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*Organizational Diversity in Italian Environmental Protest, 1988-1997*

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Italian Environmentalism in the 1990s

Prospects looked bright for the environmental movement in Italy in 1988, when this analysis of the role of different types of organizations in environmental protest activities in Italy begins. The year before, resounding victory in three anti-nuclear referenda had virtually ruled out nuclear energy as a policy option in the country for the foreseeable future (Diani, 1994). Moreover, success in the anti-nuclear campaign had been just the highlight of what had been a remarkably rapid growth in both organizational strength and mobilization capacity. After being involved in anti-nuclear mobilizations and urban struggles in the mid/late-1970s, environmental groups had started to grow in the early 1980s.\(^2\) Legambiente, which was to become the most important environmental organization in the country, had been founded in 1980, originally as a branch of ARCI, the cultural and leisure time association of the Italian left (it detached from ARCI after its 1986 convention: Poggio, 1996, p.78). Membership rates and number of local chapters of the most important national organizations were both growing dramatically. Between 1983 and 1988, in particular, membership in six major organizations Legambiente, Italia Nostra, WWF, and animal rights groups LIPU (birds protection), LAC (anti-hunting) and LAV (anti-vivisection) had increased by 250% (Diani, 1995, p.36). The movement’s mobilization capacity had grown accordingly. Data collected from Monday issues of the other major Italian daily Corriere della Sera for the 1975-1995 period (Giugni, 2000), suggest a drastic rise in protest events from 1983 to 1988.

All these elements encouraged optimism and provided advocates of a realignment of the Italian political system along green lines with some reasons for hope. About a decade later, the picture of both Italian environmentalism and Italian politics as a whole does not quite fit the optimistic expectations of the late 1980s: a new ecological cleavage has not consolidated in Italian politics, nor has one inspired by the broader emergence of “new politics” and left-libertarian parties (Kitschelt, 1989a; Kriesi, 1993; della Porta, 1996a); other new political actors, mostly with a populist, right-wing profile have stolen the show in Italian politics of the 1990s, from the Northern League to Mr. Berlusconi’s Forza Italia; environmental issues have likewise seen their prominence challenged by growing concerns about public order, immigration issues, public finance and employment shortage.

\(^2\) Diani (1990 and 1995) and Donati (1996) provide an analytical reconstruction of developments in Italian environmentalism; on a more anecdotal level, see Poggio (1996).
In the case of social movements, and indeed of political actors in general, the mismatch between reality and expectations is hardly surprising. Yet, this time at least it’s not going to lead us down the road of a “what went wrong” style of account. For all the problems encountered by the environmentalists to affect policy agendas, and for all the electoral disappointments experienced by the Greens, the Italian scenario of the late 1990s is not a “doom and gloom” one for environmentalists. In the first place, prominent members of the environmental movement have reached considerable political influence. Since 1996 the Environment Ministry is led by Green MP Edo Ronchi, with other Green members serving as ministers/junior ministers. Legambiente is similarly well placed with environmental economist Giovanna Melandri occupying another senior ministerial post and former president Chicco Testa now chairing powerful ENEL (the national agency for electric power). If integration in elite networks and formal inclusion can be regarded as measures of movement success (Gamson, 1990; Diani, 1997; Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly, 1999), then Italian environmentalism might have achieved some remarkable results.

Moreover, environmental organizations are now consolidated and regarded as a representative political actor to be reckoned with in numerous policy areas. There is admittedly no conclusive evidence regarding organizational growth. While some recorded zero-growth at the turn of the decade (from 1988-1991: Diani, 1995, p.36), recent data including some but not all of the same organizations suggest persisting growth throughout the 1990s (Giugni, 2000; della Porta and Andretta, 2000). Even in terms of sheer mobilization capacity as measured by protest events reported in newspapers, despite periods of relative intensity in the late 1970s - largely corresponding to an early wave of antinuclear opposition - protest activity between 1986 and 1995 turns out to be consistently higher than in the previous decade, for all its ups and downs (Giugni, 2000).

How can we make sense of a process which is clearly ambiguous if not contradictory in its most visible manifestations? Elsewhere, I have provided a systematic analysis of the intensity and forms of environmental protest in Italy from 1988-1997 (Diani and Forno, 1999; Diani and Forno, forthcoming). In this paper, I limit myself to the changing role of different types of organizations within the broader protest activities promoted on environmental issues. My main focus is, not surprisingly, on environmental organizations - i.e., organizations which primarily identify themselves, and are recognized by external observers, in relation to the environmental cause. However, I also pay attention to the role of organizations whose environmental identity cannot be taken for granted - e.g., local neighborhood groups - and to others
whose main perspectives and orientations are clearly not environmentalist - e.g., economic interest groups and most political parties.

Social Movements and Organizations

Earlier studies of social movements have often emphasized the opposition between “movement” and “institution” (Alberoni, 1984). This reflected in a characterization of organizations active in social movements as largely informal and non-bureaucratic, driven by either charismatic or grassroots democratic principles. While there are still enough theoretical reasons and empirical evidence to suggest a tendency from grassroots mobilization to institutionalization for most social movements taken as a whole (della Porta and Diani, 1999, chap.6; Jamison et al., 1990; Jamison and Ring, 2000), the increasing diversification of organizational forms within social movements has been long recognized (Kriesi, 1996; Diani and Donati, 1999; Rootes, 1999). In other words, the evolution of social movements may well display several broad commonalities, at the very minimum, they may be expected to face the same critical junctures at some stage (e.g., the choice between full institutionalization, further radicalization, and dissolution: Tarrow, 1989a; della Porta, 1995): but the characteristics, and the evolution, of the single organizations within them may be remarkably heterogeneous.

Recognition of the organizational heterogeneity of social movements has further reinforced another important notion, namely, that social movements cannot be equated to organizations. Social movements are more than organizations, as they provide opportunities for collective action even to actors who are in no ways related to specific organizations; but they are also less than organizations, in that they cannot rely on the latter’s continuity over time, and decisional capacity. This awareness has encouraged moves towards more dynamic and relational views of social movements. The dominant one, originated from the political process approach, views movements as sustained interactions between authorities and their opponents (Tilly, 1994), focusing on the public and political elements of movement mobilizations. Another perspective sees movements as networks of solidarity and exchange, whose boundaries are defined by shared conflictual identities and not - as in the political process version - by involvement in political action (Diani, 1992a).

Both approaches allow analysts to deal with the role of organizations while acknowledging their difference from the movement as a whole. The political process
perspective offers a set of hypotheses which link the behavior of social movement actors to changes in the political context in which they operate. Those hypotheses can be usefully applied to account for the varying profile of social movement industries across different political systems (Rucht, 1996). Most promising, however, are the opportunities opened up by the methodological tool which has become increasingly popular among scholars in this vein, namely, protest event analysis (Rucht, Koopmans, and Neidhardt, 1998; Rucht and Koopmans, 1999). Through the collection of systematic data covering long periods of time, protest event analysts escape the limitations of investigations based on a limited number of protest organizations or protest campaigns, and are able to provide broader accounts of the evolution of protest activities in specific political systems.

The problem with this approach is however its tendency to conflate protest activities (the sustained conflictual interactions between power holders and their opponents) and social movements (Melucci, 1989; Diani, 2000). In particular, focusing at it does on discrete sets of events, it pays scarce attention to the cultural definitions of conflictual stakes and to the identities which link together and assign meaning to protest events which may well develop simultaneously, but also be largely disconnected from each other in practice. For example, treating protest initiatives on environmental issues as “the environmental movement”, or on territorial issues as “the regionalist movement” (Kriesi et al., 1995), rests on the very disputable assumption that all those events are even vaguely connected to each other through personal or organizational linkages or at least shared definitions of reality. The protest events approach is also forced by its very source of data - newspapers - to exclude from the realm of social movements those forms of collective action which do not attract public attention - in particular, those cultural practices focusing on personal change and innovation in lifestyles (a choice which has long been disputed: Melucci, 1989).

In contrast, the “network approach” identifies in informal social networks, linking individual and collective actors who share a specific conflictual identity, the peculiar trait of social movements (Diani, 1992a; Diani, 1995). While they are usually reduced to a facilitator for individual recruitment and mobilization processes, social networks become the most distinctive feature of a social movement dynamic vis a vis other political phenomena. In terms of organizational analysis, this approach has some significant advantages over the more traditional ones. By shifting the focus away from single organizations to the sets of organizations which identify with, and are perceived as close to, a specific cause, the network perspective draws analysts’
attention to the pattern of ties which link different actors to each other. It makes in other terms explicit that interest in a given issue is not tantamount to membership and involvement in the movement mobilizing on the same issue. For example, women’s issues may be addressed by groups who are well integrated into the feminist network as well as by groups who are not part of that network; classifying both as part of the “feminist movement” without investigating the concrete exchanges and/or identification processes linking - or not linking them - is at best a hazardous procedure.

By the same token, claims by established organizations to be representative of a broader movement should be taken with care. Although they may enjoy easier access to the media and political institutions, they may be unable to exert control over grassroots groups mobilizing on similar issues; more informal networks may develop within the same broad movement, largely disconnected from, and hardly identified with, its more bureaucratic components. The extent to which these different clusters of actors may still be regarded as part of a broader movement depends ultimately on the spread and strength of linkages - both concrete and emotional - between their members.

This analytical shift ultimately affects our consolidated ways of naming our objects of study: whether an organization or group qualifies as “social movement organization” (or SMO) no longer depends on presumed distinctive properties of SMOs, but on its structural position within networks of exchanges and mutual recognition. Far from representing a specific organizational model, SMOs are recognized as such only in relational terms, a corollary being that even political parties and interest groups may act as SMOs in specific contexts (Diani, 1992a). Likewise, the notion of institutionalization can also be re-defined. If the distinctive trait of a movement are networks of solidarity among its components, the process of institutionalization no longer refers only to the degree of formalization and “polity membership” (Tilly, 1978) of its specific actors, but on changes in the pattern of interdependencies between them. These include a pronounced division of labor and the fragmentation of the movement networks along issue-lines (prefiguring a situation in which groups exchange only if they share specific issue-interests, and not also on the basis of the adherence to certain broader principles); the emergence of a network structure driven by instrumental logic of action (i.e., a star or wheel structure where all exchanges

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3 The definition of which, incidentally, has proved a minefield, generating countless misunderstandings and hampering rather than facilitating scholarly dialogue across subsectors of social science (Kriesi, 1996; Jordan and Maloney, 1997; Diani, 2000).
pass through a restricted number of core actors and there is little space for horizontal exchanges: Diani, 1992b); the weakening of movement solidarity and collective identity, to the advantage of organizational solidarities and identities (whereby individuals active on a certain issue identify primarily with a specific organization rather than with a broader “movement”).

The main problem with the network approach lies in the difficulty to obtain reliable network data without undertaking systematic field research, and the resulting scarcity of studies tracing the evolution of network patterns over time. In this article I try to combine some of the strengths of protest events analysis with some of the conceptual advancements of the network perspective. The evolution of Italian environmentalism provides an excellent case in point, given the range of organizational forms present within the movement (Diani, 1995; della Porta and Andretta, 2000) and its growing fortunes in the institutional - if not in the electoral - political sphere. In particular, I address the following questions:

1) what is the relative weight of environmental and non environmental organizations in the promotion of protest actions on environmental issues? Has the spectrum of groups involved in environmental action changed over time?
2) has the degree of interdependence between different types of organizations (formal and informal environmental groups, non environmental organizations in general, organizations closer to other social movements) changed over time?
3) how has the presence of the main environmental organizations in protest activities evolved since the late 1980s? What does this evolution tell us about their preeminence in the movement?
4) has any environmental organization secured a specific niche in the field either by acquiring “ownership” of specific issues, or standing out for its propensity to adopt specific styles of action?

Each of these questions is functional to a broader discussion of the evolution of Italian environmentalism since the late 1980s. We may interpret the resulting empirical in the light of different theoretical models. The first one starts from a classic “institutionalization” hypothesis. According to this perspective, we might expect environmental action to have followed a cyclical evolution, developing in the 1980s, peaking in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster and the wave of antinuclear action it spurned, and then heading towards more routinized and conventional forms of (public) interest representation. In particular this line of argument would lead us

Dalton (1994) underlines the growing convergence - despite persisting differences - of traditional conservation groups and political ecology groups already in the
to expect
a) a growing role of established, formal organizations in the promotion of actions to the detriment of grassroots, informal action groups and coalition networks;
b) a reduced level of collaboration and networking among movement organizations, with single organizations trying to achieve monopoly of specific issues and/or campaigns/actions;
c) a greater homogeneity of actors involved in environmental protests, with a smaller number of non-environmental actors (parties, other movement groups, etc.) getting involved: at the early stages of mobilization, the issue is still unstructured and is addressed by varying constellations of specialist and non-specialist actors, at times competing for ownership; later, as the issue gets structured within specific policy rules and domains, certain actors will emerge as its specialist “owners” and play a major role in related mobilizations.

Another approach suggests that, instead of cyclical evolution, one should expect a recurrent tension between trends towards institutionalization and trends towards the emergence of new forms of action at the grassroots (Rootes, 1999; Diani and Donati, 1999). In particular, the trend towards the institutionalization of certain actors might be more than counterbalanced by the emergence of new actors willing to adopt more radical styles of action. In this case it seems more difficult to identify clearly discernible changes for the totality of events. If there is a cyclical process at all, that consists of periodical shifts between radicalism and moderation, visibility and latency within a movement (Melucci, 1984a), rather than of a broader unidirectional movement-to-institution trend.

Main expectations would include the following:
a) a moderation of forms among major national environmental organizations but a radicalization of forms among informal networks, local coalitions, new organizations;
b) a low degree of interaction between formal and informal environmentalism;
c) a greater role of informal organizations as grassroots reaction to the growing institutionalization of major environmental organizations of the late 1980s develops and takes momentum.

Finally, rather than to movement organizational cycles, we could relate more explicitly the evolution of the organizational profile of Italian environmental activism to specific changes in the national political opportunities. In particular, I’d like to focus on the government alternance and the incentives/disincentives to action and mid-1980s.
more specifically - to alliance building that it may have provided. Kriesi (1995, 59) suggests that when in government, socialdemocrats or their functional equivalent may facilitate organizational consolidation of SMOs, but not necessarily encourage explicit mobilization, as the latter may always go out of control. His general hypothesis that positive expectations of outcomes from a left-wing government are likely to discourage new social movements mobilization (1995, 60), while the opposite holds when the left is at the opposition, seems supported in this specific case (Diani and Forno, 1999). Accordingly, here I will expect coalitions between environmental organizations and non-environmental actors to be broader under unfavorable opportunities; I will also expect unfavorable opportunities to foster intense interaction within the movement.

My empirical evidence comes from reports published from 1988-1997 in the national news sections of major Italian daily la Repubblica. We sampled 50% of the total issues, evenly distributed across the days of the week. Altogether, we identified 328 events of environmental protest of national relevance (or better, regarded as such by the newspaper editor: Hug and Wisler, 1998). We supplemented this information with data from the local news covering three areas in the country: Milan, Florence, and Naples (including their provinces). The sampling criteria was the same as for the national data set, and the source was provided by the local pages of la Repubblica in Milan and Florence, and the local news section of Il Mattino, the leading daily in Naples. The exercise identified 313 events in Milan, 222 in Florence, and 168 in Naples (Diani and Forno, 2000).

Although they are far from the ultimate response to problems of the analysis of collective action (Fillieule, 1997), newspaper data provide systematic longitudinal data about important features of collective action. In this paper I shall focus on the following: distribution of events across time; types of actors involved in the protests; role of major environmental groups in protest activities in terms of intensity, issues, forms; basic patterns of interaction among different types of actors involved in the protests.

The evolution of protest activities over time

The year 1988 provides a fitting starting point for the analysis of the evolution of environmental action in Italy, as it represents its all time peak, according to a study conducted over a longer time frame (1975-1998: Giugni, 2000).
evolution of environmental initiatives over the decade is quite different if we base our account on the national news sections of la Repubblica only, or if we include data from the local news in Milan, Florence and Naples.

Most of the protest events (henceforth, PEs) recorded in the national sections of la Repubblica happened in the period 1988-1990. These three years actually account for 51% of the total (67, 48, and 52 respectively). The late 1980s indeed witnessed an attempt by environmental organizations to consolidate their status as major national political actors and to extend the scope of their action and the issues addressed. Campaigners tried to apply the principles and guiding ideas of the anti-nuclear opposition to a far broader range of targets, notably, high risk industrial plants and other dangerous economic activities. Examples of the former include the campaigns against Acna factory in Piedmont, and Farmoplant in Tuscany, as well as Legambiente's national campaign against the 500 highest-risk firms in the country; of the latter, actions against oil ships cleaning their tanks offshore. The environmentalists also attempted to exploit the momentum generated by the 1987 referendum by promoting two more on other crucial issues such as use of pesticides in agriculture and hunting.

This was to prove a hazardous choice. In May 1990, referenda were held and despite the overwhelming support for limitations to pesticides and the abolition of hunting, the outcome was not valid because less than 50% of entitled voters turned up at the polls. Opponents of the referenda (in particular agricultural business associations and hunter's associations) successfully sabotaged the referenda by inviting opponents of the environmental front not to take part in the vote, which combined with the lower salience of the two issues vis a vis nuclear energy resulted in too low turnouts). Failure in the referenda induced a gradual demobilization of the movement, which was not contrasted by persistently modest performances of the Greens in the 1992 and 1994 elections. The early years of 1990 were therefore years of gradual reduction in the environmentalists' capacity to promote visible mobilizations. Our data clearly show this trend, as PEs in the 1991-1993 period only amount to 16% of the total (a reduction of two thirds over the previous three years!), with 17 events in 1991 and 1993, and 18 in 1992 (Figure 1).
This was a period where the crisis of the political system dramatically worsened as the Northern League got momentum and - from 1992 - the Milan judges’ investigations exposed massive political corruption (Gundle and Parker, 1996). We then see an increase in protest from 1993-1995. However, the major example of environmental protest in that phase - when the number of protest actions with a clear environmental profile, and capable of having an impact at the national level, reaches another peak - was indeed generated by a "transnational political opportunity", or "suddenly imposed grievance" (Walsh and Warland, 1983). French nuclear experiments in Mururoa prompted a wave of protest actions (56% of the total in 1995!) which were not restricted to small professional activist groups like Greenpeace but included much broader coalitions of both environmental and other political and social organizations. The 1995 figure was not bound to last, however, as in the last two years covered by our analysis figures dropped to their lowest, with 14 events recorded in 1996, and only 9 in 1997. This period coincided with the victory of the center-left Olive Tree coalition in the 1996 national elections.

The overall trend in Figure 1 does not differ from that of protest events mobilizing
over 500 people, which is also reported in the same figure. This finding deserves
attention as all assessments of the reliability of newspapers as data sources agree that
protest activities which attract above a certain size of participants are very likely to be
reported (Hug and Wisler, 1998; Fillieule, 1999; Hocke, 1998). That the curves
tracing the evolution of the two types of events broadly coincide suggests that a
reduction of protest activity in the 1990s might well be more than a pure reflection of
media practices.

And still, the possibility that the sharp fall in events reported might be due to media’s
reporting styles and issue attention cycles is well worth considering. Being close to
the Center-Left coalition, one could for example expect la Repubblica to be reluctant
to report incidents which might cast the new center-left government in an unfavorable
light. Figure 1 also reports data on environmental and antinuclear protest, collected
from the Sunday and Monday issues of Corriere della Sera, a daily less sympathetic
to the Center-Left than Repubblica (Giugni, 2000). The evolution of protest over time
is remarkably similar to our own account. The number of events recorded in Corriere
is higher but this is due to the fact that articles in both the national and the local
(Milan and Lombardy) sections of the paper were included, and the latter sections
actually seem to report most of the articles.\footnote{Unfortunately Giugni’s data do not allow to separate reports in the national sections from those in the local sections. However, another analysis of social conflict in Italy, based on a 100% coverage of Corriere della Sera but restricted to 1996, identified 9 environmental conflicts for that year, reported in the national news, and 31 events in the local news (1997, p.405, and personal information to the authors). Corriere's local pages only cover Milan and Lombardy, while Repubblica has several local sections covering different cities and regions. As a result, Corriere may be tempted to place among the local news reports of protest events which have some national interest, as readers throughout the country could still access them. In contrast, PEs reported in Repubblica's local sections are only available to residents in the region concerned, which may encourage editors to include some of the most relevant events in the national news too.}

The question is therefore whether the apparent fall in environmental protest since the
late 1980s is “real”, or whether it might not simply be a reflection of the growing
difficulty of the issue to secure the headlines and make the national sections of
newspapers. Issue-attention cycle dynamics may have been operating; other types of
protest on hotter issues such as non-white immigration, or law and order problems
(prostitution, petty delinquency) may have replaced environmental conflicts from the
top of the media agenda.
In order to explore this hypothesis it is advisable to look at local news sections in representative areas of the country (Figure 2). While national data report a clear downward trend, despite the 1995 peak, the picture from local news is more complex and ambiguous. There seems to be no trend at all, but cyclical evolution, in Florence, a gradual decline in Naples, yet with no special impact of the Bassolino administration - if anything, there is a slight increase from 1993-1995 - and a more pronounced oscillation in Milan. Here one suspects a relationship to the local administration orientation, as the election of an outspokenly anti-environmentalist administration led by the Northern League in 1993 coincides with a massive restart of protest activities, which between 1994 and 1996 are actually at their highest point in the whole decade. These local examples altogether suggest that the decrease in protest across the 1990s reflected in national news could be at least partially due to changes in overall reporting policies with news about local conflicts increasingly being shifted to the local news sections.

Figure 2: Protest events by year

It is also worth noting that reduction in protest activities need not imply overall reduction in collective activities, as the spread of voluntary action suggests: from 1993, campaigns like Spiagge pulite (Legambiente) and Bosco Pulito (WWF) are launched, which involve tens of thousands of people across the country. In 1995, the
transnational campaign Clean up the world is also coordinated in Italy by Legambiente (Poggio, 1996, pp.107-108). If we take similar activities into account then the number of actions grows dramatically in the second half of the 1990s.6

**Environmental Organizations in Protest Events**

What is the profile of actors promoting environmental protest? Table 1 documents their relative involvement over the ten years period. First of all, no organizations were mentioned for a sizable minority of events, over 20% of the total. Those events for which organizations were reported show an overwhelming presence of formal environmental organizations (one should note however that the estimate of 85% is probably excessive as it does not discount those cases in which two or more formal organizations were present at the same event. Similar remarks also apply, albeit on a more limited scale, to the other types of organizations). Other environmental groups with a less informal structure globally account for about one third of the events, approximately the same incidence as that of non environmental organizations (parties, and on a much smaller scale interest groups and other political organizations).

If we take into account that in all likelihood the 215 events for which no organizations are reported were promoted by informal groups with no clear environmental profile, and that less than 10% of events see the joint presence of environmental and non environmental actors (see table 2 below), the figures change slightly. A rough estimate suggests that formal environmental organizations have been present in a majority (about 60%) of all events, informal environmental groups in about a quarter, unspecified, but presumably informal groups in another 20%, and finally traditional political organizations in about 15%, independently of environmental organizations. While there is enough to confirm the massive involvement of formal environmental organizations in the campaigns, there is also reason to think that environmental protest was by no means restricted to the actors automatically identified with it, and that other actors also played a far from marginal, and largely autonomous, role in the process.

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6 These events are usually reported in “summary reports”, i.e. reports summarizing in a single article a whole set of related but geographically and possibly temporally scattered initiatives. Although we exclude them from the analysis due to the distorting effect of these reports, still they are worth mentioning for the sake of a more complete picture.
Table 1 also allows us to chart the evolution of the relative impact of different types of actors over time. The involvement of different types of actors in the protests seems to have changed drastically in the decade under investigation. The role of political parties and unions is particularly pronounced in the first two years of the period, i.e., when environmental protest was at its highest ever point in the country (Giugni, 2000), and declines markedly along the 1990s; by the 1996-1997 period it had reduced by about three quarters. The role of public interest groups is relatively stable and overall negligible. Within the environmental field, we register a tendential pronounced in the relevance of both networks of environmental organizations and informal environmental groups. The incidence of the former is above the average in four of the five earliest years, and correspondingly below the average in four of the remaining years. The presence of the latter is even more impressively biased towards the earliest years, for each of which we register a presence above the average. By contrast, the role of formal environmental groups in the protests, already very important in the late 1980s, becomes overwhelming by the end of the decade.

How to account for this shift in the weight of different organizational types? It would be tempting to suggest that formal organizations with a clear environmental identity guarantee continuity to activities even at phases when the movements’ capacity to mobilize on a national scale seems to be smaller like the late 1990s. However, if the data presented earlier suggest that the attention of the national media for environmental action tends to fade away as the 1990s progress, there is little evidence of a decline of environmental activism on the local level. One could have expected the role of informal environmental groups and even of “spontaneous” protests to be highest at the end of the decade, precisely as a consequence of the spread of local action. My evidence suggests this not to be the case, as formal organizations not only maintain, but even increase their presence in the initiatives in the late 1990s.

The decline of non environmental actors is also worthy of attention. Again, this cannot be attributed to a global reduction in the intensity of protest activities. However, the consolidation of the environmental issue and its “normalization”, also reflected in the relegation of most related news to the local pages of newspapers, suggests that there might have been a transition from a situation of relative fluidity to a situation of relative stability in the issue representation. In the former (the late 980s-early 1990s) actors with different profiles may have been tempted to engage in
competition for the control of the issue; however, as long as environmental actors consolidated and the issue itself strengthened its profile becoming associated with a distinct policy area, one may have expected other actors to lose gradually their aspiration to represent environmental issues, and their interest in them.

Is there a movement? Patterns of interorganizational co-operation

We have movements when there is networking, i.e., alliances, overlapping memberships, and mutual recognition (Diani, 1992a). For the purpose of reconstructing the networks, protest event analysis is largely inadequate as it may only offer us information about the co-presence of organizations at certain events (nothing on shared memberships, identities, and all those of interorganizational exchanges like information sharing or informal consultation which do not take a public form). This is also an area where the accuracy of reporting is most essential and may affect results. What follows is therefore a very tentative reconstruction of flows of exchanges based on a limited number of events which attracted media attention.

The large majority of events are promoted by one actor, or reported as such. Only one quarter of events (233) sees the presence of more than one organization (30 cases are included as they record the presence of “networks of organizations”). One could expect events in the years when contention is higher to have a stronger presence of joint events as the effervescence of the period encourages widespread collective action. However, the proportion of events involving coalitions of groups turns out to be quite stable (Table 2). There is in other words a fairly constant propension to networking - or at least, to report about networking - over the decade. In particular, networking activities do not seem to decrease as the overall amount of protest reduces between 1988 and 1993. The only year in which the incidence of networking differs remarkably - and negatively - from the average is 1996. It might be tempting to relate this figure to declining rates of networking since 1994 and suggest that this support the hypothesis presented above, however, networking is again on the rise in 1997 despite a further reduction in protest activities.

What about the distribution of several types of network linkages over time? Overall, differences between the early and the late years of the decade do not seem too
pronounced. There are, however, slightly different patterns of evolution depending on the type of relationship. The stable position of formal environmental organizations is confirmed also by their alliance building. Both the percentage of events featuring alliances between them and non environmental groups, and between them and informal environmental organizations, tend to oscillate around the average (in neither case, however, the incidence of these events is very high).

The role of formal organizations in maintaining ties to other political actors is particularly relevant when mobilization is at its lowest, i.e., in 1991, 1992, and 1997, or when it is very high like in 1995, but thanks to the interest in issues like nuclear experiments which are only partially environmentalist and attract attention from a much broader range of actors. On the other hand, the presence of informal environmental organizations in alliances to non environmental actors - measured by the difference between row 4 and row 2 in table 2 - is somewhat conspicuous in years when mobilization is particularly high like 1988 and 1989, or taking momentum after a period of relative stagnation like in 1994. All in all, it shows a decline over the decade, and so do the linkages between environmentalist organizations as a whole and political organizations close to other social movements (the figure in row 5 including ties to left-libertarian political parties such as DP). Altogether, the specificity of the environmental movement as a self-contained sector of collective action seems if anything to have increased over the decade.

It is also worth noting the modest number of events in which informal and formal environmental groups play a similarly visible role. Does this mean that the environmental movement does not exist as a connected network beyond its most visible and formalized components? We know this is not the case, as previous studies show that collaborations and exchanges are quite widespread (Diani, 1995). However, these networks do not result in visible, prominent mobilizations jointly promoted. This is consistent with my own field research in Milan, where grassroots and neighborhood organizations provided the major SMOs with support in their broad campaigns (a presence unlikely to be recorded in newspaper reports) while the latter returned the favor with advice and technical and legal backing (again a liaison with little mediatic glamour). There seems to be therefore a pronounced gap between the actions and the events promoted by major SMOs and those promoted by more informal ones, when focus is on the most visible public events. At this level, fragmentation is higher than a more sophisticated reconstruction would suggest.
The major organizations

Legambiente’s claim to be - and indeed most observers’ perception of it as - the most important Italian environmental organization are supported by press reports. Its presence is recorded in about one quarter of events (235 out of 967). WWF’s presence is also massive (16% of the total events), about twice as big as that of the Greens, who are next in ranking. Other prominent groups like Greenpeace, Italia Nostra, and animal rights groups like Lipu and LAV get a more limited coverage, sometimes a very limited coverage (as in the case of anti-hunting group LAC). Differences in this ranking may be partially due to the differential PR capacity of different organizations: e.g., Legambiente has been very proactive on this ground and has established particularly good links to the publishing group which also owns Repubblica - the weekly l’Espresso actually sponsors the Goletta Verde initiatives, monitoring the quality of Italian seas and shores every Summer. Therefore, they might be expected to get a particularly good coverage from la Repubblica. However, the global visibility of Greenpeace, and its notorious focus on media-oriented campaigning, do not seem to secure them overwhelming media coverage.

Differences in the specific issues addressed, and in their perception by media operators, may also affect degrees of coverage. Groups focusing on educational activities which are less appealing to the media than public demonstrations, like Italia Nostra, or focusing on traditional issues, like animal rights groups LIPU or LAV, are likely to be disadvantaged in terms of media attention. Sometimes, coverage may be a combination of strong linkages to the media and the capacity/willingness to address marketable, hotly debated public issues. One may suspect that the very poor coverage of activities by anti-hunting group LAC be due as much to the reduced weight of anti-hunting issues as to a shortage of PR capacity.

All in all, however, the ranking presented in table 3 is not a pure reflection of PR strategies or shifting media attention. There is indeed an impressive correlation between these figures and the centrality of environmental organizations in movement networks, according to data collected in Milan (Diani, 1995) and at the national level (Farro, 1991) in the 1980s. Organizations which are most frequently referred to by other groups in the movement as their regular allies/partners are also those who are mentioned most frequently as promoters of actions in newspaper reports. This further reinforces our confidence that the latter may reflect “real world” processes and not merely reporters’ attitudes and policies.
Although in general formal organizations seem to play a greater role in the second part of the decade (see Table 1), the presence of single organizations in the events may vary from year to year. If we look at the distribution of presence in events in different years, we find WWF to be the only one with a fairly evenly distributed presence across the whole decade. In contrast, Legambiente imposes itself as the dominant force in Italian environmentalism only since 1992 - earlier, its presence is already important but in the same league as that of WWF or the Greens.

The presence of other groups is even more variable. The Greens seem to be more involved - at times, much more involved - in protest activities prior to their taking up governmental responsibilities in 1996. For Greenpeace, the three years 1993-1995 correspond to its strongest public presence, but the only year with a really massive presence is 1995, in relation to protests spurned by French nuclear tests in Mururoa. Birds protection group LIPU also manage to get more attention in the media in certain years rather than in others, in particular, in 1991 and 1997; the same applies to anti-vivisection group LAV, whose activities are most visible in 1991 and 1993. It remains to be seen whether this is due to shifts in media attention, or to these groups’ lack of resources enabling them to conduct more continuous and sustained initiatives (an explication which however could not account for Greenpeace’s similar pattern). Both anti-hunting group LAC and conservation group Italia Nostra see their already limited, if important, role shrinking as the 1990s progress.

One common trait of movement institutionalization is the deepening of the division of labor among organizations, as well as, more broadly, the consolidation of specific styles of action, commonly associated with specific organizations, and the emergence of distinctive organizational identities and profiles. The overall profile of the repertoire adopted by the major Italian environmental organizations is quite clear (table 4): it is overwhelmingly based on conventional forms of action. None of the 25 events in which violence was used, and only one of the 13 events in which property was attacked, see the presence of a major group, namely, Greenpeace. Overall, most major organizations are disproportionately involved in events where a conventional repertoire of action (lobbying, press conferences, court litigation, public meetings, etc.) was adopted. For example, Legambiente is present in 29% of those events vs. a global involvement in 24% of events, whereas for WWF the figures are 20% and 16% respectively. Their involvement neatly decrease as they move from conventional to confrontational action, through demonstrative action. Greenpeace is the only group to
be over-represented in demonstrative actions (9% vs. 5%), but not particularly so in confrontational events (unsurprisingly given its professional and non participatory nature, and its reliance on symbolic disruption). The Greens are the only group to adopt an evenly spread repertoire, combining conventional and not-so-conventional techniques in similar proportions - an accurate reflection of the coupling of deep roots in the Italian new-left with their direct involvement in representative roles.

Table 4 about here

There is therefore a certain degree of organizational peculiarity in the adoption of specific repertoires of action, even though the overall modest use of radical forms of action points at the distinctive role played in environmental protest by actors other than the major organizations. But is it possible to identify any sort of “problem ownership”? According to table 5, only partially. On the one hand, certain organizations were more than proportionally involved in the issues one would expect them to pay specific attention to. Accordingly, the core animal rights groups were the dominant players in their area. The Greens - not surprisingly, given the presence in their ranks of many former leaders of the Italian anti-nuclear movement - were particularly involved in energy issues. The same applies to Greenpeace, mainly because of their commitment to ecopacifist issues. Nature conservation was mainly the preserve of WWF, who was also very active in animal issues. Pollution and urban issues saw an above the average presence of Legambiente. At the same time, though, the scope of issues covered by each specific organization was quite broad. With the exception of animal rights groups, all the major organizations showed significant levels of attention for the whole range of issues. In some cases the involvement was in areas marginal to their conventional profile, as for example Legambiente’s attention for nature conservation and WWF’s interest in transport-related issues suggest. Even LIPU extended its action beyond the animal issues domain. As in the case of repertoires, here too the Greens showed the most balanced and heterogeneous profile.

One should also note that the presence of the major organizations varied considerably across different issues. In particular, while they were a crucial promoter in events addressing nature conservation and animal rights issues, their presence in events broadly related to urban ecology themes was far less systematic. The great importance of urban ecology issues, especially but not exclusively at the local level, seems to have been determined by, while at the same time creating opportunities for, the action of organizations independent from the main ones, often with an informal
structure, and frequently with loose ties to the major players in the environmental politics field.

Table 5 about here

Conclusions

How does the evidence just presented fit different theoretical models? On the one hand, there is substantial support for the “classic institutionalization” model. Over the 1990s, the involvement of formal environmental organizations in protest activities grows both at the national and the local level, while that of informal groups and networks, strong in the late 1980s, tends to decline (table 1). Second, the profile of actors mobilizing on environmental issues tends to become more homogeneous, as the presence of parties and interest groups decreases over time. On the other hand, there is little evidence that levels of networking and interaction among organizations become less relevant at the end of the decade - with the single exception of 1996, levels of networking are relatively stable. Moreover, the overall profile of the major organizations over the decade suggests that, despite a tendency to engage more frequently in the issues they have been traditionally associated with, the range of issues they address is quite broad. This makes it more difficult to speak of issue ownership, even though a more detailed breakdown of broad issues into more specific ones might yield different conclusions.

Support for the “cyclical” model, which posits a recurrent tension between formal and informal organizational models, is very limited. Admittedly, the expectation that there would be a relatively low degree of interaction between formal and informal environmental groups is borne by the data. However, while one would expect lack of collaboration to grow by the end of the decade, when major organizations get even more institutionalized, this is not the case, again with the exception of 1996. Nor do the data support the expectation that informal organizations would play a bigger role at the end of the decade, again following institutionalization of established actors. In contrast, while I do not have figures available about changes in the strategies adopted by specific actors over time, the global profile of the major organizations’ repertoires shows their reluctance to adopt confrontational strategies, and their more than proportional reliance on conventional forms of action. There seems, therefore, to be a space for more radical initiatives which major organizations are not covering and where informal groups can play a specific role.
Finally, the “political process” model might tell something about some sudden changes in the overall protest profile in the crucial period 1994-1996 when opportunities for the environmentalists seem first to close down drastically, following Berlusconi’s election, and then open up substantially, with the success of the Olive Tree coalition and the inclusion of Green ministers in the government. Consistent with expectations, the proportion of events involving several organizations is highest in 1994, and lowest in 1996. This reflects in high levels of interaction between formal environmental organizations and both informal environmental groups and non-environmental organizations. On the other hand, the global levels of interaction are almost as high between 1988 and 1991, despite the profile of the government not being as hostile as in 1994, and despite a dramatic change in the movement fortunes following the defeat in the 1990 referendums. While the hypothesis of a link between political opportunities and patterns of networking is worth exploring, the evidence available here is too thin to allow for any strong conclusion.

After gaining considerable visibility in Italian media and politics in the mid-1980s, and reaching unprecedented levels of mobilization in the second part of that decade, Italian environmentalism has gradually consolidated into a major political force. This process appears to have been largely steered by the major environmental organizations. Although they are far from monopolizing the movement, their capacity to mobilize issues not only at the national but at the local level has been consistently remarkable. In particular, while the spread of actions at the local level has guaranteed the stability of overall levels of environmental initiative throughout the 1990s, this has not generated a backlash against the major organizations, nor determined a crisis of their legitimacy. At the same time, though, local environmental action is promoted by a range of actors which goes well beyond the major organizations, and testifies to the variety of organizational forms within the movement. The low levels of interaction between formal and informal organizations prove this point. The “archipelago” metaphor still applies to Italian environmentalism.

References


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