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Young People's Struggle for Recognition: The Movement of la Lupa and School Occupations

Angelo Galiano[a]

Abstract

This article examines some of the social and political aspects resulting from the action of young people during the pandemic, through the description and analysis of a specific performance of conflict, occupation. Between October 2021 and March 2022 an unprecedented wave of keenly-felt student demonstrations swept through Italy, triggered by the occupation of several schools in Rome. The article is based on a quali-quantitative methodology. The chronology of the protest was reconstructed by means of an analysis of the national and local daily press.

Keywords: youth participation, political organization, prefigurative protests, qualitative interviews, protest event analysis.

1. Introduction

Contrary to what one might expect, the pandemic period represented not only a challenge but also a significant opportunity for social movements. While the initial lockdown and containment measures did indeed suspend all forms of protest – at least in their traditional formats – the subsequent phases of the pandemic became a moment of renewed protagonism, particularly for student movements (Gerbaudo, 2020). This article aims to analyze, through the description of a specific performance of conflict – school occupation – some of the social and political dynamics that emerged from youth activism during and despite the pandemic. The student component proved to be particularly active, promoting a campaign of protest in which occupation became the defining feature.

[a] University of Salento, Italy.

Corresponding author:
Angelo Galiano
E-mail: angelo.galiano@unisalento.it

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Youth protagonism in social movements is extensively documented in the literature (Cini et al., 2021). From the Umbrella protests in Hong Kong to mobilizations in Lebanon and Iran, as well as the Fridays for Future movement and feminist struggles, new generations are engaging on multiple fronts and across diverse geographical contexts in an effort to transform a society in which they often feel unrepresented (Bosi et al., 2021). Far from being apathetic, disengaged, or politically indifferent (Alteri et al., 2016), young people are playing a central role in many of the mobilizations shaping the contemporary political landscape.

In the remainder of this article, I will not refer generically to "youth," but will focus specifically on those aged between 14 and 19 who have chosen to engage in non-conventional political networks and participation groups. As numerous studies have already noted (Sloam, 2013; Quaranta, 2016; Vassallo & Ding, 2016), the crisis in political participation concerns not the phenomenon as a whole, but rather one of its specific forms: the conventional kind, linked to parties and institutional processes. This highlights the need to interpret the relationship between youth and politics not through simplifications or sensationalist labels, but with analytical tools that are appropriate to the complexity of this connection (Harris et al., 2010; Pickard, 2018).

The article is structured into five sections. The first outlines the methodology and sources employed. The second provides a brief overview of the existing literature and presents the research questions. The third section analyzes the spaces and flows of conflict, reconstructing the dynamics of the protest campaign. The fourth, drawing on students' direct testimonies, investigates the concrete condition of youth within the Italian school system. Finally, the fifth section describes what the students themselves have defined as a "student-centered school": an alternative model not only proposed, but concretely experimented with through the practice of school occupations.

2. Methods and sources

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, aimed at capturing the complexity of student mobilization dynamics through a multi-source analysis. The qualitative component is grounded in a focused ethnography approach, a variant of intensive ethnography that is targeted and temporally bounded, particularly suited to the investigation of delimited social contexts characterized by a high level of researcher involvement (Knoblauch, 2005). This approach proved especially effective for analyzing episodic and intermittent protests – such as student mobilizations – manifested through localized forms of collective action (occupations, marches, assemblies) that are strongly situated.

Participant observation was conducted primarily in the cities of Rome, Turin, and Milan, through involvement in key moments of the mobilization. Continuous field presence enabled the gradual construction of legitimacy and trust within the movement. In this perspective, focused ethnography served a predominantly pragmatic and relational function: rather than being aimed at the systematic production of ethnographic data, it functioned as a field access tool, instrumental in obtaining recognition of the researcher by activists and legitimizing their presence within protest sites. Such recognition was essential for gaining access to mobilized subjects and conducting the interviews analyzed in the following sections.

The interviews were conducted in full during the national assembly held in Rome on February 5/6, 2022 – a crucial moment of the mobilization, which saw the participation of student activists from a wide range of territorial contexts across the country. On that occasion, 13 semi-structured interviews were carried out, all audio-recorded after obtaining informed consent. These interviews constitute a primary source of considerable relevance for the qualitative analysis developed in this study.

Interview participants came from different geographic areas of the country and shared prior experiences of political activism, developed both in institutionalized contexts (student organizations, student unions, political parties) and in non-institutionalized, often informal and territorially rooted forms of participation (self-organized collectives, social movements, and community centers).

The interviews did not primarily focus on collecting demographic information or reconstructing the respondents' socio-structural positions; rather, they aimed to explore their trajectories of participation and lived experiences within the mobilization cycle. Attention was directed toward three main dimensions: the political-organizational aspects of the protest (coordination practices, protest motivations, decision-making processes, relationships between local collectives and national networks); the affective dimension of activism (emotional experiences, sense of belonging, concerns linked to the pandemic); and the practical and symbolic dynamics of collective action (tactical choices, repertoires of action, meanings attributed to the protest). The goal was to reconstruct the subjective experience of mobilization in a rich and layered manner, adopting a perspective that foregrounds the actors' reflective and narrative capacities.

To complement the qualitative investigation, a protest event analysis (Franzosi, 1987; Hutter, 2014) was conducted on online daily press sources, with the aim of reconstructing the timeline of protest episodes related to the wave of school occupations that took place in Italy between autumn 2021 and spring 2022. Through systematic consultation of journalistic sources, it was

possible to elaborate an 'event history' of the mobilizations, allowing for an analysis of their spatial and temporal distribution, as well as their main characteristics in terms of forms of action, expressed claims, collective actors involved, and institutional targets.

Event collection focused on the period between October 2021 and March 2022, a time frame that marked a phase of heightened salience in student collective action, culminating in the major national assembly of February 2022. The choice of this observation period was empirically motivated by the intensification of protests coinciding with the widespread return to in-person schooling, the emergence of dissatisfaction with school-to-work transition programs, and a growing wave of spontaneous mobilizations following the deaths of two students involved in internships.

News items were gathered through a combination of general search engines (Google News) and direct access to major national and local newspapers (including la Repubblica, Corriere della Sera, Il Fatto Quotidiano, Il Manifesto, Il Messaggero, La Stampa), with the aim of mitigating the effect of selective media coverage (Maney & Oliver, 2001; Rogers, 2013; Andretta & Pavan, 2018). To minimize biases linked to algorithmic personalization and browsing history, searches were carried out anonymously and using browsers disconnected from personal accounts (McCarthy et al., 1996).

News selection followed an event-descriptor strategy (Maney & Oliver, 2001), using keyword combinations such as 'school occupation', 'student protests', 'student mobilization', 'occupied high school' and 'student assembly', along with temporal and geographical filters. All news items referring to protest events organized by student collectives in Italian upper secondary schools were considered relevant if they included at least one of the following dimensions: location and date of the event, main demands, promoting actors, repertoires of action, or institutional responses.

Relevant news articles were archived and coded according to an inductively developed protocol based on an initial exploratory reading of the material. For each event, the following elements were recorded: a) date; b) geographic location; c) protest form; d) type of actors involved; e) central issue; f) target; and g) any repressive or institutional response.

Although the sample thus constructed cannot be considered exhaustive or representative of the entire wave of protests, it enables the reconstruction of a detailed map of the main contentious episodes that attracted public attention and media visibility during the period in question. This offers a valuable empirical basis for comparative analysis and integration with the ethnographic qualitative data collected in the field.

3. Another world is possible (?)

In the early 1970s, the punk slogan 'No future' expressed, in many ways, an apolitical response to a society perceived as being in decline—a form of radical detachment from any vision of the future. Today, the slogan adopted by environmental movements – We are unstoppable, another world is possible – represents its mirror image: an explicitly political reappropriation of the future. Both younger and older generations are actively reflecting on tomorrow and seeking to shape it, engaging in political life through multiple and often creative forms, while addressing the many overlapping crises that have defined and continue to redefine the contemporary world (Pickard & Bessant, 2018).

As highlighted by numerous studies, contemporary forms of youth engagement have become increasingly complex, characterized by practices that are less conventional than in the past (Giugni & Grasso, 2021; Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Biorcio & Vitale, 2016; D'Alisa et al., 2015). The decline in participation through institutional channels should not be confused with a general political disengagement (Gallant, 2018). On the contrary, as several scholars have noted (Bosi et al., 2021), the organizations and structures mediating youth political participation are heterogeneous, and it is precisely this diversity that can significantly influence the forms of action. The literature identifies three key dimensions that shape this orientation: the degree of bureaucratization, the forms of action adopted, and the political orientation (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Staggenborg, 1988; Caniglia & Carmin, 2005; Davis et al., 2005). These considerations underscore the need to broaden our definition of what counts as 'political,' and to move beyond simplistic narratives that portray young people as apathetic, passive, or disengaged (Gallant & Garneau, 2016; O'Toole et al., 2003).

During the pandemic, young people from highly diverse backgrounds – autonomous collectives, student associations, youth organizations linked to trade unions, as well as students with no prior activist experience – participated in a vibrant protest campaign in which school occupation emerged as the primary form of action and the symbolic means through which to imagine and construct an alternative vision of education.

Against this backdrop, the following sections aim to address three central research questions: Why did thousands of students choose to occupy their schools in the midst of a pandemic? What motivations underpinned this collective decision? And finally, what message were they seeking to convey to society during a period marked by deep and uncertain transformations?

3.1 The campaign

The school occupation campaign began on October 6, 2021, with the occupation of the satellite campus of the Cine-Tv Rossellini Institute, located in the outskirts of Rome. It was precisely from this school – long neglected and marginalized by institutions – that a group of students aged between 14 and 19 decided to break the silence and initiate a mobilization that would soon involve not only a large segment of the Roman student population, but also numerous other school communities across the country.

The reasons behind the protest are clearly expressed in the words of the protagonists themselves. As stated in an official communiqué issued by the Brancaleone collective of the Cine-Tv Institute:

> Today we of the Brancaleone Collective occupied the annex of our school. After days of protesting about the problems of our school, after being forced to do lessons in the courtyard in the rain due to lack of classrooms, we have made our voice heard today more than ever to demand a school that considers our needs. (Collettivo Brancaleone Cine-Tv Comuniqué – Rome)

The occupation of the Rossellini Institute represented not only an act of protest, but a true turning point. According to Pietro, a member of the self-organized collective of Liceo Virgilio:

> The first occupation in Rome was the occupation of the Rossellini on 6 October. From that moment on a campaign of demonstrations began that we didn't expect and that surprised us. (Pietro, Collettivo autorganizzato Virgilio – Rome)

The event held strong symbolic significance precisely because it originated in a peripheral school and within an educational track often rendered invisible in public and political discourse. As Valeria, a member of the Opposizione Studentesca d'Alternativa, emphasizes:

> The autumn of conflict was triggered by the occupation of the Rossellini, where the first signal of revolt was launched. It was a signal coming from a school on the outskirts, where there hadn't been an occupation for years, the only school in all of Italy to offer that specific course, and it prompted many students to respond with further occupations. In fact, after just a few days we too occupied our school, Pilo Albertelli. (Valeria, OSA – Rome)

Simone, from the Cine-Tv Student Collective, reinforces this interpretation by highlighting the sense of abandonment that permeated schools during and after the pandemic:

> The occupations in Rome were inspired by the Rossellini students. From that day we decided to occupy as a sign of protest against the government and the institutions who for years, for too long, but above all after these two years of pandemic, have practically abandoned the school system. (Simone, Collettivo Brancaleone Cine-Tv – Rome)

These testimonies reveal how the spark ignited by a peripheral school gave rise to a widespread wave of mobilization, expressing a collective demand for radical change, for being heard, and for recognition. The school occupation emerged as a form of protest that was both political and symbolic—capable of articulating concrete demands while also proposing alternative visions of education and society.

The campaign concluded at the end of March 2022, coinciding with the final mobilizations organized by students in the cities of Turin and Milan, marking the end of a particularly intense and participatory phase of student conflict. According to the data collected through Protest Event Analysis, a total of 149 school occupations took place nationwide during the period under consideration. Of these, 47 occurred in Rome, 34 in Turin, and 25 in Milan; the remaining occupations were distributed across numerous other urban centers throughout the country. This distribution confirms the central role played by the three main metropolitan cities—not only in quantitative terms, but also as symbolic and organizational epicenters of the mobilization.

As shown in Figure 1, the cities of Rome, Milan, and Turin recorded the highest levels of diffusion of the school occupation performance. The territorial context proved to be a crucial factor in the spread of this form of protest. In particular, in cities such as Rome, Milan, Turin, and Bologna, non-conventional youth participation does not constitute an episodic or marginal phenomenon but rather a widespread and historically rooted practice. In these urban settings, school occupation is a relatively recurrent form of protest, embedded within a long-standing tradition of youth mobilization.

Another important factor to consider is the presence, in these contexts, of historic social centers – such as Brancaleone and Acrobax in Rome, Leoncavallo in Milan, and Askatasuna in Turin – as well as other subcultural spaces and political or sub-political organizations that provide a stable activist base capable of supporting and amplifying protest practices. It is therefore not surprising that the first occupation was organized by a youth collective affiliated with the

Brancaleone social center, highlighting the catalytic role these spaces play in the genesis and dissemination of the movement.

Figure 1. Occupied schools by city: distribution and intensity of the phenomenon

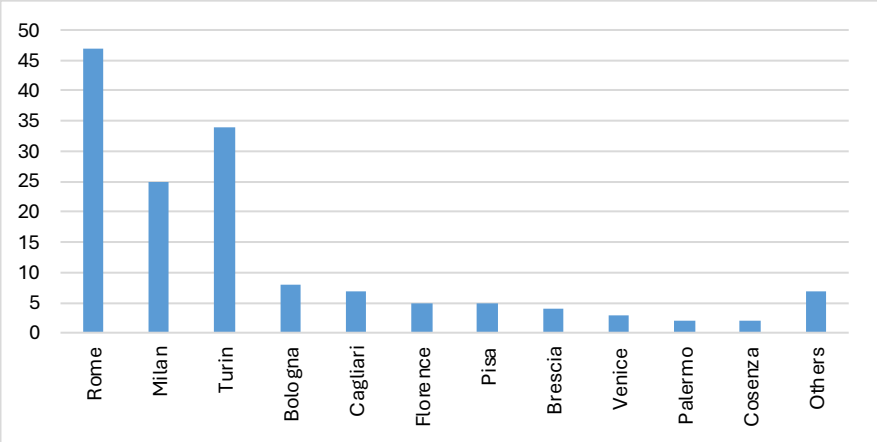
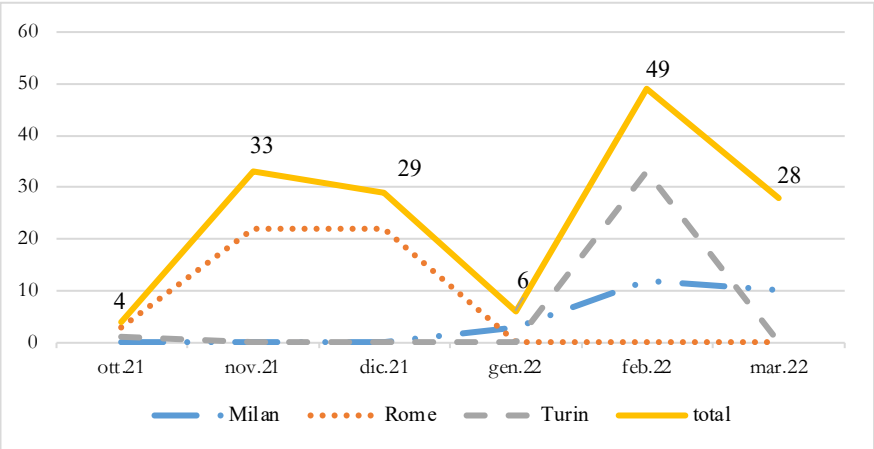


Figure 2. Evolution of school occupations in selected high-incidence cities, October 2021-March 2022



As illustrated in Figure 2, the school occupation campaign unfolded in two main phases. The first extended from October 6 to December 17, 2021, and coincided with the spontaneous emergence of the movement within Roman schools. December 17 stands out as a symbolic date: on that day, a demonstration took place through the streets of the capital, bringing together students from all the schools that had been occupied up to that point. The chosen slogan for the event – "Dalle scuole alle strade" (From schools to the

streets) – marked not only a shift from protest confined within school spaces to one that entered the urban public arena, but also the formal emergence of the Movimento della Lupa, an informal network bringing together collectives, associations, and youth organizations involved in the mobilization.

This transition from diffuse spontaneity to a more structured form of coordination was clearly described by Pietro, a member of the self-organized collective of Virgilio Institute:

> After the four occupations in the Tufello neighborhood, we thought the time had come to get organized, to harness the spontaneous energy that had characterized us, and we started to meet in assemblies involving the occupied schools. This process culminated or at least reached an important point with the march of 17 December, where all the occupied schools in Rome took to the streets with around 5000 students. (Pietro, Collettivo autorganizzato Virgilio – Rome)

The initiative launched by Roman students thus played a dual role: on the one hand, it served as the trigger for local mobilization; on the other, it provided a replicable organizational and symbolic model that influenced subsequent protests at the national level.

The second phase of the campaign unfolded between February 5 and March 31, 2022. During this period, the school occupation performance spread beyond the boundaries of the capital, reaching, in particular, the cities of Milan and Turin. The catalyst for this expansion was the national student assembly, held on February 5–6 in Rome at the initiative of the Roman movement. The meeting had a twofold objective: to scale up the mobilization to the national level, and to construct a shared political language by defining common codes and recognizable practices capable of unifying the struggles across different territories.

Syria, a student at the Archimede-Pacinotti Institute and one of the organizers of the assembly, describes the intentions behind the initiative as follows:

> We organized the national assembly firstly because we felt the need to expand our student demonstrations to all cities, to find shared actions and a common language on issues related to school and more. We summoned this assembly before the death of Lorenzo Parelli and since we called it, the protests in all the cities in the country have now multiplied, starting from that very issue of School-Work Alternation or compulsory internships. The aim was to connect the student

> protests on an operative level, which hasn't happened for many years, but also to form the backbone of a programmatic platform for next spring. (Syria, a student at Archimede-Pacinotti high school– Rome)

The Rome assembly thus represented a key turning point, transforming an initially fragmented protest into a more cohesive movement – one capable of articulating a shared agenda and projecting itself onto a national scale.

Indeed, following the national assembly held on February 5/6, 2022, students launched a phase of sustained mobilization structured around a shared platform of demands, organized into five core points. This platform not only synthesized the claims that had emerged in the preceding months, but also served as a statement of intent regarding the future of education envisioned by the younger generations: inclusive, participatory, and distanced from the neoliberal logics of efficiency and control.

1. Abolition of PCTO (formerly called School-Work Alternation): we want private interests and exploitation by firms to be excluded from our schools. Market orientation produces only deaths, inequality and precariousness. School must be a place of collective education, not of training for precarious jobs and a non-future devoid of prospects.
2. Immediate withdrawal of the Lamorgese directive: we want total freedom of movement and to manifest our dissent. No police tasers and bodycams, stop the repression and abuse of demonstrators.
3. Mental health, assessment and teaching: the present school forces students to undergo continual testing and fierce competition, which combined with the management of the pandemic and distance teaching (DaD), destroys young people's mental health and greatly increases anxiety, stress and psychological disorders.
   Youth distress is a tangible reality and the widespread difficulty we encounter in our daily life at school is the result of the imposition of a punitive, non-inclusive school.
   In addition, the teaching model, dry facts delivered lecture-style, does not contribute to our education and is in fact the manifestation of how remote the school is from our needs.
   At the same time, the new matriculation exam expresses the system's indifference to our situation in schools, not admitting its responsibilities for the shameful management of the pandemic, which had a violent impact on the bodies and minds of the diverse individualities of the young.
4. School buildings, spaces and sociality: we are forced to learn in schools that are falling down, with decaying facilities, in buildings not adequate for a school environment.

> During the first stage of the pandemic this structural lack of space and the consequent overcrowding of schools was one of the reasons distance teachings was introduced, and it still prevents distancing in classrooms, making them a place of contagion.
> The pandemic demonstrated it clearly: more spaces are needed for students, spaces for meeting and discussion, spaces managed by the students themselves.
> The national RRP funding must be used for this purpose. We demand more spaces for sociality and serious structural investments after the tens of cuts to state school funding. We want to monitor from the bottom up how this money is allocated through permanent student commissions.

5. Students as active protagonists: the occupations of recent months have been a struggle against the silence of the institutions regarding school and the world of education. Our vision of school is the occupied school, a transfeminist school, an inclusive school, a school that talks about the environment, sexuality, affectivity, care, politics and current affairs.

In this sense, the school occupations were not merely moments of rupture, but also concrete laboratories of political and educational experimentation.

One element that clearly emerges in both the first and second phases of the mobilization is the near-total absence of institutional recognition of the students' demands. Despite being coherent and well-articulated, the platform presented by the students was never seriously taken into consideration by either school authorities or government institutions, nor did it receive the attention it deserved from mainstream media. On the contrary, public discourse focused predominantly on the criminalization of the movement, downplaying its political significance and delegitimizing its claims.

A clear example of this attitude can be found in an article that appeared in Corriere della Sera by the journalist Giuseppe di Piazza. As can be seen below, in the attempt to reconstruct the features of the protest of the occupied schools, the journalist, when talking about the 'Lupa', besides stigmatizing its origin, contrasts it (belittling it) to the demonstrations of the Pantera, the earlier movement, strictly of university students, springing from the occupation of several universities in the late 1980s.

> More than a Panther, the mobilization of the students in Rome resembles a Wolf (Lupa). Sixty-odd Rome high schools occupied since the beginning of the school year is in fact a real record, not supported – and this is the point – by the overwhelming majority of students in other cities. It is as if this protest were just a local event, not connected

> to the mood of the millions of other Italian students – in Milan, for instance, not a single school has been occupied. (Corriere della Sera, 16 December 2022)

This type of narrative – which ignores the national scope of the protest and reduces its significance to an isolated and minority phenomenon – contributed to pushing the movement to the margins of public debate. Even at the height of the occupation campaign's visibility, neither school authorities nor government institutions showed any willingness to engage in dialogue. The only concrete response from the authorities was repressive in nature, particularly in relation to the demonstrations that followed the death of Lorenzo Parelli, an 18-year-old student enrolled at the vocational training center of the Bearzi Salesian Institute in Udine, who died on January 21, 2022, during an internship mandated by the PCTO program at a metalworking company in Pavia di Udine.

The following day, January 22, episodes of tension between students and police forces occurred in numerous Italian cities, particularly in Milan and Turin. In Milan, during a march toward the headquarters of Assolombarda, riot police charged demonstrators who attempted to cross the barricades to place a symbolic, blood-stained plaque in Lorenzo's memory.

> Tension at the protest march organized by the students of Milan for the death of Lorenzo Parelli. The police riot squad clashed with the front lines of young demonstrators when they tried to force their way through the barriers in via Pantano, in the centre of Milan, set up to protect the head office of Assolombarda. The students were attempting to place, in front of the building of the local industrialists' association, a blood-covered cutout in plasterboard as a symbol of the student's death. After the demonstrators' first charge, repelled by the police using shields, there was a second more aggressive charge where truncheons were used. (*La Stampa*, 28 January 2022)

Similar incidents occurred in Turin, where students attempted to break through police lines in Piazza Arbarello, resulting in charges by law enforcement and the throwing of objects by protesters.

> Tension in piazza Arbarello during the student demonstration. Two hundred young people organized a blockade to protest against School-Work Alternation after the death of Lorenzo Parelli. The students, determined to hold a march despite the restrictions in place in the orange zone, tried to force the lines of police deployed to block

> the square. Stones, eggs and glass bottles were thrown, to which the police responded with several charges. (*La Stampa*, 28 January 2022).

On February 18, during the national day of mobilization organized under the slogan "Contro il vostro modello di scuola: è tempo di riscatto" (Against your model of education: it's time for redemption), the protests escalated further. In several cities, students not only challenged school institutions but also broadened the scope of the conflict, targeting actors perceived as co-responsible for the precarization of the education system, such as Confindustria, INAIL, and the Democratic Party. In Milan, demonstrators attempted to force their way into the headquarters of Confindustria:

> Some of the students, having broken away from the march, clashed with the police near the headquarters of Confindustria. After throwing eggs and paint at the building in via Vela, some youths, their faces covered and armed with the sticks from their banners, broke through an entrance in via Vela and tried to enter the offices but were driven back with truncheons. The participants include sixteen militants from the Askatasuna Social Centre, two activists from the 'Osa' collective and one of the leaders of the Communist Youth Front. They will be charged with violence and injury of a public official. (*Skytg24*, 18 February 2022)

In Naples, by contrast, three students doused themselves in red paint in front of the regional headquarters of the Democratic Party, accusing the party of having "le mani sporche di sangue" (blood on its hands) for its role in the approval of the Buona Scuola reform:

> Three students poured red paint over themselves in front of the Campania regional office of the PD in via Santa Brigida in Napoli. The protest started during the flash mob promoted by the self-organized student collective of Campania and Power to the People. A banner was displayed with the words 'C'at accise' (You've killed us) and 'Your hands are covered in our blood'. The students used a megaphone to shout the reasons for the initiative, referring to the two young people that died during internships for School-Work Alternation. 'We are here because the PD, who brought in the Good School law have their hands covered in the blood of the two boys that died recently', according to the spokespersons. (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 18 February 2022)

Finally, in Pisa, the façade of the INAIL building was defaced with slogans and red paint—another gesture that sparked lively public debate and led to a sharp polarization of opinion:

> Students on the streets also in Pisa this morning, Friday 18 February, to demonstrate against School-Work Alternation. The Pisa police chief talks about 400 demonstrators, who left Piazza XX Settembre at 9 and marched along via Benedetto Croce, Piazza Guerrazzi, Ponte della Fortezza, Prefecture and the Inail offices. The façade of the National institute for insurance against workplace injuries was smeared with paint-filled balloons and slogans. (*Cascina Notizie*, 18 February 2022).

These episodes represent a significant departure from previous student protests. For the first time, the target of mobilization extended beyond the school and its institutions to directly confront the private sector, identified as a key actor in the processes of corporatization and exploitation within the educational system. It is precisely this expansion of the conflict toward the business sphere that constitutes the rupture: what truly alarmed institutions was not the radicalism of the protests or their "unruly" elements, but the challenge they posed to the legitimacy of the political-economic framework underpinning the school-to-work transition reform.

The chronological reconstruction of the protest campaign suggests that institutional intervention and recognition were not triggered by the disruptive nature of the protests or by an initial reading of student mobilization as mere 'youth distres'. Rather, it was the widening of the conflict beyond the strictly educational sphere – particularly in the wake of Lorenzo Parelli's death – that compelled institutions to respond. In this respect, institutional reactions appear less concerned with the substance of student grievances than with the potential political repercussions of the protest movement.

The stance adopted by institutional actors throughout the mobilization reveals a paradox: while the dominant discourse continues to assert the centrality of youth and education, the response to student activism has been marked by indifference, if not hostility. Institutional attention was activated not by calls for recognition or justice voiced by students, but by the perceived threat posed to sectors and organizations connected to business and industry. This dynamic underscore the asymmetrical responsiveness of institutional actors when confronted with demands for systemic change.

3.2 The struggle against silence: recognition, labeling, and the quest for social justice

Numerous studies challenge the still widespread notion in public discourse that young people constitute a disengaged, individualistic, and politically apathetic generation (Pickard & Bessant, 2018; Cini et al., 2021; Bosi et al., 2021; Alteri et al., 2016). As Marchi observes, the figure of the youth has historically assumed the role of a folk devil, becoming the scapegoat for broader social tensions and contradictions. Precisely because they are perceived as 'incomplete' and socially ambiguous, young people have often been portrayed as deviant, problematic, and dysfunctional (Marchi, 2014, p.19).

From this perspective, youth – also understood as a metaphor for change (Hall & Jefferson, 2006) – is often seen by institutions and the dominant culture as a challenge to the status quo. The stigmatizing labels historically attached to young people – 'vandal', 'slacker', 'anarchist', 'hooligan' – are not mere superficial narratives, but the product of specific cultural and value systems embedded within institutions. These codes do not merely describe reality; they shape it, producing concrete effects such as exclusion, deviance, and marginalization.

In this regard, Becker's analysis proves illuminating: "deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'" (Becker, 2017, p.41). When institutions operate through exclusionary value models, they generate a form of misrecognition which, as Nancy Fraser argues, does not necessarily manifest as overt contempt, but rather through norms and practices that deny participatory parity (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

The testimonies gathered during the research clearly reflect this experience of misrecognition. Pietro, from the self-organized Virgilio Collective, describes a school disconnected from the actual needs of its students:

> School should be the foundation for citizenship of a democratic country and should be built on the needs of students, whether male or female. It should be the product of our needs and requests but in reality, it is a service that has become crystallized and fossilized over time. Those who adapt to this school model do so with difficulty and this creates anxiety, stress and psychological disorders, those who fail to adapt go to swell the ranks of school dropouts. (Pietro, Collettivo autorganizzato Virgilio – Rome)

Similarly, Nina, from the Coordinamento Studenti Medi of Venice-Mestre, links the lack of spaces for listening and support to the emergence of systemic inequalities:

> We know very well that school is the first place to start if we want to eradicate discrimination. But this is never talked about in school. We feel the need for anti-violence centers, counseling services, safe spaces. And they don't exist. (Nina, Coordinamento studenti medi Venezia-Meste – Venice-Mestre)

Ulisse, from the Collettivo Autonomo Virgilio in Milan, powerfully highlights the disconnect between the school and the urban context:

> Milan is growing everywhere with new buildings, but not a single new school is being built. We launched a questionnaire on psychological well-being, and the result was clear: we're not well, and we know it. (Ulisse, Collettivo Autonomo Virgilio – Milan)

Simone, from the Collettivo Cine-Tv in Rome, denounces the systematic invisibilization of student distress, emphasizing how both the media – and above all, the institutions – have focused primarily on managing the protest rather than addressing its underlying causes:

> Every time I walk into school, I feel like a nobody. And when we occupied to make ourselves heard, no news channel gave us any visibility. That alone says a lot about how they're handling our protest. (Simone, Collettivo Cine-Tv – Rome)

Other testimonies highlight the urgency of a school model centered on care and subjectivity. Syria, from the Archimede-Pacinotti Institute, emphasizes:

> We want a school that talks about sexuality, emotionality, desires. It's not enough to teach us how to put a condom on a banana. We want to learn how to take care of one another. (Syria, a student at Archimede-Pacinotti high school– Rome)

The experience of stigmatization and criminalization is powerfully described by Pablo – a member of Scuole in Rivolta – who characterizes it as a veritable campaign of harassment by the media against the student movement:

> During the occupations, posters appeared telling parents not to let their children go out at night. The media portrayed us as vandals. It was a real campaign of hostility against us, as if we were the real problem. (Pablo, Scuole in Rivolta movement – Pisa)

Finally, Davide, also from Pisa, expresses a deep longing to reclaim a sense of well-being that he feels was lost during the pandemic – and even more so as a result of how it was managed. His words reflect a widespread need for attention, care, and justice, which emerged during a period marked by isolation, uncertainty, and collective frustration:

> We're just numbers. I spend most of my time at school, and I would like to feel good there. But I already didn't feel good before, and with Covid, and the way we were treated during the pandemic, everything got worse. (Davide, Scuole in Rivolta movement – Pisa)

These narrative fragments convey the profound sense of marginalization experienced by students: not merely a lack of listening, but a real exclusion from the possibility of participating in the definition of the rules of collective life. Rather than functioning as a space of citizenship and education, the school appears as an alienating and repressive environment.

In some cases, this feeling translates into a radicalization of the distance from institutions, as expressed by Virginia, a student from Turin, affiliated with the Kollettivo studentesco autonomo:

> After the occupation and the repression, the institutions tried to initiate a dialogue. But for us, the institutions are the enemy. There can be no negotiation with the enemy. (Virginia, Kollettivo studentesco autonomo – Turin)

As shown, institutional and cultural misrecognition operates on multiple levels, ultimately undermining the possibility of equal participation in social life. According to Fraser, overcoming such subordination requires not only visibility, but a radical transformation of the institutions and cultural frameworks on which they are based (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

From this perspective, school occupations can be interpreted as forms of de-institutionalization and as attempts to replace an exclusionary, hierarchical, and detached value model. They are not merely cries of protest, but concrete practices aimed at reconfiguring the school space, its function, and the relationships it sustains. They express a demand for recognition, care, and social

justice, while simultaneously constituting a collective attempt to redress a profound form of injustice.

3.3 School occupations as sites of collective reappropriation and prefigurative politics

In recent years, a generation marked by disillusionment – yet far from resignation – has asserted itself with increasing intensity, articulating a response to the institutional rupture experienced within the educational system through a practice that is at once materially grounded and symbolically charged: the occupation of school spaces. As noted by Pietro, a member of the Collettivo Autonomo Virgilio

> The occupations filled an institutional void of abyssal proportions, through bodies and minds united in forms of collectivity. By reclaiming our spaces, we also reclaimed our lives. (Pietro, Collettivo Autonomo Virgilio – Rome)

These words capture the deeper meaning of school occupation not merely as a form of protest, but as a gesture of care, recognition, and self-reconstruction. Occupations emerge in response to an absence – the absence of a school capable of addressing the needs of new generations – and are transformed into spaces where collective imagination takes shape. Within an educational context marked by lack of recognition and systemic misrecognition, occupation becomes a regenerative and political space.

As Margherita, a student active in the Scuole in Rivolta movement in Pisa, emphasizes:

> We don't want to go back to how school was before. Covid only brought to light problems that were already there. Even then, there weren't enough spaces. Now we don't want scraps in the name of a return to normality—we want more. (Margherita, Scuole in Rivolta movement – Pisa)

The occupations did not merely interrupt regular school activities; rather, they reactivated the educational potential of the school environment, redefining it according to principles of horizontality, participation, and mutual listening.

Following the prefigurative perspective proposed by della Porta and Diani (2020), student collective action was not only oppositional in nature, but also aimed to embody – here and now – the social relations and educational models

they aspired to. The occupied schools thus became spaces of alternative learning, where workshops, assemblies, meetings with experts, recreational activities, sports, and moments of reflection were organized on cross-cutting issues such as climate change, transfeminism, self-determination, and social justice.

As Pietro further recounts:

> Through these occupations, we put into practice the changes we were demanding. It was a process of awakening, in which, even before knowing exactly why we were occupying, we were occupying against our condition, shouting out our discomfort. (Pietro, Collettivo autonomo Virgilio – Rome)

The occupations also proved to be spaces of political and infrastructural experimentation: from the creation of gender-neutral bathrooms to the introduction of tampon boxes and self-managed recycling systems, each decision held both practical and symbolic significance. As Niccolò from the Collettivo politico Tasso states:

> The occupations have been a beautiful moment of independence and we have shown that we can take over the spaces and improve them, we have shown that we have a sustainable school model in which we truly recognize ourselves. (Niccolò, Collettivo politico Tasso – Rome)

In this sense, school occupations can be understood as genuine 'free spaces' (Evans & Boyte, 1986; Polletta 1999; Polletta & Jasper, 2001) or 'sequestered social sites' (Scott, 1990): places temporarily removed from institutional control and repurposed as laboratories for social interaction, political engagement, and cultural transformation. These are spaces of counterculture and counter-discourse, where students have not only claimed a role but enacted their subjectivity in a collective and oppositional manner.

Petra, from Scuole in Rivolta Pisa, encapsulates the political and pedagogical significance of the occupation as follows:

> In the occupations we have talked about many things, in general we have seen in these occupations how students discover a bigger self, they are not individualistic, they are no longer passive and are able to perceive the state of other very different kinds of students, who have experiences similar to theirs […] We talked about how in the eyes of principals and teachers the student is seen as a machine that produces

> results and therefore helps the school's funding. We talked about what it means to have an uncertain future, what it means to be young and to find ourselves in a future that does not exist. We talked about what it means to live in a world of inequality, wars and injustices. (Petra, Scuole in Rivolta Movement – Pisa)

From this perspective, school occupation does not appear as a suspension of everyday life, but rather as its re-signification. It restores meaning to school life, freeing it from its alienating dimension and bringing forth its unexpressed potential. Margherita adds:

> An occupation is a fragment of the school I would like, it gives you a little taste of the school you would like. A school for which you want to get up at 9, you want to take part in assemblies, to talk, to have discussions, to meet new people, to socialize. What we created during the occupations was a school of discussion, of sociability, which leaves us our space, which does not oppress us. We know what we want, because we have tried it and we want more. (Margherita, Scuole in Rivolta Movement – Pisa)

As Modonesi (2019) points out, the barricade is not only a form of defense, but also a symbolic threshold – a rupture, a suspension of normality, and the construction of a 'we' opposed to a 'they'. School occupations follow this same logic: they draw a line between what is and what could be, between the school that is endured and the school that is desired.

Ultimately, school occupations have represented a concrete form of opposition to dominant cultural models – a collective action aimed not only at denouncing injustice, but at experimenting with forms of participatory justice (Fraser, 1997) and giving shape to new institutional and relational models. For many students, they were not merely a rupture, but a beginning.

4. Concluding remarks

The political processes surrounding misrecognition, lack of legitimacy, and the social construction of deviance are multiple and interconnected. In this work, I have sought to demonstrate how school institutions, political organizations, trade associations, and moral and media authorities cooperate – often implicitly – in the production of stigmatizing labels, acting in close synergy with state apparatuses and those deemed transgressors. At the same time, I have emphasized that student collective action cannot be reduced to a mere sum of

individual acts of protest or presumed deviance, but rather constitutes a structured, coherent political action endowed with transformative meaning.

Through the direct testimonies collected, the problematic nature of youth experience within the Italian school system clearly emerged. The most significant thread running through the entire student mobilization is the demand for a radical transformation of a school model that fails to recognize students as subjects, instead tending to neutralize their identity and relegate them to social insignificance. This demand for transformation was expressed through non-conventional languages, codes, practices, and forms of political participation – born out of widespread disillusionment and, in some cases, a deep sense of estrangement from institutions and traditional forms of political representation.

In exploring the origins and dynamics of the school occupation phenomenon, I have attempted to convey the complexity of the web of interactions in which individual and collective identities, institutional and extra-institutional actors confront one another, take positions, and act – mutually shaping the construction of events and the definition of their consequences. From this confrontation, certain stigmatizing cultural and normative models have clearly emerged, still deeply rooted not only in the school environment but in society at large.

While many social movements do indeed demand normative or legislative changes, it is important to underline, as della Porta and Diani (2020) argue, that such changes do not necessarily constitute their primary objective. Following Melucci (1982, 1989) and Gamson (2004), movements should be interpreted as 'carriers of symbolic meanings', agents of cultural transformation that promote new identities, practices, and worldviews. Their impact cannot be measured solely in terms of immediate outcomes, but also in their ability to raise awareness, influence the social imaginary, and challenge dominant narratives.

In this light, school occupations can be read not only as a form of protest, but as a 'symbolic intervention' aimed at deconstructing exclusionary cultural models and developing new possibilities for recognition, participation, and social justice. In this sense, the political value of student mobilization lies not so much in what it achieved in terms of institutional reforms, but in its ability to open spaces for collective reflection, to construct antagonistic subjectivities, and to reimagine the school as a space of meaning, relationship, and transformation.

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