The discourse of political protest in Italy: populist propaganda on Facebook

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This paper addresses the way people elaborate and share social protest against Italian politicians and EU institutions on social networks. Since its beginning in 2007, the financial crisis established itself as the main topic in Italian media discourse, monopolizing almost the whole public debate. At the same time social networks, especially Facebook, grew in popularity and importance. This new type of media played an important role in the organization of some huge protests in the last five decade. The analysis explores both how themes such as recession and austerity measures, as well as blaming of politicians and corruption, are developed and mixed with nationalist and sometimes racist utterances. In our study we take into account lexical items, rhetorical forms (metaphors, hyperbole) and arguments employed to set the politicians and the EU institutions as antagonists of ordinary people, but also to define and give sense to the crisis and perform a collective identity.
Key words: discourse analysis, economic crisis, Facebook, political discourse, Italian language

1. Introduction

Since its beginning in 2008, the financial crisis established itself as the main topic in Italian media discourse, monopolizing almost the whole public debate. At the same time, social networking sites, especially Facebook, grew in popularity and importance. Not to mention their active part in other well-known protest movement around the globe, like Occupy and the so-called Arab Spring (see Fuchs 2014), this new type of media played an important role in the organization of some huge protests in the last seven years in Italy: from the anti-Berlusconi's policies demonstrations of the "Popolo Viola" (a spontaneous movement of citizens, mostly left-wing activists), to the new feminist movement "Senonoraquando?" (that promoted various manifestations to raise awareness on gender issues), but, above all, from another perspective, the Internet was pivotal for the success of the anti-establishment Movimento 5 Stelle, led by Beppe Grillo, in 2013 Political elections and it represented the

main platform through which the "Pitchfork" populist movement coordinated a series of mass protests.

The economic crisis that broke out in 2008 in the US, due to the collapse of subprime markets, developed into a global economic recession crisis of the financial and non-financial sectors of the economy (Kotz 2009), when in 2011 the crisis evolved in the so-called "sovereign debt crisis" countries like Greece, in first place, and Italy were depicted as the main problem for the European stability throughout western media, by the use, for example of the conceptual metaphors (Lakoff, Johnson 1989) of the *disease* ("crisis as a contagion") and of the *natural disaster* ("the crisis as a tsunami") (see Bickes *et al.* 2014).

Moreover, the mainstream media discourse was pervasively engaged in what Mylonas (2012) named the "culturalization" of the crisis, that is it aimed «at grounding the capitalist crisis as a crisis that concerns a particular nation state and as a crisis that is caused by the particularities and the shortcomings of the Greek society» (Mylonas 2012: 662); hence hiding the systemic nature of the crisis and avoiding a structural public debate on the issue, which has its roots in the capitalist modes of wealth accumulation (what is neutrally described with the term *growth*). That, of course, happened also in Italy. This strategy tended to depict austerity measures and the intervention of the so-called *troika* (formed by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank) as the only possible way out for Greece and other Southern Europe states, and above all represented also the chance to reinforce neo-liberalism principles and ideology in everyday discourse.

Following Fairclough's definition of discourse as «language as social practice determined by social structures» (Fairclough 1989: 17), language can be considered in a dialectic relationship with social facts, so that it is constantly socially shaped by reality, but also socially shaping it (Fairclough 1989: 55); texts, in fact, (in the broad sense, oral, written and mediatic) take an active role in the formation of group identities and in the development of relationships between various groups through their semiotic activity of meaning-making (Fairclough 1995). It is through *discourse*, and its constant repetition and cumulative effect, in every day social interactions that ideological views and forms become «the contemporary version of commonsense» (Moscovici 1981: 181).

The elite has the power to control the access to material and symbolic resources, that is to impose its ideology and social representations over other social groups[1]; but societies, at the same time are constituted by a heterogeneous number of social categories (diverging in race, sex, religion, class, occupation,

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[1] Due to its peculiar institutional position, has the possibility to directly influence other social actors, and, therefore, heavily affect public opinion.

etc.), which differ in status and power relation, that is also the very first condition for the emergence of social protest. As pointed out by Grossi, the new means of communication gave birth to a new dimension of the public sphere: «a second dimension of sociality, inclusive and cross-cutting, more and more de-spatialized, and virtual"»[2] (Grossi 2004: 126), where processes of meaning-making develops in discourse.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has a deep influence on institutions and behaviour patterns: «Interactive computer networks are growing exponentially, creating new forms and channels of communication, shaping life and being shaped by life at the same time» (Castells 2000: 2). Thus, new media appear to be at the same time products and an agents of social and political change.

Manuel Castells, in his influential work *The Network Society* (2000, 2004), believes that the Internet could be considered a particularly powerful resource in the process of creating new identities and communities:

> «In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning. This is not a new trend, since identity, and particularly religious and ethnic identity, has been at the roots of meaning since the dawn of human society. Yet identity is becoming the main, and sometimes the only, source of meaning in an historical period characterized by widespread destructuring of organizations, delegitimation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions» (Castells 2000: 3).

Although contemporary protests *per se* are not social media rebellions, at the same time digital and social media are also not irrelevant for their success: «Activists make use of multiple media, both offline and online, technologically mediated and unmediated, digital and non-digital» (Fuchs 2014: 88).

Thus, these communication forms are part of the dynamics of a political community, they contribute to the formation of a public opinion and exert some influence on politicians, journalists and other social actors.

A series of annual surveys over the last years registered the popularity of the Internet as a mean of information for Italian people. Even if television remains the main source of information in Italy, the use of the Internet to read news steadily grew from 25 in 2007 to 49 in 2014.

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[2] Otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian are mine.

It also appears that the Internet is generally believed to be more free and more independent than television (39,3 against 21,9). 70% of the people also believe that the Internet is a good resource to check politicians. Facebook and social networking sites in general integrate tools that support various forms of sociality and interactivity into a single website and in a coherent fashion. Among these services, Facebook is by far the most popular in Italy. Of the 36 million Italian Internet users, by the end of 2015 Facebook subscribers, reach 25 million. In addition, it is interesting to note that around twenty percent of Internet users engage in some sort of political activity on social network services. Our goal is, then, to analyse Facebook (as it is the most used Social network in Italy) as an index to understand people's reaction to the crisis in everyday informal discourse.

2. Corpus

As a part of a deeper investigation on the forms of political protest and racism via the Internet[3], we have collected and analysed a small (but still indicative) corpus composed by 50 Facebook posts. They were originally posted on the official "Pitchfork movement" Facebook page and on the official group named "COORDINAMENTO NAZIONALE PER LA RIVOLUZIONE 9 DICEMBRE". The first one has got 76.000 likes, it was created in July 2011, when the movement was founded to demonstrate against the crisis of the farming industry. The page is intended to promote the Movement activity with statements, videos, press release, but also with political posts, articles etc.

The "Coordinamento" group has got almost 20.000 users and was created to coordinate protests around the country and to give news and information about the "movement" activity. Soon after a failed attempt to organize another massive demonstration against the Parliament in January 2014, the group's activity decreased and left place to a more general and common activity of sharing links, articles and memes posts about the crisis, politicians, corruption and conspiracy theory.

Extracts containing the strategies discussed in the analysis were identified and subjected to more detailed analysis; they are reproduced as they were presented on Facebook, including spelling and grammar errors.

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[3] See Orrù (2014) and (2015).

3. The Pitchfork movement

In December 2013 a series of public demonstrations took the stage and caught mainstream media's attention. These protests would soon be labelled *protesta dei forconi*, (Pitchfork protests) from the name of one of the leading participants: the Sicilian-based "Pitchfork Movement", which has been active in Sicily since 2011.

The name derives both from the socio-economic background of organizers, which were mainly farmers, but also from an Italian – that is also a linguistic – *cliché* which see people revolting to depose authorities brandishing pitchforks.

In fact, the protesters' goals included the overthrow of the government, the resignation of President Giorgio Napolitano and the dissolution of Parliament. Some went so far as to propose the formation of a military junta to lead the country out of the Eurozone and to new elections.

Protests started in mid-November across different regions and with different objectives: firstly, there were student's protest, than, lorry drivers and farmers protest. Following the great echo of the Sicilian strike, the movement launched the idea of a mass protest in the whole country for the 9 December, this fact gave rise to a series of informal self-organized manifestations around Italy, the organization of which was carried out through social networks.

Media reported a series of violent acts during the protests, for example some protesters forced shopkeepers to close their shop and join the rallies. Also, the almost impossible demands of the Movement led to a rapid loss of interest across the ordinary people.

4. Analysis

4.1 Manifesto

Our analysis starts from the flyers that were posted on Facebook to promote the 9 December protests, as they were employed to set the movement demands, its "identity" and its possible opponents, in short, a sort of political *manifesto*. Several social categories and social roles are set as the victims of the crisis. There are abstract categories related to economy: the rather ambiguous and generic "productive Italy" or "the unemployed", mixed with social roles, mostly related to the family sphere: "fathers", "mothers", "children" (fig. 1).

They are also referred as *questa Italia*, literally "this side of the country". The use of the deixis opposes grammatically one concept to another: "this Italy", the good one, and "that Italy", the bad one. References to the nation state and to

nationality are pervasive: "Italy stops", "we are all Italian citizens" (with the use of the inclusive we), "this Italy revolts", "the productive Italy":

Figura 1 Manifesto

Looking at «predicational strategies»[4] (Reisigl and Wodak 2001), Italians are described as "starving", "confused – without solid cultural references" (a concept somehow implied in the loss of identity) and "hopeless". It is worth to notice that identity is clearly addressed as a relevant factor for these protesters and they perceive themselves as the victims of the whole situation, thus meaning that the protests are meant to give sense to the reality around them. Protesters, obviously, are actors of positive action or involved in the defence of positive concepts and values, like "democracy", the "constitution", and "dignity".

A range of organizations and abstract actors, not to mention abstract processes, are constructed as responsible for the crisis. For example, globaliza-

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[4] «'Predication' is the very basic process and result of linguistically assigning qualities to persons, animals, objects, events, actions and social phenomena. Through predication, persons, things, events and practices are specified and characterised with respect to quality, quantity, space, time and so on. Predications are linguistically more or less evaluative (deprecatory or appreciative), explicit or implicit and – like reference and argumentation – specific or vague/evasive» (Reisigl, Wodak 2001: 54).

tion, is described as a "Wild-West", responsible for Italian loss of market share; while Europe is put between quotation marks, with a clear polemic intent.

The government is defined as "nominated" (*nominato*) in opposition to "elected" (*eletto*), which presupposes that it was not legitimate by the popular vote; although, according to the Italian constitution, every government in Italy is nominated by the Parliament and not directly chosen in the electoral process.

It could also be noticed that "they" are not explicitly mentioned, the use of an implicit subject conveys the feeling that "the target" is common knowledge, that everybody knows who "they are" and who the enemy is, even without directly naming them. This use allows at the same time for an extremely wide generalization, i.e. differences between political sides are completely removed and all politicans are considered corrupted. "They" are also actors of negative actions such as "led to hunger" (*accompagnati alla fame*), "destroy" (*distrutto*) "wipe out" (*annientato*), "exterminate" (*sterminato*).

4.2 Nationalism

Looking at the visual presentation of the *manifesto* (fig. 1), we can also note the use of the Italian flag colours in the flyer. That lead us to the other fundamental aspect of the movement's rhetoric, that is nationalism. To a closer look, in fact, it appears evident that national identity is one of the main issue for this movement. Supranational institutions and processes are responsible for the disintegration of Italian identity, culture, and economy. People's identity is based upon the typical nationalist system of values: patriotism, religion, family.

This is confirmed by other posts that display a constant reference to nationalist elements, such as the Italian flag, which, in example (2), is "the only one allowed" or the concept of *patria*, a strong term in Italian language, mostly used by Fascist and post-fascist-right parties to refer to the native soil.

The only institution respected by the "Coordinamento 9 dicembre" are military forces and the police: "the last institution in which the people believe". And there are also references to Christianity, with the praise of Pope Frances or the use of the "god bless us all" form of wish. Ideally closing the traditional fascist triad: god, fatherland, family.

(1) «OMAGGIO A UN VERO RIVOLUZIONARIO. FRANCESCO. VOLUTO DA TUTTI: DAL PAPA, DAI CARDINALI, DAI VESCO- VI, DA TUTTA LA CHIESA ALL'INSEGNA DI STRAVOLGEN- TI CAMBIAMENTI. LUI, DECISO, TRASCINATORE, UMILE, CORAGGIOSO, DA' AMORE E SPERANZA, MA DA' CERTE FORCONATE!!!!

(2) UNICA BANDIERA AMMESSA: IL TRICOLORE

(3) ART. 52 "LA DIFESA DELLA PATRIA E SACRO DOVERE DEL
    CITTADINO - CHI NON PARTECIPA NON HA IL DIRITTO DI
    LAMENTARSI, RIBELLARSI E' UN DOVERE.
(4) FORZE ARMATE E DELL'ORDINE..UNICHE ISTITUZIONI A
    CUI IL POPOLO ANCORA CREDE!! La politica dei venduti e dei cor-
    rotti ci ha portato al disastro, ha umiliato un popolo intero e sta disonorando
    le nostre Forze Armate... Liberarci da questi infami e traditori del paese è
    un dovere civico di tutti coloro che si sentono e sono persone per bene. W
    Le Nostre Forze Armate e Dell'Ordine, uniche Istituzioni a cui il popolo
    ancora crede.

4.3 Anti-politics, anti-everything

In an attempt to make sense of the crisis: «groups of people play the 'blaming
game' where the finger is pointed at those who are constructed to be at the
heart of the problem» (Angouri Wodak 2014: 543).

Blaming, obviously, takes the form of direct accusation. To the political
system as a whole, but also to trade unions and media/journalists. They are
blamed for their incapability and their inactions, Allegations of corruption
constitute a common topic for the users. Italian governments and politicians
are constructed as being corrupt, which bears direct relevance to the country's
financial troubles.

Politicians are mainly defined with the use of an animal metaphor, accord-
ing to which they are considered as parasites (*parassiti*) draining money from
the people. The metaphor is consistently deployed in this kind of rhetoric; it
relies on the broader metaphorical field of the "nation as a body" (Musollf
2010), it helps to establish an emotional bond between the citizen and his/
her country, perceived as a living body. Therefore, in order for the nation to be
cured, every harmful element should be removed from the body of the state.

Much emphasis is put not surprisingly to the description of the moral char-
acteristics of politicians. They are often depicted as "corrupted", "sold", and
"infamous". It is also worth to note the use of military language: "we will take
no prisoners", "traitors of the country".

They are also defined in accordance to their privileged state with the use of
the term "caste"[5], and with references to their wages: "massive pay pockets and
billions of euro". In these cases, the use of foul language constitute a frequent
linguistic resource to address the elite: "assholes", "pieces of shit", "bastards".

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[5] The term become very popular to describe politicians after the publication in 2007 of the best seller *La casta.
Così i politici italiani sono diventati intoccabili*, by Sergio Rizzo e Antonio Stella. The book contains a detailed
investigative research on corruption in Italian politics.

(5) ANDATE A LAVORARE PARASSITI SIETE LA ROVINA DEGLI OPERAI VI SIETE – SEMPRE VENDUTI – STIPENDI D'ORO E BENI PER MILIARDI DI EURO ECCO COSA SONO I SINDACATI IN ITALIA,UN CASTA DI PEZZI DI MERDA CONTRO GLI OPERAI

(6) FORZE ARMATE E DELL'ORDINE..UNICHE ISTITUZIONI A CUI IL POPOLO ANCORA CREDE!! La politica dei venduti e dei corrotti ci ha portato al disastro, ha umiliato un popolo intero e sta disonorando le nostre Forze Armate... Liberarci da questi infami e traditori del paese è un dovere civico di tutti coloro che si sentono e sono persone per bene. W Le Nostre Forze Armate e Dell'Ordine, uniche Istituzioni a cui il popolo ancora crede.

(7) Ciò che le TV corrotte occultano e non vi dicono leggete !!

(8) +++"NON FAREMO PRIGIONIERI"+++ Hanno sterminato la nostra economia... Hanno assassinato molti Italiani... Hanno violentato la nostra costituzione... Hanno rubato e ucciso il futuro a noi e alle future generazioni... ..."NON FAREMO PRIGIONIERI!!!+++

The first article of the Constitution is recurrent in this kind of propaganda; although it always appears quoted in an incomplete way. In fact, the only part which is always being quoted is the first one: "Sovereignty belongs to the people", while the second half goes on with "which exercises it in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution". By quoting only the first half, this kind of propaganda feeds the idea that the abstract category of "the people" is always right and has the power to do everything, careless of the "limits sets by the Constitution".

(9) LA SOVRANITA' APPARTIENE AL POPOLO, NON AI CRIMINALI !! - Draghi: L'italia deve rinunciare alle sue Sovranità - Come mai nessuno arresta Draghi per attentato all'unita del Paese? - Come mai nessun bastardo politico lo attacca? - Draghi, Renzi, Berlusconi , Napolitano.. ve la diamo la rinuncia alla nostra Sovranità, l'unica cosa che possiamo darvi con vero piacere, è una serie di calci nel sedere!!...TRADITORI, PAGHERETE PER QUESTO!! - La Sovranità appartiene al popolo non ai CRIMINALI !!

Thus, not only the use of the "people" category is obviously misleading and unable to represent social differentiation, but it represents also the main instrument to shape a collective identity, founded in the opposition against institutions and the elite.

Protesters mostly blame the government, but also supranational institutions like the EU or abstract concepts like "globalization": «pointing finger at the whole political system and foregrounding of the loss of face and sovereignty have been quite successful in making an ultra-nationalistic rhetoric sound 'harmless' to a number of voters» (Angouri Wodak 2014). This consideration could also be relevant in this specific case, where blaming of politicians and institutions ends with invocation to dramatic results, like in the example seen before.

Euro is held responsible for the "collapse" of Italian economy as a whole. The author puts dramatic emphasis, evoking a "civil war", the loss of freedom, democracy and peace. Eventually, politics should be divided in pro and against euro in order to distinguish the good ones from the bad. The single currency appears to be the main responsible for the "bankrupt of every country".

Figura 2 Euro

The trait that characterize the most the European Union is the lack of democracy and the loss of local control over some economic decisions: therefore, it is described as a "sick dictatorship" (*schifosa dittatura europea*). Verbs often associated with the EU have often very strong connotative meaning such as "impose" or "prohibit": the Eu is agent of processes that tend to limit personal and economical freedom. These verbs are obviously contrasted with other more positive meanings that often implicate the sense of taking action against an unfair treatment (*ribellarsi*).

In addition, people's "destiny" is directly linked to the single currency. The overall tone is hyperbolic, there's a frequent use of foul language, verbs, adjective and nouns related to drama, such as "risk", "destroyed", "civil war", "killed" also the adverb "irreparably" with its lack of modality here conveys a sense of permanent desperation.

(10) +++QUESTO DEGRADO DI UNIONE EUROPEA...+++ Vieta di esportare la nostra merce in Russia, ma agevola e protegge tutte le merce importate da altri paesi come Cina, India. ecc ecc.questa è l'unione europea? L'Italia Sovrana non può permettere che questi dittatori servi dei banchieri distruggano la nostra economia, ribellarsi a questi politici traditori e uscire da questa schifosa dittatura europea, non è solo una scelta di libertà, ma di vera e propria sopravvivenza! W L'ITALIA E CHE DIO CI BENEDICA!!

(11) «CON LA LIRA CI SIAMO COMPRATI LA CASA CON L'EURO CE LA PORTANO VIA»

(12) POLITICI,SINDACALISTI,BANCHIERI,PROFESSORI E ROBA DEL GENERE CI HANNO COSTRETTO ALLA MONETA UNICA. L'EURO FORTE E' STATO LA LORO PACCHIA MA HA DETERMINATO IL FALLIMENTO DI TUTTI I PAESI. OCCHIO! GLI STESSI STRONZI STANNO CAMBIANDO OPINIONE.

(13) I FORCONI PENSIERO: L'ITALIA E' AL COLLASSO SOCIOECONOMICO. C'E' UN FORTE RISCHIO DI GUERRA CIVILE. SI VADA SUBITO A VOTARE CON DUE COALIZIONI. UNA PRO E UNA CONTRO L'EURO. NON ESISTE CIVILTA' ,DEMOCRAZIA,LIBERTA',PACE SENZA LAVORO. NON C'E' LAVORO SENZA ECONOMIA. L'EURO HA UCCISO IRRIMEDIABILMENTE LA NOSTRA ECONOMIA. AL POPOLO LA SCELTA DELLA PROPRIA MONETA E DEL PROPRIO DESTINO

Conclusions

Our analysis has attempted to tackle the relationship among crises and sense making through the use of the internet. Again, quoting Angouri and Wodak: «Crises are characterized by uncertainty regarding the nature and potential consequences of the perceived threat(s). This is what motivates various groups and individuals (e.g. governments, the mass media, citizens) to engage in 'meaning making' by constructing stories and images that may reduce or increase uncertainty and conflict generated by crises» (Angouri, Wodak 2014).

The pitchfork demands to overthrow the government and for dissolution of Parliament, clearly demonstrate that "people" constructed their sense of the crisis mainly by blaming and opposing to those more visible and identifiable target: the political system as a whole.

This highlights two main aspects: 1) the protest failed to account for the systemic nature of the crisis and to recognize its essential capitalist roots. The

movement demands were all related to the rejection of the political system as a whole, to obtain more subsidies and to lower the level of taxation; 2) the protest substantially failed and disappeared from the spotlight as steadily as it aroused. Nonetheless, it served to make visible a growing phenomenon. In fact, anti-institutional Facebook pages has become popular and contribute daily to spread false news and interpretation of the crisis based on conspiracy theory and, also, anti-immigrant discourse.

While the internet undoubtedly proved to be an helpful tool to organize a de-centralised mass protest and somehow created new spaces for political discussion and engagement, this engagement was based only on a superficial urge to protest, fuelled by widespread feelings of discontent against the political system and the crisis.

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