

The changing landscape of student activism in Europe and beyond: An overview

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Welcome to Trento



Alla memoria di

Mauro Rostagno

Studente contestatore a Trento

Laureato in Sociologia con lode

Spirito libero

Assassinato a Lenzi di Valderice (Trapani)

per le sue inchieste sul fenomeno mafioso

il 26 settembre 1988

Il Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale

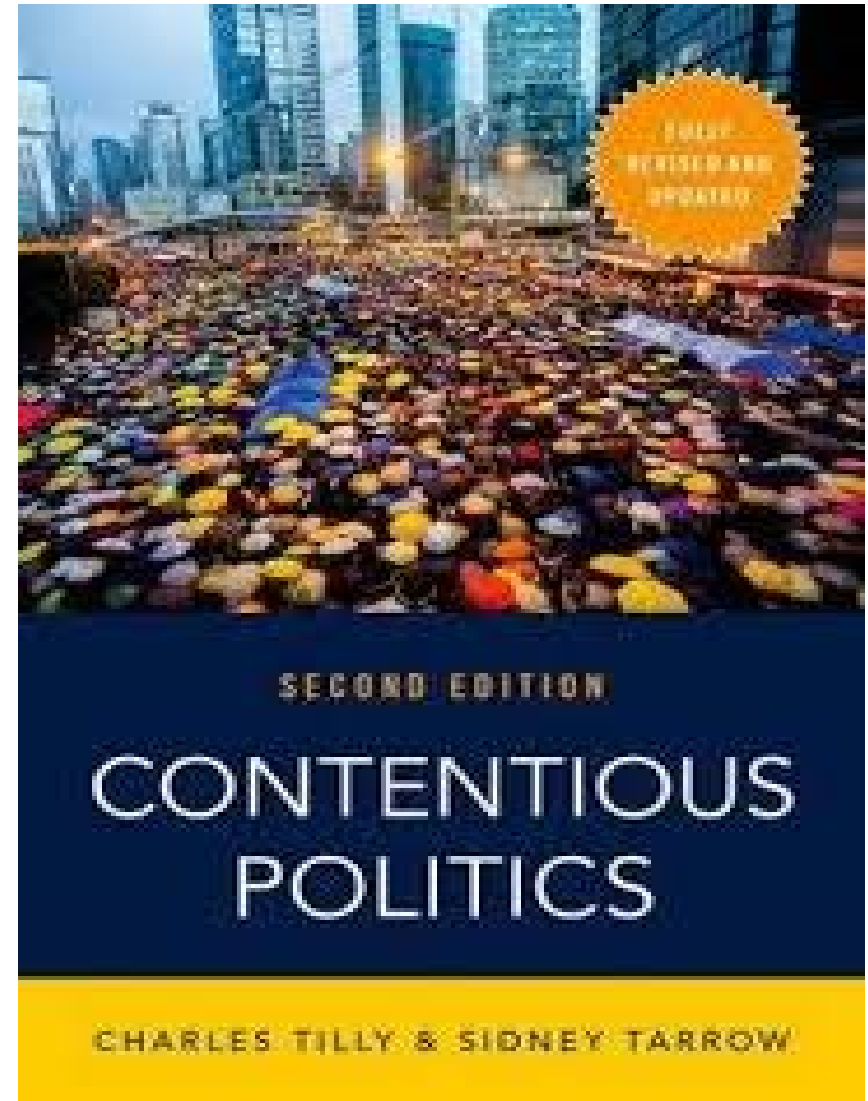
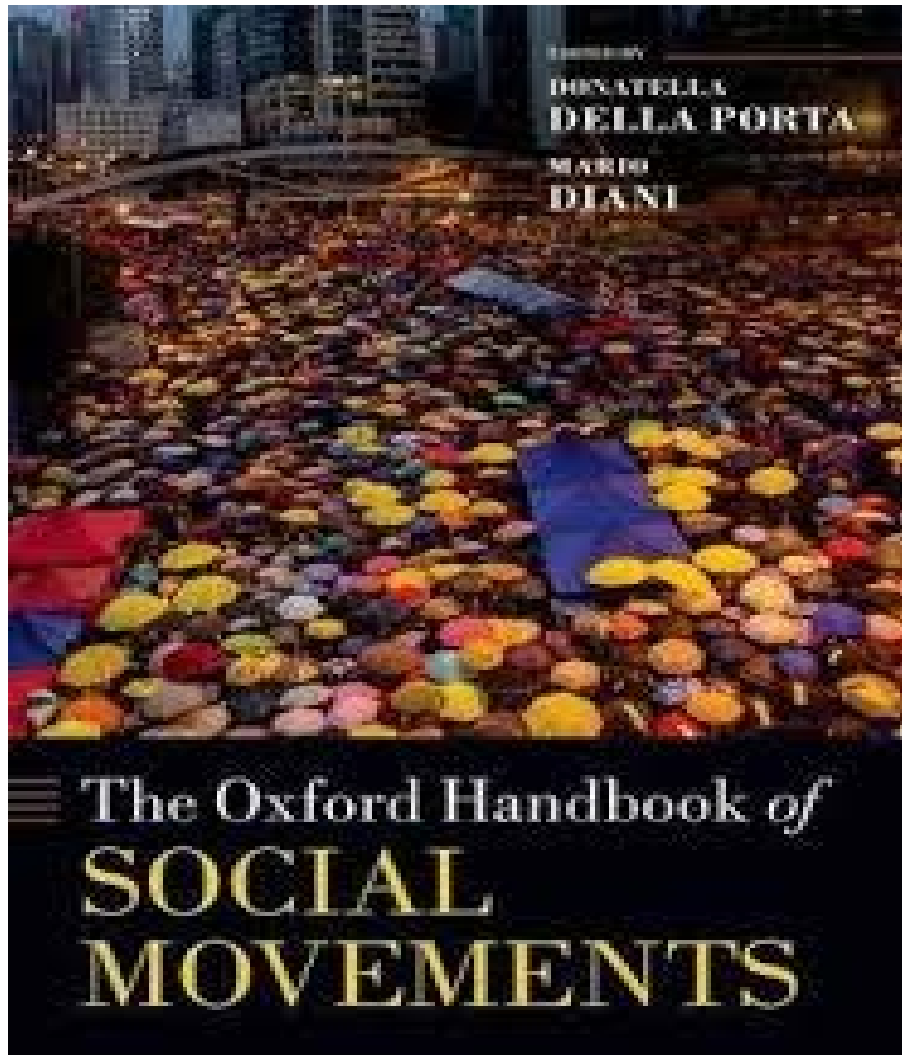
e gli studenti di allora

13 · 5 · 2016

Meet professor Kinman Chan



Students' collective action matters



This talk

It's neither an overview of student activism nor a summary of its evolution (there are many student activisms)

Instead, it attempts to identify

- a) some key elements of students' collective action
- b) how such elements (and their changes) may matter for university policy makers

But first, what is collective action?

- People cooperating on a **voluntary** basis (i.e., not driven primarily by economic calculation or coercion – although they may use professionals)
- In pursuit of collective goods *à la Olson*
- Through public displays of worth, unity, numbers, and commitment (WUNC, as US historian & sociologist Charles Tilly put it)

First dilemma: how do actors (here, students) allocate resources?

Individual students' decisions to become active, on what issues, with what level of commitment and intensity, whether linked to organizations or independently

Organizations' decisions on whether working on their own or in coalitions, with what agendas, using what kind of action repertoires

Second dilemma: Who are «we»? And «them»? (boundary definition)

The answer looks trivial: "students". But it's actually far from obvious:

- a) Student is a temporary condition
- b) Class, race, gender, religion, nation, ideology shape it
- c) Students control key resources for activism that are ubiquitous
- d) Resources vary across subjects (socio-cultural professions & NSMs)

Third dilemma: how to use public space?

Universities are locales with huge symbolic relevance (as Sociology in Trento illustrates):

1. “free spaces” with special entitlements, protected from secular powers’ interference (violations of that principle like UNAM in 1968, or Athens polytechnic in 1973 have huge symbolic impact)

2. but also “no go areas” potentially open to abuse and monopolization by radical groups

Identities and public spaces

		Spatial location of activism	
		Campus	Extra-mural
Identity of collective actor	Student condition	Stop the fees / Neo-liberal reforms / De-racialize the curriculum / Positive discrimination / Better services	Umbrella movement in Hong Kong / Vietnam war (SDS) / civil rights movement (SNCC)/ 1968 / Nationalism / Right wing / 2008 Athens riots
	Class/gender/race nation / religion / ideology	Boycott apartheid economy / Stop investment in Israel / Black Lives Matter / White supremacy / Nationalism / Brexit /	Non - student activism

As for the organizational forms

1. The same identities may be articulated in reference to specific organizations or to larger, less clearly defined, collectivities
2. Cooperation between groups and associations may be intense or limited
3. As a consequence, student activism takes the form of multiple "modes of coordination"

Key issues for administrators

- a) Identifying the relevant players: who represents what and with what legitimacy?
“Divide & rule” works with some actors, not with others

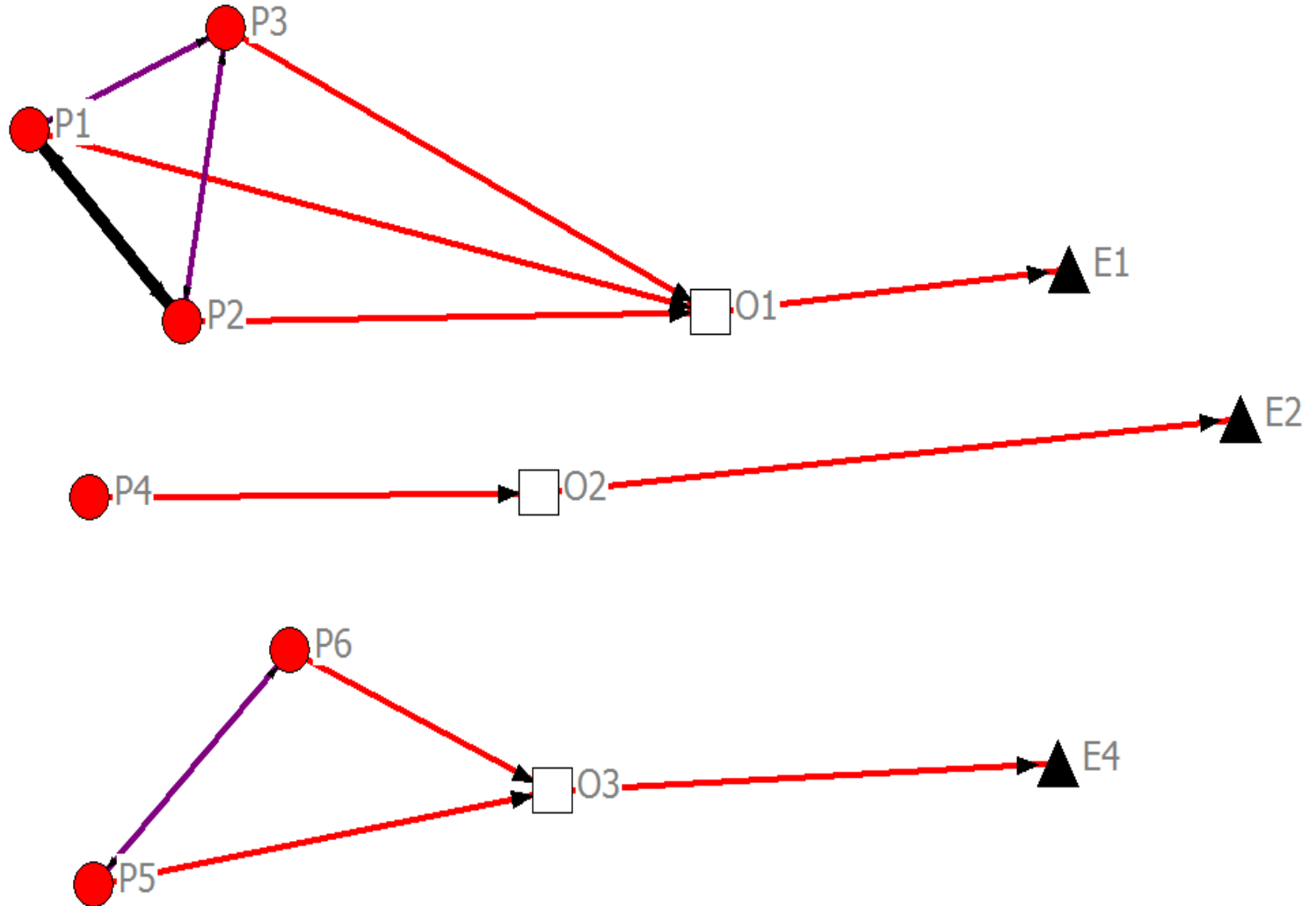
- b) Identifying sustainable policy outcomes
(Ignore? Respond? Repress?)

- c) Managing the university space (access, forms of use) in a context of multiple external pressures

Modes of coordination & management I

1. When reformist organizations/coalitions prevail, "divide & rule" often works (so does reform, in fairness)
2. When sectarian organizations prevail, "divide & rule" may not work without substantial costs (risk of repression/radicalization dynamic)

Organizational MoC: Boundaries coincide with organizations



Modes of coordination & management II

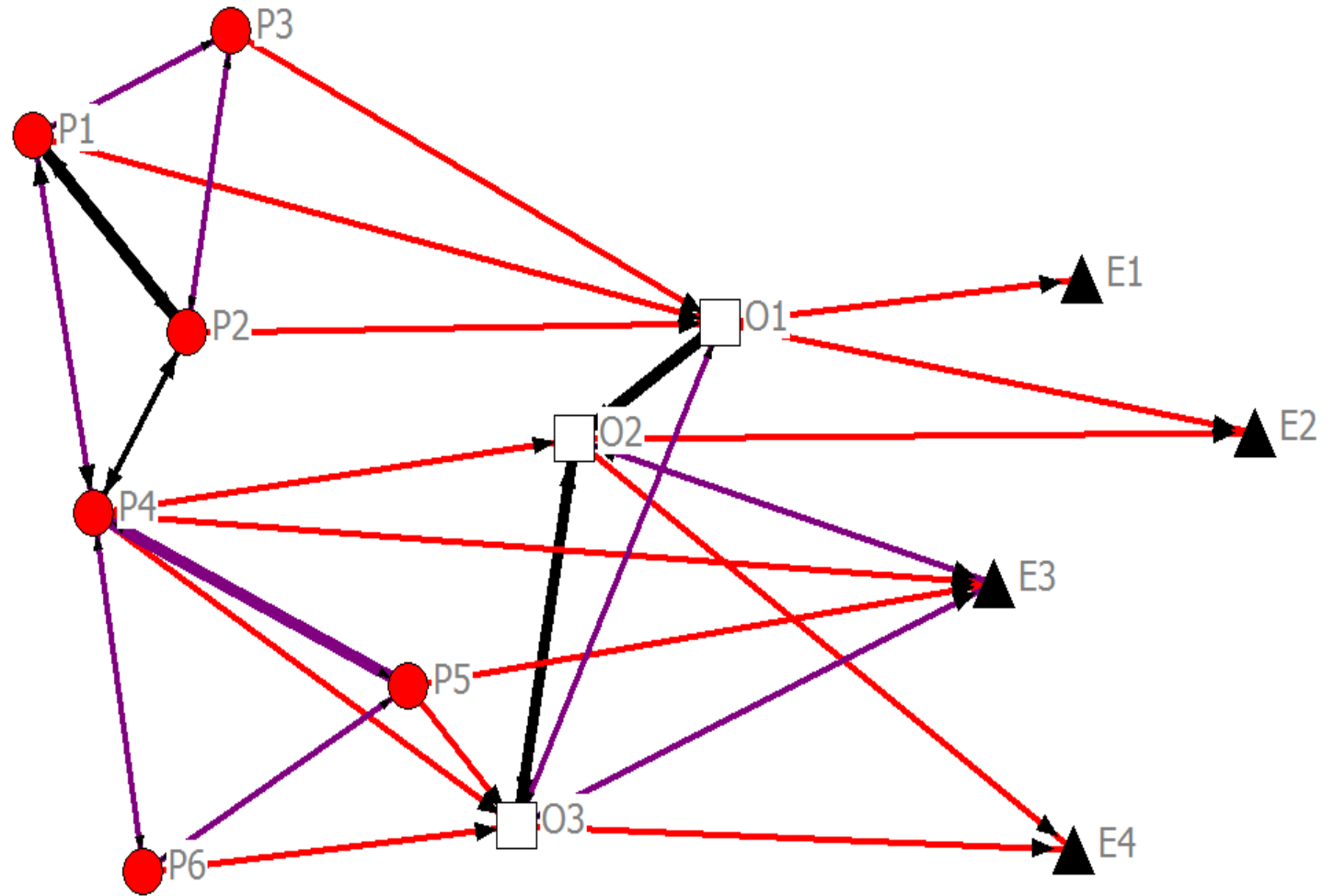
3. Student movements "proper" (multiple independent actors with some shared identity) are an intermediate case between sectarian and moderate organizations :

polycephalous

capable to mount sustained pressure

yet with some leadership structure that may be engaged with

Social movement MoC



Changing landscapes? (I)

1. Growth of (populist) right

a) diversifies students activism on campus → more difficult mediation

b) pressurizes university administrators to adopt confrontational, repressive responses over mediation (e.g. Brazilian police in 20 universities this month)

c) challenges shared ideas about the worth of expertise and competence

Populist right and external pressures

- Pressure by political authorities affects the balance between tolerance and repression
- Pressure by donors / trustees / sponsors also influences the margins for mediation between students' claims and university's responses. How do they balance universalism with profit-oriented culture and neo-liberal demands (e.g., high quality departments to be closed because they are not 'profitable')?

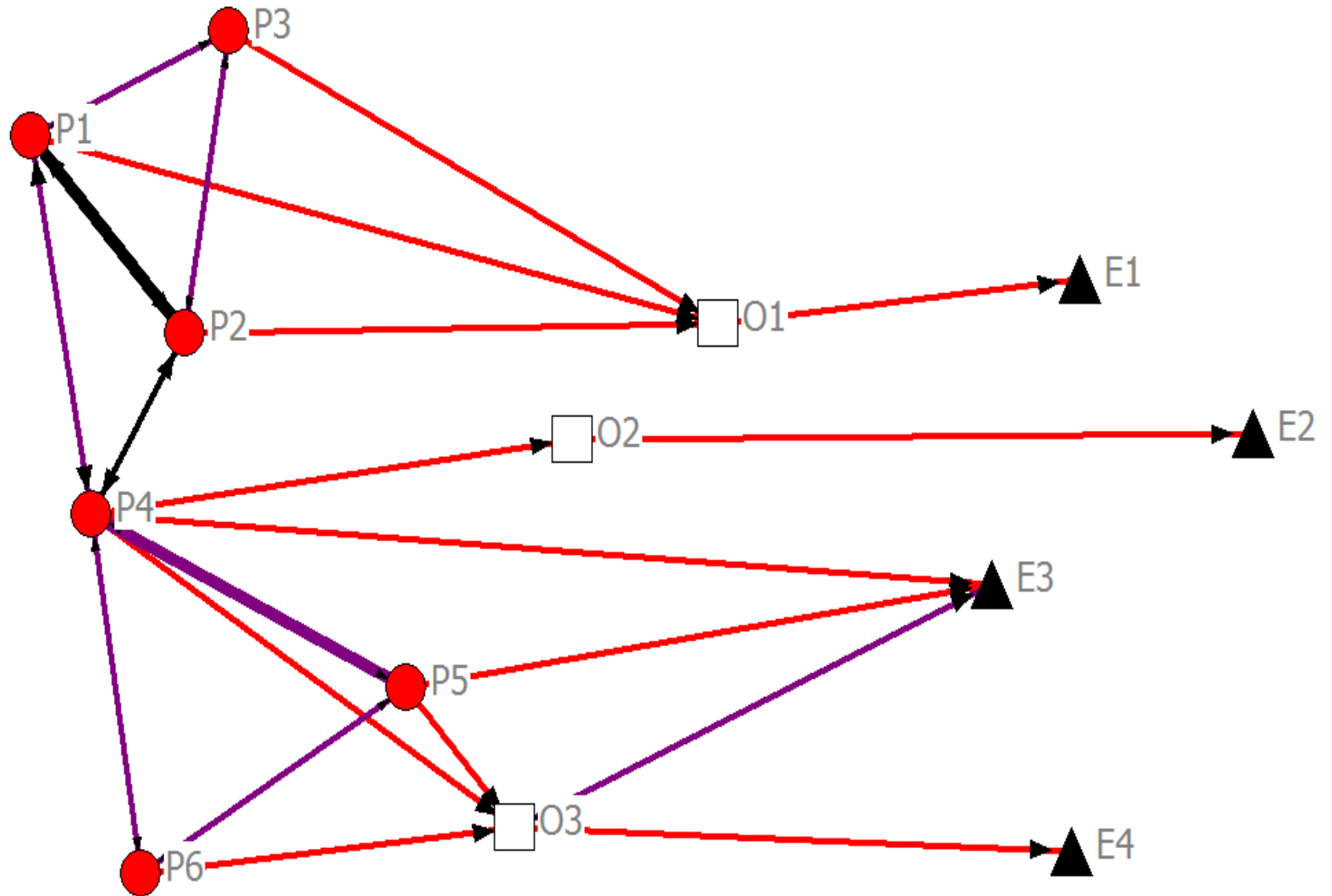
Changing landscapes? (II)

2. Weakening of traditional cleavages renders dialogue more difficult as conflict fragments and veers towards identity politics

3. Blurring of the boundaries between public and private space also questions universities' «sanctuary» status

4. The greater relevance of subcultural communities (also thanks to Internet) further hampers identification of interlocutors

Communitarian/subcultural MoC



Thanks for your attention

... And good luck to us all