“Why don't Italians occupy?”
Hypotheses on a failed mobilisation

Italy was the birthplace of the first mobilisation targeting the crisis-related austerity measures: in 2008, students protesting against the governmental cuts chanted “We won't pay for the crisis”. After that, Italy appeared unable to play a significant role in European anti-austerity mobilisation. The waves of protest of the last three years seem much less influential, in the global context, than the British, Spanish, Greek or Chilean events, let alone the Arab Spring. Furthermore, all the attempts to start some occupy-style mobilisation, during the Fall of 2011, failed. Having participated as an activist/researcher in hundreds of demonstrations, assemblies and meeting, in this paper I propose some hypotheses for future research aimed at understanding and explaining this failure: the political context, with the peculiar role of Berlusconi in attracting on himself all the criticism regarding the crisis, saving from the popular blame the EU and the 1% and paving the way for Mario Monti’s widespread approval; October 15th, with the loss of credibility for the movement after the riots and the internal breaks, with consequences on any other attempt of mobilisation; the complex interaction between political groups and general movement, once a resource for mobilisation, and now a potential obstacle, given the difficulty of fitting the sophisticated “Italian theory” in the post-political and down-to-earth frame of crisis-related indignation.

This exploratory paper aims to take part in the reflexive elaboration of the Italian movements and to break the academic habit of studying only successful protests.

1. The failure of Fall 2011

Whenever we go abroad, unfailingly, someone asks us why, while Greece is burning, Spain is in ferment and in North Africa and Middle East (including Israel!) it is happening what we know, it looks like in Italy nothing is happening. “In Italy you produce so much theory that you export it”, they say referring to Italian Theory, to post-post-workerism etc. “but, talk aside, where are the struggles?” (Wu Ming 2011)

This quote, from an article published on their blog in September 2011 by the collective of militant Italian writers Wu Ming, explains the feeling that many Italian activists had at the beginning of last Fall. Then, the Wu Ming collective answered that “the absence of contention is an optical distortion”, blaming the tendency of Italian movements not to bother telling their stories in foreign languages.

Still now, it will be possible to say that Italy, in the last few months of 2011, has seen a quite high level of contention: the largest and most violent October 15th demonstration in the world, student mobilisations, a national demonstration for public water, two general strikes. Then, where is the failure? The ongoing academic debate about the outcomes of social movements (Bosi and Uba 2009) shows how complex it is to define success and failure, given the wide spectrum of intended or unintended outcomes that collective action can achieve. Therefore, there is always the chance that the Italian anti-austerity mobilisations of the Fall of 2011 will prove to have been relevant in some future political and social development. But speaking of “failure” in this particular context I mean something very narrow and precise, that is the failure of Italian anti-austerity activists in respect with the two main goals that they shared in September. These goals, as I heard in dozens of assemblies, were to give a political connotation to the expected fall of Berlusconi, paving the way for a real progressive change after his era, and to put the Italian austerity mobilisation, that already existed, in the global indignados/occupy framework, in order to gain media coverage, mass
participation and international recognition. Even if Italy is still experiencing a high level of social and political contention, both these two goals were evidently not achieved: Berlusconi was substituted by a technical government lead by former European Commissioner and Goldman Sachs advisor Mario Monti and the austerity measures implemented in the following months did not find an Italian version of Occupy or of the Spanish 15M (the acronym for May 15th, the day of the first large demonstration in which the movement emerged) opposing them.

How did this happen? I will try and address this failure through some of the conceptual lenses of social movement studies: political context (Kriesi 2004), identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001), diffusion (McAdam and Rucht 1993), protest events (della Porta 2008), organisational and coalitional dilemmas (Jasper 2004, Meyer & Corrigall-Brown 2005).

For this first exploratory work on the topic, I base my elaboration on a peculiar kind of participant observation: I participated to these mobilisations as an activists, I have witnessed their failure and now I try to analyse it with the tools of social science in order both to identify mistakes and problems in what the movement did and to address some theoretical puzzles from the point of view of this particular empirical case, aiming at contributing to the reflexivity of the movement and to the academic debate.

2. Antecedents: the anti-austerity mobilisations in Italy, 2008-2010

The student mobilisation of 2008, the so-called Onda Anomala (“Anomalous Wave”) is usually considered the starting point of an anti-austerity discourse in Italy (Caruso, Giorgi, Mattoni and Piazza 2010). The slogan “Noi la crisi non la paghiamo” (“We won't pay for your crisis”), in fact, explicitly linked a very precise and material struggle (the mobilisation against the law 133/2008, that determined huge cuts to the educational budget) with the master frame that was dominating the public discourse in 2008, that is the financial crisis. Even the scholars interpreting the recent waves of student mobilisation in a long cycle of reaction to the corporatization of university, that started in the 90s (and I am one of them), admit that, in the most recent years, “the appeal to the condition of youth has been instrumental in articulating broad movements that undermine the dominant discourse on the economical crisis and the austerity measures” (Fernández 2012: 175).

The Italian student movement, in 2008, anticipated some traits of the Spanish experience, building a shared anti-austerity mobilisation, that transversed political belongings and was recognised by a wide spectrum of social and political actors, even if did not share its ability to involve different parts of society and its huge symbolic impact.

The mobilisations of Fall 2010 (Maida 2011) were the context in which this double role achieved its apex: the students mobilised against a university reform (the so-called “Gelmini law”, proposing the introduction of external members in university boards, the substitution of student grants with loans and the abolition of tenure for researchers) and at the same time they developed an anti-austerity discourse aimed at involving larger parts of the Italian society. Through participation in some important protest events – like the steelworkers' demonstration on October 16th, 2010 or the demonstration during the vote of confidence to then-premier Berlusconi, on December 14th, 2010 – the student movement got more and more politicised, building a message that, starting from a critique of university reform, became a denunciation of the social condition of the Italian youth as a “precarious generation” hit by crisis and austerity, and, therefore, a strong demand for a radical social and political change.

This process of politicisation and radicalisation changed the collective identity of the movement, in a fashion that is quite common in cycles of protest (Tarrow 1989): the broad, inclusive and a-political identity of the Onda became more and more defined while the target of the mobilisation shifted from the defence of public university to the opposition to austerity and neoliberal globalisation. This process of radicalisation – that obviously affected protesters with different levels of intensity, depending on the level of engagement in the mobilisation – also involved the repertoire
of contention: starting from the occupation of universities and squares in 2008, the students arrived at the occupation of the most important Italian monuments (November 25th, 2010) blockades of railways and highways (November 30th, 2010) and even violent clashes with the police (December 14th, 2010). The approval of the “Gelmini law” by the parliament on December 23rd, 2010 ended de facto the wave of mobilisation in universities.

Despite the defeat in terms of policy, discursive outcomes of the student mobilisation, in terms of public support for an anti-austerity and anti-corporate discourse, can be traced in various political events of the spring of 2011 (Maida 2011), like the national demonstration of women (February 13th, 2011), the day of action of precarious workers (April 9th, 2011), the general strike (May 6th, 2011), the election in Milan and Naples of radical mayors (May 29th, 2011) and the unexpected victory of the referendums for the re-publicisation of water and against the nuclear program (June 13th, 2011).

Nevertheless, in the season of the Arab Spring and of the Spanish indignados, no movement in Italy managed to achieve the level of mass participation, symbolical strength, and transversal recognition necessary to carry on a general anti-austerity action. In Italy, the anti-austerity mobilisations were strong but segmented in different fields of action. There never was a unifying moment comparable to the demonstration of May 15th in Spain.

3. The Italian diffusion of the indignados identity

The label indignados, or the Italian translation indignati, were initially used in the media (in this section I refer to articles from La Repubblica, the largest circulation newspaper in Italy), only to refer to Spain (Ciai 2011a, Ciai 2011b, Gotor 2011, Lazar 2011) or Greece (Livini 2011a, Livini 2011b). Then, the media started to use this label to identify not only the small and isolated group, camped in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome, that explicitly appropriated it (G. 2011), but also the activists belonging to the student movement, the unions and others. (Capelli 2011). The media stretched the indignados identity, making it a passepartout word that could define any protester. Journalists desperately searched the web for some Italian indignado (Saviano 2011), while individual activists (i.e. precarious public workers mobilising against the government) started to use this word in their public discourse (Mania 2011), given that old movement definitions, like the no global label, cited in the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Genoa G8, were ridiculed by the media (Calandri 2011). Between July and August, the media saliency of the indignados label activated a circuit, involving both journalists and activists, in which the word indignados identified every kind of protestor: citizen mobilised against a corrupted mayor (Marozzi 2011), young writers (De Santis 2011), precarious teachers (Intravaia 2011). In September this representation was so powerful in the public sphere that social movement organisations started to use deliberately not only the word indignati but also the tent as a symbol commonly associated with the indignados identity.

On September 4th, the steelworkers’ union FIOM camped in Turin (Parola 2011); on September 5th, the autonomous social centre Cantiere camped in front of the Milan Stock Exchange (Pisa 2011); on September 6th, the grassroot trade union Usb camped near to the Senate in Rome (Serloni 2011). All these acampadas involved only a few activists from specific organised groups, and lasted only a few hours. Activists seemed more interested in the symbolic aspects of the Spanish movement, that granted the media saliency connected with the fashionable indignados identity, than in following the example of the 15M in its actual traits. (Hughes 2011).

The indignados label, from September 17th on, absorbed also Occupy Wall Street: demonstrators in New York were defined as indignados (Rampini 2011a, Rampini 2011b, Aquaro 2011) and the symbolic representation of the Spanish and American mobilisations became so entrenched that, in the 92 articles in La Repubblica containing the word “occupy” in October and November, 86 contained also indignados or indignati. These articles reported news from the US, but also and mainly from Italy, given that, in October and November, all the different protest events organised by different groups of activists were framed, both by the media and by the activists themselves, in the
indignados/occupy identity. The first event, on October 7th, was the national student strike called by the school students' union Unione degli Studenti. The articles reported that tents were pitched in a square in Bologna (Venturi 2011) and the protest was generally defined “indignados style” (Zunino 2011a, Lerner 2011). Three different phenomenons seem to have interacted in this particular kind of diffusion: the instrumental choice of organised groups, which tried to allude to the indignados symbolic repertoire in order to look new and international and to gain popular participation and media attention; the symbolic resonance of the Spanish and American mobilisations, which encouraged individuals to mobilise in the same way, to call themselves indignados and to bring a tent to the demonstration; the known characteristics of the media to interpret any collective action through the lens of another familiar or fashionable example (Bird and Dardenne 1988). These three factors interacted in different ways in different occasions; on October 12th, Draghi Ribelli (“rebel dragons”), a group of activists coming from Roman social centres and student groups, started #occupiamobankitalia, protesting in front on the national bank in Rome, whose then chairman, Mario Draghi, was going to become the chairman of the ECB (Angeli and Vitale 2011). In this case the prevailing factor was the first one, the instrumental choice of activists, which tried to look as much like indignados as possible in order to activate a symbolic resonance in the public opinion and call everyone to the street. Very few people camped, and in a similar initiative in Bologna activists tried to enter the local offices of the national bank, clashing with the police (Cori 2011), showing that in the Italian political context “occupy” has a different meaning than in the American one. The public recognition of an indignados identity for the Italian mobilisation was even more challenged by October 15th, the global day of action called by the 15M.

4. The indignados identity and the big event: October 15th

The role of events is recognised as fundamental in building and shaping collective identity (della Porta 2008: 49). As far as the indignados/occupy identity is concerned, this is particularly accurate: the Spanish movement took its name from the day of the first large demonstration (May 15th, 2011), while the American from a peculiar repertoire of protest (occupying symbolically powerful spaces).

But this can be both a resource and a constraint: if the actual experience of an event and its representation in the media do not meet the expectations connected with a particular collective identity, the process of identification by protesters and bystanders is at risk.

This is what happened in Italy on October 15th. Both the organisation of the demonstration (called by a platform of national social and political groups, involving unions and parties, and organised as a traditional national march in the centre of Rome) and what happened in the streets (a few hundred black dressed people started a violent riot which occupied for hours the square in which the demonstration was supposed to end and people were supposed to camp; Zunino 2011b) were in open contradiction with the expectations of the previous days (Bonini 2011, De Luca 2011) and with some of the main traits of the indignados identity as it was represented in the media in the previous months: unity, invisibility of organised groups, organisation of local events, innovation in the repertoires of protest, absence of violence. After October 15th, it was really difficult to use the indignados label to identify the movement.

This is not the only negative outcome of October 15th. What happened in the demonstration damaged the mobilisation also in two other ways: on the one hand, the different interpretations of the riots by different political groups active in the mobilisation (some praised them, while most condemned them) made it more difficult for them to work together in the following months; on the other hand, the riots in Piazza San Giovanni made it impossible for people to camp there, starting what was supposed to be the first Italian acampada.

But for the purposes of this paper, the contradiction between what happened in the streets and the indignados identity is the most relevant factor: the pictures in the Italian newspapers, on the day after the demonstration, were different from the ones in any other country. Therefore, the use of the
indignados identity by activists to recruit people and to gain media coverage, after October 15th, became much more difficult, because neither media nor potential activists knew which image was to associate with the indignados label: the acampada in Plaza del Sol in Madrid or the riots in Piazza San Giovanni in Roma?

In fact, the media sources that contributed to the diffusion on an indignados identity (one that is quite different from what emerges from the pictures of October 15th) immediately created a distinction that defined as “indignados” only the peaceful demonstrators and resurrected the old global justice movement label “black bloc” for violent demonstrators (Zunino 2011b). In the second half of October, 119 articles in La Repubblica contained the term “black bloc”: violence in Piazza San Giovanni contradicted expectations connected with the indignados identity, destroying the symbolic construction that activists and media had been building for months and also brought back old debates (violence/nonviolence) and old definitions (“black bloc”), symbolically connected with old movements and old defeats (the 70s, the global justice movement, etc.). The events thereby contradicted the narrative of the “new” indignados movement able to overcome ideological distinctions and errors of the past.

5. The decline of the indignados identity in the Italian mobilisation

After October 15th, divisions among the activists and political groups that participated in the anti-austerity mobilisations grew: on the following global day of action, on November 11th, in same Italian cities, like Rome (Favale and Giannoli 2011) and Naples (Di Costanzo 2011), the public debate was still based on the supposed risk of violence, while in Bologna two different autonomous social centres started two different acampadas in competition with each other (Stinco 2011).

The use of the indignados label in the media rapidly decreased, and on November 17th, most articles covering the national student strike, contra events of October 7th, did not use the word indignados to identify the protesters. In the following days, the word indignados was used only to report the end of some short-lived acampada (Vanni 2011), and in December went back to where it had started, in the international section of newspapers (Ciai 2011c, Stiglitz 2011).

6. Hypotheses on a failure. Outside the movement: the political context

It is impossible to deny the fundamental role played, in this process, by the sudden change of the political opportunity structure (POS) that was the fall of Silvio Berlusconi. In 2010, in fact, the POS was particularly favourable for the movements: the right wing government was weak, damaged in public opinion by the sexual scandals involving the premier, and in parliament by the split of Gianfranco Fini out of Berlusconi's party, and there were great chances for the movement to find allies from within the elites (in the media, in parliament and in academia). On November 16th, 2011, Berlusconi resigned in the midst of an acute debt crisis and a “technical government” (without politicians in the cabinet) lead by economist Mario Monti was appointed. The POS radically changed: the new government was strong, supported in parliament by a grand coalition involving the three major parties, and in public opinion by a feeling of “national unity” spread by the mainstream media. Furthermore, Monti's strength in the public sphere was enhanced by the use of technicality as an authority principle and as a device of reduction of dissent.

In the previous months, Berlusconi had worked as a shield for the common targets of the European anti-austerity movements (ECB, IMF, financial system, etc.): all the social and economical problems of Italy, while he was in power, could be charged on him, while elsewhere the blame went to supra-national neoliberal policies (Hughes 2011). Although activists, throughout the anti-austerity wave of mobilisation from 2008 to 2011, had tried to frame their protest in a post-political way, building an anti-austerity message able to transcend the struggle with the right wing government (Caruso, Giorgi, Mattoni and Piazza 2010), Berlusconi's figure was overwhelming in
the Italian public sphere, and he and his ministers were often target for their corruption and lack of qualification. Therefore, this repertoire of arguments was useless, now that the government in charge of new and harder austerity measures were composed by qualified, honest and successful professors and businessmen.

Furthermore, the financial emergency pushed many social and political actors, like centre-left Democratic Party, trade unions and the progressive mainstream newspaper La Repubblica from the opposition to Berlusconi’s austerity measures to the support of Monti’s one, leaving the movements without possible allies and without any public legitimacy for the opposition to austerity measures that were almost universally considered as the only way to “save Italy” (Faris 2011).

On November 17th, when the traditional demonstrations for the International Students' Day coincided with the inauguration speech of premier Monti in the Senate, people were asking of activists: “Who are you protesting against?”


Berlusconi’s fall was sudden but not unexpected. In fact, the adoption of an indignados identity, for many Italian activists, was instrumental in influencing the outcome of the long-awaited governmental crisis. The scholarship on social movements has already “shown how activists construct, deconstruct, celebrate, and enact collective identities as strategies of protest” (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 294). Nevertheless, this attempt of symbolic appropriation failed.

I do not consider the change of the POS a sufficient reason to explain the failure of Fall 2011. October 15th is the most evident example of some tendencies that characterised the whole season, and that might be usefully analysed not only in relationship with the political context, but also with the problems of diffusion and coalition building in different stages of a cycle of protest.

Scholarship has already shown the role of structural contingencies in diffusion (Bunce and Wolchik 2006, Beissinger 2007), and I think that further analysis is needed on this topic. Collective identities, like any other cultural construct can be interpreted and modified, but, as research on collective memory has shown, their malleability is limited (Spillman 1998); they come with a whole set of references and connotations attached, and some of these might not fit in the actual situation of the movement. This concept might help us to understand the failure of the Italian mobilisations of Fall 2011. In fact, some of the difficulties of Italian activists to fulfil the expectations connected with the indignados identity might be interpreted in relationship with the fact that in 2011 they were coming from three years of anti-austerity mobilisations. And we already know that, in terms of politicisation, repertoires of action and coalition building, time matters.

How does diffusion work between waves of mobilisation that are at different stages of their development? Broad and inclusive identities and nonviolent practices are usually considered typical of the early phase of a mobilisation, while in an advanced phase of a cycle of protest, when activist have elaborated deeper and more precise political thinking and experienced repression, arrests and defeat, politicisation of the movement and radicalisation of the repertoire of action are usually considered more likely (Tarrow 1989).

I do not consider this some kind of iron law of cycles of protest: rather, it is nothing more that a path-dependency mechanism that might be observed in the development of some waves of mobilisation and that seems to apply to this case. In fact, some of the most particular elements of the Spanish indignados identity (Hughes 2011), like the invisibility of organised groups, the a-political identity and the stress on breadth, political transversality and nonviolence are quite similar to the main traits of the Onda Anomala that started the anti-austerity mobilisation in Italy (Caruso, Giorgi, Mattoni and Piazza 2010). As I have already explained, the political itinerary of the Italian movement, from 2008 on, headed towards a higher level of politicisation. It was not easy, therefore, for activists to go back towards less radical and more down-to-earth contents. Furthermore, the repertoire of action of the indignados/occupy identity was initially based on the peaceful and
symbolic occupation of public spaces: something that Italian activists, especially the ones coming from the student movement, had already experienced in 2008 (occupation of universities and square) and overcome, in terms of radicality, in 2010 (occupation of monuments, blockades of streets and railways), and both times the mobilisation ended in a defeat at the policy level. Therefore, even if many activists understood the need for a new beginning, involving a larger part of the population, I observed how strange it felt, for them, to give up the different political paths they were following in order to fit in the *indignados* framework. Another relevant factor is the role of organisational and coalitional dynamics in the building of an *indignado* movement. Scholarship has already shown how superficial narratives of spontaneity (Polletta 2006) and myths of immaculate conception (Meyer & Rohlinger 2012) are in explaining collective action. Planning an “unplanned” protest or hiding pre-existing identities are strategic choices activists can make, in particular in the early stages of mobilisation. Furthermore, often “social movements are coalition affairs, featuring sometimes loosely negotiated alliances among groups and individuals with different agendas” (Meyer & Corrigall-Brown 2005: 329), especially in very politicised contexts. Coalitions can be invisible and informal, but, most of the times, they exist. Participating carries a price: “an organization may obscure its own identity in service of a larger movement, diminishing its visibility in mass media or its capacity to recruit members. […] During favorable political circumstances, groups are likely to have less interest in cooperating with others” (Meyer & Corrigall-Brown 2005: 331-332).

For many reasons, in the Fall of 2011, the informal coalition which had supported the anti-austerity mobilisation of the previous years was loose: the increasing politicisation of the movement had deepened the differences among the political groups, all the groups had increased their level of militancy, the excitement around the expected fall of Berlusconi raised expectations of great opportunities to seize in the following months, and groups planned to seize them in different ways. On the other hand, the pressure of international examples made the perspective of building a united mobilisation more appealing. I observed in many attempts to start *acampadas*, that the trade-off between the visibility of groups and the unity of the movement stalled mobilisation. Organised groups tended to prefer their own visibility until they were not sure that the movement would really develop, and only when they had seen the first big assemblies and demonstrations would they give up their share of sovereignty and recognise the movement as the legitimate common actor; but the initial tendency towards visibility and differentiation made the mobilisation less appealing for bystanders and potential activists, and therefore made its development more difficult. This is not uncommon in the early phases of mobilisation. Sometimes, external factors break the halt: the media, a particular social or political context or a nice sunny day bring into the streets a number of people sufficient to win against any resistance. At other times, it is up to activists to take that leap of faith and bet on the opportunities of a movement they have not seen yet. But in this particular case, the usual difficulties of coalition building were increased by the development of the cycle of protest: starting a new wave of mobilisation from the beginning, really embracing the *indignados* identity with a real process of reflexivity and challenging original identities, would have meant giving away much of what had been built, in terms of anti-austerity politicisation, in the previous years. Paradoxically, the high level of politicisation in a social context - in part rooted in a long history, in part produced by an ongoing cycle of protest - can be both a resource and constraint for collective action, because the more populated and articulated a movement environment is, the more difficult it is to squeeze it into a specific framework.

8. Conclusions

It would be unwise to draw conclusions from hypotheses based on a personal experiences, even if they are analysed through the lenses of scholarship. Therefore, I will simply point out two possible directions for the development of research built on the foregoing reflections. The first one is a
further analysis on the structure and identity of social movements: who is the movement? The individuals, the groups, the coalition? Recent examples hint towards a more process-oriented understanding of collective action, in which boundaries between the movement and external actors are blurry, given the fundamental role that some of them (like the media) have had in its development.

The second direction I propose points towards the relationship between cultural constraints (habitus) and creative innovation, especially in processes of transnational diffusion and adaptation. In fact, I have pointed out various obstacles, constraints and path-dependencies, and at the same time I have shown how activists, with creative innovations, tried to overcome them. They failed, but it does not necessarily mean that it was impossible. Maybe, they were not creative enough.

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