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Student Revolt: Italian Style

by M. L. STEIN
and JOSEPH V. RICAPITO

During a demonstration at the University of Genoa, students scrawled on a campus wall: "We will not be satisfied until the last of the capitalists is hanged from the intestines of the last of the bureaucrats." To underscore their point, the protesters defaced a nearby bust of Giuseppe Mazzini, the famous Italian patriot and revolutionist, with this notice: "He built up this nation. We shall tear it down."

The graffiti expressed the philosophy of the extreme left wing of *Il Movimento Studentesco*, a loosely organized but potent crusade that has become, perhaps, the most important

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new force in Italian society. Not yet two years old, the student movement has, by a series of bloody riots and protests from Sicily to Milan, shaken the public and politicians to the point where long-overdue university reforms have a priority with both administrators and legislators in Rome. Very few of the changes have been initiated, but their coming is inevitable.

The question is whether the *Movimento* will halt its agitation when the reforms are achieved. The authors, after discussing the issue with a number of activists and others at several Italian universities, are convinced that the movement's violent pressure tactics will continue even if all the university wrongs are righted. Although they are a minority of the *Movimento* (estimates range from 5 to 10 per cent), the *Left-wingers* are single-minded revolutionists whose goal is to rip down the whole structure of Italian life. Their heroes are Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh, and Che Guevara. Their enemies are the state, Fiat, the church, most of the Italian press, "United States imperialism," and just about everything else that marks the Establishment.

Said one student organizer at the University of Rome: "What difference would it make if all the university reforms are granted? We would have a broken-down car with a brand new tire. It's the system that must be changed."

Still, educational improvements are the most realizable goal, and it is this issue that has given the revolutionaries the support of thousands of less ideological students, younger faculty members, and a segment of the general population. Indeed, it would be hard to find anyone in Italy, including the leaders of all political parties, who does not agree that the nation's universities need drastic overhauling and an infusion of more money to bring them into the twentieth century. This would mean a leap of about 600 years in the view of many observers who argue that the twenty-nine state-run institutions have changed little from the Middle Ages.

Even the most ossified American university would appear progressive by comparison. In addition to being overcrowded and critically lacking equipment and facilities, particularly in the sciences, the Italian universities oper-

ate under an archaic system that has stifled learning and created a deep gulf between the teachers and their students. It also has produced a bitterness that has furnished much of the steam for the Movimento.

The overcrowding is a daily fact of life for the 450,000 students, of whom only a third attend classes at any given time. The rest stay away because there is no room for them and because they know the only lectures they really must sit through are those on which the professor will base exam questions. A University of Pisa law student, for example, remains at his parents' home in Lucca most of the year, running over to Pisa for exams and an occasional lecture. Full attendance at a lecture often forces as many as 400 students to squeeze into a lecture hall made for fewer than half that number. In Rome engineering students line up at 7 a.m. to get a seat for a 9 o'clock class. The School of Letters and Philosophy has a student enrollment of 7,927 and classroom space for 1,458. The school's dean, seventy-four-year-old Professor Alberto Maria Ghisalberti, resigned in disgust, declaring: "Let them all come to classes one day and perhaps we'll get some action from someone."

Professor Sergio Baldi, professor of English literature at the University of Florence, said he cannot get a room to hold sixty students for a lecture. Dr. Baldi, who, with other liberal faculty members, has fought for reforms, said the changes have been delayed largely because many professors are more interested in securing their own privileges than in seeking change.

Despite these conditions, the students in languages and literature re-

ceive the traditional classical and humanistic education still greatly esteemed in Italy. The science major, however, is getting second-rate training. Equipment in physics, chemistry, and the other physical sciences is in such short supply that laboratory sessions are rarely held. Gabriele, a second-year chemistry student at the University of Florence, laughed bitterly when he was asked about lab work.

"Here is the way we have laboratories," he explained. "The instructor is the only one with the equipment. He performs the experiment at his desk in a huge hall. The rest of us watch, some from the back of the room. If you're sitting in the last rows you really must have binoculars to know what's going on."

The science students are aware of the well-equipped laboratories in American, Russian, and other Western European universities and know they cannot compete with graduates of those schools. Those who can afford it go to the United States or elsewhere for post-graduate training.

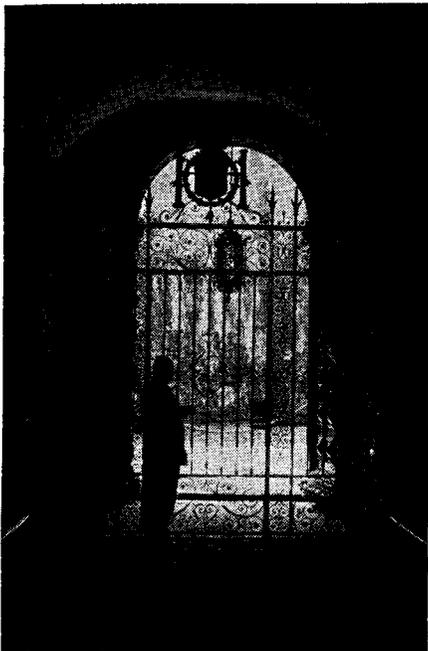
Classroom and laboratory shortages, bad as they are, do not stir up the student malcontents as much as do the professorial and examination systems. The Italian university complex has about 10,000 instructors of all ranks, far fewer than required for the student body. Almost absolute power is centered in roughly 2,800 full professors whose godlike status often relieves them of teaching at all. They impose this burden on their underpaid and overworked assistants, many of whom remain in this role for years despite the fact that they have doctoral degrees and contribute meaningfully to the ad-

vancement of knowledge in their field.

In several of the universities the most prestigious chairs are occupied by political figures who are likely to be in Rome more than in the classroom. Others lend themselves out as highly paid consultants to industry, being absent for weeks at a stretch. A number of medical and law faculty members have lucrative private practices that occupy most of their time. The political professors have included former Prime Ministers Aldo Moro and Amintore Fanfani and dozens of lesser figures in government, including seventy-seven members of parliament. Moro and Fanfani reportedly did give an occasional lecture, but some faculty members hold appointments in name only. One full professor at the University of Cagliari in Sardinia never set foot on the campus for a full year. This was too much even for his senior colleagues, who normally close ranks to protect absentees. They called a meeting and voted to fire him. When he heard of the action, the professor, an undersecretary in the defense ministry, was shaken to his marrow. When he recovered from the shock he commandeered a military plane and flew to Sardinia, where he pleaded for reinstatement. At this writing his case is on appeal.

The professors might be forgiven their outside activities if there were rapport between them and their students. There is hardly any. Most full professors are aloof, unapproachable figures who shun interaction with students in or out of the classroom. In the classic European tradition they deliver their lectures and leave. Seminars are rare, and questions are discouraged. An

—Federico Patellani (Pix).



Gate to the University of Bologna (left); students protest in the streets (right)—"Italian universities operate under an archaic system that has stifled learning and created a deep gulf between the teachers and students."

—Epoca (Black Star).



American student taking a course in Italian literature at the University of Milan was coldly rebuffed when he queried his professor on a point. "You are asking me questions about material that you yourself should be reading," the professor snapped. "In an American university I would have received some kind of an answer," the student commented. "But over here the professor is a full colonel and we are buck privates."

A group of Italian students was asked if they were ever able to see their professors in their offices for informal discussions. "No, but there would be nothing to talk about even if we could," said Claudio Scarpelli, a Florentine, who is studying English at the University of Pisa. "The only thing we can ever ask a professor about is the next examination." He added that no student would dream of requesting a professor to expand on his lecture after class, or try to open a casual discussion of ideas.

This indifference extends to the few administrative duties professors have. One example is in the matter of attendance. Although the student's presence in class is seldom necessary, he must have a signed statement from his professor that he was there at least some of the time. The problem is that the latter is often not in his office when the student comes around for his signature. One such incident helped make a rebel of Angelo Scuderi, a University of Florence medical student and an activist in the movement. The handsome twenty-four-year-old trembled with rage as he told of what happened when he sought to get his attendance card signed by one of his professors, a renowned surgeon.

"His secretary said she had no idea when the professor would be in," Scuderi recalled. "She handed me a list of clinics and hospitals where he would be throughout the day and said I could try to locate him that way. There was no time listed for any of these places. I was just supposed to go from one to the other, hoping by some piece of luck to find him." Most students tip the college *bidelli* (custodians) \$2 to get a professor's signature for them.

Another source of resentment is the staggering number of examinations required, many of them only remotely connected to the student's major subject. A young man, for example, who plans to be an English teacher in an Italian high school must pass not only his English examinations but also sixteen other tests in such areas as medieval history and Hegel's philosophy. A Ph.D. candidate in Spanish literature must take a comprehensive examination in world geography. Frustration with this rule has reached the point

where some professors flout it by asking only token questions on the so-called "complementary" examinations. One coed appeared for an oral exam that took only two minutes. She was asked the title of her textbook and her home address. "Thank you very much," said the professor and passed her. An architectural student at the University of Florence was quizzed about a soccer game the previous week when he appeared for his oral in ancient history.

Such departures, however, are the exception in a university system that is rigidly controlled from Rome. There is absolute uniformity in curriculum, which is drawn up by the government. A history professor at the University of Bologna could be transferred to the University of Palermo without missing a beat in his lecture. He would find on his new desk the exact syllabus he had been using. The fact that thousands of students submit to this deadening inflexibility testifies to the importance of the degree in a country that has a high illiteracy rate and a sharply defined class system. The Ph.D., which waits for the student at the end of his four college years, opens doors for him in business and the professions that otherwise would be tightly closed. Doctoral degrees are flaunted by almost everyone in Italy who owns one. The *Dott.* is displayed on office doors, calling cards, desk plaques, and in the telephone book. Receptionists in government offices would not think of referring to their university-bred bosses as anything but Doctor. A Florence automobile dealer puts the *Dott.* in front of his name in newspaper and billboard advertisements.

But no matter how prized the degree, the radicals are willing to risk wrecking the entire university structure and their own careers to achieve reforms. They also cite a string of other grievances, including the paucity of scholarships, the tiny number of dormitories (the University of Rome has campus residential space for only 400 of its 60,000 students), and the fact that working-class students comprise only 13 per cent of the university population.

The students' simmering rage boiled over in a series of bloody riots in Milan, Turin, Venice, and Rome. In Milan they fought a three-hour battle with police, who arrested more than 200 of them. Chanting "Ho Chi Minh" and "workers' power," the students marched on the eminent newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, branding it a "tool of a hated society." In Rome, 3,000 students battled police with nail-tipped clubs, slingshots, café chairs, and umbrellas. Last February President Nixon's visit to Rome touched off more

rioting. A month later Leftists again took to the streets, clashing with not only the police but Neo-Fascist students as well. Some fifty firebombs were found in various buildings, obscenities directed at Pope Paul VI were smeared on walls, and a crucifix torn off a classroom wall was found in a toilet. Under Italian law, every schoolroom in the nation must display a cross.

The rampages set off shock waves throughout Italy. Premier Mariano Rumor, then secretary of the Christian Democratic Party, called for urgent action on university reforms to meet an "alarming situation." The average citizen reacted with fear, rage, or both. To many persons, the students' seeming delight in overturning automobiles, smashing windows, and taunting pedestrians recalled Mussolini's *squadristi* thugs in the early Fascist days. The respected Turin newspaper *La Stampa* wondered if the destruction was not being used as an "alibi for a tiny Neo-Fascist group." The Vatican's *L'Osservatore Romano* declared: "There is no justification, there are no extenuating circumstances for violence."

Beneath the phrase-making and official protests was the frightening knowledge that the Maoist element no longer had university reforms as its ultimate goal. Its aim was, and is, to topple the entire social and economic edifice. "We don't want reform but a complete upheaval that will put the working class in power," a Rome activist said. "We will reject anything in this society until the change is complete."

Angelo Scuderi, the Florence medical student, told the authors: "In the beginning we never asked for much—bigger classrooms, better laboratories, and other things that would modernize our universities. We never discussed politics in school; it was forbidden. But none of our requests were satisfied. From that point, it was a short step to political criticism of the society and the protest movement."

The discontent first manifested itself in sit-ins that disrupted classes for weeks at the Universities of Turin, Rome, and Florence. In their street forays, the students linked their own complaints with the demands of workers striking for increased old-age pensions and other benefits. But the attempt by the Movimento to identify with and champion labor's cause has not met with a particularly enthusiastic response. Most of the student insurgents are of middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, making communication difficult with the lower-class workers. In Italy it is not easy to convince a Turin factory hand that young intellectuals are interested in his welfare. In some instances the students'

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Schools Make News

Aid for the Middle Class

AS THE COST of attending private schools and colleges has risen rapidly in recent years, it has been the middle-income families that have felt the financial crunch most severely. Scholarship funds for lower-income and disadvantaged students have proliferated dramatically, and the wealthy require no financial help. Consequently, many of the more selective—and expensive—institutions have found that their student bodies increasingly are made up of the very rich and the very poor.

To attract more students from middle-income families, Northfield and Mount Hermon, the largest independent, coordinate, residential secondary schools in the country, have instituted a new loan program. Beginning this coming fall, the schools will make available \$110,000 so that parents who would like to defer the full burden of tuition can borrow up to two-thirds of school costs. No interest will be charged until the student graduates or leaves the school. Repayment of the principal will be extended over a ten-year period, beginning with the completion of college or graduate school (98 per cent of each school's graduates go on to college). Interest at the rate of 5 per cent annually will be charged during the college years as well as

on the unpaid balance after college.

Northfield and Mount Hermon now set aside 20 per cent of their operating budgets for financial aid to students—primarily those from low-income and disadvantaged homes. This coming fall \$920,000 is earmarked for financial aid, including loans. In each succeeding year an additional \$110,000 will be added to the loan fund, and thereafter it will continue at the annual level of \$440,000.

The new loan program was initiated after the schools surveyed 6,000 graduates between the ages of thirty-five and forty-five. Results showed that two-thirds of this group had children who would be interested in attending the schools, but that the parents of half of these would need financial aid.

Advantages accruing to both parents and the schools include easing the immediate burden for parents and the opportunity to repay loans during their high earning years—almost certainly in cheaper dollars. The schools, meanwhile, build up a large, revolving student aid fund that should prove a permanent help in recruiting a wide range of students.

April Fool on Whom?

ONE OF the more intriguing aspects of New York City's attempts to decen-

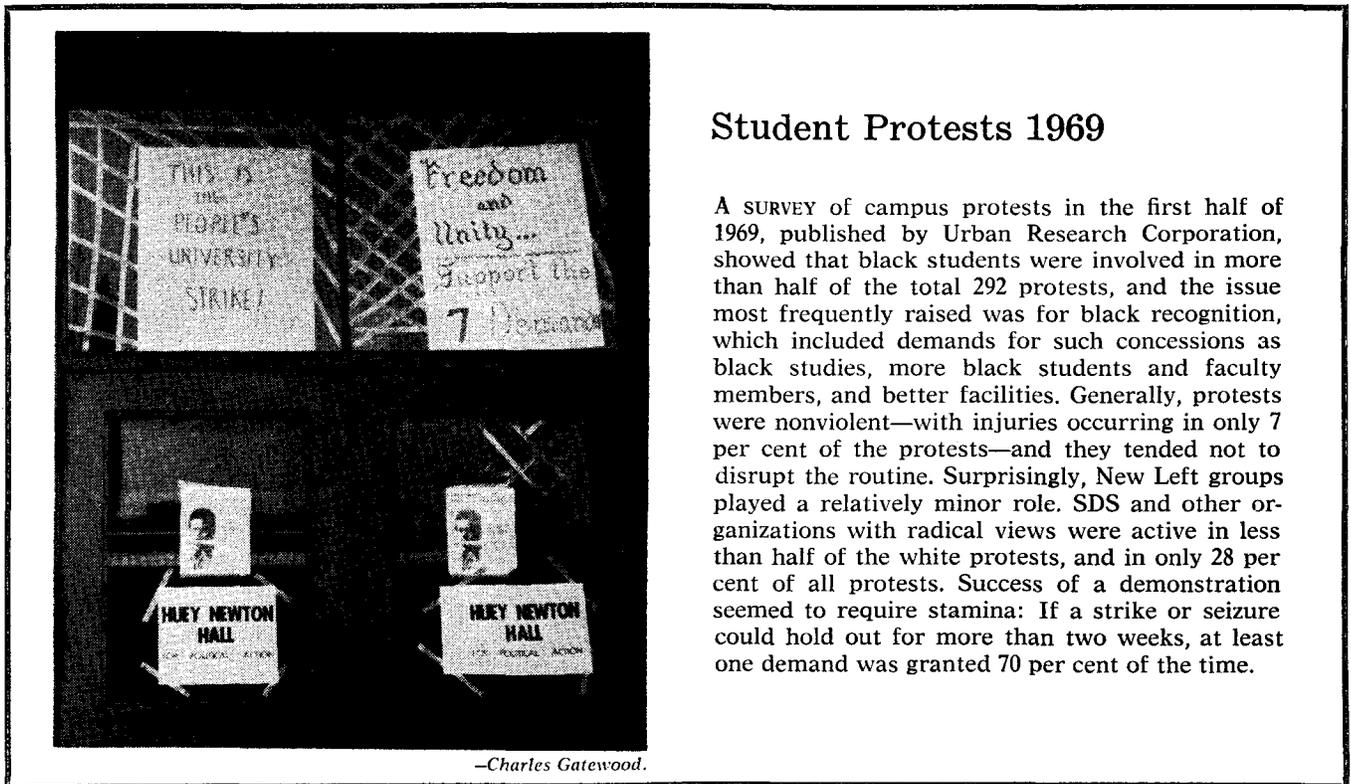
tralize its school system is that there are too many qualified educators for the available jobs.

Under a state decentralization law passed last year, all persons on the existing list for eligible elementary school principals must be appointed by April 1 so that a new list of eligibles, composed of persons meeting a different set of requirements, can be drawn up.

There are 207 names on the existing list, and, at a maximum, there are 140 vacancies in elementary schools. What to do with the sixty extra \$21,900-a-year men is causing something of a minor problem, which has been tagged, naturally, the April Fool Appointments.

A committee composed of board of education members, members of local school boards, and the principals' union (the Council of Supervisory Associations) has been attempting to find jobs for the surplus principals. It seems likely that many will be assigned jobs as interns in some of the larger elementary schools, and that others will work in specially created positions in the board of education headquarters or offices of district superintendents.

Essentially, the *tabula rasa* mandate represents a compromise between the unions and the advocates of local control: The currently eligible principals, some of whom have been waiting two years for placement, will get their jobs, and the local school boards will be able to hire more blacks and Puerto Ricans as principals. In addition, the



—Charles Gatewood.

Student Protests 1969

A SURVEY of campus protests in the first half of 1969, published by Urban Research Corporation, showed that black students were involved in more than half of the total 292 protests, and the issue most frequently raised was for black recognition, which included demands for such concessions as black studies, more black students and faculty members, and better facilities. Generally, protests were nonviolent—with injuries occurring in only 7 per cent of the protests—and they tended not to disrupt the routine. Surprisingly, New Left groups played a relatively minor role. SDS and other organizations with radical views were active in less than half of the white protests, and in only 28 per cent of all protests. Success of a demonstration seemed to require stamina: If a strike or seizure could hold out for more than two weeks, at least one demand was granted 70 per cent of the time.