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# Theories of the Political Process, Political Opportunities Structure and Local Mobilizations. The Case of Italy

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# Theories of the Political Process, Political Opportunities Structure and Local Mobilizations. The Case of Italy

by Loris Caruso

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There has been a strong bi-partisan consensus over large-scale infrastructure works in Italy over the last twenty years. The main left and right-wing parties have almost always been in favor of such projects [Piazza 2011; Caruso 2010; della Porta and Piazza 2008]. Despite this, the research project *Nimbyforum*<sup>1</sup> estimates that 331 infrastructure projects were contested in Italy in 2011. Local mobilizations against infrastructures perceived as harmful to population and territory are, in Italy, one of the forms of collective action, which in recent years have grown more in terms of diffusion and mobilization ability. In the most significant cases they have been able to have a concrete effect on decision-making, contributing towards the suspension or annulment of disputed works and to introduce mechanisms of negotiation between proponents and local communities [Podestà and Vitale 2011]. The most deep-rooted and long-lasting local mobilizations have also exerted a considerable influence on the national political debate, on the relationships within the governing coalitions and the left-wing parties. The contrast to party system and the tension between representation and participation [Vitale 2007] is a central element of collective identity in these protests. They have also built innovative experiences in local politics, which have been directly involved in electoral competitions.

For all these reasons, local mobilizations are an interesting case to analyze the recent evolution of the relationship between collective protest and political systems,

<sup>1</sup> See [www.nimbyforum.it](http://www.nimbyforum.it).

and to «test» the most widely used apparatus in the study of this relationship: the political process theories. These theories single out a decisive causal factor for the emergence of social movements within the political opportunity structure (POS) and the institutional order of a determined system. According to the POS model, the degree of openness of a political system to the claims of movements, the level of compactness and stability of the élites, the presence of parties allied to movements and other institutional factors are variables that help or hinder collective action in a decisive way. This article will try to answer these questions: in Italy, how is the relationship between local mobilization and political system evolving? Is the POS model still an adequate paradigm to single out the mobilization factors and the effectiveness of movements?

This theme borders on a broader matter. The POS thesis was formulated in a historic moment – the 1980s – in which the change processes that affect political parties and the state had not yet arrived at determining the current decisive changes. The crisis of mass party, the weakening of parties as intermediaries between social demands and institutional responses and as the main place of elaboration of political cultures and identities, the redefinition of classic parameters of statehood such as territoriality, élites and centralization in relation to other levels of governance, transnational networks and flux [Le Galès 2014; Brenner 2004], necessitate a re-discussion of the relationship between popular protest and institutional politics.

In the following section, I will illustrate the main elements of the POS model and the criticisms that have been addressed to it. I will subsequently confront the POS model with a major Italian local mobilization of recent years, the protest in Vicenza against the realization of the *Dal Molin* military base, which constitutes the empirical case of the article. This case will be analyzed by relating the emergence and expansion of protest with the POS analytical dimensions. Thirdly, the Vicenza case will be compared with other major Italian local mobilizations of recent years. In the Conclusion, I will summarize the evidences which have emerged in the empirical analysis, responding to the question about the present effectiveness of the POS model, and relating this subject with more general issues concerning the relationship between state, political parties and social movements.

## **1. Theories of the Political Process, Political Opportunity Structure and their Critics**

The concept of political opportunity structure was first employed by Eisinger [1973], who formulated it to analyze the causes of the political effectiveness of protest.

The problem of movement effectiveness also lay at the centre of subsequent elaborations of political opportunity theory [McAdam 1982, Tarrow 1994], where the central object was the theme of the opening and vulnerability of political systems to mobilizations. In this perspective, the most favourable conditions for the claims of movements are determined in the presence of open political systems, unstable relationships between parties and unstable electoral results, conflicts within élites and systems able to develop effective public policies. According to Tilly and Tarrow [2006], “contentious politics” assumes the form of a social movement only in the presence of six indicators: a plurality of independent political centres; a degree of opening of the political systems to the entry of new actors; unstable alliances; the availability of influential allies to support claims originating outside the system; a level of repression that is not too high; decisive changes provoked by earlier cycles of mobilization. Kitschelt [1986] has traced a typology of the relationships among State, movements and public policies based on the open/closed (related to the ability to transpose political requests) and weak/strong (referring to a state’s ability to lead public policies) dichotomies. Open-strong and open-weak political models tend to adopt assimilative strategies towards movements, paying careful attention to protest and seeking to build public policies that react to the demands of movements. Closed-strong systems, on the contrary, “model” social movements that are compelled to force the political limits of the system by exerting structural pressure and adopting radical attitudes and strategies against parliamentary institutions and the party system.

The political opportunity structure theory has been criticized from several points of view. Goodwin and Jasper [1999] single out three major problems within it. First, its excessive emphasis on structural factors – such as political opportunities – can lead to underestimating mobilization factors that are more contingent and dependent on the active choices of movement actors. Second, the POS model includes too many variables and dynamics, which makes it a stretched category. Goodwin and Jasper also underline its non-dialectic nature: power and institutions are seen as merely negative constraints, which can favor protest only through their weakening, and not as processes which also produce actions, ideas and symbols that movements can appropriate. According to Gamson and Meyer [1992], the POS theory does not specify in which ways the political variables can be empirically translated into actual opportunities. Kriesi [1996] argues that factors such as the presence of allies among the élites and access to political authorities – the two most frequently used casual factors in empirical research – can have ambivalent effects on movements: they may also reduce their autonomy and limit their mobilizing ability. According to Shriver and Adams [2013], the transition from a closed structure to a more open one may

result in tearing conflicts within movements about the ways in which to take advantage of the new opportunities.

According to Goldstone [2003; 2004] the POS model lacks an analysis of the way in which political opportunities interact with each other and of the effects that their different combinations can have on movements. He also highlights that empirical research often shows evidence that contradict the POS model. Factors generally considered unfavorable to movements, such as state repression, lead in several cases to an increase in mobilization. In many cases the presence of favorable political opportunities is an irrelevant factor in determining both the emergence and the success of movements. According to Goldstone, the concept of relational field is more useful than the POS model. In order to understand movements it is necessary to define the action field within which a conflict unfolds. It consists of state actors, actors holding defined collective interests (movements and counter-movements) and their mutual relations, threats and opportunities perceived by specific social groups, the political cohesion between a movement and its leadership, the reaction of the non-mobilized constituency to the movement actions.

The relationship between movements and the state does not only concern the structure of political opportunities. The state also intervenes in the nature of collective action through the formation of *political spaces*. Tilly [1986] has shown that social movements originated with the affirmation of nation states. Conflicts and protest campaigns moved beyond the local dimension to reach true politicization only after 1848. This move away from the local dimension was to connect to the political centralization of power, to the rising ability of the central authorities to control the periphery, and to the expansion of capitalistic power. These processes made the extension of collective action to the national level necessary in order for attempts to check the State and the means of production to have any chance at effectiveness. If in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth century conflicts were still predominantly local and communitarian in nature, based on a common affiliation to the land, in the Nineteenth and the Twentieth century the common relationship among individuals was organized around the state and capital. Tilly [1986; 2004], Goldstone [2004] and Johnston [2012] bring back the development and diffusion of social movements in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries also to the consolidation of democratic systems. With the institutionalization of social conflicts, the growth of citizenship rights and the development of party systems, movements become an essential element of normal politics and the boundary between institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics becomes fuzzy and permeable. After analyzing the empirical cases, in the Conclusion I will discuss the present relevance of the continuity that Goldstone establishes between movements and normal politics, and the present effectiveness of

the historical conditions that, according to Tilly, Goldstone and Johnston, determine a virtuous relationship between movements and democratization.

## 2. The No Dal Molin Case

The empirical case I will analyze in depth is the protest against the new American military base “*Dal Molin*” in Vicenza. Fieldwork was carried out between January and April 2009. In this period participant observation was carried out at assemblies, direct actions and demonstrations. I carried out 11 semi-structured interviews with activists from the three major social movement organizations involved: Permanent presidium (5 interviews), Coordination of the committees (4), Families for Peace (2). The interviews have been conducted both with activists with previous experience of political participation and with activists lacking previous experience and definite political landmarks. I have fulfilled a protest event analysis using the local press reports between May 2006 and July 2009, in order to have a quantitative outline of the evolution of protest and a classification of its repertoires. Finally, I studied the content of the different websites of the protesters up to 2011.

### 2.1. *The Constitution of the Collective Actor*

The project of the new military base in Vicenza, which is currently going to be completed, has been required by the Department of Defense of the United States to gather the 173 Airborne Brigade of U.S. Army. It will be the most important logistic base for the U.S. Army in Europe. News about the possible construction of a new military base in the area of the *Dal Molin* civil airport in Vicenza became public in May 2006, when the project was introduced in the town council by the centre-right majority. The town council was widely attended and moments of tension ensued: a banner reading “to make war you steal the land from us” was unfurled. The participating citizens were mobilized by two actors: the Coordination of city committees and the Observatory against military servitude. The Coordination gathers six district committees active on matters concerning quality of life. To a large extent, the organisation is animated by people with backgrounds in catholic activism and trade unions. The Observatory is constituted by social centres from Vicenza and Padua, the associ-

ation Emergency, the main Italian trade union *Cgil*, the *Verdi*<sup>2</sup> and *Arci*.<sup>3</sup> Its initiative is tied particularly to the social centres and their mobilization repertoires.

Coordination and Observatory differ in the type of framing and in repertoires. The Observatory insists on a pacifist frame. It denounces the fact that Vicenza is becoming a “militarized city” where different US and EU strategic structures are present. It organizes collective mobilization primarily through direct actions with a strong media impact, that may result in physical confrontation with the police. The Coordination frames have a more pragmatic nature, linked to the technical and legal aspects of the contested work. The relationship between these two organizations has been partially conflicting until the end of the protest. However, the common interest to organize an effective action have led to a reciprocal approach in relation both to frames and repertoires. The first have converged on procedural injustice issues, that is on the denunciation of the lack of transparency and democratic in the decision-making process, and on the environmental and military risks the work might entail. As regards repertoires, over time the Coordination has become more available for direct action and mobilization practices typical of the antagonist left.

The Coordination of committees began collecting signatures soon after the town council meeting in May 2006. The Coordination’s second initiative involved *Codacons*, one of the main Italian consumers’ associations, in a first appeal to the Regional administrative Court (TAR) against the planned new base. The Coordination and the Observatory organized the first demonstration against the base in which hundreds people participated jointly in July 2006, and in August they organized a torchlight walk with 500 participants. The composition of these mobilizations represents a first widening of the field of organizations joining the protest. Besides the Coordination and the Observatory, radical left parties also participated, along with *Legambiente* (the main Italian environmental association), *Cgil* and the rank and file unions.<sup>4</sup> During those months a decisive phenomenon was taking shape: the matter of the new base became highly visible in the city, and local newspapers devoted ample space to the issue. The intensification and deepening of the debate brought those against the planned base to define their reasons:

We are not only those who are called to vote, that pay taxes, that work and help develop this city, we are also and above all citizens that live their city, that care about it beyond their backyard and, if we have any doubts, we ask for explanations.

<sup>2</sup> The Italian Green Party.

<sup>3</sup> The name *Arci* stands for “Italian recreational and cultural association.” *Arci* is traditionally linked to the main Italian party of the left.

<sup>4</sup> The so called “base unions,” in Italy are much smaller and more radical than the three major unions: *Cgil*, *Cisl* and *Uil*.

Because this is the point: to understand and to know. Because the best case scenario in the *Dal Molin* case is to be able not to be afraid of the terrorists and wars that are punishing our times; it is to be able to maintain green spaces that are becoming scarce; it is to avoid seeing the quality of life in our city deteriorate further.<sup>5</sup>

The protesters organized a sit-in in the area of the *Dal Molin* airport in September. To give visibility to the sit-in and build a symbolic connection between the protest and “the city of art,” the demonstration was held in the area where the goldsmith’s fair *Orogemma* was taking place:

Let’s hold a demonstration inside the Fair to confirm our “Yes” to the Vicenza that produces art, starting from the goldsmith, and “No” to the Vicenza that is becoming no more than a military garrison.<sup>6</sup>

New segments of local society approached the protest. In September, some students organized a strike and a march against the new base, setting in motion involvement from the city’s schools in the political struggle that would deepen later. Members of the local Rugby association decided to march in the central square of the city against the new base, as it would affect their pitches. An important section of the Catholic world in Vicenza assumed an official position. The parishes adhering to the *Giustizia e Pace* (*Peace and Justice*) group signed a document in which they explained their oppositions to the base:

As inhabitants of Vicenza we confirm our wish to be directly involved in the projects that concern us, not to see the role of the active citizen that has always been ours denaturalized. For too long, we have had the sensation that there is no linear and harmonious project for our city. We also keep asking ourselves what our city is becoming: after the Ederle Camp, after the European Police, now the construction of a second great Camp is planned that will certainly make Vicenza the most militarized city in all Italy and probably all Europe.

In September the protesters request a civic referendum on the new base. A vast front of actors supported this. The hypothesis of the referendum favoured the compacting of the protest campaign around a common initiative.

Let us see how the political opportunities structure was shaped in this first phase of expansion of the protest. The centre-right city government fully supported the new base, while in the opposition, the radical left parties<sup>7</sup> participated in protest

<sup>5</sup> Letter by the “Residents of Via S. Antonino” committee to the main city newspaper, *Il Giornale di Vicenza* (*The Vicenza Newspaper*) [30 July 2006].

<sup>6</sup> Declaration of the Coordination of committees and the Observatory against military servitude [*Il Giornale di Vicenza*, September 12, 2006].

<sup>7</sup> In Italy, the field of the radical left was in that period composed of three parties: two communist



from the first demonstrations of 2006, and the moderate component of the centre-left coalition, that one year later would form the Democratic Party (merging the *Ds* and *Margherita*), criticised the project and the decision-making processes, but were very careful to assume public positions and did not participate in protest events. Almost all parties at the national level were in favor of the base (with the exception of the radical left). The political opportunity structure therefore appears to have been unfavourable for the emergence of protest.

A more decisive mobilization factor in this phase was the polarization of the conflict field. With the spread of the No front, the counter-movement of the Yes front also came into being.<sup>8</sup> A committee supporting the base was created during 2006 on the initiative of the centre-right parties. All the employers' associations in Vicenza officially supported the Yes front: *Confindustria*, *Confcommercio*, *Confartigianato* and *Confagricoltura*. Considering Galdstone's concept of relational field, the growth of a polarizing contrast between the Yes front and the No front increases the centrality and visibility of the issue in local society, playing a crucial role in the growth of protest. In the last months of 2006 and the first months of 2007, the civic institutions were increasingly marked by political contraposition about the base. At the district councils the debates on *Dal Molin* were attended by dozens of people mobilized on both sides. Between the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007 the *Dal Molin* issue began to take on a central position in national politics. The government urged the Vicenza administration to take an official and definitive decision, and the issue began creating contrasts within the national centre-left coalition. It was in this context that the first noteworthy expansion in the size of the protest occurred. In the town council in October the governing coalition put to vote a document favourable to the planned base. The ensuing debate in the council room was long and strongly hostile. Outside the council room, the largest mobilization of the No campaign up to that point was raging. The *No-Dal Molin* campaign supporters had occupied the central square of the city, improvising marches. For the first time, protests against the base showed a wider social composition that significantly transcended the "usual" participation by members of specific organizations. The feeling that the base was nearing a more operational phase accelerated the mobilization mechanisms, communicating a feeling of urgency and necessity to the population. One of the results of this mechanism was the decision – taken by the elements closest to the social centres and the Observatory, that is the more radical wing of the protesters – to create a "Perma-

parties (*Rifondazione Comunista* and *Partito dei Comunisti Italiani*), and the *Verdi*. Together they garnered about 10% of votes at the national level and about 5% at the local level.

<sup>8</sup> <http://sialdalmolin.megablog.it>.

nent assembly,” that is a place of discussion and decisions holding all the components of the mobilization in permanent communication. From the “Permanent assembly” stemmed the “Permanent presidium,” that is the physical “centre” of the assembly, which turned out to be of great importance in the conflict. From that moment on the Assembly became the epicentre and cultural elaboration of the protest by virtue of the fact that the situation that had just occurred had underlined the urgency of the mobilization.

The second consequence of the town council vote was that institutional initiative was now the exclusive responsibility of the national government. The fact that “the city decided” allowed the government to come to a final decision. This led to an important controversy within the national government coalition led by Romano Prodi and made up of the *Ds*, *Margherita*, the three parties of the radical left, some minor centrist parties and the *Idv*.<sup>9</sup> The radical left set the *Dal Molin* issue as decisive for the future of the Prodi cabinet. Some exponents of *Ds* and *Margherita* also assumed a critical position on the behaviour of the government. Full involvement at the national level increased the centrality and the visibility of the conflict, constituting a further factor for mobilization. For all these reasons, the definitive closing of the “political opportunity structure” at the local level led to a qualitative and quantitative leap in the size of the protest.

## 2.2. *The Political Dynamics of the Conflict*

In this phase some phenomena typical of a protest’s “moment of madness” [Piven and Cloward 1979] occurred. The protest reached its maximum capacity in early 2007: new actors entered the protest; actors already mobilized redirected their affiliations from a specific organization to the protest in general; the action frontiers widened, and the boundaries between legality and illegality were crossed. The distances between the different areas of the protest shrank and new connections and new forms of identification were created.

New actors entered the protest, by virtue of the mobilization mechanisms I have sought to underline thus far:

First of all, the decision. Our parents never signed a bill of exchange mortgaging the lives of their own children and nephews, this gave me the shivers, in the end they can do it, but they will do it by force, they will not mortgage our lives but our

<sup>9</sup> *Idv* was founded and is still led by the ex magistrate Antonio Di Pietro. Its political message is constructed around the relationship between politics and justice, corruption and the freedom of information.

nephews', how can they do that? What I feel is that the institutions have actually raped our city. But it is difficult to have a public meeting with the institutions about the content. (M., Famiglie per la pace).<sup>10</sup>

These perceptions and representations stimulated widespread mobilization. Perceiving institutional behaviour as illegitimate modifies the representations of the boundaries of legality: if the institutional decision is represented as illegitimate, it is easier to consider actions that are not strictly within the limits of legality justifiable.

In this phase, the Permanent assembly and the committees planned their actions in three directions. First, the request for the referendum is registered at the Court of Appeal. The referendum became the centre of political debate both in Vicenza and within the national government coalition. The second level of action was institutional. The protest sought to get involved in the institutional debates in the provincial municipalities, with the aim of multiplying the number of motions against the base in the town councils. Third, the first national march against *Dal Molin* was organized for the month of December, with dozens of Italian organizations as well as some European delegations signing up immediately. Important here, in relation to our research questions, were the political dynamics established when the demonstration was announced. A great swathe of the political and trade-unionist left joined the demonstration: the three radical left parties and *Cgil*. Nevertheless, an atmosphere of mutual distrust now began to grow between the Permanent assembly and the political and trade-unionist left. The birth of the Permanent assembly marked a wish for autonomy from the institutional actors supporting the protest. The leader of *Cub* (one of the main rank and file unions) in Vicenza, for example, affirmed that:

Party logic stays outside the Permanent assembly. We have already learned that the proxy that the power we delegate to our representatives is often used badly, if not betrayed.<sup>11</sup>

Party symbols and slogans, along with political messages that could be linked to ideological positions, and in particular position that could be charged with being "anti-American" by adversaries, were excluded from the front line. The first national demonstration of the No campaign was attended by almost 15,000 people. The committee speaker launched a new appeal, meaningful for the way it aims to represent the political nature of the protest:

<sup>10</sup> *Famiglie per la pace* (*Families for peace*) is a Catholic organization that supports the protest against *Dal Molin*.

<sup>11</sup> *Il Giornale di Vicenza*, November 11, 2006.

All the citizens of Vicenza who consider themselves against the project to build a new military installation should display this white flag (the *No-Dal Molin* flag) in their windows: it doesn't show any party symbol, it doesn't represent an ideological connotation, it is just a sign against the project.

With the widening of participation, the transversal nature of the protest and the wish to appear as a united community without internal ideological divisions grew. The protest represented itself as an action by "ordinary people."

In January 2007, Prime Minister Prodi affirmed that the government would not oppose the new base, defining the situation a simple "urban problem." This moment represents the definitive qualitative and quantitative development of the protest, an event able to pull together the energy accumulated in collective action and the dynamics that constituted the field of conflict. The way the government communicated its decision resonated with the main mobilization mechanisms previously described: the perception of an imposed decision made in the absence of contrary arguments, the absence of city involvement, the non-consideration of the threats and risks perceived by the population. This final closure of the "political opportunities" that the decision implied did not entail a crisis in the protest, but what Gaxie [1977] defines a super-generating effect. The demonstration of institutional closeness determines the explosion of the protest. Disenchantment with allied parties becomes definitive among activists:

That year I had happened to meet some leftist politicians in Rome. And it was a great disappointment. I remember that we asked them to do something, to raise a very serious matter. They answered me that the government could not fall. But the government would fall however, and with the result that they would be without electors. Sure, the government will not last long, but make it fall over something that everybody can understand, for a good cause. (C., Permanent presidium).

On the same day a march was called, gathering around five thousand people in the centre of Vicenza. This demonstration marked a dividing line among two areas of the protest – the Permanent assembly on one side, the parties and *Cgil* on the other –, that would no longer be crossed. Demonstrators burned some facsimile voting papers in front of the city council. The radical left parties were now completely identified with the government, and asked not to display their symbols during protests. One of the most representative figures of the social centres asked the members to leave these political parties, or their presence at protests would no longer be welcome. A marquee was erected in front of the *Dal Molin* airport that then became the Permanent presidium against the new base. The first initiative at the Presidium was to collect voting papers, this time real ones, as a sign of the refusal of political representation. A second main consequence of Prodi's declaration concerns the division within the parties of the centre-left coalition and, in particular, between the local and the national level

of those parties. The position taken by the local federation of *Margherita* was very polemical towards the government: 15 members of its provincial executive committee resigned from their roles: over the next few days, 84 members of the *Ds* also resigned; all the members of the *Rifondazione comunista* provincial executive committee did the same, and the regional leader of the party began a hunger strike; 120 centre-left parliamentarians formed a committee supporting the protest. The protest thus influenced “political opportunities” (the parties more sensitive to the protest) more than the political opportunity structure influenced the protest. Two important national catholic organizations (*Lilliput* and *Beati costruttori di pace*) promoted a collective fast. The same organizations distributed 50,000 leaflets outside the churches of the city after services. The closing of POS therefore also determines a further widening of the social coalition sustaining the protest.

The government now began to show weakness. In February 2007 the Senate approved a motion proposed by *Lega Nord*,<sup>12</sup> in which the government approved the new base. The government thus accepted an initiative of the opposition approving the work of the government itself. This fact brought the theme of *Dal Molin* into the limelight. The destiny of the new base and the Prodi Cabinet seemed more and more linked. At the centre of the political and journalistic debate was the possible participation of members of the government or leaders of the left parties in another march against the base on February 17. A political and symbolic conflict was being played out around the *Dal Molin* conflict regarding the permeability of institutions to demands from social movements. The radical left was accused of exploiting the mobilization to influence the government. On the other side, the most radical components of the protest announced that the presence of these parties at the march was not welcome, accusing them of submitting to the moderate positions of the centre-left coalition. This was a double and opposite pressure that would be repeated in other cases for these parties, and whose general effects are likely not extraneous to the serious failure they suffered in the 2008 elections.<sup>13</sup>

This general climate contributed to determine the dimensions of the biggest event organized in the protest against *Dal Molin*. The demonstration was attended by 150,000 people. The organization of the march was been similar to the previous December event: first families, mothers and their children, the “common citizens,”

<sup>12</sup> A northern Italian party on the right of the political spectrum.

<sup>13</sup> The three parties of the radical left participated in the national elections of 2008 in a single list (*Sinistra Arcobaleno*). They achieved just 3%, a percentage that did not allow their entry to the new Parliament. In the previous political elections of 2006, where they competed separately, *Rifondazione Comunista* had obtained 5.8%, the *Partito dei Comunisti italiani* 2.3%, the *Verdi* 2.1%: overall 10.4% of the votes. Therefore, in the two years in which they participated in the national government, they lost 70% of their votes.

the most organized components of the protest in the middle, and the political and trade union representatives at the end. If the February 2007 demonstration was the greatest success the protest had reached so far, its organization shows the deterioration of internal relations that would make it hard to maintain citizen involvement. As mentioned before, the most organized elements of the Permanent presidium (the social centres) criticized the participation of party members in the march, and they argued with *Cgil* about the organizational choices adopted for the event. The political parties and *Cgil* therefore organized an alternative group that followed at the end of the march. Some Presidium activists defined the dialectics established on the occasion in this way:

From one moment to the next Cgil no longer had a position about the base. February 17 was a symbolic date, the day of the great march. There was a battle because the Cgil representatives wanted to lead the march. You can only reason with them if you give them the visibility they want. We wanted the people's visibility instead. (C., Permanent presidium).

The demonstration contributed to some important effects on the political plan. The government decided to submit its choices on foreign policy to a vote in the Senate. Two senators of the radical left defected, and the government failed to obtain a majority, sparking a government crisis. Prodi wanted the new majority agreement to be based on adhesion to twelve programmatic points. Among these was the approval of the foreign policy line rejected by the Senate, which also approved the base in Vicenza and a heavy centralization of government communication. The most immediate consequence that this change had on the protest was its closure to every political space on the left: the parties closest to the “No” had signed an agreement committing themselves to approve every government foreign policy action and to not make public declarations in support of the protest. From this moment on, the *Dal Molin* case disappeared from the political chronicles and the national media, while the government created the conditions to make the protest totally irrelevant in political dynamics. The conditions in which the activists operated from this moment on became more difficult, and the protest met with problems of visibility. I will now consider how those new conditions were faced.

### 2.3. *Permanent Mobilization and Crisis*

2007 was the year of maximum mobilization against the base.<sup>14</sup> After the government dealt with its crisis, the protesters sought to concentrate their efforts on physically stopping the construction work for the new base. Second, the activists had to face the problem of their visibility at a moment when every opportunity structure was almost completely closed. In 2007 the “No” campaign carried out 42 protest actions at an average of almost one a week, justifying the label of *permanent mobilization*. The crucial turning point of the conflict was this resorting to direct actions: blocking traffic, occupations, raids of the *Dal Molin* area, the occupation of railway platforms. The two main occupations carried out in 2007 saw strong participation despite their high degree of radicalism. In April 2007 around 800 people occupied the *Basilica Palladiana*, one of the main public buildings in Vicenza. The indirect support for the initiative is an index of consent even more so than the direct participation:

The citizens of Vicenza have a sacred terror of illegality, but we have succeeded in carrying out illegal mobilizations and helping the public understand them. I remember last spring, the day after the occupation of the Basilica, we collected the signatures supporting illegality, that is: we all support those who have demonstrated. We collected 7,000 signatures. Unimaginable people signed. (C., Permanent presidium).

The second occupation of 2007 came in June, when almost 400 people mobilized by the Presidium symbolically occupied the civil airport in the *Dal Molin* area. In January 2008 the prefecture was occupied.

The Presidium activists also managed to organize a general lifestyle around the protest, seeking to live their values. The Presidium developed a series of initiatives tied to the alternative economy and fair trade, which became, in the “translation” of the protest, a “demilitarized economy, disconnected from war and the great lobbies of profit.” A fair-trade group (*Gas*) was set up within the Presidium. It collaborated with the local *Gas* network and was supplied by local agricultural firms.

Between 2007 and 2008 direct actions and demonstrations decreased markedly. In addition to the difficulties entailed in sustaining actions requiring long term an complex organisation, administrative elections were also held in the city in 2008. The Presidium engaged in a long period of discussion on the idea of running its own list. This was a controversial discussion:

A discussion was held and half of the people in the presidium were in favour and half against participation in the elections. It kept going for a month and a half!

<sup>14</sup> Data are obtained by protest event analysis from *Il giornale di Vicenza*, which followed with a daily frequency the actions and events linked to the new base.

There is always someone who considers the movement an object in itself, who is afraid that politics can contaminate it. I didn't hold that view. It depends how things are done. And then all the opportunities must in any case be exploited. I really wanted our list because I have always put things into practice, if we had not done it the movement would have been extinguished. (C., Permanent presidium).

We have here a confirmation of Shriver and Adams's thesis [2013]: an opening in the opportunity structure can cause divisions within the movement. In this case, the opening (at local level) lies primarily in the fact that, given the consensus the protest had among the population of Vicenza, the movement could compete to directly enter into the local political system. Second, for the first time the center-left coalition, with its new candidate for mayor, was officially against the new base. In the administrative elections the Presidium list gained 5% of the votes and it supported Variati, the centre-left mayoral candidate, elected in the second round.

The phase following the elections was heavily based on the realization of the referendum, as agreed with the new mayor. Nevertheless, a few days before the vote (October 2008), the State Council rejected any legal validity of the civic referendum. Both the protesters and the administration insisted that the referendum could take place anyhow, conferring it a strong symbolic value. The referendum, together with the demonstration of February 2007, was the main political fact produced by the protest. Despite its being a self-managed referendum deprived of institutional effectiveness, 24,000 citizens of Vicenza voted, and the rejection of the new base was near unanimous.

Nevertheless, from this moment on the protest entered its most difficult phase. The referendum did not affect the agreement between the Italian government and the United States. The mayor's attitude, after the referendum, became progressively more resigned. At the beginning of 2009 he stated that the military base would be built despite opposition. The two components of the protest (the Presidium and the Coordination) kept working, and sometimes cooperated. The Coordination of committees signalled that no environmental impact assessment (EIA) had been carried out, as obligatory for construction work on the base to begin, to the European Union. With the administration's support, it resorted to the *Tar* to suspend the work. The Presidium began another wave of mobilizations in January 2009. In February and March it organized one of the most intensive cycles of direct action, culminating in a fresh occupation of the airport that lasted three days. A number of city marches occurred during this period. The Presidium and the Coordination organized blockades to stop trucks entering the *Dal Molin* area to begin preparatory works for the base in February and March. These actions were very wasteful from a physical and



organizational point of view, and legally risky, and so could not be sustained for long periods. For this reason, a sense of resignation now began to spread even in the most motivated nucleus of activists:

In this period of time you can feel a lot of fatigue, the end is never in sight, every time we keep saying “this is the decisive moment,” and then it was not, therefore [...] it is difficult because it absorbs all of your energy. (Ch., Permanent presidium). The works are inside the military area, you are outside it, what can you do? (G., Coordination of committees).

External difficulties were reflected inside the movement:

Now that the works have begun, some attempts to personalize the protest appear, frustration that X mobilizes more than Y, or some of us saying things like “if we do what I suggest we can win, if we do what you suggest we lose.” (M., Permanent presidium).

Later, in March 2009, the *Tar* definitively rejected both the application of the *EIA* and the interruption of the preparatory works: the new base now had the final green light. The new municipality administered this result rather than opposed it. Internal divisions over which strategies to adopt got worse, and it was in this situation that work on the new base began. It became progressively more difficult to involve wide sections of the local population in the protest. The definitive start of the works eroded the sense of the political effectiveness of the action. The works on the new base went ahead and the protesters lost their struggle. This does not mean that nothing remains however. Between 2010 and 2012, when it was realized that the new base could not be stopped, the Permanent presidium sought to transform the protest into a pacifist and environmentalist network. In particular, they strengthened cultural activities and practices (*Gas*, local products markets) oriented to the protection of common goods (water, land), and demonstrations and campaigns against military activities in the city are still organized.

#### 2.4. *The Dal Molin Case and the Political Opportunity Structure: Discussion*

Let us synthesize the main evidences regarding the relationship between mobilization and POS. Considering what Kitschelt defines as input, that is the opening of the political system to movements' claims, the opportunity structure faced by the mobilized actors did not appear promising. In the *No-Dal Molin* campaign, the structure was closed not only at the national level – where the parties supporting the protest were in government, and for this reason not considered as reliable allies by the protester –, but also at the local level, where the centre-right held power and

most of the centre-left parties were against the base but unable to make their position explicit (since their parties were in favour at the national level), and the radical left parties were active in the protests but traditionally weak in the local context. Indeed, the protesters came to ask their only political allies – the three radical left parties – not to attend the national demonstration in February 2007. This is hardly the role that collective actors usually reserve for their political allies.

The protesters' distrust towards parties reached a threshold that weakened the relationship between participation and calculation of political opportunities. Using a term employed by Gaxie [1977] to define the transformation of the costs of collective action into incentives, the closing of the political system had a "super-generating" effect on the movement. It increased the "retributions of militancy," allowing the activists to identify themselves as radically different from the party system. The No campaign lived its moments of exponential growth in correspondence with announcements of closure from the government in its attempts to oppose to the protest with the strength of an unchangeable decision, declassing the conflict to a technical-administrative question. The No campaign grew around these demonstrations of closure, whose "super-generating" effect was to provide the protests with a central symbolic resource: the counter-identification with respect to the adversary. Furthermore, the parties that supported the protest later put their trust in the government's foreign policy in favour of the construction of the new base, all while they were marching against that same base. The leadership of the protest, therefore, sought the consent of the local population not by feeding a sense of the effectiveness of the action linked to the support from the leftist parties, but by insisting on a dichotomy low/high representing the situation as the struggle of the "people" against career politicians, considered as a single unit and equally antidemocratic. This representation was addressed above all to those parties that had demonstrated with the movement.

The criticisms that have been addressed to the POS model should be radicalized. Our empirical case shows that it is not enough to say that the opening/closing of the opportunity structure does not play a decisive role in mobilization. The closure of the structure itself, and the consequent hostility towards the actors of official politics, is a decisive mobilization factor. The cohesion within élites (regarding the contested public decision), the impermeability of the decision-making process to the movement demands, the absence of allies within the political system (which in our case it is not suffered, but explicitly sought by the movement leadership), are incentives to protest, because they allow the interpretation of the conflict as a struggle between the élites and ordinary citizens united beyond any ideological difference, which through conflict can regain full citizenship. At the local level, moreover, it is the creation of a more favorable opportunity structure (with the election of may-

or Variati) to mark the beginning of the mobilization crisis, confirming what Kriesi [1996] states on the ambivalent role that the presence of institutional allies may have on movements.

We have shown, in this conflict, decisive mobilization factors which are alternative to political opportunities: the collective feeling of procedural injustice (“lack of democracy and transparency”), and the representation of unlawful conduct by the institutions; the centrality the conflict takes first in the local society then in the national agenda; the polarization between a Yes front and a No front; the collective feelings and emotions of fear and threat, determined by the possibility that Vicenza is involved in armed conflict and that the work has negative impacts on the territory and on the health and quality of life of the inhabitants; the opportunity offered by the conflict to strengthen social ties on the local basis, establishing a new form of socialization around the structures formed by movement organizations (such as the Presidium); the support of other national and international movements.

### **3. Local Mobilization and Political Opportunity Structure: Other Main Italian Cases**

Let us now analyze other three main Italian territorial mobilizations of the last years: the one against High Speed railway in Val di Susa, the one against the Bridge on the Messina Straits and the one against *Muos* in Sicily.

In Val di Susa, since 1991 a conflict has been ongoing over the construction of a high speed railway (Tav) link between Turin and Lyon [Caruso 2010; Fedi and Mannarini 2008]. At the national level this project has been strongly supported by all political parties, except the small radical left-wing parties. After fifteen years of the slow construction of the opposition campaign, it became a popular mass struggle in 2005, when the proponents of the project attempted to start construction and excavation work. At the point of the largest protests, the national centre-right government was compactly favorable to the work, as was the main centre-left opposition party. Many mayors and the president of the Mountain Community (the institution linking the towns of the Valley) instead participated in the citizens’ protests. Following very radical protests by the population work was suspended in 2006, and the government established a national “Political Table” and a local “Technical Observatory,” two forums designed to encourage a mediation between the two conflicting sides. This attempt at mediation failed, as no consensus was reached between the proponent actors and the mayors of the Valley. As a result in 2009 the government (again a center-right coalition) tried again to begin the preparatory works

for the new railway. Once again, the large size of local opposition forced the government to desist. The construction sites were very much open in 2011 after severe and prolonged clashes between *No-TAV* activists and the police. Currently a site remains open, constantly guarded by the police and repeatedly “attacked” by activist initiatives, where some preparatory works are slowly going on. The *No-Tav* campaign can at the time of writing be considered at least partially successful. For twenty years it succeeded in ensuring that the project was not started. The difficult economic situation means that it is not obvious the work will be completed, due to its high cost. In the Italian Parliament convened after the general election in February 2013, about 250 parliamentarians hail from political parties that oppose the creation of the Turin-Lyon line. This fact can be considered a political success of the movement.

With regard to support for the protest from local governments, currently almost all the towns in the Valley are officially opposed to the Turin-Lyon line. But this is a result of the *No-Tav* campaign gained over time through a constant and widespread mobilization in the Valley. When the protest campaign was launched in the early 1990s, it was supported by only a few local administrators. The diffusion among the inhabitants of the area of information and expertise on the work and its consequences led to the formation of the first *No-Tav* committees, and the consequent growth of collective mobilization led local government officials, especially during elections, to approach the arguments of the protesters. Over the years both the number of mayors actively participating in the protest campaign and the presence in municipal elections and the Mountain Community of *No-Tav* electoral lists formed by activists have grown.

The second case is that of the Strait of Messina Bridge, planned to link Calabria and Sicily [della Porta and Piazza 2008]. The project was first approved in 1997 by a center-left government. However, while the parties and successive governments of the center-right have always been convinced supporters of the Bridge, at the turn of the century the main center-left parties became first uncertain and then opposed to this work due to its high costs and uncertain utility. The protest campaign against the Bridge began in 1997. In the early years the opposition was limited to a few intellectuals, political parties of the radical left and some environmental groups. Popular participation starts from 2003, when, following the presentation of a preliminary draft of the bridge’s design, the first demonstration in the city of Messina was organized. The qualitative leap in the protests took place in 2004, when a national demonstration was called in Messina, and attended by 10,000 people. In 2005 a call for tender for the general contractor and the start of works was published. In 2005 the protesters organized various demonstrations, attended by thousands of people.

At this point, the conflict over the Bridge took on significant national importance and a substantial section of the local community participated in protests. However, while some results had been achieved the protesters had not yet received any support from local institutions. The 2006 demonstration, the fifth national protest event, was the largest: 20,000 people took part. It was only on this occasion, after nine years of protests and after high involvement from local society had been achieved, that the mayors of the two municipalities of the Strait participated in a protest action. For many years the larger council of the two, Messina, was in favor of the Bridge. In spring 2006, a center-left coalition replaced the center-right in the national government. The new government immediately stopped the preliminary works for the Bridge, blocking the work. In this case, the support of local institutions was too little and too late to assert any influence on the extent of the protest campaign over time. With regard to the political opportunity structure at the national level, we must notice that the mobilization reached its peak during the years in which a coalition of center-right government, very compact and very determined to complete the Bridge, was in power.

The third case is that of the *No-Muos* campaign. The *M.u.o.s.* is a U.S. Army satellite communication system designed to coordinate the various U.S. military systems across the world. The planned site for one of these four stations is the Sicilian town of Niscemi, and it was here that the protest against the work began. Citizens participating in the protest were especially afraid that the work would involve health risks for the town's inhabitants and damage the balance of its ecosystem, but there was also a clear anti-war cultural dimension. At the national level, both the center-left and center-right coalitions are in favor of *Muos*. It was approved in 2006 by the Prodi government (center-left). Initially, the municipalities in the Sicilian area surrounding the location of the proposed ground station also expressed a favorable opinion. In 2009 the Niscemi *No-Muos* Committee was created, criticizing the City of Niscemi for not having taken a critical stand on a work of which effects on the population are not known. Shortly after, the City of Niscemi approved a resolution against *Muos*. In a few months the associations and municipalities in the area against the *Muos* created a coordinating committee, which afterwards will assume a regional dimension. The attitude Region Sicily has had on the *Muos* has been ambivalent. Until it was ruled by a center-right majority, it was in favor of the base. In 2012, the new center-left majority, even by virtue of the size the protest was gaining, was initially contrary to the work, but in July 2013 it annulled the suspension of the work the Region itself had required only a few months before.

When work began to install the satellite dishes in late 2012, the City of Niscemi stated that it would block the passage of any vehicle transporting materials for the work on its territory. Another town in the area, Caltagirone, resolved to do the same

thing a few weeks later. The *No-Muos* committee, after forming a permanent garrison around the site with the support of the City of Niscemi and three other towns in the area, established another permanent garrison within the Town Hall itself and occupied the Council Chamber in order to supervise and urge the action of the municipal administration. For the Committee, the City is not only an ally, but also a counterpart. In 2013 the committees and the permanent garrison organized several protest events, among which a mass invasion of the US base and a national demonstration in Palermo. Currently, after the final approval by the Region, construction works are progressing.

In the *Muos* case, the political opportunity structure was almost always unfavorable to the protest. At the national level, the governments and the main political parties have been constantly in favor of the work. A part from a brief period after the change in the governing coalition, the Region of Sicily was in favor of the project. The opposition of the City of Niscemi and the other cities in the area came after citizens had engaged in collective action to disseminate information, awareness and mobilization, and their opposition was constantly accused by the Committee being more formal than real.

Examining the three cases previously explored together with the *Vicenza* case, we can say that the existence of a favorable political opportunity structure at the national level has little influence on the emergence of a strong local opposition. As it emerges from a study by Piazza [2011] on movements *NoTav*, *NodalMolin*, *NoPonte* and mobilizations against landfills in the area of Naples, with the partial exception of the *Bridge* case, the main center-right and center-left parties have always been in favor of the large infrastructures contested by movements. Only the radical left parties have supported these protests. However, movements have considered the radical left parties as allies only when the latter were not part of the national government, and even when they have been allies of the protest, movements have often maintained with them conflicting relationships. In addition, these parties since 2008 are no longer in Parliament, but local protests, like the one against *Muos*, have continued to diffuse.

With regard to the effects of the national political opportunity structure on the outcomes of protest, the campaign in Val di Susa was able to block works for twenty years despite a constantly unfavorable structure. In *Vicenza*, we have seen that the final approval of the work was achieved when there were divisions within the governing majority, and thus in a phase that should facilitate a favorable outcome for the protest. The only case in which the national political opportunity structure seems to have any significant effect on the conflict is that of the *Bridge across the Strait*. Yet even in this case, the opportunity structure had an effect on the outcome

of the conflict, not on the expansion of the protest, which reached its peak when the center-right was in government.

With regard to local opportunity structures, the situations in the various examples are too different to conclude that a favorable structure is necessary for the emergence of a strong protest. In Vicenza, as we have seen, the local structure initially offered no opportunity for mobilization. In the cases of Val di Susa, the Bridge and *Muos*, the opposition of some local institutions to the work in question followed citizens' mobilization. The capacity of local protest committees to approach local institutions to their positions, affecting the ability of parties to obtain electoral consent, is greater than the role that local institutions play in fostering the emergence of protests. Piazza [2011] also shows that at the local level movements and institutions constantly waver between alliance and hostility, but this fact does not clearly influence the extent of protests. He concludes his work affirming that, in the main Italian local mobilization of recent years, the POS does not play a key role on the development of the protest nor at the national neither at the local level.

Finally, a fact I consider of utmost importance should be emphasized. Not only do these movements oppose the party system in its entirety, but, at the local level, they also try to "replace" it, creating autonomous electoral experiences or participating in them. In Val di Susa, numerous electoral lists are formed by *No-Tav* activists. In Messina, in 2013 one of the most well-known exponents of the movement against the Bridge was elected as mayor, surpassing very unexpectedly the center-right and center-left coalitions. In 2011 Luigi De Magistris was elected mayor of Naples, against both the center-right and the center-left coalition, largely taking on the claims of movements against landfills and incinerators and including some of their members in his list. In Vicenza, as we have seen, the Permanent garrison took part in the elections with an independent list. This process may evolve from the local to the national level. Several leading members of Italian local movements have been candidates in the 2014 European elections in "*The Other Europe*-with Tsipras," the national radical left list. In some ways it is a historical fact, considering the traditional distrust of movements for electoral dynamics and their hostility to participate in political-electoral projects.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Analyzing the Vicenza case and comparing it with other important Italian cases, I have come to the conclusion that political opportunity structure does not play a key role either on the emergence nor on the effectiveness of protest. The analysis has revealed a further element, which I consider the most important in relation to

the research questions. The closing of political opportunities should be considered in all respects a positive mobilization factor, as it allows movement actors to use the protest to express a widespread perception of lack of influence on decision-making processes that have major impacts on their lives, a sense of “subjection” and non-real enjoyment of citizenship rights. The criticisms that have been addressed to the POS model should therefore be radicalized. In this historic phase, the impermeability of political system and the absence of party allies encourage collective action, if it is connected to clearly perceived collective threats, opportunities and interests, as in the cases we have examined.

In his critique of the POS model, Goldstone criticizes the dichotomy between movements and official politics, arguing that in democratic systems these two poles are both placed in the continuum of normal politics. There are different forms of cooperation between the two poles: parties that support movements, movements that support parties, actors who are both party and movement activists. However, to support this thesis, Goldstone uses historical examples from the 1950s, the 1960s and the 1970s, which are related to the so-called “Golden Age” of representative democracy and the greatest development, in Europe, of the integration mass party. State, democracy and political parties have changed too significantly, over that period, to interpret the relationship between movements and normal politics in the same way. As the cases we have illustrated show, political systems and political parties have become largely impervious to the demands of movements and to the claims emerging from social conflicts.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, the decision-making systems with which movements as the local ones confront, can be defined representative only to a limited extent. The decisions they contest are assumed or implemented by public institutions, through mechanisms of multi-level governance, together with non-representative powers: commissioners, government or intergovernmental committees, consortiums, public-private companies, supranational institutions, diplomacy with foreign countries, private firms. The procedures at the basis of these decisions are often far from public in character. The plurality and opacity of the centres and procedures by which norms and decisions are produced, the local and contingent nature of political and institutional processes are the “form of state” with which local protests are directly opposed and one of the targets of their actions. In the context of a general growth in private power with respect to public powers, these processes entail a tendential substitution of the universalistic vocational political decision with contractual pacts between contingent and situated

<sup>15</sup> We may also consider the political ineffectiveness of recent movements against austerity and financialization in Europe and Usa: *Indignados*, *Occupy Wall Street*, trade union and social mobilizations in the European countries most affected by the economic crisis. Political systems have been completely closed to all their claims.



parties, and thus a reinterpretation of the borders between public and private as internal to the private sphere [Pellizzoni 2012]. Private actors become public actors and the political decision transcends the boundaries of the institutional system. The form of state with which movements currently confront is no longer the form of state they faced when the theory of the political opportunity structure was formulated.

For this reason it is important to consider also the relationship between forms of sovereignty and social movements. Territorial movements demonstrate a suggestive number of analogies with the political and social struggles of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries analysed by Tilly, when government sovereignty and the centralization of powers were not completely developed. The main targets of Seventeenth and Eighteenth century protests were the expansion of the central authority of the state, on one hand, and the birth of a national economic market on the other. Owners' power over producers grew, rights of common use were strongly limited and production for sale took priority over production for consumption. The reasons motivating these struggles were often tied to the abolition of the common use of the land, or to the marketing of primary resources taken from local communities to main cities. Mobilizations occupied state-owned lands and blocked commercial roads to prevent the marketing of primary goods. These protests had an inter-class nature (local powers were often allied with the lower classes in opposition to the central power), and were made possible by the compactness of the local community in its intermediary and base structures. Unauthorized town meetings open to all citizens would be organised, and when they could not rely on the support of the local institutions they "replaced" them by naming alternative town authorities. The repertoires, form and social settlement of these mobilizations are similar, therefore, to contemporary territorial mobilizations. Can this analogy bring us to the structural causes of the conflict? According to Tilly, the centrality of the local dimension of conflicts was due to the fact that the state was still far from assuming the monopoly of political decision. When the state authority tried to expand its authority to the peripheries, touching on fundamental affairs in local communities, the latter refused to recognize the central authority and rebelled in order to defend its own immediate interests. The analogy resides in this fact: the new centrality acquired by the local dimension as a place where mass politics emerges can be connected to the contemporary rollback of government authority, to the growth and strengthening of a multiplicity of local powers, and to the weakening of the public monopoly over political decisions.

As we have seen, Tilly, Goldstone and Johnston bring back the presence of changes in the landscape of normal politics, and therefore the continuity between contentious and institutional politics, to a set of historical conditions: the centralization of political power and the primacy of the nation state; democratization, and in

particular, the existence of political parties that play an intermediary role between society and institutions, the expansion of political and social rights, the institutionalization of social conflicts. Currently, the centralization and the primacy of the state are undermined by the de-nationalization of political authority by a “progressive uncaging of citizens, groups and firms, undermining the infrastructural power of the state related to its capacity to penetrate society, control its population or steer economic flux” [Le Galès 2013, 146], and by the diminishing capacity of the state to control globalizing capitalism, also for the pressures coming from regions and cities. Globalization, neoliberalism and financialization also intervene in the conditions associated with the virtuous relationship between democratization and social movements: throughout social rights are reduced in Western countries, moderate left-wing parties have become indifferent or hostile to popular movements and collective mobilizations, social conflicts are not included in the institutional system through codified processes of social negotiation, but mostly ignored and/or repressed by governments [Mann 2013; Kriesi 2013]. If modern politics had been organized also in order to hold conflicts, contemporary politics seems to tend towards their preventive neutralization, to non-controversial consent. These processes produce three consequences. First, we are witnessing a new centrality of collective action with a local basis, which is linked to the crisis of political centralization. Second, because of their weakness, their lack of autonomy in respect to supranational, economic and corporate interests, and their closing towards collective mobilizations and social conflicts, the State, institutions and parties lose prestige and authority and they are not considered as interlocutors by movement actors. A feeling of pure hostility and adversity has spread towards them. As a result, in conflicts such as those we have analyzed, there is no mutual recognition between opposing actors: the historical bases of the continuity between contentious and normal politics have been eroded.

In this context, it is possible to consider a new possible historical shift in the relationship between popular protest and institutional politics. As we have seen, this relationship may evolve towards a direct assumption of a political-electoral role by social movements. Signals going in this direction come not only from local movement, and neither only from Italy. There are several examples, in Europe, of a new hybridization between the party-form and the movement-form, that is of political organizations which were born by virtue of agreements between parties and movements and maintaining characteristics of both: *Syriza* in Greece, *Europe Ecologie* in France, the *Pirate Party* in several European countries, *Podemos*<sup>16</sup> and the *Partido X* in Spain

<sup>16</sup> *Podemos* obtained the 8% in the 2014 European elections, while it was officially constituted only at the beginning of 2014.

(experiences started by activists of the *Indignados* movement); in Italy, in addition to the previously mentioned cases of electoral experiences by local movements and the *Other Europe* list, it is the case of the *5 Star Movement*.

A possible evolution of the crisis of the relationship between politics and movements, therefore, is a new “great transformation” of the forms of political organization, particularly in the left, which can arise from the assumption of a fully political role, that is an electoral and institutional one, by social movements, and their cooperation with other social and political actors to build new stable political organizations, innovative in terms of form and content. As in the second half of the Nineteenth Century, when the mass parties were born by virtue of stable alliances between social organizations, social movements, intellectuals and political-ideological organizations, a hypothesis that may be interesting to follow is that the crisis of the primacy of the state and of political parties can lead to the emergence of a new form of left-wing political organization, which may renew and inherit the historical role of left-wing parties, approaching one another the movement-form and the party-form.

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## Theories of the Political Process, Political Opportunities Structure and Local Mobilizations. The Case of Italy

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Abstract: Local mobilizations against infrastructures perceived as harmful to population and territory are, in Italy, one of the forms of collective action which in recent years have grown more. The contrast to party system and the tension between representation and participation are central elements of collective identity in these protests. They have also built innovative experiences in local politics, which have been directly involved in electoral competitions. For all these reasons, local mobilizations are an interesting case to analyze the evolution of the relationship between collective protest and political systems, and to test the most widely used apparatus in the study of this relationship: the theory of political opportunities structure (POS). In this article, the POS model is confronted with a major Italian local mobilization in recent years, the protest in Vicenza against the realization of the *Dal Molin* military base, and other major Italian local mobilizations. In the Conclusions, three main findings are pinpointed: 1) Unlike what the POS thesis states, a closure of the political opportunity structures incentivizes collective protest; 2) The crisis of mass party and the redefinition of the classic parameters of statehood, necessitate a theoretical re-discussion of the relationship between popular protest and institutional politics; 3) the relationship between social movements and parties is redefining on the base of a new hybridization between the party-form and the movement-form, and through the direct assumption of electoral tasks by social movements.

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*Keywords: Social Movements; Political Parties; Politics; Political Opportunities Structure; Movements and Parties; State and Social Movements.*

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