Palermo.

In sum, the protest organization field of Italian students appeared highly fragmented in political terms in both 2008 and 2010. This made the emergence or the construction of a national actor capable of fully representing students and negotiating their demands with the government impossible.

The difficulty of the emergence of a politically credible student actor at the national level constituted also one of the reasons explaining the incapacity of the Italian students to increase beyond a certain point the level of attention that the political system devoted to the issues of the contested reforms. This, at least, was the perception of several important student leaders, who claimed that Italian students have historically been victims of a lack of consideration by Italian governments and by the media system. As a former founder of UDU Forli and UDU International officer confirmed this in an interview, quoted in Genicot (2012: 64), in which he compared Italy and England:

> If the English students' union says 'I organize a demonstration,' the minister tears his hair out. If UDU says 'I organize a demonstration,' maybe the minister will never know [. . .] when journalists do not write about universities, the government does not want to see you, nor do the rectors, you have to find a way to make yourself heard.

All the policy makers, state officials, and experts of the Italian field of higher education that I interviewed confirmed this perception. In this sense, higher education is still perceived as something detached from the main dynamics of Italian society. A majority of Italians, especially from lower social classes, do not see higher education as a public good able to generate high social and economic benefits. For Capano, the social perception of the low importance and value of higher education in Italy is also to be imputed to the fact the Italian higher education is not seen as an engine of social mobility as in the German or English systems. 'That is why there is no strong social bloc supporting higher education in Italy. It is no coincidence that it has never been a relevant political issue.'

Professor Moscati, Chair in Sociology of Education at the University Bicocca in Milan, distinguishes between the low attention devoted to higher education by public opinion and the low interest shown by the political class.

> We should distinguish public opinion from politics. Italian public opinion has historically underestimated the issue of higher education. […] Recently, we have assisted to a further decline of interest towards higher education by public opinion in virtue of certain scandals related to academic recruitment. The idea that the university system is rife with corruption is socially widespread today. On the other hand, the Italian political class is not interested in the issue of higher education. It is not seen as an important factor for
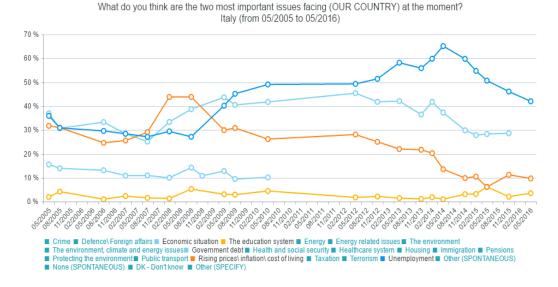
> the social and economic development of our country, as it is in the UK. With the eco-
> nomic crisis of 2008 the Italian government has drastically reduced public funding for
> higher education, when in other countries governments have increased it. In Italy, the
> importance of higher education in our economy is not perceived. We believe that the
> formation of high-skilled professional figures is not essential for our economy.

All the policy makers and state officials I interviewed confirmed such an impression: higher education has been traditionally a politically marginal policy issue in the public agenda of Italian politics and of public opinion. For instance, according to Catalano, 'the institutional political debate on higher education has never been strategic in our country. The debate mostly occurs in a hysterical manner on single and contingent ep-isodes, such as on the scandal of academic recruitment.' In other words, the Italian university system is still seen as a sort of ivory tower, and this perception relegates the issue to political marginality.

This impression seems to be confirmed by the data of a recent study, commissioned and funded by the European Commission, illustrating the most politically salient issues among European citizens in the years 2005-2016 (see: http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/General/index). The main question of the survey asks respondents what the two most important issues in their country are. In every European country, these issues are "Unemployment" and "Economic situation." "Education" is one of the most marginal. This finding turns out to be particularly strong in Italy, where the issue of "Education" is perceived as one of the least important issues. More precisely, the average percentage value for the years 2005-2016 is 2,7%, with values equal or inferior to the 2% in nine cases: 2% (05/2005), 1,07% (09/2006), 1,63% (09/2007), 1,39% (03/2008), 1,84% (05/2012), 1,55% (05/2013), 1,16% (11/2013), 1.89% (03/2014), 1,07% (05/2014) (see Fig. 1, below). These values seem to be impressively low if one thinks that the average values of the two most important policy issues, "Unemployment" and the "Economic situation," are above 40%, or if compared to the average value for higher education in other Europe-an countries such as the UK (7,6%).

Survey results regarding the most important political issues for Italian public opinion in the last decade (2005-2016) seem to confirm the impression of Italian policymakers and experts of higher education policy: higher education is not a political priority for Italian society. What is more, these data also show that the recent student protests have not been influential in significantly changing the relevance of higher education in the Italian public opinion, both during the protests and in the period immediately af-terwards.

Figure 1. What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? Italy (from 05/2005 to 05/2016)

What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?
Italy (from 05/2005 to 05/2016)

Source:
http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/42/groupKy/208/savFile/54

However, these data do not say much about the changes of political attitudes that the student protests may have provoked on the Italian public opinion (as well as on the Italian mainstream media). With respect to this, a good proxy can be represented by the media coverage that the Italian mainstream newspapers gave of the protests and of the contested issues. In analysing the news coverage that la Repubblica provided of the student protests in 2008 and 2010, Cini (2016b) claims that these protests contributed to positively influencing the news frames of such contentious issue. In the course of the protest campaign of 2008, la Repubblica has in fact gradually modified its media coverage by reporting more and more positively the student protests and their demands. This view is somehow confirmed by several student leaders I interviewed. As Lorenzo confided to me:

Thanks to our protests, we succeeded in undermining the perceptions of unanimity and of popularity that revolved around the third Berlusconi government. We constitut-

ed the first successful experience of social opposition to that government. The honey moon between Berlusconi and the Italian people ended up there. It was our main achievement.

Yet, even assuming that Italian students successfully modified the political attitude of the Italian public opinion on the issue of higher education, this shift seemed not to affect the policy decisions of the government. This fact confirms thus Burstein's theory of democratic representation (1999). When the public relevance of a policy issue is low, the public opinion's preference is not highly considered by the politicians. In short, politicians do not feel responsive to social movement demands when the public interest on the contentious issue is low. The Italian student protests seemed precisely to fall in the latter case. Since the protests did not succeed in increasing significantly the interest of the Italian public opinion towards higher education, one can derive that, also for this reason, they failed to influence the policy decision of the government over it.

Most of the various actors I interviewed confirmed to me this interpretation. The student protests of 2008 and 2010 did not manage to gain a sufficient political credibility to persuade the government to change its orientation with respect to the contested issues of higher education. If the student leaders have unanimously perceived the fragmented character of the movement as crucial in determining its failure, the fact that their political interlocutors (that is, former ministries and undersecretaries) have expressed similar views seems very telling of the validity of this interpretation. The reflection expressed by Professor Berlinguer, former Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MIUR), goes precisely in this direction, when he argues that,

> The student movement against the Gelmini Law [2010] was a spontaneous outburst, without a clear goal and a strong bargaining capacity. [...] the cause of its defeat is all here. If you do not put forward a concrete and specific goal, you are not able to influence the course of a policy decision. Additionally, the student organization was very magmatic. A loose organization both locally and at the national level does not permit the creation of an organizational structure leading to results. The movement cannot reach its goals only with the power of numbers, but also needs the organizational capacity to pragmatically delimit its demands and the ability to go to political negotiations with its interlocutors.

In the same vein, Professor Modica, a former MIUR in the late 1990s and one of the central figures of the university reforms of the 2000s, has expressed very clearly this point in his interview. For him, the main problem of the Italian student movement was its politically and organizationally fragmented character. In his words,

> The cause of the current weakness of the movement is that the organizational field of the student left is too fragmented. UDU, Link and too many other organizations populate this universe. Small groups competing against each other without a national political centre, and even capable of losing student elections to CL [a conservative organization of Catholic students]. A terrible fragmentation. Without a nation-wide scope of action, which is a deleterious lack. A strong presence of organized students would improve the system.

This interpretation seems to be shared also by the leaders of the various student organizations. For instance, Lorenzo, one of the national leaders of Link, confided to me a similar concern:

> The lack of a nation-wide movement organization has impeded the emergence of a national agenda and political alternative. We were not politically mature to pose concrete demands. Uniriot rejected completely this approach. For them, the movement had to convey only a rebellious generational identity to avoid having a reformist approach. This was wrong. We had to pose a list of demands to challenge the government.

Sharing this view, Capano argued in fact, "if you do not exhibit a credible, organized, leadership, it becomes very difficult to express a high protest capacity and to produce an effective impact." In other words, the presence of many student voices also means a proliferation of different political positions. In this sense, the presence of a politically fragmented protest field prevented the students from elaborating and agreeing on a shared political agenda to reform higher education. This led the Italian student movement to fail to formulate an alternative vision for Italian higher education. For Professor Regini, Professor of Political Economy at Milan's State University, this was an emblematic weakness of the current movement, especially when compared to the progressive political agenda of the 1968 student movement. In his words:

> The big difference between the movement of 1968 and the current ones lies in the fact that the former had progressive goals claiming social change and innovation. It was a vector of radical demands for social transformation. All successive movements were protest movements with mostly conservative demands. They were not able to integrate their protest with demands for innovation and change. They were perceived as defenders of the status quo. Only defensive movements. So, does this mean that you like the university as it is now?

Professor Decleva, president of CRUI (Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane, Conference of Italian University Rectors) at the time of the student protests

(2008-2011), shares and broadens this view by criticizing not only the protesters but also all other student organizations and even every academic component of the Italian field of higher education:

> In the CUN [Consiglio Universitario Nazionale, National University Board] there are only student unions, which obtain few and marginal victories and do not show great scope and planning in their policy. The most depressing thing is the weakness of all their political interlocutors. As President of CRUI, I was only able to defend the existing situation, attempting to reduce the damages of the government's reforms and to bring public funding back. I have the impression that we no longer have an idea of where we should go. Academics, politicians, economic actors, students: none of these actors has a strong vision or a planned policy for the university system. This thing is very depressing. The university system has by now become a suffocating environment that tries to live day by day, carrying out small political operations in order to gain little portions of power and money. Today, students reflect these dynamics.

For several observers, this inability of the key actors in the field of higher education to formulate a clear political vision concerning higher education policy is one of the main causes that have led to the political and economic sacrifice of this sector as the socio-economic situation of Italians worsened with the arrival of the crisis. This sacrifice was enacted by Mr. Tremonti in 2008, then Minister of Economy and Finance (MEF), to avoid losing consensus both amongst his constituency and with the wider Italian public opinion. For Regini, "the cuts carried out by Tremonti and the subordination of the MIUR to the MEF has been a clear and precise political design. To lower taxes, especially during an economic crisis, we need to find money. You draw it from the sector about which your electorate doesn't care: higher education!"

Modica shares the same view, claiming that, "the financial dismantling of higher education was an idea of Tremonti. Tremonti is strongly against the idea of mass public universities. In his view, it is too costly for Italy. That's why he invented the cut of the turnover for the academic personnel." Modica imputes this policy orientation also to the fact that "Italian right-wing parties perceive the university as a stronghold of leftist thought. For this reason, they aimed at destroying it." With respect to this, Minister Berlinguer is even clearer when he affirms that "the Italian university system is an important constituency for the left, but very hostile to the right." Decleva fully agrees with this interpretation. In tracing the history of the relations between politics and higher education in the last twenty years, he contends, in fact, that:

> The negative turn for the sector of higher education has started when the right was in office. They emphasized some problems of Italian higher education to attack the system globally. For them, Italy spends too much on its universities. In short, the Italian right is very hostile to the issue of higher education. That's why they wanted to punish the sector. Consequently, in 2008 the cuts on public spending towards the university system and the 'caste' of university barons were huge and tremendously damaging.

In times of economic recession, cuts in the policy sectors that are not perceived as relevant by both political actors and public opinion are the first intervention normally carried out by governments. This is especially true when the credibility of a policy sector and of its actors has constantly declined, as it was in the case of the Italian higher education. As Lorenzo (Link) explicitly put it in his interview,

> I do believe that higher education is a truly marginal issue for our governments in the current political phase. If it is marginal, then the political cost of cuts is very low. In the Sixties, the university was still elitist. This means that students had an enormous legitimacy. Students were considered as gentlemen. Today, their social legitimacy has significantly changed. At that time, students were a part of the Italian elite addressing some political demands to the system.

The reasons as to why the lack of response by the Italian government to student protesters was not seen as very costly in political and electoral should by now be clearer. Forced to face the most negative effects of the crisis, the 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 (see the Eurobarometer data, Fig. 1), but was also a policy field closely related to the Italian left and its traditional voters. It is again Lorenzo who suggests this interpretation when he claims that:

> As students in mobilization, we were forced to face a very difficult political situation, since the right wing parties in government were fully against the idea of opening up a dialogue with us. There was a dynamic of strong polarization. If you take to the streets, then you are considered a political enemy of the government. Consequently, there is no room for political manoeuvre and negotiation.

In this sense, and even in light of the absence of a politically credible interlocutor on the students' side, the choice not to negotiate with the students was seen by the Italian government as the most plausible political solution in both 2008 and 2010.

4. Concluding remarks

Through this article, I have presented and discussed some hypotheses on the policy outcomes of social protests (Burstein 1999, Giugni 2004, Kolb 2007, Luders 2016) by explaining why the Italian student protests of 2008 and 2010 failed to influence key policy decisions affecting the sector of higher education (i.e. the withdrawal of two national laws). Even though Italian students were able to positively modify, to a certain extent, the public's orientation on the contentious issues (especially the media coverage), they did not manage to persuade the government that such a shift was so significant to induce a policy change. What is more—as noted by several policy experts—the lack of consideration that the Italian government exhibited vis-à-vis the student demands had also to do with the traditionally low level of public interest towards the issue of higher education. Also in light of such a context, the politically and organizationally fragmented student mobilizations did not gain a sufficient credibility to be perceived as a credible threat in terms of loss of consensus by the Italian government. The latter was thus able to take advantage of the low interest that Italian society showed towards the issue and of the protesters' low political credibility to hijack the protests and implement its full policy agenda.

Appendix

Students:

Alice, LINK (Turin); Chiara, LINK (Turin); Andrea, LINK (Turin); Davide, LINK (Turin); Luca, National spokesperson of Link (Turin); Fabio, LINK (Rome); Elena, LINK (Rome); Lorenzo, LINK (Padua); Roberta, LINK (Naples); Gianluca, Collettivo Universitario Autonomo (CUA) and Askatasuna (Turin); Simone, CUA (Turin); Matilde, CUA (Turin); Giorgio, Atenei in Rivolta (Rome); Luca, UniRiot (Rome); Tiziano, Uniriot (Rome); Fabio, Uniriot and Esc (Rome); Giancarlo, Red-net (Naples); Giovanni, Laboratorio 081 (Naples); Luca, Laboratorio 081 (Naples); Mauro, Laboratorio 081 (Naples)

Policy experts:

Professor Marino Regini, Chair in Political Economy at Milan's State University
Professor Giliberto Capano, Chair in Public Policy at the University of Bologna

Professor Roberto Moscati, Chair in Sociology of Education at the University Bicocca of Milan

University and political actors:
Doctor Bruno Catalano, consultant of the university funding system for the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research in the years 1993-1998
Professor Luigi Berlinguer, former Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MI-UR)
Professor Luciano Modica, former MIUR undersecretary
Professor Enrico Decleva, president of CRUI (Conferenza dei Rettori delle Università Italiane, Conference of Italian University Rectors

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European Commission data on the most politically salient issues among European, *What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment? Italy (from 05/2005 to 05/2016)*, (http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/42/groupKy/208/savFile/54; accessed 15 September 2016)

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