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## **Dissenting youth: how student and youth struggles helped shape anti-austerity mobilisations in Southern Europe**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Social movements do not appear spontaneously. They are rooted in cultures and contexts and their evolution depends both on macro structural factors and on the action and organisation of pre-existing actors. In particular, the anti-austerity protest events that characterised southern European countries in the last few years cannot be understood through a focus on them as isolated incidents. They need, instead, to be analysed as part of a cycle of protest. Furthermore, some of their components are rooted in the activity and elaboration of pre-existing actors. We contribute to this issue by analysing the role of the student movement in the lead up to the antiausterity mobilisations in Italy and Spain. This analysis allows us to show that a relevant component of the discourse of anti-austerity mobilisation comes from a long-standing trajectory of critique of neoliberalism, and that specific actors in specific fields of action reshaped and recontextualised this heritage in the context of the economic crisis, paving the way, at least from the discursive point of view, for the emergence of anti-austerity mobilisations. Our analysis, based on qualitative interviews of Italian and Spanish activists, point out how student activists acted as initiators of antiausterity mobilisations and as brokers in the adaptation of the anti-neoliberal discourse in the new context, with the goal of addressing a wider audience. We stress that pre-existing political trajectories play a significant role in the development of social movements, we highlight the importance of discursive continuities of cycle of protest and we argue that this role needs to be taken into account, together with structural factors and political processes, in understanding protest. Furthermore, we aim to contribute to the study of social movement continuities and cross-temporal diffusion, pointing out the active role of movements in this process in a dialectic relationship with the structural context.

### **1. Introduction**

#### ***1.1. Crisis, austerity and social movements in Southern Europe***

The mobilisations against austerity policies that characterised, in different ways and with different levels of intensity, the Southern part of the Eurozone (Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece) in the last five years, are at the core of both the public and scholarly debate on collective action. Their analysis has triggered the exploration of several research questions, investigating different aspects: the comeback of materialistic issues in the field of social movement studies (Hetland & Goodwin, 2013), the role of structural economic factors (della Porta, 2015), the radical critique of representative democracy (della Porta, 2012; Flesher Fominaya, 2014a), the crisis of European governance (Kriesi et al., 2013), the relationship between social mobilisation and political representation, the role of social media (Gerbaudo, 2012; Juris, 2012; Sloam 2014), the links with extra-European experiences such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring (della Porta & Mattoni, 2014), the forms of organisation experimented in the squares (Maeckelbergh, 2012; Nez & Ganuza, 2013), the return of grievances as an explanatory factor (Portos, 2014) or even the relevance of the generational issue in the configuration of the mobilisations (Hughes, 2011).

Nevertheless, this manifold effort has not been free from some of the most common flaws of social movement research. In particular, the analysis of anti-austerity mobilisations has been ‘putting the thunderbolt on its trial’, as Victor Hugo wrote about the French Revolution, instead of taking into account the ‘cloud that had been forming for the space of fifteen hundred years’. Focusing on massive protests and treating them as isolated events, as spontaneous outbursts born out of immaculate conception is one of the most common biases of social movement research, that has been increasingly addressed by the scholarship with an admirable reflexivity in the last few years (Flesher Fominaya, 2013b, 2014b; McAdam, 1995; Taylor, 1989). Analysing and understanding waves of collective

action not as ephemeral explosions, but as the results of dynamic and complex interactions between long-standing trajectories of dissent and contextual changes of opportunities and resources, both at the discursive and at the structural level, is one of the central goals of social movement studies. Thus, we think that looking at genealogies and continuities, focusing on what is reproduced and what changes, between different stages of protest, can produce fruitful analyses and insights. In particular, we claim that the recent anti-austerity protests have been often analysed from, so to speak, too close, and that a deeper understanding of them can be achieved through a historically grounded analysis and a focus on the longer term processes that brought them about.

### ***1.2. Putting anti-austerity protest in context: theoretical background***

This article aims to contribute to this deeper understanding by setting itself two goals: a contingent and a theoretical one. On the contingent level, we aim to contribute to the debate on the recent wave of anti-austerity protest, proposing an analysis of the genealogy of anti-austerity mobilisations in Southern Europe, with the goal of reconstructing their development, shedding light on their fundamental traits and enhancing the understanding of their meaning in the context of neoliberal Europe. The media depictions of the most relevant episodes of protest of the last few years, of which the superficial grouping of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the European anti-austerity mobilisations is the most visible example, tend to flatten out in the present, losing the perspective of historical trajectories, evolving genealogies, and cultural continuities. A rhetoric of newness, spontaneity and techno-enthusiasm, describing unorganised and unpoliticised masses of individuals that are threatening the global political and economic order thanks to their easy access to social media on their mobile phones, has been dominating the public discourse on the most recent episodes of mobilisation. This is thwarting our ability to really understand such complex and long-term processes. These narratives, other than being potentially misleading for researchers, tend to ‘unwittingly (or not) deny agency to social movement networks and actors’ (Flesher Fominaya 2014a, p. 2), thus favouring a depoliticised and confused representation of collective action, which is easy to exploit for those actors interested in doing so. We aim to participate in the effort of placing anti-austerity protests in context, in order to enable researchers to better understand them.

At the theoretical level, we aim to contribute to a widespread attempt to look at protest not only in its most visible components, but also in the underlying factors that enable it. Research on social movements traditionally tends to focus more on the present than on the reconstruction of historical trajectories. Thus, movements are often represented as isolated occurrences and each wave of mobilisation appears as the starting point of history. Nevertheless, as we have briefly mentioned, a growing interest towards movement continuities is visible, in the attempt, building on seminal works like those of Taylor (1989) and Polletta (2006), to develop a genealogical approach (Flesher Fominaya, 2014b) aiming to understand contentious politics as accumulative processes in which every new cycle is partially shaped by the previous movement activities. This effort is rooted in different lines of work inside social movement studies. On the one hand, there is the analysis of the role of specific social actors in ensuring a certain continuity between different waves of mobilisation: to define these actors the literature has used a wide set concepts, including, among others, ‘movement areas’ (Melucci, 1989, p. 70), ‘abeyance structures’ (Taylor, 1989), ‘social movement communities’ (Buechler, 1990; Staggenborg, 1998), ‘free spaces’ (Polletta, 1999), countercultures, subcultures and scenes (Bennett, 1999; Leach & Haunss, 2009; Martin, 2009), pointing out how ‘latency and visibility are two interrelated poles of collective action’ (Melucci, 1989, p. 70) and how specific actors are instrumental in this interrelation. On the other hand, there are the literatures on social movement reciprocal outcomes (Whittier, 2004), on diffusion (Roggeband, 2007, 2010, Soule, 2004; Tarrow 2005), and on cycles of protest (Koopmans, 2004; McAdam, 1995; Tarrow, 1991, 1994), which show how every episode of collective action takes place in a context that has been influenced by previous action and analyses the development of the dynamics of contention across time.

The interest towards the dynamics of social movement continuities has been visibly increasing during the last few years, producing also interesting innovations for what regards the role of movement culture (Flesher Fominaya, 2013b), the effect of memory on cross-temporal diffusion (Zamponi & Daphi, 2014), the impact of the socio-economic context on the continuity of forms of action (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015). In particular, recent contributions in the field have put into question the traditional literature on diffusion and cycles of protest, underlining the importance of phases of latency in the development of activism practices that are later made visible by protest (Flesher Fominaya, 2014a) and calling for a dialogical model of diffusion (Chabot, 2010), able to account for the agency of brokers (Romanos, 2015).

### ***1.3. Our argument: students as early risers and brokers***

In the context of this attempt to widen the temporal lens of the analysis of anti-austerity protest, we examine the role of the student movement as one of the initiators of the wave of mobilisation, and, more precisely, as a significant broker in the diffusion of an anti-neoliberal discourse in the context of the economic crisis.

The literature on social movements has shown how cycles of protest are the result, among other factors, of ‘the cognitive, organisational, cultural, and tactical effects of “early risers”, the influential movements that emerge first in the cycle, on later movements’ (Whittier, 2004). This article focuses mainly on the discursive component of this dynamic. ‘Initiator movements’, according to McAdam (1995), trigger a process of cultural diffusion, acting as ‘the source of new cultural forms – of insurgent consciousness, cognitive liberation, injustice frames’ (Minkoff, 1997, p. 781). We claim that this dynamic is visible, at least at the discursive level, analysing the role of student movements in respect to anti-austerity protests in Southern Europe.

The choice to focus on the discursive component of this process does not imply its exclusivity. On the contrary, student movements and youth activism in general have contributed to anti-austerity protests in many ways: the literature has shown how youth protests during 2010–2011 in Southern Europe were specific in their ‘extent and nature’ within the anti-austerity cycle, expressing at the same time ‘disaffection with economy and with the functioning of democracy’ (Campos Lima & Martín Artiles, 2013). Furthermore, student movements provide both activists and a wide set of practices

to anti-austerity protests. We will partially refer to such aspects in the descriptive part of this article (Section 2), but we chose to analytically focus on discursive continuities for an empirical reason – they were particularly visible and recognisable – and a theoretical one – they allowed us to trace a long-term genealogy and to shed light on the underlying mechanisms.

In this article, we present the recent dynamics of the student mobilisations in two countries where they have been particularly active in the period immediately leading up to anti-austerity mobilisations: Italy and Spain. In our analysis, the student movements in Italy and Spain between 2008 and 2011 significantly contributed to shape anti-austerity mobilisation in both countries, among other actors. In particular, we identify in their action some fundamental elements of the anti-austerity discourse that characterised the anti-austerity protests emerging in 2011.

However, if we widen even more the temporal lens, we see that this discourse is largely based on the heritage of the anti-neoliberal student struggles of the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, we argue that the role of the student movement as one of the ‘early risers’ in the anti-austerity cycle of protest, coincides with its role of a broker in a diffusion process (Roggeband, 2010; Tarrow 2005), between different waves of mobilisation. The mobilisations in schools and universities inherited a long-term trajectory of anti-neoliberal critique of privatisation, commodification and welfare retrenchment, and popularised it, reshaping it, in the context of economic crisis. In this way, they contributed, discursively, to pave the way for anti-austerity protest. In particular, their role was decisive in the transformation of the anti-neoliberal discourse into an anti-austerity discourse, given the new context of economic crisis.

Through this analysis, we aim to contribute to the development of a historically grounded analysis of collective action, able to account both for the agency of social movements and for the impact of the structural context. After briefly reconstructing the trajectory of the student movements and of anti-austerity mobilisations in Italy and Spain (Section 2), we describe the impact of the crisis in this process and analyse the role of the student movement in anticipating and preparing the development of anti-austerity mobilisation at a discursive level (Section 3). Then, we draw some conclusions proposing hypotheses for further research (Section 4).

#### **1.4. Methods**

Our analysis is based on 66 qualitative interviews with student activists in Italy and Spain. This choice is based on the correspondence between our goal of investigating the development of collective action through agency and the known capacity of qualitative interviews to ‘bring human agency to the centre of movement analysis’ and ‘generate representations that embody the subjects’ voices, minimizing, at least as much as possible, the voice of the researcher’ (Blee & Taylor, 2002, pp. 95–96). Our interviewees were selected from student activists that have taken part in the mobilisations in the Italian and Spanish universities between 2008 and 2013, identifying individuals that ‘have different levels of activism and participation in different factions of a movement’ (Blee & Taylor, 2002, p. 100). Furthermore, both of us have been actively participating at different stages in the movements, making of this work a piece of ‘engaged research’ from a material point of view prior to from a political point of view, given the fact that we are analysing mobilisations in which we were personally engaged. This structural condition has to be acknowledged in the interest of full disclosure, with its strengths (i.e. the easy access to interviewees) and drawbacks (i.e. possible influence of wishful thinking in our analysis). From our point of view, benefits have significantly outweighed drawbacks, though, clearly, this is up for the reader to decide.

## **2. Description of the cases**

### **2.1. The student movements in Italy and Spain (2008–2011)**

Between 2008 and 2011, both Italy and Spain experienced phases of intense student mobilisation. Protest exploded in both countries between the autumn of 2008 and the spring of 2009. Later, the movements developed in different ways: after a similar decrease of action in the course 2009–2010, Italy went through another intense wave of student protest in autumn 2010, while Spanish students were particularly active in spring 2011, in a generation-based campaign that would be instrumental for the explosion of the 15-M (Caruso, Giorgi, Mattoni, & Piazza, 2010; Fernández, 2014; Fernández, Sevilla, & Urban, 2010; Mir Garcia, 2009; Zamponi, 2011).

The student wave of mobilisation in Spain is usually called *anti-Bolonia*, or simply *Bolonia*, given that its main target were measures taken by the Spanish government to follow the intimations of the ‘Bologna Process’, the series of agreements between European governments, started by a summit in Bologna in 1999, aiming at establishing the European Higher Education Area. A critique of what was perceived by a part of the student population as a process of commodification of education functional to neoliberal globalisation started spreading in 2006 and 2007, and between 2008 and 2009 occupations, strikes and demonstration characterised most Spanish universities (Fernández, 2014).

The peak of the protest against the implementation of the Bologna Process in Spain was in 2008–2009, and coincided with the *Onda Anomala* in Italy. That academic year was marked by the first significant application of the new system to the Spanish universities, and this accelerated a mobilisation that had been steadily growing in the previous months. The protest culminated – symbolically at least – in the occupation for four months of the rectorate of the University of Barcelona, but involved a wide set of forms of actions: demonstrations, occupations, self-managed referendums and ‘Japanese-style strikes’ (consisting in working, or in this case studying, more than expected). Interestingly enough, and differently from the Italian case, the movement did not focus on a specific proposal of law or a specific minister whose policies are contested. Instead, the target of the mobilisations was *Bolonia*, the ‘Bologna Process’, or at least its Spanish

implementation. This peculiar attention towards Europe represents at the same time the heritage of previous experiences (the critique of supranational protocols dictating commodification, privatisation and neoliberalisation was one of the core elements of the Global Justice Movements) and the anticipation of what will come: criticising the EU as a carrier of contested policies, instead of identifying it as the beacon of progress, was far from common in Spain and in Southern Europe, at least until 2008.

In Italy, student protests between 2008 and 2011 are usually identified as the ‘anti-Gelmini’ cycle, by the name of Mariastella Gelmini, minister of education in the right wing government led by Silvio Berlusconi from May 2008 until November 2011. Protests started in September 2008 after the approval of the law 133/2008, that drastically cut state funding to public universities (by 63.5 million euros in 2009, by 190 million euros in 2010, by 316 million euros in 2011, by 417 million euros in 2012 and by 455 million euros in 2013) and allowed the transformation of public universities into private research foundations. The protests, under the journalistic label of *Onda Anomala* (‘Anomalous Wave’), included occupations, demonstrations and blockades, and went on until the spring of 2009. In this phase, the critique of austerity was still at a primitive stage. The famous slogan ‘We won’t pay for the crisis’ stated a refusal of the social costs of the crisis, but it did not problematise the crisis as something to be analysed, nor did it mention austerity or clearly identified enemies of the movement in the ‘1 percent’ (Giorgi, 2010). Attempts to take the movement’s political temperature show predominantly an identification with the left or the centre-left, a complete distrust of parties and a ‘legalitarian’ attitude, with ‘high trust towards the judiciary, preoccupation for corruption’ (Novelli, 2010, p. 136).

A second peak of protest was reached in autumn 2010, in correspondence with the parliamentary itinerary of a massive university reform (the so-called ‘Gelmini law’, proposing, among other things, the introduction of external members onto university boards, the introduction of student loans in a system traditionally based on scholarships, and the abolition of tenure for researchers). This second phase saw the gradual broadening of the claims and of the social composition of the movement. From a students’ and researchers’ protest against university reform, mobilisations turned into a complex and

broad movement, including social centres, the steelworkers’ union FIOM (engaged in those months in a massive struggle on bargaining rights in the car industry), and the committees for the republication of water (leading the campaign towards the referendum of June 2011 to abolish the laws that privatised the water supply system), kept together by a shared anti-austerity and anti-neoliberal discourse. The broad, inclusive and apolitical identity of the *Onda* became increasingly defined, while the target of the mobilisation shifted from the defence of the public university to opposition to austerity and neo-liberal globalisation.

## ***2.2. Student movements in the anti-austerity mobilisations (2011–2012)***

After the decline of the mobilisation in universities, student groups, both in Italy and in Spain, became a relevant component of anti-austerity protest. These protests took on very different forms in the two countries: in Spain, they substantially coincided with the 15-M as a united and transversal anti-austerity movement characterised by specific traits, while in Italy, they were articulated in a wide set of sector-specific mobilisations, unable to go beyond sector limits. Our analysis does not aim to explain the differences between the Spanish and the Italian anti-austerity protest. In fact, we do not consider these differences as an outcome of the processes we are describing, but, instead, of differences related to structural factors, political opportunities and organisational dynamics that have been explored elsewhere (Zamponi, 2012b). Instead, we claim that, in spite of these differences, the aspect we are analysing in this article (i.e. discursive continuities) play a significant role in both countries.

The presence of student activists is visible in both countries, even if it took on different forms: while in Spain student activists tended to merge into the united and transversal 15-M movement, in particular thanks to the role of Juventud Sin Futuro, in Italy, the lack of a united and transversal anti-

austerity movement and the ‘scattered’ nature of anti-austerity mobilisations favoured the permanence of student activists in their own organisations, limiting the effects of reciprocal contamination between activists coming from different backgrounds.

### 2.2.1. Spain: *Juventud Sin Futuro*

The continuity between student activism and anti-austerity protest is particularly visible in the Spanish context, due to the role of *Juventud Sin Futuro* (‘Youth without Future’), the generational platform that was instrumental in the emergence of the 15-M movement.

The role of JSF in the Spanish anti-austerity mobilisation has already been acknowledged by the literature (Flesher Fominaya, 2014a; Nez & Ganuza, 2013; Romanos, 2013). The platform emerged on 7 April 2011, with a demonstration called under the slogan ‘no house, no job, no pension, no fear’ that was able to bring thousands of young people in the streets of Madrid. In this sense, JSF was a visible carrier of the experience of the student movement in the new context of anti-austerity protest. It was started as an answer to the decline of the anti-Bologna movement, as an idea of broadening its claims and scope and of putting the expertise of activism developed during the student movement at disposal of a broader public, connected with the changed context of economic crisis. Two activists in Madrid, involved both in the anti-Bologna protest and in the core group of *Juventud Sin Futuro*, describe quite well this process:

We participate in JSF, that is the post-student movement in Madrid [...] We saw that the university was no longer what it was, it was a closed space, and said: we need to work on precarity, we need to work on housing, we need to work on the city, as a form of contention. (E6)<sup>1</sup>

It started as a platform of what was left of the student movement, that was above all university associations. Then, it abandoned this mechanism and individual participation was chosen<sup>2</sup> [...] The idea was to work on education, housing and precarity. (E4)

This process of transformation of what remained of the student movements into something different is quite complex and articulated. It consists at least in two different elements. On the one hand, the acknowledgement of a changed context, that calls for a different attitude and for the broadening of claims, as a JSF activist sums up:

The economic crisis appears, and it is impossible not to refer to it, because people are living it in the flesh, people are losing their jobs. [...] I am a student for half of my day, but for the rest of my week I have to look for a shitty job, or I have a scholarship, or I cannot afford a decent house. (E4)

Activists have to change their movement identity. They cannot identify simply as students anymore: in a changed context shaped by the economic crisis, they have become underprivileged social subjects in terms of work and housing. Also, they bring with them the experience of the student mobilisation:

15 cadres, 15 people that had worked for 5, 4 or 3 years in the student movement, that meant at least 3 demonstrations a year, a couple of strikes, daily activist work, became great activists for the city. (E6)

Movements are learning processes, and the experience accumulated during the student mobilisations could be, and was, used in the new context, becoming instrumental for the development of the anti-austerity wave of protests. The process we aim to describe, through this example, is the dynamic continuity between student movement and anti-austerity protest: there is a visible heritage in terms

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<sup>1</sup> See the appendix for some contextual information on interviewees.

<sup>2</sup> This quote described the transformation of JSF from a platform of student associations to an assembly in its own right based on individual participation.

of activists, experience and organisational resources, but this heritage needs to be reshaped in a context characterised by a broader popular participation.

### 2.2.2. Italy: students in the 'scattered' anti-austerity protest

In the last few years, Italy has not seen the emergence of a united, general and transversal anti-austerity movement able to keep together the many forms of dissent against the policies imposed by the national government and the European institutions in response to the economic crisis. This does not mean, as it might appear from a superficial observation, that austerity did not meet any significant opposition in the squares and in the streets of Italy. In fact, protest event analysis has shown a rather high level of austerity-related contention in Italy both in 2011 (della Porta, Mosca, & Parks, 2013) and in 2012 (Mosca, 2013). Furthermore, surveys conducted during these protest show results, in terms of social composition, of claims and issues and of attitude towards politics, quite in line with those of the Spanish 15-M (della Porta & Andretta, 2013). Italian anti-austerity protests are described as emerging 'in a more scattered way than in other European countries' (Mosca, 2013, p. 268) and interpreted as "functional equivalents" of the Indignados in other countries, even though they had some peculiar features that we shall link with political opportunities specific to the Italian case' (della Porta & Andretta, 2013, p. 25). Overall, the protest was significant and characterised by issues and attitudes similar to those seen in other countries, but it remained confined to some specific social sectors (mainly education, labour, housing and planning conflicts). For reasons that have been investigated elsewhere, no movement in Italy managed to achieve the level of mass participation, symbolic strength and transversal recognition necessary to develop a general anti-austerity movement similar to the Spanish 15M or the Greek 'movement of the squares'. Among these reasons are: a different shared experience of the crisis in public discourse (Zamponi & Bosi, 2016), the peculiar situation of the national government (which, unlike Spain and Greece, did not include progressive forces, but only Silvio Berlusconi's populist right and Mario Monti's technocratic cabinet), the internal divisions in the movement after the violent outcome of the demonstration of 15 October 2011, and the failed diffusion of the *indignados* identity (Zamponi 2012b).

Nevertheless, the presence of student movement actors in these 'scattered' anti-austerity mobilisations is quite visible. In particular, student movement actors were among the main protagonists of the attempt to develop an indignados-like movement in the autumn of 2011 (Zamponi, 2012b) and of the series of anti-austerity protests of the same year (della Porta et al., 2013) and of the following period, as the experience of the European general strike of 14 November 2012, launched by the European Trade Union Confederation in 23 EU countries, clearly shows: on that occasion, in fact, the anti-austerity strike organised in Italy by the Italian General Confederation of Labor and by grassroots unions, students were the major component both in term of size (200,000 students protested in the squares of 87 cities) and of issues (Mosca, 2013).

### 3. Anticipating and preparing the anti-austerity discourse

How did anti-austerity protests happen? We suggest that observing the process that led to the emergence of their immediate antecedents, the student mobilisations of the late 2000s, might shed some light on the issue.

In our reconstruction, the student movements in Italy and Spain between 2008 and 2011 not only proved instrumental for the generalisation of the struggle against neoliberal austerity in Southern Europe, but they also emerged following a recognisable dynamic: the interaction between a long-term struggle against neoliberalism in the university and the economic crisis, which provided a broader audience for an already existing ideological discourse. In this section, we propose a brief reconstruction of this process, tracing the roots of the student movements in the anti-neoliberal struggles of the 1990s and 2000s, analysing the impact of the crisis as the turning point that determined the mobilisations of 2008–2011 and describing the development of this dynamic in the anti-austerity mobilisation.

### ***3.1. The roots of student mobilisation: ‘Education is not for sale’ and the anti-neoliberal discourse in 1990s and 2000s***

The level of continuity in terms of content, organisation and practices of the episodes we have described in Section 2 easily allows one to categorise them as part of one wave of mobilisation, in each country. But when did this wave of mobilisation start, and when did it end? Older activists tend to see what happened between 2008 and 2011 as a continuation of what started a few years before, in particular, in the Italian case, between 2002 and 2005 (with the protests against the school reform and the precarisation of research contracts in universities, both under the minister Letizia Moratti, from which the ‘No Moratti’ name usually attached to these events comes from), and, in Spain, between 2001 and 2003 (with the campaign against the LOU, the educational reform proposed by the right-wing government led by José Maria Aznar). This continuity is visible in the role of specific actors, both individual and collective,<sup>3</sup> who participated in the different campaigns transmitting contents and practices. Activists tend to identify also a biographical continuity between their commitment in the universities and their experience in movements outside the educational field, such as the anti-war movement, the housing movement (in particular in Spain) and in general the Global Justice Movement, fundamental in the development of an anti-neoliberal discourse on the privatisation and commodification of public services, the main traits of which are clearly recognisable in the public discourse of the student mobilisations of 2008–2011. While organisational and biographical continuities stop here, from the point of view of discourse and contents, it is possible to go back (and some activists do so in their reconstruction) to the student mobilisations that characterised both countries at the end of the 1980s, especially in Italy, where issues like the role of private sector actors and the corporatisation of universities were already part of the agenda.

The reconstruction of a detailed genealogy of student mobilisation throughout the world in the last 20 years goes beyond the scope of this work. In this context, we limit ourselves to acknowledge, in accordance with an already existing if scarce literature, the existence of a wide set of episodes of protest, between the 1990s and the 2000s, in different areas of the world, targeting the commodification of education as one of the main pillars of neoliberal globalisation. From a symbolic point of view, we can identify as the starting point of this wave the so-called ‘millennium strike’ that was organised by the General Strike Council in Mexico in 1999, capable of paralysing the National Autonomous University of Mexico for nine months. Insofar as Europe is concerned, these protests went hand in hand with the development of the so called Global Justice Movement, some of the traits of which they shared: ‘the criticism of neoliberal capitalism, the emerging transnational coordination (in this case, European) and the contentious repertoire of protest’ (Fernández González, 2014, p. 198). Surveys conducted in this period show that 56.1% of the participants in the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001 and 57.3% of the participants in the first European Social Forum in Florence in 2002 were students (della Porta, 2005, p. 182), and both in Italy and in Spain students participated in the protests against neoliberal globalisation proposing their own critique against the corporatisation of universities and the commodification of knowledge, part of a global discourse identified by the slogan ‘education is not for sale’ (Verger & Novelli, 2010).

This discourse is present in the anti-Moratti and anti-LOU protests in Italy and Spain in the early 2000s, and the wide set of actors, collectives and networks that structure the movement in this phase are able to act as ‘abeyance structures’ (Taylor, 1989), proposing in the context of a different university struggle this general critique of the corporatisation of universities and the commodification of knowledge.

### ***3.2. Student movements as brokers in the context of the crisis: from ‘Education is not for sale’ to ‘We won’t pay for the crisis’***

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<sup>3</sup> We are referring, in particular, to student unions, associations and collectives, that often tend to survive a wave of mobilisation and transmit its legacy (Zamponi, 2015). To name just a few: AEP in Catalonia, ‘La Caverna’ in Madrid, the Coordination of Collectives in Rome, ASU in Padua, and so on and so forth.

If the student mobilisations of 2008–2011 seem to be in full continuity with their antecedents of the 1990s content-wise, and if some fundamental individual and collective actors of their development came from the experiences of the early 2000s, some elements of innovation must not be overlooked: a massive participation of previously non-politicised students (especially in Italy), the focus on the European level (especially in Spain), the increasing references to labour-related issues (in particular around the concept of precarity) and in general to the economic crisis and to austerity policies.

In these protests, there is a visible interaction between two different phenomena: on the one hand, the long-term wave of protest against the corporatisation of universities, started in the 1990s, in the context of the general process of neoliberalisation of welfare societies and education; on the other hand, the short-term effects of the global financial crisis on the youth, through different channels (cuts to student welfare, raising tuition fees, explosion of loans, increasing unemployment), that offered a broader constituency to an already existing (even if evolving and shifting) discourse, triggering large episodes of mobilisation.

The interaction of these two elements, a long-standing struggle by organised groups and committed individuals against the commodification of the university and the recent emergence of a broad constituency of young people whose hopes and dreams for the future are directly clashing with the crisis and austerity policies, is one of the factors that make these mobilisations so relevant to understanding the development of anti-austerity protests. In fact, the student mobilisations of 2008–2011, in Italy and Spain, have been the context in which a significant part of a generation has been socialised and

politicised, and in which the anti-neoliberal discourse, against the commodification of education in particular and of public services and common goods in general, became a relevant part of the public debate on the crisis and on the policies applied in response to it.

This critique of the Bologna Process, for example, is made easier, or, at least, is allowed to reach a broader audience, by the economic crisis, according to a Barcelona-based student activist:

2008 is the starting point of the global crisis, when people started to see obscure intentions in Europe, when the word ‘commodification’ acquired a meaning, differently from when we used it and very few people understood it. In 2008 the cards are on the table, the monster is unmasked. Europe is not any more this poetic and romantic thing that they had sold to us. (E1)

Italian student activists too, in their account of the mobilisations of 2008 and 2010, tend to stress the broadening of the social composition of the movement, linked to the economic crisis. Here are the accounts of two Italian student activists: different contexts (the first is based in Padua, the second in Rome), different political backgrounds (the first is a militant of a post-autonomous social centre, the second of a student collective near to the post-Trotskyist area), but a very similar point of view on how the crisis created unprecedented conditions for student mobilisation:

We were sticking on the walls our classic stuff of the social centre, we arrive in front of the department of humanities and we found it full of A4 fliers printed on someone’s PC. This gave us the impression that we were in front of something new, a real movement, something I had never seen, that nobody had ever seen. (I1)

With 2008 according to me there was a new generation of youth, students and precarious workers, that realised the situation of the economic crisis. The movement of the *Onda* was born with the materialisation of the economic crisis [...] and from there a new cycle of struggle started, in which we are still immersed, not only Italian but international.[...] In 2008 I would have told you that the Wave was born from the Law 133 [...], but analysing it now I think there were deeper reasons: we were at the beginning of an economic crisis, and above all we were at the beginning of the acquisition of a certain consciousness by a generation without future. (I2)

We claim that, from the discursive point of view, the student movements, in both countries, were at the same time the heirs of a long trajectory on anti-neoliberal struggle and the initiators of a new anti-austerity discourse. In order to illustrate these two different discourse, we use two slogans: ‘Education

is not for sale' and 'We won't pay for the crisis'. With 'Education is not for sale' we identify the discourse that characterised the movements against the commodification and privatisation of knowledge in the 1990s and 2000s. The literature has already been focusing on their development and their relationship with the Global Justice Movement (della Porta, 2005, 2015; Fernández González, 2014; Verger & Novelli, 2010). In this case, we want to stress their focus on an ideological opposition to neoliberalism and to the gradual commodification of knowledge. Instead, with 'We won't pay for the crisis' we identify the discourse developed by student movements from 2008, with a stronger focus on the material elements of the crisis. This distinction echoes the analyses on the differences between the Global Justice Movement, 'located in the rampant years of neoliberalism's development' (della Porta, 2015, p. 2203), in which, thus, opponents self-identified as 'an alliance of minorities' (della Porta, 2015, p. 2598), and anti-austerity protests, characterised by 'a more down-to-earth attitude, showing the practical effects of neoliberal globalisation and calling for urgent and radical action' (Zamponi & Daphi, 2014, p. 212). Addressing this issue in detail would need for a longer analysis, but we can roughly summarise our argument pointing out the difference between an ideological denunciation of the injustice of neoliberalism and the later revelation of the consequences of this injustice in terms of economic crisis and austerity policies. This passage is far from seamless, and student activists themselves perceive it as a turning point, as we have shown.

In this section, we have briefly summarised the trajectory of the Italian and Spanish student movements, describing them as fruitful interactions between a long history and anti-neoliberal struggle and the impact of the economic crisis. In the next section, we will illustrate how this peculiar condition of the first protest reaction to the crisis enabled the student movement to anticipate some of the core discursive elements of anti-austerity mobilisations.

### ***3.3. Student movements as initiators of the anti-austerity mobilisations: youth, precarity, austerity, Europe, and the construction of the anti-austerity discourse***

From a discursive point of view, the student movements active in Italy and Spain between 2008 and 2011 anticipated a significant part of the contents of the anti-austerity mobilisations. In particular, their role was fundamental in reshaping the discourse produced in the long wave of anti-neoliberal critique of the 1990s and 2000s, finding in the economic crisis, on the one hand, the ground for a more material critique of neoliberalism and, on the other hand, the context to broaden the potential audience and constituency of the movement. This is not the only way in which student movements influenced

anti-austerity mobilisations in Italy and Spain: direct transfer of activists and application of skills and practices need also to be remembered. But this discursive component is particularly interesting, because it is visible long before the start of anti-austerity mobilisations in the strict sense. Thus, we can identify, at least from a discursive point of view, a role of initiators, by the student movements, of a long cycle of anti-austerity protest that had already started before 2011. We summarise this complex process by referring in particular to the symbolic elements of precarity, youth, austerity, and Europe.

The concept of *precarity* in this context is a fundamental symbolic element in the double connection, on the one hand, between the educational struggle and the general anti-austerity mobilisations and, on the other hand, between an ideological critique of neoliberalism and a material struggle. As Alice Mattoni (2012) has noted, the concept of precarity, once used to identify the specific condition of workers with temporary contracts, had already been adopted by the Italian student movement in 2005, through a 'frame extensions process' (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 625). And what in 2005 was an ideological assumption in the political discourse of student activists, by 2010 had become a concept commonly reported in the public discourse by mainstream media. As it has already been shown elsewhere by means of an analysis of media material throughout the student protests of 2010, the concept of precarity is continuously used both by activists and by journalists reporting on their action, 'mostly as a label to define a general condition of distress in the university, in relationship with the concept of "future" and with the idea of a social coalition between students and workers' and usually

associated with a set of topics not directly related to the university context, such as ‘the need for a generational change, the inequalities between open-ended and precarious workers, the lack of welfare protection’ (Zamponi, 2012a, p. 194).

The concept of precarity provides the movement with a generational key to interpret the university struggle in the context of a general process, involving issues related to labour relations and welfare cuts in general. In this way, the critique of the university reform gradually became the critique of the whole neoliberal architecture, and in particular of austerity policies imposed in response to the economic crisis. Through participation in major protest events – like the steelworkers’ demonstration of 16 October 2010, or the demonstration during the vote of confidence to then Prime Minister Berlusconi,

on 14 December 2010 – the student movement became increasingly politicised, building a message that, starting from a critique of the university reform, became a denunciation of the social condition of the Italian youth as a ‘precarious generation’ hit by crisis and austerity, and, therefore, developing a strong demand for radical social and political change (Zamponi, 2011). In the interviews, Italian student activists tend to mention precarity as soon as they are asked about the historical context of their experience of mobilisation, and they describe it as the structural element that identifies their generation. Furthermore, they tend to qualify their movement as concrete and material, in comparison with the past wave of mobilisation, because of precarity:

This is because of a problem we feel, that of precarity, the perception of an uncertainty. Therefore, this protest was born much more from some material needs rather than from an anti-authoritarian or an ideological framework, as had happened in other movements. (I3)

In this way, precarity becomes the symbolic key that opens the door between a student mobilisation against a university reform and a generational movement challenging the bases of neoliberal labour and welfare policies. Precarity acts as a symbolic device, providing the movement both the chance to extend its domain from the university reform to the general condition of a generation and the possibility to express a sense of urgency, concreteness and materiality linked to this condition.

In the Italian context, this process is made evident by the quasi-ubiquitous presence of references to the concept of ‘precarity’ in the self-representation of the student movement (Zamponi, 2012a). But both the same extension from university-related issues to a general condition of generational distress and the same sense of urgency, concreteness and materiality linked to this condition are visible also in the Spanish case. An activist in Madrid described this feeling of generational despair:

Our condition has radically changed in the last few years: in fact, it is visible how many students are leaving the university because it makes no sense for them to go on paying. (E2)

A similar process can be observed in the Spanish context for what constitutes ‘youth’. In fact, JSF is explicitly constructed as a generational platform, that includes activists and organisations coming from the student movement but that does not limit itself within the universities, and, instead, refers to a general condition of the Spanish youth. The demonstration of 7 April 2011 was called with the slogan ‘without a home, without a job, without pension, without fear’: similarly to what we have observed in the Italian case, there is a visible broadening of the scope of the mobilisation, that goes much beyond

the university-related issues that characterised the anti-Bologna movement and paves the way for an encompassing movement. Transforming themselves from ‘students’ into ‘youth’ meant to trespass the borders of the university and to address a broader set of issues: a step towards engaging society as a whole. The call for the demonstration of 7 April 2011 referred to the defence of public education, but also to the opposition to the governmental reforms of labour conditions and pensions. According to the authors, the conditions of the youth, in terms of housing, work and welfare, made them ‘become aware that the measures to go out of the economic crisis were implemented through a constant need of socialising losses’. This particular condition put them in a symbolic position of centrality in the

debate on the crisis, and from there they called to whole ‘civil society’ to engage in a ‘cycle of mobilisations’ (Juventud Sin Futuro, 2011). In this way, in both countries, individual and collective actors coming from the student movement broadened their education-based discourse in the context of the economic crisis, contributing to the construction of an anti-austerity discourse.

Furthermore, the targets of the two movements coincided with two fundamental points of what became anti-austerity protest: *austerity* and *Europe*. The Italian movement, in particular in the opposition to the Law 133 in 2008, was directly opposing the first of the major austerity packages passed in the country, composed by 85 articles, only two of which (article 16 and article 66) referred to the university, while all the others impacted on a wide set of different policy fields, under the common denominator of welfare retrenchment. Using ‘We won’t pay for the crisis’ as the main slogan meant

building a symbolic connection between the economic crisis and the cuts to education, the same connection between the crisis and welfare retrenchment that is at the core of austerity policies and of the critique posed to them by contemporary anti-austerity movements. The symbolic passage from ‘Education is not for sale’ to ‘We won’t pay for the crisis’ represents the passage from the critique of commodification to the critique of austerity, the transformation from a mobilisation against ideological components of neoliberalism to a set of protests against the actual emergence of the contradictions of neoliberalism and their impact on massive parts of the population. If the target of the Italian movements represents a step towards the critique of austerity, the one chosen by the Spanish movements indicates a significant critique of the policies promoted by the European Union. Explicitly targeting the Bologna Process, in 2008, meant challenging the popularity usually enjoyed by the European Union in Southern Europe in general, and in particular in Spain. This aspect is very well explained by the activists’ own words. Here are two very explicit references to the discursive role of Europe, made by two student activists based in the Complutense University of Madrid:

Here there is a myth, that everything that comes from Europe, given that we come out of a dictatorship, is acritically considered good, without caring which kind of Europe. When I was participating in debates on the Bologna Process, others always spoke about the ‘Europe train’, I remember the rector of the Complutense University [...] saying ‘we cannot miss Europe’s train, we already missed it with Franco, we cannot afford to do so again’. (E3)

Bologna was Europe, with everything that Europe meant in 2008, that was money, growth, the possibility of travelling all around Europe without problems [...] The pretext was ‘it comes from Europe’, ‘Europe rules’, ‘Europe knows better’. [...] It was very difficult, because in Spain the European project still had credibility. (E4)

The student movement, criticising the Bologna Process, politicised the European integration process in the context of Euro-enthusiastic Southern Europe, paving the way for the radical critique of European policies that is at the core of anti-austerity mobilisations.

### **3.4. Students in the anti-austerity mobilisations**

The previous section illustrated how student movements, in Italy and Spain, were building around the concepts of *precarity*, *youth*, *austerity*, and *Europe* an anti-austerity discourse, preparing and shaping further mobilisation. This process was instrumental for the development of an anti-austerity movement. Not only were student activists able to exploit the movement work they had already done and adapt it to a much more favourable context, but also other actors could exploit the work that the student movements had done.

In both countries, student mobilisations created discursive opportunities for broader anti-austerity protests, the composition of which was significantly larger and more heterogeneous. The work they had done to reshape the anti-neoliberal discourse in the new context of the economic crisis proved useful to the wide set of actors that formed the anti-austerity movement coalitions in both countries. This process is particularly visible in the Spanish case where the anti-Bologna student movement was, among others, such as the Movement to the Right of Housing (Haro Barba & Sampedro Blanco, 2012)

or the Free Culture Movement against Sinde Law in Spain (Fuster Morell, 2012), one of the direct precedents and driving movements of the 'indignation' wave that emerged dramatically with 15-M 2011 (Fernández, 2014). In particular, this was due to the reinforcing effect of an opposition discourse against financialisation and hyper-marketisation of youth life-conditions (Alonso, 2012). As illustrated by a student activist in Barcelona:

Before the 15-M we were seen as a highly politicized minority, very oblivious to what was considered the regular or normal. I believe that the outbreak of the economic crisis, the failure of the expectations of many people... well, I think that now people have more difficulties (in terms of economic hardship) or, at least, can see much more difficulties (in other people's lives) if they do not experience them directly. And I think the crisis legitimizes what we said at the time about what the process of commercialization of the university was. (E5)

A similar process, in which the experience accumulated during the years of the student mobilisation is put at the service of a new and wider wave of collective action, bridging and amplifying the discourse developed during the previous years, can be observed also in the Italian case. To take one example: the document with which the student assembly of the 'La Sapienza' University in Rome called for the participation to the national March of 15 October 2011, in occasion of the global day of action launched by the 15-M. As in the Spanish context, we have infrastructures and activists coming from the student movement (the student assembly of the university), that broaden their claims and reshape them in the context of a broader struggle. The document opens quoting the ECB, the crisis of subprime mortgages of 2008, the financialisation of the global economy, the example of Occupy Wall Street, and then tries to insert in this framework the position of Italian university students, in continuity with the struggle that had characterised the previous months and years:

We also are that 99% of people that do not want to pay for the crisis, that 99% that reclaims real democracy, that 99% convinced that a balanced budget is not the priority, in of the face of the risk of losing another 50,000 jobs in Italy, with youth unemployment already at 29%. (Studenti e studentesse della Sapienza in mobilitazione, 2011)

Quoting the 99% and 'real democracy', symbols of Occupy Wall Street and the 15-M, together with the idea 'not to pay for the crisis', symbol of the *Onda Anomala*, in the same line meant to create a direct link between the student movement and the anti-austerity protest. Activists and organised networks participate in the context and adapt to it. The document calls for a 'student bloc' of the 15 October demonstration, leaving from the square in front of the university and then joining the March, participating to the demonstration 'with the forms that characterised our demonstrations over the past few years and proposing new ones'. There is a visible dynamic between continuity with the previous student movement (organising a 'student bloc', leaving from the same place of previous times, claiming to use the same forms of the past) and the choice to address a broader audience, to be part of something different, and to propose new forms of action.

#### 4. Conclusions

Our analysis shows the significant role of the student movement in the lead-up to the anti-austerity protest in Italy and Spain. In particular, we have described how student activists have acted as initiators in respect to the following anti-austerity mobilisations and as brokers in the adaptation of the anti-neoliberal discourse coming from the previous tradition in the new context of economic crisis. We argue that the discourse produced by the student movements around symbolic elements like *youth*, *precarity*, *austerity* and *Europe* between 2008 and 2010 has significantly contributed to the construction of an anti-austerity discourse, reshaping and reframing the anti-neoliberal discourse in the context of the economic crisis, with the goal of addressing and mobilising a wider audience. In this way, we aim to contribute to showing that anti-austerity protests were not born out of immaculate conception, they did not start from zero one day in the square, but, instead, they were the result of the interaction between a long wave of anti-neoliberal struggle, whose core discourse had been

reproduced by political structures for years, and the explosion of the economic crisis and austerity policies, that suddenly provided a broader audience to this discourse. The emergence of the economic crisis, on the one hand, provided a broader audience to an already existing anti-austerity discourse, and, on the other hand, favoured the reshaping of such discourse. This dynamic is visible both in Italy and in Spain, notwithstanding the clear differences in the development of anti-austerity protests that we have described in Section 2. In the two selected cases, the interaction between some particular frames related to precarity, privatisation of public services and commodification of education developed in a long wave of anti-neoliberal mobilisation and, additionally, the particular effects of the economic crisis were the factors that opened political opportunities broadening the audience for anti-austerity discourse.

Our analysis needs to be taken with four caveats. First, while we argue against the narratives of complete spontaneity and newness that are often related to anti-austerity protest, we do not claim that there is nothing new in it: the innovations in terms of composition and forms of mobilisation have already been pointed out by the literature; what we claim is that these innovations are situated in a historically grounded context. Second, while we point out the role of the student movement as a significant actor in initiating and shaping anti-austerity protest at the discursive level, we do not consider

it either the sole initiator of such mobilisation or the most important one: instead, the generalisation of our analysis in respect to other cases, such as the labour struggle or the housing movement, may significantly contribute to the understanding of the processes we describe. Third, we do not claim that the discursive component on which we focus in this article is the only form of influence that student movements had on anti-austerity mobilisations. Rather, this influence took the form also of a direct transfer of activists and of the application of skills, resources, frames and practices developed in the student movements to the anti-austerity mobilisations. The student movements not only prepared the discursive terrain for the anti-austerity mobilisations, but also acted as important bridging actors, not only through participating in anti-austerity initiatives but in some cases being directly involved as initiators of those mobilisations. Nevertheless, we claim that the discursive component of this process is peculiar, because it took place before 2011. In this way, we do not simply claim that student activists were instrumental in anti-austerity mobilisations, but that the student mobilisations of 2008–2011 themselves constitute an initial stage, at least from a discursive point of view, of the anti-austerity cycle. Finally, we do not claim that discursive continuities fully explain the development of anti-austerity protest: for example, as we explained in Section 2, in our analysis, the differences between the trajectory of the mobilisation in Italy and in Spain are independent of the factors on which we focused, likely being related to structural and organisational dynamics. Our claim about the relevance of the student movement in the lead-up to the anti-austerity mobilisations in Italy and Spain does not imply that the presence of a strong student movement, in a different context, can be used as a predictor for the development of anti-austerity protest.

Our analysis points out the relevance of discursive continuities in collective action and the fundamental role of specific factors in ensuring them, in a dialectic relationship with the changing structural context. Are these considerations, in the context of the recent anti-austerity mobilisations, limited to the student movement, and to Italy and Spain? The evidence suggests that some other countries in Southern Europe might tell us similar stories. For example, in Portugal the demonstration on 12 March 2011 called by *Geracao a Rasca* ('Desperate Generation') meant the beginning of a long series of national demonstrations and allowed the emergence of intense changes in the organisational structures of mobilisations (Baumgarten, 2013). In this sense, the influence of a dissenting youth was also key in order to open the field of opportunities for broader mobilisations. Furthermore, are these considerations limited to youth and student movements or are they valid also for other movement sectors? Due to space constraints, we cannot address the issue of the peculiar role of the student movement, echoing the debate of the 1960s about the youth as a revolutionary subject. Nevertheless, the literature has already pointed out some factors that facilitate the involvement of young people, and in particular of students, in social movements: the availability of

shared social spaces and networks (Crossley, 2008; Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012); the availability of time to organise and protest (Fernández, 2014); the widespread familiarity with technology and social media (Flesher Fominaya, 2013a; Gerbaudo, 2012). Moreover, the scholarship has described a wide set of grievances related with the crisis that are particularly relevant to young people, including disaffection, distrust and dissatisfaction towards political institutions (Orriols & Rico, 2014, pp. 77–78) and, more generally, generational issues in anti-austerity protest (Hughes, 2011). From our analysis what was visible was the capacity of the student movement to open discursive opportunities and to create the conditions for larger coalitions. Only further research can tell us if these considerations are valid for other countries and for other movement sectors.

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## Appendix

### Quoted Interviews

- E1 Interview with activist of a Catalan student union, conducted by Lorenzo Zamponi in Barcelona (in Spanish) on 24 October 2011.
- E2 Interview with activist of a student collective of the Complutense University, conducted by Lorenzo Zamponi in Madrid (in Spanish) on 8 October 2011.
- E3 Interview with a former activist of a student collective of the Complutense University, conducted by Lorenzo Zamponi in Madrid (in Spanish) on 10 October 2011.

- E4 Interview with a former activist of a student collective of the Carlos III University, later member of Juventud sin Futuro, conducted by Lorenzo Zamponi in Madrid (in Spanish) on 9 October 2011.
- E5 Interview with a student activist of the University of Barcelona conducted by Joseba Fernández González in Barcelona (in Spanish) on 12 November 2012
- E6 Interview with a former activist of a student collective of the Carlos III University, later member of Juventud sin Futuro, conducted by Lorenzo Zamponi in Madrid (in Spanish) on 9 October 2011.
- E7 Interview with an activist of Juventud Sin Futuro conducted by Joseba Fernández González in Madrid (in Spanish) on 8 December 2014.
- E8 Interview with an activist of “Patio Maravillas” Social Center, conducted by Joseba Fernández González in Madrid (in Spanish) on 10 December 2014.
- I1 Interview with an activist of a student collective of the University of Padua, conducted by Lorenzo Zamponi (in Italian) on 29 April 2012.
- I2 Interview with an activist of a student collective of the “La Sapienza” University in Rome, conducted by Lorenzo Zamponi (in Italian) on 8 March 2012.
- I3 Interview with an activist of a student collective of the University of Turin, conducted by Lorenzo Zamponi (in Italian) on 7 June 2012.