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Italy

The ambiguous nature of the 5 Star movement

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The victory of the 5 Star Movement (M5S according to its initials in Italian) and its young candidates, Virginia Raggi and Chiara Appendino, in the municipal elections of June 2016 in two symbolic cities of Italy (the capital, Rome and the main industrial city of the country, Turin) has revived many questions about the political role and the nature of the group founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo.

The founders and the electoral dynamics

The early stages of construction of the “Friends of Beppe Grillo” date from 2005-2006, but it was the two days of mobilisation of the “Vaffanculo Day” in 2007 and 2008 against the political caste which created the conditions for the foundation in September 2009 of the 5 Star Movement. The first tests of voting in local elections were modest and it was not until 2012 that the M5S obtained its first significant results in some cities, including Genoa and in particular Parma, where the M5S elected a mayor. This was the point of departure for great success in the general elections of 2013, at which the M5S became the biggest party with 8,691,106 votes, 25.56%, against 25.42% for the Democratic Party (PD). However, the latter won 29.18% of the votes with its allies, which allowed it to claim the majority premium in the Chamber of Deputies.

In the European elections of 2014, the M5S achieved a result of 21.16 % compared to the exceptional result of PD (40.81%), with Berlusconi's Forza Italia Berlusconi in sharp decline (16.81%). In 2016 there were the victories in Rome and Turin, although the M5S was defeated in Milan and Bologna, and especially Naples where the outgoing mayor, Luigi De Magistris, was re-elected as the head of a coalition of citizens and of the left. Ahead of the parliamentary elections, recent surveys show more or less similar voting intentions (around 30 %) for the PD and the M5S, as well as for a unitary list on the right.

Two men have built and defined the political project of the M5S. In the first place there is the showman Beppe Grillo, known for his invocations against the political caste, corruption and the destruction of the environment, and with a great influence on a wide audience. Then there was the head of the undertaking, Gianroberto Casaleggio, owner of a large corporation, Casaleggio Associati, specializing in communication and marketing, which has allowed the formation of a centralized and controlled organization thanks to an internet network.

The M5S is a very vertical political force, with the two leaders playing a very dominant role. The recent death of Casaleggio has not changed this setting because the role of the father has been occupied by his son, who manages the company now. However, the development of the movement and its presence in the institutions have increased the weight of the leaders of the parliamentary groups in the House and the Senate. At the national level, a steering committee of five persons has been formed, but Grillo still has the last word.

Nature and characteristics of the M5S

What are the characteristics of this movement? Using old Marxist terminology, we would say that it is a petty bourgeois movement by the composition of its leadership, its political program and its objectives: to democratize and rationalize the society and the functioning of the institutions, punishing corruption and privileges, imposing transparency in public actions and citizen's control via the internet. The capitalist system is not put in question at all,

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only its excesses and the corruption of its policymakers are denounced. Therefore, the M5S does not develop real campaigns against the dominant neoliberal economic policies or against capitalist austerity. Its main slogan is the demand for honesty and its central political theme is the struggle against the privileges of the political class; the movement is presented as “purifying” and the “saviour” of society.

Thus, the M5S aims to be neither right nor left-wing, not only because it thinks so, but also because it consciously uses a mixture of languages, messages and concrete proposals that allow it to attract support from both right and left. In certain areas, such as the environment, transport, civil rights or energy, it defends a left discourse and M5S activists are actively involved in mobilizations on these topics. In other areas, such as migrants, the rights of public sector employees or the role of trade unions, it generally defends right positions. There is a long list of statements with a clearly xenophobic tone by some of their leaders or activists, designed to gather support of depoliticized or right wing popular sectors.

The ability of the leading group is precisely to have succeeded in building an ambiguous but credible image. The operation has been possible because it corresponds to a large drop in the class consciousness of workers, as well as in the average level of political awareness of the masses who can no longer bear their situation and want change. The latter, lacking a class organization and collective responses, think they can find an answer in the “anti-caste” positions of M5S. The rapid growth of this movement can only be explained if one takes into account what happened in the first decade of this century: the big struggles of workers and the social movements, their disastrous defeats, the failure of the Prodi government of the centre-left (2006-2008) and of the Party of Communist Refoundation. All these developments have led to a profound disillusionment and demoralization of broad sectors of the working class, with a collapse of class consciousness even in its most elementary forms. The economic crisis of 2008 and the destructive austerity policies have led these phenomena to their end: the working class is no longer a political subject.

The program of the Grillo movement

The M5S has criticized certain decisions on foreign policy and military intervention by successive governments, but does not question the role of Italy as a capitalist and imperialist power. With regard to the European Union, it has taken contradictory positions depending on the circumstances, ranging between exit from the euro and other much more moderate proposals. The accession of the M5S members of the European Parliament to the same group as Nigel Farage’s UKIP expresses all the ambiguities of Grillo, although this does not mean an adoption of the political choices of the British far right party.

The M5S is very much an institutional force. It has waged democratic battles in Parliament and currently opposes the draft Renzi reform of the Italian Constitution of 1948. But it does not try to converge this action with a democratic mobilization of masses, and even less with the initiatives of the workers’ movement. Nor is it concerned with developing a real program on issues of employment and precarity to cope with the dramatic conditions in which the popular classes live after years of austerity.

The Grillo movement proposes as a central objective the introduction of additional tax reductions for small and medium-sized enterprises, considered as key to development, and an uncertain citizen’s income for those who remain without work (in fact, a form of charity). Its programme does not question the dogmas of neoliberal capitalism, or advance the need for a new and strong public intervention in the economy, or the general reduction of working time, or the defence of collective labour agreements. Nothing strange about that, given its interclass nature.

Its leaders originate from the petty bourgeoisie and have different types of employment background including the

liberal professions. The rank and file activists come from different employment backgrounds, self-employed or employees, rather of an intellectual nature, but not only that. Some of them are in precarious work. Much less present are activists from industry and the “traditional” working class. On the contrary, there are many in the private and public sectors (including trade union rank and file delegates) who have voted for M5S candidates. The recent municipal elections have shown the ability of Grillo’s movement to capture a significant number of votes among the poor and marginalized, desperate to find an alternative to the situation in which they find themselves.

Internal structure and relations with other forces

The internal structure has been built to ensure full control by the two principal leaders over the whole of the organization. Decisions are taken in line, quickly, by a vote of the members - perhaps directed - and without real public debate. And this occurs in the same way when members who are considered not in accordance with the foundations of the organization or simply not in line with the official positions are expelled. The base structure of the M5S is the “meet-up” (electronic meetings, initiated from above by the network of the movement); direct face-to-face meetings are rare. These, however, have shown their importance in periods of electoral campaign.

The internal operation of the M5S is therefore very questionable from a democratic point of view. On the other hand, there is evidence of a fundamentally sectarian behaviour towards other political forces. For the members of the M5S, there is only their movement: all the other forces are part of the old system that is to be regenerated and belong to an outside world which is “impure”. The M5S advocates the participation of citizens, but only in the framework of its methods and if they assimilate the forms under which the movement exercises its activities.

Governing cities such as Rome and Turin today exposes M5S to a strong offensive from its political adversaries, as well as enormous political and administrative problems. It will be important to follow these dynamics. The success of the Grillo movement, which leads certain sectors to have illusions in him, highlights the defeat and the crisis of the left in our country. But it is not in the nature of the M5S work to build the mass social movement which is essential in order to deal with the policies of the employers and the governments that represent them. As they have done up to now, the “Grillistas” will attempt to reap the electoral benefits of discontent among the population, denouncing some, but only a few of the ravages of the government without putting into question the market and the rule of capital. There are no shortcuts in the task of building a movement of the masses of workers and an anti-capitalist class organization. The M5S phenomenon does nothing but confirm this.