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New Political actors in polarised democracies. Is the case of Beppe Grillo the beginning of a success story? Perspectives for the Left.

The appetite for change which characterised the recent national elections of February 2013 was largely identified and expressed by Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S), which took 25% of votes. This has completely thrown off balance the way of thinking we've been used to for the past 20 years. A context dominated by bipolar competition between centre-right and centre-left. The Democratic Party didn't manage to score the victory that seemed inevitable according to the polls because it was more interested in reassuring the markets and Brussels than paying attention to and interpreting the demand for change. None of the other left-wing parties which proposed themselves as parties able to meet this need for change were successful either. *Left Ecology Freedom* only got 3% of the vote and Antonio Ingroia's *Civil Revolution* only took 2%. M5S's success is born from a movement which, unusually, developed over the years through demonstrations online and in town centres. It is only more recently that Grillo's movement became directly involved in the elections, starting as a local party and finally participating in the national elections over the course of the past year. In Italy we haven't (yet) had any demonstrations which can be compared to those of the *Indignados* in Spain, Portugal and Greece. Dissatisfaction and the demand for change have been strongly expressed chiefly by the use of votes. The M5S has succeeded where many others failed: get the issues of local and national citizen demonstrations into political institutions. Issues that political parties don't recognise and are generally ignored by the mainstream media.

A political arena for populism in Italy

In Europe, two processes are responsible for the current favourable conditions for populist protest. The first is the crisis of the mainstream parties and changes the traditional representation systems have undergone. The second is the progress of globalisation which has created many problems and demands in various countries and created new social fractures that the main parties are unable to represent and manage. These problems have been worsened by the effects of the economic crisis and the austerity measures promoted by the European Union. After WWII and the anti-fascist resistance, the Italian political system gave very little room for the spread of populism. The breakdown of the relationship between the masses and the main parties grew in the Nineties, after the end of the cold war and above all before the *Tangentopoli* corruption scandals. Distrust of the political class grew sharply and party membership collapsed.

And so, far more room for unrest and populist politics was created in Italy than in other European countries. The Italian Social Movement, the right-wing party most similar to the French *Front National* for historical and traditional ideology reasons, failed to take advantage of this political space. In addition, at the end of the Eighties moderate centre voters and practising Catholics in particular started to feel unable to identify with a political party. The Northern League, a regional unrelated to the biggest traditional Italian parties, identified and exploited the space which was now available to a populist movement. Following this, the same political arena was used very successfully, including by the commercial television monopolist Silvio Berlusconi. The difference between the League's populism and that of Berlusconi fostered

competition and conflict for some time, but from 2001, they sought to align with each other and their parties governed Italy for many years. Over the last few years however, distrust in the centre-right government has continued to grow. Not just Berlusconi, but other Northern League ministers were held responsible for the failures in the face of the expectations they had encouraged.

After the end of the Berlusconi government, the forming of a government led by Monti and supported by both the Democratic Party (Pd) and the People of Freedom (Pdl) undermined the credibility of the main political parties which the public considered ever less able to address the people's real problems. Inquiries by the judiciary revealed scandals involving members of all parties, whilst the public were continuing to suffer the effects of the economic crisis and the austerity measures adopted by the government, supported by the three largest parties. The League was in opposition once more and tried to influence the protests against the Monti government's policies, with little success because of the role it played in Berlusconi's government. Over the past year, many League voters abstained, whilst others have been attracted by the 5 Star Movement, seen as a more credible interpretation of the protests against the parties and against the Monti government. Grillo's movement identified and expressed the huge appetite for change which was very clearly expressed in the February 2013 elections.

Creating a new type of movement

Before arriving on the election scene, Grillo built and consolidated a true movement starting online. The Genoese comedian gradually changed his role and on many occasions became a mouthpiece for citizens' protests and grass-roots movements. A comedian going into politics can be particularly effective, because it uses and changes key elements of popular culture, a point which has been highlighted several times in anthropological studies. By using satire, impressions and caricatures of politicians, it is possible to communicate information which would otherwise be difficult or uncomfortable to say. Information that can easily overcome the barriers set up by social norms and has a profound effect on the public's thoughts and feelings. The original approach and the innovative aspects of the new movement only came about however after the involvement of Gianroberto Casaleggio, one of the foremost experts in Italy on internet marketing strategy. This collaboration showed that it is possible to successfully combine two possible strategies for managing political initiative and collective mobilisation. Casaleggio's advice and professional ability offered Grillo's political activism, and his extraordinary ability to communicate with the public, a way of growing exponentially that those people who control the largest television networks and newspapers cannot hinder.

The blog, which began in 2005, was a space for information and discussion, but it also became a platform to launch collective and participatory political initiatives, including the following campaigns: "Out of Iraq" for the withdrawal of Italian troops, "Clean Parliament", to remove convicted deputies from Parliament and campaigns defending consumers and small shareholders against big companies.

The creation of the movement really got going when the *Meetups* started, platforms which allowed the blog visitors to organise themselves as local activists in constant contact. A new space for meeting, interacting and socialising was created for people who were potentially interested in changing Italian politics and society, for many this was the first time they had participated in parties, groups or organisations.

With demonstrations in hundreds of Italian town centres - the "Vaffanculo Days" ("F*ck Off Days") or V-Days in 2007 and 2008 - the movement showed the functional potential of the *Meetup* networks outside of the internet. The aim of the mobilisations was to collect signatures for popular bills and referendums. For the first time, the two V-Days gave the movement a great deal of visibility in the national media and public opinion, showing its ability to exist away from the internet.

In three years, a network of links between people with shared beliefs, a sense of belonging and a collective identity was created and they opposed the same elements: the typical features of a social movement. The new movement enjoyed success in Italy which is comparable to that of the *Piraten* in Germany or the MoveOn demonstrations in support of Obama during the 2008 election campaign. Today, the M5S has a network of around 1,100 Meetups, across 900 cities and small towns, with almost 140,000 activists.

Grillo has kept his role as the mouthpiece and loud hailer of popular protest, but has progressively changed his political commitment, striving to understand and listen to the public's needs, collecting and re-working the ideas of his movement's activists until they are in tune with the "grass-roots" political and social mobilisations which have appeared over the past 20 years.

Commitment to the elections and managing protests

Following the success of the V-Day rallies, the movement moved increasingly closer towards using another democratic tool; non-party lists, to participate in elections on a local level. The Five Star Movement (M5S) was founded in Milan on October 4 2009, with a programme of 120 points and a "non-manifesto" which establishes the membership rules. The movement rejects the idea of creating a party as an organised and professional tool which acts as a representative/mediator between the public and the institutions.

The crisis of the parties which were formed after the First Republic, along with the deep mistrust of the political class, created very favourable conditions for the creation of the M5S. In the 2012 regional elections, the movement won over 500,000 votes, reaching 7% in the region of Emilia-Romagna and 5% in Piedmont. In 2012, there was a decisive leap in the quality of the 5 Star Movement, which was seen as a more credible interpretation of the protests against the parties and against the Monti government. In Parma the M5S candidate became mayor, winning 19% of votes and then the second ballot with 60%. M5S was also successful in Genoa (with 14% of the vote) and in many other communes in the north and centre, with votes ranging from 8 to 12%. The results were higher than expected and national polls immediately doubled the estimates for the movement, from 6-7% to 18-20%.

The M5S gained wider approval because it was able to reply on an online organisation which was already strong and widespread. Grillo refused to participate in any television broadcasts, but his message on issues important to the public was communicated, particularly the criticism, controversy and ridicule aimed at the key political and government figures. In this way, in just a few months, the M5S became the principal reference point for the protest against the parties and the "caste" system, taking on a role similar to that attributed to the Northern League in the first half of the Nineties last century.

M5S was the party which won the biggest share of the vote in the February 2013 elections, with 25% of the Chamber of Deputies. It collected almost a third of voters who voted for *Left*

Rainbow or *Italy of Values* in 2008 and won 14% of former Democratic Party voters. It also won a lot of votes as a result of the severe crisis which shook the centre-right coalition. Grillo's movement similarly won 16% of voters who voted for the Pdl in 2008 and 24% of those who voted for the League.

These trends changed the social profile of M5S voters. Support is cross-cutting but particularly high amongst factory workers, the unemployed, the self-employed and students. It's no surprise that the Pd and the Pdl are particularly weak in these social groups which were worst hit by the effects of the crisis and the Monti government's austerity measures. Pd is most popular amongst the retired and the Pdl most popular amongst home makers.

From populist rhetoric to promoting participatory democracy

Many commentators tried to undermine the 5 Star Movement, presenting it as one of the many populist demonstrations managed by right-wing political parties in other European countries. Grillo himself controversially accepted this comparison, turning the meaning on its head. The most obvious feature which makes the M5S similar to popular movements is its strong criticism of political parties and the political class. Grillo's line covers various aspects of populist rhetoric, in the disenchanted and ironic forms of a comedian. The voters who voted for the M5S are different from those who voted for other political parties above all because of their deep distrust of public bodies and political institutions. In fact, trust in the parties (4%), the Chamber of Deputies (12%) and the trade unions (19%), is very low. These levels are much lower than those for League voters. There is a huge amount of criticism of financial institutions and the media. M5S voters have very little faith in banks (6%) and the stock market (13%). They also place very little on the reliability of Rai (13%) and Mediaset networks (23%).

The way M5S has translated protests into proposals is very different from the populist right. For parties in this camp, the people can regain sovereignty by putting their faith in a "strong" leader able to represent the will of the common people to the institutions. The people are defined as a community in ethnic-cultural terms, which sees immigrants as the enemy and more generally other national communities or transnational bodies.

M5S's plan, on the other hand, is to establish itself as a tool for regaining the sovereignty of the people, by making way for participation by the public. The programme put together by the Grillo movement is completely different from, in fact almost the opposite of, the platforms supported by populist parties. The goals set out mainly focus on encouraging a democracy in which the public is involved, defending a universal welfare state, protecting and enhancing common and/or public property.

The M5S is very different from traditional political forms, but paradoxically, has had to find new ways of reproducing many of the roles that the parties carried out in the past and which have either fallen into disuse or are poorly managed. Starting with creating a network of activists spread across the country, selecting and monitoring candidates elected to political institutions, and finally understanding and communicating the public's requests.

The large historical parties drew on a privileged social group, or they proposed general goals which justified their existence. The M5S rejects the idea of creating a party as an organised and professional tool which acts as a representative/mediator between the public and the institutions. The key goal is the aim to put the public back at the centre of politics, making them protagonists in choices and decisions, both on local and national levels. The hypotheses offered

by the "non-manifesto" show how similar the M5S is to the German *Piraten* party, although the latter cannot rely on the capacity for communication and the fame of a charismatic leader.

The M5S has created three levels of participation; activist, sympathiser and voter. At the very beginning it introduced formal subscription processes open to all sympathisers. The main differences compared to the traditional parties hinge on whether the potential for increasing direct participation, particularly in the context of the movement, that the network offers is used. This is perhaps the most innovative aspect of the new political player, and allowed M5S to overcome the drop in participation which is affecting all political parties. The blog has also become the most important channel for getting direct messages to sympathisers and potential voters; it has in fact replaced the role of political guidance and teaching that the parties disseminated using different in the past.

The internet made it possible to recruit many activists who were previously alienated from politics. Subscription gives the right to participate in the decision making procedures in the movement and establishes a relationship with the sympathisers, in the same way as the traditional party membership. Using the blog and *Meetups* to bring political discussion back to the people and promote public opinion campaigns has created, over seven years, a mass of sympathisers, some of whom have become members of the M5S and, in many cases, also activists.

The M5S was not built on a programme that was defined from the beginning. It progressively developed a manifesto-style platform which sought to meet the wide-spread needs and demands of the people, public opinion and in particular the more frequent users of the internet. In other European countries, political parties have in the past played a central role for democracy, ensuring that demands from the public for political action were communicated. When creating its programme, the M5S tried to reproduce this role in a variety of ways. A role which is played less and less and often in an unsatisfactory way by the current parties.

There are still some challenges and issues facing the 5 Star Movement; rejecting politics as a profession, the public treating it as a temporary commitment and resisting creating organisational bodies away from the internet could create many problems for a political actor which must manage powers and responsibility on a national level. The movement can't limit itself to simply being a "tool" to encourage protest and direct participation from the public, it must rethink its organisational structure. Direct democracy may be sufficient to manage political issues in limited local areas or in the online community. But it's not easy to do when the commitment becomes a national one, and political decisions are only actually made by Grillo and central staff. In this phase, the Genoese comedian can no longer limit his role to that of "guarantor" to avoid traditional political practices from repeating themselves. To interact with other national political leaders on a daily basis he must stress his role as the movement's political guide. Grillo is also the key link who keeps together the activists and ensures they have a significant influence in the political arena. There is still however, a certain ambivalence about his role which has caused some ructions and discussion amongst the activists.

In any event, the M5S has provided an important contribution to political change, focusing attention back on many critical issues and problems which beleaguer our democracy and how it works, from loss of sovereignty and powers of the people to the distrust of the current public bodies, to the difficulty of creating new and credible ways of participating in politics. The answers to these questions proposed as a result of the M5S experiences do contain some problems and contradictions; but they must be considered very carefully as possible ways of bringing about change in Italian politics.