



Partecipazione e Conflitto
** The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 8(3) 2015: 944-952
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v8i3p944

Published in November 15, 2015

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BOOK REVIEWS

BEPPE GRILLO'S FIVE STAR MOVEMENT

Organisation, Communication and Ideology

edited by Filippo Tronconi, *Ashgate, Farnham, 2015, 254 pp., €65.00, ISBN 978-1-4724-3663-4*

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The resounding debut of the Five Star Movement (M5S) at the 2013 Italian General Election marks the «most successful party entry in the history of post-war Western European democracies». Less than five years after its official foundation, the political movement led by the (former) comedian Beppe Grillo was able to become the first Italian party. How could this astonishing result have been achieved? Is this new political actor here to stay? The book edited by Filippo Tronconi revolves around these two main questions, presenting the results of a research project launched in 2012 by the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo. The contributions of a pool of Italian scholars offer different perspectives and different methods and sources: election results, survey data, qualitative interviews with activists and elected representatives.

The book provides an analytical framework that helps to identify the factors underlying this unprecedented (and largely unexpected) electoral breakthrough. Moreover, in the concluding section, Tronconi poses questions about the stability of the position that

the M5S has acquired in the Italian party system, and about the sustainability of its party model, given the peculiar features of its ideological profile and organisational arrangement.

The nine chapters of the book may be divided into three parts.

The *first part* introduces the Movement to the reader. It reconstructs the M5S's history and illustrates its basic characteristics and their internal contradictions, drawing attention to the challenges they pose to political science in its attempt to classify the M5S using traditional party models. This story, of course, cannot be told neglecting the personal path of its leader and founder, Beppe Grillo.

The title of *Chapter 1*, written by Rinaldo Vignati, captures a large part of the conflicting features of the internal structure: the M5S is a «'leaderist' Movement with a leaderless organisation». The M5S describes itself as a purely horizontal, post-bureaucratic, anti-hierarchical, leaderless organisation, while Grillo defines himself as a guarantor (of internal 'purity') and a megaphone (using his popularity and communication skills to spread the 'Word' of the Movement to a large audience). At the same time, its evolution, success and internal functioning are strictly dependent on the leader. Even if the (official) birth of the M5S is quite recent (2009), the formation of Grillo's "people" has been a much longer process, following his personal career from TV showman, to public preacher, to successful blogger, to leader of a social movement able to mobilise immense crowds in public demonstrations against the political class. The next step was the formation of a web-based organisation that bridges online and offline initiatives. It is a *non-party* with an *anti-party* discourse whose 'ideology' discards representative democracy; but, at the same time, it has accepted entry into the electoral arena and representative institutions. In short, the non-party has become a party.

Hence, in *Chapter 2*, Vignati tries to identify 'what kind' of party the M5S has become, examining the basic features of its organisation and their consistency with old and new party models. On the one hand, the direct, exclusive and unmediated relationship between Grillo (along with his close entourage) and the party's base, combined with the total control of the leader over the party's central dynamics, recalls the arrangement of charismatic *personal parties* theorised by Mauro Calise¹. Grillo is actually the *owner* of his party, since he is the *owner* of the Five Star symbol: a 'proprietary' arrangement which gives him the power to decide, at any moment, who is *in* and who is *out* of the Movement. On the other hand, the relative independence of local groups recalls the *stratarchical* arrangement typical of a *franchise system*, according to which there is a sort of 'contract' between the central organisation and its local branches. In essence, it

¹ See M. Calise (2010), *Il partito personale. I due corpi del leader*, Laterza, Rome-Bari.

is a situation in which elected representatives find themselves squeezed between the *party in central office* and the *party on the ground*.

The *second part* of the book focuses on specific dimensions of the party's overall architecture. The picture outlined in these pages is that of a pyramid truncated in the middle², built on the relationship between: the large – and largely indistinct – base of voters and activists; the apex represented by the leader and the Casaleggio Associati (the marketing and web strategies company embedded within the Movement's *central committee*). While there seems to be a «total absence of the meso-structures connecting the *party in central office* to the *party on the ground*».

The (largest) base of the pyramid is analysed, in *Chapter 4*, by Andrea Pedrazzani and Luca Pinto, who trace the socio-demographic and political profiles of the Five Star electorate. The data presented display the deep evolution of the party base since the Movement's early days. The 2012 local elections may be considered the watershed. Before that moment, the Movement attracted voters from precise social groups: «young people, mid- and highly-educated white-collar workers and students». After that turning point, the degree of internal heterogeneity has grown significantly, and the M5S has transformed itself into a *catch-all (anti-party) party*. This enlargement of the electoral support parallels the evolution of its ideological profile. At the 2013 General Election, voters with very diverse political backgrounds, as regards their past voting choices and their self-placement on the traditional left-right axis, decided to shift to the M5S. If the first sympathisers (and voters) of the Movement were mainly former voters of left-wing parties, and their socio-demographic profile resembled that of the left-libertarian European parties of the eighties, the success obtained at the 2013 General elections is associated with consistent inflows of voters from right-wing parties.

In *Chapter 3*, Maria Elisabetta Lanzzone and Filippo Tronconi broaden their view to *the party on the ground*: the activists and the grassroots organisation. In this respect, the strength of the M5S is identified in its ability to provide disillusioned or disappointed citizens with alternative channels of political participation. In the reported words of a Five Star city councilman interviewed for this research, «If you want to join a party, you have to become the canvasser for someone who is already being a canvasser for someone else». The M5S is described by its activists as a completely different structure. It's a fluid and open organisation with minimised forms of delegation. Its main communication and recruitment places are essentially three: the blog *beppegrillo.it*, which, according to the Movement's non-statute, is the official address of the M5S; the *Meetup* platform; and periodical (offline) assemblies of the local groups. This constitutive organisational

² This image has already been used by the Hungarian political scientist János Simon to describe the party model that emerged in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

'weakness', which is part of the Five Star myth, is counterbalanced, in its concrete workings, by the (written and unwritten) prerogatives of Grillo's leadership.

In *Chapter 5*, Pinto and Pedrazzani analyse the 'growing middle' of the party pyramid: the elected representatives in the parliamentary arena. The Five Star *citizens* – this is the label chosen by the M5S MPs who reject the title of *honourable* normally bestowed upon parliamentarians – were selected through online primaries, and are distinguished by a total lack of previous parliamentary experience. Their socio-demographic profile displays a large presence of previously unrepresented categories: young people, white-collar workers, students and the unemployed. This seems to be consistent with the ideology of the M5S, whose declared aim is to bring 'ordinary people' into the institutions. Professionalisation of the political class is perceived as something inherently evil, and is avoided through precise rules such as the rotation of parliamentary positions, the 'restitution' of part of the MPs' remuneration, and the refusal of parliamentary benefits. At the same time, the new *party in public office* appears to be strongly dependent on the *party in central office*: the leader, his close staff, and a *Communications Group* whose members are 'hired' directly by Grillo. Their autonomy is also limited by their commitment to the instructions provided by M5S members through the web. This point has given rise to much criticism, since this provision could represent the *de facto* introduction of an *imperative mandate*, which is prohibited by the Italian Constitution.

The multifaceted and often contradictory role played by the Internet for the M5S is addressed in *Chapter 6* by Lorenzo Mosca, Cristian Vaccari and Augusto Valeriani. Their in-depth analysis reveals the many inconsistencies between the rhetorical claims about the 'Internet revolution' and the actual dynamics of internal life, especially as regards the decision-making process and the management of disagreements (which have led to many expulsions of MPs and local representatives). In particular, the 2013 online primaries (the so-called *Parlamentarie*) were characterised by a «somewhat exclusionary and opaque process» discouraging involvement and participation. The real centrality of the web is further questioned by survey data regarding the importance of the Internet for M5S voters. While the web is confirmed to be an important participatory channel and a source for their voting choice, the success at the 2013 General Election was the result of the «skilful use made of a diversified repertoire of integrated media».

The aim of the *third part* of the book is to identify the roots of the party success, analysing the links between the M5S and society.

Chapter 7, by Lorenzo Mosca, focuses on the links between Grillo's Movement, social conflicts and local protests, in terms of programmatic, biographical and geographical proximity. The analysis of grassroots campaigns and electoral manifestos shows that lo-

cal groups (and the leader himself) have drawn many of their issues from social movement claims and demands – e.g., environmental battles, opposition towards large-scale infrastructures, the defence of common goods, and the expansion of civil rights. At the same time, the analysis of the elected M5S representatives' biographies displayed a significant proximity to social movements, experiences of local mobilisation and protest groups. This finding is also confirmed at the geographical level, as many of the areas in which the Movement obtained its best results are marked by strong territorial conflicts. In sum, the M5S has brought into the institutions a wide range of demands and social conflicts, and, at the same time, a repertoire of unconventional actions typical of social movements. The Five Star MPs knowingly break the codes and routines of the institutionalized forms of parliamentary action, with protest actions practiced inside and 'around' the Parliament.

The last two chapters use post-electoral surveys to investigate the main components of the M5S voters' choice: the protest component and the ideological component. The analysis performed in *Chapter 8* by Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto confirms that protest voting played a crucial role at the 2013 General Election. Logistic regressions show that *system discontent* and *elite discontent* are distinctive features of the M5S electorate, as both dimensions – especially when combined together – had a significant impact on the choice to vote for Grillo's party. Another important empirical evidence is that the Five Star Voter's profile seems to fit the model of the *critical citizen* rather than that of the *apathetic citizen*. When measures of political engagement are introduced in the statistical models, «voters who are in touch with politics always display a higher (predicted) percentage of votes for the M5S».

In *Chapter 9*, Pasquale Colloca and Piergiorgio Corbetta focus on the ideological nature of the M5S. Grillo's party rejects the traditional categories of politics. It claims to be neither left-wing nor right-wing. Nevertheless, if we look at its 2013 voters' values and political attitudes, can the Movement find a position on the left-right axis? «On average» its voters stand «somewhere around the centre of the left-right political spectrum (only slightly left of the centre)». This lack of a clear ideological orientation is the result of a great(er) ideological diversification (compared to other parties) on the main issues of public interest associated with the respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale. Moreover, this indefinite position on the traditional ideological space, stemming from their contradictory answers, seems not to originate from the existence of two ideologically opposed groups. The analysis excludes a significant presence of *consistent leftist voters* or *consistent rightist voters*, even among those who most closely identify themselves with the party. The largest group of the M5S electorate is composed of *inconsistent voters*: non-ideological voters, for whom the left-right dimension simply «has less

meaning than for other voters». This inconsistency is also high among politically informed voters, and can consequently be described as the result of a «knowing rejection of the left-right ideology».

At the end of this comprehensive journey through the Five Star galaxy, the book tries to answer the questions from which the research originated. Reviewing the literature on the experience of new political actors in established democracies, Tronconi isolates three different factors that may explain their rise and success: (1) institutional conditions that favour their access to the competition; (2) an innovative organisational structure that helps them to mobilise citizens; and (3) the ability to occupy the 'right spot' of the political space, giving voice (and an electoral option) to citizens whose demands or expectations are not met by traditional or mainstream parties.

Tronconi's conclusion is that factors 2 and 3 certainly favoured the extraordinary rise of the M5S, whereas there is contrasting evidence regarding factor 1.

(1) The existence of relevant sub-national electoral arenas – especially the 2012 Municipal and Regional Elections – provided the Movement with an important training ground to prove its credentials and emerge as a reliable competitor at the national level. Nevertheless, the M5S had to face rather high institutional barriers. Its access to State resources, such as public funding and communication on state television, was very limited, mainly due to its deliberate decision to 'avoid' television and to refuse state subsidies (one of the M5S's strong points is the battle for the sobriety of politics and the abolition of any form of public funding to parties). Another important limiting factor for the M5S was represented by electoral rules centred on coalitions and characterised by rather demanding thresholds. An important point the analysis misses to note is that the M5S benefited from the absence of a stable legal framework regulating the internal democracies of parties. As Andrea De Petris has pointed out, in Italy «this normative deficiency made political movements raise and compete for electoral consent without very meaningful boundaries»³.

(2) As regards the organisational level, the contradictory ingredients of the party structure actually seem to have favoured the Movement's success. This argument is particularly persuasive. If we look at the base of the pyramid, the (seeming) weakness of its horizontal dimension and the (seeming) absence of intermediate bodies gave the impression of an 'open' organisation, able to mobilise people who had previously distanced themselves from politics, or to re-mobilise those who were disappointed with traditional political infrastructures. If we look at the apex of the pyramid, the strength of the lead-

³ On this point see Andrea De Petris and Thomas Poguntke (eds) (2015), *Anti-party Parties in Germany and Italy. Protest Movements and Parliamentary Democracy*, Luiss University Press, Rome.

ership guaranteed internal unity, while the professionalisation of the *party in central office* provided the M5S with great visibility on both old and new media, capitalising on its front-man's communicative gifts.

(3) The analysis of the Movement's ideological positioning leads to similar conclusions. Its vague, contradictory, ambiguous ideological positioning allowed the M5S to attract a large and composite electoral base. In the political crisis that hit Italy in 2011, the M5S was able to acquire the issue-ownership in the domain of the renewal and moralisation of politics. At the same time, it blurred its position on other issues traditionally associated with left-wing or right-wing political actors. «This was achieved by appealing to leftist voters with the emphasis on the environment, the pledge for a universal basic income, support for the public health and education system[...] At the same time, rightist voters could consider voting for a party that was in favour of lowering taxes on house property, critical towards the Euro, sympathetic towards the expectations of small entrepreneurs and cautious towards any opening on immigration policy».

What about the future of the M5S? Tronconi's position is straightforward: in respect both to the organisational and the ideological dimension, the M5S's strength is at the same time its weakness. The key factors of its success coincide with the main challenges regarding its future. Once a party has entered the institutional arena, position-blurring on the left-right dimension of the competition becomes a difficult task. The party is forced to take positions that could alienate part of its (composite) electorate, and even if it tries to maintain its *tous azimuts* political outlook – this is actually the route chosen by Grillo after the 2013 electoral success – it will see internal divisions growing. Meanwhile, precisely because of its success, it will be challenged by other political actors on its core issues.

The same line of reasoning is applied to the party's organisation. Now that the M5S has become a (national) party, the contradictory mix of horizontal and vertical features in its internal configuration becomes «more and more unbearable». Internal conflicts arise, and the leader is forced to use a strong hand against internal dissent, with the risk of not living up to the promise of a direct, unmediated democracy. Hence, «its survival and consolidation is not guaranteed. It mainly depends on its ability to adapt to a new institutional environment, something which probably requires changes in the internal organisation, including a redefinition of Grillo's role».

The troubles experienced by the Movement, after its astonishing breakthrough and triumphal entrance into the Italian Parliament in 2013, are consistent with the interpretation offered by the book. Grillo has closed the door to every prospect of alliance with other political parties, and has maintained – actually reinforced – his anti-political (and

anti-European) stance. The party in public office has seen a growing internal division between the so-called *Taliban* – Grillo's faithful followers, most intransigent on certain basic principles of the Movement – and the *Dissidents* – the critics of the Five Star (charismatic) management, open to the idea of dialogue with other parties. Internal turbulence and the isolationist strategy chosen by the leader largely explain the bad result obtained at the 2014 European Elections, in which Matteo Renzi – the new head of government – and his Democratic Party (PD) – the main centre-left party – were able to 'steal' the Movement's role as the flag-bearer of change. The M5S actually obtained 21.2% of the vote, and although this result marked a loss of (only) four points compared to the figure obtained a year earlier, it was completely overshadowed by the unprecedented 40.8% obtained by the PD. Moreover, the expectations of victory raised by Grillo during the Electoral campaign turned the result into an actual defeat.

In many respects, this electoral step-back and the troubled months that followed seem to have marked a turning point for the M5S. Something has changed in the internal organisation. In particular, since November 2014, the party structure has had a new decision-making organ: the so-called *Five Star Directory*⁴, a group of five MPs chosen by Grillo himself – and ratified by an online vote – to «examine the general situation, share the most urgent decision, and build, with the help of everyone, the future of the M5S»⁵. «I'm pretty tired, as Forrest Gump would say», Grillo wrote on his blog, citing the famous movie character at the end of his endless run across the country.

The 'taboo of television' and the 'taboo of alliances' with other political forces have also been partially broken. Now the Five Star MPs participate in television talk-shows, mixing themselves with other politicians (no longer with the risk of being expelled from the Movement, as has happened to some of their colleagues in the past). The strategy of self-isolation has been dismissed at the European level. Just after the 2014 Election, Grillo signed an agreement with the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) for the formation of a (new) Eurosceptic front inside the European Parliament. At the national level the M5S has not formed any formal alliance, but it has shown a more pragmatic (*policy-seeking* and *office-seeking*) attitude, in its relationship with other parties, in order to reach specific goals. The Regional and Municipal elections of Spring 2015 have pro-

⁴ *Directory* is not the official name of the group, but it was immediately proposed by observers because, like the *French Directory* of 1795, it seemed to open the final stage of the M5S's 'revolutionary phase'.

⁵ Beppe Grillo (2014), "Consultazione online – Comunicato politico numero cinquantacinque", www.beppegrillo.it, November 28: http://www.beppegrillo.it/2014/11/consultazione_online_comunicato_politico_numero_cinquantacinque.html.

vided important signs of territorial consolidation, and political polls conducted in September regarding voting intentions have revealed a level of popularity that even exceeds 2013 levels⁶.

In 2013, an anti-system political actor 'entered the system'. An anti-political movement has become an (anti-party) party. Albeit in a contradictory and intermittent fashion, Grillo's 'creature' has initiated a process of institutionalisation and normalisation that seems to be accompanied by a growing internal complexity and an unexpected electoral stability. Nevertheless, the M5S will never be a 'normal' party. Its bottom-up, internet-centred view of democracy has intercepted a widespread demand for the renewal of representative democracy and its traditional infrastructures. At the same time, Grillo is still there: he is still the owner of the M5S, and it is still not clear how the Movement could 'work' without its founder, leader and megaphone. On the other hand, what still seems to 'work', in terms of electoral appeal, is the Movement's post-ideological proposal, which has broken the wall between left and right. After all, the analyses presented in the book show that *ideologically inconsistent* voters are now the majority in Italy; and many new, innovative political actors, across many European countries, are capitalising on the window of opportunity opened up by the economic crisis and political discontent, calling into question traditional bi-polar or bi-party systems.

The M5S, with its original (and extreme) mix of *horizontal* and *vertical* features, with its *tous azimuts* political outlook, with its extraordinary electoral success, is maybe the most intriguing of these experiments. The M5S is like a *contrast agent* injected into the body of contemporary democracy: it assists us in analysing its "anatomy", identifying its changing contours and its critical zones. The seemingly vague and contradictory features of the Movement's organisational model and ideological position help us to discern how politics is changing, and what it will look like in the future. Tronconi's book is useful precisely because it offers a theoretical framework to reconstruct the Movement's path, and to "read" its future trajectories.

⁶ See, for example, the *Political Atlas (Atlante Politico)* by the research institute *Demos&Pi*: <http://www.demos.it/a01167.php>.