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Abstract

This article investigates an undocumented migrants' protest that took place in Italy in 2010-2011 and examines the relational dynamics within the movement behind this mobilization. Although there is a growing literature exploring different aspects of migrant activism and border struggles, the binomial migrant and politics has mostly been interpreted in terms of migrants as the objects of politics rather than the subjects. During the nine-month protest a similar argument was used by authorities who recurrently stated that the migrants were remotely controlled and manipulated by their Italian advocates. Without underestimating differences in social and cultural capital and power relations within the movement, this article seeks to challenge this approach and problematise the relationship between the actors who organised and participated in the protest. Drawing on 27 in-depth interviews with documented and undocumented migrants, and migrant rights activists, the article aims to show how relational dynamics go beyond the subordination-domination dichotomy.

Keywords: Migrant activism, migration policies, citizenship, border struggles, social movements, undocumented migrant rights.

1. Introduction

A significant body of literature has been drawn by the border struggles of the last decade inspired. In particular, research has focused on migrants as agents of political transformation while border struggles have been framed as 'acts of citizenship' (Anderson 2009; Chimienti and Solomos 2011; Isin 2009; Isin and Nielsen 2008; Monforte and Dufour 2011; Nyers and Rygiel 2012; Però and Solomos 2010; Pojmann 2008; Tyler and Marciniak, 2013). According to Balibar (2004) these struggles bring to the fore a 'new' figure of citizen who although without a formal legal status participates in public affairs and develops a form of *active citizenship*. Isin (2009) also assumes a relevance for the struggles of the undocumented distinguishing, however, between active citizenship and acts of citizenship. The former includes routinised social actions such as voting, taxpaying or enlisting and is implied by legal status and, therefore, belongs only to those who are already considered citizens (Isin 2009, 383); it is only with the latter that a new actor, the *activist citizen*, and a new scene are produced. Acts of citizenship are unexpected and disrupt the established political patterns, enabling the actor to establish new rights. They call the law into question and sometimes break it. These, therefore, are not 'bare lives', vulnerable to the arbiters of sovereign power and *trapped* in zones of indistinction (Walters 2008). Rather, border struggles turn irregular migrants into agents of political transformation who disrupt the exclusionary logic of migration policies and reflectively recognise their own potential as political actors (McNevin 2013; Monforte 2015).

While these analyses of border struggles put the emphasis on citizenship, as defined in its relation to the territorial state, others examine some of the ambivalences of these struggles. In particular, they are understood as acts of desertion (Squire 2015) that challenge the limits of liberal citizenship and enact new rights, including the right to mobility. However, acts of desertion and citizenship should not be conceived of as being in opposition. As noted, migrants often work with citizenship and against it in resisting relations of power (McNevin 2013). By claiming the right to mobility and freedom of movement, the acts of desertion 'remain immanent to citizenship but at the same time temporarily exceed citizenship' (Squire 2015, 505). They challenge the limitations of the rights and responsibilities associated with liberal citizenship within that framework. The status undocumented migrants claim is part of the same order they contest.

Another strand of research has focused on the way undocumented migrants reclaim agency. It has been argued that a condition for any social movement to emerge is the presence of pre-existent organisational structures, often latent and unnoticed but ready to activate at any time (Diani and McAdam 2003; Melucci 1996; Tarrow 1998). Similarly, migrant mobilisations are not simply the result of frustration linked to economic exploitation and social marginalisation, but emerge out of the capacity of migrants and their supporters to mobilise the organisational structures available to them. Several studies have investigated the nature of mobilising structures involving migrants and migrant rights advocates and have raised important questions of power, access to valuable resources and information control (Nicholls 2013, 2014). Even when decisions and interactions are not structured in a centralised manner, some groups may assume a dominant role. Real tensions exist and contribute to the emergence of hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, gender, and the availability of resources such as social and cultural capital. Some particular groups become empowered and assume crucial positions while others remain marginal within the decision-making processes.

In particular, undocumented migrants have long been represented as lacking the essential cultural and social capital needed to generate mobilisation and represent their own cases. As Nicholls (2013) argues, migrants need to ally with native supporters who not only provide solidarity and contribute to expanding the undocumented struggle (Mantanika and Kouki 2011), but also possess the knowledge required to act and advance claims in a restricted political field (Bourdieu 1991). Within these structures, invisible hierarchies easily form in relation to the possession of symbolic and cultural resources. Native supporters who possess these scarce resources are likely to assume a

dominant position that involves the framing of claims, their representation and their legal negotiation; this introduces a division of labour whereby natives assume the dominant role of representational broker. The asymmetric distribution of power within these structures is not necessarily a deliberate outcome of migrant advocates' support, but might be a contingent result. A lack of cultural capital (language and knowledge of legislation), the hostility of the political environment and uncertain legal status put undocumented migrants in the unavoidable position of allying with native organisations to obtain indispensable forms of support (Nicholls 2013). Therefore, although asymmetry may not be the intention, it exists and produces tensions between migrants and their supporters, with native activists playing a dominant role.

Focusing on an eleven-month cycle of protest that took place in Brescia, the Italian city and province with the third highest migrant population, between 2010 and 2011, my article seeks to examine the role of undocumented migrants and how they reclaim agency. The aim is to problematise the type of relationship between the actors, migrants and solidarity activists, who organised and participated in the protest. This article is not a network analysis of the protest; that would require other analytical tools. Rather, it investigates how different roles and power relations between migrants and their supporters have evolved and whether possible asymmetries have been addressed. It will be argued that relations between migrants and their advocates have transformed during different phases of the protest and that the complex web of relations that developed during the protest's cycle went beyond the subordination-domination dichotomy. The first section describes the methodological approach used for this study. The second explores migration policies in Italy and the characteristics of the regularisation that triggered the cycle of protest. The third, which is made up of different sub-sections, investigates the protest by focusing on its dynamics and on how the relationship between the different actors changed over the nine-month-long mobilization. The fourth section discusses some possible outcomes of the cycle of protest.

2. Methodology for this study

This article draws on 15 in-depth interviews with documented and undocumented migrants, and 12 in-depth interviews with migrant rights activists and members of immigrant rights associations who took part in the protest, as well as interviews to key

informants such as union members, priests and NGOs who did not take active part in the protest but did witness the progress of events. The detailed interviews addressed three major issues: 1) the evolution and dynamics of the protest; 2) mobilisation strategies, and 3) forms of participation. In addition, the interviews with key informants addressed some broader issues about the context in which the protest took place, and attitudes towards the protest. The interviews with migrants also addressed issues related to their participation in the protest, such as how they joined it, the effects it had on their daily lives, and some questions about their migratory experience, such as how long they had been in Italy, how they arrived, their occupation, their status and its impact on their lives. Both documented and undocumented migrants were chosen according to whether they participated in all three phases of the protest, their role in the protest, and the degree to which they were sufficiently fluent in Italian or English. With some I conducted a second round of interviews and further conversations after the protest ended.

My personal biography has facilitated access to the sources. I am from the town where the protest took place and lived there for 40 years before moving to London. For many years I have participated in and supported migrant rights mobilisations. While my former activism may be seen as biasing my perspective and analysis of the protest, it has facilitated communication with my interviewees. Migrant rights activists were willing to put me in contact with migrant activists to whom I was often introduced as 'a friend who is conducting a research project into our protest'. This facilitated an open dialogue of mutual trust between myself and my interviewees, and allowed me to gain a deeper insight into the reasons for their protest. All the interviews were carried out between November 2010 and December 2011 and their narratives inform much of the empirical aspect of this article. I use pseudonyms to maintain interviewees' anonymity and refer to the position they held at the time of the protest. Such exhaustive interviews have been combined with conversations with activists involved in the protest, participant observation at demonstrations, meetings and other events, particularly in the first and second phase of the protest, and documentary sources including printed leaflets, magazines, and electronic communications such as websites and e-journals. The use of some local newspapers has been useful in reconstructing the key protest events, assessing the wider political context and examining the dynamics of the protest.

3. Regularisation as an exclusionary tool to control migratory flows

The protest's trigger was the decree of regularisation passed by Berlusconi's government in August 2009, which selectively regularized the undocumented migrants who were working as so-called 'colf e badanti' –carers providing assistance to elderly people, and excluded those who did not belong to these categories. In the 1990s and early 2000s Italian governments frequently used regularisations to control migratory flows and to assuage growing anti-migrant rhetoric and the public demand for control over illegal immigration (Ambrosini 2013; Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero 2015). Between 1986 and 2012, seven regularisations were passed affecting over 2,100,000 foreigners who were given residence permits. These regularisations were directed to all the migrants and aimed at managing the large strata of irregular – albeit employed – migrants attracted by a large informal economy sector (King 2002).

The rationale of 2009 'selective' regularisation was twofold. First, it addressed the needs of several thousand Italian families, many from middle class backgrounds based in the North, the electoral constituency of government parties, who were left without caretakers by the 'security packet' approved in July 2009 and the introduction of the offence of undocumented migration. Simultaneously, the selective character of the regularisation aimed to reassure them that it was not an 'open door to all' policy[i]. Secondly, it would have brought some money into the state coffers. The Home Office calculated that the regularisation would have meant revenues of €600 million for the Work and Pensions department, to which applications were to be made. The 'selective' character of this regularisation led thousands of migrants employed in different sectors to try to bypass the law by looking for people who acted as 'employers' and were willing to sponsor their applications in exchange for money. A survey carried out in Milan showed that the average tariff illegally demanded from migrants was €3,027 and that most of the employers – either real or fake – disappeared once they received the money (Naga 2011).

In a further complication, in February 2010 the government issued a revision of the law that prevented those who had received a deportation order, either before or after the 2009 decree, from applying for regularisation. However, the initial formulation was very ambiguous. It did not clearly state that undocumented migrants who did not leave the country following a deportation order would be excluded from the regularisation. As we will see, this ambiguity left some room to appeal to the national and European courts against this revision and the offence of undocumented migration.

On these bases, in Brescia a group supported by the activists of the Associazione Diritti per Tutti and the local self-managed Social Centre Magazzino47, chose to protest in favour of the undiscriminating 'regularisation of all′ those who applied for it, including the victims of 'fraud' and those who received deportation orders.

4. Ethnography of a struggle

4.1. The making of an undocumented migrant movement

While the amnesty and the following decree were crucial in triggering frustration and anger among migrants, they are not enough to explain why the protest developed in Brescia while other places remained quiet. Despite being a stronghold of the Northern League – a party with a strong anti-migrant attitude – Brescia has a long tradition of migrant mobilisations that had built over time the organizational structures, social trust among migrant communities, and cultural capital employed during the course of this protest. The first migrant struggle dates back to autumn 1990 and summer 1991 when hundreds of homeless migrant workers, supported by migrant rights activists, squatted several buildings in the centre of town and turned them into hostels. Collaboration between foreign migrant communities and migrant rights activists continued in subsequent years, and in May 2000 several thousand migrants mobilised again and occupied the main square, Piazza Loggia, calling for regularisation. The occupation lasted several weeks and mobilised migrant rights activists and associations, particularly Radio Onda d'Urto and the self-managed Social Centre 'Magazzino 47'. As a result of the protest more than 6,000 stay permits were issued (Montagna 2000). In the early 2000s Brescia was also at the forefront of the mobilisation against the Bossi-Fini law and several national demonstrations were organised in the town. Similarly the largely self-organised migrant general strike that took place in Brescia on 1 March 2010 as part of national action was one of the biggest in the country (Montagna 2013). In short, 'Brescia has always been very active in migrant protests and many of us took part in them. In the past these struggles led to some clear outcomes, and in a relatively short period of time' (Giovanni, Diritti per tutti). Support provided by antagonist groups is not limited to protest. The self-managed Social Centre Magazzino47 regularly offers its premises for foreign communities to organise parties and community events, while Radio Onda d'Urto broadcasts information programmes for migrants and in 2009 it promoted a campaign to safeguard the right to play cricket in public parks. Similarly,

the Associazione Diritti per Tutti provides legal, welfare and practical advice to both documented and undocumented migrants.

Therefore, towards the end of September 2010, when a group of undocumented Egyptians contacted Radio Onda d'Urto to call for a demonstration they were aware that they were likely to find support to organise it: 'We did not know them personally, but we knew what they did for migrants... we knew they were migrants' friends' (Abbas, undocumented migrant activist).

On these grounds, several hundred undocumented migrants and a few activists from Associazione Diritti per Tutti took part in the march on 30 September 2010 that ended with the occupation of a small park in front of the prefettura, the provincial state office. This group was soon joined by other migrants from India, Pakistan, Morocco, Tunisia and Senegal; mainly males[ii] in their twenties and early thirties who had been living in Italy for some years and were informally employed in the construction sector, manufacturing and commercial leafleting. With the onset of the economic crisis the demand for migrant workers fell and the lack of regular stay permits only worsened the already poor and precarious working conditions. Many participants in the protest reported being paid only a few euros or, in many cases, not being paid at all or having credit with their employers, and of working irregularly. Although these were not numerically the largest ethnicities in the province, they were some of the most established nationalities. More importantly, they could rely on their own 'mobilising structures', as social movement theories define the resources that make protests possible (Melucci 1996), such as the Hindu temple and the Islamic mosque. These were important meeting places for thousands of people and therefore facilitated communication, networking and circulation of information, and provided the migrants with the necessary social capital to develop the protest:

Other numerous groups including the Albanians and the Chinese do not have such spaces and their involvement has been marginal (...) Without such spaces I do not think aggregation between different communities would have occurred. (Valerio, migrant rights activist)

When the protest started the mosque for us was an important meeting point, a place where we could discuss and circulate information. We were allowed to talk to the other attendees. This legitimised what we were doing ... our protest,

> particularly in the first month when we were still occupying the green in front of
> the prefettura. (Azhar, undocumented migrant activist)

It is during this phase of the protest that migrants began a process of subjectivation. By contesting the exclusionary logic of migration policies and determining the conditions and repertoires of their protest, they transformed into political actors and, in so doing, escaped the fate of 'bare lives' (McNevin 2013; Monforte 2015). Numerous actions including road blockades, pickets at local offices, leafleting, sit-ins outside public offices, public debates were organised:

> We were always very active, ready to act, to do something ... I don't know ...to
> occupy the street and start a traffic blockade with no notice. It was like a
> flooding river, full of energy and will to fight! (Aroona, undocumented migrant
> activist)

In the mornings and afternoons there was always a core of about 100 migrants present, while in the evenings several hundreds gathered to discuss, bring solidarity and support, and participate in the assemblies. An Italian activist describes how the migrants took the initiative and organised the activities and protests within the occupied space:

> Everyone took a bit of responsibility for whatever needed to be done. To provide
> one banal example: when banners had to be made and we put a piece of canvas
> and paintbrushes on the ground, there were always a dozen people there,
> wanting to do it. I can think of certain initiatives where banners and posters were
> written in perfect Italian and with messages and slogans that came more from
> the movement than from the migrants themselves. (Anita, Magazzino47)

Decisions were taken through two different types of general meetings: an assembly that organised the undocumented migrants according to language background and a general assembly that involved all the migrants and took place in Italian every three or four days. Working groups were formed to implement the decisions taken by these meetings and to organise the occupation and other activities; these included both foreign and Italian activists, were operative and dealt with practical and logistic issues.

Alongside the two general meetings, a narrower group constituted of migrants and Italian activists was also formed. This group was not meant to take decisions but was set up in order to discuss issues that could not be taken to the general meetings. It came about as the initiative of some migrant activists who were afraid of discussing publicly some proposals that may have had legal consequences. Within a very hostile public environment for undocumented migrants, they felt intensely vulnerable and their risk of deportation was high. An Italian activist who was also involved in this group defended the decision to keep these meetings private:

> These meetings aroused much controversy, but it was a request from the migrants themselves. When we started, we did not know each other. Sometimes we had to discuss initiatives that were riskier, sensitive, illegal. They did see Italians, the Italian 'community', but they did not trust everyone equally (...) When it came to discussing certain things they just wanted some of us and some of them, but mostly they were selective with the Italians. This was mostly a need coming from them. They were very pissed off and there was a lot of conflict. They often proposed actions that they did not trust others enough to tell them about. (Sara, Magazzino47)

Although this group was not set up to take decisions, some Italian activists questioned its legitimacy, arguing that 'everything should be discussed collectively within general assembly and there should not be a separate level of discussion' (Pietro, Magazzino47), and ironically dubbing the group the 'magic circle'.

While migrants' participation increased day by day, the occupation of the park failed to open political opportunities and aggregate new actors. Those who could have supported the protest, including the unions, local NGOs and the very influential and powerful local church remained largely indifferent. The CGIL[iii] was the only union that provided some logistical resources, which progressively withdrew, while the only unconditional support came from antagonist groups such as Associazione Diritti per Tutti[iv], Magazzino47, and Radio Onda d'Urto[v], who provided the protesters with mobilising and networking resources, without, however, participating en masse. The local authorities held a firm line by refusing to meet the protesters and negotiate, which would have implied recognition and legitimating of migrants' claims. The Northern

League, the main local government party, could therefore demonstrate that they were tough on immigration and migrants, as promised during the electoral campaign.

Although this phase failed to reach practical objectives and mobilise supporters, it was crucial for the progress of the protest, contributing to the definition of a collective framing, generating a sense of belonging and building a shared space where ethnic and personal distances were reduced and mutual trust constructed:

> Hundreds of people have passed through this place, some from the previous regularisation, others just to complain about their experience in Italy. There are continuous religious discussions, for example among Sikhs and Hindus, since this was a huge and heterogeneous group. (…) It was a real cauldron. (Sara, Magazzino47)

Several migrant and Italian activists agree that both the decision-making process and the sharing of space on a daily basis made national differences and the very idea of national community irrelevant. Relations were between individuals rather than national or religious communities. Therefore, for example, migrants' identification with their spokespersons went beyond nationality or common language: 'each of us had our own representative. Mohammed[vi] was very charismatic and become the spokesperson for many of us' (Mustafa, undocumented migrant activist). During the first month of protest, the occupied park was therefore turned into a political entity wherein migrants quitted their 'accidental differences' (Gilroy 1993) based on ethnic affiliation, political cultures and religious beliefs and replaced them with common objectives, a new sense of belonging, and a shared identity.

4.2. 'Fight hard without fear'[vii]: the mobilizing effect of the acts of citizenship

The second phase began on 30 October. In an attempt to break the deadlock, migrants had called for a public demonstration on that day which the *questura*[viii] did not authorise, on the pretext that there was already an event taking place and organised by the alpini[ix]. While a few hundred demonstrators decided to challenge the ban and carry on with their rally, a group of six migrants broke through the police cordons, reached the crane and climbed it. Meanwhile, in a further attempt to halt the protest, the police

were evicting the occupied green using bulldozers and other vehicles, showing that the authorities were in total control of the situation:

> It is good that they evicted us. If they had left us in the park we would have not had any striking initiative and the protest would have soon collapsed. We thought about occupying it another day but the eviction anticipated the action. (Pietro, Magazzino47)

The migrants themselves suggested the occupation of the crane during one of these restricted meetings as a way of attracting more attention and mobilising other constituencies:

> Before, they [the local authorities, Ed.] never talked to us. I never heard a word from them. It meant that they did not want to grant a permit to stay. After 30 days of occupation and no word from them we thought we had to do something serious. So we decided to go on the crane. (Amman, undocumented migrant activist)

The discussion then expanded and involved all the communities; several migrants volunteered to climb the crane and occupy the cabin: 'at first 12 people volunteered. But we decided that was too many and the space in the cabin was too small. We were desperate; we were ready to do anything' (Ismael, undocumented migrant activist). The crane was identified for its central position in urban traffic and for being part of the construction of the local underground: 'You interrupt production, daily life, its ordinary flows, its rhythms. This was an absolutely crucial element that made the crane so visible, more visible than other similar actions elsewhere. The occupation of the crane forced everybody to wonder what was going on' (Giovanni, Diritti per Tutti). It was what Isin and Nielsen (2008) define as an 'act of citizenship' as, on the one hand, it was unexpected and therefore created a rupture in the normal order of things, including the protest itself, which subsequently changed course. On the other hand, this action challenged the 'bare lives' view of undocumented migrants. Rather than hiding and accepting the conditions imposed by the government, the migrants who climbed the crane not only openly challenged the law, they also made themselves visible and, therefore, turned the right of circulation into a practical act.

When the six migrants climbed the crane a permanent solidarity gathering was established at the base while, in the days following, a campaign started to involve other migrants, Italian activists and grassroots organisations. The gathering was attended by several hundreds of supporters and drew the solidarity of other migrants, activists and ordinary citizens until, in the early morning on Monday 8 November, it was violently dispersed by a massive police intervention, which several times charged at the activists who were trying to recompose the gathering and started a man-hunt with migrants particularly targeted. During the eviction nine activists were arrested and several undocumented migrants were deported:

> That morning was a blow. Police everywhere, people taken away. An apocalyptic scene. They lit a fire on the crane. If climbing onto the crane had been about being heard, about visibility, that day was the defeat. (Anita, Magazzino47)

This repression had two main effects. On the one hand, under pressure from the police and community leaders, many migrants abandoned the protest, believing it to be too risky. On the other hand, solidarity from local civil society increased, while the unions and several NGOs mobilised for a positive solution to the dispute. As policing of the protest became harsher, Italian activists took on more responsibilities:

> We all agreed that the migrants should expose themselves less. They were continuously raided, stopped and searched...deported. All this left its scars and the consequence was a handover to the Italians. (Sara, Magazzino47)
> Right after the eviction and the police charges everything changed and the situation became scary, much riskier. Some of us went underground for a few days. It was too risky for them to go out and take part in the protest again. (Mohammed, undocumented migrant activist)

Although some local businesses signed a petition against the occupation of the crane, others organised a counter-petition asking the government to find a positive answer to the migrants' demands. In the meantime, the mobilisation gained a national visibility and on 11 November the most popular political television show broadcast live from the protest. Finally, on Monday 15 November the exhausted migrants agreed to

leave the crane with the assurances that they would not be deported and talks between authorities and migrants would be held. For some, the decision to evacuate was a 'defeat' because the occupation did not lead to any concrete outcome. However, all agreed that what the occupation was successful in many respects as it brought to light the the problem of the frauds and the extremely exploitative conditions of undocumented migrants. Most important, it drew in hundreds of new participants from a variety of political backgrounds: activists from the radical left, members of left wing parties, ordinary citizens who had never taken part in any protest before, and members of Christian communities who openly dissented from the official line of the local curia:

> Until they were in Via Lupi di Toscana I did not realise they were there, although I live very close, 100 metres away. I passed by without noticing. The day they climbed the crane there was a quarrel between police and demonstrators and I got scared. The first night they shouted from the crane and I could hear everything from my room. Then I started to get involved, bringing them something to eat. Their shouts kept going, did not stop, and me and my children could no longer stay at home. (Angiola, member of the local parish)

Signs of solidarity also came from centre-left political parties, some sectors of the local church and grassroots associations that urged the municipal government to mediate and find a solution; appeals were written and signed, while newspapers covered the protest and some popular television shows gave the protest airtime. Even mainstream newspapers called on state institutions to find solutions rather than fuelling tensions between migrants and Italians and exacerbating the situation for political calculations[x].

4.3. Institutional retrenchment and the 'clash of civilisations' discourse

The institutional political opportunities remained closed during the days of the occupation. The Home Office, run by a Northern League minister, said repeatedly that it would not regularise 'the clandestine'[xi] and gave its full support to the local municipal government. Migrants became the main targets of police action through intensified controls and some protest leaders were deported while others had to go underground for a while. Similarly, the local church, particularly the Ufficio migranti of the Caritas also tried to delegitimise the protest by insinuating that it was jeopardising integration and

damaging the migrants' cause (my interview with the head of Caritas - Ufficio Migranti).

During this second phase, retrenchment also took place at a cultural level, with local authorities reiterating the 'clash of civilisations' through language and symbols. This happened in many ways: bulldozers may not have been physically needed during the eviction of the green, but they symbolised the will to eradicate the 'issue' by any necessary means:

> The symbology of bulldozers has been used several times. The local authorities, particularly the Northern League with their anti-migrant stance, promised to get rid of migrants by any means, making this the core of their electoral consensus. After a month of protest they needed to show that they were in control of the situation, they needed to exhibit their strength and authority. (Giovanni, Diritti per Tutti)

The bulldozers were part of the ideological and symbolic weaponry also signifying the place, its territory and its positive work ethic in an area where manual labour is a virtue and the construction industry plays a huge economic and occupational role.

Similarly, the 30 October celebrations of the alpini, a powerful symbol of national identity, were used to develop a nationalist narrative based on a marked opposition between 'us' and 'them' and an incompatibility between Italians and foreigners:

> My theory is that the incompatibility was not physical but symbolic. On the one hand, there was the gathering of the alpini which, by the way, took place after a month of marches by "illegals" who were claiming stay permits...and then the gathering of the Alpines, which is a bit like polenta e osei or the spiedo[xii], the dialect, the crucifix: a vehicle of local identity, of Brescia and its natives. I think the mayor wanted an opposition and to exclude those who do not belong. It is a usual narrative for this mayor. (Giovanni, Diritti per Tutti)

In public statements and briefings with the press, protesters and their supporters were depicted as strangers who were interrupting the usual economic flow (*Giornale di Brescia*, November 3, 2010); wasting public money since the interruption of

construction was causing losses of €25,000 a day (*Bresciaoggi*, November 9, 2010); disrupting local businesses (*Bresciaoggi*, November 11, 2010); 'putting at risk the work done over the years to integrate migrants' (*Bresciaoggi*, November 11, 2010) and – as the main church representative said – 'causing a racist backlash' (*Bresciaoggi*, November 14, 2010).

The harsh policing of the protest also reinforced the symbolic divide between locals and 'aliens'. A sort of military sanitary cordon was built around the crane, with police controlling the area 24 hours a day. Students from the local campus, workers, academics, commuters, local residents and shopkeepers had their identity cards checked in order to cross the police lines. This prevented people from going to local bars and shops and increased businesses' anger at protesters while reinforcing the idea that this was a matter of law and order rather than a legitimate claim for citizenship rights.

5. Changes in the law and processes of subjectivation

With the evacuation of the crane on 15 November the protest entered in a new less confrontational phase until two rulings broke the deadlock. First, in April 2011 the European Court of Justice in its judgement C-61/11 PPU ruled that undocumented migration cannot be treated as a criminal offence, and that the Italian law which punishes migrants who remain in Italy after being ordered to depart is prohibited by an EU directive which establishes the procedure concerning the return by member states of a foreign national to his country of origin. The ruling was made as a result of an appeal presented in 2010 by Mr El Dridi, a third-country national who was sentenced to a year in prison by the Trento District Court, under a provision of an Italian Legislative Decree, for not had not having complied with a removal order issued against him in 2004. This resulted in a second decision taken by the Consiglio di Stato[xiii] in May 2011 that recognised the right of migrant workers to apply for regularisation even if served with a deportation order. As a consequence of these two rulings, on 23 June 2011 the Home Office had to issue a decree which stated that foreign nationals who received a double decree of deportation could be regularised if an appeal is presented by their sponsors. For several thousand migrants, this opened the door to the stay permit, although for those who had been defrauded, and therefore could not prove that they had applied for the regularisation, the door remained locked. This was a partial win and the state took its revenge on those who did take part in the protest: whereas in most towns,

undocumented migrants received their papers within a few weeks, in Brescia they were made to wait for several months.

Some studies about undocumented migrants' activism have demonstrated the role that protest, advocacy, and organising have had in shaping legislation (Coutin 2003). With regard to this protest, it is unclear whether it had any impact on decision-making processes or influenced the European Court ruling and the subsequent decisions of the Consiglio di Stato. While those who did not sympathise with the protest argue that it was irrelevant in the process that brought about a positive outcome for migrants, those who participated in the protest take the opposite view: 'there is a link between our struggle and the court's decisions. Our struggle made the problem visible, not only in Italy but also abroad, whereas before it was invisible' (Mustafa, undocumented migrant activist). It certainly brought the issue of migrants' exploitation and rights to public attention and activated political processes by mobilising a wide activist solidarity as well as a countermobilisation and cultural retrenchment by government parties.

It was perhaps at the micro level of social relations and daily practices that the protest was most effective activating processes of the subjectivation (Deleuze 1988) of the undocumented that exceed the legal notion of citizenship and enact rights (Squire 2015). Before the protest started, being undocumented shaped all aspects of the migrants' lives. Their living conditions were characterised by extreme vulnerability and forced invisibility. The threat of being caught and deported was constant and led them to live in a sort of 'underground', in the sense of a social reality rather than a separate place (Coutin 2005). In this context, the delays in regularisation and the negative outcomes of the amnesty increased frustration and anger:

> Being illegal means being afraid all the time. When you go to work; when you go out. I never had freedom. I tried to have fun, to joke with friends to chase away the stress. But I've always been afraid of being hunted and returned to Morocco and having to start from scratch. It would be a failure. (Mohammed, undocumented migrant activist)
>
> If I think of my fear before the struggle and what I feared whenever I had to go to work outside Brescia, I was always scared of passport controls outside the factory. It [the protest, Ed.] has been liberating...all the time in this condition of fear or hiding. Many like me say: I stay at home and watch the TV. (Javi, undocumented migrant activist)

An effect of fear, a sense of insecurity. You cannot live in this situation. You can be deported at any time. You feel in prison because you are not allowed to go where you want. Even if a person treats you without respect you cannot do anything because you're underground. (Makam, undocumented migrant activist)

Therefore, one of the outcomes of the protest has been to turn fragmented, largely individualised and subaltern individuals into a unitary actor able to confront public officers and negotiate rights even in daily life. Again, although the migrants who took part in the protest were still undocumented and therefore outside traditional citizenship status, by confronting the state and claiming the right to visibility and circulation they were enacting themselves as citizens (Andrijasevic, C Aradau, J Huysmans, V Squire 2012):

Once [after the protest had ended] there was a passport check and the local police were checking the papers of someone next to the office [the Associazione Diritti per Tutti]. All the guys [the undocumented migrants who took part in the struggle] were there. Well, they surrounded the police officers who were forced to leave. Before the struggle, it would have been the opposite, the migrants would have run away. (Sara, Magazzino47)

The processes of subjectivation activated by the protest are also reflected in the types of relationship migrants established with the *questura* and local institutions and how this changed during the course of the protest. While in other cycles of struggle undocumented migrants relied more on migrant right activists, in the last months of this protest migrants assumed an increasingly autonomous role. On the one hand, a board including representatives of institutions and local authorities, migrant rights associations and undocumented migrants was set up to discuss the issues of regularisation. The migrants had their own spokesperson and this legitimised their role. On the other hand, at a more informal level migrants and the *questura* began a direct communication which often left out the migrant rights activists:

Compared with the struggle in 2000, when they were more dependent on Italians and part of the communication was delegated to Italians, in this struggle they tended to negotiate directly with the police. There was no delegation and in the

last few months we were left out. But they [the migrants, Ed.] just took the freedom to negotiate...it is not that they came to ask us what to do. (Sara, Magazzino47)

With the end of the protest and the release of residence permits, many migrant activists left. However, for others, the process of subjectivation continued over the following years and several joined associations including Associazione Diritti per Tutti and the Cross-point, founded from a split within the solidarity movement campaigning for migrant rights. In 2012 a new amnesty was issued by the government and several thousand migrants applied for it. In Brescia, rejection of 70% of the applications led to a new campaign by Associazione Diritti per Tutti in spring 2015that involved former and new migrant activists. The mobilisation ended with a government promise to revise the decisions.

In 2013, Associazione Diritti per Tutti and other local associations began a campaign against the eviction of tenants unable to pay rent, and the repossession of properties whose owners could not keep up their mortgage payments as a result of downturns in their economic circumstances. As part of the campaign, Associazione Diritti per Tutti has occupied several empty buildings and turned them into accommodation for homeless foreigners and Italian citizens and blocked 405 evictions between August 2015 and July 2016. This campaign also has the participation of veteran and new migrant activists.

6. Conclusion

This article has illustrated the dynamics of a cycle of migrant protest and how the collaboration between undocumented migrants and migrant activists changed during its course. During the protest, activists were accused of manipulating migrants and migrants were accused of being controlled by activists. Analysis of the different phases of the protest shows that the relationship between migrants and their advocates changed over time and did not follow a linear pattern in which activists were in a dominant position and migrants in a subordinate one. Although the role of pre-existing organizational structures and the social capital of migrant rights activists were crucial for the progress of the protest, the agenda of the undocumented migrants was rooted in their need to emerge from the underground after spending years as undocumented migrants. The practical aspirations of migrants to enjoy social rights and a decent life was reflected in the claim for general regularization of all who applied for it –

regardless of whether such requests were rejected because of fraud or deportation orders. Migrant claims such as 'equal rights for all', 'we are all on the crane', 'amnesty now', 'we are here to stay' and the cosmopolitan 'cauldron' generated during the protest aim to generalise rights and challenge the stratifying and exclusionary character of migration regimes in relation to mobility and the proliferation of subjects' positions regarding their right to move across borders (Andrijasevic 2009; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Monforte 2015).

Similarly, changes in the protest repertoires were not determined by Italian activists acting according to their own agendas, but were produced by the relational dynamics between protesters and authorities. The protest began peacefully with the occupation of a small park and the use of traditional repertoires. It was only when they realised that this protest had gone completely unheard that the repertoires radicalised and the occupation of the crane – initially intended to be symbolic and last few hours – becomes the migrants' chosen protest tactic.

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i

The Security Package passed by the third Berlusconi government in 2009, while not specifically directed at immigration, made irregular immigration a criminal rather than administrative offence (Merlino 2009).

ii

The presence of female migrants has been marginal and those few who actively took

part were mainly care workers from Eastern Europe.

iii

The CGIL is the biggest Italian union federation.

iv

The association Diritti per Tutti is an NGO based in Brescia and run by national and

foreign rights activists. They provide advisory services to documented and undocumented

migrants rand promote migrant rights campaigns.

v

antagonistic left.

vi

M. is a migrant who arrived in Italy from Egypt in 2006 and was a key figure in the

protest. He was deported during the second phase of this mobilization.

vii

'Fight hard without fear' (Lotta dura senza paura) was a slogan on a banner

exposed from the crane during the occupation.

viii

The *Questura* is the territorial police headquarter that is responsible for law

enforcement at a province level.

ix

Alpini (Alpines) are the elite mountain soldiers of the Italian Army and a powerful

symbol of national identity.

x

See Mucchetti M., 'Da quattordici giorni sulla gru, è tempo di decidere', Corriere della

Sera, 10 November 2010.

xi

A derogative word usually used by the Northern League and right wing media to say

undocumented

xii

These are traditional dishes from the Pianura Padana which are often used emphatically

as symbols of local identity. They are therefore counterposed to couscous, which is identified as

migrants' food regardless of their country of origin.

xiii

The Consiglio di Stato is a body that evaluates the constitutionality of Italian laws.

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