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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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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'

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 sit

exacerbating political cr

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

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

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-

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

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

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

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) wh

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

In what follows the themes found throughout the texts are separately discussed to identify

"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

Or in *source 1*, he writes, "The 5SM supports movements with common objectives" (line 19).

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:

44).

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 antiounter

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Gimmler, A.

APPENDIX

Source #1:
Type of Document: Blog Entry
Reference: pre-expulsion of Giovanni Favia and Federica Salsi
Title: Grillo for dummies

We have achieved three fundamental things through these online elections:
1.

Source #3

Date: 31st October 2012
Type of Document: Blog Entry
Link:

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_mastrange
li.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.

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 wes J ET (v) -3 ( ) 2 (r) -(e) -2 (w) -4 (o) -1 (r) 2 (t) 3 (

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