Wrong turns towards revolution? Grassroots media and political participation in Italy (1967-2012)

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Summary: *The article presents a socio-historical analysis of the connections between media and participation in the political realm in Italy from the sixties, when social and political protests interrupted the pedagogical relationship between public (radio and TV), or commercial (newspapers) media and their audiences.*

In particular, the article focuses on three different phenomena in two phases: first, the social appropriation of cinema and the birth of the free radio stations during the historical period of the “Contestazione” (protest: from the late sixties to the late seventies); second the development of the blogosphere and social media and their relationship with political engagement during the last 10 years.

The examples demonstrate different forms of media appropriation related to different forms of participation. By the term appropriation, the author refers to the choice by collective parties to learn the communicative, organizational behavior and business of one or more media, in order to participate in social and political life.

In the years of the contestazione, in Italy, the practice of appropriation covered two traditional media: cinema and radio. Both, as we have seen, were put to the service of new expressive and participative needs related to politics. They became a place of socialization for a generation of young people (the baby boomers), highly educated and keen on change and modernization.

In the years after 2000, we still have forms of explicit political appropriation, for which, the web is central for participation and also for the building of new forms of representation in Beppe Grillo’s movement/party. In these forms the means of appropria-

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tion are different, because of the particular nature of social media, the different cultures and goals of the new generations using social media and for the new social and political framework.

Keywords: *media appropriation, media social history, Italian media, political participation*

Introduction

The following article presents a socio-historical analysis of the connections between media and participation in the political realm in Italy from the sixties, when social and political protests interrupted the pedagogical relationship between public (radio and TV), or commercial (newspapers) media and their audiences.

In particular, I will focus on three different phenomena in two phases: first, I will analyse (1) the social appropriation of cinema and (2) the birth of the free radio stations during the historical period of the “*Contestazione*” (*protest*: from the late sixties to the late seventies); then, (3) the development of the blogosphere and social media and their relationship with political engagement during the last 10 years.

The examples demonstrate different forms of media *appropriation* (a concept that will be defined later) related to different forms of participation. The basic thesis of this work is that these different forms depend not so much on the use of different media, but on profound socio-economic and political culture differences between the phases that involve different generations (the parents in the first period and children in the second), and have distinct political cultures. The article is comprised of two parts, each dedicated to a phase. For each phase, I will present a socio-historical description and then an analysis of the considered phenomena. In the conclusion, I will summarize the different forms of political participation through the appropriation of the media.

The '60s and the '70s: from school desks to the Media

This period, which is often called the *Contestazione* (*protest*), began in Italy in the years 1967/68, after the crisis of the political experience of the so-called

Center-Left alliance (between the Christian Democrats and the Italian Socialist Party), which had attempted to build a “well-tempered modernization of the Country” (according to the hypothesis formulated by Ginsborg, 2006). In 1967, the first student protest took place at the University of Trento, but it is also the year when the *Lettere a una professoressa* (*Letter to a Teacher*) was published, the book written by Don Lorenzo Milani’s “Boys of Barbiana”.

Don Lorenzo opened in Barbiana, a small town of Mugello, a school for the children of the popular classes, and carried out experiments of shared didactics and collective writing. The resistance of the traditional schools to the revolutionary experimentation of his little school, though, threatened to derail the project: several of his “pupils” were inexorably rejected at the official examinations. From the rebellion against this state of affairs came the *Lettere a una professoressa* (Scuola di Barbiana, 1967), in which the protagonists of the school of Barbiana denounced the entire school system, accusing it of classism and inconclusiveness in the face of illiteracy. Here is a small extract, example of the strongly “alternative” contents of the book:

Dear Lady, You won’t remember me or my name. You have failed so many of us. On the other hand I have often had thoughts about you, and the other teachers, and about that institution which you call ‘school’ and about the boys that you fail. You fail us right out into the fields and factories and then you forget us².

The complexity and the problematic nature of the Italian school system, which brought forth the generations of the protest are very important for our subject. School was central, indeed, for at least three reasons. The first one, of a structural nature, is the circularity between institutional innovation and demographic pressure. On one hand, the sixties marked a new focus on the school, and its necessary democratization (Gabusi, 2010): the launching (1962) of a uniform and compulsory middle school, the free distribution of textbooks (1964) in the elementary school; the modification (1969) of high school final exams, qualification and middle school exams and, in the same year, the liberalization of access to university and study plans. These turns promoted the access to education by an impressive number of “new students”, a number made even more explosive by the baby-boom years at the turn of the fifties and sixties.

² Translated by Nora Rossi and Tom Cole. This translation is linked to the English version of Wikipedia, article *Lorenzo Milani*, footnote 4 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lorenzo_Milani)

The second reason of centrality is that the new access to school for people “from the bottom” of the social ladder fed a growing demand for participation. Not surprisingly, another of the fundamental reforms of the school in the seventies is constituted by the School Regulation Reform (so called “*Decreti delegati*”) of 1974, which opened the doors of institutional government of schools to its “social partners”: students, parents and teachers. It is a participatory request that came from beyond and from inside the school, and more generally from the world of youth. Young people, after becoming (in the sixties) an important new target for the promotion of both cultural and general consumption, became protagonists in society, starting from 1966, with the symbolic gesture that brought thousands of students in Florence. They provided relief to the city, devastated by the flood, and saved precious masterpieces of art and cultural memory (Bargellini and Bargellini, 2006). Young people’s participation took new forms, even within the industrial sector, where the “new” young workers contributed innovative elements to the relationship between the unions and the companies that will last through the seventies.

The third reason consists in the cultural output that accompanied young people toward innovation and change. This new generation became simultaneously the target audience, the protagonists, as well as the content for radio, television, cinema, comics, books and the periodical publishing industry (Colombo, 2012).

As target audiences, young people were not only a new audience to be reached, but also a strata of the population who developed new ways of thinking. On the one hand, there was the rejection of the old school, the old university, the old media, the inadequacy of which was recognized. On the other hand, there was the revival of cultural trends and fads that drew on that same cultural tradition, albeit with a new force. A school still articulated and structured in the traditional way was in fact accompanied on one side by the pedagogical role of the public service broadcasting, and on the other by a hugely influential model of the middle-class family. In the second case, it was a model shared between classes and the two major sub-cultures (Catholic and Marxist) in the period of the reconstruction. So, if the school was no longer deemed sufficient, from a certain point of view young people of the sixties and seventies continued to think about the cultural exchange according to pedagogical models, and they followed for a certain period – in their alternative proposals – the same pattern

of the relationship between intellectuals and mass/audience on which the whole Italian cultural system was more or less explicitly based.

As protagonists, young people were enactors of the Italian cultural revival of the decade. This happened through the expansion and transformation of the consumption of for example films, publishing and music, but also through an independent production, often commissioned to countercultural circuits, of new genres, products and practices, from theater to songs, from movies to newspapers. This production changed – regardless of how we judge its influence – the overall picture of the national imagination, as the language developed by young literary authors, screenwriters, directors, radio presenters and journalists broke substantially with the previous language, becoming the bearer of new visions and values.

As content, young people became the ideal topics and themes of the products of mass narrative, amplifying a tradition that started abroad and that, in Italy too, had been a mainstay of the industrial production of culture, from *Pinocchio* (1881-83 by Carlo Collodi) to *Cuore* (*Heart*, 1886, by Edmondo De Amicis) from the *Giornalino di Gian Burrasca* (*Diary of Hurricane Johnny*, 1907, by Vamba) to the many young stars of Children Television. Of course, these were very different young people, motivated by demands for change: the son of the Commissario Spada, the character of the comic magazine of Catholic inspiration “*Il giornalino*”, drawn by Gianni De Luca and written by Gianluigi Gonnano (1970-1982), who struggled with the Oedipus conflict toward his father-police officer and with complex histories of domestic terrorism; the participants in Renzo Arbore’s live-recording TV broadcasting *Speciale per voi* (*Especially for you*, 1969/70), so active in “judging” the protagonists of the Italian song with no psychological subjection; Fortunato Santospirito, the young emigrated worker from the South, protagonist of the militant film *Trevico-Torino. Viaggio nel Fiat-nam* (*Trevico-Turin: Journey into the Fiat-nam*, 1973), by Ettore Scola and Diego Novelli; finally, in a completely different way, Rocco and Antonia, the two teenagers, children of the protest, whose erotic stories and paratactic language/thought were presented in *Porci con le ali* (*Pigs have Wings*), a novel by Marco Lombardo Radice and Lidia Ravera published by Savelli in 1976 and translated into a film by Paolo Pietrangeli in the following year.

So, young people were at the center of the Italian society and cultural industry: it was the student struggles that started the renewal cycle that would lead the country – in the short span of a decade – to change, to modernize and

globalize its face. Those struggles had their immediate and remote causes in the backwardness of the education system, displaced by a new student inflow that the system itself was unprepared to integrate into its ranks.

On the other hand, we can say that the crisis expressed by the student world was the first sign of a widespread feeling that disclosed the end of the boom expansion phase, and foreshadowed a future far more uncertain than that continuously prefigured by the naive consumerist promises of the official media. No wonder that the youth perceived, with a new collective sensibility, the crumbling of the postwar welfare myths, put to the test by industrialization, urbanization, and internal migration from agricultural regions of the South toward the industrial metropolis in the North. Therefore the labour movement finds in the young Southerners, unrelated to the traditional logic of the union, the strongest advocates of new forms of struggle.

In short, we can say that one or two generational cohorts, brought up with a homogeneous cultural and consumerist ideal, and recognized as central by politicians and the media, became key societal protagonists. An important part of this change was their new relationship with the media, through what I will call “media appropriation”, that is the ability not to be mere recipients or spectators, but also producers of cultural contents and products, innovating the forms and representations of the traditional media industry³.

The following analysis of two media appropriation phenomena, as a form of political and social participation, seeks to demonstrate the connection between these phenomena and the original mix of education and new consumption patterns that formed the generations involved. In the case of cinema, the utopia of a high culture democratization based on the school model prevailed, while in the case of the “free” radio stations it was the youth-oriented trends of consumption that dictated new modes of expression.

Cinema in cinema halls, magazines and film clubs

The relationship between cultural and political participation and cinema in the protest period was very complex. On the one hand, in fact, there was the

³ “‘Appropriation’ is Marx’s most general expression for the fact that man incorporates the nature he comes into contact with into himself. Activity enters this account as the chief means by which man appropriates objects and becomes, therefore, the effective medium between the individual and the outer world. Marx sees such activity in three special relationships to man’s powers: first, it is the premost example of their combined operation; second, it establishes new possibilities for their fulfillment by transforming nature and, hence, all nature imposed limitations; and third, it is the main means by which their own potential, as powers, is developed.” (Ollman, 1976: 138)

great effort to make the “seventh art” a means of grassroots production: cinema and audiovisual began to be “taught” in schools (fueled by a period of ferment and innovation), in some cases bringing experimentation up to the creation of short Super8 films. On the other hand, some theorists such as Roberto Faenza (1974) could see in the new technologies extraordinary possibilities extraordinary possibilities for so-called video-activism, which conceivably would, for example, challenge the traditional television news.

However, in those years, the contribution to the cinema brought by the new generations did not pass through production, but rather through interpretation and comment. Here, it needs to be clarified that the traditional school education of those years tended to promote, in the reading of films, a literary perspective, which consisted mainly in centering each film analysis on the figure and intentions of the “author” (the director). Curiously, while semiotics and Marxist critique highlighted, even in Italy, the often filmic nature of industrial and commercial products, the widespread knowledge on cinema (which remained an important and often central medium) still seemed idealistic and romantic. The participatory practice in cinema – in line with this attitude – materialized in the animated comments and discussion, both in magazines and in the widespread practice of film clubs.

It should be clear that, in the period we are considering, domestic film production was still firmly in the lead in terms of ticket sales, and the great Italian directors were at the heart of this production. In addition to old favorites such as Roberto Rossellini, Ermanno Olmi, Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Marco Ferreri, “young lions” such as Marco Bellocchio, Bernardo Bertolucci and the Taviani brothers began to be active, not to mention directors who definitively broke the primacy of men in the film authoriality, such as Liliana Cavani and Lina Wertmüller. Moreover, even in serial production, some directors went from obscurity to great fame and international recognition, as was the case of Sergio Leone, inventor of the commercial *spaghetti western* subgenre, and later a world-famous director. Finally, the cinema of civil commitment of Elio Petri, Damiano Damiani, and Sergio Lizzani was also highly popular and successful. Enjoying, analyzing, commenting on and criticizing these “authors” meant, therefore, participating in the cultural national debate, fostering a continued and fruitful collective discussion.

The years we are dealing with saw both the survival (often in new forms) of magazines from the previous decade, as well as heirs of the first post-war studies on the cinema by militant criticism that linked up with the wave of neo-realism and the emergence of new experiences. In all magazines, however, there was considerable social commitment, often overtly political. These magazines looked at the cinema as a means able to “reveal” the truth via art, or at least to arouse feelings and awareness in their artistic production. However, they seemed quite remote from the general public, even though the ranks of film fans simultaneously spread out to curious and culturally engaged young people⁴. The same happened during film discussions, which in those years became even richer in ideological disputes; there were various associations (mainly expression of the Catholic or left wing culture) that coordinated the organization and presentation of films in avant-garde cinema halls. What was characteristic in militant film criticism and cinema debates was the identification of the author (director) as a focal point. The authors were identified as examples of a cultural, intellectual and creative activity to which everybody could aspire in a new and more egalitarian kind of society, in terms of knowledge distribution and control of the means of production. In a recent book, based on a series of interviews with representatives of the baby boomer generation, I tried to narrate the film club experience and its demise from perhaps an unusual perspective. Allow me to quote here an extract of those pages which, though they are written in an essayist style, are the result of evidence gathered with rigorous ethnographic methods:

In addition to television and books, another of our generation's classrooms was represented by cinema. Obviously, films were also a wonderful opportunity for fun, both if we went alone - in the oratories' halls or in summer cinemas - (...) and with our parents in bigger cinema halls, to watch films for the family or for a more 'adult' public. It was a widespread fun, which permeated the city, extending radially from the center (first run cinemas) to the suburbs (reruns, and more and more distant cinemas) (...) Yet, even the TV has played, with regard to us, an important role of education toward

⁴ “After their great development in the years between the two World Wars, the next phase was one of decline: in Italy 194 magazines were being published between 1950 and 1959 and 56 between the 1960 and 1969, while in the 70's there were only 35 magazines. Essentially aimed at a target audience of film fans and insiders, and characterized by non-fictional slant, magazines from this period reflected the disaffection of the popular audience for the big screen” (Piredda, 2005: 300–301) [my translation].

the cinema. To avoid excessive claims by cinema owners, RAI prudently aired only old movies (i.e. released at least twenty years earlier): gangster movies and westerns of the forties; musicals; Laurel and Hardy, Bob Hope or Marx Brothers' comedies, not to mention Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. (...) So, the cinema became a parallel classroom (...) Yes. We went to film school, without knowing it, and also the 'television' cinema brought us to school, again and forever, because we became accustomed to think of the films as of audio-visual books that we looked at with respect and passion.

We later transferred this experience into a mature manifestation: the film club. During the winter, in the sixties and seventies, in all cities and in almost every village, some rooms (often in the parishes, but also 'secular' rooms or meeting rooms of cultural associations) filed debates about movies. There was an expert, who presented the 'author' (...) and the film. Then followed the film show, and finally there was a debate. (...) In cinema halls, as well as at home in front of the TV, it was not considered polite to leave after the screening, and then the rather many who did so, crept outside during the credits, in the shelter of the persistent darkness, before the debate started (...). In the film club experience two aspects were decisive: first, a 'democratic' idea of culture, which saw in the diffusion of cinema a kind of artistic mass pedagogy, even though it created a caste of priests (critics, film club conductors, film buffs, the first university teachers) dedicated to the worship of the seventh muse and the celebration of its rites. Secondly, there was the passion for discussion, even for harsh debate, in a context in which (...) dialogue and discussion were seen as the salt of society and democracy (...).

The year 1976 in particular, constituted a breaking point (...): when two very different films came out in cinemas, featuring surreal play scripts. The first is *I am Self-Sufficient* by Nanni Moretti, and the other is *The second, tragic Fantozzi* by Luciano Salce, on the subject of Paolo Villaggio. At the end of the first film, a cry raised: 'No debate! No debate!', which (finally) expressed the fatigue of the more self-critical intellectuals regarding a ritual in which they no longer believed, and that was dragging on wearily with its watchwords and its sometimes manic frenzies. In the second film, *Fantozzi*,

the protagonist, when compelled to participate in yet another debate on the film *Battleship Potemkin*, during a qualifying match between England and Italy, uttered the now famous proclamation: '*For me, Battleship Potemkin is nothing but crazy shit!*', giving rise to an endless applause. In that applause lies the revolt of the 'uncultured', tired of serious films, specific filmic, and mass pedagogy. It is the revolt of provincial and white collar Italy that has always looked with skepticism towards (...) dreams and (...) snobbery, in short, (...) utopias. (Colombo, 2008: 76–78 [my translation])

Radio Days

If the appropriation of cinema passed through discussions and analysis, other means became the instrument of collective expression, also for the drive towards change of more traditional institutions. It is the case of the radio, which was already in a state of renovation and reform in this period marked by the rise of the broadcasting freedom. In 1966, the great re-launching of Radio RAI, by Leone Piccioni had profoundly changed the public offering of radio content. In the same year, the music emission *Pervoigiovani* (*For you young people*) began, designed and conducted by Renzo Arbore and Maurizio Costanzo, which opened the radio station to young people, and began to teach them about British and American music genres of beat, rock and pop. In 1967, the Second Channel began broadcasting *Hit Parade*, led by Lelio Luttazzi, which, at lunchtime on Friday, proposed the ranking of the most successful songs of the moment on the Italian market. In 1968, *La Corrida* was inaugurated, a program of "amateurs" that has never lost its popularity in subsequent years. In 1969, the program *Chiamate Roma 3131* (*Call Rome 3131*) had the brilliant idea to contact the audience at home through the telephone (Monteleone, 2003: 394). In 1970, Renzo Arbore again (this time with Gianni Boncompagni) achieved an extraordinary success with *Alto Gradimento* (High Rating), a true "cult" radio show that expertly mixed music and typical characters wrapped in their own catchphrases, in the form of a surreal variety. For several years, the program was a fixed appointment for adolescents and young people at home for lunch after school, and the language and sketches it offered, often close to non-sense, were often cited by them (Grasso, 1985; Ortoleva, 2003; Dark, 2009).

These new initiatives created, between 1967 and 1974, a strong increase in the listening to Radio Rai, regularly registered by the surveys. Yet, despite the experimentation and novelties of the new Radio Rai, the drive to create new contexts and communication vehicles began to grow and bear fruit. Michele Sorice explains:

The first experience of free radios came in secret and without fanfare. The protagonists were not looking for technical quality (...), but for the possibility of opening new spaces of freedom of expression. So, in 1970, Danilo Dolci started broadcasting from Belice Valley with his *Radio Sicilia Libera*. An admittedly illegal experiment, which aimed more at drawing the attention to the issue of media freedom than at starting production processes: *Radio Sicilia Libera* was quickly switched off by law enforcement. (Sorice, 2001: 34) [my translation]

According to Sorice, the factors that enabled the development of free radios were three: “a) a strong social consensus that legitimized a different use of the radio medium (...), b) a type of broadcasting that tended to flow and deconstruct the tradition of the program schedule, getting the audience recognition as a dimension of democratic social life; c) the development of local advertising investments that allowed the creation of a previously non-existing market – accessible to small and medium sized operators, too” (Sorice, 2001: 34) [my translation]. To these factors, I would add the low cost of the equipment; if cinema required quite substantial investments and long production processes in order to reach audiences radio immediately allowed airing programs in the neighborhood, city, wider areas, and produced immediate notoriety and visibility, as well as social and political effects in the spreading of news and local counter-information.

What is certain is that the experimentation, provocatively started by Dolci, exploded with unimaginable strength: in 1977 there were 938 stations, equally distributed between city centers and peripheries. Northern Italy hosted about half of the stations, while the center and the south/islands (with a slight primacy of this last area) shared the other half (Trasatti, 1977). In short, “radio stations raised and developed, located in areas traditionally excluded from the spread of mass communication” (Sorice, 2001: 35). Of course, the story of free Italian radio stations is part of a supranational trend: in the seventies, in the UK, music radio stations broke the ether state monopoly (Radio Caroline I and

II, Radio Atlantis, Radio Seagull) through a series of gimmicks on the border of legality (e.g. broadcasting from ships moored outside the territorial waters). The main difference between the British and Italian “radio revolutions” was in the aims of the stations: mainly musical and commercial the earlier, more complex the latter. Indeed, part of the Italian independent radio station were absolutely similar to their British version, but a big part of them were – at the opposite – politically oriented (mainly to the left-wing parties), and their lives were strictly connected to the social and political movements of protest and participation.

In any case, they were all designed and made by young people. Were they music radios or (they broadcasted dedications from the small province or suburbs of large cities), or political ones, they embodied and spread an overwhelming desire of expression.

About the music radios Umberto Eco writes,

(Radio Milano International) began as a family radio, young men who take shifts bringing their girlfriend to the studio. It seemed as they did not want to talk politics (...) it went from small advertising on some restaurant or boutique to a very good style of advertising; it was clear that professionals had arrived, and the presenters improved their level, they were experts in the field. After the news started being broadcasted, the radio powered up: it was business, already. (Eco, 2003: 328–329) [my translation]

“This is Radio Bologna for a democratic information”: this announcement (23 November 1974: Dark, 2009: 43) is on the contrary the emblem of the politicized and engaged wave, not surprisingly inspired by Roberto Faenza, determined theorist of antagonist communication (Faenza, 1973). There is a thread that binds this type of broadcasting from Radio Popolare of Milan to Radio Alice of Bologna, protagonist of the ‘77 *movement* (a new wave of protests that was the expression of the *contestazione*): on the one hand the ideological awareness, on the other hand the tenacious roots in the respective territory.

However, beyond the polarization between the two instances, it is worthwhile to illustrate what the birth of free radio stations meant for the Italian scene: for the first time, young broadcasting stations showed that a generation raised in a media immersion (a generation of students and consumers, where education had fostered a new attention to cultural consumption) was able to innovate the medium of which it was a passionate consumer. It made it through some sort of organizational revolution, which could combine volunteering

loaded, with amateurism and with paradoxical communication effectiveness. On the spur of the moment, the comic writer Stefano Benni described the creative experience of an imaginary (but not too much) free radio:

One who calls to see if Marx Brothers films are in English.

One who asks: "Are you interested in knowing that here is one with his head crushed, full of blood, a destroyed Lambretta, a shoe here and one there, a mess."

One who wants Elisa

A comrade who wants to sell a turntable.

A comrade who wants to sell hamsters.

One who wants to listen to the *Genesis*, that song of the blue cover album, the third of the second side or the second of the third side, that goes like this: za-da-za-da-daaaaa, babum, taratara, rirara, but come on, how come you don't understand?

...

A noise, a whistle, a skipping record, one out of tune, a comrade who cannot speak, a self-confident one, a serious one, a brilliant one, an educated one, a stoned one (...) and then the news, radios turned on in prisons, closed radios, radios sticking out and there is never a penny... (Benni, 1978 [my translation]).

What is the reason for the success of these broadcasting radio stations, soon embedded in the large commercial and music business? According to Gianfranco Bettetini, they codified an equal relationship between broadcasters and audience, which previously could only take the form of "extraordinary testing" (Bettetini, 1985). Somehow, as the researcher suggests, the strong interaction between listeners and speakers abolished the last "institutional aura" of broadcasting, creating a new equal communication environment (and thus in consonance with the demands of the period). Yet, the new communicative citizenship to which the consumer had access, was not fully political. It was rather one aspect of that right, the right to consumption, which at the end of the decade incorporated and replaced the libertarian and participatory instances.

Perhaps we should re-evaluate the innocent, trivial and naive belief of that generation of broadcasters and consumers according to whom the new radio stations could better express not a strategy, but a whiff of freedom. From this point of view, it is worth remembering the simple, spontaneous ballad devoted

to these broadcasting stations by a songwriter of the last generation of committed singers-songwriters, Eugenio Finardi:

When I am home alone and alone I have to stay/ to finish a job or because I have a cold/ there is something very easy that I can do:/ turn on the radio/ and listen/ I love the radio/ because it comes from the people,/ enters our homes and speaks to us directly/ and if a radio is free, but truly free/ I like it even more, because it frees my mind/ While listening to the radio you can write, read or cook/ no need of standing still, sitting there to watch./ And maybe that's what makes me prefer it/ it is that listening to the radio/ you do not need to stop thinking" (Eugenio Finardi, *La radio*, 1976 [my translation]).

The libertarian expression

The seventies can be described, according to the perspective used here, as a decade of the multiplication of "voices" (Couldry, 2010). Generating pluralism in and of the communication subjects, the policy of "a Hundred Flowers" is nothing more than a new possibility for the citizens to access the public sphere, claimed, conquered, and ultimately lost – or rather sold – on the wave of disappointment or collective fatigue.

Of course, the desire to participate and "communicate their own opinion" was not devoid of ingenuity: it was an example of the parable of the so-called "programmi dell'accesso" of the post-reform RAI, in which groups of organized citizens showed their collective identity and their objectives in a frame of television broadcasting direction that was much too simple, almost amateurish. On the one hand, this type of broadcasting expressed the belief that expression and self-declaration was everything; on the other hand, the strenuous practice of public discourse, which required – to be effective – long preparation, awareness, and style, was forgotten. However, beyond all this, it is important to understand the form and content of this wave of collective expression, which characterized the decade, as it is important to ask what happened to it in the immediate aftermath, i.e. what was the legacy from the seventies to the culture of Italian society.

This legacy of expression, which we have briefly illustrated in the preceding pages, was based on societal needs that somehow questioned the present in the

light of a strong tradition of past militancy, although it was transferred to new players (especially young people). Firstly, this type of participation in the public debate represented a continuation of traditional forms of intellectuality, which it sometimes imitated in its stylistic motifs. From the cyclostyle to the Dazebao, from the documents of student assemblies to newspapers and their debates, the “words of revolution” fatally attracted – also in their rituals – the seriousness of “adult” politics that they wanted to challenge and overcome. The model of politics and its themes, with its strict seriousness, the effort and commitment it required, was (and still is) one of mass parties, even if it applied to small groups or even cliques. Large general issues remained central (the working class, the capitalist society, the role of the intellectuals), and political-participatory activities required demanding duties and tasks (meetings, demonstrations, leaflets ...). Yet macro or micro social practices that pointed to the transformation of the existing order operate according to rather prescriptive ideals.

Playing politics – especially in its militant dimension – was a commitment that involved inserting the individual not just as a volunteer into a collectivity, but also as a cog in the machinery of change, in which all energies had to be channeled by common visions. Of course, as evidenced by the splitting of the formations in the Alternative Left, this model had elements of contradiction, because the common ideals, when viewed up close, could be less “common” than previously thought, and the “strategic” obsession could sometimes (actually often) cancel the overall vision and the sense of the primacy of strategy tactics. However, this great immersion into serious politics served to give to many people the perception of having their own role in society; it introduced the habit to a critical look; it stimulated an intense role for intellectuals and an intellectual dimension of citizenship.

The *contestazione* was thrown into a crisis by some very specific factors: the evolution/involution of political participation into the violence and terrorism by a few but very effective activists; the paradigm shift in the Italian society, as in much of the Western world, by the neoliberal wave, with fundamental changes in economy, work and social fabric, education and cultural hegemony; the progressive reduction of the role of school and university as cultural agencies, able to transmit and keep alive the cultural heritage; the new centrality of television as a dominant medium (with the consequent crisis of the status of cinema, and especially of domestic cinema).

In the following years, Italian society met a decade of boosting innovation and consumption, financed by the growth of the public debt, followed by a major economic political and social crisis, between the eighties and nineties. And finally came the so-called *Berlusconian* period that lasted twenty years. These years have still been marked by moments of important mobilization, but we can say that only with the development of the web they have reappeared on a more central stage.

The years 2000 and the web

We have seen so far that the role of the media in the years of the *contestazione* was based on some very specific factors: first of all the presence of a broad youth base (a result of the population growth of the post-war years and the economic boom) that was highly educated and able to impact on the education system and absorb some of its cultural forms. Secondly, the collective experiences of participation and sharing that permeated the Italian society (as well as the international one), which saw politics as an essential dimension of social life. Finally, the instances of media appropriation, where the term *appropriation* refers to both the acquisition of literacy, and a willingness to learn how to use technological means for autonomous and direct self-expression. In the following decades, these three factors have been profoundly transformed:

a) The youth “class” has undergone a demographic resizing, becoming gradually less numerous and compact; its tide has gradually subsided, and the school is less seen as a place of genuine education. Indeed, the school has been gradually altered in its nature as a culture transmitter, to become a place of professional training, in the spirit of neoliberal reconstruction.

b) In Italy, as in much of the world, the participatory trajectory has been diminished by the powerful market-oriented groundswell that has gradually replaced collective ideals with individualism, sharing with success, cultural ideals with entrepreneurial work. The role of commercial television in this hegemonic transformation of the Italian society has been widely documented (Gozzini, 2013), and on the other hand, it's no coincidence that TV (after some experiments of “free” television in the latest 1970s) has never entered into the process of appropriation by users.

c) There have been very strong processes of technological *domestication* (see Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992), especially technological means of socialization,

without any particular instances of participation. This is particularly true of mobile phones, with Italy still being one of the leading countries in terms of diffusion and use (Colombo, 2001; Colombo and Scifo, 2005). With regard to the Internet, the story is a little different: Italy is relatively backward in terms of connections and broadband distribution; nowadays, however, in particular, the presence of social media is expanded, made easier by the spreading of smart-phones. When I speak of *domestication*, I emphasize the difference from the mechanisms that I described as *appropriation*. In the case of domestication, in fact, we have learning and adaptation that – starting from certain affordances – make the technology compatible with the user's home life. With the term appropriation, I refer instead to the attitude of learning that aims at subverting and adapting the same affordances of the medium, its organizational and economic structure.

From the 1980s to today, the differences in the context do not prevent explosions of political participation, also expressed through non-mainstream media (Pasquali and Sorice, 2005). This is the case of school and university movements such as the one called *La pantera* (the panther, 1989/90); the great wave of opinion that led to the 1993 electoral referendum, after the political and judicial scandal called *Tangentopoli*; the great collective indignation that followed the G8 Summit in Genoa (2001). For the sake of brevity, I would like to dwell here on some civic and political movements strongly linked to the emergence of web 2.0, in which the Italian case inserts itself into some more global trends.

Web and extemporaneous mobilization

The first scenario is that of web 2.0 as a tool for base mobilization, outside the relationship with traditional political institutions (see Dahlgren, 2009). In recent years, also in Italy, we have witnessed a phenomenon comparable to the various versions of *Occupy*, the Mexican movement *Yo soy 132*, the so-called *Arab Springs*, the *Green Movement* in Iran, the protest of Gezi Park in Turkey, the Spanish *Indignados*, all characterized by an original mix of spontaneity and organisation, land occupation and use of social networks.

The Italian examples are strongly linked to national peculiarities, i.e. the opposition to Silvio Berlusconi, the governments he chaired, and the culture he represented. A prime example of these movements and initiatives can be found

in the protests of the so-called *Popolo Viola* (Purple People), with the organization of the No Berlusconi Day (December 5th, 2009; in which they requested the resignation of premier Silvio Berlusconi) and the subsequent creation of an informal network (born out of a Facebook group). A second example is the women's movement *Se non ora quando* (If not now, when?), from 2011, which objected to the exploitation of women and their image in the Berlusconi political and mass culture. Also in this case, the social media (Twitter and Facebook especially) were key elements for the success of massive street demonstrations. In my opinion, the most relevant characteristics of these movements (in the context of this article) regarding the use of the web are two:

a) The conflicting relations with the traditional media; these can of course still filter the news for the general public, but the circulation of alternative social networks threatens them, because it selectively reaches exactly those citizens escaping the mainstream information, for intellectual curiosity or programmatic suspicion. Moreover, the news and comments on social networks have become sources that the media cannot ignore.

b) The social networks, as horizontal tools, ensure the best possible integration between the circulation of ideas and the organizational success of citizen-based political action (demonstrations, boycotts), without being rooted in organized structures such as political parties or trade unions. These demonstrations use the network and its potential of relations and circulation of ideas to build light organizational forms, which are particularly practical and consistent with the contemporary diffused sensitivities (Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy, 2013).

These movements have a limited duration in their superficial presence, while the activism that characterizes them remains in the protagonists' consciences and can play a long-term cultural role. They base their activism not only on the web, but also on physical territory, with an original integration of strategies and tactics. Often, the objectives of their politics (as Hardt and Negri, 2012 remind us) relate to the "common", i.e. the ownership of goods of which a share is claimed collectively and that constitute a new frontier in relation to the so-called "public". Sometimes web-based activism in Italy was put at the service of more traditional political occasions. This happened for example in the spring of 2011, during the campaign for local elections in some major cities, and the referendum against some privatizations of common assets (including water).

In that case, the strength of use of the social media in “traditional” campaigns was shown especially in the case of the election of the mayor of Milan, with the surprising victory of the Centre-Left candidate Giuliano Pisapia against the outgoing mayor Letizia Moratti, candidate of the Centre-Right (a coalition that had had a very broad consensus in Milan for years).

Web-politics

A second example of participatory use of the web in Italy is provided by The MoVimento 5 Stelle (Five stars movement), recalling – with some specificity – the German or Swedish Piraten Partei. To briefly explain its history: in 2005 a comedian, Beppe Grillo, who in the 1980s was a television star, and then continued in ecologist theatre shows, became a successful blogger. In his blog he suggested to use Meetup as a technology to coordinate activists who shared his critical ideas of consumption. In 2007 Grillo organized via his blog a protest against traditional politics, called V-Day (“Vaffanculo Day”), which had great success. In 2008, for the first time, the activists of Grillo’s movement participated in local elections. In 2009, the MoVimento 5 Stelle was officially founded, and it took part in the local elections of 2012 and, above all, in the 2013 elections, attaining eight million votes. Unable due to space to perform an in-depth analysis of the movement, I summarize here three features that I deem essential:

The first aspect is related to leadership. The movements that use the web emphasize the role of horizontal democracy, in which the “one head one vote” logic prevails. The philosophy of some of them, such as the Pirate Party or Occupy movements, recall in some way the utopia of the Paris Commune, which is translated into the rotation of those appointed to coordinate. MoVimento 5 Stelle appears more complex though, because it combines the rotation of the Parliament’s spokesperson among the elected candidates with a stable charismatic leader like Beppe Grillo (who, by the way, is also somehow the “owner” of the Statute of this movement and who shares some of the leadership role with Gianroberto Casaleggio). The coexistence of horizontal democracy and a strong leadership are typical of the “new movements”, and some theorise that this situation is essential to the renewal of politics. Philosophers such as Žižek (i.e. Žižek, 2010) and Badiou (i.e. Badiou, 2011), for example, argue that the new movements, consisting of informal organisations resulting from

specific dissatisfaction and anger towards traditional politics, do not have the ability to last.

In the case of MoVimento 5 Stelle, their leader does not run for an office while he continues to manage the political movement outside of institutions, often coming to a conflict with the elected representatives and their own choices. There have already been cases of expulsion of representatives who were considered traitors of the purity of the message of the MoVement certified by Beppe Grillo. Some paradoxes of these formations relate both to the ambiguous nature of leadership and with the issue of the formation of political elites, which is precisely the second node of the problem.

The second issue is that in spite of public statements, MoVimento 5 Stelle certainly has some elitist traits. In the first place, only a few thousands voters of listed representatives voted in the “Parlamentarie” (the primary elections for the parliament) and then in “Quirinarie” (the on line referendum to propose a candidate for the Presidency of the Republic). Their selection depends on the use of the network as a tool for aggregation and discussion, on participation on the blog comments or meet-ups, and not on class, gender and other forms of belonging and membership. Still we are speaking about elites. Besides, the elected representatives of the Movement are a sort of “superelite”, because chosen by a wider elite. Both of them describe themselves as opposed to and different than the rest of the political class, and they manifest their distinction in various ways, even in Parliament, with rather drastic speeches and haughty gestures (for example refusing to shake hands, the use of sarcasm and snobbery). This presumably conveys a sense of a prior moral superiority within the movement, an “otherness” to preserve and to defend against mainstream political culture. Thus there are very strict codes of conduct, which allow the expulsion of those who do not comply to them, with a mechanism that could be called elitist ostracism.

The third issue concerns the political discourse of the movement and of its charismatic leader. This discourse is often critiqued for being an expression of anti-politics, but here I argue that it is mainly counter-political: it seems to me a useful definition to include a form of expression that draws on the carnivalesque and the scatological, mocking the discourses made by the mainstream political ‘caste’ and media. The tradition of satire, from the politically acute to the more indulgent, is reused by Beppe Grillo in his speeches and in his blog in the name

of a new politics. The abysmal distance that this counter-discourse creates, compared to traditional political language, is an excellent tool for consent because it is simple and liberating (carnavalesque in fact, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word) to laugh at the opponents, at institutions and powers, thus tasting one's revenge.

Conclusions

In conclusion of this article, I would like to summarize its path and offer some inspiration. I followed the story of two different historical moments in which somehow (what Carpentier (2011) calls) the "participation through the media" was marked in Italy by processes of appropriation. By this term, I mean the choice by collective actors to learn the communicative, organizational behavior and business of one or more media, in order to participate in social and political life.

In the years of the *contestazione*, in Italy, the practice of appropriation covered two traditional media: cinema and radio. Both, as we have seen, were put to the service of new expressive and participative needs related to politics. They became a place of socialization for a generation of young people (the baby boomers), highly educated and keen on change and modernization. Of course, for their economic and organizational structure, cinema and radio were not appropriated in the same way: with cinema they attempted a critical appropriation, aimed at promoting the improvement of knowledge of the public and – as a consequence – the desirable diffusion of a more politically and aesthetically aware cinema. With radio the appropriation was in the sense of building a "new radio", very different from that of the monopolist public service, sometimes confused in objectives and contents, but still capable of changing the relationship with the public in a sense of greater closeness.

In the years after 2000, we still have forms of explicit political appropriation, for which, as we saw, the web is central for participation (as a protest or as electoral activism: see Carpentier, 2011), and also for the building of new forms of representation in Beppe Grillo's movement/party. In my opinion, these forms are very different from those of the earlier protest period for several reasons:

a) The means of appropriation are different: Social media tend by their nature (and interest) to build a membership and a strong use. Learning processes by users are required by Facebook or Twitter, both in the sense of literacy and

the actual production of content. Of course, radio and cinema are very different, as they grew up with a view of the traditional cultural industry, with a clear separation between production and consumption. In this case, therefore, the appropriation processes were more complex, tiring, and certainly collective, largely enacted by groups, while the use of social media is largely individualistic.

b) Social subjects have different cultures and goals: The young baby boomers lived in a strong participatory culture, had a strong education and a dialectic relationship with their traditional culture. Their children, protagonists of the post-2000 era, are less numerous and therefore less able to influence collectively with their social presence. Further, their shared culture is less traditional and less educated, more often linked to forms of consumption than to cultural transmission as heritage;

c) The social and political framework – including civic cultures – of the two moments are extremely different: At the time of the earlier protests, participation was intended as an essential element of an unfinished democratic system marked by strong iniquities. In the years after 2000 we are in presence of a strong sense of disillusionment, in which participation is even aimed at overcoming the democracy as we know it.

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