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What is Web-populism doing to Italian Politics? The Discursive Construction of ‘Grillini’ vis-à-vis the Antagonist Other

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What is Web-populism doing to Italian Politics?

The Discursive Construction of ‘Grillini’ vis-à-vis the Antagonist Other

Isadora Arredondo

ABSTRACT

In the year of 2009 comedian and blogger Piero ‘Beppe’ Grillo and social media guru Gianroberto Casaleggio launched ‘Movimento 5 Stelle’ (5 Star Movement,) a political party that within the span of three years would become the biggest anti-establishment force in Europe. From the outset, the movement has evoked both criticism and praise amongst political communications scholars. Most of the backlash is centred on the movement’s anti-establishment rhetoric, its lack of a consistent political agenda and most prominently, the controversial nature of the main head; Beppe Grillo. Most of these remarks have been unsuccessful in grasping the movement’s position in the political landscape for they have quickly dismissed its democratic potential by deeming it anti-political. Conversely, the celebratory interpretations surrounding the 5SM phenomenon have focused on the leaders’ ability to create a mass support base primarily through the use of the Web, but equally in combination with traditional rallying strategies; all of this whilst bypassing traditional institutions. Therefore, what seems to baffle analysts is the communicational strategy he employs from a technical point of view, rather than a discursive one. As a result, both kinds of assessments run short of critical strategies to analyse the movement’s *differentia specifica* within the current Italian context.

This paper conducts a Discourse Theory analysis of the rhetoric used by Beppe Grillo in constructing ‘the people’ (i.e. the movement’s followers, also known as ‘Grillini’) vis-à-vis the antagonist other. Drawing on competing models of public sphere theory and merging it conceptually with the literature on populism, this paper asks how Grillo’s discourse on internet politics has managed to interpellate new political subjects and create new social spaces to guide social action in a stage where traditional media seem to be undergoing a crisis of legitimation. Nonetheless, whilst this project supports the idea that a central dimension to his rhetoric is his ability to revive the political, it rejects the notion that the articulation of a zero-sum war against mass media will lead towards a proactive form of civic engagement.

Instead, this paper urges for more research to be conducted on how a counter-discursive dimension can be theoretically and practically implemented within traditional institutions' frameworks so as to recuperate what seems to be a seemingly quiescent citizenry.

INTRODUCTION

Given the ubiquity of mass media in contemporary capitalist societies, it is now deemed a truism in academic circles to claim that they constitute the main sites through which the nurturing of social power is enacted. This observation stems from the idea that their deontological role in society grants them the authority to institutionalize common sense and thus normalize a particular social structure (see Ives 2004, Myles, 2010). Arguably, the present symbolic regime which upholds Western societies is mainly sustained through the overall consensus that “liberal democracy represents the objective order” (Mouffe, 2000: 18). In this line of thought, any material and or discursive dislocation of the edifice through which this shared understanding runs, inevitably results in a temporary dissolution of its figurative totality and legitimacy as a political model. Crucially, as representative institutions increasingly unveil their failure to represent the ‘common’ they are meant to embody, the voices that have been excluded from their agenda have started seeking for new outlets to express their marginalization. This instability is said to be exasperated when new channels for dialogue open up the possibility for new struggles to emerge and thus compete to institute a new hegemonic order.

Particularly amongst social movement and media and communication scholars, the idea of a rise of an ‘Information society’ is met with optimism as it leads to the claim that societies are being progressively organized around ‘networks’ and ‘multitudes,’ therefore weakening old centres of power (see Castells 2009, Hardt et al., 2005). In this terrain, the success of any given political actor(s) will depend primarily on his/her ability to claim to represent what is shown to be absent and mobilize groups through such framework. Nevertheless, this paper will from the outset align itself with thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe (2005) and reject the premise that the ‘progressive’ side of modernity coupled with the rapid development of communication technologies has led to new forms of identity politics that will challenge the need for traditional institutions or political alignments (for an overview of these claims see Giddens 1991, Beck et al 1994). Rather, the ideas put forward in this work will advocate for what scholars of agonistic democracy have called a ‘radicalization of the public sphere’ (Licoln, 2007,) which as it will be argued, may help us endow traditional institutions with their democratic role in a state where they are thought to be losing their legitimacy.

An attempt to navigate these theoretical tenets will be made by employing Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s ‘Discourse Theory’ method to the case study of the Italian protest party ‘5 Star Movement’ (hereinafter referred to as 5SM). The motivations behind this undertaking are two-fold. First of all, Italy is an emblematic case of a Western democracy whose

exacerbating political crisis goes hand in hand with the constitution of its media ecology. For many years now, substantial academic research has been dedicated to understanding how a developed, liberal capitalist society can thrive in an environment where information is tightly in the hands of small political and economic elite (see Ricolfi, 1997, Statham 1996). Simultaneously, it presents us with another recent case of a European country having to allocate a strong political force of populist character in its parliamentary system. Evidently, this has been met with concern by the political class insofar as the leader's rhetoric is instilled with a high anti-establishment sentiment and his leadership has already led to several political disagreements, including parliamentary deadlock in the 2013 elections (Hooper, 2013).

Lastly, the 5SM's communication strategy has gained academic appraisal amongst political communication scholars, as 'Beppe' Grillo (the head of the movement) and his social-media guru partner Gianroberto Casaleggio have not only been able to mobilize actors by bypassing mass media; but they have also "incorporated the internet into their very notion of democracy" (Bordignon et al., 2012: 1) Moreover, as a study from British think-tank Demos found that the so-called 'Grillini' (the movement's members) come from all sides of the political spectrum, they are mostly young, educated and most of them are 'first-timers' in politics (Bartlett et al., 2013) Therefore, the success of the 5SM may serve to refute the notion that the seemingly apathetic and sceptic Italian citizenry can no longer be mobilized towards collective action, but instead illustrates that they require a figure who offers alternative articulations of politics. Hence, by analysing the performative dimension of Beppe Grillo's rhetoric, the aim of this project is to empirically assess how he interpellates new political agents through the discursive construction of 'the people' vis-à-vis the antagonist 'Other.' In so doing, this project will seek to understand the "social spaces and subjectivities going under his form of address" (Glasson, 2012: 101) and contextualize them within the present situation of Italian politics.

Restricted by the scope of this paper, the texts that have been chosen for analysis will only concentrate on four different instances in which representatives of the 5SM were controversially expelled from the movement via the leader's blog after violating the code of conduct by participating in talk shows. These cases were deemed as a relevant point of departure given that they provide us with explicit articulations of the failure of the media system to fulfil its public role and may also point us towards its possible remedies. Overall, this project is not concerned with evaluating the legitimacy of Grillo's agenda, but rather seeks to understand how his discourse may shed light to the symbolic rupture of Italy's social identity resulting from the monopolization of its media environment.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

The Internet and the Public Sphere: Agonism and deliberation

With the incorporation of digital technologies in everyday life, critical inquiries have concentrated on the quantitative and qualitative changes that the democratic process may undergo as new spaces for citizen engagement are created and facilitate the challenging of power structures (Castells, 2007; Dutton, 2009). This discussion departs from the notion that traditional media, hold too much of an influential role in most capitalist societies, for they have assumed the status of ‘conveyors of reality’ and therefore occupy a social space “that is mutually referential and reinforcing” (Silverstone, 2007: 5). Therefore, any reconfiguration of such structure allowing for the permeation of new frameworks and voices is said to conduct to a ‘healthier democracy.’ However, given that the concept of democracy is one of the most contested in political thought, conflicting conclusions regarding this shift stem from what theorists presume the ‘democratic problem’ to be in the first place. Despite diverging claims, however, one central concern to democratic participation is brought forward in most discussions: how to give equal weight to deliberation and contestation.

Hence, implicit in most academic literature is the normative assessment of online fora in relation to the Habermasian ‘public sphere’ (Agre, 2002: 311). Particularly amongst deliberative democrats, public sphere theory becomes a useful point of departure because its main thesis is that communication lies at the centre of the exercise of democratic power (see Habermas et al., 1977, Habermas 1994). Thus spaces where dialogue free from coercion can occur, where the force of the better argument wins and where social status becomes irrelevant, become promising milestones towards the building of a ‘strong’ democracy (Licoln, 2007: 48) These celebrating remarks are usually made in relation to the top-down, hierarchical nature of mass media; privileging the Internet as a means to build new dialogic communities given its fast, cost-effective, open, direct, easy and many-to-many capacities of information sharing (Brants, Huizenga, & van Meerten, 1996, Gimmler, 2012).

Arguably, the Internet is also hailed under the hope of easing the tension between “two democratic traditions that seem to be in constant competition under the conditions of modernity: political liberalism and popular sovereignty” (Mouffe, 2000: 18).

On top of that, an increasing voter turnout in developed democracies and citizens’ overall disengagement with traditional institutions (such as the mass media) has led a strand of the literature to the claim that, “in the context of an aggregative pluralism that privileges

efficiency over participation, strategic rationality over performative virtuosity” (2005: 59). citizens end up “taking one of three routes: they have abandoned politics almost completely and concentrated on accumulating private benefits; they have retreated into homogeneous communities that reject the radically pluralist ethos of the public arena; or they have resorted to violent means of expressing opinions that, they feel, are otherwise marginalized” (Goi, 2005:59). As a response to this, different theorists have sought out solutions so that a vibrant civil society can be revived.

For deliberative democratic theorists, this answer is to be found in the platforms where rational debate over public issues may find a place, thus asserting that sovereignty can be regained by enabling critical scrutiny over power and by limiting the excesses of private interests (Crossley et al., 2001). Thus, they argue, a procedure of eliminating private, irrational, anti-political, fundamentalist views from public discourse through dialogic encounters ensures that representative institutions remain at check (Goi, 2005). As Licoln mentions, because the Habermasian public sphere is considered a process and not an institution, the goal becomes to investigate to what extent the Internet provides a structure that can foster an ‘ideal speech situation’ of consensus (2007: 54). Nonetheless, a substantial amount of work has challenged the degree to which the idealized conception of the public sphere is fully desirable, given that it has been questioned on its inclusivity on structural and discursive grounds (see Fraser, 1990; Calhoun, 1992).

The latter critique is mostly prevalent amongst discourse theorists. For example, Chantal Mouffe scrutinizes the deliberative model by problematizing the notion of ‘rational consensus.’ According to Mouffe, the deliberative model ignores that power is a necessary element of every practice of political articulation (Mouffe, 2000: 20). Therefore the illusion that a ‘common will’ can be established is “an attempt to close down the play of differentiation inherent in human relations” (Barnett, 2004: 1). As a result, what is at stake in consensus is an act of discursive exclusion, which denies that social antagonisms are at the heart of every political identity (Howarth, 2006: 105). Hence, advocates of agonistic politics argue that the deliberative model and its respective public sphere model seek to erase difference though they may paradoxically claim to celebrate plurality (Goi, 2005; Licoln, 2007). According to Licoln, the deliberative model fails to theorize structural inequalities, for its insistence on ‘public reason’ inevitably divides the political camp into politics that are deemed ‘reasonable’ and those that are deemed ‘unreasonable’ (2007: 50). In doing so, the deliberative model promotes an irreconcilable antagonism by delineating the margins between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (see Mouffe, 2013).

On the other hand, radical democrats envisage a sphere where contestation is democratically promoted, by encouraging participants to see each other as adversaries whose differences are legitimised and considered essential for the formation of political collectives (Honig, 2007). This model attempts to configure a platform where there is an adherence to a political etiquette, but without denying the temporality of compromise (unlike the fixity of consensus). As a result, the emphasis on conflict put forward is based partially on the notion that when the deliberative model implies that there exists harmony, the people's loss of sovereignty is discursively justified (Honig, 2007). Instead, the radical model always allows for 'intra-discursive contestation' vis-à-vis representative institutions in a space that is not imagined as a unified public, but as Licoln suggests, "constituted of counter-publics" (2007: 48). Consequently, with the rise of the Internet enthusiasm (and fear) about the way radical politics and contestation may evolve is growing. Advocates of the Habermasian public sphere may feel threatened that the so-called 'online fragmentation phenomenon' may lead to an accentuation of extreme politics and towards mere radicalism (Licoln, 2007: 832). Conversely, some radical democrats see the Internet as an opportunity to promote the inclusion of marginal voices into public debate.

As Simona Goi suggests, forms of political articulation that are often deemed 'demagogic' or theatrical vis-à-vis the illusionary rhetoric of rationality may find it easier to express themselves online, and this is positive insofar as new range of politics may be included (2005:61). Whilst research is not conclusive as to how people encounter difference or as to where to draw the limits of 'radical' discourses online (see Cammaerts, 2009,) there is hope amongst some agonistic democrats that their inclusion is better than their alienation (see Licoln, 2007). This is due to the notion that when excluding voices on moral and reasonable grounds, we affirm to have "eliminated adversaries whilst remaining neutral" (Mouffe, 2000: 31). However, as Chantal Mouffe stresses, "it is not enough to eliminate the political in its dimension of antagonism and exclusion from one's theory to make it vanish from the real world [...] when the institutions and discourses are missing that could permit potential antagonisms to manifest themselves under an agonistic mode, the danger exists that instead of struggle among adversaries, what will take place is a war against enemies" (Mouffe, 2000: 32). This idea of a 'consensus at the centre' that Mouffe argues predominates in public spheres models (where plurality is silenced to construct a harmonious common) inevitably produces movements of resistance that seek to politicize the debate and bring differences to the foreground (2013).

This is seen in a plethora of counter-mobilization movements, each of them articulating different struggles, but most of them contesting the limits of the current symbolic regime. Whereas the deliberative model demoralizes the political dimension of populist forces and the like, the radical democrat understands them as a political expression that emerges out of the incapacity of the liberal order to give room to adversaries (Villacanas Berlanga, 2010:159). Therefore, what is of pressing need is to study how oppositional movements have used the Internet to react against this marginalization by constructing a new discursive space for the formulation of new political identities. The aim of this study is to focus on one style of political resistance: populism.

Populism and Democracy

As Kaltwasser explains, the literature on populism has grown exponentially in Latin American and Europe since the 1990s, for populist forces have continued resurfacing in contemporary democracies (2011:184). Theorists often struggle to define populism's defining nature; particularly those that try to focus on its ideological content given that populist movements often vary across the political spectrum with regards to their agenda (for a detailed account of this see Laclau, 2001: 11-16) and increasingly, some of them refuse to identify with old left/right wing distinctions. A common feature in most accounts, however, is to seek to explain its relationship with democracy, which inevitably obliges the scholar to make normative claims about whether populism is a "threat or a corrective to democracy" (Kaltwasser, 2011: 184).

Those who approach populism from a liberal perspective rarely define it positively, since populists' general refusal to accept the rules of dialogue with the establishment go against the aforementioned liberal paradigm. Thus, from a liberal perspective populism is often spoken of with analogies of 'mal-function,' 'illness,' extreme and even anti-politics, as it is known to arise in a state of organic crisis (Kaltwasser, 2011: 186) Therefore, the trend is to seek ways to appease such symptoms or to blame the confused masses for their expansion (see Albertazzi et al., 2007; Mazzoleni: 2003). This is problematic insofar as such line of analysis is unable to grasp why populist figures are successful in mobilizing groups, and they may therefore miss out something essential about their logic, that as discourse theory suggests, may be inherent to the political (Mouffe, 2005). In order to understand this, however, a few principles that the radical democratic model puts forward in its account of populism must be outlined.

Politics and the Political

Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau coined the radical democratic model on their work “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,” which is primarily an intervention on the “uncontested hegemony of liberal thought” (Mouffe, 2005:10) and attempts to provide a new model for the left. Both authors pertain to “the ‘family-members’ of the post-foundational constellation” (Marchart, 2007: 2). This school of thought edifies a philosophy that neglects the possibility of conceiving the social as a structure based on natural foundations (e.g. rationality, universality, scientism) and instead conceives it as being instituted through contingent practices of discursive struggle that seek to totalize society’s ontological ‘absence of ground’ (Laclau, 2005; Marchart, 2007). Hence, a stress on the primacy of politics in momentarily ‘grounding’ social systems through the exercise of power and the construction of social identities proves central to understanding the nature of the status quo (Howarth, 2006:104). It is through the interplay between attempts at grounding the social and the context of contingency that the difference between *politics* and the *political* is conceived.

Broadly speaking, politics is identified as “the realm of the decision” (Critchley et al., 2003:36). Whereas, the political is what informs what “routine politics is about” (Barnett, 2004: 3). In this line of thought, the political is continuously *gentrified* as an attempt at appeasing conflict (Arditi, 2010:26). The Gramscian concept of hegemony becomes central to explain how those who temporarily occupy the seat of power must seek to organize consent around their legitimacy through institutions like the media and the educational system (Ives: 2004, 2). Nonetheless, following previous assumptions regarding “the systemic ambiguity of the locus of power” (Gould, 2005: 341,) it is assumed that any system – i.e. the realm of politics or the media- is open to contestation *a priori*. Therefore, challenging ‘politics’ lies in the struggle of constantly re-defining what constitutes the political. Presumably, whilst this ‘intra-discursive contestation’ operates on a constant basis, its articulation becomes most effective in a state of social crisis where the absence of ground reveals itself (Laclau, 2005).

Constructing the Political

The radical approach is concerned with deconstructing the units (or what they refer to as ‘nodal points’) that structure the field of meaning and turn populism into a discursive practice capable of constituting political subjects. One of the most extended works on populism from a discourse theory perspective is Ernesto Laclau’s ‘On Populist Reason.’ The author starts his analysis by departing from the assumption that populism begins when unsatisfied social demands become increasingly accumulated in a society (Laclau, 2005: 73). These demands, he argues, derive from different groups requesting a particular need to be fulfilled (e.g. access to water, higher wages, etc....) (2005: 74). Given that liberal democracy has framed social demands as a *right*, the impossibility of allocating each of them results in frustration derived from a sense of injustice (Arditi, 2010). This does not mean that, that these have been denied, as much as it results from a failure to include them in the ‘common sense’ framework of priorities (Krips, 2006: 85).

Therefore, the populist leader identifies the inability of the system to absorb these and in doing so articulates the existence of a group by constructing an *equivalential chain* (e.g. totalizing their identity as one) between their differential characters (Laclau, 2005:74). Hence, most discourse theorists put forward the notion that what is often denoted ‘the people’ can be understood as the “quest for a substantial identity” (Arditi, 2010: 95) in a context where the harmonious continuity of the social is missing. Crucially, they postulate that every identity (i.e. an ‘Us’) can only be developed through *difference*, i.e. the identification of a ‘Them.’ Therefore, the antagonistic relationship against the ‘establishment’ present in most populist movements becomes a necessary element of ‘the people’; it becomes its constitutive outside (Mouffe, 2005). However, this form of appeal is contentious when viewed from a liberal lens, as populism is “based on the idea that popular sovereignty is the primary value of democracy” and therefore, it “not only assumes a dividing line between the people and the elites, but also aspires to construct a political model in which representative institutions are not necessary” (Kaltwasser, 2011: 188).

Conversely, from a RD approach, an antagonistic relation is “structured around tendentially empty signifiers” so as to aid the subject “externalize this (communitarian) lack onto those identities which ostensibly block the subject’s self-identity” (Glasson, 2012: 109). Evidently, how ‘the people’ are construed as one depends on the contextual discursive disruptions and the social spaces required to re-defining them. Nonetheless, in all cases this identity is a

negative one, as far as this negativity serves as an “affective vehicle to represent the threat that impedes the subject from fulfilling his needs” (Glasson, 2012: 109). Here, the concept of interpellation is borrowed from Althusser’s notion of ideology constituting subjects, i.e. by hailing individuals “in the name of a Unique and Absolute subject, whether it is God, Nation, Freedom [...]” and thus “functions as a mirror in which individuals contemplate their own image and enter into a relation of mutual recognition” (Krips, 2006: 83)

Thus, in the case of populist subjects, Laclau argues, “In providing a collective point of identification for what they demand, the common signifier also provides individuals with a collective point of identification” (Krips, 2006: 83). This point of identification is also a ‘mythical’ one, for it is the construction of society (and its members) as ‘such’ and not differently, that “we continuously produce society and act as if it exists as a totality, and we verbalise it as a totality. Hence, with words like ‘the people’ or ‘the country’ populist figures seek to demarcate a totality by ascribing it an objective content/target. But this ‘totality’ remains an imaginary entity in a context of contingency (Jorgensen et al 2002: 39). Therefore, as discourse would suggest, the leader becomes a ‘symbolic device’ that “disambiguates the identity of the populist camp by constructing the common signifiers that connect ‘the people’ and therefore articulates a new hegemonic project (Arditi, 2010: 23).

Challenges and opportunities

According to Chantal Mouffe, one of the biggest challenges populist figures face is transitioning from ‘the political’ to entering the ‘realm of politics’, for their rhetoric must be one of having “one foot inside and one foot outside of the institutional system” (2005: 177). More specifically, she suggests, when the institutional system has reached an organic crisis populist figures “have to do more than engage themselves in the ambiguous position of subverting the system and at the same time being integrated to it: they have to reconstruct the nature around a new popular core” (2005: 178) Crucially, as this paper will argue, when neglecting the status of ‘mediated representation,’ leaders attempt to construct the myth of a new ‘neutral’ space where ideas of sovereignty can be imagined, thus acting as though momentarily gentrifying conflict. However, as long as the institutions at place have not been radicalized to assume the political dimension and allocate the plurality of voices that populist movements attract under their rhetoric, the populist project will ultimately disintegrate or display an accentuation of antagonisms stemming from its inability of ever totalizing its followers’ identity.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Conceptual Framework

Public sphere theory, new information technologies and the concept of populism understood from a Discourse Theory lens will frame our investigation into the online phenomenon of the 5 Star Movement. A brief revision on the literature on Internet politics attempted to expose the shared concern amongst scholars regarding the decay of civic participation in liberal democracies and consequently their growing interest in how new spaces of dialogue may revive public participation (or in some cases threaten it). Thus, the first chapter explored the tensions that emerge between two competing models: the agonistic and deliberative. This is understood as an impasse in academic theory, insofar as few accounts have given equal weight to contestation and compromise in safeguarding representative institutions whilst giving public sovereignty a stable outlet.

Without arguing for the primacy of the radical democratic approach, the second chapter of our literature review understands the phenomenon of the rise of populism in liberal democracies as a response to the naturalized status of consensus in theories of democratic participation. Most importantly, the interest of this study is to explore the social experiences and the political subjectivities that populism – recognized as a confrontational form of politics- configures under its rhetoric and seeks to grasp its potentially democratic dimension. As such, the theoretical kit that Discourse theory supplies us with; i.e. mainly concepts such as hegemony, antagonism and the differentiation between politics and the political, will be considered as central in exploring the performative features of populist logic (i.e. how it interpolates and constructs political subjects). However, only an empirical study will help us understand to what extent populist reason can serve as a departing point to revive the political and to what extent it must be reconfigured so that its essence survives in the realm of politics.

Research Objectives

Given that the ideological content of each populist movement must be contextualized in order to be rendered meaningful, the next section will methodically operationalize the theoretical framework through the case study of M5S. More specifically, the research questions to be addressed are the following:

1. How is the empty signifier of ‘the people’ (i.e. ‘Grillini’) discursively constructed vis-à-vis the antagonist other?
2. How does Grillo create a *chain of equivalence* between different agents so as to compel them to act?

Following these queries, a normative assessment is brought forward:

3. What can these ‘signifiers’ teach us about the current conditions of representative institutions in Italy?
4. How has the Internet, by providing a space for agonistic expression, influenced the democratic process in Italy?

These questions thus intend to justify the aim of this project by asking: ‘so what’?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Rationale for Methodology

According to the framework previously outlined, the complexity of the debate on Internet politics stems from the ideological positions that enter into a *discursive* struggle to define its potential. Simultaneously, populism is understood as a *discursive* logic of articulation based on the construction of political subjects. Thus, an effort to weave the two together inevitably points us to the study of discourse, which here is broadly understood as “groups of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about- a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Wetherell *et al.*, 2001:72). Consequentially, by *discursive practice* we espouse the constructivist position that “all objects are objects of discourse, in that the condition of their meaning depends on a socially constructed system of rules and significant differences” (Laclau in Howarth, 2006: 9). In this vein, discourse analysis studies how objects/subjects are spoken about in particular institutional contexts, with the purpose of unveiling how their articulation reflects, maintains or disrupts social relations and structures (Chouliaraki *et al.*, 1999) However, there are different approaches to undertake discursive research, each of them “laden with particular assumptions about the nature of the social world and the way we attain knowledge about it” (Howarth, 2006: 3).

For example, Critical Discourse Analysis claims to be one of the most emancipatory approaches, as it unveils how certain discourses help to reproduce social dominance and seeks to challenge those modes of reproduction through its analysis (Van Dijk in Wetherell *et*

al., 2001: 301) Nonetheless, although CDA recognizes that power is not unilaterally imposed and thus embraces its multimodalities, its framework becomes less useful to analyse practices of resistance as it still adopts a Marxist conception of ideology and consequently is *less* concerned with agency than with top-down exercises of power (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002: 62)

An alternative approach to these questions is Discursive Psychology, for it views identities as being constituted through discourses the same way as poststructuralist approaches do (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002: 103). In this line of thought, subjectivity becomes *meaningful* only through discursive practices (Wetherell *et al.*, 2001). However, the methodologies employed by discursive psychology focus on *interaction* (e.g. conversations, ethnography) and base their conclusions on the construction of subject positions by analysing agents' interpretative repertoire (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002:105) Nevertheless, the purpose of this study is to understand a corpus of texts that exhibits a unidirectional speech act. Therefore, it does not seek to answer how 'the people' (our object of analysis) interact with/interpret the leader's discourses.

Development of methodology

Despite the fact that Laclau's and Mouffe's approach of the social (also known as Discourse Theory) briefly discussed in the second chapter in the literature review does not provide a systematic approach for empirical analysis, it has been previously used as a theoretical kit by a plethora of theorists by being combined with other principles of DA (see Glasson, 2012, Howarth, 2006). This analysis will borrow primarily from Jorgensen's *et al* (2002) synthesis of the principles of Discourse Theory as method. Table 1 illustrates a guide summarizing their key points.

Table 1. The Operational Steps to Discourse Theory as Method

CONCEPTS	THEORETICAL CODING
Nodal Points	Organizing discourse around concepts
Master Signifiers	Organizing identity around differential categories
Myths	Organizing a social and physical space
Chains of Equivalence	Investment of signifiers with meaning
Concept for conflict analysis	Constructing antagonism and hegemony

(Assembled by analyst)

As Jorgensen *et al* stress, when these aspects are identified in the text, then we can seek to unveil how “discourse, identity and the social space are organized discursively” (2002: 50). The strength of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory is that it encompasses Foucault’s principles of problematization and Derrida’s technique of deconstruction. In this vein, Foucault’s idea that “dominant discourses and constructions are contingent and political” (Howarth, 2006: 135) points us to the recognition that it is primarily through dislocations in dominant discourses (i.e. ‘common sense’) that competing understandings gain visibility. Simultaneously, Derrida’s notion that texts are “constituted around the privileging of certain conceptual oppositions and logics and the repression of others” (Howarth, 2006: 135) leads the analyst to recognize that all articulations are a hegemonic act. Last but not least, when the authors refer to ‘empty signifiers,’ they are adopting the idea inherent to semiotic analysis, which is that signs only gain meaning in relation to their position with other signs in a system and insofar as they project a specific version of reality (Wetherell, 2002: 295). Therefore, the method employed in the following sections consists on thematizing the various articulations of the fixation of meaning around differences and there onwards the task is to unveil the role that signifiers play in constituting discursive spaces and subjectivities in their wider context (Glasson, 2012: 102)

Challenges to Discourse Theory and Discourse Analysis

As just mentioned in our methodology section, the main problem with using Discourse Theory as method is that it is not a systematic approach. Therefore, this inevitably renders the analysis less visibly cohesive and structured than other methods of discourse analysis. Furthermore, DT provides an interpretative framework of social reality *a priori*, and therefore its “results cannot be falsified by the accounts of the reality it facilitates” but can only reflect the direction towards which the analyst wants to guide the research (Howarth, 2006). However, the practice of Discourse Theory should be evaluated not in terms of how ‘objective’ its findings are (as DT refuses that such foundations exist), but rather, to what extent it “provides a new meaningful understanding of the phenomena it seeks to investigate” (Howarth, 2006: 131). Beyond this, there are substantive criticisms about the assumptions this method puts forward that must be discussed before our analysis. These can be assembled as follows: 1) their notion that society is ‘purely discursive,’ 2) the lack of agency they give to subjects, 3) the ‘normative deficit’ in their account (Howarth, 2006: 115-124).

The first critique can be solved by pointing out that the authors do not reject the existence of a material world and thus ‘retreat to the linguistic world.’ Instead, their theory posits that there is always an “interweaving of the semantic aspects of language with the pragmatic

aspects of action” (Torfing, 2003: 94). Hence, their interpretations simply conclude that “all actions have meaning and to produce and disseminate meaning is to act” (Torfing, 2003: 94). The critique regarding a lack of agency is equally misinterpreted, as Laclau and Mouffe explicitly point out that “while individuals are constituted as subjects within discursive structures, these structures are contingent and malleable” (Howarth, 2006: 121). Thus, individuals are constantly transforming their position as a consequence of discursive dislocations and hence “become political agents in the stronger sense of the term” (Howarth, 2006: 121).

Finally, the question of a ‘normative deficit,’ in which critics have claimed that by not taking an epistemological position to defending any grounds nor seeking to commit to a political project, Discourse Theory inevitably avoids taking any ethical stance (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002). Nonetheless, their theory is normative insofar as it aims towards the (idealized) project of a radical democracy, which advocates for the endless inclusion of different groups by “opening up the domain for questions which can be discussed politically in terms of freedom and equality” (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002: 187). Importantly, as Jorgensen warns us the “unmasking of the taken-for-granted” that Laclau’s and Mouffe’s theory provides does not guide us towards “what we should be unmasking” (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002: 188,) but this can be overcome by setting out the research objectives and its political aims. In the end, the analyst is “condemned to distort reality through his analysis” (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002: 197,) but by asserting their position they can explain what exactly they are seeking to reveal.

Sampling

The sampling method involved purposive rather than random sampling, which means that the selection of the material was framed by the research objectives. Therefore, the following criteria were established: 1) the texts had to involve a direct form of address from the leader (Grillo) to the followers (‘Grillini,’) 2) The texts had to illustrate a logic of articulation based on differential categories of ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them,’ 3) The texts had to deal with the subject of internet politics, given that it is one of the most novel features of the movement’s communicational strategy and it was a topic of the researcher’s personal interest. The medium to obtain the documents was Beppe Grillo’s blog, as it constitutes the “official instrument for the divulgence of information and participation of the movement” (Beppe Grillo, 2013) Taking these conditions into account, four events were reckoned to fulfil the requirements of being ‘empirically interesting’ and ‘theoretically relevant’ (Chouliaraki *et al.*, 1999): the (separate) instances in which ‘Grillini’ members were expelled from the movement

after having granted interviews to journalists and participated in talk shows. A sample of five texts dealing exclusively with the subject was assembled.

The data was deemed empirically pertinent for there was substantial controversy in the mass media surrounding these events. The first instance was the conjoint expulsion of regional councillor Giovanni Favia from Emilia Romagna and Federica Salsi, municipal councillor in Bologna. Two months before their expulsion, the leader wrote a blog post entitled 'Grillo for Dummies' (here onwards referred to as source 1) which was written as a guide of conduct on the basis that some members (i.e. the two councillors) had to re-learn the movement's rules. The following text (*source 2*) was addressed only to Federica Salsi, which was a short piece entitled 'Talk Shows Will Kill You: Tell Them to Stop.' Whilst the post did not make any direct references to councillor Salsi, it was written immediately after she had appeared on the Talk Show 'Ballaro.' However, it was not until a videotape of councillor Favia (in which he criticized the movement's leaders) was released on TV that Beppe Grillo suggested their expulsion. Favia thus appeared on the show 'Otto e Mezzo' to explain the incident and the leader subsequently explicitly asked both councillors to abstain from using the movement's logo on their future political endeavours.

The third text (*source 3*) is a text released soon after their expulsion and just before the elections. In this communiqué Grillo called upon all members to learn from the experience of those who had violated the rules and discussed the need for internal cohesion within the movement. This appeared to instil peace for some months, until the expulsion of senator Marino Mastrangeli following shortly after the general elections. In this fourth instance (*source 4*), senator Mastrangeli had granted an interview to news programme 'Pommeriglio Cinque' to speak about the movement's coming agenda. This time, however, the leader called upon a formal expulsion through an online voting procedure. After the votes were assembled, the leader wrote a detailed justification for his expulsion. Lastly, the fifth text (*source 5*) focuses on the dismissal of Senator Adele Gambaro, who appeared on national television publicly criticizing Grillo's authoritative and demagogical leadership (Valesio, 2013). The leader consequently published a reply to her criticisms through a blog post entitled 'When one is worth nothing' and thereafter called for her expulsion through another online voting procedure.

Fundamentally, whilst these blog posts were published at different times throughout the movement's evolution, the assemblage of this body of texts is framed in this paper as showcasing a discursive continuity. Although there have been a few other expulsions since 5SM's emergence in 2009, these cases were deemed theoretically relevant as they were

unified around the discourse on the relationship between new media, old media and democracy. Simultaneously, the connection between them lays on the fact that with each blog post, the movement's members were hailed to understand their political identity vis-à-vis a 'threatening bloc'. Hence, studying instances where the battle over social spaces of public deliberation was articulated proved pertinent insofar as it reflected how the leader aimed to discursively position political subjects between the two loci of hegemonic struggle.

Last but not least, it should be pointed out that given the fact that the texts assembled were in Italian and later translated into English, a semantic loophole was inevitably found when conducting the analysis. Evidently, when analysing texts the analyst must take into account the fact that language must be situated within its cultural environment to be rendered meaningful. Therefore, some nuances that are pertinent only to the Italian language and culture were predictably lost. Nonetheless, a professional translator was contacted to proofread and make sure that the English version was as close as possible to its original.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In what follows the themes found throughout the texts are separately discussed to identify the interaction between ‘nodal points’, ‘master signifiers’ and ‘myth’ as they are weaved around the discourse of televised and online politics. The first section will examine how the relationship between the Grillini and the antagonist other is articulated. Throughout the analysis, these findings will be understood in relation to discourse theory; for example, it will identify ‘internet politics’ as an articulation of the master signifier of ‘the people.’ Additionally, the centrality of the internet will be interpreted as a nodal point in the political discourse of direct democracy and its function will be understood as constructing a ‘myth’ towards which social action can be guided. Consequently, their contextual relevance will be unpacked in section II of this chapter. This will entail a discussion regarding the role of similarities in constructing a popular camp and constructing the political. It will also seek to explore the performative dimension of antagonism and its limits when it comes to entering the realm of politics.

Thematizing the body of texts

Certain consistencies were found along the texts assembled, which were thought to reflect a discursive continuity in the form of semiotic differences. These in turn were paired up in the following order: *reality versus distorted lies*, *public versus private*, *agency versus structure*. It must be clear from the outset that these pairs were coded by the analyst, and the words chosen are not guiding the discussion towards their connotative meaning in sociological research. Indeed, words like agency and structure play a central role in defining the subject’s position in Laclau’s and Mouffe’s theory of the social. Furthermore, they are highly contested terms and their reference must be used with caution to avoid sweeping arguments regarding the findings within the body of text. Nonetheless, their reference in the following section serves the purpose of facilitating the analysis and rendering it more systematic, given the lack of a rigorous cadre when using the approach we have chosen.

Reality versus distorted lies

The first common theme found throughout the body of texts is the differentiation between the concept of ‘truth’ as it is juxtaposed to the online realm and the concept of ‘falsity’ juxtaposed with the discourse of televised politics. Hence, from a discourse theory perspective, ‘televised politics’ acts as a nodal point around which signs such as

“disinformation,” “ritual,” “bribery,” “deception” are organized. For example, in *source 3* Beppe Grillo calls participating in talk shows an act of:

Siding yourself with the distorters of truth, the parties’ hucksters, the professional slanders, wasted away to the clapping sound of bribery (lines 4-5).

Or, in *source 5* he claims:

One is worth nothing when he lends himself to be used by ruffian sources. (line 16).

Thus, the discourse of ‘televised politics’ constructs the master signifier of ‘the TV host,’ who becomes an antagonist that threatens the members’ identity (by hiding the truth from them). Conversely, internet politics acts as a nodal point, for the interpellation of a new master signifier (the Grillini): A unified political force, which encompasses individuals who are aware, make efforts, and whose actions are truthful. For instance, in *source 5* he positions the Internet user as a worthy individual, by claiming:

One is worth one when he sacrifices. When he is ready to confront hostile and harsh information, in order to pass his own message that contests the system (lines 13-14).

The sacrifice here is seen as the act of participating in online discussions. This sacrifice has a purpose: to contest hostile information (once more the idea of a threatening other is at play). Furthermore, this space of “*majoritarian deliberation*” (see *source 4* line 16) is not only seen as transparent, but also constitutes a whole (i.e. it becomes a myth). In *source 1*, the master signifier ‘Grillino’ is not considered a ‘representative,’ i.e. “a proxy for those who are physically absent” (Jorgensen et al., 2002: 45,) but rather s/he is the citizens’ ‘megaphone’ (lines 20-21). Hence, the online election of ‘Grillini’ is discursively constructed as an act of society directly electing itself, of totalizing the social camp with a unified identity (‘the true voice’) existing in a differential (and thus antagonistic) relationship with the ‘information gatekeepers,’ (who are in turn a powerful bloc that impedes the fulfilment of such identity by ‘gate-keeping reality’). (See *source 3*, lines 12-13).

Thus it would appear that the discourse of Internet politics, by constituting the ‘real thing’ (see *source 2* line 23) assumes the position of being ‘an objective’ realm. As a result, pairing the online platform with notions of ‘visibility,’ ‘transparency,’ ‘freedom’ and ‘direct democracy,’ (see *source 5*, line 5; *source 2* lines 7-8) means granting it a neutral authority against that which is ‘manipulated,’ ‘distorted’ and fragmented (see *source 3* line 6-7). As

Jorgensen et al suggest, when discourse gains an 'objective' status, it erases the possibility (or desire) of other alternatives to the existing myth (social space) (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002: 37). By insisting on the 'realness' and 'directness' of online procedures, Grillo can thus be seen to be performing a hegemonic intervention, whereby he establishes the internet as the ultimate platform of politics and fixes such construction as though it was a matter of 'common sense' (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002: 37).

Public vs. Private

The second dichotomy found in the sample is the tension between a body politics with 'public' aims (the Internet) vis-à-vis a realm organized around 'private' needs (the talk show). Throughout the texts, televised politics discursively captures concepts such as 'fame,' 'self-promotion,' 'spotlight' and 'hedonism' (i.e. it acts like a nodal point around which these concepts are fixed).

For instance, shortly after Federica Salsi's appearance in '*Ballaro*,' Beppe Grillo published a piece in which he used the metaphor of the T.V as constituting her 'G-spot' (see source 3 line 1). Hence, he made references to the 'ephemeral excitement' that 'visibility' in the talk show produced (See source 3 lines 1-4,) calling her participation an act of: 'Voluntarily and voluptuously' giving herself a 'televised hug' (see source 3 line 20).

On source 4, (text directed towards Senator Adele Gambaro) Grillo maintains that her interview meant:

Using the project of millions of Italians, to promote herself and secure a place in the spotlight (lines 22-23).

As a result, in both scenarios the subject who participates in talk shows is discursively positioned as pursuing a narcissistic behaviour. Accordingly, their expulsion is justified on the basis that they are 'greedy' individuals, whose only interest is to pursue private gains. This rhetoric is strengthened by constructing the alternative discourse of 'internet politics', which attains a differential constitution by being organized around themes of 'solidarity,' 'ethics' and 'democracy.' Thus, for example he writes in the same text:

One is worth one when he is a free man; who puts democracy into practice in the most noble and highest sense: embracing freedom by following the rules (see source 5 line 4).

Or in *source 1*, he writes, “The 5SM supports movements with common objectives” (line 19). The ‘objectives’ are then simultaneously juxtaposed with “*collaboration through the web*” (See line 20-21).

Therefore, there is a necessary opposition at work between actors whose goals are communal and those whose goals are personal. Given their subject position, ‘Grillini’ must follow the rules and avoid engaging with the outside (the talk show). In this vein, following Laclau’s and Mouffe’s understanding of discursive subjectivity, we infer that “identity is always relationally organised: the subject is something because it is contrasted with something that it is not” (Jorgensen et al 2002: 43). Crucially, his/her behaviour is preconditioned by the identity around which he is organized discursively, which guides his/her actions but also defines him/her as a political subject.

Agency versus Structure

The most common theme underlying the corpus of texts is the idea that televised politics deprive individuals of agency whilst the internet is a space that constantly contests the structure, and thus enables them to act willingly, directly and consciously. For example, in *source 3* Grillo compares the talk show to a piteous ritual, in which individuals are “trapped in a circus cage without speaking for hours” (lines 8-10).

In this space, the subject is passive and his/her presence is regarded only as spectacle. Simultaneously, this is counter-posed to the work of the ‘activists’ (i.e. the Grillini) who as a result of the passive agent’s betrayal, they react: “They (the activists) think about the effort they invested when holding direct streaming sessions online for a lack of having connections” (lines 25-27).

This passage demonstrates that the talk show participant (i.e. here referred to as the ‘masochistic lamb’ in line 10) is compliant with the show and gives away his agency, whereas the activist has not only invested a lot of effort into his work, but is also *disconnected* from the structure.

In *source 5*, for instance, he compares the ‘worthiness’ of the individual in terms of their ‘awareness’:

One is worth one when he respects, lives, and knows the political ethic of the project in which he participates, and this requires him to make daily efforts (lines 7-10).

This is compared to:

One is worth nothing when he –naively- takes pleasure out of the flattery of the caste who deceives him and throws him away when he no longer needs him (lines 16- 18).

The word ‘naively’ acts to position the individual within the discourse of televised politics as unaware of the fact that he ultimately depends on what ‘the caste’ (configured as a whole) decides to do with him. He is not only giving away his agency, but he is satisfied to become a passive agent. Inversely, the internet user is an active and willing participant who is politically aware and knows his responsibilities.

Lastly, on *source 2* Beppe Grillo poses a rhetorical question to the members, in which after being questioned about the democratic nature of the movement’s online voting procedures, he asks:

And to all of those who say that there is no democracy because the votes were few (online), I ask them one question: of all the thousand members of parliaments there are, how many votes did each of them get? Who voted for those people there? (line 14-16)

By emphasizing the unknown status of votes and of ‘*those people there*,’ Beppe Grillo is interpolating the individuals (i.e. the Grillini) who voted online by implying ‘*you did not vote for them, you voted for someone else.*’ As Glasson notes, this deixical rhetoric “constitutes a context of awareness in which such a subject position” (here the online voter) “is intricately tied to a negation of its other” (here the unknown voter) (Glasson, 2012:103). Simultaneously, this construction emphasizes the fact that online the subject has agency, by ‘knowing’ and ‘voting’.

Chains of equivalence and conflict analysis contextualized

According to discourse theory, “group formation is to be understood as a reduction of possibilities. People are constituted as groups through a process by which some possibilities of identification are put forward as relevant while others are ignored” (Jorgensen *et al.*, 2002:

44). All possibilities by which the subjects could be positioned exist within what is called the 'discursive field' (Howarth, 2006: 107). Nonetheless, as mentioned in the literature review, it is along the creation of a 'chain of equivalence' that all the different demands constituting the plethora of identities within the group are absorbed and totalized around one symbol. Ernesto Laclau calls this 'the moment of hegemony,' because demands lose their autonomy (specificity) and one demand becomes the dominant frame for the entire struggle (2012).

Thus, for example, in Grillo's discourse the 'imaginary' of internet politics aims to guide subjects towards one particular goal ('direct democracy') in a particular space ('the online platform.') Before this differentiation, the 'Grillini' could have been pursuing different struggles (e.g. left wing ideologies, feminists, ecologists) but in this instance they are defined within the limits of participation in discursive spaces and thus all have one common demand: to change how they engage in dialogue politically. Therefore, in this political articulation all those who participate in talk shows are enemies, whereas all those who are detached from the structure are the 'true voice' of politics. This tension sheds light to the notion that "the construction of subject positions and hence identities, then, is a battlefield where different constellations of elements of struggle prevail." (Jorgensen et al., 2002: 47) Nonetheless different identities do not necessarily have to relate antagonistically with one another, unless "the two identities make contrasting demands in relation to the same actions within a common terrain, then they inevitably block one another." (Jorgensen, 2002: 47).

In this case, the struggle is defined as a zero-sum game because there are two conflicting models being advocated: 'internet politics' is fixed around the discourse of direct democracy, whilst 'televised politics' is instituted around the discourse of (a failed) representative democracy. Hence why, for example, in *source 3* Grillo claims that "the public's consensus towards the movement diminishes" (line 18) when members of the movement participate in talk shows. In view of that, the inability of the movement to grow as a political force comes as a direct result of the 'other' stealing its position. Therefore, as Jorgensen et al would suggest, from a discourse theory perspective 'Grillini' are being asked to choose between two antagonistic identities and to make a hegemonic intervention in favour of one of them (2002: 53).

For that reason, the purpose of an 'equivalential chain' is to disambiguate the popular camp in a way that the limits of the struggle do not have to be specific (e.g. what 'political ethic' are Grillini adhering to when following the rules?) so that as many people as possible can identify with the group whilst simultaneously demarcate the dividing line of conflict as though it

existed *outside* its boundaries. For example, in *source 2* Grillo claims:

We have a battle to win; we are at war towards the elections. As long as it is the newspapers or the television, (those who are our true enemies) declaring war to me I am fine with that. But I do not want an internal war (lines 12-13).

In this passage Grillo does not go into detail about the specificity of the conflict emanating within (i.e. what is the nature of the war? Why are they at war?) Thus his discourse adopts an ‘ideological ambiguity:’ the symbol of the struggle empties itself of meaning and becomes universalized into a struggle between discursive spaces (i.e. the mass media and new media). Crucially, whilst many theorists criticize populism under the basis of its ‘imprecision,’ for discourse theorists this appears to be the condition of their political efficacy because it will allow for each subject to define on their own what this ‘struggle’ represents.

As mentioned in chapter 2 of the literature review, it is when “dislocations that emanate from the internal or external events that question, destabilize or dismantle the current discursive regime” (Torfing, 2003: 195) that opportunity for new discourses seeking to address the crisis emerge and ‘speak’ to the subject and compel him to act (Howarth, 2006: 109). Whilst in the Italian context it would seem that the realm of politics and economics should take priority in the public’s agenda as to how their future conditions should be negotiated, one could argue that the rhetorical efficacy of Grillo’s discourse does not lie on his ability to promote a sophisticated reform plan for either. Instead, it seems that the centrality he has given to combat the ‘information regime’ has played a key role in his rhetorical efficacy. This is extremely relevant to the case of Italy, where traditional media institutions (or journalists) have the reputation of acting as the government’s mouthpiece, of not providing enough space for a plurality of voices and of selling audiences to advertisers (Albertazzi et al., 2008, Pepe et al 2009). Therefore, the increasing weakening of their reputation as an authority and a provider of ‘common sense’ provides with a new opportunity to reconfigure what ‘common sense’ should be about.

Thus, the strategy of constructing a differential and antagonistic relationship between the ‘caste of journalists’ and the ‘free internet user,’ helps focalize the political project on the notion that it is because citizens have not been granted with ‘truthful information’ that was meant to be geared with the public’s interest in mind that they no longer have the agency to make informed political decisions. As a result, assembling the myth of the ‘Internet’ seeks to interpellate subjects towards the promise of regaining such agency in a space free from

‘selfish individuals’ and by constructing such myth “cover over the social dislocations and limit the field of intelligibility” (Howarth, 2006: 111).

Simultaneously, the internet as a rhetorical space gains its force as it is also weaved within a more fixed order of discourse (or meta-discourse,) which limits the way we talk about it by providing us with already “privileged condensations of meanings” (Howarth, 2006: 110) e.g. we talk about the internet as a ‘tool’, an ‘instrument’, a platform, etc. Hence why the subject of the internet’s efficacy towards political projects (i.e. it is a medium to conduct democracy separate from human action) appeals to social actors as a ‘neutral’ ground, for it is fixed around other nodal points which have gained legitimacy, e.g. the assumed relationship between technology and progress. Therefore, the internet is incorporated into this new configuration (Grillo’s discourse) but carries with it the status of an object detached from the social relations that drive it, therefore concealing its relationship with power.

Nonetheless, returning to Laclau’s and Mouffe’s main argument, this is to be understood as a *momentary act of grounding*, hence its definition as a *political act* (Marchart, 2007:7). For example, the leader’s reaction to expel the members reasserts the notion that both hegemonic projects and social structures can be disrupted at any given time, thus revealing the “instability of the political frontier that divides the struggles” (Howarth, 2006: 110). Simultaneously, it reflects the notion that conflict is a foundation of the political, constantly penetrating the realm of politics (Marchart. 2007: 92). Emblematically, the accentuation of antagonisms that invades the project of Grillo’s ‘direct democracy’ arises from the inherently fallacious assumption that a “neutral sphere based on peace, understanding and reconciliation (i.e. the technology) can domesticate the antithesis of men” (Schmitt, 1992: 90). Arguably, Grillo’s rhetoric of standing against the ‘antagonistic’ bloc helps revive the political dimension that had been domesticated through a combination of a dominant media framework that monopolized social debate and a political regime that had established an illusion of consensus through political coalitions that blurred left and right distinctions. Hence why, without any alternative political forms of identification, the idea of reinventing a new and ‘neutral’ public sphere may prove successful in compelling actors to identify themselves as ‘those agents’ seeking for change.

Notwithstanding, the strategy of not engaging with traditional media altogether has led to a constant fermentation of conflict within the group, at times culminating and resulting in expulsions. This is partially because the mass media cannot be altogether bypassed as the main platforms of public discussion and therefore their discursive power cannot be disregarded. Arguably, what Grillo’s discourse does shed light to is the gradual dissolution of

its authority in Italy and consequently an escalating identity crisis amongst the electorate that is manifesting itself in antagonistic forms contestation channelled through other counter-spheres like the web. The main task, therefore, is not to see these forms of expression as anti-political or driving debate towards deadlock. Rather, they should be acknowledged as a legitimate venue to reassess the impotency of Italian journalism in fulfilling its public role of promoting plurality of debate, encouraging democratic adversaries and providing citizens with information to assess the future of their institutions in a critical manner.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay attempted to analyse the case study of Italian protest party '5 Star Movement' theoretically and empirically through Laclau's and Mouffe Discourse Theory lens. The motivation behind this undertaking was sparked by two debates of precedence in contemporary literature of political communications: 1) the debate on internet politics and its implications for democratic participation, 2) the emergence of populism in Western liberal democracies. This paper argued that the discursive construction of 'Grillini' followers during moments of expulsion represented a fruitful opportunity to analyse how populist rhetoric successfully articulates new social spaces and political subjectivities in a moment of social crisis. Particularly, the centrality of the new media versus old media dichotomy in Grillo's discourse helped shed light to the notion that in the current context of Italian politics, the media have become the locus for antagonism given their failure to promote a pluralistic environment.

Evidently, the results found in this paper do not seek to reflect an objective reality or to provide a detailed guide towards the redesigning of traditional media in Italy. The nature of the method employed, other than lacking a systematic procedure for analysis, is pre-constituted with a set of assumptions about the way society functions and thus the normative assessments that are hitherto put forward can only be a reflection of the researcher's own interests and political objectives. Consequently, the purpose of this investigation was to contribute primarily to the literature on agonistic politics and the media, pressing for further research on public sphere theory that may redefine the place of counter-discursivity in traditional institutions so that the revival of the political may manifest itself in adversarial rather than antagonistic forms. In this particular scenario, web-populism may have awakened the political force which had been partially dormant in the Italian collective imaginary. But it is only as long as those with the authority to drive public consensus bring this vigour back to the front seat of politics that citizens will cease to take use alternative vehicles of involvement.

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APPENDIX

Source #1:

Type of Document: Blog Entry

Reference: pre-expulsion of Giovanni Favia and Federica Salsi

Title: Grillo for dummies

Date: November 6 2012

Original Language: Italian

Word count: 502

Link: http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/11/grillo_for_dummies.html

Not everyone understands, not everyone wants to understand. And then they misinform others by talking to journalists and attending talk shows. Therefore, it is indispensable to have a 'Grillo for dummies' guide, for all of those that still have interpretative doubts and need to be clarified.

D as in Di Pietro: Antonio Di Pietro is my friend, but the M5S will not align itself with Italy of Values, or with any other party. The 5SM wants to substitute the party system with direct democracy. In essence, the M5S wants to see the end of parties who have achieved their power through mysterious means.

E as in elections: nobody can submit their candidacy for more than one position (e.g. if you are a councillor you cannot submit your candidacy for depute, etc).

E as in Emoluments: those who are elected by the 5SM will keep only a slight part of the emoluments, which as of today will not exceed 5,000 euros. The rest will have to be refunded to the state.

E as in Euro: the decision to remain in the Eurozone is to be made by citizens through an online referendum, this is my position. I personally believe that Italy cannot allow itself to stay in the Eurozone. But it must be Italians who decide this and not a group of oligarchs or Beppe Grillo.

M as in mandate: the 5SM does not elect anyone who has already been in office.

M as in movement: the 5SM supports the emergence of social movements with objective goals, for example anti-nuclear struggles, public water, etc.

P as in Primaries: within the 5SM we will not hold primaries (we do not vote for leaders) for the elections. Instead we choose spokesmen to act as a megaphone of citizens. Their job will be to follow the electoral program by collaborating directly with those who have subscribed to the online platform.

P as in Program: the 5SM's program exists (whoever says it does not is lying) and it is visible on the blog. Before elections this program will be integrated and ameliorated by those who are subscribed on the online platform.

R as remission of mandate: the councillor, the parliamentarians and the syndicate have no obligations to publish their mandate periodically (for example every six months). In case this was necessary, it shall be preceded by a public and detailed account of his/her obligations published through the portal, in such a way that the M5S can conduct a voting process amongst all of those who are subscribed to the website.

R as reimbursement: the 5SM does not give any electoral reimbursement for regional elections and will not do it either for the ones coming up.

T as in TV: It is not 'forbidden' for members to give out interviews to journalists to explain the activities they are undertaking. It is instead strongly discouraged. In the near future, participation in talk shows will be forbidden as these shows are usually conducted by journalists who are the parties' mouthpieces

Source#2:

Type of Document: Blog Entry

Date: November 2012

Title: Objective: Elections 2013

Link: http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/12/obbiettivo_elez.html#commenti

Word count: 331

Original Language: Italian

Reference: Pre-elections address. Expulsion of Giovanni Favia and Federica Salsi.

We have achieved three fundamental things through these online elections:

1. We have created a free vote and from this free vote we achieved something that I want to highlight: we granted votes to women.
If elections were free we would have many more women than men in parliament today.
2. The second thing to acknowledge is that the candidates will possibly go to parliament three months in advance, which means that you can discuss with them; get to know them and decide whether to vote for them or not, whether to give advice to them or criticize them.
3. And the third thing: we did not spend a single penny.

So whoever says that the procedure was not democratic because there were only a few votes, I ask them one question: of all of the members of parliament, who many votes did each of them get? Who voted for those people? Don't come and bust my balls about democracy. That is right, I am getting tired. I am getting really upset. I cannot do this anymore. We have a battle to win; we are at war towards the elections. If it is journalists or TV who declares war to me I am okay with that. Those are my true enemies. But I do not want an internal war. If anyone thinks I am not democratic, or that Casaleggio is stilling money, he needs to get out of the movement. He needs to go, and he will be thrown out of the movement. We have to be a united force so that we can get the results we want. We haven't got enough time. Our forces need to be directed towards the real thing, towards our online program, towards the campaign that awaits us. Until the last breath. We are at war, we were always at war. So now, whoever is inside this movement and does not share these meanings, and is asking question after question and is threatening the movement's internal cohesion, he can leave. They can leave the movement: no one is forcing them to stay. You will have to leave
Greetings.

Source #3

Date: 31st October 2012

Type of Document: Blog Entry

Link: http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/10/il_talk_show_ti_uccide.html

word count: 381.

Official language: Italian

Reference: Pre-expulsion Councilor Federica Salsi

Title: "Talk Shows will kill you; tell them to stop"

Your G-spot: you have an orgasm as you step on a talk show. Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame you were longing for. At home, your friends and family applaud; they share your excitement towards your ephemeral visibility. Sitting on your throne, siding yourself with the distorters of truth, the parties' hucksters, the professional slanders, wasted away to the clapping sound of bribery. A carefully mastered plan: the morbid cameramen will frame you relentlessly to show your best profile if you nod when a 'nobody' voices his opinion. There, trapped in a circus cage, without speaking for hours: your presence in a piteous ritual where only your scalp is required, butchered like a masochistic lamb. You have been granted four minutes to reply to pre-packaged questions, posed by the dummies that serve the interests of the established parties. Information gatekeepers, whose only job is to perpetuate the conditions of the system through the last resource remaining for mediated mesmerism: television. The ranking of the show goes up, and all of this to your merit, showcased as a trophy, like an alien, like a strange creature, and simultaneously, the public's consensus with the movement you (claim to) belong to diminishes. As a result, those who do not know anything about the Movement and watch talk shows, after the morbid televised-hug to which you voluntarily (and voluptuously) gave yourself, opt for the least worst. And that is never you, but always somebody else, someone who knows how to sell their lies (that is what they master the best,) who talked for an hour without ever being interrupted or contradicted by the talk show hosts. Astonished, the activists see the votes that had been won through hard work fly away, thrown out on a laundry basket and they think about all the thousand videos uploaded online, they think about the effort they invested when holding direct streaming sessions online for a lack of having connections. They know from personal experience the strenuous difficulty of explaining to disillusioned people and skeptics that the 5 Star Movement is different from the other parties; that it does not accept electoral reimbursements, that it cuts the salary of those elected, that it does not participate to provincial elections out of congruence, that it wants to respect the outcomes of the referendum, etc., etc. Sometimes all we can do is cry.

Source #4**Type of Document: Blog Entry****Reference: Official expulsion Marino Mastrangeli****Date: April 30th 2013****Title: Voting for the expulsion of senator Mastrangeli****Link:****http://www.beppegrillo.it/2013/04/voto_espulsione_senatore_m5s_mastrangeli.html**

The voting procedure has concluded. The total number of registered people was 48.292. From this number, 19,341 voted. 88.8 % (equivalent to 17.177 votes) has voted for his expulsion. The rest, 11.2 % (equivalent to 2,164 votes) has voted no. Thank you to all of those who have participated.

All of the members of the 5 Star Movement have publicly signed before the elections the 'Code of Conduct for those elected to Parliament in the name of 5 Star Movement.' This agreement was necessary to apply for candidacy, a voluntary act and without obligations towards the 5SM and its representatives. In the case of violating this, the parliamentary group can decide to expel any member from the movement.

The parliamentarians from the 5SM united, without discriminating between the House and the Senate, can propose the expulsion of any member who has violated any of the rules of the code of conduct and conduct such expulsion when the majority agrees. The expulsion shall have to ratify by an online voting procedure through the 5SM portal amongst all of those who have subscribed.

Senator Marino Mastrangeli has repeatedly violated the rule 'Avoid participating in Talk Shows' without consulting with anyone from the movement. In doing so, he has damaged the image of the 5SM by giving his private assessment of the movement to journalists.

For this reason, members of the 5SM united have deliberated as a majority through the online platform -with the Code of Conduct in mind- to propose for the expulsion of Senator Marino Mastrangeli from the movement.

In particular, Marino Mastrangeli has repeatedly participated in numerous talk shows, despite the fact that all members tried to convince him to desist as they knew it would damage the achieved progress.

The votes towards Mastrangeli's expulsion are ratified today by those who have a digitalized copy of their registration as of December 31st 2012. The users can vote today April 31st 2013 from 11h to 17h00.

Source #5.

Type of Document: Blog Entry

Date: 11th June 2013

Title: When One is Worth Nothing

Link: http://www.beppegrillo.it/2013/06/quando_uno_vale.html

Language: Italian

Word count: 305

Reference: Pre-expulsion of Adele Gambaro.

One is worth one when he builds. When through dialogue he allows for growth and enrichment; making an effort one step at a time. One is worth nothing when he dismantles his own project by being complicit with those who want to destroy him. One is worth one when he is a free man, when he puts democracy into practice in the noblest and highest sense: embracing freedom by respecting the rules. One is worth nothing when he proclaims to be 'democratic' here and there, and ends up stomping on the rules he himself embraced. One is worth one when he respects, lives and knows by heart the political ethic of the project in which he participates, which demands him to participate and make efforts on a quotidian basis. One is worth nothing when he discovers that his own ethic coincides with other parties, and in doing so damages his other partners for personal gains. One is worth one when he sacrifices for others. When he is ready to confront hostile and harsh information in order to get his own message across and contest the system. One is worth nothing when he lends himself to be used by ruffian sources. When he –naively- takes pleasure out of the flattery of the very caste that deceives him and throws him away when it no longer needs him. One is worth one when he is aware that the only opportunity that has been granted to him has not been for his own merits, but to serve a country and its citizens, and lead them out of the gas chamber. When he instead believes to have become an 'honorable' citizen for out of who-knows-what luck, and he uses the project of millions of Italians to secure himself a place in the spotlight, then, he is really worth nothing.

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