
From anti-colonialism to anti-imperialism: African student associations and activism in 1960s Italy*

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Con la fine degli imperi coloniali europei, l'afflusso di studenti universitari provenienti dai paesi di nuova indipendenza crebbe da entrambe le parti della Cortina di ferro. Questi si resero protagonisti di attività e mobilitazioni politiche tanto nei paesi del blocco orientale, quanto in Germania occidentale, Francia, Gran Bretagna. Gli studi su questi aspetti sono invece assenti per il caso italiano. Questo articolo intende proporre una prima ricostruzione della geografia dell'attivismo studentesco africano in Italia negli anni Sessanta, ricostruendone le modalità associazionistiche e proponendo una prima mappatura dei legami di tale attivismo con varie organizzazioni italiane, in particolare con alcuni gruppi studenteschi anticoloniali e con l'Ufficio Centrale Studenti Esteri in Italia, di matrice cattolica. L'articolo mostra come, nel corso del decennio, negli interessi dei gruppi africani l'anticolonialismo venga sostituito dall'antimperialismo, e come l'associazionismo africano subisca un processo di radicalizzazione in parte connesso alla simile trasformazione del movimento studentesco italiano, e in parte connesso agli sviluppi della politica africana.

Parole chiave: anticolonialismo, antimperialismo, terzomondismo, studenti africani, Modern Italy, movimenti studenteschi

After the end of European colonial rule, the presence of university students from the newly independent countries increased on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Although the students were involved in political activities both in the Eastern bloc and in Western Germany, France and Great Britain, there is a gap in academic research on this involvement in the Italian case. This article offers the first reconstruction of African student activism in Italy in the 1960s, tracing the modalities of association and mapping the links of this activism with various Italian organisations, in particular anti-colonial student organisations and the Catholic Ufficio Centrale Studenti Esteri in Italia. The article shows that throughout the decade, the African students' interests shifted from anti-colonialism to anti-imperialism and that their associations underwent a process of radicalisation, partly linked to the concurrent transformations of the Italian student movement, and partly to developments in African politics.

Key words: anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, Third Worldism, African students, modern Italy, student movements

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African and Asian students in Europe between colonialism and decolonisation

Although the colonial educational systems developed by imperialist states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were tailored to individual colonisation models, they shared a vision of education as a useful tool for building and maintaining the colonial system.¹ From this point of view, the system favoured elementary education, while higher levels of education were a viable option for a minority of the population — those who were more affluent or closer to the colonial power. University education was even more selective, also because the lack of academic facilities in the colonies forced students to move abroad; for reasons related to the recognition of qualifications or economic support, this move abroad often led the few students who could access university education to the European metropolitan centres. If this European transfer had to ensure that the colonisers could rely on educated people to maintain the colonial system, and to reaffirm the pre-eminence of European culture, the trajectories and histories of university students highlight the contradictions of this system; starting with the best-known cases of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral but also Gandhi, the students — far from being considered a passive tool in the hands of the colonisers — had the opportunity to weave networks and build relationships, and to gain knowledge that was decisive not only for the organisation of liberation movements but also for a reconsideration of the role of culture and education in the decolonisation project.

In addition, the coexistence of these opposing dynamics was an important key to understanding student mobility from decolonising or newly independent countries to Europe in the decades following the end of the Second World War. The possibilities for African and Asian students to attend European universities did not diminish when the decolonisation process began, but even increased; the emergence of independent states to replace the European colonies required trained technical and political staff who could not study in their own countries precisely because of the lack of well-structured educational systems, even

¹ Ana Isabel Madeira, Luís Grosso Correia, *Colonial Education and Anticolonial Struggles*, in John L. Rury and Eileen H. Tamura, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Education*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 413-426; Bob B. White, *Talk about School: Education and the colonial project in French and British Africa (1860-1960)*, “Comparative Education”, 1996, n. 32/1, pp. 9-25. Per il caso italiano: Richard Pankhurst, *Education in Ethiopia during the Italian Fascist occupation (1936-1941)*, “The International Journal of African Historical Studies”, 1972, 5/3, pp. 361-96; Tekeste Negash, *The Ideology of Colonialism: Educational Policy and Praxis in Eritrea*, in Ruth Ben Ghia, Mia Fuller (eds.), *Italian colonialism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 109-119; Alessandro Pes, *Building a new colonial subject? The Fascist Education Systems in Albania and Ethiopia*, in Lars Berge, Irma Taddia (eds.), *Themes in Modern African History and Culture*, Padua, libreriauniversitaria.it, 2013, pp. 319-329; Matteo Pretelli, *Education in the Italian colonies during the interwar period*, “Modern Italy”, 2011, n. 16/3, pp. 275-293.

if the elites of the liberation movements were working towards the de-Europeanisation of education. On the other hand, the prospect of training the future African and Asian elites to gain their loyalty was seen as an unmissable opportunity for all parties in the Cold War context; a well-known case is that of the USSR, which opened an ad hoc university in Moscow, the Patrice Lumumba, and more generally the case of the Eastern bloc states, which activated study programmes aimed at training African elites.² The United States, too, considered the training of African and Asian students as a soft power tool. For the Western European states with a recent colonising past, training students was part of the project to gain new influence on the African continent, not only by carving out a place for themselves in the new world balance dictated by the Cold War but also by maintaining a privileged relationship with their former colonies.

While they may have gone abroad as part of projects that often proposed a new version of Western superiority, as some scholars in educational history have suggested,³ even here the students proved to be anything but passive pawns caught between the interests of the host countries and — in some cases — the governments that had sent them to Europe. Several studies have reconstructed the tensions that arose between Portuguese African scholarship holders in the Soviet Union and their host country, which they criticised not only for its racism but also for its imperialist foreign policy.⁴ Likewise, African students in Western Europe were at the forefront of political struggles: Quinn Slobodian has highlighted the contribution that Congolese students made to the elaboration of an anti-imperialist ideology in 1960s West Germany; French scholars have studied the participation of African students in the 1968 movement, focusing on the role of the *Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en France*; and in Great Britain, attention has been given to the role of West African students.⁵ With regard to the latter, studies like the one that examines the links between Zimbabwean students in the UK and local organisations

² Michel Leclerc-Olive, Marie-Antoniette Hily (eds.), *Former des élites. Mobilités des étudiants d'Afrique au nord du Sahara dans les pays de l'ex-bloc socialiste*, "Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales", Dossier Thématique, 2016, n. 32/2; Patrice Yengo, Monique de Saint Martin (eds.), *Élites de retour de l'Est*, "Cahiers d'Études africaines", 2017, n. 226/2.

³ Sharon Stein, Vanessa Oliveira de Andreotti, *Cash, Competition, or Charity: International Students and the Global Imaginary*, "Higher education", 2016, n. 72, pp. 225-239.

⁴ Constantin Katsakioris, *Students from Portuguese Africa in the Soviet Union, 1960-74: Anti-Colonialism, Education, and the Socialist Alliance*, "Journal of Contemporary History", 2021, n. 56/1, pp. 142-65.

⁵ Quinn Slobodian, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2012; Françoise Blum, *Années 68 postcoloniales?: "Mai" de France et d'Afrique*, "French Historical Studies", 2018, n. 41/2, pp. 193-218; Amady Aly Dieng, *Les premiers pas de la Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en France. De l'union française à Bandung (1950-1955)*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003; Hakim Adi, *West Africans in Britain 1900-1960: Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and Communism*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1997.

highlight how the transnational perspective offered by the history of foreign students — Africans, in particular — allows us to delve not only into the history of student movements and anti-colonial movements, but into the post-war political history of Western Europe at large.⁶

The case of foreign students in Italy has remained at the margins of the European debate on the subject. Only a small number of studies deal with this topic,⁷ whereas research on immigration in the second half of the twentieth century has only recently started paying attention to foreign students. For example, Luca Einaudi has shown that the acquisition of a study visa was used as a trick to enter Italy before the first regulations were introduced to manage immigration.⁸ According to ISTAT data, the number of visas issued by the Ministry of the Interior to foreign students rose from 3,000 in 1956-1957 to 28,000 20 years later; although the data do not give a clear indication of the continent of origin, statistics from the Central Office for Foreign Students in Italy (Ufficio Centrale degli Studenti Esteri in Italia, hereafter UCSEI) show that the percentage of Afro-Asian students was around 35 per cent until the end of the 1960s, dropping to 25 per cent by the end of the following decade.⁹

The specific case of students from decolonising and newly independent countries enrolled in Italian universities has barely been researched, nor have their voices and experiences received much scholarly attention, apart from a few autobiographies and individual case studies.¹⁰ The delay compared to

⁶ JoAnn McGregor, *Locating Exile: Decolonization, Anti-imperial Spaces and Zimbabwean Students in Britain, 1965-1980*, "Journal of Historical Geography", 2017, n. 57, pp. 62-75.

⁷ Andrea Cammelli, *Studiare da stranieri in Italia. Presenze e caratteristiche degli studenti esteri nelle università italiane: il quadro internazionale di riferimento. 1954-1988*, Bologna, Clueb, 1990; Elisa Signori, *Università: tra orizzonte nazionale e internazionale: 150 anni di migrazioni, ostracismi e scambio scientifico*, "Il Politico" 2011, n. 76, pp. 267-285, here p. 286.

⁸ Luca Einaudi, *Le politiche dell'immigrazione in Italia dall'Unità a oggi*, Rome, Laterza, 2007, pp. 84-85; Michele Colucci, *Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia. Dal 1945 ai nostri giorni*, Rome, Carocci, 2018, pp. 28-31. See also UCSEI, *Studiare da stranieri nelle università italiane*, UCSEI, Rome, 2004.

⁹ The data provided by ISTAT also indicate the students' continental origin, but the percentage of 'Don't know/doesn't answer' for the years under consideration is 80 per cent. The UCSEI's data seem to be more complete but less precise, given that the used system 'may count the same student twice and does not differentiate between long-course students or transient students; Institutes and universities: not all answer, and it happens that institutes report students following a short course who are then also reported by other universities'. Remigio Musaragno, *Fonti e criteri di rilevazione*, "Amicizia", 1970, n. 11, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ Exceptions include Mohamed Aden Scheik, *La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi*, Reggio Emilia, Diabasis, 2010 and Joy Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa. L'immagine dei neri nel cinema bianco e il primo cinema africano visti nel 1968*, Rome, Aracne, 2014. In the introduction to the volume, a re-edition of a book published in 1968 when the Nigerian author was a student in Rome, Leonardo De Franceschi observes how the presence of African students in Italy is given space in some documentaries: *Africa chiama* by Ansano Giannarelli (1961); *Appunti per un'Orestiade africana* by Pierpaolo Pasolini (1970) and *Il colore delle parole* by Marco Simon Puccioni (2009). Leonardo De Franceschi, *Introduzione*, in Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, cit., pp. 14-15.

European historiographies is probably due to the smaller number of foreign students — and therefore their reduced visibility — in Italy, which also explains the delayed historiographical reflections on the first coloured people and communities in Italy after the end of the Second World War. However, recent studies on this latter issue have proved useful in understanding how the concepts of otherness and blackness have been dealt with — first and foremost at an institutional level — in the Republican era.¹¹ In this sense, studying foreign students in Italy allows us to take a step forward and examine whether even here, as in the rest of Europe, “African-ness” or “otherness” was not merely suffered, in a context where prejudice and racism persisted despite having been remodelled, but was rather claimed as a carrier of complexity in student and public debate. Immigration studies have proven useful here, in particular the works by Michele Colucci, who pointed out that ‘political participation is important among the thousands of foreign students in Italy’.¹² Although this reflection does not concern African students alone, these offer a privileged vantage-point for a preliminary study as they began to arrive in Italian universities when decolonisation processes were still underway in the continent of departure, and liberation movements — with which the students had connections — were still active. Furthermore, the students were directly connected to the colonial history of the country of arrival, especially in the case of Somalis and Eritreans.

This article offers an initial mapping of African student associations and activism in Italy in the 1960s. It does so by reconstructing the types of associations that emerged throughout the decade, assessing whether the aims of and relations between the groups changed over time, and giving an initial reflection on the links of this activism with certain Italian political, associational and student groups, especially the UCSEI. The decade under consideration is that in which Third Worldism, in its various meanings, became a privileged approach in the political thought and practice of the institutional and non-institutional Left, but also of some Catholic circles; it is also the decade of a growing politicisation, mobilisation and transformation of the university. The histories of postcolonial students can help shed light on both themes.¹³

The starting point is the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, when the period of Italian trusteeship of Somalia was coming to an end and Italian policy towards Africa was entering a new phase. In the previous

¹¹ See Sabrina Marchetti, *Ragazze di Asmara. Lavoro domestico e migrazione postcoloniale*, Rome, Ediesse, 2011; Silvana Patriarca, *Il colore della Repubblica. “Figlie della guerra” e razzismo nell’Italia postfascista*, Turin, Einaudi 2021; Valeria Deplano, *La madrepatria è una terra straniera. Libici, eritrei e somali nell’Italia del dopoguerra*, Florence, Le Monnier-Mondadori, 2017.

¹² M. Colucci, *Storia dell’immigrazione straniera in Italia*, cit., p. 31.

¹³ On both topics, see Marica Tolomelli, *L’Italia dei movimenti. Politica e società nella prima Repubblica*, Rome, Carocci, 2016.

decade, the presence of African students — and foreign students in general — had been very limited, but in those years, some features of Republican Italy's policy towards them were defined, a process that went hand in hand with the redefinition of the country's foreign policy. Faced with an investment in higher and university education that had been almost non-existent during the colonial occupation, after 1945, the first post-war governments — through the Ministry of Italian Africa — financed the studies in Italy of a few dozen Eritrean and Libyan students, mostly selected from families that were thought to be able to support Italy's attempt to maintain a role in the former colonies.¹⁴ Attention to foreign students began to follow a logic less tied to the immediate circumstances (i.e. the maintenance of the colonies) and closer, instead, to the soft power functions that other countries ascribed to the student mobility programmes once the fate of the colonies had been decided, with Libya's independence in 1951, Eritrea's entry into the Ethiopian federation in 1952 and the trusteeship of Somalia by Italy from 1950 to 1960. Thus, from 1952 onwards, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was authorised to grant scholarships for foreign students not only from the former colonies, with a view to 'developing knowledge between peoples on a cultural level'.¹⁵ By the middle of the decade, the number of foreign students (scholarship recipients but not only) also began to increase steadily; as far as the chronological span examined in this article is concerned, there were 3,689 students in 1960-1961 as opposed to 14,357 in 1970-1971. It was in this context, between the late 1950s and early 1960s, that the first African student associations began to take shape.

The Association of Somali Students in Italy: organisation and anti-colonialism

The first African students to gain visibility as political subjects in Italy were Somalis, 531 of whom arrived in the country during the years of the Italian trusteeship of Somalia, through the scholarships financed by Rome and regulated by the UN mandate.¹⁶ Most of the scholarship recipients were members of the Somali Youth League (hereafter SYL), the party founded in 1943 that would lead Somalia's transition to independence, and which in the period between the end of the war and the establishment of the trusteeship had been the main opponent of Italy's neocolonial intentions.¹⁷ Although the degree of

¹⁴ V. Deplano, *La madrepatria è una terra straniera*, cit., pp. 64-85.

¹⁵ Draft bill no. 2770, "Autorizzazione al ministero degli Affari esteri a concedere borse di studio", Parliamentary Acts, Chamber of Deputies, presented during the session of 12 June 1952.

¹⁶ Valeria Deplano, *L'impero colpisce ancora? Gli studenti somali nell'Italia degli anni Cinquanta*, in Valeria Deplano, Alessandro Pes (eds.), *Quel che resta dell'impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani*, Milan, Mimesis, 2014, pp. 331-350.

¹⁷ Antonio M. Morone, *L'ultima colonia. Come l'Italia è tornata in Africa*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2011, pp. 96-140.

political activism of each individual student, as well as the nature of their relationship with Italy, varied from person to person, ministerial reports reveal that they had a broad political awareness of their role as young educated guests in what had once been the colonising centre. This awareness led some students to speak out on various occasions, in both public and private contexts. In 1955, for example, a report from the Perugia police headquarters referred to generic anti-colonial speeches made in public by some students of the University for Foreigners.¹⁸ These first acts of “speaking out” worried the Ministry of the Interior, first because of the denunciation they contained, which was defined as anti-Italian, but also because they were interpreted as a sign of organised activism and, above all, of communist inspiration. The Italian government warned that Somalia — on the verge of independence — could turn to Socialism; the Italian Communist Party (Partito Italiano Comunista, hereafter PCI), instead, had until 1960 cultivated the expectation that the left-most wing of the SYL, which in 1956 separated from the latter to become the Great Somali League, would succeed in pushing through the socialist option.¹⁹ In this climate, the political stance of the students who were destined to become the country’s future elite aroused opposing interests, from which the young Somalis distanced themselves by creating the first organisation of African students, which is also mentioned in the ministerial documents: the Association of Somali Students in Italy (Associazione degli Studenti Somali in Italia, hereafter ASSI), founded in Rome in 1958. The association publicly spoke out in September 1959, when a brawl in the capital resulted first in the arrest of eight African students (including seven Somalis), and then in a press campaign against them. With the exception of “L’Unità” and “Paese Sera”, the newspapers insisted on the students’ alleged communist sympathies and on the fact that they, as recipients of ministerial grants, were doing politics and living the good life at the expense of the Italian state.²⁰ In a public statement, the ASSI distanced itself from the accusations:

Let it be clear once and for all that the students in question are not involved in politics and exclusively devote themselves to their studies, which are moreover the sole reason for their stay in Italy, so much so that even when the Italian press has tackled issues concerning our country, and unfortunately in a way detrimental to our national dignity, they have refrained from giving a response on the subject, and this to respect the sensitivities of the Italian people.²¹

¹⁸ Report from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 October 1955, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (hereafter ACS), ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1947, b. 198.

¹⁹ Paolo Borruso, *Il PCI e l’Africa indipendente*, Florence, Le Monnier, 2009, pp. 37-59. Borruso writes that the fact that this possibility faded in favour of a nationalist choice meant that the PCI lost interest in Somalia, until Siad Barre’s coup.

²⁰ V. Deplano, *L’impero colpisce ancora?*, cit., pp. 343-346.

²¹ Statement from Assi, attached to the letter to the Afis administrator, 23 September 1959, in Archivio Storico-Diplomatico del ministero degli Affari esteri (Adsmæ), Direzione Generale AFIS, Cassa3, f. 18.

The ASSI also denounced the “racist campaign” fuelled by the newspapers, which reposed demeaning stereotypes when talking about the young African students. If talking about racism was a sign of rupture at a time when Republican Italy claimed to have left behind the discriminatory attitudes of the colonial period, the moderation with which the statement addressed the issue of the students’ relationship with the Italians and, indirectly, the issue of colonialism is striking: ‘We would like to take this opportunity to reject the rumours reported in some newspapers that accuse Somali students of anti-Italian sentiments, and we would like to clarify that we have deep sympathy for the noble people who are currently our hosts, and with whom we have a part of history in common.’²² The specific context in which the statement was made (i.e. the arrest of eight African students) must certainly be taken into account when assessing this position. After all, the Somali students — even ASSI members — had never stopped criticising Italian colonialism; thus, a lecture on the crimes committed by Italy in 1961 resulted in the then-medical student Mohamed Aden Sheikh being accused of discrediting the nation.²³ At the same time, this was not the main focus of the association’s activities. Starting in 1960, the Year of Africa but also of Somali independence, ministerial documents reveal that the ASSI had strengthened its now explicitly political commitment; the latter was not an action controlled or directed by Italian left-wing parties,²⁴ but a form of intervention in African issues through collaboration with student and political groups that — as we will see — combined criticism of Italian and European colonialism with the aim of promoting activities to support the liberation struggles still underway and to face the new challenges of independent Africa.

The time was ripe for this kind of activism: throughout Western Europe, the beginning of the 1960s coincided with growing attention to the issue of anti-colonialism, and the Left — both the institutional and the independent Left — began to take an interest in Third Worldism as a perspective through which to ‘redefine the project of European Socialism’.²⁵ Italy became a driving force for

²² Statement from Assi, attached to the letter to the Afis administrator, 23 September 1959, in loc. cit. note 22.

²³ V. Deplano, *L'impero colpisce ancora?*, cit., p. 348. Mohamed Aden Sheikh, who first came to Italy in the 1950s to follow a teacher training course, returned there to study medicine. Back in Somalia, he served as minister to Siad Barre but was later arrested by the Somali president himself. Upon his release in 1989, he returned to Italy.

²⁴ Report from the police headquarters in Rome to the Ministry of the Interior, 20 February 1961, in ACS, ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 200, fasc. “Studenti comunisti stranieri in Italia”. Some students and the PCI were involved in a debate on African issues, as we will see. On the basis of this link, which was probably inconsistent, the police commissioner accused three students of the ASSI – Mohamed Aden Sheikh, Hassen (Hassi) Alì Gurrà and Mahmud Mohamed Hassan – of being pro-Communist.

²⁵ Marica Tolomelli, *Dall’anticolonialismo all’anti-imperialismo yankee nei movimenti terzomondisti di fine anni Sessanta*, “Storicamente”, 2016, n. 12, pp. 1-33, here p. 11.

this theoretical elaboration; in the early 1960s, the Third Worldist militancy of Giovanni Pirelli and Joyce Lussu began, and after the Algerian War and the diffusion of Frantz Fanon's thought, the first anti-colonialist and Third Worldist movements were born.²⁶ It was in this context that the Somali students' association became more visible, precisely because it was less isolated and, instead, connected to the political ferment that also affected Roman circles. An example of the ASSI's involvement in Roman activism was an event held in March of that year, following the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa, when police killed 69 people demonstrating against the anti-black pass laws and the apartheid system. An assembly of the Comitato anticoloniale nazionale, an Italian anti-colonial committee founded a few years earlier by communist, socialist and radical intellectuals and politicians,²⁷ was organised in Rome. Sitting at the president's table, next to the writer Carlo Levi and the PCI parliamentarians Maurizio Valenzi and Ugo Bartesaghi, was Hassi Alì Gurrà, a member of the ASSI and a long-time political science student at the La Sapienza University of Rome, who had also been accused of being a communist sympathiser. Gurrà first denounced European colonialism, recalling 'stage by stage the appalling tribute of blood paid by African populations to colonial domination and racial segregation', and then went into the specifics of the South African situation, presenting segregationism as a consequence of the colonial system.²⁸

In that same year, the young student and the ASSI also began to engage with and participate in the meetings and initiatives of a new organisation founded in Rome, the Associazione universitaria contro l'oppressione coloniale, which in 1961 would change its name to Associazione giovanile anticoloniale, to also make it accessible to high school students.²⁹ Chaired by Raffaele Chiarelli, an independent left-wing activist and economics student, the association brought

²⁶ M. Tolomelli, *L'Italia dei movimenti*, cit., pp. 112-129. Tolomelli notes that the Italian Left had difficulty reading Third Worldism 'outside the interpretative matrices of anti-fascism and class struggle'. On Third Worldism see Tullio Ottolini, *Dal soutien alla cooperazione. Il terzomondismo in Italia fra il Centro di Documentazione "Frantz Fanon" e il Movimento Liberazione e Sviluppo*, dissertation in Storia, culture e civiltà, XXX ciclo, Università di Bologna, 2018. In the most recent debates, scholars agree on dating the relevance of Third Worldism in Italian political debate and practice to the early 1960s, contrary to the historiographical reading that linked it primarily to the escalation of the Vietnam War.

²⁷ These included Pasquale Bandiera, Ugo Bartesaghi, Giorgio Bassani, Arrigo Boldrini, Carmelo Carbone, Alberto Carocci, Giulio Cerreti, Carlo Levi, Lucio Luzzato, Oscar Mammì, Giacinto Militello, Giuliano Pajetta, Ferruccio Parri, Leopoldo Piccardi, Giovanni Pieraccini, Fernando Santi, Paolo Sylos Labini, Maurizio Valenzi, Paolo Vittorelli, Elio Vittorini, Bruno Zevi. On the origins of the committee, see Marco Galeazzi, *Il Pci e i paesi non allineati. La questione algerina (1957-1965)*, "Studi storici", 2008, n. 3, pp. 793-848, here p. 799.

²⁸ *Giovani di tutte le tendenze manifestano contro i massacri razzisti nel Sudafrica*, "L'Unità", 31 March 1960.

²⁹ Memo from the chief of police to the Ministry of the Interior, 21 March 1961, in ACS, ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 200, fasc. "Associazione universitaria per la lotta all'oppressione coloniale".

together students of different political orientations: Communists, Socialists, Catholics and independent students who were affiliated to the aforementioned Comitato anticoloniale nazionale, but who also occupied an autonomous space within Roman university activism, even from the parties of reference of the individual activists. The association aimed to mobilise the student population in support of the various struggles for decolonisation, expressing its opposition to Western interference in the emancipation processes of African people. At the beginning of the 1960s, the main area of mobilisation was the Algerian War, the cruelty and complexity of which had struck a chord in Italian public opinion. The Associazione giovanile anticoloniale supported the struggles of the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, hereafter FLN) and French groups opposing the army's actions in the North African territory. Echoing the French opposition and Jean-Paul Sartre, the young activists denounced the Algerian War, calling it a Fascist war. Furthermore, reflecting the tendency — typical of those years — to consider national and international phenomena closely connected, they compared the pro-FLN militancy with the struggles in Italy against neo-fascist associations, starting with the National Action University Front (Fronte Universitario di Azione Nazionale, hereafter FUAN).³⁰ In fact, the student groups that were active in Rome had taken a stance on the Algerian War; the representatives of the various progressive groups adhering to the Italian National University Union (Unione Nazionale Universitaria Rappresentativa Italiana, hereafter UNURI), the students of the Italian Goliardic Union (Unione Goliardica Italiana, hereafter UGI) and the Catholic students of the Intesa (joined by the representatives of the federalist movement and some middle-class students, like those of the Mamiani high school) participated in the activities of the anti-colonial association. Students close to the right-wing MSI had, instead, attempted to disturb these initiatives on several occasions, for example by breaking into assemblies and occupying the headquarters of the UNURI itself following its activism in support of the FLN.³¹

In addition to the Algerian War, other ongoing anti-colonial struggles caused further clashes between student groups. Thus, while the secession of the Katanga region (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and the subsequent assassination of Patrice Lumumba prompted the anti-colonial association to once again criticise the actions of European states and the UN, in early 1961, the neo-fascist Avanguardia nazionale giovanile promoted a 'university committee for the defence of European civilisation', which considered the events in Congo as a threat to the old continent.³²

³⁰ *Manifestazione per l'Algeria nella città universitaria a Roma*, "L'Unità", 29 November 1960.

³¹ *Giornata di lotta di studenti e lavoratori per Algeria libera e contro il fascismo*, "L'Unità", 30 November 1960.

³² Press office memo from the police headquarters in Rome, 17 February 1961, in loc. cit. note 30.

The African students — especially the Somalis, the largest national group within a militant representation that included young people from Algeria, Nigeria and Sudan — had a peculiar role in all this. First of all, they massively took part in the assemblies and demonstrations organised by the anti-colonial association,³³ and this sometimes exposed them to the violence of the FUAN, which considered them the incarnation of the ‘enemy at home’,³⁴ as happened during the demonstration dedicated to Algeria on 29 November 1960. Most importantly, they actively participated in the discussions at the assemblies and in the political work of the association, of which some were full members. The best known among them is the aforementioned Mohamed Aden Sheikh, who spoke at the assembly preceding the demonstration of 29 November as a representative of both Somali students and the youth oppressed by colonial regimes such as the Algerians.³⁵ In other cases, the association and the Italian students used the direct experience of the Somali students to analyse current events. In 1961, Jusuf Harri, one of the signatories of the ASSI’s first statement in 1959 and who would become its secretary in 1963, took the floor at the assembly following Ethiopia’s attack on Somalia to explain the political situation of the newly independent country and offer a key to interpreting current events: ‘Talking about the latest events, he said that it was not a simple border incident but a real act of aggression by Ethiopia, which allegedly had the tacit consent of the British and the Americans, who would have supplied the weapons to the Negus.’³⁶ Harri again spoke — on behalf of all Somalis — at the assembly held two years later, which was a prelude to the demonstration against the United Kingdom and its interference in the definition of the Somali border.³⁷

³³ The police report an increasing participation of African students: while in 1960 there were about ten, in the two assemblies of 1961, Somali students made up half of the participants (31 out of 50 and 25 out of 55).

³⁴ There have been several cases of attacks on African students in Italy: Congolese students were attacked in Rome and Avellino after the Kindu massacre in 1961. See Matteo Caponi, *Con eterna voce al mondo intero ammoniscono fraternità: i martiri di kindu e il culto dei soldati caduti per la pace*, “Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà”, 2019, n. 32, pp. 191-223, here pp. 203-204; in Rimini, in 1963, students from the Portuguese colonies were confronted by a group of young fascists shouting ‘Fuori dall’Italia’ (‘get out of Italy’) and ‘viva Salazar’. Gianfranco Pintore, *UNURI. Iniziato il dibattito*, “L’Unità”, 10 April 1963. In 1966, in a letter addressed to the Italian president, 50 professors from Sapienza University of Rome called for a ban on neo-fascist organisations, writing — among other things — that they threatened ‘African students merely because of the colour of their skin’. *50 docenti chiedono a Saragat lo scioglimento delle bande fasciste*, “L’Unità”, 3 May 1966.

³⁵ Report from the police headquarters in Rome to the Ministry of the Interior, 28 November 1960, in loc. cit. note 30.

³⁶ Report from the police headquarters in Rome to the Ministry of the Interior, 11 January 1961, in loc. cit. note 36.

³⁷ Report from the police headquarters in Rome to the Ministry of the Interior, 13 March 1963, in ACS, ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 200, fasc. “Comitato permanente per la lotta contro il colonialismo”.

The constant participation of Somali students in the anti-colonial activities organised in Rome in the early 1960s, both as individuals and as an association, testifies to the growth and development of their political action, favoured by the growing interest of the Italian students in anti-colonial movements. In these early years, the ASSI — which according to the Ministry of the Interior had about sixty members, mostly resident in Rome — made a qualitative leap in terms of both visibility and objectives, by now explicitly giving active support to the liberation struggles even within the host society. This was not an easy or risk-free step, because political activism among foreign students could lead to police controls and possibly be grounds for repatriation.

Nevertheless, in the mid-1960s, Somali student activism continued to grow and gained a new transnational dimension: the ASSI strengthened its contacts with Somali student associations in other parts of Western and Eastern Europe, entering fully into a dimension from which African students in Italy were hitherto excluded. In 1962, the Union of All African Students was founded, which represented the first attempt to link and coordinate the mobilisation of thousands of young Africans across Europe to obtain cultural and professional training. The initiative was launched by the London-based Committee of African Organisations and the *Fédération des étudiants d'Afrique noire en France*, but African students in Italy were not involved.³⁸ However, European networks of students linked to specific national experiences began to emerge in those same years, and the ASSI went down the same road; in November 1965, it organised an international conference in Rome, at the Marianum university centre, which was attended by about sixty young compatriots resident in various European countries, in particular the Soviet bloc. The conference, which constituted the fourth meeting of the *Unione studenti somali all'estero*,³⁹ was held in Somali, a decision deemed suspicious by the ministry, but which reflected a political choice. In fact, one session dealt precisely with the theme of language and its transliteration, an issue considered crucial in those years for the construction of the national identity of Somalis.⁴⁰ Moreover, the conference discussed the place of Somalia in independent Africa and the Horn of Africa, without neglecting issues related more to student life, such as the modalities of distributing scholarships and selecting scholarship recipients, the inclusion of students in Somali student communities in the various countries, and the discrimination suffered in Europe.⁴¹

³⁸ Telespresso form by Falchi to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Adsmæ, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Ufficio 7, b. 138, fasc. "Union of all African Students".

³⁹ Previous conferences were held in Prague in 1962, Moscow in 1963 and Leipzig in 1964. *Il IV convegno degli Studenti somali all'Estero*, "Amicizia", 1966, n. 1, p. 10.

⁴⁰ A. M. Morone, *L'ultima colonia*, cit., pp. 172-175.

⁴¹ Report from the police headquarters in Rome to the Ministry of the Interior, 5 November 1965, in ACS, ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 200, fasc. "Associazione studenti somali in Italia".

The African dimension and anti-imperialism: African student associations in the second half of the 1960s

In the early 1960s, the criterion of nationality — or rather, national affiliation — was the basis for the creation of several student groups, beyond that of the Somali students: the Associazione degli studenti etiopici in Italia, the Associazione studenti congolesi, the Associazione studenti nigeriani in Italia and the Unione generale studenti tunisini. Their political activity appears to have been less structured at this stage than in the case of the ASSI.

At the same time, the national dimension — without disappearing altogether — was accompanied by a continental dimension, heralded by the creation of several African student associations. It is not clear from the documents whether this decision was influenced by the establishment, in 1963, of the Organizzazione dell'unità africana, which institutionalised the willingness of the newly independent countries to coordinate their initiatives and act within a common horizon, characterised above all by the desire to overcome and eliminate colonialism. In 1964, an organisation of this kind was born in Rome, the Union of African Students in Italy (Unione Studenti Africani in Italia, hereafter USAI). Its promoters included both the ASSI and some students who were already part of the afore mentioned Associazione giovanile anticoloniale, including Asibey Ebenezer Layeras, a Ghanaian student with a scholarship from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who had actively participated in a debate on Congo promoted by the anti-colonial association after Lumumba's death, and the above-mentioned Somali student Mohamed Aden Sheikh. The organisational chart of the union's executive board also included Gabre Selassie Tesfay, an Eritrean student with a scholarship from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, acting as secretary; the chairman, Avani Daniel Edo (Anikwe), a Nigerian scholarship recipient and former member of the anti-colonial association; the Egyptian Salama Maamun (then a citizen of the United Arab Republic and government scholarship recipient, with a law degree); and Maanli Abducar Abulle, a scholarship recipient from Somalia. The USAI, which ideally wanted to connect national groups and which, according to its statute, had no political aims but those of protecting African students and spreading knowledge of Africa in Italy, fuelled new concerns on the part of the ministry, which reacted by immediately subjecting 'the activity to controls and precautions, even taking coercive measures against them [*sic*].'⁴² However, in 1966, after the difficulty of acting on a national level and, above all, being recognised as a point of reference and coordination had emerged, the USAI changed its name to Association of African Students in Rome (Associazione degli Studenti Africani

⁴² Communication from the Ministry of the Interior to the police headquarters in Rome, 1 July 1964, in ACS, ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 200, fasc. "Unione degli studenti africani in Italia".

a Roma, hereafter ASAR); having a more limited range of action, this structure momentarily dropped the aspirations of creating a network of structured subjects to act through the direct militancy of individual students in Rome.⁴³

Similar associations, based in cities and with different orientations and networks, were founded in other university cities where African scholars and students were present. The first of these seems to be the Associazione studenti africani di Firenze, founded in 1963, which in the following two years promoted both cultural exchange events (e.g. conferences on African cultures, film screenings, etc.) and political initiatives, including a debate on Congo in 1964 and the celebration of the Addis Ababa Charter in 1965.⁴⁴ It was followed by the establishment in 1964 of an association of African students in Padua, composed of both Italian and African students, which immediately started organising events about Congo,⁴⁵ and one in Milan in 1965, focused more explicitly on culture and welfare; the latter counted some fifty members after a year, including students from the Cattolica and Bocconi universities.⁴⁶ In 1966, an association of African students was founded in Verona, headed by a Congolese secretary and a Somali chairman,⁴⁷ as well as in Turin, which had its headquarters at the international centre Genti e culture, set up in 1963 by the fathers of the Society of Jesus to assist foreign students attending the university and the guests of the Centro internazionale per l'istruzione professionale. In that same year, the Turin association promoted city demonstrations against the film "Africa addio" (Farewell Africa), whose contents were considered racist and had triggered reactions from both African governments — like that of Kenya — and African students residing in other European countries and Italian cities.⁴⁸ The protests against the film represented the moment when the 'speaking out' of African students in Italy was reported in the press and gained visibility in the public debate.⁴⁹

However, in the second half of the 1960s, African students actively took part in different types of mobilisation. First of all, young Africans continued

⁴³ Mohamud. M. Guled, *Che cosa è l'Asar*, "Amicizia", 1966, n. 5, p. 160.

⁴⁴ *Costituzione dell'associazione studenti africani di Firenze*, "Amicizia", 1965, n. 5, p. 165.

⁴⁵ From the police headquarters in Padua to the Ministry of the Interior, 21 December 1964, in ACS, ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 200, fasc. "Associazione studenti africani".

⁴⁶ C.O., *Studenti africani a Milano*, "Corriere della Sera", 25-26 April 1965.

⁴⁷ From the Ministry of the Interior to the Servizio stranieri of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 April 1966, in loc. cit. note 46.

⁴⁸ From the police headquarters in Turin to the Ministry of the Interior, 31 March 1966, in loc. cit. note 46. See also *Gli studenti africani a Torino protestano per il film "Africa Addio"*, "La Stampa", 24 March 1966.

⁴⁹ The ASAR wrote a condemnatory statement against the film, which it sent to the Presidency of the Republic, the Presidency of the Council, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. *Studenti africani a Roma, ASAR, Documento contro "Africa Addio"*, "Amicizia", 1966, n. 4, pp. 137-138.

to promote demonstrations directly aimed at raising awareness of colonial-style oppression in Africa. One of the hottest topics at the time was Rhodesia, where the white minority led by Ian Smith had declared independence in 1965, preventing the emancipation process of the former British colony and establishing a segregationist system. The Associazione studenti africani di Firenze published and circulated a report on the situation in the country,⁵⁰ while its counterpart in Rome organised some demonstrations. There were two demonstrations in 1968: the first, in March, brought some hundred African students to the streets, who were joined by Italian students, to protest against the Rhodesian government's execution of three Zimbabwean nationalists and the connivance of the British government, accused — as we can read in the association's statement — of having 'tolerated both the existence of the regime and the massacres that its own citizens carry out, with criminal intent and with the precise aim of stifling Africa's liberation movements'.⁵¹ The second demonstration, still against Ian Smith's government, took place in September; a student intervened and explained that the racist system was instrumental to capitalist exploitation.⁵²

The replacement of anti-colonialism with a discourse that had taken on explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist connotations is confirmed by the participation of African student organisations in various mobilisations centred around these concepts; although the examined documents do not offer information on the Africans' degree of involvement in mobilisations relating to the organisation of the university system, in the years of protest, this is the level on which their organisations and the Italian student movement engage with one another. One of the ways in which the latter defined its identity in 1966 and 1967 was by radically opposing the Vietnam War and promoting an anti-imperialist discourse; one of the crucial moments in this sense, which marked the affirmation of more intransigent positions,⁵³ was the demonstration of 22 May 1967 in Florence, called for by the Spring Mobilization Committee and organised by the UGI. Dominated by the interventions of Greek students, who described American anti-imperialism as something that unites different struggles, the demonstration saw the involvement of the African student association, along with that of the Latin American Student Association.⁵⁴

Starting in the following year, this combination repeated itself several times, when formations were born that were more clearly positioned in the interna-

⁵⁰ Associazione studenti africani di Firenze, *Libro bianco sulla Rhodesia*, Florence, CLUSF, 1965.

⁵¹ *Colpevole atteggiamento di Londra di fronte ai crimini di Salisbury*, "L'Unità", 9 March 1968.

⁵² *Protestano gli studenti africani a Roma*, "L'Unità", 18 September 1968.

⁵³ Ermanno Taviani, *L'antiamericanismo nella sinistra italiana ai tempi del Vietnam*, "Annali della facoltà di scienze della formazione", 2007, n. 6, pp. 166-185, here p. 170.

⁵⁴ G.L., *Dalle fabbriche all'università, l'Italia cambi la politica estera!*, "L'Unità", 23 May 1967.

tional political scene; this was the case of the Federation of African Students in Italy (Federazione degli Studenti Africani in Italia, hereafter FSAI), founded in Florence in December 1968 to coordinate the organisations in which the now numerous African students in Italy were involved. Like the USAI, the federation presented itself as an instrument for action on Italian territory, but unlike the union founded five years earlier, it chose a real battlefield as it instantly joined the African student union in Europe, based in Prague. Despite failing to attract all the African students in Italy, from the beginning of the 1970s until at least 1977, the FSAI distinguished itself for its systematic activity and had, in any case, a certain attractiveness on the national territory; it published a bulletin, which in the second half of the decade was published irregularly, “Lo studente d’Africa”, and it organised conferences and initiatives through local groups in Florence, Bologna, Turin, Milan, Perugia and Rome. The groups, in turn, were in touch with the local student movement. These relations became particularly evident in February 1969, when, on the occasion of US President Nixon’s visit, an anti-American and anti-imperialist demonstration was organised in Rome, in the Piazza dell’Esedra.⁵⁵ The African students of the FSAI’s Roman branch, carrying a leaflet that condemned ‘the policy of US imperialism, neocolonialism and the regime of brutal exploitation that still keeps Africa in a state of subjection to big capital’, joined the procession together with the activists of the Latin American Student Association; on their entry into the square, they were greeted with applause.⁵⁶

These first public appearances highlighted the difference between the federation and the groups of the beginning of the decade, as will subsequently be made explicit in various documents. One of these is a manifesto presented at the beginning of the federation’s third congress, which took place in Bologna in 1972.⁵⁷ The document reiterated the will to collectively address the problems related to the condition of students by ‘counting mainly on our own strength’; it supported the ‘militant unity with all African revolutionary youth’, whose main objective was the decolonisation of the African school, accused of being subjugated to foreign, imperialist and neocolonialist, classist and individualist knowledge. The FSAI’s proposal was for an Africanised school, accessible to young people from working-class and peasant families and capable of training ‘revolutionary technical and intellectual managers at the service of the people’; next, it proposed the unity of oppressed African, Asian and Latin American peoples, in the struggle against imperialism and neocolonialism; finally, it

⁵⁵ Kino Marzullo, *Roma in stato d’assedio. Ora per ora la drammatica giornata antimperialista*, “L’Unità”, 28 February 1969.

⁵⁶ *No all’imperialismo degli studenti africani e latinoamericani*, “L’Unità”, 28 February 1969.

⁵⁷ From the police headquarters in Bologna to the Ministry of the Interior, 13 January 1972, in ACS, ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 363, fasc. “Federazione degli studenti africani”.

proposed cultural work as a tool for mobilising the masses.⁵⁸ If the Somali students had been suspected of being pro-communist ten years earlier, in the sense of being close to the PCI and the USSR, the FSAI had instead adopted an anti-imperialist position that included explicit attacks even on the Soviets. African associations in Italy therefore seem to follow the same trajectory that Marica Tolomelli has identified for the Italian movements born out of anti-colonialism; after a moment of growth and openness in the early 1960s, throughout the decade, they experienced a ‘process of radicalisation and growing ideologisation’, often coming close to Maoism.⁵⁹

The birth of the Ufficio Centrale Studenti Esteri in Italia

The fact that associations of various sizes and with different inclinations flourished shows the growing need for African students to organise themselves in order to increase their capacity for political, cultural and trade union action. At the same time, the dialogue that these associations had with different kinds of realities (e.g. committees, other student groups, etc.) shows how the presence of foreign students aroused the interest of various actors, who considered the young Africans not only interlocutors but also subjects to be approached and actively involved in their activities, especially with regard to the themes of Third Worldism and anti-colonialism.

Ecclesiastical circles also expressed an interest in students. In particular, following the encyclical ‘Fidei Donum’ with which Pius XII called for missionary action in 1957, Bishop Pietro Sigismondi — a former apostolic delegate in Congo, Burundi and Rwanda, and secretary of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith — charged a priest in his early thirties, Remigio Musaragno,⁶⁰ with the task of studying, ‘through the reports of the local churches, that kind of intellectual immigration on which the encyclical recommended pastoral care’.⁶¹ In a book that reconstructed the initiative, Musaragno wrote that he was commissioned in 1960 to do a survey on foreign students in Rome and then coordinate the people in Italy who were interested in foreign students. To this end, the UCSEI was set up in Rome in 1962, before two more offices were opened in 1965, one in Bologna and one in Naples; in

⁵⁸ Political platform proposed by the executive committee at the 3rd FSAI congress, 6-9 January 1972, in loc. cit. note 58.

⁵⁹ M. Tolomelli, *L'Italia dei movimenti*, cit., p. 130.

⁶⁰ Musaragno (1927-2009) completed his priestly studies in Treviso. After the UCSEI was established, he dedicated his entire life to foreign students in Italy. In 1970, he founded the Centro culturale internazionale Giovanni XIII in Rome, a residence for foreign students that still existed at the time of writing this article.

⁶¹ Remigio Musaragno, *Studenti esteri in Italia (1960-2000). Un itinerario d'impegno per lo sviluppo e di testimonianza missionaria*, Rome, UCSEI, 2001, p. 22.

1969, the UCSEI opened its own general secretariat in Perugia, a pivotal city for the history of African students since it was the seat of the University for Foreigners.⁶² The office — which was private and would only become a recognised association in 1968 — set itself the goal of helping foreign students with various paperwork, of acting as a link between the host institutions, but above all of providing support and assistance during their stay in Italy. Although founded on request of the Propagation of the Faith, and explicitly placed within the Catholic realities that acted from what Musaragno called a ‘missionary’ perspective, the action of the UCSEI was not specifically aimed at Christian or Catholic students, nor did its activities concern the religious formation of young foreigners — as far as emerges from the available documentation.⁶³ Attention to religious issues was, instead, part of a more general interest in the life of foreign students in Italy: for example, a report on the situation of foreign students that the office prepared in 1965 pointed out that young university students, apart from those of the Catholic and Jewish faiths, could not count on religious assistance during their stay.⁶⁴

The main purpose of the office’s work (until the 2000s) was to reconstruct and analyse the presence of foreign students in Italy. With this in mind, in 1963, the office began the statistical collection of data on foreign students in the country’s schools and universities, through a direct survey in individual institutes. This was an important working tool for the UCSEI, which thus gained an idea of the general situation of incoming student mobility, from which to start wider-ranging initiatives. The analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data was entrusted first and foremost to the annual conference organised by the office; held in various Italian cities, this was a themed event that addressed specific issues related to the presence of foreign students.⁶⁵ The first meeting took place in Rome on 4 and 5 October 1962 and dealt generically with the theme of foreign students in Italy. The following year, the conference took place in Florence, where the role of foreign students in Italian universities was addressed more directly.

This was the start of a reflection that would continue for years and eventually became one of the main pillars of the UCSEI’s activities: the battle to

⁶² Musaragno states that the UCSEI was founded in 1960, but ministerial documents reveal that it was formalised in 1962. On the offices in Rome and Naples (closed in 1971), see: From the police headquarters in Bologna to the Ministry of the Interior, in ACS, ministero dell’Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 200, fasc. “Ucsei”.

⁶³ In 2020, the UCSEI archive was no longer kept by the Centro Giovanni XXIII in Rome, which continued part of the office’s activities; at the time of writing this article, it does not seem to be kept elsewhere.

⁶⁴ *Rapporto sugli studenti esteri in Italia*, “Amicizia”, 1965, n. 5, p. 163.

⁶⁵ Between 1962 and 2000, the UCSEI organised 39 national conferences and 78 regional conferences, seminars and round-table discussions.

guarantee foreign students more rights within the Italian university system and, above all, a specific and recognised legal status that would relieve them of the situation of uncertainty and vulnerability that they experienced on a daily basis. Students were, in fact, granted a tourist residence permit, which was highly restrictive and forced those who did not benefit from a scholarship — the majority — to work (inevitably) illegally, running the risk of being expelled from the country. From 1964, the office's theoretical and organisational work expanded and became more systematic thanks to the publication of the periodical *Amicizia* (Friendship); in the first three years of its existence, it acted mostly as a bi-monthly bulletin of the activities and initiatives of Musaragno and his closest group of collaborators, and as a practical newsletter aimed at students. The turning point came in 1967, when foreign students increasingly signed articles and interventions, thus becoming their own “spokespeople” and using the magazine to address — from the inside — issues related both to the situation in their countries of origin and to aspects of their presence in Italy, such as racism or their relations with Italian students.⁶⁶ Thanks to this approach, the periodical could, for example, host an important debate on the meaning of the student protests of 1968 in Italy — which it had covered — for foreign students close to the UCSEI.⁶⁷ It was coordinated by the Guinean student Abdullaye Bah, a future member of the editorial board of *Amicizia*, and involved three Italian students, who claimed the universal character of overthrowing power relations that the movement promoted, as well as a number of foreign students (five Africans and one Peruvian). The latter took different positions: the Guinean Touré M'Bemba argued that the protests anticipated a better study and life experience for African students as well, whereas a student called Abdollah claimed that the mobilisation could contribute to the socio-cultural formation of foreign students. Others raised doubts, especially with regard to the exemplary character of the protest: the Somali Arios Abdullahi saw the demands as being far removed from the interests of foreign students, while the Guinean student Keita Momadi Fallo criticised the student movement for being too influenced by individualism and partisanship to be an example to Africans. Josep Mukumbi, from Congo Kinshasa, highlighted that protests were already happening in Africa and that there was no need to ‘borrow them from the West’. From a practical point of view, several called into question the additional difficulty for foreigners to take part in the protests, with the risk of being expelled from the country. The debate nevertheless ended with a recognition of the social and political, and not merely trade union, nature of the Italian protests.

Interestingly, the debate was sparked by a letter from a foreign student in Florence who complained that the protests were slowing down his university

⁶⁶ *Amicizia si rinnova*, “Amicizia”, 1967, n. 1, p. 3.

⁶⁷ *Studenti esteri e contestazione*, “Amicizia”, 1969, n. 3, pp. 14-17.

career. In fact, in the second half of the decade, the voices of foreign students began to find space not only in articles but also in a specific column hosting letters to the UCSEI. Although we cannot speak of a core of students who were “affiliated” with the office, given its functionalist nature, through its activities it nevertheless established itself as a point of reference for many foreign students, who read the articles, commented on them and sometimes criticised its approach. A very striking feature of both the 1960s and the following decade was Musaragno’s willingness to host debates on thorny issues, both in physical meeting places and in publishing outlets, as well as criticism of the structure of the UCSEI and of Musaragno himself, as we shall see further ahead.

Another evident and essential characteristic of the UCSEI’s action is the fact that it focused on what the periodical itself defined as students from developing countries, namely Africa, Asia and Latin America, with a prevalence of Africans in the 1960s and a growing focus on Latin Americans from the 1970s onwards, even though the office was formally interested in foreign students at large. Furthermore, European and North American students always outnumbered what the magazine referred to as ‘Third World’ students. What counted, though, was the reason that drove foreign students to mobility:

Compared to other students, Third World students (we use this terminology for the sake of convenience) have a closer connection with the problems of their country of origin, which are problems of ‘development’: subject to colonialism for a long time, this prevented, among other things, the development of schools at all levels, but once they gained political independence, the first thing the new nations did was to spread education, at all levels, which is a condition of national and popular development. Unfortunately, though, the generalisation of education does not go hand in hand with the establishment of schools, institutes and universities, so, as I said, many young people are still forced to go abroad. It is in this sense that we speak of these students in Italy, as those who will play a large part in promoting development in their countries: let’s say that they will be the future leaders, not in an aristocratic and elitist sense, but in the sense that they in turn will have to promote the development of their own populations.⁶⁸

In line with the reasons for which it was created, the UCSEI’s commitment to young foreigners consisted in helping them and supporting their demands as students in Italy: it conducted the first enquiries on the challenges of finding accommodation in the context of widespread mistrust of the colour of their skin, it highlighted the difficulties of accessing health care during their stay in Italy and, as mentioned above, it argued for the need to give them a legal status that would remove the risk of expulsion if they decided to work or engaged in political activity. It is not surprising that these issues mainly concerned students from newly independent countries; with the sole exception — in some respects — of Greeks, Europeans and Americans, these generally enjoyed

⁶⁸ R. Musaragno, *Studenti esteri in Italia (1960-2000)*, cit., p. 136.

greater financial resources, did not represent organisations linked to their countries of origin and did not embody “otherness” as opposed to Italians.⁶⁹ On the other hand, the office directed by Musaragno adopted a development cooperation perspective; the main objective of training students was that they could contribute to the cultural and economic growth of their places of origin on their return. This is why both at conferences and in *Amicizia*, emphasis was placed on the concept of “brain drain”, that is, on the risk that the students would dissipate their potential elsewhere after completing their training in Italy. Without going into detail on the concrete attempts to support the employment of students in their countries of origin, nor analysing them in the context of the criticism of the very concept of cooperation, it is important to note that, given a generic definition of the ‘foreign student’, the UCSEI’s action must be read within a reflection that concerns the processes of training people in the postcolonial world.

The UCSEI, the associations and the representation of foreign students

Having chosen to act on this terrain, from the beginning, the office had to collaborate with foreign student associations in Italy, including those of Africans. Shortly after its formation, the UCSEI promoted a federation of foreign students that could represent their interests before the Italian government and academic authorities. Unlike existing organisations, the project emphasised the foreigners’ membership of the student body rather than their national, regional or political affiliation; this approach was in line with the interests of the UCSEI at that early stage, as the closure of *Amicizia* before 1967 also demonstrates, and with the interpretation of student activism as trade union representation rather than political militancy.

The proposal for a federation was first made during the second conference organised by the UCSEI, the one held in Florence in 1963. It was repropoed at the conference in Rome in 1964, entitled ‘L’Università italiana e gli studenti stranieri’, and then picked up again in an initial study meeting in March 1965, prepared by an organising committee that included representatives of the Iranian, Greek, Latin American and Ethiopian student associations, together with Musaragno himself. The meeting was also attended by delegates from 52 associations representing Latin American, Asian and Middle Eastern students (only Palestinian and Iranian students, and associations of Arab students with no indication of nationality), Africans, Afro-Asians and Greeks — the only Europeans present. The 12 associations representing the Africans and Afro-

⁶⁹ The Greeks were the most numerous and organised of all national student communities. After the 1967 coup d’état, they mobilised to gain public support for their opposition to the regime. On this occasion, the UCSEI’s monthly magazine offered them support and space.

Asians were partly continental or regional; the national groups also contained Nigerians, Congolese and Tunisians, in addition to Somalis and the aforementioned Ethiopians. The proposal for a federation was widely debated, and the main challenge was the risk that a national group — specifically the Greek one, represented on that occasion by 14 associations — could make its own interests prevail within the federation. Furthermore, there was widespread hostility to overcoming pre-existing associational structures and a preference for groups of foreign students created on a city basis; the differences between many of the representatives and the UCSEI emerged most clearly in the principle of privileging the connection, interests and struggles linked to the condition of the student's home country or region over their foreign student status in Italy. Finally, the office itself presented a problem: Dominic Ekesi from Nigeria opened the meeting by asking that the federation not be created under the aegis — and with funding alone — of the UCSEI, which could have limited its autonomy. His reasoning was backed up by the Ethiopian representative Jahia Gaber, as well as by the Congolese Birhashiwirwa Chrysostone. Within such an articulated debate, one African specificity manifested itself: the firmness in demanding autonomy and a step backwards from the promoting office, whose future interference was feared. This was the first sign both of the associations' claim to autonomy and of the difficult relationship between the UCSEI and more structured groups, which would become more marked at the end of the decade.⁷⁰

Given these premises, the project was never completed, but the UCSEI continued to raise the issue of foreign students' representation in the Italian context, pushing for solutions that would make the recourse to national or regional associations unnecessary, even suggesting a possible coexistence. Musaragno also urged UNURI on this issue, the “parliamentary” student union created after the war, and which disappeared precisely because of the principle of direct democracy supported by the 1968 movement. As we have seen, the UNURI intervened in the anti-colonial mobilisations in Rome and thus also interacted with African students through the committee; in 1963-1964, it had begun protesting against the university reform plan proposed by Minister Luigi Gui, officially presented in Parliament in May 1965. The UNURI's proposals against the reform plan aimed at democratising the university by enhancing student representation and giving it powers that, unlike those outlined in the decree-law, were not merely consultative.⁷¹ Within this framework, the

⁷⁰ *La riunione di studio dei delegati delle associazioni estere degli studenti in Italia, “Amicizia”, 1965, n. 2. pp. 43-64.*

⁷¹ Gaetano Quagliariello, *La politica dei giovani in Italia 1945-1968*, Rome, Luiss University Press, 2005, pp. 243-250; Luciano Governali, *Prospettive di riforma ed evoluzione dell'Università italiana (1946-68)*, dissertation in Storia d'Europa, società, politica, istituzioni (XIX-XX) - XXVIII Ciclo, Università della Tuscia, 2016, pp. 169-183.

student representatives — urged by the UCSEI — also addressed the issue of the representation of foreign students; their space for action resided not in a specific structure, as the federation should have been, but in their full participation in a university community that had to be transformed and reinvented. Cristiano Zironi, a Christian Democrat student who handled foreign affairs for the UNURI, affirmed the importance of the

insertion of the [foreign] student into the university community, an insertion that, in my opinion, does not happen perfectly, both for a series of technical, objective and material reasons, and mostly because in Italy there is no university community (that is, there is a type of university that, however, does not facilitate the student's insertion into the university community but makes it very hard to experience this community life as a life of scientific research).⁷²

Musaragno himself supported this position, even if not immediately; on the occasion of the birth of the FSAI, he wrote that ‘the interests of foreign students, as students, should be represented and defended within each university (and at the national level) by bodies made up of students from individual universities (regardless of whether they are Italian or foreign)’.⁷³ The change of direction was also influenced by the fact that, at the end of the 1960s, the increasing politicisation of the new student groups made it difficult to imagine proposing a purely trade union mobilisation or bringing together groups that shared the attitudes of their members/militants towards the host country but could be divided by different political convictions. Moreover, as we have seen, Musaragno's office had become a point of reference for certain sectors of the foreign student body, but the end of the decade was marked by an escalation of tensions with the more politicised groups, which distanced the possibility of any leadership role for the UCSEI. In 1967, the Somali student Abdulkadir Mao Omar, from the Associazione studenti africani di Torino,⁷⁴ accused Musaragno's office of ‘protectionism and compassion towards students from underdeveloped countries’:

[T]hese students, contrary to what the editorialist [Musaragno] would have, are neither better nor cleverer than other students. And when someone says that a student comes from the Third World or an underdeveloped country, the person who hears this term, especially if they are Italian, cannot help but appeal to their moral sense to come to the aid of that ‘poor fellow’; it is, therefore, necessary to avoid the charitable and compassionate element that the term ‘underdevelopment’ or ‘Third World’ evokes.⁷⁵

⁷² *L'Unuri e i problemi degli studenti esteri*, “Amicizia”, 1965, n. 6, p. 206.

⁷³ Remigio Musaragno, *Come nasce una federazione?*, “Amicizia”, 1969, n. 1, p. 15.

⁷⁴ The student had also attended the unsuccessful meeting in 1965, then as a representative of the Organizzazione Studentesca Internazionale di Torino (OSIT), the International Student Organisation of Turin.

⁷⁵ Abdulkadir Mao Omar, *Gli studenti esteri non vogliono protezione paternalistica*, “Amicizia”, 1967, n. 9-10, p. 20.

Mao Omar then added that foreign students wanted to be able to approach their problems from the same position as their Italian counterparts, looking for solutions that were based on the existence of ‘one level of civilisation’.⁷⁶

Tensions increased with the creation of the new, more radical associations, in particular the FSAI. In November 1970, “Amicizia” published an open letter signed by the Milanese committee of the Federazione degli studenti africani and the Milanese branch of Latin American students, stating that the UCSEI

intervenes by constantly trying to control foreign students by means of the smokescreen of assistance and the blackmail of the renewal of the scholarship [...] The UCSEI, by supporting foreign students through social services, conferences and various initiatives, hides its main task, which is to act as a job placement office for foreign technicians trained in Italian universities to facilitate capitalist penetration and class exploitation in Africa, Asia and Latin America, in accordance with the principles of neocolonialism. [...] We reaffirm our decision to stand on the side of the national patriotic liberation struggle of our peoples against imperialism, social imperialism and reaction.⁷⁷

The federation’s anti-imperialist position, which identified the liberation of oppressed peoples with that from capitalism and the creation of popular democracies, made the training and cooperation projects supported also by the UCSEI unacceptable to its militants, as they were considered an expression of neocolonial action.

After the 1960s

At the end of the 1960s, Third Worldism in Italy reached its peak and simultaneously became one of the terrains on which the split between movements and the institutional Left was consummated.⁷⁸ This Third Worldism still looked to Africa, in particular to the wars of liberation of the Portuguese colonies, but its symbol had by then moved to Asia, to the Vietnam War, where the end of imperialism was thought to be taking place. As we have seen, the perspective of African students in Italy was also marked by these turning points.

However, the radicalisation of the new African student groups was not only linked to the more general radicalisation among students; it also depended on the evolution of the situation within the African continent. At the end of the decade, inaugurated by the Year of Africa, the Portuguese colonies had not yet become independent, but other states on the continent were already experiencing the fragility of the order that had emerged after the end of European colonial rule. Hence, in opposition to some of the regimes established after

⁷⁶ A. Mao Omar, *Gli studenti esteri non vogliono protezione paternalistica*, cit., p. 20.

⁷⁷ *Un volantino da Milano*, “Amicizia”, 1970, n. 11, p. 1.

⁷⁸ T. Ottolini, *Dal soutien alla cooperazione*, cit., p. 62.

independence, some student groups went beyond a generically anti-colonialist discourse to express more radical criticism: Siad Barre's coup d'état, for example, brought Somalia under communist rule nine years after independence. In 1972, a group of students resident in Florence reacted by founding the *Unione nazionale studenti somali in Italia*, which had a Maoist orientation and was affiliated with the FSAI; in its criticism of imperialism, it also explicitly included the Soviet Union and its presence in Africa.

In those same years, the case of Eritrea also emerged more clearly in the student scene; in 1952, the country had been included in the Ethiopian federation and indeed completely absorbed by it in subsequent years, only to become a province of Haile Selassie's empire in 1962. In support of the cause of independence, in 1968, the Italy-Eritrea association was founded in Rome on the initiative of some Eritrean and Italian students from the anti-colonial association.⁷⁹ Its establishment had created concerns in ministerial circles because of the effects it might have on Italy's relations with the Ethiopian government, with which Italy had resumed relations after the war. Once again, though, the fears turned out to be unfounded because in the first two years of its life, the association's activities — especially those of a propagandistic nature — appeared very limited, to grow from 1970 onwards. In the meantime, the Popular Eritrean Liberation Front — a division of the Eritrean Liberation Front, which would later lead the fight for independence — had also taken root in Italy. From the new decade onwards, then, the activism of young Eritreans took on very different characteristics and objectives from those of the African students analysed in this essay. The former sought contacts with trade unions and parties, and organised an annual conference (held in Bologna from 1974 to 1991) that attracted militants from all over Europe, with the concrete aim not simply of influencing Italian public opinion, but of organising and strengthening the African country's liberation movement by connecting the fighters with the Eritrean diaspora in Europe.⁸⁰

For all these reasons, even in the case of African, Asian and Latin American students, the 1970s require a different — and separate — treatment that takes into account the specific context of that decade, namely the peculiarities of youth protests in Italy after 1969-1970 as well as the political developments in independent Africa and their repercussions in the international political debate. At the same time, when reconstructing subsequent events we must

⁷⁹ Communication from the police headquarters in Rome to the Ministry of the Interior, 6 October 1968, in ACS, ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, G - Associazioni 1944-1986, b. 200, fasc. "Associazione Italia-Eritrea".

⁸⁰ Agostino Tabacco, Nicoletta Poidimani (eds.), *Bologna. Testimonianze di lotta degli eritrei esuli in Europa*, Milan, Edizioni Punto rosso, 2001. The book shows that the first conference of Eritreans in Europe took place in 1970, while the first in Italy was held in Padua, in 1973. However, from the following year until Eritrea's independence, the annual conference would usually be held in Bologna.

not forget that it was in the 1960s that a part of foreign students — and specifically African students — in Italy (but not only) began to organise themselves at a local, national and occasionally transnational level. In Italy as in Europe, the activism of young Africans had a “diasporic” trait: it fuelled the internal debate within the communities of Africans in Europe concerning the future of their countries, as with the transnational conference of Somalis in 1965, and as will be more evident in the case of the Eritreans. From this point of view, reconstructing the presence and activism of foreign students in the peninsula allows us to include Italy in a broader reflection on Europe’s role in the formation of African elites, from a perspective that is not only “institutional” — thus focusing on the role of scholarship programmes and that of university institutes — but which, instead, views the experience of young Africans as an opportunity for cultural and political self-formation. A biographical analysis, which is not possible here but is suggested by certain life paths, like that of Mohamed Aden Sheik, would make it possible to assess the impact of this experience and possibly also the legacies of the networks developed during the experience abroad.

At the same time, the liveliness and the structure of the African students’ associational and political activism in the 1960s highlight how limiting it is to study their presence and experience merely from a diaspora perspective, hence as a European chapter of African history, or by identifying the students exclusively with liberation parties or movements whose action was focused on the country of origin. As emerges from my discussion, in Italy — even if in a less structured way than in other European contexts — students were part of a debate and activism that interacted with the institutions and society of the “host” country and continent. If their action only marginally concerned issues that were considered internal, such as the transformation of the university and relations within society, the students were nevertheless very active on themes like the relationship between Italy and the newly independent countries, or the Italians’ perception of Africans and Africa. This approach is evident in the case of the overall contribution of Somali students to the protests carried out together with Italian students, whose space of action was that of Italian politics and public opinion. The same need to interact — albeit in a decidedly critical way — with the Italian environment can also be traced back to the subsequent opposition of some groups of African students to expressions of interest in their cause that they considered paternalistic. This meant, on the one hand, taking a stance as well as speaking out to claim one’s autonomy and, on the other hand, criticising the approaches to the postcolonial world that were inherent in the concept of ‘development cooperation’, and which were gaining ground in Europe and Italy in the first two decades of the post-war period.

Translated by Andrea Hajek