Social Movements and Public Administration: Spontaneous Citizens’ Committees in Florence*

DONATELLA DELLA PORTA AND MASSIMILIANO ANDRETTA

Ecological issues and urban protest: an introduction

The end of the 1990s witnessed an explosion of local conflicts around environmental issues. Different — at least in part — from the ecological protests of the 1970s and 1980s, the protest campaigns of the 1990s have not been distinguished by the prominence of ecological or environmental groups and associations, but more by the actions of dozens of local groups, which are often referred to in the press and in political debate as ‘citizens’ committees’. Citizens’ committees usually mobilize around issues that affect a small territorial area; they use various kinds of protest and are organized in very loosely structured forms. The issues they raise range from pollution to security, from town planning to local community services. Citizens’ committees mobilizing around the issue of pollution, in particular, often enter into complex relations of cooperation, as well as of competition, with local branches of environmental associations. In a sort of political exchange, the environmental associations offer organizational resources and mediate protest through institutional channels, while the citizens’ committees offer the human resources for protest activities. Local newspapers, individual administrators and even the decentralized institutions of local government may join these campaigns, for differing reasons. The rise of citizens’ committees seems to generate hope and fear among observers, and has been seen as both a threat to and a resource for urban government. On the one hand there is the risk of fragmented, diffuse protest jeopardizing public decision-making. In a situation in which political parties no longer act as mediators of consent (intermediaries between the needs of the population and urban government), questions that were once addressed to the territorial sections of political parties, finding a point of mediation there, nowadays tend to be organized and presented directly to the public administration. Since they have not been developed within more general ideological discourses, these issues enter the political system in a particularistic and localistic form. On the other hand, however, the debate about democratic governance has long insisted on the need for participation from below (Bobbio, 1996). Social pacts, dialogue and participation in planning have been proposed within new models of policy-making and implementation, which, overcoming the illusion of rational planning, evolve instead though incremental adjustment processes (Bobbio, 1994).

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Within this picture, citizens’ committees have sometimes been seen as Nimbyist (‘Not in my back yard’) — characterized by conservative behaviour and selfish, materialist motivations, potentially resistant to social change. At other times, in contrast, they have been seen as new forms of grassroots citizens’ participation (Gould et al., 1996: 3–4). In one form or another, these committees seem increasingly to influence local government choices. As Luigi Bobbio has written, localistic mobilization ‘is the direct daughter of democracy, of its promises of citizenship, self-government and of the right to the pursuit of happiness. And at the same time it constitutes a challenge for democracy since it opens a divide . . . between the general and the particular, between the national and the local, between the comfort of the more and the sacrifice of the less’ (1999: 187). It is, in addition, a by-product of demands for direct participation and the spread of protest skills acquired in previous forms of collective mobilization. Our research aims to understand the spread of such forms of collective organization, their strategies, their purposes and their resources, starting from their embeddedness in a social and territorial context that, although it is constantly being reshaped, defines the relationship between the actors, their resources (cognitive as well as material) and the way they conceive themselves within the society in which they operate. Our initial hypothesis is that social conditions in modern urban centres generate tensions between different types of city users, who experience the city in different ways. Environmental issues have been raised especially by residents of historic city centres, who live with the negative consequences of chaotic ‘invasions’ — during the day, by people coming to work or study, and at night, by people using the city centre’s cultural and recreational facilities. Conflict often arises between residents, who want restrictions on private traffic, and shopkeepers, who are traditionally hostile to any intervention that regulates individual mobility.

In this regard, one hypothesis that has emerged from recent thinking on urban movements and urban governance is the rise of a new conflict between ‘urban regimes’, oriented towards local economic development, and loose coalitions of actors resisting the ‘growth machine’. According to this hypothesis, economic and political interests tend to converge in local economic development policies. Faced with the fiscal crisis of the welfare state, local governments try, through investments in human capital and infrastructures, to replace declining public funds with private investments. Therefore, local governments are working as enterprises, in unceasing competition with one other (Thomas and Savitch, 1991). Local politicians attempt to raise electoral support by generating economic development, allying themselves — on these issues — with economic interests, which are oriented towards increasing profits (Elkin, 1987). Trade unions may also join this coalition, because of their interest in reducing unemployment. However, growth coalitions are unable to integrate marginal social groups (which are the losers in this type of development) or those who express environmental concerns (Stone and Sanders, 1987; Le Galès, 1995). Political and social conditions may help or hinder the development of growth coalitions (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Orr and Stoker, 1994).

Another aspect worth emphasizing is the relationship between the structures of political representation and the forms and organization of ecological protest in the city: here we draw on some of the social movement literature (e.g. Tilly, 1984; Tarrow, 1998). The crisis of traditional political parties explains the proliferation of committees representing single streets or squares, in part as a surrogate for the disappearing territorial party structures of the past (della Porta, 2001). In the absence of alternative forms of party mediation, demands from citizens’ committees tend to remain fragmented. However, forms of coordination of local protest are emerging, often via the formation of networks involving both citizens’ committees and more traditional ecological associations.

For the time being, our research has concentrated on the situation in Florence, privileging committees as a source of information relating to their own organizational
forms, their strategies for action and the way they interact with other existing social actors, whether institutional or not. In the first part of this case study, we outlined a map of the presence of committees in the urban area of Florence (see Figure 1). We ascertained the territorial spread of the phenomenon and then sent a letter to about 40 committees in Districts 1, 3 and 5 of the city, in which we asked whether they would be available to meet us. The mapping of these committees was made possible by the collaboration of Florence’s Office for a Safe City. Of these 40 committees, 21 replied promptly, indicating strong interest in the research we were developing. Our sample of committees therefore consisted of more than 50% of the population of individual committees in the three districts. We asked them to complete a questionnaire and interviewed them in depth (see Appendix), as well as requesting any materials they had produced up to then and, where possible, a review of the press coverage of their protest campaigns. Additional interviews were conducted with local institutional actors, who were asked for their point of view on the activities of the committees they had to deal with. For the moment at least, this forms the empirical base of our work.

Committee for what? Between localism, security issues and participation

Citizens’ committees originate primarily in two types of issue, both highly relevant to current public debate: environmental issues and those relating to security. While committees on environmental issues have often been suspected of ‘Nimbyism’,

1 We have not yet mapped citizens’ committees in Districts 2 and 4, and therefore these are excluded from our analysis.
committees on the security issue have aroused still more suspicion. Although committees which originate in action against pollution by traffic or against major infrastructure or dumping sites have often been studied — even if with some doubt about the ‘purity’ of their inspiration — as components of a broader environmental movement, committees on issues relating to security have generally been rapidly identified with mobilizations of the right, even if they are not directly racist or xenophobic. In terms of scientific research, this has led to a renunciation of the use of analytical categories that see protest as rational action carried out by actors mobilized on the basis of shared identity, and to a return to the analytical categories of the old structural-functionalist and psycho-sociological approaches, which saw protest as an emotional reaction to systemic dysfunctions and/or to individual frustrations. Thus, analyses of mobilizations around the issue of security often stress that it is somehow irrational to feel insecure, given an overall reduction in the crime rate. The sources of insecurities have, therefore, been attributed to the increasing standardization of society and the loss of ties and traditional values (e.g. Palidda, 2000). In line with hypotheses that mass society is disintegrating social linkages, analyses of mobilizations around security issues often stress that racism and an obsession with security are interlinked in the irrational search for a scapegoat for individual discontent.

In a frequent collateral hypothesis, committees on security have been defined as expressions of the economic interests of shopkeepers. Research on movements that places more trust in the rationality of collective actors has stressed their capacity to manipulate frames in order to increase the potential for mobilization (Snow and Benford, 1988). In this approach, movements are not seen as irrational actors mobilizing around problems, but as ‘entrepreneurs’ capable of mobilizing individuals on the basis of ‘credible’ definitions of the situation (McAdam et al., 1996).

A first observation from our data is that only seven out of our 21 committees have relations with shopkeepers’ organizations, and only three of these are mobilizing on security. In contrast, all the committees are engaged in a discourse that is predominantly about defending or improving the quality of life in a defined territory, and in this context the issue of security and that of the environment often become tightly interwoven. As can be seen from Table 1, half our committees deal with both these issues at the same time, and all the committees that are mobilizing on security also tackle environmental issues. In fact, the Director of the Office for a Safe City observed that many committees are shifting towards the issue of security, including those that deal with cultural issues, with traffic restriction zones or with other traffic issues (Interview D).

Where security (Table 2) is the main issue (for 10 out of the 21 committees), most actors stress the problems of criminality, drugs and prostitution without necessarily linking them to the phenomenon of immigration. In replying to our questionnaire, only two of the 10 committees on security explicitly referred to immigration generically, and the figures were not different for illegal immigration. Generally, proposals to tackle the issue of security go beyond a purely repressive response. Also, although some of them place emphasis on police action and ‘law and order’ demands, many others emphasize the

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Security</th>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
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<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
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multiple dimension of the problem of security, often referring to interventions aimed at redefining urban — and, therefore, town planning — policy for the district or the street in which they are mobilizing: this was the case with no fewer than six out of 10 committees that were tackling security issues.\(^2\)

In fact, the representative of the San Pierino committee, a shopkeeper, thought a greater police presence would certainly be needed to solve the problem of security:

\[\ldots\] but the police cannot control all the streets every day: more structural interventions are needed. What’s more, we need to reclaim our squares through a series of initiatives: demonstrations, festivals etc. And here we immediately come up against the problems of bureaucracy: to hold a demonstration we generally have to apply to the City Government three months in advance, with a whole sheaf of requests, and we have to pay for the public space and so on. This bureaucracy is killing the community (Interview 1).

One of the representatives of the Sant’Orsola committee, at the same time as demonstrating concern at the concentration of illegal immigrants in the area, suggested redefining urban policy as a way of solving the problem of security that is clearly manifest in deprived areas (Interview 2). However, the coordinator of the Joint Committees against the Third Lane cautions that the issue of security must be handled with care, because it often risks sliding into racism: ‘a lot of people come out with the idea that outsiders to the community are the cause of the city’s security problems. This is not true, because there are many Italians who do much worse things’ (Interview 3). It is mainly illegal immigration that tends to be stigmatized — as, for example, by the representative of the Intercommittee Coordination, who said:

I do not agree that the problem of security relates to racism \ldots\ however, it is clear from the statistics we have that crimes are committed by immigrants whose papers are not in order. This has nothing to do with race, it is just acknowledging reality \ldots\ There are a good number of outsiders who integrate and want to work, and they work more and better than we do — but you cannot ignore reality (Interview 4).

So, citizens’ committees mobilizing around security in Florence tend to present a non-racist image of themselves, proposing complex solutions to the issue of criminality. Also, according to the Director of the Office for a Safe City, citizens’ committees do not present the issue of criminality in racist or xenophobic terms, nor in radical tones:

Some people have political experience, others political aspirations, while others have special interests — not in a negative sense — and everyone has a strong civic awareness, an attachment

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\(^2\) It is also true that in some cases proposed town planning interventions satisfy — or are aimed at satisfying — applications to ‘exclude’ marginal groups, such as the poor or immigrants (especially illegal immigrants). In this respect, see the excellent collection edited by Ugo Brunello (1996).
to the city. From the point of view of party politics, they are not right-wing; indeed, I have found people who have had political experience in left parties. You do not find that the right-wing and security issues coincide. There may be a perception of insecurity linked to immigration, and prison statistics can lead you to equate them. However, there have never been requests to exclude these people, just a desire for a pragmatic solution. Also, shopkeepers have never asked for extreme solutions, but for the creation of an area without illegal trading. We’ve also met representatives of their associations — there is one lady who is involved in forming a cooperative of immigrant workers, trying to get them hired to work for the community . . . And we have talks with Senegalese youth, to try and find a solution: they don’t represent a public order problem (Interview C).

Turning to the citizens’ committees mobilizing on environmental issues (Table 3), we were not surprised to find that the most frequently cited problems were pollution and especially traffic. However, it is surprising that the committees are more proactive than reactive. In fact, only two of the committees interviewed are engaged in mounting opposition to the implementation of infrastructure projects. There are five committees mobilizing against town-planning interventions of various sorts, but no fewer than 11 promoting new environmentally-friendly town-planning interventions appropriate for the territory. Many are often asking for the construction of parks, gardens or other places for meeting and socializing. Therefore, it is not always true that committees mobilize for claims of the ‘why just here?’ type; they often provide well-formulated suggestions and responses to the questions ‘where?’ and ‘how?’.

It seems, therefore, that citizens’ committees have their origins in more complex problems that relate to the territory defined by stressing the dimension of belonging, of identity. So the security of the territory becomes just as important as respecting its ‘natural’ characteristics: both are inescapable aspects of the residents’ quality of life, and they will mobilize to defend both. However, the importance of territory does not necessarily mean that citizens’ committees act only on the basis of proximity. Although, as we have already said, they have been accused of being interested only in their own patch, our data show a more varied situation. Besides the seven committees dealing with the problems of the particular street where their members live — often dismissed by more structured committees with the term ‘manhole cover committees’ (Interview 7) — we found seven ward committees (which substantially limit their action to within the confines of the districts as they existed before the reform that created the current, larger districts), four district committees proper, defining themselves as actors of social integration in the district where they operate (Interview 8), and two committees that extend their activities outside the confines of the city, covering the whole provincial territory (Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mobilization on issues relating to the environment</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% Response</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pollution</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposing infrastructure projects</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposing town planning interventions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-traffic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposing incinerators</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting monuments</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protecting the natural environment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting town planning interventions</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing attitudes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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We can add that — and this has already been shown by other research (for example, Petrillo, 1999) — committees are not typical of the suburbs, nor of areas where hardship is great in absolute terms. In fact, the district with the most committees is the central District 1 (with 17 committees recorded, as against 14 in District 3 and eight in District 5 — the most peripheral of those under consideration). This provides further proof of the importance of the centre in political participation: in this case, ‘centre’ as metaphor coincides with the actual territorial meaning but does not lose its social connotations, although it stops short of ecological analysis. Thirteen of the 21 committees we interviewed were in District 1, which is about 70% of those that exist, while six were in District 5, and only two in District 3. If the readiness with which citizens’ committees responded to the stimulus of this research says something about their organizational capacity, then this fact again reinforces the idea that centrality is an important explanatory factor.

If the phenomenon of citizens’ committees can, as we have hypothesized, be understood within a more general process of the restructuring of political representation — evidenced mainly by the decline of the parties’ capacity for social and territorial rootedness, the loss of their hold on civil society and the weakening of their capacity to bring together demands and influence decision-making processes — then the birth of citizens’ committees should obviously coincide neatly with the emergence of these elements of crisis in the political system. Figure 3 shows that, in fact, the phase in which committees started to organize more often coincided with the years of the political crisis in Italy that has been defined in successive stages as ‘the crisis of the First Republic’. Eighteen out of the 21 committees we interviewed had been formed since 1994, and there was a growing trend over the 1990s. However, this fact should be viewed with caution, because past research has demonstrated that one of the characteristics of these new forms of organization is their extreme transience. Therefore, it could be that committees set up in the years preceding the crisis did not stand the test of time, and there is no evidence that those created during the second half of the 1990s will be any more resilient. However, the picture we gained from the institutional actors we interviewed supports the idea that the phenomenon is in rapid growth.

The issue of the crisis of representation was raised by the same committee members who often lament the disintegration of society’s institutions and their inability to solve people’s concrete problems. For example, the chairwoman of the Via Laura committee said: ‘Citizens’ committees proliferate because the administration is inefficient and
responds so slowly. But, even more significantly, politics is not in a position to dictate rules for people to live together in civil society’ (Interview 5). The coordinator of the Joint Committees against the Third Lane was even more explicit:

We are aware that there is a movement of opinion; in reality, we are completely detached from the institutions, completely separate — it’s as if we are living on two different planets. One way of looking at it is to say we are mobilizing against a project that has been decided in Rome — but another is to observe that local institutions, at the level of the region, the province and the trade unions, have completely abandoned their citizens (Interview 3).

Other committees provide evidence that political parties have lost the capacity to represent citizens’ interests. For example, an activist in the Terzolle committee said:

The committees try to put citizens in touch with the administration. Party meetings don’t do this any more, because they are tied to party lines. The things they are asking for are a function of the party organization itself: they are never disinterested. They mobilize for party ends, for political ideology. Things are changing because people no longer want to give power and cushy jobs to these parties. People want to solve their own problems: it’s not important to them whether it’s the left or the right or the centre that helps them do it. So we don’t have any side interests; we are completely apolitical and non-partisan. Our interest is in solving real environmental problems in relation to society — people’s problems . . . All the committees are now so much like this and have taken so many initiatives that they have taken over what were once the parties’ functions (Interview 6).

It is perhaps relevant to point out that this activist told us that he had earlier been a militant member of a left-wing party.

Another activist from the same committee offered a more profound analysis:
The true difference between then and now is not that committees did not exist. In fact, even earlier — in the 1970s — committees existed, because political parties would set them up to deal with more general problems, like district activities or social activities. However, they are now forming in response to problems as they arise. For example, a committee will be set up to tackle the problem of traffic in a certain area. In the past, this was an expression of the social fabric and a response to the demands of community, social demands. Now all this has been lost . . . However, we are becoming the link between the demands of the population and the parties. The parties get to know about people’s problems at committee meetings, and this goes just as much for the Chairman of the District Council. Otherwise people would not even have the possibility of meeting him. The Chairman of the District Council once came to me and said “Take me around the area because I don’t know it” — you see! (Interview 6).

The parties’ loss of rootedness seems, therefore, to have stimulated forms of protest rather than hindering them. Where demands used to be channelled by the parties through their meetings or other consensus-building ‘terminals’ in order to penetrate the institutions of government, the attention of administrators is now sought instead by applying directly to the public sphere, through protest actions capable of attracting media attention. In the past, trust in parties (in particular, in the party one belonged to oneself) encouraged people to postpone their claims over time, through the typical mechanism of representation. Nowadays, in contrast, lack of confidence in parties has led to withdrawal of these ‘blank proxies’ and to mobilization around one’s own immediate needs.

Spontaneity and participation? The organizational structure of citizens’ committees

There are certain obvious continuities between the organizational structure of citizens’ committees and the social movements of the past. In some cases, these relate to networks of belonging. The literature on social movements has often highlighted the relevance of mobilization resources — among them, the presence of dense social networks (della Porta and Diani, 1999: chapters 5 and 6). In the cases we studied, friendship networks and previous membership of other organizations formed the basis for many citizens’ committees. The picture of committee representatives’ past experiences is rather varied and relates to party activity as well as to associationism, voluntary social service and activity in trade union and district council organizations. Some committees (Terzolle and Peretola, for example) drew on friendship networks established during struggles for school councils and district councils, and others on shared membership of environmental organizations (Terzolle again, Idra, Il Giardino dei Leoni). Moreover, committee activists have frequently had experience on other committees in the past. The experience of the coordinator of the Joint Committees against the Third Lane, although not unique, illustrates this phenomenon:

When the bypass was planned, there were several meetings, bringing together people who felt the project would deface the environment. We came to the conclusion that if we were to win we would have to unite the various protests in a single voice — and we did. After 18 months, the project was completely abandoned. At least seven or eight committees had been formed, involving volunteers who were active on a regular basis and people who gave sporadic support. The committees remained afterwards, and the experience meant there was mutual esteem and friendship between the volunteers. So, a year later, when the issue of extending the motorway came up, we decided to meet in Galluzzo, in order to establish that the route would bypass there . . . The problem was that there was a national interest which was no longer compatible with our situation. We then started going around suburban areas that should have been interested in the extension, and where there were no committees, sometimes just individual protesters. We
encouraged the setting-up of committees, which have become part of our Joint Committee — so it now consists of 18 committees. A battle began, culminating, in 1998, in a parliamentary question, to which no answer has ever been given (Interview 3).

Shopkeepers’ networks represent another type of social network involved in the formation of some committees. They often generate informal street associations, and this was the case with seven of the committees we interviewed, as we have already seen.

However, resemblances to movements of the past are particularly visible in the organizational forms chosen. Social movements have been defined as ‘networks of networks’, or networks of informal groups with weak internal coordination. Citizens’ committees assume a less structured form than the organization of movements, with a lower level of coordination and less consistency in terms of number of activists and material resources. Informality seems to be the main characteristic of these micro organizations: the degree of division of labour is minimal and relates to a very restricted number of people.

Table 4 shows that only two of the 21 committees have more than 20 active members — and 14 committees have under 10. Not only is the number of members low, but committees have not been consistently able to increase their membership over the years of mobilization: only two committees have increased the number of activists beyond what they had in the year they were founded, and most have remained the same — while, in six, the number of members has actually fallen. Moreover, of the 21 committees interviewed, only five have registered and gained regular associative status. Cross-referencing position in a central district (District 1) or a peripheral district (Districts 5 and 3) with official registration of a committee, we observe that the level of structuring is still lower in the historic city centre, where only one of the 12 committees interviewed has such a status; while in the peripheral districts, no fewer than four out of eight committees have officially registered with the authorities as associations.

Finally, a lower level of structuring is also confirmed by the availability of material resources. Most committees do not show the amount of material resources they use in the course of a year’s activities, because they do not keep books and their expenses consist mainly of telephone, fax and postage, which are difficult to quantify. Only two committees derived income from sources other than their members: this came from the local administration (of the districts concerned), because the group had decided, for example, to organize a ward festival or cultural event. In addition, budget trends show that the groups are not in the course of becoming structured: in fact, only three committees have seen their resources increase during their years of activity.

3 According to an interview given by the coordinator of the Joint Committees against the Third Lane, in September 2000 there were some 70 committees involved (http://www.lavocedifirenze.com).
The organizational structure of movements is based on networks: various organizations are linked through formal and informal ties, with varying degrees of density. One of the difficulties in defining citizens’ committees as belonging to a movement is certainly the relative isolation of each of them. However, our research on Florence gives evidence of some attempts at coordination. Of the 20 committees interviewed, no fewer than 14 declared that they had contacts with other committees, with an average of five contacts per committee. The frequency of contacts is equally high in central and peripheral districts. These contacts are often with committees mobilizing in an adjoining area, as is the case with committees from the central district; other contacts are between committees mobilizing on similar issues, like the Third Lane (that is, the widening of the Florence to Bologna motorway), or private traffic in the city. These contacts are sometimes structured into coordinating organizations involving about 10 committees (like SOS Alberi, the Intercommittee Coordination, the Third Lane Committee and Idra — this last brings together all committees in the Florence area that are opposed to high-speed traffic).

Our interviews showed that a coordination initiative is often led by activists who have previously already been militant in some committee, and who seek to go beyond the limits of action that they view as too circumscribed and objectives that are too specific, convinced that bringing together points of view and planning projects that relate to the urban fabric as a whole can lead to better results. The coordinator of the Joint Committees against the Third Lane, for example, says that this structure was created at:

a meeting of committees, where a big argument broke out: in practice, seven committees means seven different opinions, because each one is taking care of its own patch — that’s something else typical of committees. Thinking about it, I realized that this wouldn’t get us far. So I tried to get to the heart of the matter, with a resolution that the motorway simply had no place in the urban fabric. That meant we could all agree, and we decided to produce a paper on it and to join forces (Interview 3).

The representative of the Intercommittee Coordination confirmed that the need to be more effective influenced the decision to ‘join forces’:

We joined forces in this Coordination because it was very convenient for the Council that citizens’ committees should be loosely structured, and there was an idea that each committee was cultivating its own patch. So the idea came up that committees with very consistent numbers — about 40 — could come together to change things, because it is very hard to go against organized citizens (Interview 4).

It should be said, however, that the possibility of coordinating all the committees often arouses scepticism, given their heterogeneous positions and demands. In the first place, a common platform is required. So, for example, in meetings of committees opposed to city-centre traffic in Florence, the possibility has been discussed of summoning a citizens’ committee assembly, proposing as a reference base the Aalborg Charter, approved by participants in the European Conference on Sustainable Cities in 1994, which provides for forms of participant planning to tackle environmental problems in the city. However, suspicions that they may be open to use as instruments of various political forces are at the root of a certain mutual diffidence between the groupings of committees.

**Anti-political or alternative political? Forms of action and strategies**

Having established that the territory is the central node for mobilization of committees — or at least for their rhetoric — and that their organization is weakly structured, we need to look at the way they present their requests and interact with institutions and the
surrounding environment. In other words, we have to understand the forms of action they use and the strategies they adopt. Drawing on studies of collective movements, it can be hypothesized that there should be an obvious relationship between forms of action and forms of organization and, in particular, that a low level of structural organization corresponds to a more radical repertoire of action (Piven and Cloward, 1977; Gamson, 1990). More generally, it has been noted that lack of power resources tends to make actors use protest as a political resource (Lipsky, 1965).

The first variable on the behaviour of citizens’ committees relates to the type of action they favour, whether they use political pressure or prefer protest, whether they ‘practise their aim’ (that is, they themselves produce the service they demand, which could involve monitoring the environment or the safety of residents in their district, cleaning gardens, helping children or the elderly), or whether they have gained a channel of access to political elites and therefore can represent the interests that they articulate through mediation in appropriate councils or related institutions. Previous research on citizens’ committees has noted that the type of action they prefer is protest. This seems to be confirmed by our data, as can be seen in Table 5, with 90% of the committees we interviewed having used this method. However, it is interesting to note that 13 committees regularly use lobbying to influence decision-making processes and that no fewer than five committees explicitly mentioned political representation as their usual form of action — by which they mean participation in appropriate consultative committees. Although we already know that protest is typical of committees’ repertoires of action, it is useful to ask what forms of protest they prefer. They may be moderate or else radical; they can aim to gain consensus in public opinion through appeals and leaflet distribution or through street demonstrations or even by acting directly on the political elites.

Table 6 shows that the most radical protests, those defined as confrontational (that is blockades, sit-ins or even occupations and hunger strikes) are relatively rare, and that citizens’ committees’ repertoires of action more often consist of direct action intended to influence policy-making — such as petitions, letters to the administration or petitions to the Regional Administrative Court, or else direct appeals to the public through cultural events or press conferences. Moreover, protest seems to be highly ‘mediated’, with appeals to public opinion launched directly on the local pages of newspapers. Nine committees declared that they had frequent contact with the press, some — like the coordinator of SOS Alberi (Interview 11) — even referring to the internal headings of newspapers’ local sections. Easy access to the media reduces the need to use radical repertoires.

All things considered, it also seems easy to gain direct access to institutions, and so citizens’ committees — in Florence, at least — do not seem to have any interest in radicalizing encounters with institutions, preferring to try to interact with them in such a way as to influence their choices. From our interviews with some of the citizens’ committees’ representatives, it became apparent that — despite their harsh criticisms of parties and the political classes — they do not see themselves as being a factor in the

Table 5  Types of action used by citizens’ committees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% Responses</th>
<th>% Cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political representation (consultative committees)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services to members and associates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services to others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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delegitimization of political representation. In fact, they feel they are driving forward citizens’ demands, and offering the information and support that the institutions need for good administration. We have already cited some interviews in which representatives of committees asserted that they are acting as a structure of political mediation and thus replacing the political parties. Some other committees stated that their aim was certainly not to create revolution, but to act moderately in order to achieve their objectives. This, for example, applied to the Sant’Orsola committee, whose representative said ‘we have tried to be extremely cordial. We have sent very civil letters to the mayor. We have contacted the press, who have helped us out to a really enormous extent’ (Interview 2). The representative of the Via Santa Chiara committee stated that ‘we are not in favour of sensational action or radical protest actions. We know how to deal with politicians and how to talk to them. The most violent reactions have come from those who are culturally less well-equipped, pace Karl Marx, Lenin, the Social Encyclicals etc.’ (Interview 10). In fact, the committees have defined their objective as being to solve concrete problems, and the forms of action considered more useful to this purpose are moderate ones, with radical ones often stigmatized as counter-productive.

However, if we look at the structure of the alliances formed by citizens’ committees (Table 7), political parties — even though they are viewed as inefficient — continue to be seen as necessary interlocutors: 19 out of the 21 committees declared that they have relations with them. It is well-known that citizens’ committees have defined themselves as apolitical and often exclude from their organization people who are already active in parties, in order not to risk being used. However, they explicitly state that they do have contact with politicians, so that they will be heard by the institutions. It is interesting to note that 18 of our committees have contacts with centre-left parties, while only seven have contacts with the centre-right. This may reinforce the idea that relations with parties are viewed as instrumental: committees maintain relations with those parties that occupy the decision-making positions in the local administration (and, in Florence, this means

Table 6 Types of protest used by citizens’ committees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions aimed at policy-making</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct appeals to the public</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontational protest</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total responses</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 Citizens’ committees: contacts with social, public and private-sector actors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of actor</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizations in the environmental movement</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legambiente</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations from other movements</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various associations</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade unions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations of entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, artisans etc.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties in general</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre-right parties</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre-left parties</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church or other religious groups</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
those of the centre-left), and only when the issue is particularly contested do they also seek support from opposition parties. Furthermore, our indicators on relations with parties contradict the widespread impression that committees on security favour contacts with right-wing parties: all our committees that had contacts with centre-right parties also had them with centre-left parties. Moreover, it should be noted that only four of the committees mobilizing around security issues have contacts with parties of the centre-right, while five of them have contacts only with parties of the centre-left, and one with no party (Table 8).

Although parties are more frequent interlocutors, other types of actors are also considered strategically important by committees. Among movement organizations, the environmentalist ones are more popular, and among them Legambiente was the one mentioned most (all committees that have contacts with environmentalist associations also have them with Legambiente). Among special interest organizations, those of shopkeepers, artisans or entrepreneurs are contacted more than trade unions; and the parishes, often used as meeting centres by committees, are held in high regard. The privileged relationship with environmentalist organizations can be explained by the pertinence for citizens’ committees of defending territory. However, these ‘pragmatic’ alliances do not preclude a certain diffidence towards some associations, which are viewed as an integral part of the structured political representation that can stifle the spontaneity of committees. This was instanced by our interview with the coordinator of Idra, which brings together several committees opposed to the high-speed railway system:

> These associations are not only the environmentalist ones, and there is a kind of genetic mutation of the role that these associations play: some have tended to drive politics in a particular direction, but mainly — partly because of the essential financing they receive from the private sector and partly because of their equally essential public-sector funding — they have, one might say, moved away from a Utopian outlook to a consideration of the possible, the practicable — and, therefore, the marketable. They fight battles using images, and so they will show you the historic centre of Florence, and things like that — but when it comes to structural interventions that could deface the city, like high-speed railways, when they’re asked about them in public, they say that they can do nothing more. And so we do other things. They are too attached to their cushy jobs, so the official environmentalist position is to stick to a joint position and to reject conflict. Another aspect of the so-called ‘modern’ environmentalist associations is that they have become a kind of client — they get a lot of commissions from the institutions to study and plan so-called ‘environmental projects’ (Interview 9).

As we have already seen, citizens’ committees have a pragmatic attitude: their forms of action are moderate, protest is considered an extreme measure, and they generally prefer direct contact with institutions to tackle everyday problems. From this point of view, relations with political parties are only one of the moves in a very complex game, involving elected administrators as well as the bureaucracy, members of the City Council and Chairs of District Councils. Thus, this flexible form of pressure on the centres of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safety committee</th>
<th>Centre-right</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 8 Committees on security: relations with centre-right parties**
power seems to be exerted almost exclusively at local government level, rarely going beyond the confines of the Region. Although no fewer than 20 out of our 21 committees have continuous relations with the various interlinked parts of the City Government, and 19 have similar relations with the Chairs of District Councils, only three committees are in contact with the Province and six in contact with the Region (Table 9). The fact that they do not act much beyond the regional level is understandable: their claims often relate to areas of competence within the sphere of local government, and at the same time their weak organizational structure prevents them from exercising steady pressure on higher institutional levels. Relations with those who hold political power are, therefore, of crucial importance and represent their channel of mobilization against inefficient political representation; moreover, their activities may, in showing up the weaknesses of the administration, to some extent re-legitimize traditional channels of mediation. When the administration ‘opens up’ (see the next section), it may seem that they are just responding symbolically (Edelman, 1964) to concrete problems — and often does seem so to citizens’ committees; however, the fact that many of them take part in ad hoc consultative committees shows that interaction and mediation with the public administration are, in fact, accessible. As can be seen in Table 10, no fewer than 13 citizens’ committees participate in district-level consultative committees, while eight do so at the level of the City Government.

It might be expected that greater propensity towards forms of political mediation would correspond to more structured forms of organization. However, cross-referencing ‘being registered and having articles of association’, which indicate organizational consolidation, with participation — or not — in the City Government’s consultative committees, we observe that only three of the eight citizens’ committees with regular registered status participate in city-level consultative committees.

To conclude, therefore, it would seem that their weakly structured form does not inhibit citizens’ committees from using a conventional repertoire of well-consolidated actions, which permits, and even favours, contact with institutions.
Administration and committees

Local government seems to see the need to respond to the crisis in the political parties’ ability to mediate, by allowing previously excluded social actors access to mediation bodies and public decision-making. This is evidenced by the numerous agreements signed with environmentalist associations by both the city and the region; by extension of some bodies that interact with the public (like the Secretariat of the City Council’s Transport and Mobility Department); and, above all, by the opening of ad hoc offices — organized to varying degrees — to improve the quality of life through interaction with citizens, like the Office for a Safe City and the Office for a Sustainable City. Our interviews with the managers of some of these offices showed their high level of awareness of change in mechanisms for transmitting demand, with the administration tending increasingly to play a role in mediation and in channelling conflicts. As one of the senior officials of the Secretariat of the City Council’s Transport and Mobility Department observed, citizens’ committees nowadays present directly a series of requests that used to arrive already filtered through the parties:

Citizens are asking for changes in the way parking is regulated, and for well-made pavements and streets. What we do is to maintain continuous relations with these committees and once we are aware of their need — which often is just what is really needed — we contact our local offices to carry it out … The political parties are losing contact with citizens, so our technical offices are turning into receptacles for citizens’ requests. And they do come in — in their hundreds. I must say, they are on the increase, there’s a big increase … there are people who even write in four times a day … and my reply is: “Letters like yours act as a stimulus: they bring these sore points out into the open and show us what needs to be done — and how much needs to be done”. We get 400 to 500 letters a year (Interview A).

However, making demands directly to the administration cannot be explained solely by the weakness of other mediation bodies: it also results from growing awareness on the part of citizens of a series of rights. ‘Citizens nowadays know that there are laws guaranteeing them certain rights’ (Interview B); thus, ‘as citizens acquire this awareness of their power to demand, to attend, to participate, they throw themselves into it. This conviction only came to a head a few years ago … and now citizens are strengthened by their rights and come out with their demands, so we do what we can’ (Interview A). Therefore, some offices are taking on the function of directly receiving and transmitting demands:

We are the link connecting citizens to the administration, and a thorn in the side of the offices whose job is to get things done … Requests come to us about everything from security and quality of life to sound-absorbent road surfaces, speed humps, pavements, zebra crossings and the positioning of wheelie bins, right through to transport and mobility plans for a given district. We each get about 40 telephone calls a day from outside … Individual citizens ask for small interventions; the committees generally have a broader vision. Because we know the City’s transport and mobility programmes, we can speed up interventions on the basis of citizens’ requests, and we do so fairly often. I have been in contact with about 15 committees. A good number of requests come to us from the districts, and they can act as a good link with City Council Departments, because many citizens put forward their requirements to the Chairman of the District Council or to the District’s senior official for transport and mobility … Obviously, those who exert more pressure get a quicker reply — and the same goes for the districts: those who are more divided exert less pressure (Interview B).

Relations with citizens’ committees are sought after, although in varying degrees. In particular, the Director of the Office for a Safe City, instituted in 1999 by the Mayor’s Office, stresses that interaction with citizens, in particular with organized citizens, is central to his work:

We have made use of the Mayor’s position on the Committee For Law And Order and Public Safety to try and get contacts in some districts to put us in touch with the situation of
associations, in order to find out their problems and report them in the Committee, through the
Mayor. Often the citizens’ committees have contacted us, sometimes we have contacted them,
where there have been known problems: in particular, given that we are guided by the concept
of integrated security, we have contacted citizens’ committees before taking decisions, in order
to find out what the problems were and how they thought they should be resolved. The Office is
part of a civic network. We have met citizens’ committees just to get to know them: we have
had contact with 30 to 40 committees and associations . . . I really think our relations with all the
committees and associations are a positive thing (Interview C).

One objective of this Office is in fact to coordinate the various committees and to
structure their interaction with the public administration. The Director even says:

I would like to succeed in bringing together citizens’ committees and creating a relationship —
a communications strategy — through which I could go some way towards servicing them. I’d
like to set a scale of priority for requests, which would then allow me, in my privileged position,
to contact the various administrations. We have a security agreement, the first one here on the
French model — the Chairman of the District Council is a permanent member of this, alongside
representatives of the forces of law and order, and from time to time the citizens’ committees
become involved, to tackle their district’s problems. It’s very important (Interview C).

Even though they emphasized it less, the City Council’s Transport and Mobility
Department demonstrated that they pay some attention to direct contact with citizens who
get in touch with the administration: ‘In general, it is the committees who contact us. We
receive so many phone calls. They write to us, tell us what they need, we contact them or
leave them a telephone number, or trace them through the addresses of the first
signatories. Then our technical office makes an on-the-spot investigation, deciding what
is to be done at street level, drafting a small plan and showing it to them. The next phase
is to put it into effect’ (Interview A).

Bringing together diverse interests — ‘to create synergy between people, resources
and contacts’ — was represented to us as a basic function of the Office for a Sustainable
City, set up in 1997 to facilitate Agenda 21 being carried out:

The function of the Office is to bring the various actors together around the table, find a way of
mediating between them, even intervene to a certain extent, to open up a process of
participatory planning. It’s not enough to sign a petition: things have to be brought to fruition.
For example, we launched Agenda 21 in District 4, in this case from above, with the
environmentalist associations and the Chairman of the Council of District 4 . . . We chose an
area and held a meeting with all the offices in the district. We set up meetings with schools,
because they include this project in their curriculum. This is the idea of participatory planning:
we went to people’s houses, to the parishes, to political associations. We provided them with
premises, but they had to manage them themselves — for example, opening and closing,
cleaning etc. These are small forms of participation. First the coordinators must be functional, in
order to enter into a process of interaction, and then people can talk about the solutions they
want to see (Interview D).

In addition to this trust in cooperative (‘win-win’) moves, there seems to be a hope
emerging that citizens’ committees can contribute to civic growth. As the director of the
Office for a Sustainable City said to us:

There is a need for the committees to create a minimum strategy, including things that it’s
feasible for them to do autonomously. There needs to be a recovery of local society that will be
capable of overcoming a number of local problems, and that will allow them to do something
directly for themselves, for their own quality of life. After all, this kind of action has a
psychological effect: they feel they can bypass the administration, instead of just settling down
to wait (Interview D).

However, there is also a perception that citizens’ committees risk fragmenting demands.
In fact, some interviewees drew a clear distinction between types of committees:
Sometimes, in reality, a committee is one person with 15 signatures, while others have significant capacities for planning. Often a committee defends only its own area, without understanding that in doing so it is pushing traffic into other areas (Interview B).

Committees are springing up like mushrooms, even street by street. Without losing sight of the needs of individuals, the administration has to look after the collective good. From this point of view, committees have a common denominator: improving conditions in the place where they live. In some cases, this is just one street, but in the enormous majority, it is within a broader area. Those who are interested in just one street make me think that they are out for their own personal advantage and they are simply moving the mess into the next street ... Those who are interested in a broader area, however, are trying to restore quality of life to a district, and I believe that their work is for the good of the whole city. However, those who are interested only in one street — or stretch of street — are working for themselves (Interview A).

This mistrust on the part of the administration does not, however, arise solely out of fragmentation of demand, but also out of internal fragmentation between offices, local bodies and public participation companies. Thus, these offices often bring into contact representatives of various City Council departments and district councils, public bodies at various levels and public participation firms, as well as associations and committees. This complexity of intervention is seen as necessitating coordination and mediation activities, both inside and outside institutions: ‘you have to answer complexity with complexity’ (Interview D). Intervention on security, for example, is presented as ‘flexible, global and interinstitutional’:

Citizens’ committees are asking — often with an undue emphasis on problems — for a police presence, but this is not always a solution. Sometimes they also raise problems that do not have to do directly with security, but indirectly — cleaning, urban regeneration, lighting. Their problems often relate to ‘soft’ crime — minor infringements — or else are expressions of malaise, which make people feel insecure about going out: in fact, these go hand-in-hand ... and they have a considerable impact on people’s perceptions. This has led, for example, to our emergency call points in parks. Often the perception is the true problem. For us, security is not simply the opposite of criminality: it is linked to improving the quality of life in general — lighting, street cleaning, meeting places — and to the presence of committees and associations that are in synergy with the administration. I am convinced that it is really important to succeed in creating a network of participants — not to act as patrols, but to signal problems (Interview C).

Conclusions

In summing up, we can say, on the basis of our interviews with 21 citizens’ committees in the Florence area, that most of them were organized in the second half of the 1990s or later. Their distribution seems to be more or less homogeneous in all districts of the city. Our focus on Districts 1, 3 and 5 showed that the theme common to citizens’ committees is defence of the quality of life on their own territory. Seen from this point of view, security and the environment are not alternative themes but complementary ones. Moreover, even when they mobilize on security issues, citizens’ committees rarely refer to immigration as a cause of nuisances like drug-pushing or prostitution; they tend to be asking the administration for a redefinition of town planning policy rather than a simple law and order intervention, although the latter is also considered fundamental.

There are also difficulties emerging in the interaction between management and the executive, administrators and politicians, especially in relation to financing various interventions. As one of the members of the City Council’s Transport and Mobility Department stressed: ‘The role of management is now most important. We make political inputs, but if the Director has not planned a particular expense we are blocked. The administration is not immovable, but movement does not always generate a product ... that is the problem’ (Interview B).

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Friendship and neighbourhood networks lie at the origins of these committees, as do associative experiences of various types. The previous experience of many activists in political parties, associations and trade unions has provided the secure knowledge base necessary for collective organization. Some committees are founded on functional, rather than territorial, solidarity — notably that of shopkeepers. However, there is no evidence of differences between the structure and action of committees that depend on the presence of shopkeepers and those made up of political activists and members of voluntary associations.

From the organizational point of view, citizens’ committees seem to be structurally weak (as already evidenced by other research): ours often had no more than 10 active members; their budgets were limited and came directly from members; only five of them had regularized their status. However, they often mobilize beyond the level of the street, covering the ward or the district, or sometimes even the province. Comparing central districts with those on the periphery showed that most of the committees with regular status and those with a more general level of mobilization are found on the periphery. As regards forms of action and strategies, we noted that protest remains a basic resource for these organizations, but that it has assumed a moderate, mediated form and tends to be directed at influencing the decision-making process rather than constructing a collective identity. Relations with public authorities, with parties and political institutions are also considered more relevant than relations with other, movement-type organizations or associations. Environmentalist organizations represent an exception to this, especially Legambiente, which is often mentioned as an important ally. Another significant aspect is that of growing interactions between committees seeking to generalize the level of mobilization and, therefore, the issues on which they protest. This fact is important, because it could indicate that a collective urban movement is in the making, mobilizing on issues of services and quality of life in the city.

Their critical attitude towards existing forms of political representation does not prevent citizens’ committees from regularly participating in activities that put pressure on public authorities and also — despite their low level of formalization — in regular consultative committees and political mediation. Citizens’ committees seem to achieve a certain success in their interactions with institutions. In exerting pressure to block projects decided ‘at the centre’, they find allies in local bodies and in the bureaucracy, and they often also succeed in these intentions, blocking infrastructure developments with high environmental impact and bringing an influx of public resources into the protest area.

Thus, the crisis in the political parties’ capacity for mediation does not seem to have led to a reflux in the private, nor to an anomic explosion of conflicts. On the contrary, the weakness of party patronage seems to have liberated a series of energies and capacities, built up during earlier mobilizations, and to be directing forms of engagement no longer towards ‘absolute politics’ (Pizzorno, 1996), but towards a condition experienced as ‘immediate’ and presented as ‘limited’. Resources for collective action have been transferred from the collective movements of the past to new mobilizations, bringing the capacity to promote protest and to use it through the communications media and with the institutions. It also seems as if past mobilization experiences have left other institutions broadly — if selectively — open to negotiating, at least with those actors considered worthy of recognition. Thus, in the past, the problem of conflict management was linked more to the strong ideologization of the actors of protest: nowadays, in contrast, it seems to derive from the political institutions’ weak capacity for creating ‘high’ collective identities, thus postponing the achievement of objectives over a long period, and mediating between the egoisms of individuals.

The activities of citizens’ committees seem, therefore, to be adapting to the gradual weakening of the parties’ capacity to act on two fronts of representation: that of identification and that of efficiency (Pizzorno, 1996). Identification activities are, in fact, becoming the prerogative of new subjects, while the parties maintain control of
representative institutions and, therefore, of efficient activity. Through their own administrators, they too interact with the actors of protest, presenting themselves as more or less close to them, mediating, seeking solutions — but are no longer capable of developing or promoting the acceptance of comprehensive interpretations for causes of dissatisfaction or for possible solutions. However, this identification activity is being carried on by groups, voluntary associations and committees, which address their requests to institutions, bypassing party mediation. So the weakening of the parties seems to be having an effect on the types of collective identity emerging, which in fact reject the major ideologies, the quest for the universal and the postponement into the future of satisfaction of one’s own claims. In both spheres, even if in very different ways, intervention is concentrated at the local level and seeks to have an immediate effect. For the parties, this seems to mean setting themselves the goal of adapting to the role of ‘high-efficiency’ mediators of identity built elsewhere. However, for protest entrepreneurs, who find themselves managing considerable collective action assets ‘in the here and now’, the stake seems to be the capacity to give stability over time to many mobilization resources that appear very ephemeral at the moment.

These changes make it necessary to adjust the instruments used for analysis of collective movements — starting with redefining the concept of movement itself. Although, traditionally, the intervention of movements has been conceived as predominantly limited to mobilizing public opinion — and through that, political parties — nowadays the analysis has to extend to other phases of the decision-making process. Analysis of political opportunities for protest has shown the role of the parties as allies, but recent research suggests that, alongside the electoral arena and the channels of democratic representation, the policy arena is another very important area for protest, with its channels and rules that go beyond democratic representation. Relations here, whether of cooperation or of conflict, are not developing mainly with the parties, but with their representatives in government and in the administration.

To conclude, it seems that even though there is a disjuncture between identification-based representation and efficient representation, the role of interactions between movements and institutions remains important, if typically very differently from the past. Organizations of movements are acquiring considerable degrees of freedom in relation to the traditional actions of ‘patronage’ maintained by political parties in the past. Since they can no longer use a privileged relationship with the party as their main key for access to institutions, movements must be equipped to accomplish some functions ‘on their own account’, using a multiplicity of organizational forms, ideological discourses and strategies for action — which we have already described. Despite this, the ‘new-new movements’ do not appear to be completely deprived of channels of access to the institutions. Indeed, it seems that there is a gradual opening of the administration — and in particular of elected administrators, that is, representatives of the parties — towards a dialogue with any emergent interested parties. Dramatically aware of the gradual crumbling of their ‘core support’, the parties — or at least administrators belonging to the parties — seem to be gradually more permeable to accumulated demands from below.

Therefore, although we have captured some signs of the various actors adapting to the new connotations of representation, there are also visible difficulties in this transition phase. As far as the organization of movements is concerned, what is at stake seems to be the capacity to build less localistic and more lasting identities. The role of the political parties in a varied structure of representation will certainly not become outdated: still the main actors in selecting the political class, they can always be called on to fulfil important mediation and guarantee functions. It will certainly not be easy for them to adapt organizationally and, especially, strategically to a situation in which the making of identities takes place predominantly elsewhere. This raises not only the problem of trying to mediate continually between localistic — and often opposing — pressures, but also that of the need to maintain a type of participation not oriented solely towards material
incentives. Although the tradition of attachment to one’s own private preserve can be an obstacle to understanding emerging requirements and identities, excessive permeability to particularistic demands can reduce the capacity to carry out ‘efficient representation’ activities.

Donatella della Porta (dellaporta@mail.unifi.it) and Massimiliano Andretta (andretta@mail.unifi.it), University of Florence, Dispo, Via Valori 9, 50132 Firenze, Italy.

Appendix: Interviews

(a) With committees:

Interview 1: Representative of the San Pierino Committee, District 1
Interview 2: Representatives of the Sant’Orsola Committee, District 1
Interview 3: Coordinator of the Joint Committees against the Third Lane, District 5
Interview 4: Representative of the Intercommittee Coordination, District 1
Interview 5: Representative of the Via Laura Committee, District 1
Interview 6: Representatives of the Terzolle Committee, District 3
Interview 7: Representatives of the Borgo di Peretola Committee, District 5
Interview 8: Representatives of the Environmental Defence Committee, District 3
Interview 9: Representatives of the Idra Committee against high-speed traffic, District 5
Interview 10: Representative of the Via Santa Chiara Committee, District 3
Interview 11: Coordinator of SOS-Alberi

(b) With public administrators:

Interview A: Representative of the Secretariat of the City Council’s Transport and Mobility Department, Inspector Bencini
Interview B: Representative of the Secretariat of the City Council’s Transport and Mobility Department, Inspector Ottanelli
Interview C: Director of the Office for a Safe City, Dr Filucchi
Interview D: Manager of the Office for a Sustainable City, Dr Pozzi

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