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VOLUME I

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THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL REVOLUTION?

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ABSTRACT

The Five Star Movement has been the great novelty of the Italian political landscape. The paper seeks to highlight the core content of its doctrine, which calls for a sort of anthropological revolution based on the advent of the “Net” in which the “new political order of the communities” will replace that of individuals, offering fresh forms of direct democracy. The consequence would be the end not just of traditional western political parties, but also of the *self-referential* man of *subjectivity*. The paper also gives an account of the research in the Communication and Social Research Department of the “Sapienza” University of Rome after the Movement's outstanding success in the 2013 political elections. The aim of this research has been to study both the original communications of the Movement, based on a combination of public rallies and the internet, and its composition in terms of *forms of psychological organization*, on the basis of the innovative approach of dynamic sociology. The research consisted of an ethnographic study conducted in Rome during the administrative election campaign of May-June 2013, along with the administering of an online questionnaire to Movement voters. Results have shown that people of all three *forms of psychological organization* (i.e., *subjectivity*, *post-subjectivity* and *re-ascription*) are likely to be present among Movement voters, even though attitudes, motivations and purposes differ widely.

Keywords: *Five Star Movement, political anthropology, direct democracy, dynamic sociology, forms of psychological organization.*

INTRODUCTION

1. The doctrine of the Five Star Movement

The Five Star Movement was officially founded on 4 October 2009 by the popular actor Beppe Grillo and the information and communication technologies manager Gianroberto Casaleggio. The Movement had already competed in several minor elections at the local and regional level, but its first appearance in national political elections, on 24-25 February 2013 was an outstanding success. Even though outdone by the left wing coalition formed around the Democratic Party and that of the right wing around the Party of Liberties, the Movement finished first among single political parties, with 8.700.000 votes, 25,5% of the total.

The Movement has gathered strength in what is surely a moment of great social and economic crisis, connecting several millions of dissatisfied and sometimes desperate people in an attempted rebellion against the political parties' ineffective and inefficient system of government. Much of the earned consensus is likely due to the content of its political doctrine, published in several books both by the founders, Grillo and Casaleggio, and by Genoa University philosophy Professor Paolo Becchi.

Grillo and Casaleggio state that “a war is going on between two worlds, two different conceptions of reality” and this war “is concealed by the media, feared by politicians, obstructed by international organizations, and opposed by multinational corporations”. The authors add that “it is a total war, which involves every aspect of our lives and calls into question economic and social structures taken for granted for centuries”. The war is due “to the ubiquity of the Net”. As for the future, the authors state: “the old world will perish”, but “before leaving us, will use all its resources to retain old privileges and revenues accruing to position”. This war “will be long”, because in Italy “the political parties control society, the economy, information, commerce, transport, the laws and their application”, because they “are the essence itself of the old world”. But “spontaneous movements are emerging everywhere, replacing the parties” and “the direct participation of citizens in public affairs is replacing their open mandate”. The internet is portrayed as an eschatological entity with its own laws, which are “always on display”. Foremost among these is “each one counts as one”; “the Net itself may be explained by these words, the basis of direct democracy and the birth of these movements, which are horizontal, transnational and universal” [1].

Becchi underlines the anthropological effects of the internet: “the Net is changing our lifestyle and with it the entire society. And will go on doing so. It’s already beginning to modify our perception of death” [2]. He makes a number of connections with the concept of *collective intelligence* of Pierre Levy, which “comes from the interconnection between different communicative agents, surpassing any single person’s knowledge and having potentially unlimited power” [3]. This because “the Net entails a widening of our information and knowledge”, with “a sharing of knowledge unthinkable in the civilization of the printed book”. Becchi also states that “the advent of digital technologies in general, and specifically of the Internet, has been welcomed as a revolution comparable only to the discovery of printing” [2]. The perspective the author aims to share concerns the *historical drift of the media*, which predicts the gradual demise of *typographic man*, the *self-referential* and individualistic person of *subjectivity*, together with the progressive affirmation of a *new-media* or *neo-oral* man, the result of an anthropological transformation due to the change of the dominant medium [4].

Becchi also explains that not all the traditional categories that characterize real space come into play in the virtual space of the internet, juridical and economic especially. He adds that “one of the pillars of the Internet against the market economy is the *gift economy*, which includes the free sharing of knowledge and the abolition of intellectual property, elements able to create an economic system based on non- monetary values”. He also introduces the question of free, *open source* software, where *copyright* is replaced by *Creative Commons* [2].

But the new individual of the Five Star Movement is not isolated; his/her main attribute is being part of a community. Becchi emphasizes the contrast between *ideologies*, which are the main contribution of the modern *subject* to the sphere of politics, and *community*, which would characterize *ascriptive* and traditional societies. He states that “in place of ideologies the Five Star Movement presents a new idea of community, the idea of building a concrete community, which undergoes a reshaping of relations between centre and outskirts, between the central power and role of local communities”. The bet is on “mechanisms which assure a direct relation between local communities of citizens and the formation of collective political decisions”. He adds that “the

communities will mark the end of the political parties' power [...]. Parties will disappear when the state and society become so integrated that society, structured in communities that are neither too small nor too large, will make itself the state" [2].

The local level units of the Movement, called *Meetups*, preceded the foundation of the Movement itself, the first having been established on July 16th 2005, after an announcement on Beppe Grillo's blog. Becchi joins the idea of a network of informal local micro communities with that of a virtual *macro* community, global in its extension, in a multi-level project of direct democracy. He states that "the revolution provoked by the new information and communication technologies not only determined the irreversible crisis of the representation paradigm, but also made possible the direct participation of citizens in the political life of the country". And this is because "there is no doubt that the Net, with its speed, with its information flows, with its openness, will be able to guarantee that political decisions are formed horizontally and from below. In this way "decisions could be taken after a public discussion which, thanks to the Net may in principle involve everyone" [2].

Davide Casaleggio, son and collaborator of Gianroberto, explains that "the life and the evolution of the networks on Internet follows precise rules and knowing them allows the use of the network to one's own advantage". He promotes the idea of "a network organized in small groups in which internal dynamics dispose the members to act", because "those belonging to our group, those we consider similar to us, our peers, are more than others able to persuade us to act in a certain way. The pressure that our peers put on us, *peer pressure*, is a particular condition in which the people we know push us into action". But the peer group, to be effective, must not exceed a certain size, and it is only in groups of fewer than 150 individuals that "formalities are not necessary and behaviour may be controlled on a personal basis". So, he states, "the networks have to be structured in *tiny worlds* of 150 individuals, but the hubs aren't all the same: there are some with more value than others". Thus the *organizers*, responsible for each Meetup, are the most important hubs and are the most connected in the entire system [5].

Blogger Federico Mello explains that "from the beginning, in the different local groups, Grillo and Casaleggio have favoured some figures of reference, allowing them to grow in comparison to other members, through a waterfall mechanism". In fact, "in the Meetups, the ones who reach a very visible position are invariably those with direct contacts with Grillo, Casaleggio or their famous staff". Each of them "is like the carrier of knowledge that the others lack, and every hub has exactly this function: anyone who wants to be at the centre has to establish a relation with whoever is there already, thus perpetuating the centrality of the hub to which he/she connects" [6]. This is another similarity with *ascriptive* traditional communities, where there is a "system of ascendant individualities"[7]. The concept of *community* serves both as the new *hetero-reference*, able to replace the *self-reference* of the modern individual, and the means of cognitive transformation: "to change the beliefs and the behaviour of people, a community is necessary", because "information may spread only among people for which it is relevant". Equally essential are the reference to the community of peers and the role of cognitive mediation provided by charismatic leaders in interpreting a reality perceived as too complex, their task being to provide followers with simplifications in clear and relatively plain messages [6].

Becchi states that the Movement is against all parties, both right wing and left wing, because “all are jointly liable for the condition into which they drove the country” [2]. The Movement itself “will never be a party, because it will not submit to compromise”. “Ideologies are made to compromise with other ideologies. Movements have no ideologies: they just have a target, an objective. For this reason, the Five Star Movement cannot, by definition, make alliances” [8]. He adds: “the political parties must all be fought on the same plane; they are our political enemies and no alliance with them is possible”. This because the Movement’s final goal is not “to take control of the state’s apparatus, which is the aim of the parties”. It is just “to win elections and to rule alone”. Then “the system of parties will collapse by itself”, and a “new political order: the order of communities” will rise in its place [2].

The consequence of all these statements is the essence of the anthropological revolution called for by the Movement. Not only will Western style political parties in competition over different ideologies disappear, but along with them the concept of ideology as an organic vision of the world, as a plan for a future society shared by independent individuals will disappear as well. The same fate of extinction awaits the creator of ideologies himself, the modern *subject*. In other words, the “political order of individuals” will be replaced by the new “political order of communities”, and the self-reference of the *subject* by a new kind of hetero-reference, with a global relapse into *ascription*.

Many other elements of the Movement organization, modality of action, communications, and rules of conduct point to the same conclusion:

- 1) the lack, inside the Movement, of an organizational structure with positions, offices and roles; all that formally exists is a network of 1.396 *Meetups*, in Italy and abroad, led by their *organizers*. What’s more, Grillo is the sole owner of legal rights on the name and on the logo of the Movement; even while presenting himself as a “guarantor”, he reserves for himself the last word on the most important decisions, such as the rules (the Movement has a “Non-statute” and an “Internal code of conduct”), candidatures in elections, and expulsions, which are in legal terms presented as a “revocation of permission” to make use of the name and logo of the Movement;
- 2) the denial of individual *self-reference* as a value, because for the Movement the *community*, both the *micro* of the *Meetup* and the *macro* of the Net, always precedes individuals, standing as a visible and tangible reference and making sense of political action and commitment at all levels, while denying expectations of personal benefits of any kind; these include the denial of the prospect of a political career, together with a declared preference for amateurism and inexperience in politics;
- 3) the general prohibition on all members at any level from making public declarations or comments, granting interviews to journalists or participating in television broadcasts;
- 4) the denial of honorific attributions for institutional roles achieved through political activity, including a commitment of elected MPs to be named simply “citizens”, a mere expression of their community membership;

- 5) the use of an innovative mix of oral and new media communication, respectively involving the empirical and virtual levels; by contrast, the symbolic level of communication appears to be ignored or negligible;
- 6) the presence of charismatic leadership, embodied in Grillo and Casaleggio, with a staff of personal collaborators, including communications experts;
- 7) the limitation of the right to individual dissent, with many repeated cases of banishment, including those of notorious regional and local administrators and later also of several elected Members of Parliament.

Corbetta and Gualmini assert that within the Movement there is “a direct contradiction between a charismatic and omnipotent leader on one hand and the exaltation of the common citizen and the quasi-anarchic self-government of the assemblies on the other, omitting every intermediate institutional step” [9].

The invitation to escape the form of psychological organization of *subjectivity* seems to be the true strength and driving element of the Movement, providing it with an innovative and boundary-shattering range. This does not mean recognizing the Movement's founders and “ideologists” as capable by themselves of changing people's form of psychological organization, and even less of building from scratch new forms alternative to subjectivity. But it surely does mean recognizing that they have:

- a) the capacity to have read and interpreted in good time the oncoming changes and trend lines of the social system, and the *historical drift of media* toward the *neo-oral*, due to the advent of the Net and the new media;
- b) the capacity to prearrange a system of beliefs capable of capturing the consent of people already striving along an *ontogenetic* path away from *subjectivity* in the direction of different forms, such as *post-subjectivity* and *re-ascription* [10].

2. The “Sapienza” Research

After the great success of the Movement in the 2013 political elections, the course in *Public Relations and Corporate Social Responsibility* of the *Communication and Social Research Department* of “Sapienza” University of Rome carried out social research on the Movement in two steps:

- a) an ethnographic study through participant observation at the Movement's offices and events in Rome between March 25th and May 27th 2013, during the administrative election campaign of May-June 2013;
- b) an online questionnaire, handed out to a sample of Movement voters.

The entire research project was theoretically oriented by the dynamic sociology approach and had a double aim:

- 1) to study the communications of the Movement, which boycotts newspapers and television in favour of both the most traditional tools of the world of politics, rallies and shows in public squares, and the most innovative tools of the digital world, such as Beppe Grillo's famous blog and the discussion forums on popular social media like Facebook or Twitter; this study especially sought to understand the real extent of the contribution made by the originality of the communication strategies to the electoral success;

- 2) to study the plausibility and the true extent of the anthropological revolution called for by the Movement by analysing the *forms of psychological organization* present among the ranks of its activists and voters through the introduction of focused indicators. The choice of a short questionnaire administered exclusively online was a strategic decision aimed at meeting Movement supporters specifically on their ground, the *virtual* space of the internet, instead of moving them into the *symbolic* area of the traditional survey.

It must be added that in the period between the Movement's electoral success and the research, several events and facts widely undermined their consensus:

- a) the refusal of the Movement not just to make any kind of alliance with other political parties, but also to support any proposed innovative candidature to the offices of President of the Senate and of the Chamber of Deputies;
- b) the perceived flimsiness and ineffectiveness of the political initiatives of the Movement's elected Parliamentarians, both in the controversial period preceding the formation of the new government and after;
- c) the difficulties of the online internal democracy procedures in expressing a Movement candidate for the April 2013 election of the President of the Republic, and the failure to properly support the one finally approved;
- d) some notorious cases of expulsion from the Movement of elected Parliamentarians for alleged violations of the "Internal code of conduct".

The results of the May-June 2013 administrative elections were a serious setback for the Movement, and even more so the European Parliament Elections of May 25th 2014, where the Movement had just 5.800.000 votes, 21.2% of the total.

In the survey, conducted between 13 April and 14 June 2013, online questionnaires were administered to 200 Five Star Movement voters in the 24-25 February 2013 political elections. Even though no claim is made that the results can be generalized to a universe of millions of voters, some useful indications nonetheless emerged. Speaking of qualitative research, Alasuutari states that the term *extrapolation* would be more appropriate than *generalization* [11] but his observation looks extensible to surveys with a slim and not statistically representative cross-section of data. Furthermore, Perakyla claims that the existence of certain social structures among large collectives may emerge even applying qualitative methods to comparatively few cases [12].

Laura Anderlucci, commenting on the results of the research on the Movement's communications, states that most of the Movement's communicative message is built on the shortcomings of its opponents, the politicians, and also of the journalists, the parties' "servants", who produce partisan information. For the Movement, to privilege the web over other media means "facilitating links with the citizens, familiarizing them with political events, increasing participation in decisions in the public interest, transparently sharing information, establishing a direct dialogue based on confidence". The web is unrelentingly used by activists to spread news and to communicate because it is the most rapid and direct tool and is also inexpensive. The web "has been the strategic element of a Movement which rejected classic communication through traditional media. Blogs, social networks and political rallies transmitted through live streaming coverage have replaced television debates and interviews in the more important national newspapers.

But even considering its fundamental role in the Movement's organization, the web has not been the main source of the great consensus raised by the Movement. More than Grillo and Casaleggio's frequently proclaimed idea of the web as the source of salvation, what has taken root in the collective unconscious is the protest against the caste (of politicians) and the promise of a change" [10].

From the multilevel analysis of the online questionnaire responses, three clusters of Movement electors have emerged:

- 1) the *Enthusiasts*, mostly with a middle or low educational qualification, from different age groups, with an in-depth knowledge of the Movement's political doctrine and programmes; they decided long ago to vote for the Movement, getting information mostly from its online sources, with a majority reading the Beppe Grillo's blog daily, declaring that they would never change their minds about voting for or supporting the Movement; they mostly reflect indicators of *re-ascension* as a form of psychological organization;
- 2) the *Fortuitous*, mostly young and of middle educational level, they spend much time connected to the internet and get information mostly on blogs and social networks, attracted by the Movement's innovative forms of communication and by the idea of seeing new faces in Parliament, but with little knowledge of the doctrine and the programmes of the Movement; they decided to vote for it in the middle of the electoral campaign or in the last week before the elections and are mostly uncertain whether or not they will go on giving their support to the Movement; they mostly reflect indicators of *post-subjectivity*;
- 3) the *Discriminating*, mostly of very high or very low educational qualifications, getting information from several sources, online and not, they decided to vote for the Movement shortly before the elections as a protest against the conduct of previous governments and the party system, hoping for future action by the Movement. This because they are rationally persuaded by its positions, but also critical of many erroneous decisions, and have decided to withdraw their support or are at least open to the possibility; they mostly reflect indicators of *subjectivity* as form of psychological organization [10].

CONCLUSIONS

Both the ethnographic research and the online questionnaire have shown through indicators that all three forms of psychological organization, *subjectivity*, *re-ascension* and *post-subjectivity* are likely to be present among Movement voters. The *re-ascriptives* form a core of faithful followers of the Movement, deeply devoted to its doctrine and dependent for information mostly on its online sources. They declare that they would never change their minds about supporting the Movement, thus showing that they are already the stable vanguard of the announced "new political order of communities". The essential thing for the Movement is to keep them linked to their communities, both local *tiny worlds* and online on the internet. Nevertheless, much of the Movement's future depends on its capacity to attract and maintain the consent of many *subjects*, who will require realistic and consistent proposals, a concrete political project and effective actions, and *post-subjects*, who need constantly improved and stimulating communications to confirm their fluid and unstable preference.

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