EDITORIAL

STUDENTS, THEIR PROTESTS, AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS
Exploring old gaps and new evidence

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Abstract: While introducing the four contributions to the special issue "Students, their protests, and their organizations: exploring old gaps and new evidence", we link them with influential literature on students' protests and their organizations. The 'old gaps' refer to the long-standing divide between two traditions of research in students' collective action: social movements and organizational studies. The 'new evidence' refers to the finding that studentship is not conducive to protests (Oană 2019a), while the father's education is a strong predictor. While the 'agentic' character of studentship is one important presumption behind many arguments making sense of campus unrest, this finding does not invalidate it as such, but rather indicates that selection to higher education, and not campus socialization, may be conducive to this form of political participation.

Key-words: collective action, social movements, students' protests, students' organizations, students' agency

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1. Introduction

Students' collective action, a term we shall use below to designate any kind of concerted effort by students directed at a common goal, raises a number of interesting questions. They range from how students organize themselves within the more or less formal framework of higher education organizations; to how such organizations collaborate in national student bodies, often claiming to act in the name of the studentship as a whole; to how formally established organizations or comparatively informal groups or networks mobilize individuals for various types of activities, perhaps most significantly common demands and protests; to how these groups and organizations build alliances with other social actors or how they transact with political forces. One intriguing facet, which has emerged time and again in scholarship on student collective action, concerns two key modes in which such action is organized. One is, generically speaking, the protest (or protest campaign), frequently as a part of – or eventually coalescing into – a social movement. Secondly, student collective action is expressed within formal organizations often (but not necessarily) endowed with some form of official representative status, whether in a particular university or at a regional or national level. Research has been looking at students acting in primarily one way or the other, that is, with a strong emphasis on either protest activities and the organizations and networks underlying them; or, conversely and more recently, with an emphasis on students' comparatively formal engagement with policy at their universities or nationally through representative organizations enjoying some form of recognition. These two perspectives have resulted in somewhat contrasting narratives of student agency: students as embattled social reformers or, recently, as professionalized partners in policy-making. While students themselves constructed and perpetuated these narratives (e.g. publications of the European Students Union, formerly ESIB (Baumann, Bielecki, Heerens, and Lažetic 2005; Cacciagrano et al. 2009; Malnes, Vuksanović, and Simola 2012; Mikkola et al. 2007; Øye, Jungblut, and Chachava 2009; Proteasa 2009)), partly in an effort to forge collective identities and mobilize their peers, they have also been taken up, in some form or other and with varying degrees of sophistication, by scholars.

In this special issue, we invited scholars to write on student movements and organizations in an attempt to bring together the two partly contrasting approaches described above. One of our initial hopes – expressed in the invitation to contribute, but not fully realized in the end – was that at least some of the resulting articles would explore, in an explicit way, the intersection of protest activity and formal organizations, particularly representative organizations such as student governments or unions. As things turned out, the four articles in this special issue are divided along somewhat traditional lines. The first two – by Lorenzo Cini and, respectively, Gabriela Gonzalez Vaillant and Michael Schwartz – discuss protest participation within a well-established social movements perspective. Specifically, they explore the perceptions and justifications of activists (Cini (2019a) in particular) and theorize on and test empirically students' tactics in relation to their stated goals and the addressees of their grievances (Gonzalez Vaillant and Schwartz (2019) especially). Despite the geographical distance between the two case studies – South Africa and Argentina –, these two contributions talk directly to each other and, dare we say, inform each other in useful ways.

The other two articles, by Toma Burean and Ioana-Elena Oană, are also worth reading as a couplet. They look at student engagement with protests from within a broader political participation frame, which takes into account values (Burean (2019) in particular) or tests the supposed effects of 'studentship' and of regional differences on protest involvement (Oană 2019a). Geographically, these two articles are close to each other: the former looks at Romanian students during the recent mass street protests organized under the banner of the anti-corruption movement; the latter compares two countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Romania and Hungary) and four in the continent's Western part.

In what follows, we engage in some additional detail the gap between the two scholarly approaches to student collective action, in order to at least explain why we find it problematic and, as a result, why overcoming it may be a worthwhile project for the future. We also introduce the four articles in the issue in more detail and position them on the map of the scholarly literature that we have sketched. Last but not least, we take issue with some of the findings

reported in this issue and offer our own views on these somewhat surprising re-sults.

2. A split in the literature on student collective action

Most of the existing literature on students' collective action stems from one of the two partly distinct scholarly traditions hinted at previously. Although students were historically a very politically active group even before the emergence of modern urban life (Gevers and Vos 2004), researchers only started to pay serious attention to them after the revolts that shook Western societies in the sixties and the seventies. The scholars investigating student movements have been particularly interested in contentious episodes that pitted students against the 'powers that be' – whether their own universities (for example, the divestment movement in the US or the campaigns against tuition fee hikes) (Altbach 1997), their 'neoliberal' governments (e.g., protests against higher education policies across Europe or the Global Justice Movement (Della Porta 2015)), or their authoritarian ones (such as the Greek students' rebellion against dictatorship in the 1960s (Kornetis 2013) or the 1980s struggles in South Korea (Lee 1997)). This strand of research has been particularly interested in linking what we would term inputs – such as repertoires of action, tactical diffusion, movement recruitment, discourses and/or activist identities – with questions related to the unfolding of protests or their effectiveness. To the extent that structural explanations for student protests were investigated, for example in the United States, they included factors such as college size and selectiveness, or histories of past activism on campus (Soule 1997; Van Dyke 1998).

When this social movements perspective on student collective action, arguably best developed theoretically in the United States in the aftermath of the sixties, was applied in recent decades to protests in Europe and elsewhere, it tended to underemphasize one potentially significant type of actor: formally organized, relatively stable, often representative student organizations (sometimes known as student unions, parliaments etc.). Increasingly after the 1990s, these organizations have been acting more frequently than before through institutionalized channels, with protests representing only one tactic within a

more diversified set. In our view, part of the explanation for the relative omission of these groups from social movement literature stems from an 'original gap' related to the specificities of the American system of higher education, out of which this theoretical perspective originated. In the US, students did not typically participate, in a formal collective capacity, in the government of their colleges and universities – not to mention national-level policy-making in higher education. This is not to say that student organizations were ignored by student movement studies; on the contrary, some of them were assigned a paramount importance in protests (see, for example, the ample scholarship on Students for a Democratic Society and its involvement in the 'sixties' movements (Gitlin 1987; Hunt 1999; McAdam 1990). However, when student organizations were investigated in connection with episodes or campaigns of protest in the post-sixties era, they tended to be the loosely structured groups or networks formed on campus in relation to specific issues such as divestment (Van Dyke 1998) or living wages (Biddix and Park 2008; Van Dyke, Dixon, and Carlon 2007). These groups had a preference for non-institutionalized action, partly because they lacked access to decision-making structures (e.g., a formal involvement in governance), and in part due to a widespread belief that '[c]onsciousness-raising is facilitated in non-hierarchical, loosely structured, face-to-face settings that are isolated from persons in power...' (Hirsch 1990 p. 245). Indeed, the narrative of student protest as the result of a 'spontaneous combustion' (Polletta 1998 p. 245; Killian 1984) predominated in many first-hand accounts of such events.

  The first two articles in the special issue, Cini (2019a) and Gonzalez Vaillant and Schwartz (2019), belong firmly in the category above. For his part, Cini seeks to explain the success of the 2015 student mobilizations (#FeesMustFall) in blocking a tuition fee increase in South Africa. The article shows how the events built up from an initially isolated protest in one university to a nation-wide campaign that, after an almost total shutdown of the country's universities, managed to elicit the desired response from the top of the government. The article emphasizes, among the main causes of this success, the pre-existing activist networks in universities and, in particular, the symbolic status enjoyed by students in South Africa as anti-apartheid revolutionaries and thus as 'children' of the African National Congress. As a credible political threat, a characteristic shared by protesting students in many 'young democracies', students

thus emerged victorious in a campaign which Cini places under the banner of the broader fight against the 'neoliberal university'.

Gonzalez Vaillant and Schwartz look at Argentina from within a similar frame of anti-neoliberal student revolt. The article aims to offer an analytical characterization of the 'situational equation' which influences students' choice of protest tactics and, ultimately, determines their eventual chances of success or failure. It covers three contiguous political periods in the late 1990s and 2000s responsible for a broader range of grievances. This variety of political conditions and of their associated grievances enables the authors to test empirically their hypothesis that, when student demands are more narrowly educational and addressed to their institutions, activists tend to engage in 'structural disruption' on campus; whereas, with demands that transcend education and/or are addressed to the authorities, students often have to leave the campus and interfere with the working of institutions wherein they do not have a routinized role ('invasive disruption').

In their analysis of student protest in Argentina, Gonzalez Vaillant and Schwartz exemplify students' reliance on invasive disruption in cases where demands concern broader policy goals that must be negotiated with high-level authorities. Significantly, the authors emphasize the requisite efforts to build national alliances with other actors in order to support students' riskier invasive tactics. While potentially better at generating leverage under the right conditions, these tactics are always at greater risk of losing students their popular support. As a matter of fact, Cini's contribution provides an additional illustration of this dynamics with the South African students' #FeesMustFall movement. The article illuminates how students' acts of invasive disruption, in tandem with other allied groups' structural disruptiveness, forced a government 'scared to death' to act quickly to placate the alliance. In our view, this theory of the dynamics of disruption dovetails nicely with Altbach's (2006) general point that students in 'third-world' countries are sometimes more successful (but can also fail more spectacularly) in their protests than their peers in established democracies. Altbach partly attributes this to student's symbolic status as (recent) children of the revolution, which enhances their alliance-making capacities and lends an air of general legitimacy to their high-risk tactics.

This being said, and returning now to the point we raised previously, both of the articles above also illustrate the tendency of this type of scholarship to underemphasize the role of more or less formal student organizations in protest campaigns. Effectively, this leaves a gap in analysis between the students as a collective movement, on the one hand, and their individual leaders and key activists interviewed in the articles, on the other. However, we know from collective action research that, in practice, the organizations or informal groups bearing the largest part of the burden of mobilizing students or forging alliances with outside actors do not make decisions just in response to the lofty goals of the movement as a whole. Formal organizations are sometimes the main nexus for militant student networks (Crossley and Ibrahim 2012) and an important locus for resources necessary for mobilization (Crossley 2008). The strategic and tactical decisions of the many participating actors are also determined by factors such as the inter-organizational dynamics within the movement or the diverse individual objectives or proclivities of individual leaders. Cini (2019a) and Gonzalez Vaillant and Schwartz (2019) offer only furtive glimpses of such complexities. Cini, for example, mentions the factionalism of the student movement in the aftermath of its successful bid to stem tuition fee increases. He credits these internal ideological tensions – blamed on 'the return of the influence of party politics' – with the movement's eventual failure to scale up its initial success into a campaign for broader societal issues. Such a return of influence, but also the supposed temporary escape from it during the #FeesMustFall campaign, would demand a more in-depth look at the organizational dynamics at play. Gonzalez Vaillant and Schwartz, for their part, mention in passing the 'chronic' quarrels of activists over specific actions and over the deployment of some particular tactics rather than of others. This is an additional reason to believe that inter-organizational dynamics, and not just the nature of the grievance (educational vs. societal) and of the addressee (university bodies vs. public authorities), could be significant factors in how tactics are actually chosen on the ground.

We have made the preceding points not to take issue with the research designs of the authors in this special issue, which are doubtlessly well suited to their objectives, but rather to highlight a blind spot in student movements research that preoccupies us more generally. We find this blind spot more con-

cerning now that, in most of Europe and elsewhere, students have recently turned into an established part of academic governance, organizing more formally and often gaining a seat at the table of local and national policy-making[1]. Luescher-Mamashela (2013) identifies the critical juncture that led to the eventual acceptance of student organizations in higher education decision-making as the waves of protest in the sixties and seventies (see also Vos (2011) for a historical account of these transformations). In response to this arguably global trend, some of the scholarly focus has shifted towards subjects such as the growth of national federations of student unions, the structure of representative student organizations (particularly under circumstances of frequent change in membership and leadership), processes of professionalization, and representative organizations' transactions with universities' administrations, governments and political parties (e.g. Altbach 2006; Brooks, Byford, and Sela 2015; Klemenčič 2012)[2]. This is the second, more recent strand in the literature on student collective action that we have been alluding to so far.

This perspective has its own blind spots – and they essentially mirror those of traditional student movement studies. Specifically, less formalized student groups and especially the loose networks that are often crucial to protest campaigns have been comparatively neglected by this approach. Rather, the latter has tended to emphasize broader structural variables such as the diffusion of specific organizational blueprints, the granting of national representation monopolies, and more generally the effects of higher education massification and globalization on student identities and engagement. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this school of thought has sketched a narrative of the 'evolution' of student power from protest activism to professionalization, often placed at opposite poles of a development continuum (Antonowicz, Pinheiro, and Smuzewska 2014; Klemenčič 2012). It has also given rise to a narrative that studentship is beset by

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[1] Of course, students enjoyed in fact a 'constitutional' role in the government of universities at many different times and in various places, starting in medieval Europe but also in twentieth-century Latin America, for example.

[2] A substantial set of this literature is available in three special issues published over the past decade: *Tertiary Education and Management*, 17.3 (2011); *European Journal of Higher Education*, 2.1 (2012); and *Studies in Higher Education*, 39.3 (2014). There is also a lengthy collection of articles edited under the sponsorship of the Council of Europe (Klemenčič, Bergan, and Primožič 2015).

increased political apathy generated by the simultaneous increase in the size and heterogeneity of the student body. Some authors have hailed professionalization as a sign of policy (if not political) maturity (Smużewska 2018), while others have bemoaned it as the end of student power as we used to know it (Pabian, Hündlová, and Provázková 2011).

In our view, the trouble with this second perspective is that, while it identifies an important trend in student collective action in Europe and beyond, it fails to do justice to other developments that are just as manifest. In recent years, students have participated in a wealth of protests around the world, as the papers in this special issue also illustrate. Students have surged into action in Italy (Piazza 2018), Spain (Hughes 2011) and the United Kingdom (Cini 2019b), but also in Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary (Toth 2011), Slovakia and Romania, in the Balkan states (Popović 2015) or in Latin America (Guzman-Concha 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman 2012). In some of these cases student national representative organizations had an important mobilizing function (e.g., Day 2012; Foroni 2011; Jungblut and Weber 2012), while in others the allegedly conservative role of these organizations was directly challenged by looser networks of campus activists (Popović 2015; Smużewska 2018). Additionally, in some campaigns on broader social issues students were energized into participation not by *student* activists, but through other types of networks – a point to which we will return below.

Let us end this section by pointing out that the split in the literature on student collective action we identified above has remained, so far as we are able to judge, not only wide but also relatively unchallenged. Recent neo-institutionalist theoretical advances (Mahoney and Thelen 2009; McAdam and Fligstein 2012; McAdam and Scott 2005) aiming to bridge, to use Giddensian language (Giddens 1984), structural perspectives related to organizational studies with a structuration approach closer to social movement studies, have not found an echo in scholarly research on student collective action. At a time when the field of student action has been experiencing important institutional changes globally (Luescher-Mamashela 2013), we believe such integrative theoretical approaches to represent a potentially fruitful resource.

3. The agentification of studentship: a cornerstone under scrutiny

We have focused so far on a gap in the literature, although there are, of course, commonalities to the two strands of scholarship described above. Perhaps the most obvious and significant one is what we would call the 'agentification' of the campus (Altbach 2006) – the notion that 'studentship is highly conducive to engagement due to its liminal and developmental characteristics (Klemenčič 2015 p. 13)'. The literature on political participation, to which the other two papers in the special issue belong, directly engages this question, which we examine in this section.

The agentification thesis describes students as having 'strong agentic resources, such as well-developed dispositions of self-organisation, self-regulation, self-reflection and proactivity' (Klemenčič 2015 p. 17). These are enhanced by the structural conditions of the campus (Altbach 2006; Klemenčič 2015), among which an intentional self-development culture, the intermediate temporality of studentship between past experience and imagined futures, the special rights students enjoy on top of those conveyed by citizenship, fewer social responsibilities, and especially the availability of social networks that enable students to reach critical mass (Crossley 2008; Oliver and Marwell 2001; Van Dyke 1998). The view that students, more than the rest of the general population or of their age group, tend to engage in protests, strikes and other disruptive forms of collective action has been almost undisputed, especially after the 'golden age' of student activism in the sixties and seventies. More recently, the so-called 'neo-liberalization' or 'corporatization' of the university has been said to have turned academia into a battleground over the future of capitalism itself, a battle in which students are said to play, in light of their privileged location, a central role (Della Porta 2015).

The results of third study in the special issue lend support to some of the findings associated to the student agentification thesis. Burean's article is an analysis of student participation in the 2017 weeks-long anti-corruption marches in Romania (also known as #rezist), where as many as half a million protesters took to the streets in one single day. The piece also engages the controversial claim, sometimes invoked in the literature on student political participation, that in recent decades a more apathetic youth disappointed with de-

mocracy has toned down political engagement. The counter-argument to this thesis is that, in fact, modes of political participation have changed among the post-materialist young in today's developed societies, where 'extra-institutional repertoires' such as protest activism are now preferred to traditional political activism (Theocharis 2011 p. 215). Given that people with higher education are thought to have a more post-materialist outlook (Knutsen 1990), the latter argument lends additional, albeit indirect, support to the agentification thesis, in particular the assertion that students are more concerned with loftier societal objectives than their non-student peers.

Looking at a sample of Romanian students in four of the countries' main academic cities, Burean (2019) finds that post-materialist attitudes are indeed associated to engagement in protest activities. This being said, by far the strongest predictor of participation in protests is online engagement, 'focused on expressive acts such as symbolic signaling and joining protest groups and events. Comparing the findings of Burean (2019) with those of Burean and Badescu (2014), we can identify a shift from social media being a medium for civically engaged young people to mobilize for protests towards expressive behavior on social media being a strong predictor of on-site protest. Of course, the validity of such a comparison is limited: the two populations of students are only partially overlapping, with similar sampling methods being used. However, the dynamics between social media and traditional student mobilization actors and repertoires remains, in our opinion, a key pending issue.

Another core statement of the agentification thesis is that non-STEM students are more likely to engage in protest activities. This statement is by now a classic of student protest literature (e.g., Altbach 1967), and hardly limited to the West (Bonilla and Glazer 1970). Once again, this view is predicated on the notion that students in the social sciences and humanities are more oriented towards abstract values and are more ideologically adept, while also facing less certain occupational prospects. The findings in Burean (2019) offer support to this view.

So far, so good for the agentification thesis. However, the fourth article in the set, by Oană, provides some surprising results. Based on data that allow the author to directly compare students to non-students, as well as traditional with non-institutional modes of political engagement, while also controlling for key

potentially confounding variables, these results call into question the notion that students are (or are *still*) more politically engaged than non-students. Given that, with the advent of social media, the resources for mobilizing have been radically expanding, with a clear impact on protest involvement (as Burean also shows), one has to wonder whether this expansion does not perhaps negate the traditional advantages offered by on-campus concentration and information.

In short, the agentification thesis is not supported by this large-scale, cross-national survey data: 'students do not significantly differ from non-students in terms of their level of political participation in either party politics activities, or in protest politics activities when adjusting for age, gender, father education, income, and country of origin' (Oană 2019a). More than that, there is another result that has the potential to turn the agentification thesis upside-down, or at least its ideological roots: the strongest predictor of students' political involvement, especially in protest politics, is the father's education. This recalls processes of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and their specific application to the study of inequalities in higher education, including the so-called 'maximally maintained inequality' (Raftery and Hout 1993). Though the author does not pursue this strand of interpretation, we consider that one explanation for the spuriousness of what are sometimes called 'college effects' on protests is the students' family backgrounds as social elites, which in her study has a stronger impact than leftism. This thesis is certainly consistent with long-established findings from the United States that protests tend to take place in elite colleges and universities (Altbach 1967; Soule 1997; Van Dyke 2003), where students 'from wealthy families, may have a high sense of efficacy that inspires them to political action [or] … might come from politically active and powerful families' (Van Dyke 1998 p. 206).

Let us mention a final striking result in the fourth article in this issue, one that is particularly relevant to us as Eastern Europeans: students in CEE are 'significantly more engaged in both party and protest politics than their W[estern] E[uropean] counterparts not only after matching for age, gender, and family background, but also above and beyond media usage, ideology, political interest, or satisfaction with democracy' (Oană 2019a). This flies in the face of a relatively common assertion in political participation literature, discussed by Oană

(2019b) and touched on by Burean (2019), namely, that the weaker civil society and the stronger dissatisfaction with democracy in CEE have resulted in weaker political participation compared to Western Europe. Though the CEE disengagement thesis seems to be widely accepted, little systematic evidence has been gathered specifically about students' protests in the region. Our own research, of which the figure below offers a snapshot, reveals that the first decade of the 2000s, when the disengagement thesis was popular (e.g., Bădescu and Uslaner 2003), was indeed a period with relatively fewer protests.

Figure 1: Estimates of the size of student protests in Romania (1990-2007)
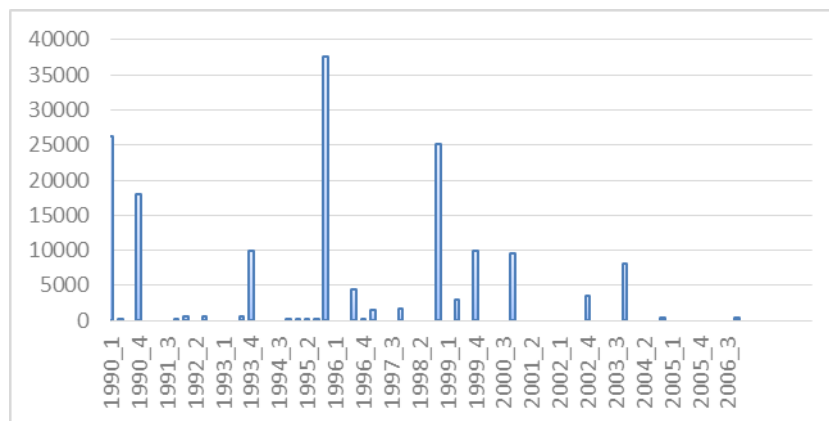
Source: **Authors' estimates. The values represent maximal estimates of the number of students participating in protests, aggregated over trimesters.[3] The second trimesters are excluded because protest activity over the summer was minimal.**

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[3] The data comes from a systematic newspaper analysis carried within the frame of the research project 'From Corporatism to Diversity: A Neoinstitutionalist Study of Representative Student Organizations in Postcommunist Romania', funded under the Human Resources – Young Teams programme of Romania's National Plan for Research, Development and Innovation (PN2). The period covered is 1990-2008 and the data relies on news pieces reporting events and forms of student discontent, as well as articles covering other forms of protest, in two mainstream newspapers accounting for the partisan political divide of the early nineties (*Free Romania* (*România liberă*) and *The Truth* (*Adevărul*)). We treated the resulting corpus of articles as an extensive, longitudinally consistent track record for student protests. The values represent maximal estimates (i.e. articles often referred to 'a few hundred or a few thousand') of the number of students participating in protests, aggregated over trimesters.

As the figure shows, student protests in Romania were undoubtedly larger and more frequent in the nineties. In fact, the first years after the fall of communism are considered the heyday of contentious politics in CEE as a whole (Ekiert and Kubik 1998). Student protests peaked in 1995, which saw the biggest such event in the country's post-communist history, with over 20,000 students and additional labor unions taking part. The size and frequency remained comparatively high in the second part of the nineties and the early 2000s, a period which researchers have shown to be plagued by inequalities in access to higher education at a time of expansion in enrolments (Proteasa and Miroiu 2015). Starting around 2001, protest activity indeed fell dramatically in size as well as frequency, lending some contextual support to the disengagement thesis. However, at the other end of the 2000s decade, after around 2012-2013, protests in Romania again increased substantially in size and frequency, as discussed at length by Olteanu and Beyerle (2018) and Oană (2019b).

In light of these changes in protest activity, the findings on relative CEE engagement reported by Oană are not, after all, very surprising. They are merely a reflection of the waxing and waning of protest politics, in the population at large as well as among students in particular. Indeed, at least among Romanian students, we believe the comparatively 'quieter' decade of the 2000s can be explained not only by contextual social and economic factors of the type explored in political participation literature, nor simply by a crisis of campus activism of the kind investigated by social movement studies, but crucially also by a re-institutionalization of the field of student representative organization - as we show in Proteasa, Andreescu, Botgros, and Dodiță (2018).

4. Concluding remarks

The findings in the articles included in this special issue provide insights on students, their protests and their leaders across three continents, and especially in countries whose societies have witnessed important political transformations in the last decades: South Africa, Argentina and Chile, Romania and Hungary. In our view, the richness and novelty of the data gathered makes this special issue a must read for scholars and practitioners of social movements.

When putting together the articles for this special issue, the responsibilities we took on as editors led us to a reflection on some of the insufficiently charted areas of research into students' collective action. We would stress in this respect the discussion on the agentification of studentship. Oană (2019a) brings empirical evidence on the possible spuriousness of 'college effects' on political participation, especially on engagement in conventional protest forms. Of course, the evidence is limited to a set of countries and more empirical proof is needed to properly inform this discussion. However, we think it is high time to question if the presumption that students protest more than their respective age group outside the universities is (1) valid and (2) determined by campus socialization – especially since the evidence presented by Oană (2019a) indicates family background as one of the most powerful predictors. This result corroborates previous research and findings indicating that the selection into campus life, with its socially reproductive character, is a key determinant for students' engagement in protests.

The link between students, their leaders and their organizations remains, in our opinion, one of the main challenges for scholarly work on students' collective action. The articles included in the special issue all provide new and useful parts of the overall picture, offering both partial answers and opportunities for cumulative reading and further scientific inquiry.

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