

## TRANSCENDING MARGINALIZATION: THE MOBILIZATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED IN FRANCE, GERMANY, AND ITALY IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE\*

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*Mobilization by the unemployed has traditionally been considered a highly improbable phenomenon. However, recent observations challenge such a supposition. Our article compares protest waves in France, Germany, and Italy, where the unemployed successfully organized themselves and acted on their own behalf for several months. We argue that mobilization of the unemployed—although it empirically proved to be a possibility—remains very fragile, particularly depending on beneficial “windows of opportunities.” Our analysis is above all interested in deciphering macrostructural conditions and opportunity structures, arguing that the unemployed benefited from external developments causing changes in potential mobilizing resources, and brought about new allies and political entrepreneurs. At the same time, however, these opportunity structures were actively exploited and, at the same time, their opening was fostered by the mobilization itself.*

Mobilization by the unemployed was long considered highly improbable. The obstacles have been abundantly outlined in the literature and related to powerful forces of social and political atomization (Richards 2002). First of all, we are dealing with a very heterogeneous group of people with different biographies, diverse interests, and a range of identities and belief-systems. Mobilization is further hindered by the public stigmatization of the unemployed (Piven and Cloward 1977). This stigma impedes the formation of collective mobilizations and leads rather to social isolation (Wolski-Prenger 1996). Moreover, their job insecurity complicates the formation of stable networks, memberships, and organizations. Finally, scholars tend to argue since the path-breaking Marienthal study (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel 1971 [1933]) that unemployment, particularly long-term joblessness, drives individuals into apathy and fatalism, and leads to the erosion of social capital (e.g., trust, personal contacts, and organizational memberships). Most scholars have taken these sociological and psychological features and consequences of unemployment for granted and have thus tended to argue that the collective mobilization of the jobless is either improbable or even impossible. However, at least in the light of the recent rise of collective action by the unemployed in Europe, such analyses require substantial qualification. For this reason, we want to engage in a more timely and differentiated analysis of unemployed mobilization, its conditions, structures, and dynamics. For this purpose, we aim to study comparatively the protest waves

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\* This analysis is based on data collected by the members of a project entitled “The Contentious Politics of Unemployment in Europe: Political Claim Making, Policy Deliberation and Exclusion from the Labor Market.” The project includes the following countries: Britain (Paul Statham, University of Leeds), Switzerland (Marco Giugni, University of Geneva), France (Didier Chabanet, University of Lyon), Italy (Donatella della Porta, University of Florence), Germany (Christian Lahusen, University of Bamberg), and Sweden (Anna Linders, University of Cincinnati and University of Karlstad). The project is financed by the European Commission (HPSE-CT2001-00053 UNEMPOL) and the Swiss Federal Office for Education and Science through the Fifth Framework program of research of the European Union. We thank all the members of the UNEMPOL research consortium for their contributions to the project.

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since the late 1990s in three European countries—France, Germany, and Italy—where the unemployed succeeded in organizing themselves and acting on their own behalf for a significant period of time. Our study is geared primarily to develop explanatory hypotheses and present comparative empirical data for a subject that remains understudied in social movement analysis.<sup>1</sup> Although we do not claim the analysis to be fully systematic or representative of all unemployed mobilizations in Europe, we hope that it helps to decipher the macrostructural environments and conditions impinging on unemployed mobilization—leaving microfoundations to other studies.

### CONTEMPORARY UNEMPLOYED PROTESTS

In all three countries under analysis, collective action by the jobless is undoubtedly connected to pressing local deprivations and grievances rooted in social marginalization and exclusion. Moreover, this unrest benefited from an organizational infrastructure that consisted of long-standing charitable organizations and newly founded and more politically outspoken groups, which had finally engaged in setting up national networks and coalitions during the 1980s. Hence, even if protests had a specific geographical origin, the developments of the last twenty years give testimony of an increasingly dense web of local and national organizations and coalitions, which were actively committed to instigate local actions and coordinate national protest campaigns.

In Italy, for instance, the mobilization of the unemployed is geographically limited. The phenomenon is concentrated in certain urban areas in the south, primarily Naples and the surrounding region, where an unemployment rate of over 30 percent has been endemic for some decades. Moreover, Naples has a long tradition of sociopolitical radicalism dating back to the nineteenth century (Hobsbawm 1959), comprised of social, political, and labor-related struggles, which largely escape the control of the unions and other institutional actors. Thus, the unemployed movement is a component of a set of social claims (housing, health, environment) originating from different events (the protest wave of 1968, the outbreak of cholera in 1973, the earthquake in 1980), which constituted an excellent seedbed for organized protest (Baglioni 2008). A crucial date for the Neapolitan unemployed movement is June 1975, when almost 2,000 jobless people—wearied by more than a year of protest in Naples organized by the Committee of Vico Cinquesanti (called with the name of the street where it was based)—marched to Rome and were received by the government. At this meeting a promise was made to create 10,500 new jobs for the mobilized unemployed; and the same day the city of Naples offered 700 mobilized unemployed persons a one-year work contract financed by a state assistance fund (Ferrara 1997; Ginsborg 1989). This success led in Naples to the creation of numerous committees of the unemployed, like the Comitato Banci Nuovi or the *Unione Disoccupati Napoletani*, active in the 1970s and in the 1980s, or the more recent *Movimento di Lotta per il Lavoro* and the *Disoccupati Autorganizzati di Acerra*, active in the 1990s and in the 2000s, which negotiated hiring terms for members with the local and national authorities.

In France, the mobilization of the unemployed is a more large-scale phenomenon. France is unquestionably the European Union country in which the unemployed have achieved the greatest visibility. Over the last twenty years they have mobilized massively on several occasions and shown a certain capacity for ongoing action (for instance, occupation of local bureaus of ASSEDIC, the insurance unemployment system, or of financially prosperous enterprises announcing dismissals). Their organizations have built up a network, which, while more active in some regions than in others, enjoys both a national presence and alliances with trade unions and far-left bodies thus reducing their political isolation. Despite its limited resources, the French unemployed movement has succeeded in maintaining certain autonomy of action. The first-ever National Union of Unemployed People (*SCN*) was formed in 1982 at

the instigation of a handful of leftist Catholic militants. On May 30, 1985, it was the driving force behind a protest march in Paris gathering some 5,000 unemployed. Weakened by internal divisions, the *SCN* split in 1985 and gave rise to the National Movement of Unemployed and Precarious Workers (*MNCP*). Two years later Communist Party leaders from the Paris suburbs formed the Association for Employment, Information, and Solidarity for unemployed and precarious workers (*APEIS*). In 1993, Act Together Against Unemployment (*AC!*) was jointly launched by unionists, unemployed association leaders, and intellectuals. Also important is the General Confederation of Work (*CGT*) trade union's unemployed defense section, founded in 1983, which plays a vital role in southern France. All these organizations were formed in the course of only one decade beginning in 1982, a period marked by mass unemployment, the emergence of the new poverty, the failure of the Left in promoting employment, and the acceleration of the process of European integration, which, since the ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht, prohibits any expansive policies.

In Germany, too, the mobilization and organization of the unemployed took a clearer shape from the early 1980s onwards. Unemployment groups and organizations proliferated locally, and gradually became structured around a number of national associations. In 1982 the West German BAG-Erwerbslose, as it was later known, was founded to coordinate the work of the independent organizations of the unemployed, and the Koordinierungsstelle (KOS) was established in 1986 to represent the organizations affiliated with the unions (Rein and Scherer 1993). Moreover, after reunification in 1990, the Arbeitslosenverband (ALV) was set up as an association of the jobless in East Germany (Grehn 1996).<sup>2</sup> These organizations had a perceivable impact on mobilization dynamics. While smaller protest events were reported in individual localities, nationally coordinated mobilization began in the mid-1990s, when demonstrations by the unemployed in many cities brought together several thousand people. Actions peaked in 1998 with national elections in view, yet soon disappeared from the national arena as the coalition of Social Democrats and the Green Party came into government. It wasn't until 2004 that a second wave was triggered, particularly in eastern Germany, where protests opposed parts of the government reform program *Agenda 2010*. The Agenda aimed to establish restrictions in social security, retirement, sickness, and disability insurance, and rules regarding payment and job assignment for the unemployed. In the same year more than one million people protested in 230 cities—predominantly in eastern Germany—against the upcoming installment of the labor market reform *Hartz IV* (Roth 2005).<sup>3</sup>

These brief descriptions suggest that the various protest waves exhibit similar patterns. In order to understand better and more systematically the conditions and dynamics of protests by the unemployed, it is thus necessary to take a closer look both at exogenous and endogenous factors. We will argue that the mobilization of the unemployed depended heavily on very specific patterns in the social and institutional environment. At the same time, however, the comparative analysis of these three countries will show that unemployed action also builds on the availability of mobilizing resources, such as organizations.

## DEPRIVATIONS

Reflecting upon our observations, we perceive that high levels of mobilization tend to correspond to high unemployment phases, even if the relationship is neither direct nor automatic. In fact, France, Germany, and Italy have all been characterized by outstanding levels of mass unemployment, particularly since the late 1970s: the standardized unemployment rate rose in France from 4.9 percent in 1975 to 11.2 percent in 1995, in Italy from 4.7 percent to 11.2 percent, and in Germany from 3.3 percent to 8.5 percent. In all three countries, from the early 1980s and throughout the 1990s, there has been a deep and dismantling process of industrial change that has led to a dramatic reassessment of the country's labor configuration. These developments were centered in specific regions, which

were thus particularly affected by mass unemployment. In Italy, the strong cleavage between the southern and northern parts of the country reproduced itself in the field of unemployment. A similar observation can be made for Germany, where the economy and labor market of the former German Democratic Republic crumbled after reunification and has experienced deindustrialization ever since. In spite of significant financial investment, economic recovery in the new *Länder* only focuses on a couple of prosperous, urban areas. In France strong regional inequalities persist as well. In particular, the departments of Bouches-du-Rhône and of Nord-Pas-de-Calais are most heavily affected by the dismantling of the steel industry and dockyards. Not surprisingly, these regions were strongholds of the emerging protest movement of the unemployed.

On first sight, the relation between unemployment rates and collective action by the unemployed seems plausible, because unemployment is linked quite obviously with individual material deprivation, which should provide enough motivation for personal unrest. Moreover, in regard to the emergence of collective action, we might expect that mass unemployment gives more public recognition to the problem (Bust-Bartels 1989). Finally, rising figures should have a favorable influence on mobilization because “blaming the victim” strategies should become less persuasive (Gallas 1996). Deprivations, however, do not translate into protest automatically, as classic social movement research has argued (Zald and McCarthy 1987). In order to arouse discontent, deprivations need to be perceived subjectively as unjust when compared with the situation of others (Runciman 1972). This insight translates into two propositions that find evidence in our countries.

First, it can be argued that the mobilization of the unemployed benefited from regional hotspots of joblessness. This “regionalization” implies not only a higher concentration of jobless people “per capita,” and thus more potential constituents. Deprivations also translate more easily into shared, collective grievances when interpreted in terms of regional inequalities, such as when obviously contradicting the claims of territorial unity and homogeneity enshrined in French Republicanism, and/or ritually stated by governments in Italy and, particularly after reunification, in Germany. The public awareness of regional inequalities is more probable in long-lasting historical economic and social cleavages, like the divide between the north and south of Italy and the east and west in Germany.

Second, feelings of relative deprivation will arise when events occur that imply a deterioration of the situation of the jobless (Walsh 1981). This signaling effect does not stem from macroeconomic developments and the deteriorating situation of the labor market, because these creeping changes affect jobholders and do not directly alter individual grievances of those already without jobs. The latter are much more directly dependent on public policies and services. Hence, feelings of deprivation will emerge if the state administration is unable to respond effectively to the needs of the unemployed in specific moments of crisis (e.g., in Naples, during the cholera outbreak in 1973 and the earthquake in 1980). Relative deprivations also become apparent when social provisions and administrative services are modified in the wake of government reforms. The chance that these policy changes are perceived as relative deprivations are high, as soon as the reforms qualify social rights, to which the unemployed were legally and morally entitled before (Böhnisch and Cremer-Schäfer 2003).

In France, for instance, the movement began at the eve of 1983, when the perspective of a decrease of unemployment became unrealistic and when the leftist government, which had been in power for the past two years, abandoned neo-Keynesian policies in favor of the monetarist orthodoxy. Protests in late 1997 centered on a demand for a “Christmas bonus” of an amount equivalent to approximately 250 euros for every unemployed. The same is true for Germany, where protests during national election campaigns in 1998 contributed to terminate a government that was blamed for promoting labor market and social policies hostile to the unemployed. Protests surged again in 2004 when the leftist government announced implementation of the unpopular Hartz IV reforms. In Italy, the mobilization of the jobless

remained strongly attached to Naples. Protests grew out of frustration over the quality and reliability of local public services and public employment; moreover, they were nurtured by the general perception among the unemployed, radical-left parties, and unions that the center-left government they supported was not able to find the promised solutions to unemployment (Baglioni, della Porta, and Graziano 2005). Interestingly enough, however, leftist governments of that time (e.g., the first Romano Prodi administration) were unable to develop a consistent reform program, which could have aroused dissent and/or opposition by the jobless on a national scale, following thus the example of the two other countries.

In sum, de Tocqueville's law, which holds that the subjective dynamic of a social phenomenon counts more than its objective gravity (Tocqueville 1969 [1840]), is a key element to understanding the transformation of grievances into collective action, because *grievances have to be perceived subjectively and interpreted collectively as unjustified deprivations*. Hence, local protests are driven by feelings of frustration and anger, generated by the spread of mass unemployment and the inability of local authorities to respond to the immediate needs of a growing constituency of jobless. National protests seem to require additionally a collectively shared feeling of being deprived by the national government, which is perceived to be either unable to improve the situation of the jobless or even committed to introduce more adverse policy reforms. Frustrations are aggravated by the fact that expectations in some cases have been high (Gurr 1971). Indeed, it is noteworthy that the late 1990s had brought leftist parties into government in all three countries, on which the jobless and their allies had pinned their hopes.

### POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

Collective action by the jobless is not only marked by grievances and relative deprivations, as described thus far, but is also strongly dependent on the opportunity structure of the surrounding political system. These opportunities are not merely external and immutable factors in protest development, but, as McAdam has shown (1982), often reflect the interaction between the immediate political environment and the actions of different policy actors—even if some of them may be particularly marginalized in social and political terms. Political opportunity theorists predict collective action is more probable in a political environment that (a) provides easier access to the political institutions, (b) is characterized by instable electoral constituencies, and (c) is marked by heterogeneous elites, thus providing influential allies (Kitschelt 1986; McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1996). These elements work as “pull” and “push” factors on protest mobilization. On the one hand, they can create room to maneuver for social movement actors and encourage them to mobilize for their cause. On the other hand, they may encourage “insiders” to become interested in forming and mobilizing political opposition—both inside and outside political institutions—and further stimulate protest actions by “outsiders.”

In its original wording, the conception of political opportunity structures is strongly state-centered. Theoretically and empirically speaking, however, it is not so easy to determine which actors belong to the system that provides opportunities (the “insiders”) and those trying to capitalize on them (the “outsiders”). This is particularly true for European politics in the realm of social and labor market policies. Here, industrial relations are heavily institutionalized, albeit in very different forms in different countries, generating “private-interest governments” (Streeck and Schmitter 1985) and/or consensual patterns of policy formation and implementation, often subsumed under the catch phrase of neocorporatism (Lijphard and Crepaz 1991). Thus, at the edges of the political system, unstable and porous borders appear that are responsible for the ambivalent position of unions. On the one hand, unions tend to belong to (and support) institutionalized politics, such as in the early 1990s when the unions in all three countries acted as political parties and provided governments

with the social consensus necessary to initiate unpopular labor policies and welfare reforms (Mania and Sateriale 2002). In France this phenomenon is particularly marked through the national unemployment compensation system, which is managed by social dialogue between the state and the social partners. On the other hand, the unions are strongly committed to their role as representatives of workers' interests, including unemployed workers. This means that unions are simultaneously privileged partners with and challengers of the government.

This ambiguous form of unionism gives rise to contradictory relations between unions and the unemployed, especially when unemployed workers mobilize to protest. As Lahusen and Baumgarten (2006) argue, it is the specific structure of national unionism and the particular form of institutional inclusion in each country that seems to condition political opportunities. We expect that higher levels of unionization and stronger union centralization into branch-specific or national unions will be less conducive to unemployed protests. This is because these organizational variations create a representational monopoly which tends to pacify social and political unrest by providing institutionalized patterns of interest representation and policy deliberation. Conversely, we assume that collective action by unemployed workers is more probable when the unionization and/or centralization of unionism is lower or in the process of eroding. This is because an organizationally and ideologically fragmented landscape of unions should provide a seemingly beneficial environment for protest. As more unions enter into contestation over policy reforms, it becomes more likely that some will choose protest tactics. Also it is likely that more forceful political dissidents will arise, who can play particularly important roles in unemployed mobilization as political entrepreneurs or sponsors.

Empirical evidence suggests that the political opportunity structure in all three countries became more permissive for protest by the jobless during the 1980s and 1990s. Rates of unionization are on the decline: in France, membership decreased from 25 percent to around 7 percent between the mid-1970s and 2004 (Bérout 2006); in Italy, it diminished from 50 percent in 1980 to 38 percent in 1998 (Carrieri 2003); and in Germany, in only nine years (1991-2000) unionization strongly decreased since German reunification from 38 percent to 27 percent. This decline was particularly strong within eastern Germany, where figures decreased in the same period of time from 50 percent to 27 percent (Ebbinghaus 2002). We also observe a dramatic increase in dissent within national unions. These conflicts were caused by the conservative shift in social and the labor market policies beginning in the 1980s, and especially when leftist parties governed during the so-called Social Democratic era of the late 1990s (Germany, 1998-2005; France, 1981-1986, 1988-1993, 1997-2002; Italy, 1996-2001). Within this constellation of power, unionists in the three countries were torn between loyalties towards leftist governments and an outspoken criticism of the administrations' neoliberal policy reforms. Conflicts were particularly pronounced in France and Italy, given the fact that unionism in these countries is structured by ideological orientation and not by industrial branches, as with German unions, leaving French and Italian unions more exposed to sectarian tendencies. For example, the French trade union landscape was both unified and divided. Certain confederations, like *CFDT*, changed their political line, forsaking trade unionism in some disputes. In the early 1990s, they adopted a clearly reformist line, more or less in line with economic liberalism. New organizations (like the trade unions *SUD*), or new coalitions (for example the Group of the Ten), were created in response, embracing a combative, extreme-left and anticapitalist form of trade unionism.

Similarly, in the early 1980s, Italian school workers created a more radical and social-movement oriented unionism (known by the acronym of *Cobas*, that is *Comitati di base*, base committees) as an act of dissent towards the traditional Italian unionism. Traditional unions were accused of being part of the political-consociational system and thus neglecting to defend the rights of many workers and unemployed (Bernocchi 1993). Also, the center-right Berlusconi government in the early 2000s provoked the re-emergence of the historical political-ideological division in national unionism (split among Communists, Socialists, and

Christian Democrats), when only two (the Catholic and Christian Democratic-oriented *CISL* and the former socialist *UIL*) out of the three major unions agreed to sign the “*Patto per l’Italia*,” a national agreement for employment, isolating the largest leftist union, *CGIL*.

In Germany, where unionism is less exposed to political fragmentation and sectarianism, there nevertheless has always been dissent. Some union branches are traditionally more militant, (e.g., the *IG Metall, ver.di*), and many local branches and activists within the unions have been involved in supporting and/or organizing local unrest, especially by establishing unemployment groups and the related umbrella organization (the *KOS*). These groups of activists were successful in winning the support of their national leaders and functionaries until the elections of 1998, when the Social Democrats came into power. Torn between loyalty and criticism, cleavages within German unionism deepened, particularly between the national leadership and local unionists. The national leaders ultimately endorsed the reform program of the Schröder government and dissociated itself from collective action in early 2004, but local unionists remained attached to the cause of local protests, partly with the silent support of their national organizations (Baumgarten 2004; Lahusen and Baumgarten 2006).

These observations show that political opportunities for jobless protest were created in the 1990s. Severe conflicts over the future of the welfare state in general and labor markets and social policies in particular, led to dramatic controversies and cleavages within elite political circles. This made the “political establishment” more vulnerable to collective action from the streets and generated political entrepreneurs within their own ranks, primarily amongst the unions, which actively seized opportunities and allies in order to boost their political weight in institutional bargaining. Consequently, “outsiders” like the jobless became important political stakeholders and were able to influence public policy debates. Hence, scholars are correct to note that “[o]pportunities open the way for political action, but movements also make opportunities” (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 276). This means that social movement development, even a movement of dispossessed citizens, occurs through the interaction of movement groups and the sociopolitical environment they try to change (McAdam 1982: 40; Kriesi 1995; Kitschelt 1986).

#### **GENERATING AND USING “WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY”: MOBILIZING STRUCTURES AND STRATEGIES**

While objective grievances, subjectively perceived relative deprivations, and political opportunities are crucial to understanding the emergence of political protest action, they do not explain how deprivations and opportunities are successfully transformed into collective action. This question is particularly pertinent to our case because we are speaking about marginalized people who are affected by social exclusion, apathy, and a lack of resources. In this regard, resource mobilization theory proposes a focus on organizations as an explanatory factor (Zald and McCarthy 1987), insofar as they tend to pool resources (e.g., funds, knowledge, contacts), offer selective incentives, build constituencies, construct webs of solidarity, and formulate collective identities, both within individual organizations and interorganizational fields (e.g., networks, coalitions, alliances). Organization is thus a strategic resource that helps to translate social and political opportunities in collective action, by defining common objectives and targets, constituencies and memberships, means and action forms. In this sense, we have to clarify in this final section whether the organizational structure of the unemployment movement helps us understand the upsurge of collective action during the later 1990s.

The answer to this question is not self-evident, given the “weakness” of the movement, especially in regard to available resources, political weight, and public visibility. Social exclusion and unemployment engenders a situation of (shared) precariousness, which creates very specific organizational problems: a higher dependency on external resources might

endanger the movement's autonomy; the greater dependency on available access points into the political arena might detach the movement from its grass-roots; and the higher need for public awareness might induce the movement to opt for more striking action forms that are difficult to stabilize and scale up. As we will see, the protest waves of the late 1990s demonstrate that activists learned quite successfully to develop an organizational structure that was able to solve these problems. Their organizational adaptations helped to explain why the jobless successfully mobilized in a very specific social and political context. In this regard, our thesis is that the organizational solution consisted in the building of broad coalitions with a low level of formalization and institutionalization. However, while these organizational patterns were able to generate and stabilize collective protest for a certain period of time, the price of this pattern was a sustained fragility (Lahusen and Baumgarten 2006), which is responsible for the transitory nature of the protest waves under analysis.

Beginning in the 1980s, the unemployed in our three countries established and stabilized a dense web of associations from the 1980s onwards, that centered on mutual aid and political awareness, and thus established an important lever for the transition to action (Maurer 2001). The specific structure of this web suggests that *mobilization of the unemployed is boosted by a low level of institutionalization of their organizations* (Piven and Cloward 1977). Indeed, in our three countries, this organizational web was fragile and fragmented, because it lacked logistic and financial resources, and because it was pervaded by ideological and geographical divisions. In France, cleavages were strong, particularly between a militant tradition of the extreme left, often close to Trotskyist milieus, and a socially inspired Catholicism of varying radicalism. In Italy, these organizations were created along the right-left political divide: the oldest ones like the Movimento per il Lavoro, the Disoccupati Autorganizzati di Acerra, and the *Sedile di Porto* belong to the radical left wing, whereas a new generation of small associations like Forza Lavoro Disponibile or Lista Flegrea took inspiration from post-fascist ideologies and iconography and found political allies in the right-wing parties. The ideological differences between German unemployed organizations were less marked, however, groups and initiatives were tied either to churches and unions or are explicitly independent, moreover, significant differences persist between organizations from the East and from the West (Gallas 1994).

In all countries, activists and groups began to develop a more conciliatory and strategic behavior. This shift was dictated by the immediate need of weak actors to fuse their energies and strengths during the 1980s. Consequently, a number of national or local organizations and coalitions of the unemployed were set up (for Germany: BAG-Erwerbslose and KOS; for Italy: Coordinamento per il Lavoro di Napoli), which did neither replace the polycentric structure at the grassroots level (Gerlach 1999) by a hierarchical pattern, nor contributed to overcoming geographical and ideological fragmentations. In most cases, they merely provided some formalized instruments of coordination, brokerage, and public representation. This complex structure was conducive for the organization of the unemployed, because it was built upon a grassroots web of local groups. The latter were much more effective in activating and sustaining constituencies, as local and small groups required fewer resources, provided more incentives for participation and generated more control over their members (Olsen 1965). Additionally, collective action like those discussed here could not occur without close connections between persons sharing the same problems and hopes, a relation that was nurtured primarily in a local context. The organizational resources mobilized by the unemployed were thus varied and diffuse. They were often grounded in daily routine activities like mutual aid, which provided a basis for the development of socialization and a more specifically political engagement (Maurer 2001).

This organizational web was an indispensable precondition for collective action by the jobless. In particular, it enabled the emergence of political entrepreneurs within unions and sponsors, corroborating Michael Lipsky's dictum: "The 'problem of the powerless' in protest activity is to activate third parties to enter the implicit or explicit bargaining arena in ways

favorable to protesters” (1970: 2). While it remains true that unions were uncertain and ambivalent allies, union support enabled unemployed mobilization, insofar as unions’ fragmentation offered a greater scope for action to unemployed groups, which played on rivalries and found room to maneuver in a host of possible alliances. The building of broad and loose coalitions was an effective organizational strategy to activate the complex web of unemployment groups *and* to preserve their autonomy in view of friendly, but more powerful allies. Additionally, they turned out to be effective in helping to overcome the political weakness of the jobless. While protests remained largely a local phenomenon until the early 1990s, this situation changed when activists started mobilizing protest movements in order to increase their own political weight. Particularly in Germany and France, activists could capitalize on controversial debates about national policy reforms directed at changing the face of the traditional welfare state. This move to the national level had beneficial impacts on the local level. It lent legitimacy to local unrest and thus contributed to long-term stability. Moreover, as in the case of Naples, the pressures on the national government could generate “boomerang effects” (Keck and Sikkink 1998) on local authorities (e.g., in increasing their willingness to respond to the needs of the unemployed). This “externalization,” however, exposed the protest to a new set of pressures derived from electoral politics and institutional policy deliberations, which the jobless could hardly control. Moreover, there was the real danger of dislocating protest resources and activities from the local environment, where resources and motivations are generated, as argued earlier.<sup>4</sup> The less institutionalized pattern of coalition building proved to be beneficial in this respect as well, because it limited the mandate of national associations and coalitions to tasks of coordination and brokerage, while maintaining the real focus of action on the local level. These less-institutionalized patterns of coalition building, however, remained fragile and were determined by contingent contextual factors.

In France, unemployed associations established strong links to militants located close to the extreme left. Leaders commonly made statements that were strongly anticapitalist, although disassociated from communist ideology. Some of these militants had roots in social Catholicism—for example, Christian Working Youth—but more frequently they came from trade unions, generally Trotskyist organizations, but sometimes the French Communist Party or the CGT. These organizational bonds were discrete but effective because they enabled unemployed organizations to preserve autonomy of action, while taking advantage of the experience and material resources of senior activists (who thus became true political entrepreneurs). At the same time, this strategy of coalition building was unstable and fragile, as illustrated by the example of AC! (*Agir contre le chômage*). Initially, this coalition gathered intellectuals, trade unionists, and unemployed people, but today the group is almost exclusively composed by the unemployed.—demonstrating their capacity to act independently.

Unemployed groups in Germany also relied heavily on external support. While they were active in local activities and events, the national protest campaign during the summer of 1998 was instigated and coordinated mainly by the union-funded KOS. Close relations to the unions turned out to be ambivalent, though, given the fact that protest dwindled significantly after national unions discontinued their support over concerns about maintaining good relations with the newly elected Social Democrats. The selective and self-interested support of the unions during the following years aroused much discontent amongst the unemployment groups, which started from 2002 onwards to build up local “Anti-Agenda 2010,” “Anti-Hartz IV,” and other social forums and round tables throughout German cities. These consisted of welfare organizations, local parishes, *ATTAC* groups, and some local union branches. They provided a fertile ground for the spread of so-called “Monday demonstrations” throughout eastern Germany during the summer of 2004. Pragmatic and broad coalitions thus proved to be successful, even though activists struggled to exclude the extreme-right groups who tried

to co-opt the demonstrations for their own purposes (Lahusen and Baumgarten 2006; Baumgarten 2003 and 2004).

In the Italian case, the unemployed, instead of establishing alliances with the traditional and stronger unions, created a strong network including other unemployed organizations, the radical-left party Rifondazione Comunista, the new radical unions Cobas, and other social organizations like the antiglobalization groups. The density of the networks established by organizations of the unemployed depended on the organizations' nature and composition. In fact, there were groups that developed an intense net of contacts whereas others were more isolated. The latter were those that conceived their struggle essentially as a pure dispute engaged with public institutions to obtain a job for their own members. Hence, they cooperated with other social actors at best only sporadically. More relevant were groups endowed with social links and whose members approached the organization not only as a means to get a job, but as a "movement" whose claims, while encompassing the basic request for work, embraced a richer range of issues (safe home, respect for the environment, workers rights). In this perspective, the struggle of the unemployed was seen as a component of the larger struggle against social exclusion that needed to be reinforced through the establishment of links with other groups and other experiences. The majority of unemployed groups belonged to this kind of organization. Two of them (Movimento Disoccupati Autorganizzati di Acerra and Coordinamento per il Lavoro di Napoli) were part of the new global network: they were connected with a vast range of social actors, such as squats (*centri sociali*), communist groups, and critical unions (Cobas and SINCOBAS). This network was robust to the point that they considered themselves as two branches of the same movement of the unemployed.

In sum, we see that growing networks of organizations and groups provided an essential precondition for the mobilization of the unemployed, and the process activated during the 1990s by militants and political entrepreneurs. The poorly institutionalized patterns of coalition building were efficacious to solve specific mobilization problems related to the weakness of this constituency. In fact, such a low level of institutionalization allowed the integration of a highly fragmented area of activists and groups, the neutralization of friendly or unfriendly "takeovers," and the maintenance of a grass-roots focus.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the peaks of mobilization in the three countries, what is most clearly seen is the sporadic—if not to say marginal—character of actions taken. In one of the European democracies' most relevant problems, the most vulnerable fringe of the population is unable to organize on a lasting basis or to give structured, enduring expression to the main social ill that has been gnawing at it for decades now. Nevertheless, we have discussed several conditions that are conducive to protests by the unemployed: (1) when those affected by joblessness experience the loss of formerly granted rights or goods; (2) when organizations are available to establish a latent protest infrastructure; (3) when political allies and entrepreneurs are recruited to stimulate action; (4) when mass media and public opinion is sympathetic for their quest, and (5) when activists engage in empowerment and collective learning with regard to the best way of working the system of available opportunities and constraints. These three countries share similar experiences in this regard, yet they show different variations in the interplay between these various explanatory factors.

If the mobilization of the marginalized can occur under certain beneficial conditions, what can we say about the future? On the one hand, we might assume that collective action by the jobless is becoming a more normal aspect of political life. In fact, we have argued that a main structural development is under way, which facilitates mobilization: the erosion of unionism, of consensual patterns of social partnership and/or neocorporatism. These trends

open the way for more pluralistic contentions fuelled also by political entrepreneurs and minority groups. Moreover, the establishment of an interorganizational network either within the countries or across borders reduces the costs of mobilization and facilitates future protest diffusion. Finally, we might also assume a collective learning process is under way, according to which activists learn how to mobilize “weak interests” and to capitalize on situational windows of opportunities. On the other hand, these structural changes may not increase protest mobilization if the structural barriers discussed in the article remain in place: the effects of social exclusion on atomization and political passivity, the scarcity of resources and the political weakness of the constituency, the heterogeneity of the organizational fields and the fragility of strategic coalitions, and dependency on powerful allies and sympathetic public opinion.

In the final analysis, we might assume that structural developments do strengthen latent mobilization potentials, but that collective action still depends on favorable situational factors which the jobless cannot influence themselves. In this sense, the mobilization of the unemployed will remain rare and fragile; yet, this is not so because they are intrinsically reluctant to act collectively, but because they have to surmount significant hurdles in the organization of collective action.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The empirical data of this article have been gathered primarily by means of semi-structured interviews with key informants. A total number of 117 interviews in the three countries (in Italy 39, in Germany 38, and in France 40 interviews) have been carried out with local and national representatives of trade unions, employers associations, political parties, governmental bodies, organizations of the unemployed, and other civil society groups active in the field. Moreover, organizational ethnography and life history interviews have been carried out specifically with the unemployed organizations and their leaders. Finally, labor policy-related documents of governmental bodies, research agencies, and think tanks, as well as policy actors, have provided an additional empirical database.

<sup>2</sup> Unemployment officially did not exist in the former German Democratic Republic, thus there are neither unemployment figures nor reports on any kind of organization of the unemployed.

<sup>3</sup> The so-called Monday demonstrations started with about 600 participants in Magdeburg on Monday, July 26, 2004, and went on once a week at a high level of around 80,000 participants in more than 100 cities. About 45,000 participants came to a central demonstration in Berlin on October 2, 2004 (ATTAC, [http://www.attac.de/genug-fuer-alle/neuaufgabe/seiten/veranstaltungen\\_alt.php](http://www.attac.de/genug-fuer-alle/neuaufgabe/seiten/veranstaltungen_alt.php) (accessed October 29, 2004)).

<sup>4</sup> Externalization pressures were weakest in Italy. This was partly due to missed opportunities, and thus a lack of pull-factors (i.e., the lack of wide-ranging government reforms and a related oppositional nation-wide protest movement). Moreover, local authorities not only provide social benefits for the unemployed, but also maintain clientelistic relations with jobseekers. Hence, the local responsibility for the delivery of unemployment benefits and job allocation helps to explain why the mobilization of the jobless remained much more strongly attached to the local level in Italy than in the other countries.

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