



The Many-Headed e-Monster

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In February 2013, weary Italians said “no” – to austerity, sleazy politics, and the corruption endemic in Italian public life. Unelected technocrat Mario Monti, the outgoing prime minister, had a reputation for clean hands and had improved Italy’s financial position, but his coalition finished a poor fourth in the elections. Silvio Berlusconi’s PdL finished a respectable second, while the favorite, Pier Luigi Bersani’s PD, won a majority in the Chamber of Deputies. But victory turned to ashes when it failed to win control of the Senate. In Italy, the two houses have equivalent weight, so it was stymied.

It was stymied by a party that had only existed since 2009, run by a famous comedian, Beppe Grillo. From virtually nowhere, the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement or M5S; www.movimentocinquestelle.it) had forced its way into the public consciousness, regularly polling 10–16 percent in the run-up to the election, and then astonishing observers with about a quarter of the votes, enough to hold the balance of power.

M5S is an unusual party – populist for sure, as Grillo rages against the political class and declines to be called leader. M5S has no headquarters, and no ideology (keen M5S watchers read Grillo’s blog for hints), while its senators and deputies insist on being called “spokespeople,” reflecting the views of supporters garnered via the Internet. Its manifesto promised free Internet access for all, more bicycle lanes, term limits for elected officials, a ceiling for executive pay, and the assessment of lecturers by their students (eek!).

Yet this populism is different in kind from the traditional type that combines fierce egalitarian anti-elitism with a simple, crowd-pleasing message such as nationalism, anticorruption, anticapitalism, anti-immigration, anti-EUism, or

anti-Americanism.¹ The difference is signaled in the previous paragraph, where I mention the online world three times. Grillo is a pioneer in what we might call e-populism, rousing hoi polloi against the elite in traditional fashion, but with untraditional tools.

The Spread of e-Populism

Italy isn’t alone. Across Europe, a series of parties has arisen defending direct democracy, transparency, and free speech.² In response to stern regulatory attention (orchestrated by the powerful and intimidating Motion Picture Association of America, which often takes the role of a pantomime villain for e-populists) to a popular and resilient peer-to-peer file-sharing site based in Sweden called Pirate Bay, so-called Pirate Parties have made a splash in many countries, especially Sweden, Germany, and Iceland, and even have a couple of members of the European Parliament. The US Pirate Party put out a collection of papers³ boasting contributions from Laurence Lessig, danah boyd, and Cory Doctorow, and epigrams from Camus, Gandhi, Orwell, and Jefferson.

This “pure” e-populism takes the Internet as a model for political engagement. Less ambitious is to use the Internet to conduct effective guerrilla warfare against ponderous incumbents, while even vanilla-flavored populists use the Internet and social media adeptly.⁴

The Internet helps coordinate spontaneous social movements, with the Arab Spring as the main exhibit. A string of related yet separate revolts spread across the Arab world after a frustrated young Tunisian immolated himself in 2010. The incident, which symbolized the negligent paternalism of many Arab dictatorships, was widely reported across the Web, and within a little over a year, apparently solid decades-long

regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen had fallen, Bahrain and Syria had suffered violent protests, and Morocco had a new constitution.

President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt attempted to close down the Internet to shore up his position – he failed. This year, his inept Islamist replacement, Muhammad Morsi, was tripped up by social media; the Tamarod movement, begun by five people in April, had by the end of June collected 22 million signatures calling on him to resign.⁵ At the same time, protests in Turkey showed how marginalized the mainstream media are becoming; CNN-Turk became a laughingstock when it ran a documentary about penguins while police were cracking heads in Istanbul.

Even though these Internet uses are largely oppositional, it isn't much of a stretch to see wider potential for the network organizational model. No less a pundit than Eric Schmidt has mused about virtual statehood, sketching the example of a virtual Kurdish state, and arguing that its feasibility "says something significant about the diffusion of state power in the digital age."⁶

Note also the e-populism of radical transparency sites, which might lack a political agenda but espouse powerful anti-elitist messages. Wikileaks' principle axiom is that no government or corporation deserves the power or space to conduct any of its dealings in privacy or confidentiality (although Wikileaks, as well as being a pressure group, now also presents as a political party in Australia, which failed to make an impact in September's election). There is no nuance in the strong connection between transparency and legitimacy in the Assange view of the world.

E-Populism and Traditional Populism

At the turn of the century, populism was seen as a broadly right-wing phenomenon – so-called “new

populism” included Ross Perot in the US, Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National in France, and Jörg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria¹ – but could also be of the left (Hugo Chávez) or Islamist (Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). It was conceptualized as a threat to rich democracies, a throwback to the “many-headed monster” that symbolized the terrifying mob in earlier ages.⁷

It's instructive to ask how e-populism resembles and differs from the old school. Traditional populism speaks for “the people” – its content is therefore relative to an embedding society.⁸ The people are opposed to “the elite,” who have monopolized existing political institutions (Parliament, Congress, political parties, the media, and so on), which

The technology that makes e-populism possible is disproportionately used by the wealthy, the educated, and the young – not by “the people.” It does indeed allow uninhibited communication, empower communities, and undo restrictive business models, but it also exposes us to surveillance and fraud. If we may use a distinction made by the philosopher Michael Oakeshott, whereas populism is an ideology of skepticism, e-populism, in its reverence for the Internet, is an ideology of faith.

The electrifying appearance in Dutch politics of Pim Fortuyn (assassinated in 2002) was understood at the time as a part of the 1990s wave of anti-immigration parties, but in some respects he harked forward to the Pirates and Grillos of today. His

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must thus be bypassed using direct democracy and extra-parliamentary action. “Experts” can't be trusted – all they do is define problems with needless complexity to blind the people with science and protect their own livelihoods by making themselves seem indispensable. Rhetoric and “common sense” replace technocratic solutions to problems.

So far, e-populism resembles a species of e-enabled populism (for example, the direct consultation of the people via the Internet), but when we look more deeply, subtle differences emerge. The old-style populist looks askance at new theories and ideas propounded by the deluded or frivolous elite⁹ – yet e-populism assumes that the Internet has a moral purity and perfectibility that can't be found offline.

politics were complex and libertarian – his opposition to immigration was based on worries about an influx of intolerant, antifeminist, and homophobic people into liberal Dutch society. He opposed the war on drugs, and was anti-authoritarian. His particular animus toward Islam was connected to his secularism, as well as more particularly to his homosexuality and libertarianism. Here was an unusual instance of a populist protective of “advanced” societal elements.

The populist's notion of “the people” is usually restricted in space, which is why they often worry about immigration. But cyberspace has an internationalist flavor, as I argued in my first column for this magazine.¹⁰ On the other hand, technology

facilitates local communication, so small communities are also under the e-populist's purview. National government, in this view, reduces to a platform for interaction where open data and privately developed apps let people craft their own environment and break down traditional hierarchies.¹¹ As government shrinks, the nation state (and "the people") look ever more anachronistic.

Who are the e-populists? Grillo's M5S has fared particularly well, with a million people on his Facebook page and not far short of a million following his tweets, while his blog is far and away the most widely read in Italy. He has populated a vacuum, given that traditional Italian parties have little online presence. A recent survey of M5S's Facebook supporters

than but not dissimilar to the picture in the rest of Europe.² Young, overeducated, underemployed, pessimistic, and mistrustful: a volatile cocktail for the Internet to shake.

Grillo's Progress

So, how has Grillo fared? The evidence is mixed, and it depends on your starting position. The M5S has consistently refused to play ball with the parliamentary process. Grillo always stated that his aim was to sweep away a corrupt political class across the board; he appears to make no salient distinction between Monti, respected technocrat, and Berlusconi, less-respected proponent of bunga bungaism. At least one commentator, Nobel prizewinning writer Dario Fo, sees nothing negative in

the Senate, and other parties' leaders outmaneuvered M5S by creating a coalition government with a fresh prime minister. M5S has pleased the purists who want to bring the Italian system to its knees, but by refusing to cooperate with opponents, has disappointed those who thought it could bring about change now. As it is, the main parties got on with their compromises, and the M5S looks isolated, although the PD has been badly split by the strain (and the new prime minister, Enrico Letta, has made some concessions to anti-politician feeling).

As the summer wore on, Grillo seemed to become increasingly autocratic, lambasting party rebels on his blog. A senator who failed to toe the line (not that there's supposed to be a party line in the M5S's vision of direct democracy) was booted out of the party (after an online poll, natch).¹⁴ Jamie Bartlett and colleagues write that "online movements with a broad supporter base are ... less able to be disciplined to follow a ... party line, with potentially unpredictable consequences for the leaders of those movements."¹² On the contrary, Grillo's draconian discipline has been the unpredictable factor for party supporters.

Meanwhile, the Arab Spring has hardly been an unqualified success from the e-populist's viewpoint. Tamarod proved able to muster more signatures to its e-petition to oust Morsi than he received in the presidential election, but having helped provoke a coup, it found itself opposing the sweeping powers of the new government (even before the awful bloodshed in August). The attempt to export rebellion to Syria was even more ill-starred, as democratic intentions were soon overtaken by the brutal sectarianism of thuggish President Bashar al-Assad and the appearance within rebel ranks of well-organized jihadists.

The great Syrian poet Adunis criticized the Arab Spring from exile

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showed that, though young, they were older and more likely to be male than the average Facebook user.¹² They were better educated, but more likely to be unemployed than the average Italian; the economy, unemployment, and taxation concerned them most, and as the previous paragraph would suggest, the M5S e-populists were less concerned by immigration than other Italians. Nevertheless, they were much more pessimistic about the future, and an overwhelming majority were very unsatisfied with the state of Italian democracy. Twenty percent trusted the EU, 8 percent the government, 6 percent big companies, 3 percent political parties, 2 percent banks, and 2 percent Parliament. Meanwhile, 76 percent trusted the Internet. This is more extreme

M5S's populism (www.beppegrillo.it/2013/03/poco_prima_della_rivoluzione_-_dario_fo.html).

As with Barack Obama's presidential campaigns,¹³ the secret of M5S's success is combining online and offline activism. Frequent local public meetings review city councils and regional governments, while Grillo (who is disqualified from standing for office by M5S's own rules – he has a criminal record) is a barnstorming campaigner. M5S bypasses the Italian system via rallies and social media, furnishing an important contrast to the behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing that characterize the Italian scene.

But politics raises hard questions. A rebellion within M5S ranks occurred over electing the Speaker of

in Paris, arguing that the revolutionaries were trying to overturn governments, rather than trying to change social, economic, and cultural foundations from within. This certainly stirred major controversy across the Arab world,¹⁵ but viewed as a general comment about e-populism rather than Arab culture, Adu-nis's argument highlights its nature as a blunt instrument. Do the relatively positive outcomes in Tunisia and Libya offset the Egyptian and Syrian carnage? Many argue that they do,¹⁶ but however we look at it, the Spring has set off forces that will be hard to control, with long-lasting effects.

Real Politics

Margaret Canovan writes that the mystery of popular sovereignty might stem from "the rarity, contingency, and brevity" of those grass roots mobilizations that overthrow regimes with their awesome power.⁹ Extending this thought, could it be that rarity is also necessary for legitimacy? Does it make sense to have a "new beginning" every few months? Surely, the hope of any revolution is to provide the foundations of a lasting settlement – which demands positive thinking bringing together diverse interests. Power to the people enabled by technology is no bad thing, but proposals such as Gavin Newsom's¹¹ won't necessarily fix government. It's easy enough for people to vote for their preferences, but far less straightforward to create aggregative systems and institutions that reconcile opposed interests and unravel complex histories. Civic crowdfunding, for example, using sites such as Kickstarter, Spacehive, or Neighbor.ly, is a great idea, but how can we be sure that this type of public investment won't starve poor areas or create unfair provisioning patterns if pursued to the exclusion of more traditional approaches?

At this point, it's almost irresistible to turn to Bernard Crick's

masterly *In Defence of Politics*,¹⁷ which outlines "the activity by which government is made possible when differing interests ... grow powerful enough to need to be conciliated." Politics is the solution to the problem of decision and order that attempts compromise rather than coercion. This produces liberty as a corollary: "because it arises from the problem of diversity, and does not try to reduce all things to a single unity, [politics] necessarily creates or allows some freedom." In contrast, with the technological facilitation of direct democracy, we must still consider how to garner the consent, and provide for the protection, of those in the minority.

Abraham Lincoln wished to abolish slavery, but he also knew he could not wish it away. He argued in 1858 that

If there be a man amongst us who does not think that the institution of slavery is wrong..., he is misplaced, and ought not to be with us. And if there be a man amongst us who is so impatient of it as a wrong as to disregard its actual presence among us and the difficulty of getting rid of it suddenly in a satisfactory way, and to disregard the constitutional obligations thrown about it, that man is misplaced if he is on our platform (www.bartleby.com/251/72.html).

The world is as it is – imperfect – and people are as they are – bull-headed. Technology will not solve those problems overnight, thank goodness.

Liberal democracy is a protean mix of two separate components. In the first place, there must indeed be space for consultation of "the people," whose will is in some sense sovereign. The consultation process must be decisive and independent, and must somehow determine a position that as far as possible,

aggregates diverse opinion across the polity.

The second component is a set of safeguards – human rights, the rule of law, respect for contract, freedom of speech and association – for defending the position of individuals or small groups within the wider society from hostile decisions made by the majority.

We can't determine the balance of these two components in advance for any society; they should and will vary with circumstances. E-populism trades on a problem and an opportunity. The problem is common to all types of populism – modern life is fraught with imagined dangers and lived experience (of 20th century warfare and totalitarianism, and 21st century terrorism), but its safeguards are increasingly impenetrable. As Canovan puts it, "If any power is to be effectively given to the people-as-population of a large and complex modern society, this can be done only by means of institutions and procedures that are intricate to the point of being baffling."⁹

This paradox, ruthlessly exploited by populists through the ages, is combined in e-populism with the observation that consulting the people is now trivially simple. Aggregating opinion – sentiment analysis, e-petitions, crowdsourcing, wikinomics, liking and following, polling, and so on – is cheap and has the merit of being able to sample very large populations. The e-populists want democracy, but not democracy as usual.² Peter Bazalgette, a reality TV producer, noted that "our democracy is divorced from the rhythm of the age" – a rhythm for which he himself provides the beat.

Technically, many of the intricate institutions and procedures Canovan mentions are now redundant, thanks to the Internet and social media. Politically, the question hanging over e-populism is whether we are

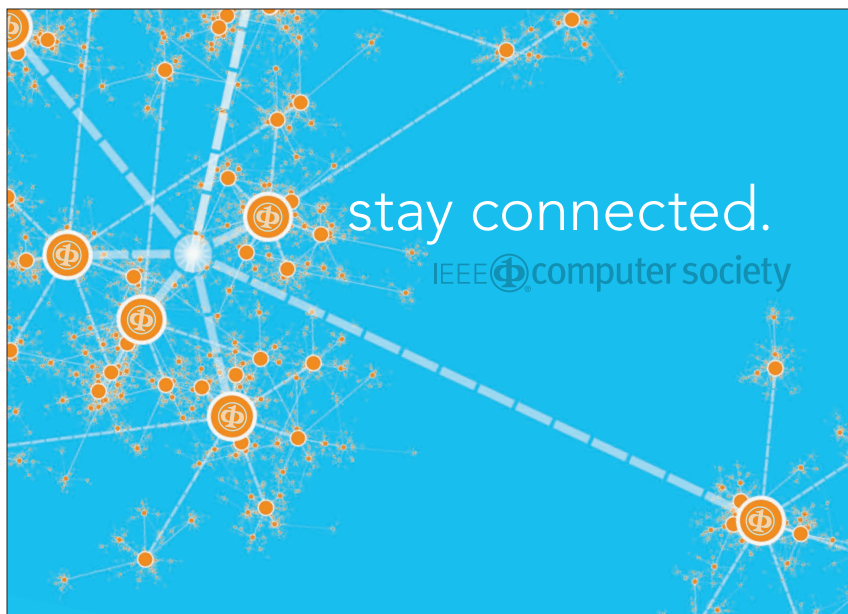
sufficiently mature to consign them to history without regret. ☒

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