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Institutionalized Populism: The “Strange Case” of the Italian Five Star Movement

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BY AMEDEO VARRIALE

ABSTRACT

The Five Star Movement (M5S) is one of those populist parties that is often misunderstood. Throughout the years, the media, independent journalists, and bloggers—as well as well-known academics and commentators—have struggled to define this “strange political creature.” Some have labeled it a polymorphous “hybrid-party” and others a “movement-party.” The mistake most analysts make when discussing the M5S is that they somehow forget the party’s left-wing origins.

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INTRODUCTION

Italy's Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, M5S) has long been considered a left-wing populist formation. This is mainly because its original agenda was dedicated to addressing five themes (the so-called "five stars") that were the preserve of the 20th century's post-materialist left-wing parties and movements—public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, technology, and environmentalism. They are typical issues of the post-1968 New Left (Tarchi, 2015: 337).

The New Left encompassed various European parties that gradually abandoned their original radically authoritarian, Marxist, statist positions to embrace contemporary issues such as environmentalism, feminism, and globalization (Damiani, 2016: 13). We know that these left-wing establishment parties[1] adopt a more liberal and libertarian outlook than the anti-systemic extreme left.[2] Today, the Dutch Socialist Party, the M5S, La France Insoumise, SYRIZA, and PODEMOS flirt with populism rather than with Marxist-Leninism and are no longer necessarily inspired by the old Soviet (or even Chinese) model (Moffit, 2020: 55–70). Today, some contemporary left-wing parties may very well be fully populist, given they adopt a particularistic form of politics that involves people-centric appeals and unmediated forms of communication. In this way, they go beyond the clientelist, formalist, and territorial politics of the traditional social-democratic mass parties.

The Five Star Movement, one of the youngest children of the reformist and progressive New Left (which some scholars like Luke March associate with the "radical left"[3]), is a perfect example. It gained serious popularity, not by using outdated Marxist tropes but by embracing left-wing populism[4] and mobilizing disenchanted voters in a period of widespread social malaise. This form of populism, quite different from the significantly more anti-migrant and socially conservative right-wing variant, is an ideology that combines left-wing politics and populist rhetoric and themes. The rhetoric of left-wing populism often consists of anti-elitist sentiments, opposition to the establishment, and speaking for the "common people" (Ibid). While themes like anti-capitalism, social justice, pacifism, and anti-globalization are very much relevant to these populists, class struggle and class society, as well as socialist theory, are not as important as they are to traditional left-wing parties (Ibid). The case of the Five Star Movement, which will be analyzed in the following paragraphs, is very much a demonstration of this.

Suppose we follow Cas Mudde's (2004: 543) lead and treat populism as an ideology that considers society as two homogeneous and antagonistic groups ("the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite") and holds that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. In that case, the Five Star Movement is a left-populist party. The *raison d'être* of the party ever since its first protests (the V'Day protests in 2007) has been

to pressure professional political elites to step down in order to take politics back to the people (Tarchi, 2015). Their first offensives were against the Italian establishment, which they saw as untrustworthy and detrimental to the commonwealth (Tarchi, 2015).

Populists of the left purport to give a voice to the silent majority—the ordinary men and women who (according to the populists) are being let down by career politicians, bureaucrats, corporate bankers, the media, and the European techno-managerial establishment in Brussels and Strasbourg that has usurped governing power. Unlike the populist right, the grillini (a term used by Italian pundits to refer to supporters of the M5S’s “guarantor” Beppe Grillo) do not openly argue that Italian ethnic and cultural identity is under threat by a wave of immigration perpetrated by financial corporations (or “liberal elites” conspiring to create a new order based on multiculturalism and cheap labor). Instead, the grillini propagate the left-wing populist narrative that social democracy has failed—in no longer representing its old electoral base and betraying its egalitarian principles (Gandesha, 2018).

Moreover, Grillo has openly called for the left to abandon the concept of class struggle in favor of a so-called caste struggle (Tarchi, 2015: 351; Zazzara, 2019: 110). To some degree, this is a defensible approach, at least according to proponents of left-populism like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Moffit, 2020: 65). For some time, high-ranking M5S members like Alessandro Di Battista and Grillo himself have justified their attacks on elites by arguing that “the caste” has steadily impoverished Italians (“Ci hanno impoveriti”). The leadership argues that only the M5S (the so-called “true democrats”) can “open up parliament like a can of tuna” to restore to power everyday citizens with ordinary qualities such as common sense (Tarchi, 2015). This is in line with their call for direct democracy, a feature that, alongside anti-elitism, is central to understanding the true ethos of the party.

Beppe Grillo speaks during a public meeting of the 5 Star Movement in Florence, Italy on March 8, 2009. Photo: Giacomo Morini.

Ideology and Discourse

The French political scientist Guy Hermet (2000: 80) long ago observed that populism's capacity to capitalize electorally on cultural, financial, and political crises and its futurist, quasi-utopian, and millenarian features make it palatable to left- as well as right-wing forms (Tarchi, 2015: 374). Hermet's vision has been borne out by the Five Star Movement, which has deftly navigated Italy's post-2009 recession and post-2015 refugee crises in recent years. Beyond established thinkers like Hermet, newer commentators like Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) advance the idea that populism can indeed be left-oriented.[5] In fact, popular sovereignty in the past has very much been a theme of focus adaptable to the republicanism and commitment to democratic principles of the center-left (Tarchi, 2015: 373).

Nevertheless, the Five Star Movement cannot be treated as a classic left-wing party and has never been particularly committed to liberal republicanism. Yet

its overt focus on the majoritarian aspects of democracy (linked to what Peter Mair defined as the popular pillar of democracy[6]) and commitment to the nation's sovereignty and the *volonté générale* of Italian citizens falls in line with the definition of left-wing populism provided above. For example, expanding the welfare state—a typical left-wing policy—and the so-called *Reddito di Cittadinanza* (a kind of universal basic income scheme) were “signature policies” that the M5S took to the 2018 elections (Mancini, 2020).

The overt hostility toward elites embedded within the M5S ideology saw Grillo and his circle try (and fail) to introduce a “recall” procedure[7] and referendums without a quorum (i.e., against privatization of water, nuclear energy, and the Euro) into the Italian system (Tarchi, 2015: 341; Adnkronos, 2014). However, they were successful in reducing parliamentary salaries and the number of MPs (Brunetti, 2019). Another great success was blocking arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which has intervened militarily in Yemen and thus been party to severe breaches of international human rights laws (according to the United Nations, a child under the age of five dies every ten minutes in Yemen).

Such policies reflect a blending of the polymorphous ideology of populism and the zealously egalitarian and pacifist values of the New Left.

In order to understand the discourse and ideology of the “strange political animal”[8] that is the M5S, we must first look at the background of its founders—Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio.[9] Grillo, an ex-comedian, is well-known for his passionate tirades against the establishment (i.e., the leftist Democratic Party and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia or Forward Italy). Casaleggio was a wealthy entrepreneur from the technology sector who invested in the revolutionary “Gaia project”—inspired by the 1995 essay “The Californian Ideology” written by the media theorists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron—that seeks to dismantle parliamentary, representative systems to bring democratic processes online (Musso and Maccaferri, 2018). It is for this reason (among others) that Chris Bickerton (2018) has spoken about the Five Star Movement as a “techno-populist” party. Grillo has never hidden his admiration for the internet and has gone so far as to point out that the web is a collective good and a necessary one since “even prostitutes do their business online, without the inefficient and unfair mediation of pimps (Tempi, 2013). In addition, both founders expressed convictions that the web reflects the values of the egalitarian left (it is apparently “Franciscan, anti-capitalist”) and that “online, ideas and sharing ideas are worth more than money” (Natale and Ballatore, 2014: 10; Grillo and Casaleggio, 2011: 9).

The M5S web portal “Rousseau” (directly inspired by the French thinker’s ideas of the *volonté générale*, civic nationalism, and direct democracy) is central to party organization. Through the portal, party members (not just MPs) choose what candidates to field for important local, municipal, regional, and national elections (Stockman and Scalia, 2019). Time and time again, the press and committed constitutionalists have criticized the party’s “digital primary” process for its lack of transparency, as explained in the book by a veteran of Italian journalism Bruno Vespa (2018). In conversation with someone intricately linked to the movement, Vespa underlines how—contrary to the

conventional wisdom—decision-making within the movement is not at all bottom-up but is instead quite top-down. Ideas other than those of Grillo and Casaleggio are readily dismissed (Vespa, 2018). This has sometimes resulted in members being expelled, including Federico Pizzarotti, the former mayor of Parma, and Giovanni Favia, an M5S politician from the Emilia-Romagna region (who revealed to journalists that there is no democracy in the M5S as Casaleggio manages every single programmatic aspect), and many others.[10]

Grillo’s agenda, especially on immigration, has often conflicted with that of the activists who are in theory able to use “Rousseau” to advance proposals and policy ideas. For instance, when two Five Star MPs (Maurizio Buccarella and Andrea Cioffi) proposed decriminalizing illegal immigration, Grillo reprimanded them, saying that it was not in the electoral program, although the majority of the members had voted in favor. Rather than implement the members’ decision, Grillo has since ignored or avoided discussing it in public (Parodi, 2019). Nonetheless, the M5S cannot exactly be considered pro-immigrant either. Grillo has always been skeptical of multiculturalism, as numerous posts on his blog make clear: “Citizenship for those born in Italy to parents born elsewhere makes no sense” (Grillo, 2012). It is clear given their positioning in parliament—abstaining on votes that would make access to Italian citizenship easier for immigrants—that Grillo’s party supports *ius sanguinis* (citizenship inherited through parents) to the current policy of *ius soli* (citizenship by birth) (Tarchi, 2015: 344).

It is also true that Grillo’s partisan leanings are ambiguous—he has never declared himself right-wing and did once attempt to become a candidate for the center-left (but in practice neoliberal) Democratic Party. Moreover, he often reiterates his passion for leftist egalitarian principles. He once stated that “Everyone counts, regardless of their social position. I want a single mother with four children to be able to become mayor of a city...” (Tarchi, 2015: 342). Interestingly, this ambiguity has led pundits to question whether the Five Star’s success among older, disen-

chanted center-right voters is merely a direct result of his and Luigi Di Maio's (former M5S leader, deputy prime minister, and current Italian foreign minister) rants against pro-immigrant NGOs (rather than migrants themselves). Both Grillo and Di Maio have been given to localist, folkloristic, identitarian discursive-performative devices that sometimes resonate well with the populist right (Damilano, 2020).

Grillo is known to begin some of his semi-ironic public addresses by pointing to the audience and shouting "Italians!" Here, perhaps, observers have drawn a false equivalence with Mussolini's nationalistic populism (Scanzi, 2013). Nonetheless, Di Maio has accused Grillo of being too centrist and has openly expressed his sympathy for national-conservative values of economic, territorial, and popular sovereignty. Di Maio has said that "the term sovereignty is found in the very first article of the Italian Constitution... Sovereignty means... defending the interests of Italians. If this is a crime, then arrest us all [the M5S] because this is what we have started doing." [11]

Commentators like Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini (2019: 167) are perhaps correct in defining these left-wing populists as "multi-ideological" (rather than "post-ideological"). Grillo (2013) has stated in his blog that he is "proudly populist" and has always wanted the M5S—which is supposed to be an "idea, not an ideology"—to function as a big-tent party (Tarchi, 2015: 339). For Grillo, the M5S is a political force to mobilize the young and the old, the wealthy and the poor, and both private and public sector workers. The big-tent approach comes from the goal of fundamentally destabilizing representative democracy by forcing it to abandon programmatic parties in favor of partyless democracy, which all forms of populism promote to some degree (Mair, 2002). Grillo insists on "a state without parties governed by citizens directly, for a limited amount of time and as a civic service" (Tarchi, 2015: 339).

Setting aside the fact that the M5S is polymorphous and is understood to have many currents within it, we can argue (taking Grillo's words at face value) that his organization is "neither left-wing nor

right-wing—it is a movement of Italians" (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2013). In any case, a close look inspection of the M5S shows it seeks to mobilize the angry, the frustrated, and the disenchanted—those Italians who nurture a profound distrust for mainstream politics. Nevertheless, the core message of the party hues close to the ethos of the left—namely, foregrounding environmental issues and harshly criticizing the economic and political power of the big industrial groups (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013: 432).

Supporters of Five Stars Movement in Naples rally with Italian flag and political symbol of the movement in Napoli, Campania, Italy on May 30, 2018. Photo: Antonio Balasco.

Organizational Structure

The Five Star Movement has not been a fully institutionalized party for long (the party first entered parliament in 2013 and was in opposition before June 2018). For this reason, the organizational structure is skeletal and deliberately so (Sun, 2019: 33). At the top, of course, we find the "Guarantor" of the party, Beppe Grillo, known to have strong links with the Casaleggio family and its company, Casaleggio Associati. His role is to set the tone and preserve the dynamic, protest-movement-like nature of the organization (as dictated in its party manifesto[12]) as well as to decide "who's in and who's out" (Tarchi, 2015: 359). In other words, Grillo—alongside Casaleggio, the movement's chief ideologue, and his apprentice Di Maio (who quit as leader in early 2020[13]), both technically below Grillo in the M5S hierarchy—have set the political agenda.

Yet, it is inaccurate to view the M5S strictly as a hierarchical, top-down, leaderist party. Indeed, Bordignon and Ceccarini (2013: 438) have referred to it as a strataarchical organization because power is effectively dispersed through the ranks. Since those ranks are often in open disagreement with each other, there is a tendency toward internecine conflict. It is unclear whether the Members' Assembly ("Assemblea Degli Iscritti")—an advisory board of mostly parliamentary members that meets annually—is below Grillo and the party head (who is a political and legal frontman) vis-à-vis administrative decision-making and policy proposals (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2019: 162–163).

What is certain is that the Committee of Trustees ("Comitato di Garanzia") has the power to supervise applications for membership and policy proposals. In 2018, the committee comprised Vito Crimi (who replaced Di Maio as "political head" in 2020), Roberta Lombardi, and Giovanni Cancellieri. It shares some power on important decisions with the Board of Arbitrators ("Collegio dei Probiviri") (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2019: 162–163). The board's task to monitor members' compliance with party rules and take disciplinary action if needed (as when two MP's were expelled for giving unapproved interviews on state television while under the M5S banner) (Tgcom24, 2021). The role of treasurer is essential, as it oversees internal and external financial resources (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2019: 162–163). Di Maio has held the role previously, but somewhere in the summer of 2020, the position went to the MP Sergio Battelli, who took on the delicate task of managing the EU's Recovery Fund in Italy (Zapperi, 2020).

To be clear, the majority of these roles have been assigned to party members through internal (albeit relatively non-transparent) procedures of direct democracy. While direct democracy is essentially unconstitutional in Italy, the fact that Grillo himself owns the party logo and that the "Rousseau" platform (used for political purposes even as the party has access to public funds) is entirely in the hands of a private commercial firm like Casaleggio Associati casts some doubt on the bottom-up, spontaneous, protest-like image of the party that Five Star politi-

cians like to portray (Biondo, 2019).

Five Star activists and grassroots members do not really appear to be entitled to all this liberty of self-expression (as much as Grillo claims) because if ever activists cease to "toe the party line," they risk expulsion (or worse). More than once, Casaleggio's son Davide—who inherited all the property of the Rousseau Association after his father's death—has threatened to sue his own MPs and take complete charge of the platform if they fail to pay their membership dues on time (Lombardo, 2020).

A large demonstration was held by the 5 Star Movement against the privileges of politics in Rome, Italy on February 15, 2020. Photo: Gennaro Leonardi.

Domestic Policy

The domestic policy of the Five Star Movement has been relatively straightforward. It advances partially redistributive and quasi-socialist economic policy to reduce socioeconomic inequality in Italy. Recent studies conducted by Ruth-Lovell (2019), Doyle (2019), and Hawkins (2019) show that governing populists of both the left and the right have committed to reducing the gap between the very rich and the poor and are more likely to do this with a welfarist approach rather than via tax relief (Moffit, 2020: 52–54). The aforementioned *Reddito di Cittadinanza*—really a policy of welfare chauvinism (in both its positive and negative aspects)—has been the M5S's way of presenting itself as a pro-social and pro-working-class party committed to an essentially leftist agenda (Brancaccio and Fruncillo, 2019: 129–158).

Political opponents from both the left and the right have attacked these wel-

farist policies as too costly and poorly implemented. Nevertheless, the Five Star Movement has continued to operate as a populist force in government. Certainly, the party has steadily institutionalized itself and has had to back away from some “binding” commitments (e.g., holding a referendum on the Euro, opposition to the single market, and the promise not to ally with old rivals, like the national populist[14] Lega party and the Democrats). Still, the party has managed to implement a series of its 2018 election pledges to spec (Di Maio, 2020). For example, M5S MPs successfully maneuvered to rescind the dysfunctional Fornero Law (a labor-market reform from 2011 aimed at reducing youth unemployment), scrapped the “golden pensions scheme” for MPs, and introduced harsh measures to combat public corruption (known as the *spaz-zacorotti* or “bribe destroyer” law) and a new decree to combat climate change. The M5S has worked hard to reduce the cost of the Italian state and limit the privileges of the political class (Di Maio, 2020). A referendum pushed forward by the Five Star Movement in conjunction with some other parties legislated a drastic reduction in the number of Italian MPs in September 2020. The move has been viewed favorably across the political spectrum and by most voters in Italy. In sum, the M5S has managed to shift the parliamentary demographic of the country. The arrival of grillini MPs into both of Italy’s chambers (the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate) after 2013 has produced a significant increase in the degree to which ordinary Italians feel involved and engaged in official political processes (Rapisarda, 2018).

Citizens who had never considered a political career nor had any involvement whatsoever with public administration—including former doctors and surgeons, tradesmen, volunteers from the private sector, primary sector workers, and teachers (among others)—have nonetheless begun to work in state institutions for the very first time (Agenzia Italia, 2019). The new civic consciousness and engagement of the “ordinary Italian” have been viewed as part of a great season of change in the history of Italian democracy (Ibid). Moreover, the number of young women in parliament has increased markedly, and commentators on the progressive left and

more liberal right consider this a significant step forward for the country (Ibid).

The coalitions that the M5S has joined have also produced a marked turn in Italian policy toward the EU, often in a positive direction. To begin, the M5S—and its coalition partner and fellow populist outfit Lega—were the first parties in many years to openly confront Brussels over its uncompromising and often hostile approach to budgetary matters (Moschella and Rhodes, 2020: 4–5). Thus, the Troika had a hard-time taming Italy’s populists, in contrast with the position it had in conflicts with the Greek state in the past. Indeed, the Italian populists have aggressively defended a spending program that included both an expansion of welfare and a generalized cut of taxation—against the much-defended austerity approach of the European Commission (Politi, 2018). Of course, an expansive budgetary approach is what led Italians to vote for radically populist and Euroskeptical parties in the first place.

Most pundits will argue that the most controversial aspect of the Five Star Movement’s domestic policy has been its tough line on immigration and security (the latter actually unrelated to migrants). Most M5S MPs voted to save Matteo Salvini (the deputy prime minister and off-and-on ally of the movement) from prosecution after he repeatedly refused to allow a rescue ship full of migrants to enter Italian ports in breach of international humanitarian laws (Reuters, 2021). Another controversy arose around a publicity stunt led by Salvini and the justice minister (from the M5S). In a classic example of “penal populism” (a term coined to describe the use of crime in populist propaganda[15]) the two were in attendance for the cameras when the narco-terrorist Cesare Battisti—who had just been extradited from Brazil—landed back on Italian territory.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio attended a meeting of EU foreign affairs ministers at the European Council building in Brussels, Belgium on September 21, 2020. Photo: Alexandros Michailidis.

Foreign Policy

The Five Star Movement's foreign policy has always been somewhat contentious. From the outset, the grillini have rhetorically advocated for a re-alignment—or at least a reconsideration of aspects of Italy's classic foreign policy orientation. Thus, the party has challenged Atlanticism, Europhilia/Europeanism, military interventionism—including peace-keeping operations—as well as large-scale multi-national capitalist projects (such as the EU-funded Trans-Adriatic gas pipeline or TAP)—in favor of a politically different direction. A big part of the Five Star Movement's agenda has involved tilting Italy's foreign policy axis toward China and, to a lesser degree Russia (Coratella, 2020). This “Euro-critical” approach—usually accompanied by mild anti-Americanism—comes directly from within the more socialist currents of the M5S, especially those led by the rabble-rouser Di Battista and the more institutionalist but no less ideologically driven Roberto Fico, the current president of the Chamber of Deputies.

Long before their first experience in government (which continues to this

day), the Five Star had always exhibited a thinly veiled hostility toward neoliberal Western powers. This has included the German and French governments (in the latter case, by sending party representatives to meet the leaders of the insurrectionist “Gilet Jaunes” or “Yellow Vests” to express their sympathy), but also the United States before Trump. Grillo, Di Battista, and other leading figures in the organization have never really hidden their affinity for the developing world and certain “rogue states” (Tarchi, 2015: 352). So much so that in government, the Five Star Movement refused to recognize Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaido as president (Binelli, 2019). The party's support for withdrawing Italian troops from Afghanistan is another example of a deep skepticism toward globalism and a quasi-isolationist *weltanschauung* typical of populists of both the left and the right (Nelli Feroci, 2019: 12).

The Five Star Movement's uncompromising opposition to Italy's adoption of the new European Stability Mechanism (ESM), its constant critiques of NATO's defensive strategy (an approach reminiscent of the old Italian communist left of Enrico Berlinguer), its position against EU

sanctions on Russia, and its desire to reform the statute of the European Central Bank (ECB) all align neatly with the party's populist ideology. The more ideological populists are usually highly critical of the mainstream media and high finance "castes" (Panebianco, 2020).

The early Five Star Movement in opposition (2009–2018) was undoubtedly a lot more Euroskeptic than the current one, which had to evolve politically once confronted with real institutional power. Governing the third-largest EU member state has inevitably meant making compromises with other parties once demonized (especially the Democratic Party) and shelving some of their more bizarre and radical policies. These include initiatives such as ceasing negotiations over the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), MP selection by lottery, and scrapping Article 67 of the Italian Constitution, which exempts MPs from any "vincolo di mandato"—the obligation to act strictly according to the voters' mandate.

Five Star MPs (with some exceptions) are now more cautious in pointing the finger at the EU as the perpetrator of Italy's evils (namely, low growth and high unemployment). Still, they remain critical of most of their old enemies and have continued to antagonize them subtly. For example, the agreements of former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte—known in Italy as "the people's lawyer"—with China over the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were frowned upon in Washington (Nelli Feroci, 2019: 10).

Furthermore, allegations have surfaced that Five Star's political operations have been financed by Venezuela's authoritarian government, which has worried the other parties they worked with in parliament to get bills passed (Bozza, 2020). Rhetoric and bizarre proposals aside, in its three years as part of governing coalitions, the Five Star Movement has never entirely severed ties with Italy's foreign allies nor seriously damaged or impeded progress in diplomatic and economic relations. In fact, in commenting on the foreign policy of the populist coalition (of which the M5S was supposedly a senior partner), the former Italian diplomat Ferdinando Nelli Feroci (2019: 11) has pointed out that "despite uncertainty and ambiguity," the

populists have "pursued a line of relative, albeit often hesitant continuity."

Five Star Movement office in the downtown in Gino-sa, Italy on July 19, 2019. Photo: Diego Fiore.

Transnational Alliances

Even if there are ideological similarities that can be drawn with other movements or anti-establishment parties like the Pirate Party in Germany or the Gilet Jaunes, there has been no substantial political agreement between the Five Star and such political forces apart from limited political flirtation and informal communication (during the early days). The Five Star Movement (along with UKIP) formed the Euroskeptic Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group in 2014 after a vote on the "Rousseau" platform (Bressanelli and De Candia, 2018: 25–48). Unsurprisingly, because Grillo initially wanted to present the party in international as well as national politics as anti-establishment and radically reformist, he pointedly excluded the option of joining the somewhat ideologically similar but more moderate Greens/EFA (Ibid).

Once the M5S joined the EFDD, it was clear that Grillo's political marriage to Nigel Farage and like-minded people was one of convenience (Ibid). Belonging to one group or another in the European Parliament usually signifies something deeper than just ideological affinity and is always somewhat functional to long-term strategic objectives at the domestic level. At least, this appeared to be the case for the Five Star Movement. It and UKIP were distant on the environment, domestic economic policy, and many aspects of for-

eign policy. However, they surely agreed on the fact that elites have abandoned the “losers of globalization” and that Brussels is a bully that prevents nation-states from making their own monetary decisions and controlling their own borders (Ibid). Both parties saw themselves as representing the “Europe of the people” rather than of the big banks (Michieli and Luxardo, 2016: 1–14).

Either way, the Five Star Movement (and apparently UKIP as well) treated EU alliances as secondary to what occurred in the national arena (Bressanelli and De Candia, 2018: 25–48). By 2020, M5S had already broken away from EFDD and was left with just 14 MEPs[16] (Bresolin, 2020). Other members of EFDD relied on the movement because even if they voted differently on certain motions regarding the environment and relations with foreign superpowers (albeit similarly on EU integration issues), they still needed a big party from a large member state like Italy to avoid problems related to funding and finances, and voting rights in executive positions.[17]

Bressanelli and De Candia (2018) report on recent research that the Five Star Movement is only moderately Euroskeptical. This soft Euroscepticism results in the Five Star voting like the European left-wing GUE/NGL and G/EFA on issues that do not explicitly involve more EU integration or direct democracy. At the end of the day, the movement did not really fit the EFDD due to its staunch anti-globalism, anti-immigration policy, and skepticism toward issues related to the environment or state intervention. A keen eye would notice that M5S and UKIP voted the same way less than half the time and are on different ends of the spectrum despite a shared populist style of communication (Bressanelli and De Candia, 2018: 25–48).

The “Rousseau” base voted overwhelmingly in favor in another vote on whether to join Guy Verhofstadt’s center-left ALDE. However, the existing ALDE membership decided it was a dangerous move that would risk a split by those group members more hostile and skeptical toward the Five Star Movement (Ibid). Verhofstadt himself feared the alliance might damage his image.

By 2017, many realized that Grillo’s strategy of moving away from the UKIP hardliners and the rest of the EFDD had some political logic. With the 2018 general elections approaching and a very weakened center-left after Matteo Renzi’s departure, the M5S wanted to project itself as an institutionally responsible party ready to lead the nation and to capture the majority of moderates and center-left voters disenchanted with the Italian Democratic Party (Ibid). If the M5S wanted to have a shot at becoming Italy’s leading party following Renzi’s exit from politics, it had no choice but to assure wealthy Italian families, national corporate and political elites, and international financial markets that it was not an “extremist” group and did not intend to leave the Eurozone. To some extent, this strategy paid off—M5S took 32 percent of the vote and emerged as the leading Italian party in competition with the center-right, although it had to ally with Lega to form a government.

From Opposition to Power: A Five-Starred Future?

In mid-2021, the Five Star Movement was polling between 16–17 percent and was lagging behind the right-wing parties (Lega and Brothers of Italy) and the center-left Democratic Party (Termometro Politico, 2021). This is undoubtedly disappointing for a party that saw significant electoral gains off the back of the 2008–2009 financial crisis and the refugee/immigration crisis of 2015 to become the leading party by 2018 (Bulli and Soare, 2018).

Having spent the last few months of 2020 in the lost cause of saving Conte (who used to present himself as a Eurosceptic populist before his purported switch to being a staunch Europhile anti-populist), the grillini are really struggling with their political identity (Di Niro, 2021; The Submarine, 2020). Defending Conte until the end and then supporting the candidacy of former ECB head Mario Draghi as prime minister cost Grillo, Crimi,

and Di Maio their parliamentary majority, with many MPs fleeing the party (Cuzzocrea, 2021). Also, the “pure heart” populist Di Battista publicly distanced himself from the party that he had helped build, showcasing his disdain for what is largely seen as a technocratic executive serving with the support of a center-right–center-left political coalition (Pucciarelli, 2021). This “grand coalition” was created to help Italy overcome the Covid-19 crisis and includes characters as distinct from each other as Enrico Letta and Matteo Salvini.

The Five Star’s identity had almost always been taboo for its semi-centralized leadership, which must constantly appease the infighting among distinct ideological currents and personalities within. Recently this ideological divide had become too obvious to deny. In December last year, 22 EU-critical Five Star representatives from the Chamber of Deputies voted against a motion on the new ESM or abstained (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2020). Even more M5S Senators appeared happy to take the political risks of pitting themselves against party chair Di Maio by voting in favor (Ibid).

The party is highly factionalized. The first is the institutionalist faction (or centrist faction) made up of MPs who follow Di Maio and Fico — the former more centrist and moderate, the latter openly progressive–leftist —in strategy. Both cabinet ministers want M5S to remain a party open to almost any kind of alliance to stay in power. The second is the “rebel hearts” who prefer to follow Di Battista’s guidance on policy and approach. This radical-left-wing populist faction has always been committed to anti-capitalism and hardline, anti-political (sometimes Manichean) principles. Di Battista and his followers are obviously less keen on broad alliances. Then there is the futuristic techno–populist faction comprised of traditional M5S activists who rally behind Casaleggio and Grillo on the party’s blog to bring about a digital revolution that involves direct democracy at the national level. One of the oldest factions, its members maintain a cordial yet ambiguous relation with Di Maio’s wing mainly because they know they are forced to work within institutions if they want to change them. The fourth grouping is the environmen-

talist faction which does not have a true reference point or political figure within the party but oscillates between Grillo’s futuristic techno-populists and Di Battista’s populist-left.

Alessandro Di Battista conference with his supporters during M5S event in Imola, Italy on October 17, 2015. Photo: Benny Marty.

Last, but not least, there is a minority that feels better represented by Conte and went out of its way to convince moderates from other opposition parties to vote to save his second prime ministership. We would possibly call this the loyalist faction as it comprises all those who believe Conte is the only one that can lead the movement in a fully Europeanist and responsible direction. These loyalists believe Conte did his best in administering Italy during the Covid era by cooperating with European allies like the Germans and the French. This faction is careful to behave institutionally (probably even more so than Di Maio and Fico’s) and follow the Italian constitution to the letter. In fact, after some experience in government (initially alongside Lega), Conte’s men evolved away from the anti-politics approach of the past and came around to the idea that it is impossible to rid Italy of the establishment altogether. They now realize that the vast array of checks and balances introduced into the Italian political system after the Second World War mean that political actors are inexorably drawn into the establishment.

It bears noting that the institutionalization of the M5S has meant it has shed many of those right-wing, anti-establishment voters that contributed to its success in the highly volatile general election of 2013. Back then, Grillo’s team could rely on its anti-establishment appeal,

which later manifested in Gianluigi Paragone's[18] now-defunct Italexit–No Europe for Italy party that gave a direction and meaning to the M5S's more nationalist proposals. Even if Paragone claims to lean socialist,[19] in and out of parliament, he has focused a lot on issues concerning territorial (e.g., anti-immigration) and economic (e.g., Italy's disputes with the European Commission on the budget) sovereignty that are seen as the preserve of the political right.

For a party that has worked very hard to appear honest, hard-working, law-abiding, and a vehicle for reform to bring ordinary people into the political sphere, the M5S has had to make painful choices. The party was famously committed to eschewing all political alliances with other forces, refused to participate in mainstream media or television talk shows (as they feared being scapegoated), declined to recognize the legitimacy and importance of parliament, failed to address the inefficiency of the horizontal and decentralized[20] online platforms (occasionally mediated in a more authoritative, top-down manner by Grillo), and refused to admit that even an anti-establishment populist party can be susceptible to corruption and mismanagement (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2019: 149–171).

All these aspects are manifest in the problems faced by Five Star mayors and local councils in Rome and Turin[21](Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2019: 149–171). Above all, the backtracking on commitments and promises has seen the M5S become a party of government and a quasi-institutionalized organization. The political understanding that led to coalitions with Lega and the Democratic Party and ongoing parliamentary representation since 2013 has eroded the rebellious “anti-politics” quality of the early Five Star Movement. The result has been electoral poison in a country where elections have become highly volatile and with an electorate increasingly populated by non-voters who no longer identify with mainstream politics (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013).

With Conte gone and following its many ideological and programmatic about-faces, the left-wing populists of the Five Star Movement are now on the verge of

collapse. After changing course vis-à-vis sanctions on Russia, failing to deliver an EU referendum, changing its position on mandatory vaccines (this was one of Grillo's favorite rallying cries), and completely abandoning its opposition to the TAP, there is a sense voter do not trust the party. The party's fate appears to dovetail with that of populists in government (of both the left and right) in many parts of the world, thanks to the challenges associated with managing the Covid-19 crisis (Zangana, 2020).

On the right, Donald Trump lost the pivotal 2020 election, and Salvini — while back in government — is hamstrung in pushing his Eurosceptic agenda with Draghi in charge. On the other side of the Alps, Marine Le Pen (although ahead in polls) will struggle against Emmanuel Macron, who has reinvented himself as a civic nationalist who is “tough” on Islamists. Across the Atlantic, Jair Bolsonaro's “machismo” stance on the virus has radicalized his own supporters and damaged his credibility with moderate conservative voters. He is now viewed as a full-blown authoritarian abroad and is widely blamed for more than 300,000 Covid-19 related deaths in Brazil.

On the left, the picture is not looking so bright either. The Five Star Movement, which was actually one of the most popular left-leaning populist forces worldwide (perhaps even more than Pablo Iglesias's PODEMOS in Spain), has now become a pale imitation of the neoliberal Democratic Party and has lost more of its support in less than two years as a result. SYRIZA, the original and arguably most successful left-populist government in resisting EU edicts, are now out of government in Greece and have lost most of their “propulsive force” (a term used by Enrico Berlinguer to describe the Soviet Union's downward spiral). Notwithstanding the effects of the pandemic, left-wing populists will most likely try to revive themselves as early as 2022, given the European Commission's poor handling of the vaccine rollout offers a political lifeline that can be capitalized on at the ballot box.

Attacks on Big Pharma—at which the Five Star Movement excelled in the early days—are as effective when launched

from the radical left as from the right. The European populist-left, unlike the center-left, is starting to understand that progressivism, environmentalism, and LGBTQ+ rights are not the only issues to be taken into consideration during agenda-setting. The public zeitgeist teaches us that much ground is being cleared for the right on socioeconomic issues, which is disadvantaging the left. Suppose the Five Star Movement were to return to being the unrelentless force that undermined the very legitimacy of the Italian neoliberal status quo. In that case, it will be because it will have returned to its roots as a credible big-tent party for the working classes, as the electorally more successful populists on the right (e.g., Chega!, Vox, Rassemblement National, and Fidesz) are. The “losers of globalization” are today no less disenchanted with mainstream politics than they were after the infamous collapse of Lehman Brothers, which for some remains an open wound (Stephens, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The M5S is one of those populist parties that is often misunderstood. Throughout the years, the media, independent journalists, and bloggers—as well as well-known academics and commentators—have struggled to define this “strange political creature.” Some have labeled it a polymorphous “hybrid-party” and others a “movement-party.” The mistake most analysts make when discussing the M5S is that they somehow forget the party’s left-wing origins.

Some accuse the movement of pandering to the anti-immigrant “far-right” due to its short-lived coalition experiment with Salvini. Others like Bickerton focus too much on its “techno-populist” media-savvy, treating it primarily as a vehicle for a digital revolution. Instead, one must attempt to understand the Five Star Movement in its entirety and for what it really is—namely, a legacy of the New Left and an institutionalized populist-left party. The Greek intellectual Takis S. Pappas reminds us that populists tend to march toward institutions and can remain entrenched inside for extended periods as they seek to remake them (Pappas, 2019: 74).

Grillo has managed to bring an initially disorganized mass of his followers (who all held differing beliefs yet with a common anti-establishment denominator) together by mobilizing them online and giving a political flavor to anti-political protest. This protest was against pro-austerity center-right and center-left forces that dominated Italy’s bipolar system. However, there is no doubt that the majority of Five Star Movement activists, supporters, and parliamentarians—even when identifying as “post-ideological”—have views that fit much more readily with the left than the right. Their commitment to expanding welfare, technological innovation, migrant integration, environmental protection, civil liberties, and half-hearted (but still crucial) anti-capitalist crusades are certainly not those of the populist right. National populists of the right are instead mainly concerned with defending a nation’s borders, the traditional family, and ethno-cultural identity and tend to favor Atlanticism. For this reason, in assessing the ideology, discourse, and policies of the Five Star Movement, we must treat it as a case of left-wing populism or “social-populism.”

Even today, while being an active part of liberal Italian institutions, most of the policies they push forward are considered too radical and too leftist by neoliberal actors on the right and left (such as Forza Italia and the Democratic Party). The M5S clearly opted for a strategy of political compromise to retain its grip on power and maintain its parliamentary majority so as to ensure its influence over domestic policy (especially when it comes to the handling of EU funds). Yet, there is reason to believe that the scholar Marco Tarchi was right about the movement. Grillo’s creation is potentially a case of the purest forms of populism in Europe (Tarchi 2015: 333).

Not only have they upended Italy's bipolar party system, but they have shepherded scores of ordinary people with no prior political experience into parliament and other state institutions. Their populist style and communication (always present to some degree since Benito Mussolini and Guglielmo Giannini) are now embedded within the democratic system and process. Evidence of this can be found in many anti-political television programs like "Piazzapulita" ("clean slate"), "Dritto e Rovescio" ("obverse and reverse"), and the daily newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* ("the daily fact"). The latter is openly sympathetic to the Five Star cause. In addition, examples of systemic populism manifest in the series of organized rhetorical attacks, threats, and brawls in parliament launched by Grillo's MPs.

Only time will tell whether the Five Star Movement will disappear from the political scene (after Casaleggio's death, Di Battista's departure, and the betrayal of some of their core principles and constituencies, things are looking difficult for Grillo's people). However, what is certain is that the legacy endures. The M5S has demonstrated the kind of impact that populists who institutionalize themselves can have. The Five Star's presence in institutions has culminated in a drastic cut in the number of MPs (as well as their salaries), something virtually unprecedented in a large Western democracy. This sets a precedent that some may see as a curtailing of democracy. Instead, it should be understood part and parcel of Italy's apparently functional "populist democracy."

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ECPS

EUROPEAN CENTER for
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ABOUT ECPS

The European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS) is an independent, non-partisan, nonprofit organization, based in Brussels, for research on and analysis of challenges posed by the resurgence of political populism. ECPS facilitates collaboration among networks of academic experts, practitioners, policymakers, media, and other stakeholders. ECPS offers a platform for the exchange of policy solutions on issues relating to rising populism and provides insights for policy-making and critical analysis to raise broader awareness and engagement through:

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