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THE CAN OF TUNA FISH IS STILL INTACT. THE RISE OF FIVE STAR MOVEMENT IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ITALY

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THE RECENT YEARS HAVE WITNESSED the rapid rise of an unconventional political movement/party that represents a sore thumb in the European political scenario, a combination of direct democracy, populism, euro-scepticism and environmental battles: the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S).

But how has it succeeded in gaining such a position in less than 10 years since its foundation?

The history of the Five Star Movement cannot be understood without some information about its founder, the comedian Beppe Grillo, who was a real TV celebrity during the first half of the Eighties, but was later banned from the public space owing to a gag injuring Bettino Craxi's Socialist Party: in that moment Craxi was a powerful politician, the protector of Silvio Berlusconi's media empire. Later on, in the early nineties, he became the symbol of the widespread system of corruption that emerged thanks to the investigations of Milan magistrates.

After Craxi's escape to Hammamet, the Italian political context witnessed the rise of former Craxi's protégé Silvio Berlusconi, who won the 1994 elections. Berlusconi's success inaugurated a period of strong dualism, which was structured on the dichotomy Left/Right and the existence of two different and coalitions according to a majority electoral system.

During those years, Grillo had practically disappeared and used to work just in the theatres where his exhibitions started to approach political, social and economic subjects. Grillo's life changed after meeting Casaleggio, who convinced him of the potentiality of the web and converted Grillo, who destroyed computers in his exhibitions, into a sincere devout of the web.

Grillo opened a blog (beppegrillo.it) that became the meeting point of people dissatisfied with the political and economic course of Italy and was well-known also at a global level, joining the interventions of scholars such as Joseph Stiglitz or Dario Fo criticizing globalization, pollution, international finance, political corruption and in general the lack of a sustainable strategy of development.

This blog contained vicious attacks against Italian politicians: Silvio Berlusconi was labelled as the psycho-dwarf (*psiconano*) or asphalt head (*testa d'asfalto*, owing to the aspect of his hair after reconstructive surgery), Piero Fassino who was called the "breadstick" (*grissino*) due to his aspect, Romano Prodi was *mortadella* (after a sort of ham of his same region of provenience), Pierluigi Bersani was Gargamella (the evil wizard of the cartoon *Les Schtroumpfs*), while recently Renzi was attacked as the "little idiot from Florence" (*ebetino di Firenze*).

In 2005, the blog supported the birth of local social networks to communicate and spread political messages at the local level through the first *Amici di Beppe Grillo* meetups. The political platform of these experiments was focused on technology and innovation, ethical consumerism, environment protection, public transports, but obviously could not help denouncing the inability of the traditional political parties to establish a real alternative to the current political course.

In 2007, a national coordination was established and Beppe Grillo launched the idea of a Fuck-off Day (*Vaffanculo Day*, V-Day), a public mobilisation in order to protest against the Italian political system. The first V-Day was held in Bologna on September 8 (a symbolic date reminding of the WW2 armistice) and was associated to the initiative "Clean Parliament" aiming to prevent the nomination as parliamentary candidates of criminal convicted politicians and to limit the membership of the parliament to two terms in office.

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Thanks to the signature of 336,000 people, by far exceeding the 50,000 required for the filing of a law of popular initiative, the first legal proposal of Grillo's meetups was officially delivered to the Prime Minister Roman Prodi but was never discussed by the Italian parliament.

In 2009, Grillo and the local civic movements assembled around his blog supported the election of some independent candidates to the European Parliament, Luigi de Magistris and Sonia Alfano, and elected their first communal councillors in some municipalities of Emilia Romagna.

In the same period, Grillo theatrically tried to join the Democratic Party (PD) in order to candidate himself to the primaries and spread his political program through a mass party that he openly criticized and wanted to reform radically. Grillo's membership was obviously refused and Piero Fassino, a leader of the Democratic Party, accused Grillo for his hostility and lack of seriousness.¹

In September 2009, together with his friend Gianroberto Casaleggio, Grillo consequently announced the birth of the Five Star Movement (M5S). The five stars representing the targets of the movement were: public water, sustainable mobili-

ty, sustainable development, connectivity, environment. The main idea was the centralism of the citizen, who can become an active part of the political system through the instruments of direct democracy.²

As stated by Natale and Ballatore, the movement adopted the cyber-utopian discourses from the so-called Californian ideology, and symbolically identified itself with the web. The traditional political establishment was associated with "old" media (television, radio, and the printed press), and was a "walking dead," destined to collapse against an innovative web-based direct democracy.³

In 2010-2012 regional and local elections, M5S candidates generally obtained scarce electoral results but the first M5S mayors were elected at Parma, Sarego, Mira and Comacchio.

The 2012 regional elections in Sicily, in particular, need to be mentioned owing to Grillo's *coup de theatre*: he decided to launch the campaign by landing in Sicily through the sea, swimming in the Strait of Messina. It was what he called the third liberation of Sicily after Garibaldi in 1860 and the Allied Forces in 1943. It was a sort of dress rehearsal before the 2013 elections of the Italian Parliament, which Grillo wanted to open from within, as a can of tuna fish.

The political message of the movement was based on some key-principles: there is no difference between Italian Left and Right as both proved to be "incapable" to fight corruption (if not direct accomplices of illicit private interests); the individual political engagement of the candidates should be limited and being a politician should not be a profession, just a civic endeavour; the press is completely in the hands of the political elites and is no more trustworthy, while in the digital world everyone is free to access to every kind of information and to participate to the political debate.

The vision of the European Union was quite critical, especially towards the monetary system, and a particular insistence emerged when denouncing the fact that no referendum had been held regarding Italy's adhesion to the monetary union. But the movement's position towards the EU cannot be defined as totally euro-sceptical. As stressed by Corbetta and Vignati, the approach towards Europe is quite peculiar and contradictory and, though featuring some affinities, cannot be analysed as an expression of nationalist euro-sceptical tendencies, as in other European countries.⁴

The 2013 national elections registered the great unexpected triumph of M5S. The candidates were chosen through online primaries by a limited number of activists and the reduced numbers of votes in these primaries was used by the other parties to ridicule the M5S deputies, who were all

substantially alien to politics. The M5S obtained almost nine million votes and elected 108 deputies and 54 senators. In March 2013, Luigi Di Maio was elected Vice President of the Chamber and became the youngest vice president of that house. The hostility and contempt of the institutions were clear and Grillo's supporters were called *grillini*, emphasizing their lack of political experience, and were consequently treated as dumb obedient serfs of the comedian and his acolyte Casaleggio. When asked what he was thinking about the boom of the M5S, the President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano answered that he heard no boom. But the fact that a single movement composed of some unexperienced people with no funds, no TV participation, no official press agents, succeeded in gaining 25% of the votes at their first general election (challenging the leftist and rightists coalitions) was undoubtedly a point of no return in the Italian political scenario.⁵

The change was clear during the public meeting between the delegations of M5S and PD, when Bersani's request for the M5S support to his government was radically and, once again theatrically, rejected. Another innovative aspect was the fact that M5S deputies and senators were obliged to give back to a bank account the excess of their salary and indemnities, and these sums were destined to sustain micro-credit initiatives in favour of small enterprises.

Since the beginning, a critical point of the movement was the lack of a statute (*non-statuto*) and the traditional sees where to hold political debates and decide the political strategy of the "party". This "Contradictory Party Model", as it was defined by Rinaldo Vignati, was evident when a part of the deputies and senators questioned the refusal to cooperate with Bersani's PD.⁶ They were simply expelled according to various motivations but generally on the ground that the M5S political strategy has always denied any cooperation or agreements with other parties. The phenomenon of the expulsions had substantial proportions. In less than two years, the parliamentary groups lost 18 out of 54 senators and 17 out of 109 deputies.⁷ In 2014, the strangeness of M5S resulted once again during the phase of affiliation to the great political groups of the European parliament. The choice was basically oriented towards two very different groups: the Greens-European Free Alliance and the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, with the latter resulting as the final destination of M5S European deputies.

In Italy, after the birth of a government composed by two historical arch-enemies, the democrats and Silvio Berlusconi, M5S tried to establish a clear political strategy: to be a new political force with no connections with the historical categories of Left and Right, showing to adapt the principle to direct democracy to a more pragmatic and flexible approach.⁸

The results were not always satisfactory: in the 2014 European elections M5S scored 21%, in the 2015 administrative elections the results were limited, while the real success was registered only

in 2016, when two M5S Virginia Raggi and Chiara Appendino were elected as mayors in Rome and Turin.

On that occasion, Grillo appeared at the window of his hotel room showing a coat hook, in Italian an *appendino* (as the new mayor of Turin), while M5S supporters and Italian alternative press ridiculed once again Piero Fassino.

As reminded by Marco Travaglio, with his usual subtle sarcasm, Fassino's prophecies proved to be lethal for his own Democratic Party (PD).⁹ In 2009, when Grillo tried to participate to the PD primaries, Fassino commented on: "If Grillo wants to come into politics, why does he not create a party and let's see how many votes he gains".

In May 2015, when Fassino was the mayor of Turin, he replied to the critics of the councillor Chiara Appendino: "sit down on this chair and let's if you are able to do what you wish: the electors will decide".

Fassino's prophecies are significant in order to understand the reasons of *grillini's* unstoppable rise. The inability to understand a substantial part of the Italian population was only partially compensated by the appeal of a new young leader who promised to change everything, Matteo Renzi, who in 2014 European elections led PD to 40%. But Renzi's support gradually decreased owing to the renewed agreement with Silvio Berlusconi, the scandals regarding the banking system, the perception of his ministers as a sort of small clique from Florence and, last but not least, the radical reform of the constitution that was rejected in the 2016 referendum. On that occasion, Renzi presented his reform as a matter of life and death and publicly promised to retire from politics in case of failure.

It should be said that during these years, though carrying out a radical and fierce opposition with some theatrical events, the strategy of M5S began to change and a more moderate approach emerged. The M5S showed two different sides of the coin: on the one side, Alessandro di Battista's anger and radicalism, on the other, Luigi di Maio's composedness.

At the same time, the movement deepened its digital dimension through creating a web platform where to discuss and vote the legal proposals (rousseau.movimento5stelle.it/main.php) and finally separated the total coincidence with its founder Beppe Grillo, creating a new site (ilblogdellestelle.it) and abandoning beppegrillo.it.

Though this partial change of course, the movement maintained its uniqueness under other points of view: the rigid affiliation of its candidates, who had to sign a special agreement establishing a fee in the case they changed party once elected, the critics to the European Union, which anyway have been substantially revised, or the refusal to be part of political alliances and in fact, M5S run for the 2018 elections alone.

The M5S pet subject for the 2018 elections was represented by the minimum income for citizens (*reddito di cittadinanza*), which contributed to its great success, especially in the depressed regions of South Italy, where the movement obtained almost 50% of the votes. But the success was not confined

to Southern Italy and the M5S became the first political party in Italy (32%). However, owing to the electoral law that had been hastily approved in 2017, there was not a clear majority in the chambers and Italy precipitated in the chaotic situation of today.

Once again, M5S proved its "ideological flexibility" and showed to make no distinctions between Left and Right. The draft of a political contract was proposed both to Salvini's Lega and to the Democratic Party. The latter seemed reluctant and, though the existence of an anti-Renzi faction, obediently followed Renzi's plan while Berlusconi reluctantly let Lega and M5S finally begin a bilateral dialogue towards the draft of a contract, that was finally presented in May 2018. The birth of a Lega-M5S government, anyway, met with Sergio Mattarella's (the President of the Republic) refusal to appoint professor Paolo Savona as minister of economy, owing to his critical approach towards the European policies and to an alleged veto coming from Bruxelles and Berlin. ■

Notas

¹ "Pd, Grillo annuncia: Prendo la tessera. Ma il Pd dice no: Non ha i requisiti". *Repubblica*, July 13, 2009.

² G. Casaleggio, *Web ergo sum*, Sperling & Kupfer, Milano 2004, pp. 23-25.

³ Simone Natale-Andrea Ballatore, "The web will kill them all: new media, digital utopia, and political struggle in the Italian 5-Star Movement", *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2014, pp. 105-121.

⁴ P. Corbetta-R. Vignati, "Direct Democracy and Scapegoats: The Five Star Movement and Europe", *The International Spectator*, vol. 49, 2014, issue 1, pp. 53-64.

⁵ The following table does not take in consideration the data of two autonomous regions, Valle d'Aosta and Trentino-Alto Adige.

⁶ R. Vignati, "The Organization of the Movimento 5 stelle: A Contradictory Party Model", in F. Tronconi (ed.), *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, pp. 29-52.

⁷ P. Ceri-F. Veltri, *Il Movimento nella rete: Storia e struttura del Movimento a 5 stelle*, Torino, Rosenberg & Sellier, 2017, p. 246.

⁸ L. Manucci-M. Amsler, "Where the wind blows: Five Star Movement's populism, direct democracy and ideological flexibility", *Italian Political Science Review*, vol. 48, issue 1, March 2018, pp. 109-132.

⁹ M. Travaglio, "Fassino, l'ultima profezia", *Il fatto quotidiano*, November 15, 2017.

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