

Neoliberal Hegemony, Neoliberal Reforms of Education in Italy, Student Organizations and their Protests: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at assessing the nexus between the neoliberalization of education policies in Italy and the opposition to them of student groups and organizations, in the aftermath of the global economic crises. This theoretical and empirical study aims to show the main characteristics of the neoliberal education policies, starting from an overview of the literature on neoliberalism and analyzing then the main features of the New Public Management reforms developed within the processes of neoliberalization. Thus, the empirical case-study focuses on three student organizations and their protests against the neoliberal reforms of education, in the context of an “ecology” of policies constituted by the implementation of workfare and austerity programs and the transformations of the Welfare. The empirical observations of these student organizations mobilizations, along with the analysis of the interviews conducted in the fieldwork, and of the documents they have produced, support the findings of this research.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Education Policies, New Public Management, Workfare, Austerity, Student Organizations, Student Movements, Waves of Protests.

1. Introduction: Neoliberalism, Neoliberal Education Policies, Student Protests: Setting the Scene

Neoliberalism is the name of contemporary capitalism according to a burgeoning critical literature on the topic. A number of scholarly accounts identifies different definitions of neoliberalism, regarded as an ideology or as a set of specific policies and policy making processes, or rather as the manifestation of a renewed “class domination”. The “historical” accounts of neoliberalism explain how it can be considered to be at the same time the cause and the consequence of a global process of dismantling the structures of the embedded Welfarist Keynesian Fordist Liberalism to make way for the re-establishment of the proto-liberal self-regulating market¹. Indeed, some scholars emphasize how this process has been produced by a set of policies aimed at the concomitant de-regulation and re-regulation of the relationship between State and market, politics and economy, and ruled by a new model: New Public Management, considered the brand-new “spirit of capitalism”. Within such a framework, education policies can be considered to be one of the main fields of action of the neoliberal hegemony. The intertwining of causes and effects, constraints and opportunities, which we seek to describe herein, can be summarized as follows: education and labor policies are part and parcel of the neoliberal policies framework. These policies deeply influence contemporary youth societal conditions in general and the student condition in particular; our analytical attempt here is that of addressing the latter. According to some scholars, the interplay of neoliberal policy framework and policy delivery in social and education policies hugely impacts on contemporary youth condition² (France, 2016; Sukariek&Tannock, 2015; Wyn & Woodman, 2014). To what extent young people respond to these conditions in general, and the student movements in particular, is regarded here as a very fruitful analytical perspective. Student movements can articulate their “imaginary power”, a form of power which relies on the ability and opportunities of student mobilizations. It can be said that the power of students is the power of their mobilization (Cini, 2013).

¹ A seminal theoretical account about the “utopian” character of the capitalist market as a self-regulating institution was developed by Karl Polanyi (1974) in his study on the origins, transformations and crisis of the liberal market.

² Unemployment, under-employment, delayed transitions to adulthood, inequalities, social and material deprivation, precarization are some of the empirical issues affecting contemporary youth conditions, that is a cluster of societal and economic problems that cannot be addressed here; about this topic, it is possible to see Antonucci et al. (eds) (2014). *Young People and Social Policy in Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan); see also Lo Schiavo (2017).

Student mobilizations have been part of the recent global waves of protests. Different movements in various countries participated in the global protest against global recession opposing neoliberal and austerity policies. Student organizations and student movements have devised a number of “counter-actions” to contrast the neoliberal managerial and austerity measures which have been implemented in different countries. Our analytical focus will be specifically on Italian student movements, namely on a set of organizations rooted both locally and nationally with also transnational links, which are at the forefront of the mobilization against the most recent “neoliberal reforms” of higher education (hereafter HE), as we shall see below.

2. Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Policies: An Overview

To place Neoliberalism within the contemporary theoretical debate, there are four main interpretative strands to consider. First, it is possible to view neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology, the “new way of life”. In fact, according to Dardot and Laval, “the originality of neoliberalism is precisely its creation of a new set of rules defining not only a different “regime of accumulation” but, more broadly a different society (Dardot& Laval, 2013, 4). Secondly, there is a wealth of literature on this topic which traces the concept of neoliberalism back to the analyses of the transformations of contemporary capitalism. According to Harvey, who is one of the most influential authors in this field, the aim of neoliberalism as a political-economy rationality is “to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites” (Harvey, 2005, 19). According to Duménil and Lévy “the neoliberal order aims to reaffirm the fundamentally capitalist nature of our societies” (2004, 3). In this vein, the crisis of accumulation that occurred in the Seventies, was subsequently reinforced by the debt burden caused by the implementation of austerity measures, by the “counter-revolution” of right-wing social and political actors with policies implementing public services spending cuts along with the reduction in tax rates for the wealthier classes. These transformations have also impacted on the domain of economic production; the reorganization of industries and services under the influence of the technological revolution, which utilizes knowledge and cognitive resources as the main “factor” of production. The knowledge economy therefore defines the new frontier of capitalism; also influencing the rationale of education policies aimed at developing this new frontier. According to the “knowledge economy” rationale, “a country’s ability to generate and exploit knowledge is an increasingly crucial factor determining its economic development”. Then economic growth is therefore increasingly based on knowledge accumulation; consequently, “economies of scope, derived from the ability to design and offer different products and services with the same technology, are increasingly important driving forces for expansion” (OECD, 2008, 53). Another shade of meaning, shows the nexus between knowledge and neoliberal capitalism and this relates to the exploitative nature of cognitive capitalism, which constitutes the final frontier in the process of commodification, expropriation and exploitation all exerted through investments in “human capital” (see Dardot, Laval 2013; Leonardi 2010).

Another influential position, the third, within the theoretical debate on neoliberalism has been developed by Wacquant who investigated the constitution of neoliberal capitalism through State interventions. As the author maintains, neoliberalism can be considered to be the product of a far-reaching process of state-crafting the market that is the “Market as Statecraft”. Thus, neoliberalism is “an articulation of the state, market and citizenship that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third” (Wacquant, 2012, 71). Neoliberalism as state-crafting hinges on four logics for the reengineering of the State. First, commodification that extends the market or market-like mechanisms to other social domains. Second, disciplinary social policy shifts away from protective welfare to corrective workfare. At the same time there emerges an expansive penal policy aimed at curbing the disorders generated by diffused social insecurity whilst it is “the trope of individual responsibility as motivating discourse and cultural glue that pastes these various components of state activity together” (Wacquant, 2012, 72). In a similar vein, other scholars such as Dean (2007), highlight the two faces of neoliberalism: on the one hand it involves the augmentation technologies of power (in a Foucauldian sense³) devoted to the production of human capital (hence fabricating the entrepreneurial subjectivity which is the cornerstone of neoliberal anthropology), while on the other it manifests a coercive, violent, punitive face, aimed at “absorbing” or rather eliminating the subjects not up to the rules of competition, commodification and exploitation.

³ Thus, according to Dean (2007), the Foucauldian approach provides a sharp analytical instrument in critical studies of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. In particular, Dean refers to the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, meant as an “ensemble” of knowledge and power governing techniques.

Finally, different scholars have used the interpretative instruments of policy analysis to better grasp the nature and importance of neoliberal hegemony. Here, neoliberalism, as a policy template, comprises three main processes of transformation of the relationship between the State and the Market. Privatization, liberalization, marketization are the three components of the neoliberal programs shaping a specific set of policies, according to the New Public Management template (that is the market-like reform of public administrations). More specifically, the privatization of public services and the reform of institutional settings relate to legislative changes aimed at altering the public ownership or rather the legal status of organizations and contractual arrangements (from public to private law); liberalization consists in the withdrawal of institutional regulatory power (de-regulation) along with changes in the modes of regulation (re-regulation). As far as marketization is concerned, it relates to the proactive creation of competitive dynamics in areas and activities where asset ownership and collective bargains remain in the public sector (Palumbo, Scott, 2017).

Another constitutive part of the hegemonic impact of neoliberalism is its societal and “ontological” dimension where individuals are constructed as rational subjects encouraged to compete in flexible labour markets that depend on entrepreneurship, life-long learning and transferable skills (i.e. employability). Here, competition represents a moral principle of economic behavior which also involves other societal domains. Moreover, a sort of permanent revolution has been underway since at the heart of neoliberalism lies the idea of re-organizing society through the multiplication and intensification of market mechanisms; this transformation inescapably implies a transformation of subject and subjectivities, as well as the emergence of an entrepreneurial subjectivity regarded as a source of “human capital” (see Dardot & Laval, 2031; Foucault 2005; France, 2016; Peters et al., 2009).

In this context, education policies and the transformation of welfare into workfare are inextricably intertwined. Thus, neoliberal policies and programs prescribe a model within which the flexibilization of the labor market, the valorization of knowledge and “skills” as productive factors and the marketization of secondary and tertiary education are closely connected. The redefinition of the welfare state through the implementation of active policies (workfare), the managerialization of the organization and delivery of “education” and the weakening of protective measures to safeguard workers all define this policy framework. As France explains in particular:

“A skill revolution is pivotal to the creation of a neoliberal opportunity bargain [that has] left individuals responsible for their employability through education and career development. As a result, the role of the state is limited to “improving educational standards, expanding access to higher education and creating flexible standards, job markets that reward talent, ambition and enterprise. It does not guarantee jobs; that is for the market and the private sector. But young people’s failure to get a quality job and be successful in this environment is then seen as a problem of the individual”⁴ (France, 2016, 79).

The rationale of the nexus between workfare and education policies can be explained also by illustrating how austerity policies “governed” the consequences of the global financial crisis of 2007, that is the Great Recession. In reality what we have witnessed over this last decade are two crises, the second being driven by the use of austerity as a policy response to the Great Recession. To clarify the point, austerity measures are fundamentally neoliberal practices that encourage states to prioritize the “economic imperative” and market principles as the core of economic recovery (see France, 2016; Konzelmann, 2014). In particular, as Konzelmann explains: “the private sector (finance in particular) has steadily increased its power and legitimacy relative to the state. The distribution of financial resources has been increasingly skewed towards speculative activities, depriving the productive side of the economy of much-needed capital and reinforcing the cumulative and self-reinforcing cycle of economic stagnation and involuntary unemployment. Government budgets have been strained by the growing costs of both socializing the risks of financial speculation and countering economic recession. Growing inequality has been aggravated by austerity, which has a disproportionate effect on those in lower segments of the income distribution, who rely on public services but have very little, if any, voice in their provision. In contrast, the interests of those with economic and political influence are being served by austerity and by the systematic assault on the state” (Konzelmann, 2014, 735).

The types of policy programs implemented include: cutting minimum wages, reducing welfare programs, reductions to pensions and other social benefits, job losses in public administration, increased direct taxes and, in the education sector, the marketization of the production and delivery of education in order to reduce public spending. Thus, austerity measures, the commodification of education, the shift from welfare and workfare are part of the same neoliberal policy template.

⁴ The author refers to Brown et al. (2011). *The Global Auction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3. Education/Higher Education Policies: the Hallmarks of a Neoliberal Policy Template

The paradigm shift from the public to the private governance of education has affected the organization and the regulation of both secondary and higher education. Privatization, marketization and managerialization of education define the perimeters of this neoliberal paradigm. The role and objectives of both teaching and learning have been reworked; the subjectivity of teachers, researchers and students re-forged. Education has been commodified and, as a consequence, both sides of the teaching and learning relationship have been redefined. As scholars testify, the ascendance of the market mechanism in HE systems worldwide has led to the conceptualization of students as consumers (see France 2016; Olssen, Peters 2005). Consumerism in HE may be seen to be part of a broader policy shift away from the Keynesian Welfare State settlement towards a new one based on neo-liberalism which introduced mechanisms of the market and new managerialism into higher education. Consumerism operates within a regulatory framework which is based on the notion that competition between HE institutions for limited resources will produce a more effective, efficient and even equitable HE system. The underlying assumption is that HE services that are below the standards will be rejected thus forcing HE providers to improve or lose out on customers and revenue (Naidoo et al., 2011; Olssen& Peters, 2005).

To delve deeper into the marketization of education, it is worth observing that the objectives underlying HE policy making contain: efficiency drives, that is measures directed at improving the inner working of the university system while reducing its economic burden on public finances; corporate governance, measures aimed at rationalizing and standardizing the organizational structure of the entities operating in the HE sector to make them fully accountable; growth machine, that is the role attributed to HE within the evolving social and economic context that characterizes the world at the turn of the twenty-first century (Palumbo & Scott, 2017, 136).

The first set of measures are designed to justify the spending cut policies that have defined the austerity template on a meritocratic base. The managerialization of the production and delivery of education is aimed at transforming education from a public service sustained through public funds to become a “commodity” produced within the competitive environment of the market whereby “quasi-market” arrangements are devised to reform the public sector while also creating new sources of income for capital and businesses. Thus, the corporate governance of HE has been crafted through a series of “reforms” aimed at making universities and education institutions “accountable” and autonomous on the one hand, while still retaining centralized control by means of competition-based rules. The latter includes evaluation benchmarks and performance standards devised as suitable tools to establish both the amount and the distribution of funding. As far as evaluation and funding are concerned it is noteworthy that “by allocating the funds reserved for research by complex systems of assessment, central government managed to legitimate its traditional financial support for elite institutions as meritocratic and performance-based. The imposition of assessment criteria started with some form of self-regulation but soon evolved in the opposite direction, increasing the role of central government and its enforcers. Individuals, departments and universities are now told what constitutes proper research, what to write on, how to do it, and where to publish it, even when the financial benefits they drive from doing so are no longer evident and long-standing scientific values are compromised in the process. Likewise, academics and their institutions are now told who to teach, what to teach, and how to teach” (Palumbo & Scott, 2017, 137-47).

Therefore, concepts such as “value for money”, “efficiency”, “customer satisfaction” and “performance management” are now seen as a way of conceptualizing and constructing HE. The changed relationship between students (the purchasers) and universities (providers) has led to a change in student orientation to learning and knowledge and the commodification of knowledge. As a number of scholars explain, the main policy has been the introduction of student loans and finance that aim to ensure those who cannot pay upfront have a mechanism to support themselves while engaging in education or training. Thus, tuition fees at university level have emerged incrementally over last twenty years (see France, 2016; Naidoo et al., 2011; Olssen& Peters, 2005).

The corporate governance of education has been devised at both national and international level. In effect, the neoliberal and austerity policy templates, in their variegated guises, have been devised mainly at inter/supranational level where their main tenets have been engendered. It is in this context, in line with the knowledge economy paradigm, that EU education policies have been ideated and forged to pursue knowledge, education and development.

The Bologna Process together with the rationale of the reforms encouraged through the Europeanization process and conditionality policies implemented at national level, mainly contemplate the: “a) openness to the external world, in order not only to promote greater transparency in the management of universities and a closer match with the needs of the economy and society but also to draw on abilities that have been developed in corporate organizational contexts, which are presumably more efficient; [...] b) verticalization of decision-making processes, in order to enhance the efficiency of universities through a strong leadership insulated from veto powers and spoils system practices; [...] c) the rationalization of the university’s structures or organizational units; [...]; d) the promotion of projects aimed at cooperation between national systems, in order to favour the quality of education through the adoption of quality assurance standards and guidelines at university, national and European level” (Capano, 2016, 16).

In particular, the aim of the cycle of education reforms in Italy (which hugely impacted on a variegated “Welfarist” education policies tradition), in accordance with the EU Bologna Process was to implement the neoliberal policy template, that is the marketization and managerialization of schools and universities governance. In this vein reforms have been devoted to: verticalize decision-making powers, diminishing the role of the elected Board (the Academic Senate) and to appoint a Board of Governors with executive powers with some members recruited from outside the university system; implementing an evaluation system centered on an “independent agency”, that is ANVUR (the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research) to which various strategic functions are attributed (such as the implementation of all evaluation operations to which the allocation of government resources is linked along with the accreditation of degree programs). The enforcement of massive spending cuts (at least since 2008 when the government decided to make cuts of €1.5 billion over 5 years) has to be regarded as one of the most hotly contested parts of the HE reform, since the Gelmini Law in 2010.

As far as secondary schools are concerned, a process of managerialization of school governance underpinned the Buona Scuola Reform (“Good School” Bill 107, July 2015), whilst a marketization rationale has been introduced, consisting in the implementation of a performance and competitive model to regulate teaching and the organizational structure of educational institutions. Thus, the head teacher has become a manager endowed with strategic decisional powers (which student movements claim are excessive). Moreover, the implementation of statistical tests for educational attainments evaluation (e.g. Invalsi) have given rise to a model of “governance by numbers” and “distal” pedagogy, as opposed to “proximal” qualitative context-based systems of evaluation. Since the new model works using big data, and compares schools using benchmarks, the schools thus competing against each other even as regards the distribution of increasingly scarce funding which then is distributed based on “merit” (Giancola, 2015). As far as the “Buona Scuola reform”, as we shall see, the student organizations studied in our research, contest the implementation of a compulsory apprenticeship scheme in secondary schools, called “Alternanza scuola-lavoro”, regarded as the manifestation of the workfare-marketization neoliberal rationale, as illustrated above.

4. Students Mobilisations in the Neoliberal Age: a Sequence of Waves. Italian Student Movements within A Wider Movement

A long-term cycle of protest against neoliberal education policies has occurred, that is a global wave of student protests directed at education policies since 2000. In this context, the re-emergence of massive student protests has been devoted to opposing the process of privatization of HE, demanding equal conditions of access and greater involvement. Student protests in Austria (2009), Croatia (2009), California (2009), Ireland (2010), the United Kingdom (2011), Nigeria (2011), Columbia (2011), Chile (2012), Canada (2012), South Korea (2012), Spain (2013), and Italy (2010) are but a few of the many examples of mass national student movements against the marketization of HE and cuts in public spending. The global financial crisis that began in 2007 only reinforced such reforms in HE (see Flesher Fominaya 2012; Klemenčič 2014). These global waves of student protests have been analysed by exploring similarities and differences with the global justice mobilization at the beginning of the 2000s. Both express the “critique of neoliberalism”, whilst calls for global justice acted as a master frame, bridging social concerns to political solutions. Thus, “a stronger moral framing, as well as more of a reference to all-inclusive identities” characterized the anti-austerity protest after the Global Recession (della Porta, 2015, 96). As far as the 2010-2012 mobilization cycle is concerned, sociological accounts highlighted how some key elements have been shared across contexts as follows: shared master frames (“we won’t pay for your crisis”, “we are the 99%; Indignados”) against neoliberal capitalism blamed as being responsible for the global crisis; the tactic of occupation (enabling movements to try out direct-participatory democracy);

prefigurative actions which construct an alternative imaginary of social and political life (the common good and solidarity against capitalism and exploitation, participatory democracy against representative democracy); shared collective identity; the global circulation of information, ideas and practices through social media (Flesher, Fominaya, 2014).

Actually, student organizations differ between countries, based on the different legacies of student politics as well as on the diverse institutional settings in the education sector. Scholars provide useful analytical typologies to identify the organizational, social and political characteristics of both student unions and movements. In particular, Klemenčič (2014), Genicot (2012), Gill and De Fronzo (2009) illustrate the main analytical dimensions to classify student organizations that represent the interests of student as a societal category, while student movements are portrayed as more conflictual political subjectivities. It is therefore possible to contrast the representative, interest-based functions of student unions and organizations on the one hand, with the movement/activist and/or conflictual nature of student movements on the other. This conceptual distinction is of particular importance here since these organizations (Link, the Students Union and the Knowledge Network), dare to challenge this very distinction by defining themselves as a “political union” as well as a subject that is able to combine dialectically its unionist and movement facets along with their different modes of action. This is what has emerged from the interviews and from the frame analysis of the documents produced by these organizations.

The Italian student organizations/student movements landscape is variegated, developed along political cleavages; the different organizations positioning themselves respectively on the right or the left, and also on the centre-right and the centre-left, or the Radical Left (activists, organizations such as Social Centers or left-wing groups such as post-workerism, Autonomism, Trotskyist or Leninist). The other analytically relevant dimension lies in the distinction between two “structural dimensions”, that is the “logic of influence” and the “logic of membership” which shape the hard balance between the “function” of representation against state and/or secondary/tertiary HE institutions, and the expressive, identity language of “belonging” to a specific societal and political subjectivity (Cini, 2013; Genicot, 2012; Klemenčič, 2014). In terms of “agency”, the system of student representation in Italy could be said to be constituted by pluralist arrangements. Under a pluralist system, different organizations compete to represent student interests. Another noticeable dimension is the one concerning the role of protest and of contentious politics which also characterize student political organizations, and in particular the “other side” of the structural-agency spectrum through which it is possible to observe student unions and organizations on the one hand and student movements on the other.

5. From the Anomalous Wave to the Most Recent Protests. The Global Crisis and the Imaginary Power of Student Movements/Organizations: Historicizing Student Mobilization of three Italian Organizations

The “Anomalous Wave”, the student protests that started in Italy in 2008, was a composite student movement opposing the neoliberal attacks that undermined the right to public education through huge spending cuts in 2008. Thus, according to scholars, an activist and a researcher who participated in the protests of the 2008-2010 “Anomalous wave” of mobilization, the student movements which emerged in order to protest against the funding cuts implemented by the law 133/2008 (€1.5 billion over five years) and, two years later, against the Gelmini Law (for University Reform), have also been able to gather different mobilization energies towards a wider shared objective, demonstrating the ability to create a broader social coalition in order to oppose austerity measures (Cini, 2013, 2017; Zamponi, 2012). “We will not pay your crisis”, the claim chanted on the streets during the 2008 mobilization, contributed to creating a shared master-frame for the protest, as part of the structure of opportunities to enlarge a societal coalition against neoliberalism and austerity. As both scholars and activists involved in the protests cycle testify, the mobilizations have contributed to the evolution of both the student movements and the student unions, while creating a wider constituency against austerity.⁵ Indeed, these three organizations emerged from a sort of laboratory of participatory democracy among students which has actually been shaped by this huge cycle of protests against austerity and against neoliberal reforms within the education and HE policy sector, since 2008-2010.

⁵ Therefore Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist, Post-workerism (these radical leftist orientations are relevant parts of the leftist political culture in Italy; Cini (2013)) components of the mobilization on the one hand, and the evolution of a less radical student unionist tradition on the other, both constitute part of the history of the Anomalous Wave and also of the three student organizations described herein.

While the 2008 Italian student movement anticipated some of the characteristics of the global anti-austerity protests in 2011, and the mobilizations of Fall 2010 involved both student-centered protests and a more general anti-austerity discourse, however, in 2011 – in the aftermath of the Global Recession – the Italian protest movements failed to achieve the “transversal recognition” necessary to construct a “general” less fragmented, consistent “anti-austerity movement” (Andretta, della Porta, 2015; della Porta, 2015; Zamponi, 2012).

During these two waves of protests, mobilizations catalyzed a societal and political learning process which is also connected to the evolution of these organizations, arising from both the scissions and mergers of former left-wing student unions and the creation of a hybrid political body, half union and half movement. Thus, these student organizations are rooted at both local and national level but also operate at transnational level. They position themselves in the societal and political context not only territorially, but also “thematically” as regards specific social and political issues, while mobilizing in defense of rights, identity and cultural differences, against exploitation, violence, and inequalities (for example anti-fascism and anti-mafia mobilizations and the protests against homophobia, as well as in defense of the environment and the rights of women and migrants).

The “Unione degli Studenti” (Students Union for secondary schools, hereafter UdS), “Link coordinamento universitario” (hereafter Link) and the “Rete della conoscenza” (the Knowledge Network hereafter Rete) have all been fulfilling both roles: as student unions involved in the representative dynamics at school and university, pursuing adaptive claims within education institutions and boards and as “movements” mobilizing against austerity measures. A brief account of the organizational structures of the above organizations can be analytically fruitful. Starting from the second-tier organization, since the structure is closely tied to their objectives and modes of action, Rete in effect unites the first-tier organizations, UdS and Link, as they belong to it as national members and legal partners. While Link is present in different universities (to date 33, with different members on elected boards and the second most numerous representative group within the national committee of students CNSU), the UdS is present in secondary schools in all Italian regions (with local, provincial, regional coordination committees). Together they constitute the Rete which is also to be found in different cities and regions.

Local, regional and national campaigns are organized to address different issues, in line with the identity framework of these organizations: adaptive claims, representation, conflict all define the mobilization and protest actions of these complex subjectivities. The result is a sort of hybrid organization which aspires to be a general representative of society, and which is both a union and a movement. This complex triangular dialectic, functions as a permanent laboratory of societal and political representation, since the “transmission belt” between “traditional” political parties and societal organizations has disappeared definitively. The experimental political nature of these organizations is clearly expressed through their other organizational dimension: along with the structural, territorial dimension there are “issue-areas” and consequently specific work groups and collectivities. These work on countering issues considered highly salient to their identity and include: fascism, criminality, migration, gender and Lgbtqi+, and the environment; all relevant to an ever-expanding social, cultural and political subjectivity.

Scholars have identified an “imaginary power” that the mobilization of student movements may manifest. In this regard it is possible to observe specific dimensions of this, namely substantive issues, procedural and structural dimensions which involve respectively: “the promotion and opposition to the University Norms and Policies”, “representation and access to the decisional bodies”, the “academic power relations, forms of power, structure and content of education” (Cini, 2013, 3). Combining these different analytical dimensions, Link in particular can be said to represent a case of “radical unionism”, manifesting an attitude towards institutional, representative, procedural issues, which lies in between institutional representation and protest elements. The imaginary power of students is not only expressed in their mobilization potential but also in their demands, statements and documents. In what follows we will try to assess both what kind of conceptual definitions and which goals and imaginary resources are expressed in their lexicon, with the aim of providing a possible “alternative” to neoliberal HE policies discourse and practices.

6. An Account of the Empirical Research

The specific goal of this empirical investigation was to comprehend the actors’ own views, analysis, as they emerged from their own spoken words: during interviews, mobilizations, and in debates and assemblies, and those written in their documents. The frame-analysis of interviews (Benford & Snow, 2000) and the documents produced is the core of the empirical findings of our inquiry; these are outlined below.

“Deeds” and documents were gathered during some of the most important events in the organizational and political life of these student groups. These included the regional congress of “Link Bologna” and the national congress in July and August 2017, the national assembly of the UdS in Rome in December 2017, along with regional and local events attended from spring 2016 to autumn 2017 (when more than 40 interviews were conducted with individual members of these organizations in Messina, Catania, Cosenza, Rome and Bologna). In particular, during the Riot Village, the national congress in July-August 2017, the “territorial” structure of these organizations was observed since members of the different organizations “federated” into the second-tier organization (Rete). The Riot Village attracts participants from different cities and regions, gathering them in the same place at the same time. This allowed interviews to be conducted with students of different ages, from different places, with different experiences, just as if they had been sampled contemporaneously at national, regional and local level.

6.1. The Most Recent Mobilisation. The Construction of the Movement Identity and The Mobilization Discourse. Some Observations from The Case Study

An overview of the documents examined and of the interviews conducted has allowed us to shed light on the constitutive features and the defining objectives of these “hybrid” student organizations, half union and half movement. What we have observed first is that, according to their own analysis, the privatization of knowledge implies the generation of financial profit, allowing the few to possess knowledge to the disadvantage of the many. Thus, knowledge becomes a tool to divide society, making money out of its privatization.

As the preamble to the Manifesto for Free Education (Rete, 2014, 3) claims: they have imprisoned and enclosed knowledge. They have built enclosures and erected barriers. They have made knowledge scarce and competitive at the same time, enslaved to the aim of profit, leaning towards an economic system based on inequalities which has produced wealth for the few, exclusion and poverty for the many.

Based on these premises, the recent campaigns (Autumn 2016-2017) organized by these organizations demanded the recognition of rights for secondary school students on training schemes (organized under the scheme “La Buona scuola” called “Alternanza scuola-lavoro”); these campaigns were named “Stiamo diritti” and “Riscatto è ora”⁶ in order to claim the quality of the training process along with the respect of the student rights against any form of exploitation. Therefore, these student organizations contest university fee increases and propose fiscal reforms; they contest austerity policies in general, the huge cuts in resources for both schools and universities and demand “student welfare” and student citizenship sustained by free access to school and university. The latter is also regarded as a building block for the construction of “another democracy”, with an alternative articulation of the relationship between schools and university, one which is “open” and influences to its surrounding society.

They challenge the “exploitation” of students in traineeships, internships, apprenticeships in both school and university, claiming that corporate actors enjoy tax reliefs in order to train young people, schemes that in reality consist of various forms of unpaid work (workfare). They advocate “an alternative” development model to implement state-funded new technologies, an environmentally friendly model, one which moves away from a work-wage based society to one in which income is bound primarily to the citizen status of human beings, above and beyond their employment status. They claim students should have the right not to succumb to loan schemes, which become an unbearable burden in the years that follow entry to university. Based on these premises, in 2016-2017 a proposal for the reform of student entitlements to funding and services was launched by Link for free education (the “All In Campaign”), along with the national campaigns launched by UdS against the Buona Scuola Reform and the compulsory apprenticeship scheme for secondary schools (described above). The enforcement of the BuonaScuola Reform has revealed how discriminatory quantitative evaluation devices can be. The same organizational template, including managerialisation and competitiveness, has been applied in both schools and universities.

They reject this competitive model of education and maintain that another university and another school are possible through mobilization and grassroots participation. To paraphrase their statements, nowadays new enclosures imprison knowledge: higher and higher tuition fees, the managerial regulation of schools, competition and subordination to market imperatives. Against all this, they claim that what is needed is first to grant free access to education in order to make knowledge the main tool for equal and shared development (UdS, Link, Rete).

⁶ Translation: “The Good School”, “Alternating School and Work”, “Stand tall for rights”, “This is time for redemption”

As far as evaluation and apprenticeships are concerned, they explain that evaluation should not be considered as a reward or a punishment in competitive game; individual evaluation of students should be instead an opportunity to achieve knowledge, awareness, development; they say yes to apprenticeships, based on clear rules and students' rights guarantees, but they say no to exploitation and violation of students' rights (Uds, Link, Rete).

On a broader perspective, they emphasize that the marginalisation of their generation is part and parcel of the broader process of de-democratization produced by market hegemony. Since the toughest phase of the crisis, democratic spaces have been eroded, knowledge has been commodified, the youth generation has been made precarious. Against all this, they maintain, they will fight and organize mobilizations in order to (re)gain democratic and participatory space, reinvigorating collective subjectivities against individualization (Link, Fisciano, 2013). They also maintain that they have warned that democracy has been under attack for years, an attack which has been conducted by neoliberal forces, corporations and international institutions (see Cini 2013; Dardot & Laval 2013; France 2016). Against this they propose to defend democracy which mainly consists in the self-determination of the subjects on their own lives; it is this right to self-determination which implies respecting others. They stress that democracy also means equality among the members of the societal community, allowing citizens equal participation in political decisions. This kind of participation can be made effective firstly by freeing knowledge and education (Manifesto per la liberazione dei saperi 2014).

7. Concluding Remarks

In this essay we have analytically focused on education policies regarded as a strategic area of action of neoliberal hegemony. In particular, the knowledge economy model has been regarded as the normative core of neoliberal education policies in the EU, which have revealed its austerity and workfare character in the aftermath of the global crisis. In particular, the Italian student organizations we have studied counter-posed this model proposing an emancipative version of the knowledge society, one built on cooperation and solidarity with the sharing of knowledge (meant as a common good), unlike the knowledge economy version committed to the marketization of social relationships and activities and based on the commodification of knowledge as a factor of production.

By way of conclusion, we would highlight some considerations emerging from the empirical study of these student movements/organizations. In essence, these half movement half union student groups argue that their aim consists in making "knowledge" a battlefield on which a counter-hegemonic game is to be played for the sake of a broader goal, that is to transform society. Thus, it goes beyond the transformation of school and university. The revolutionary project of these student organizations envisages a wider and deeper horizon: knowledge regarded as a common good. Under a broader conception, the "production" and "reproduction" of knowledge constitutes the very fabric of society; at the same time knowledge can be regarded as a vector of social emancipation for each, able to provide equality while recognizing differences. The aim of Rete in particular is to do their utmost to overturn the neoliberal paradigm, and the neoliberal education model in particular. In pursuit of this, they emphasize the need to mobilize and express grievances both within and without the educational institutions. Thus, according to their analysis, the struggles in which they engage relate both to adaptive, "student-centered" grievances and to broader issues, which must be fought not only as "students" but as citizens and as "learning subjects" meant in the broadest sense. Consequently, they propose the end of austerity policies along with the development of a "cognitive welfare", that is rerouting neoliberal competitive mechanisms towards an inclusive regulated form of capitalism or, in the long run, towards the re-regulation of capitalism if not towards its substitution of capitalism with an economic system committed to ecological equity and social justice.

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