

# **The Struggles of Precarious Researchers and Demands for Social Change in (Post-) Berlusconi Italy**

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## **The Siege**

October 25 is a special day for the Italian university. On that day students and precarious researchers organised a large demonstration, in which some 100 thousands participated, according to the movement's own estimates (see figure 1). The marchers walked through the streets of Rome's historic centre, reaching the area surrounding the building where the Italian Parliament is located. Protesters asked for the withdrawal, without mediation, of the law proposal presented by the Berlusconi government, the so-called Moratti Reform (derived from the name of the Minister that introduced the legislation). The law aims to revise the juridical status of Italian university teachers and researchers, most notably by replacing existing permanent positions with fixed-term contracts at the entry stages of the academic career<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In Italy the academic career is organised as follows: at the first faculty level, there is the ricercatore (researcher), a permanent position whereby only research activities are undertaken, but in fact in the vast majority of cases it includes lecturing through teaching appointments or only as



Figure 1. The Roman demonstration on the 25 of October 2005.

It was the first time that an intergenerational alliance between students and precarious researchers was taking shape in such a visible fashion. By the time the latter took to the street, it had already been many weeks that students were involved in protest, leading to the occupation of faculties and departments in many universities (such as those of Rome, Milan and Bologna). Precarious researchers thus joined students in their second year of intense and practically uninterrupted mobilisation, aiming to stop the adoption of a law which would inexorably sanction the casualisation of academic labour in Italy. The mobilisation had started at the end of 2003 with the formation of an informal National Network of Precarious Researchers, communicating through a

mailing-list called “Debate” and organised on a local basis with committees of researchers and postgraduate students seeking to settle disputes and other forms of confrontation with single universities<sup>3</sup>. For many of the precarious researchers getting involved in the movement was not the first experience as activists at the university level, as most of them had taken part in the student movements of the 1990s in Italy. It was thereby made easier not only to identify a common political background of the network but also to find a common line of action with the students. On the other hand, at that time Italian universities still lacked unionisation for temporary staff. More generally, Italian universities lack a unionist tradition at all levels of lectureship and professorship, and the trade unions count more members within the technical and administrative staff than within the teaching and research staff. This low level of trade union membership is essentially due to the historically hierarchical functioning of the Italian university, which empowers primarily full professors in recruitment procedures and in all university administrative matters while keeping the other parts of the teaching and research

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substitutes; then there are the associate professor and the ordinary professor, which are quite similar to the US model.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the history and the profile of the movement of precarious researchers, see Rete Nazionale Ricercatori Precari (2005). See also [www.ricercatoriprecari.org](http://www.ricercatoriprecari.org).

staff in a rigidly subaltern condition in terms of career autonomy and decision-making power (see Martinotti, 2006).

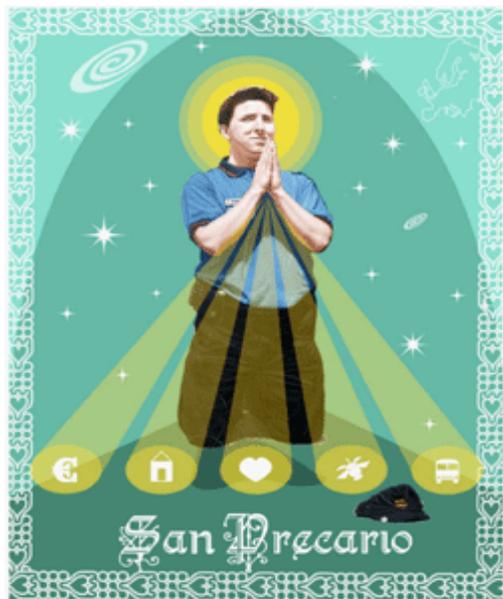


Figure 2. San Precario, icon of the precarious workers.

It was therefore the first time, in the long history of Italian universities, that precarious researchers organised themselves in a more or less permanent and structured way claiming a full set of rights, entitlements, and guarantees, along with the call for the resumption in offering permanent researcher positions<sup>4</sup>. Some protests had occurred in the past, but they were limited in scope and action, mainly for the reasons just explained above. In the late 1960s, during the strongest period of mobilisation ever experienced within the Italian university, a group of so-called ‘subaltern teachers’ formed, while in the early 1990s there was the rising of the first small committees of

doctoral candidates and ‘young scholars’. However, this latest mobilisation marks the development of a stable network linking together groups of precarious researchers active at the national level. It evinces the formation of a novel subject in the Italian university, one that represents itself as part of the wider collective subject of the ‘social precariat’ that has emerged in the last few years in Italy and that has given rise to a movement regarded with interest and even with admiration from social movements in other European countries, thanks to its self-representational and creative abilities (like those performed in the annual May Day parade promoted by the Chainworkers movement in Milan: see figure 2). More specifically, the rise of a movement of precarious researchers testifies to the shaping of a new phase in the history of the Italian university, which marks the completion of the transition to a ‘post-fordist university’ initiated in the early 1990s (Padovan, 1994). The transition in the Italian higher education system is, on the one hand, a consequence of what is occurring simultaneously in the whole Europe with the introduction of the so-called ‘Bologna Process’ and, at a wider global

<sup>4</sup> The functioning of the current recruitment procedure in Italy (a peculiar mix of local and national public competitions), which was introduced in the mid-1990s, has largely favoured the recruitment of associate professors and full professors to the detriment of researchers (the entry level for tenure-track faculty in Italian academia, see previous footnote). From this follows the greater attention being demanded towards employing full-time, permanent researchers in Italy.

scale, with the ongoing process of entrepreneurialisation of the university (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). On the other hand, this transition brings together a peculiar mix of old and new features in this country, such as the demand for market competitiveness along with the reproduction of traditionally particularistic interests in the university and the further reduction in the autonomy and independence of early career researchers.

The October 25 demonstration is therefore revealing not only for the university, but for the country as a whole. At that moment, Italy is coping with a difficult process of economic 'decline' (Gallino, 2003). The Italian economy seems to be unable to redefine its identity beyond the tight paths of post-fordist development in the industrial districts and local production systems, whose potential is strongly limited by the effects of globalisation and by the traditionally limited firm size. Moreover, it seems unable to deal with stagnation in the strategic sectors of the service economy and large industry, facing increasing difficulties due to the unchallenged power of hidden lobbies and group interests (Giavazzi, 2005). In order to respond to this process of apparently inevitable decline, the progressive forces of the country have called for higher investments in R&D and have emphasised the crucial importance of the university and the higher education system for re-launching the national economy. But the national government was still firmly in the hands of the centre-right majority and, thus, it was this political coalition that still wielded the power when students and precarious researchers took to the street in Rome on October 25, 2005.

That day, the Italian Parliament was under the siege of a multitude of young and less young people (notably, the 'late-young' precarious researchers), shouting slogans against the casualisation of labour and clamouring for a greater role in Italian society. These are the generations that have entered the public sphere and the labour market after those of the 1960s' 'baby-boom', but have found impediments on their way to a career by a perverse combination of apparently ambivalent factors: a historically low social mobility and a persistent gerontocracy, on the one hand, and the effects of economic policies leading to an unregulated flexible labour market, on the other hand (Cobalti and Schizzerotto, 1994; Di Vico and Fittipaldi, 2005). The former factors are in line with the traditionally conservative social structure of the country while the latter are in line with the growing social uncertainty and the rise of a "new culture of capitalism" taking place today at a global level (Bauman, 2000; Sennett, 2006). In this context, the university appears as one of the most significant examples of the general situation affecting the country. In Italy the university has the highest number of lecturers over age 50 in Europe and, for this reason, some expect, using an explicitly catastrophic terminology, a looming 'demographic tsunami' in the Italian university. From 2007 onwards and quite steadily for a decade or so, the Italian university will lose about half of its currently available human resources as a consequence of the retirement of those professors and researchers who have

entered the academia between the mid 1970s and the early 1980s (Sylos Labini and Zapperi, 2006). Without an adequate policy plan for research and public education, universities risk chaos and reduction to a mere tool in the hands of small groups willing to guarantee only its survival and passive self-preservation.



**Figure 3.** Member of Parliament Daniela Santanchè raises her middle finger towards students and precarious researchers (she has never admitted doing so).

The response of the Berlusconi government to the peaceful and sometimes even irresponsibly joyful demonstration performed by the multitude of students and precarious researchers was exemplified by the middle finger coarsely raised towards the crowd of protestors from a parliamentarian of *Alleanza Nazionale*, the former fascist party and second strongest party of the centre-right coalition. The image appeared in nearly all the national newspapers the day after the demonstration (see figure 3). To add insult to injury, only a few days after the 25<sup>th</sup> of October, the proposed law was forced through by the centre-right majority by means of the so-called ‘vote of confidence’<sup>5</sup>). Both parliamentary and ‘real’ oppositions were only offered the possibility for a major, but paradoxical amendment to the original proposal. The amendment postpones to 2013 the abolition of permanent positions at the researcher level and it introduces a set of measures accommodating the particularistic interests of a limited number of older lecturers and professors.

The postponement of the abolition of the researcher position, more than an apparent concession to the protest movement, is actually a boomerang thrown against the subsequent generations of researchers, particularly those that will strive to enter the academic labour market after the latest struggle to obtain residual permanent positions. In addition, preferential paths to the academic career were introduced for tenured professors and researchers who come first in order of

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<sup>5</sup> In Italy the confidence vote (*voto di fiducia*) is used by the parliamentary majority in order to approve a law while avoiding discussion of any amendment proposed by the opposition. It is thus an authoritarian way of passing laws, which should be used only in extraordinary situations, but in fact has been frequently adopted by the centre-right majority during the years of the Berlusconi government.

seniority (with 10-15 years of experience). The amended law of the centre-right government, therefore, shows its paradoxical and even derisive character, perfectly symbolised by the middle finger raised by the Alleanza Nazionale parliamentarian against the 25 October demonstrators. Originally announced as aiming to ‘unbridle’ the academic job market and rejuvenate the university employees, the new law is actually introducing regulations favouring some specific groups, much as the clientelistic regulations adopted by the Christian Democrat Party at the time of the so-called First Republic. “The Moratti Reform does not exist” is the conclusion of some observers (Pellini, 2006), who regard this as a kind of *gattopardismo* – “changing in order to remain the same” – as an unnecessary and harmful law for the Italian university and, above all, for the precarious researchers and the upcoming generations of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

## The Wait

April 9 is a special day for Italy. Italian citizens go to the polls in order to renew the Parliament, at the end of the longest legislature in the history of the Italian Republic. The electoral campaign has been split into two parts: calm and quite peaceful during the first two weeks, with a wide-ranging debates about the crucial issues in the country and possible policies dealing with them; excited and sometimes even tempestuous in the subsequent two weeks, characterised by an aggressive anti-tax campaign, in seemingly perfect Reaganomics style (Harvey, 1989), launched by the outgoing prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. The centre-left coalition, on the other hand, has appeared to be much stronger and cohesive than in previous elections, thanks to the sharing of a detailed government programme, signed this time also by the more radical Marxist, post-Marxist and green parties.

The university and public education occupy an important role in the government programme of the centre-left coalition and its policy recommendations seem to have accepted many claims made by the ‘movement’ in the 2003-2005 biennium: the revamping of the public university, the crucial importance conferred to the recruitment of ‘young’ professors and lecturers, the rise in the share of public expenditure destined for research activities and the university, the controversial but equally much expected establishment of an efficient research and teaching assessment procedure to stimulate innovation in Italian universities. Other policy proposals advanced in the previous months by the more ‘Blairite’ forces within the centre-left coalition have been excluded from the government programme, at least for the moment: the abolition of the ‘legal value’ of academic qualifications<sup>6</sup>, the

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<sup>6</sup> In Italy, the first degree – called *laurea* – has a ‘legal value’, which means that only universities that are officially recognised by the State are able to give this qualification. According to an increasingly influential neo-liberal view, the abolition of this legal value would have the effect

transformation of colleges into private foundations of rights law, the introduction of a new position of 'excellent professors' above that of the currently highest position of 'ordinary professor' (see *Democratici di Sinistra*, 2005). It is not only the Unions and the movements of researchers that denounce the negative implications of these policy proposals, but also the Conference of the Rectors of Italian Universities, who have without hesitation openly criticised these proposals. They instead suggest the adoption of specific, but not destabilising, adjustments, primarily based on the driving principle of 'responsibility for one's choice' in the making of university policies and decisions (Conference of the Rectors, 2005). The government programme of the united centre-left, the so-called *Unione*, seems to position itself along the lines of the reformist suggestions and proposals advanced by the rectors and some other progressive sectors of the Italian university, accepting at the same time many claims made by the grassroots movements of researchers and students, including the one concerning the necessity and the urgency of a process of substitution amongst generations.

On the day of the general elections precarious researchers therefore looked at this event with disenchanted optimism. The optimism stems from their specific generational condition, as they are somehow obliged to think about the future of the university in a more positive light, compared to their colleagues of the older generations, who are no longer inclined to believe in a process of change. At the same time, however the disenchantment originates from the observation of the long-term stagnation of the Italian university, unable to renew itself and end the traditionally unchallenged power of some conservative groups within it. The 'reform' of the Berlusconi government was justified through neo-liberal ideology and the rhetoric of efficiency typical of the Italian centre-right coalition, but at the end of the day its main effect has been to consolidate pre-existing power relations within the Italian university, particularly to the disadvantage of subaltern researchers and lecturers. But this is not specific to the university system. It reveals the more general approach to economic policy pursued by the centre-right government, which has led to a deep and unregulated casualisation of the labour force (in the wake of the so-called *Biagi Law*) and, at the same time, to a systematic preservation of established power structures within Italian society, from large industry to neo- or semi-privatised public companies.

For this reason, precarious researchers will be following the latest political events with much interest. But these concerns are hardly confined to precarious researchers. The burgeoning 'social precariat' (an estimated 4 million people, more

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to foster a higher competition amongst universities leading to a better quality of the courses and the other services provided by these institutions. Those criticising this view, however, point out that the abolition of the legal value of the academic qualification would only favour the interests of those already privileged within society, who can afford paying the tuition fees of the more prestigious universities and schools, thus limiting further the already low social mobility of the country.

than the 10% of the active population) in general demand a strong and clear change in economic and social policies. The movement of the 'social precariat' has been growing during the last years in Italy, but in many respects it appears to remain weak and fragmented and very unevenly distributed on a geographical level: in the largest cities of the North of Italy, and most notably in Milan, it has demonstrated to have powerful communicative skills, which have granted it a lot of visibility within the public opinion, but still its capacity to ground itself in the decentred and often invisible networks of the urban post-fordist economy seems to be much limited; on the other hand, in the major cities of the centre of Italy, most notably in Rome but also in Florence, the social precariat movement has been particularly active and visible in the public and semi-public sectors and it is in these regions that it probably shows the strongest level of (self-)organisation and mobilisation at the national level; finally, in the largest towns of the South, such as Naples, Palermo and Bari, the movement of the social precariat is almost absent, apart from occasional events such as the May Day protests, while more conventional movements of unemployed people organised on a neighbourhood level are still dominating the urban scenes. The social precariat movement is currently having a sort of 'pragmatist turn' in the definition of the political agenda, seeking to combine a sort of 'radical reformism' with the more anti(alter)-globalisation identity characterising the movement from the very beginning of its appearance, with increasing emphasis being placed on the extension of a full set of rights and entitlements to the temporary workers and the obtainment of a real basic income along the lines of what is already done in many countries in Western Europe.

A similar situation characterises the narrower realm of the university precariat: after two years and half of mobilisation, precarious researchers discuss the ways in which the political agenda and the organisational features of the movement have to be redefined in light of the new political phase and particularly seek to understand to which extent it is possible to exert influence through the continuation of struggles and mobilisations at both the national and local levels on the possibly changing political context.

April 11, the day in which the results of the general elections become definitive, is therefore a potentially 'liberation day' for Italy, despite the much suffered electoral win of the centre-left. While Italy slowly prepares itself and not without complicated political mediations to enter the new government phase, and only after having succeeded in electing the two Presidents of the Parliament and the President of the Republic, precarious researchers keep watching with their own disenchanted optimism at the future of the university. They are aware, given prior experiences, of the potential for disappointment under a centre-left government. It will therefore be necessary for student and researcher movements to continue with the struggle, maintaining a high level of mobilisation and striving for political recognition. The struggle must go on.

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