Struggles for “redistribution and for recognition: the case of the “organized unemployed movement” in Naples (Southern Italy)

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1. Introduction

In this paper we address the link between struggles for “redistribution” on the one hand and struggles for “recognition” on the other hand through a case study of the *movimento dei disoccupati organizzati* (organized unemployed movement) in Naples. The *movimento* is a grassroots organization of unemployed born in the Seventies in the historical centre of Naples. Their request has been basically the creation of jobs in public services or in urban renewal. It has been characterized by relatively high dynamics in its social composition. The actors of this movement are mostly urban unemployed, precarious workers and women employed in unskilled and unprotected jobs. Our research on the *movimento* is based on an overview of documentary sources and on meetings and interviews with the local actors involved.

In this paper we start by describing the mobilization that began in the mid-1970s in Naples. Then, we discuss three questions. The first and most noticeable concerns the forms of representation of under-represented people, a problem difficult to face for the trade unions. Secondly, the union representation is not the only form of representation of the unemployed. There have been in various countries and historical movements autonomous forms of representation with different types of relations with the national unions. For short term unemployed belonging to a specific union branch, there is no need nor a tradition of specific organization. Different is the situation for long term unemployed, for non-standard workers, and for women and young people in search of a first job. The question is particularly relevant now with the massive burst of unemployment among young people and with the long lasting experience of deindustrialization. The case of Naples and of the *movimento* can be useful in order to understand the issues of organization and representation of the unemployed in other area. The aim is to explore whether and how the need of representation of this part of the workers is met and which relations are established with other actors (unions, political parties, institutions).

Finally, the third question we address has not attracted the attention of scholars so far. It concerns the way in which the protest activity of this group of marginal and vulnerable workers has fostered the emergence of a "counter-narrative" capable of opposing the categories and labels attached to them. The social representation of activists was transformed from one of welfare clients to that of people struggling for their rights. According to this perspective the paper discusses the question if the *movimento*’s struggles are related to the
issue of recognition (Honneth 1996) and could be considered as an actual example of capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004).

2. Origins of the movimento

The movimento is the most important protest movement that erupted among unemployed people in Naples, and the only one of this kind in Italy. It started in the mid-seventies in the historical centre of Naples and since its early appearance two main distinguishing features clearly emerged. It was a “poor people movement” (Piven and Cloward 1979) and it had a clear urban character. As for the latter aspect the movimento was not an answer to an urban policy at the level of housing, services or neighbourhood, ( ) It should also be stressed that, despite the urban character of the movement, it hasn’t had housing objectives, even though the vast majority of its members lived - and still lives - in a “basso”, a ground floor apartment that opens onto the street, in the historical city centre or in the decaying peripheral apartment blocks. In that sense the movement is quite different from marginal people’s urban mobilizations. Rather it is Spontaneous movements of protest, characterizing in the past Southern Italy, mainly concerned rural areas, workers employed in agriculture, both small farmers and labourers. Instead the players in the organized unemployed movement have not been rural workers who recently moved to the city, but marginal workers mostly coming from the Neapolitan urban Lumpenproletariat: precarious workers without social security protection and at a very low wage, unlicensed car-park attendants, street vendors of goods and food of low value, women employed in unskilled and unprotected work such as cleaning of building stairs, and only in few cases, individuals belonging to petty crime (such as people selling cigarettes or videos and music CD without licence1, or even small drug dealers). Among the first activists there were also many former workers of small and micro-factories belonging to traditional manufacturing sectors (glass, leather, printing manufacturing with not more than ten employees), which could boast significant previous experience of representation and trade union struggle. A component later joined by those who are at present called NEET (not in employment, education and training young people). Rather, a classical social conflict in the sphere for redistribution of incomes and jobs involving the local administration as the first counterpart. The main aims of the movement have been indeed (at any rate in

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1On this specific aspect see the ethnographic research of the American anthropologist Jason Pine (2012)
(principle) the right to a regular and decent work and the basic principle which inspires the action is that it can be achieved only through the mobilization. The most common slogans have been “work to those who fight” and “we want a job” (and the fight also aims to stimulate the creation of job opportunities).

Although their family income falls below the official poverty line, they are indeed not simply “poor”, as they claim to belong to the Neapolitan working class, albeit in its most precarious components. But at the same time they cannot be defined as modern "precariat" (Standing 2001), since their precarious position in the labor market is not a consequence of the decline of the Fordist model, which has never fully occurred in Naples. Despite in the Sixties and Seventies, the number of workers of medium and large firms increased, the structure and its social composition have of employment in Naples was characterized by the prevalence of mass unemployment and non standard work. The cleavage between the area of the blue-collar working class and of the precarious workers has never been sharp. This might suggest that disoccupati organizzati are a sort of modern Lumpenproletariat in the Marxian sense. Again this would mean a misunderstanding of the real situation because most activists are largely unrelated to the circuits of organized crime or to the processes of downward social mobility usually associated with this category. Rather they belong the underproletariat typical of traditional urban economies of subsistence. A fraction of the social structure frequently object of stigmatization and stereotypes of both the media and partly of the same sociological literature, which produced an erroneous representation of the struggling Neapolitan unemployed. This kind of social representation, as it has been noted,

“develop within a more general imagined Neapolitan Weltanschauung made of fatalism, irresponsible optimism and “amoral familism” 3, and on the other hand in a representation of an economic and social context in which work and production are substantially absent. The world of more or less imagined "Lazzari" with its misery and its immorality attracts the eye of the visitor, of the grand-tourist, but also of the social researcher, more than the world perhaps equally painful but certainly more decent of the labor" (Cotugno and Pugliese, 2002, 97).

A remark quite appropriate to present situation. There is more and more talk of poor

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2 As is well know the “precariat” is defined by Guy Standing (2011) as those people who not only have insecure jobs or move uneasily between short-term jobs and spells of unemployment, but who lack any sense of occupational identity or narrative to give their lives.

3 The “amoral familism” refers to the inability of individuals to act together for their common good or, indeed, for any end transcending the immediate, material interest of the family (Banfield 1958).
people as though they were separable from their material condition (above all, the loss of the chance of steady work). The Neapolitan organized unemployed are not the only one in this poverty, but certainly they account for a high proportion of it.

3. The cycle of the unemployed struggles

To bring order to the chaotic sequence of events related to the history of the movement we can refer to the well known scheme by Sidney Tarrow (1990) based on the concept of "cycle of protest", as "a phase of heightened conflict and contention across the social system" (1994: 153). In our case it would be more appropriate to talk about "waves of contentions" given the narrower scope of the struggles, the number of people involved and the limited geographical dimension.

The first protests of the unemployed were part of a long phase of social struggles which affecting the all Nation and the city of Naples in the seventies. Somehow those first protests can be considered as an echo of the great union mobilizations known as "autunnocaldo". At the beginning intense - though not easy – was the dialogue between the movimento and the trade unions, in particular the CGIL (Pugliese 2011). At this stage, the aggregation experiences of the unemployed were characterized by the presence of organizational structures that were partially modelled on the organized forms of collective action of the trade unions. At the head of these structures - defined committees - there were delegates elected by the assemblies (Andriello 1980 208 et seq.). Even the forms of struggle were inspired, albeit indirectly, by those carried out in factories. "We cannot go on strike," said the unemployed, "we cannot block the factory, for now our factory is the street and like the workers block the production we block traffic", as remarked by Fabrizia Ramondino (1977, 21), author of a book portraying the lives of some of the most significant participants in the movement (not necessarily in a leadership position).

The concept is also taken up by a participant in the movement we interviewed in 2013:

"... In the 70s there was still a living working class, it was at the start of the decline that led to the state it is today. There was precise organization, such as the factory councils, which also concerned the workers and that went beyond the trade unions. So there was a direct link between the movement of the Unemployed and the organized labour movement through the factory councils.
We have made many initiatives in the factories and have obtained a lot of jobs. 

"(Int.a1)

The fact that the union was, at least initially, identified by the "organized unemployed" as their main reference is also confirmed by a second interview:

Since we were LSU [state subsided workers] we wanted to enrol the CGIL, but the CGIL refused, saying that as unemployed had repeatedly criticized the economic and union policy of the CGIL and therefore we had no right to subscribe to the CGIL. We also talked at the time, in '96 / '97, with Cofferati[then leader of the CGIL, the main union of the left], to see whether in the statute it was written that the person who criticizes a union cannot be enrolled. But there was nothing written. Any way they did not welcome us and we continued as a movement of the unemployed organized (int. a4)

Throughout the Seventies women's participation was very limited (Di Genova 2008). This is related on one hand to the difficulty of unemployed women in self-perceiving their own state, on the other hand to adherence to traditional patterns by the movement itself:

Women should stay at home and care for housework and children, if they work it is a strict necessity that you accept because her husband is unemployed or does not earn enough ... they should not take to the streets with men because they are delicate and then it is inappropriate, they cannot face some clashes with the police - Ramondino writes (1977, 379).

However, as noted by the same Ramondino, when "the first ten organized unemployed women take to the streets with their banners, all the unemployed applauded them" (ibid., 37).

Since the end of the Seventies, a new wave of contentions began, in which the unemployed abandon the traditional forms of struggle of the trade unions, unable to comprehend the reasons for the unemployed struggle and also to channel the protest towards the achievement of concrete objectives, thus revealing an innovative possibility of social practice. The unemployed devise new autonomous forms of struggle, based on direct action, aimed at attracting media attention, less tied to the size of the factory and to the classic organizational structures of the unions and closer to the forms of conflict typical of social movements. A very important change is the replacement of the traditional procedure of union membership, as a way to count subscribers, with the so-called "list of struggle", i.e. the list of persons who participate in the various street actions and attend meetings. These lists, following the requests of the unemployed, obtained some kind of institutional recognition by the local political system and by the national government that allowed subscribers precedence in job placements and promoted a number of work experience projects reserved to them. In short,
the presence in the streets was imposed as a criterion of effective work activation: a questionable criterion, that however helped to draw attention to the absolute inefficiency of the employment services, especially at the local level, which were in fact shortly after subjected to a more extensive reorganization at the national level. Cotugno, Pugliese and Rebeggiani observe in this regard:

The lists of participants in the unemployed movement and mobilizations, collected by the committees of the time, were considered by the Prefecture of Naples as actual lists of unemployed with a right of priority in the job placement: an acknowledgment not insignificant and destined to produce consequences. The decision to officially declare the unreliability of employment services and at the same time to legitimize the lists born from the mobilizations will create and nourish expectations in further mobilizations (1990, 1161).

This kind of success at local level were relevant in keeping the mobilization of the Neapolitan unemployed going, reinforcing the idea that protesting and mobilizing help getting immediate results (i.e. public employee in the local administration, the organization of professional training courses as the reform of the job centres) (see also dellaPorta 2005).

The earthquake of 1980 is a turning point in the history of the organized unemployed. The earthquake attracted public resources for reconstruction, especially in construction, a possible source of employment. But it also implied the move of part of the unemployed and their families from the historic centre towards the new housing estates risen up following the reconstruction or to other municipalities in the town belt, resulting in weaker local roots of the unemployed and the fragmentation of the movement in aggregations with little or no contact with each other. A rift start to develop, which will increasingly widen between old and new lists and, later, between aggregations that recalled forms and contents of fighting close to the union and to the historical left and lists of struggle that aimed to the only objective of getting the assignment of the higher number of jobs for their members, also used as a store of clientelistic votes in support of one political candidate or another (Liguori and Veneziano 1982). These internal divisions will lead to a decline of the movement, from the point of view of both the capacity of policy proposal and of participation. Nonetheless, it has not resulted in the disappearance of the movement that still survives in both its historical "lists" and through new aggregations, but it has lost much of its ability to convince the local political system that they can guarantee swing voters in the local elections getting in exchange forms of social recognition.
This decline has been also explained by the failure to get support from the left-wing parties and by the trade unions. According to Enrico Pugliese “there was the need of more stringent form of collaboration with the labour movements and its organizations as well as other skills in order to negotiate with the institutional counterpart” (Pugliese 1998, 196).

Due to the perceived betrayal of the trade unions and of the local and national political system the mobilization of the Neapolitan unemployed were more and more in search of public opinion support. As it has been noted the strategy of address and convince public opinion through action with high symbolic impact as a channel to reach public decision makers has traditionally been a strategy of the unrepresented people (della Porta 2008).

However, over the last years the innovative attitude of the movement has been profoundly reduced. Such transformation has been paralleled by the emergence of new – and much more visible than in the past- episodes of urban violence, such as garbage and bus fires, squatting and damaging public facilities. This process, in turn, resulted in the gradual political and social isolation of the unemployed from civil society. As a consequence of such new radicalization wave, the movement has undergone different attempts of criminalization from public authorities. A process culminated, at the beginning of 2014, in the arrest of 25 unemployed people involved in the protest. Police officers also searched the movement’s headquarters and charged the movement with the accusation of criminal conspiracy and affiliation with the camorra, which was eventually found to be unproved.
4. Social representation and representation of the unrepresented

The link between the organized unemployment movement, the trade unions and the local and national political systems is so not the only issue we want to consider. We are also interested in how the movement itself has changed its policy views.

Let us go back to the repeatedly cited book by Fabrizia Ramondino in which the author tends to make the protagonists speak directly and tell their stories. The unemployed have a hard life, have suffered and still have causes of distress, but their political mobilization is also an opportunity for redemption (in fact the title of the next edition of the book will be "We were called illiterate"). Enrico Pugliese writes in this regard:

Of course those who "believed them illiterate people" were wrong. What emerges from the book is that those unemployed are not "illiterate people", as they are culturally emancipated and able to express directly their way of seeing things, to discuss, to negotiate. In the fight - and that of Naples is not the first case - the unemployed also learn to speak. And if - as often happens - that movement degenerated, there is still the legacy of an important experience (2011, XX).

Neapolitan unemployed and precarious workers through their struggles burst into the public sphere, they become visible. They break the crust of common sense by imposing a self representation not as poor miserable experts in the "art of getting by", a kind of creativity that would lead to invent strange and unlikely jobs, even at the limit of legality, but as people who live in conditions of extreme economic insecurity due to the lack or uncertainty of their earned income. They dictate their own rules in a clearly defined universe, made of behaviors rigidly preordained (training, internships, professional budgets, lists, and other tools for placement, expectations, competition for jobs etc..) (Demazière, 2000).

And again Fabrizia Ramondino refers to:

dignity they feel they have gained, at the human level, through their organized struggle, they know they have written a small piece of the political history of the Italian proletariat and of history in general. And this pride in belonging to the movement of the organized unemployed cannot be expressed if not in a solemn way. .... The dignity of belonging to the workers, conquered by a proletarian struggle, corresponds to the dignity of expression in their language, using all the union terms of the struggle (Ramondino 1977 32-33).

The effort of the Neapolitan unemployed to deploy this specific identity of workers in struggle and make it recognizable and recognized in the public arena gives their mobilization
not only the character of struggles for redistribution but also for recognition. The main objective of the struggles of the unemployed Neapolitan is the job or at least resistance to severe conditions of exploitation within the framework of a deregulated labor market strongly dominated by low wages and lack of work health and safety, influenced also by some Camorra interests. They are therefore undoubtedly struggles for redistribution and for overcoming a state of economic insecurity.

But in their struggles also the right to "voice" is at stake, in the meaning of Hirschman (1970), to mobilize, to protest, to be heard. Through their dramatic actions of protest and unusual ways of self-representation, the Neapolitan unemployed were in fact able to impose, at least in some stages of the cycle of mobilizations, symbolic forms of reassessment of their social status and confirmation of their work based identity, even if the work in this case is configured as an "absence". The conditions for recognition that pass through a different self representation are therefore, as noted by Nicola Negri "an indispensable component of redistributive actions ... precisely because it gives them the valence of a ritual generative of new symbolic connections". They could not have these hallmarks if they occur in the context of top-down policies "(2012 144). Franco Crespi also stresses how "the dynamics of recognition do not just emphasize the relational nature of our freedom in terms of interpersonal respect, but also refers to the fact that effective recognition can not exist without a fair distribution of cultural and material resources available in the real social contexts "(2013, 59).

Struggles for redistribution and struggles for recognition must therefore be considered as "co-fundamental and mutually irreducible dimensions of justice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, 3; see also Borghi and Dorin 2011). However the link between these processes should still be better explored, as will be hopefully done in the near future.

The downward trend of the movement demonstrates in fact the non-sequential nature of recognition and redistribution effects. The reduction of inequalities of distribution cannot be devolved only upon the dynamics of recognition, since the ability to be recognized as people with aspirations in the course of those interactions is related to previous results obtained, i.e. the economic benefits they were been able to draw from the struggle.
5. A final remark

The major objective of the movimento is to achieve a permanent and regular job or, at least, a decent income from either labour market occupation or from minimum income schemes. However, Neapolitan unemployed also struggle to be fully recognized as laborers, not only as welfare clients nor a marginal part of the citizens. The innovative approach to social protest of the movimento has proved to be a powerful means to publicly reformulate their social status as ‘workers’, at least at a symbolic level. For some of its members, the movement also resulted in the successful achievement of a “permanent and secure” job when for most of the participant in the obtainment of, despite unstable, important working experiences. An aspect also explaining the long-term effect of the movement, which lasted over 40 years. As stated by one of the interviewed women: “when you talk about organized unemployed in Naples, times stops”. Continuity and duration have become a main trademark of this unusual movement.

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