

**COSMOS CONFERENCE**

**The Contentious Politics of Higher Education.**

**Student Movements in Late Neoliberalism**

15-16 November Scuola Normale Superiore (SNS), Florence

**Conveners:**

Prof. Donatella della Porta (SNS); Dr. Lorenzo Cini (SNS); Dr. Cesar Guzman-Concha (SNS)

**Confirmed Keynote Speakers:**

Thierry M. Luescher (Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa)

Manja Klemenčič (Harvard University, United States)

**Abstract:**

University students have traditionally engaged in contentious collective action. New generations of political leaders have emerged out of the student movement, often associated to broader hopes of renewal and regeneration. The events of 1968 show students as a key actor committed to a varied program of progressive change which included issues such as the fight against bureaucratism, oppression, and imperialism. The most common depiction of students doing radical politics stems from the images of rallies and clashes with the police in the streets of Paris or Los Angeles. To be sure, education has been traditionally a contentious issue. The right to attend educational programs was one of the core demands of worker movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries all over the world. The origins of the welfare state are closely related to the granting of primary education and the idea of minimum levels of compulsory instruction. Education systems have been one of the components of the welfare state, although scholars have paid far more attention to other aspects such as health and pension systems. In historical perspective, the granting of access to higher education to the lower classes was the culmination of the extension of demands that consolidate the access to education (and state provision of it) as social right.

Student activism has been sometimes related to the emergence of new middle classes and the expansion of the public sector but also as expressions of demands of emerging sectors so far excluded from the political system. Over the course of the twentieth century, and in successive waves which combine contentious and non-contentious mechanisms and their participation in broader struggles along with other actors such as labour unions, women and peace movements, and left parties, student political activism has resulted in democratization (either restoration or further consolidation), the expansion of the welfare state, and overall in the creation of more opened and inclusive societies. Several recent episodes of massive student protests in countries in Europe, Latin America and Africa, have triggered questions over the main characteristics of a new wave of campus activism taking place across the world. For sure, these protests address the

neoliberal transformations of the system of higher education, enacted by governments of all political leanings, promoting the outsourcing of personnel, the managerialization of governing bodies, the introduction of tuition fees as well as cuts to public funding. The outburst of the economic crisis in 2008 has represented a decisive watershed in this process of marketization: as many governments across the world have adopted the neoliberal and pro-austerity agenda as a way out of the crisis. These measures accelerated the implementation of neoliberal reforms in countries where they previously did not exist. Although differences between countries continue to be pronounced, national higher education systems are becoming more alike in the sense of being more market-oriented, even in countries with a strong state intervention tradition. Such transformations were not only aimed at meeting effective and well-structured policy designs, but they were also triggered by the logic of vested interests, power relations, and social conflicts. This is where our research interest comes in with our focus on the contentious politics of higher education. Over the past ten years, students of all around the world have indeed contested these policies and their implementation with different degrees of success.

### **Submission Details:**

The Centre on Social Movement Studies (COSMOS: <http://cosmos.sns.it/>), directed by Professor della Porta, calls for papers addressing the recent global wave of student protests for a two-days conference at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Scuola Normale Superiore (SNS) of Florence to be held on 15-16 November 2017. We look for research contributions, both from junior and senior academics (especially sociologists and political scientists), who have worked on this topic over the last years. We are especially interested in contributions that link protests to policy transformations within the broad arena of higher education. Abstracts should be 300-400 words and suitable for a 15-20 minute presentation. Please send your abstract and contact details to Lorenzo Cini ([Lorenzo.Cini@sns.it](mailto:Lorenzo.Cini@sns.it)) or Cesar Guzman-Concha ([cesarguz@gmail.com](mailto:cesarguz@gmail.com)) by the deadline of July 15<sup>th</sup>. Decisions on abstracts will be made by July 30<sup>th</sup>. The conference is organised under the auspices of the Centre On Social Movement Studies (COSMOS) at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, SNS. Unfortunately, we are not able to cover travelling costs, but we will offer coffee breaks and light lunches. No conference fees are demanded.

During the conference, we will also present the findings of our two-years research project, entitled "The Contentious Politics of Higher Education. An International Comparison of Student Movements", whose aim was to compare and assess the political and policy outcomes of the recent student protests occurred in Chile, Quebec, England, and Italy.

### **Contacts:**

If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact either Lorenzo Cini ([lorenzo.cini@sns.it](mailto:lorenzo.cini@sns.it)) or Cesar Guzman-Concha ([cesarguz@gmail.com](mailto:cesarguz@gmail.com)).