

To Be or Not to Be ‘Rousseauian’. The Rise and Fall of ‘Digital Utopianism’ in the Five Star Movement

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Abstract: A growing dissatisfaction with the political class has emerged in Italy. Inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the original strategy adopted by the Five Star Movement (FSM) was to connect citizens and institutions directly, thanks to ICTs. A participation platform called “Rousseau” was created to this end in 2016. However, after the Movement’s great success in the 2018 national elections, digital utopianism was gradually abandoned. In 2021, the statute was reformed, creating new roles and organs making the FSM more akin to a traditional party, and the ‘Rousseau’ platform was replaced by another one with limited functions. This evolution leads to three theses: first, the reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a mainly symbolic value for FSM; second, as recent facts show, this ideal reference weakened with the action of governing and the ‘normalisation’ of the party; third, this evolution confirms that the Rousseauian ideal is difficult to realise in a complex society.

Keywords: Rousseau, Five Star Movement, decision-making platform, direct democracy, representative democracy

1. Introduction

In Italy, a growing dissatisfaction with the political class has emerged: representatives are suspected of not being able to make effective decisions, of institutionalising the decision-making impasse, and of being unwilling to listen to the voices of citizens. Politicians are often compared to a “caste” (Stella and Rizzo, 2007).

The recent development of digital technologies might seem to offer a solution: through participation platforms it is technically possible to ‘overcome’ the mediation of the traditional political class and ‘directly connect’ citizens and institutions. This has been the strategy adopted by the so-called ‘digital parties’, which have attempted to use digital tools to increase participation (Gerbaudo 2018). After the crisis of the mass parties, and the ‘personal parties’ of the 90s, digital technologies have

had the effect of prompting the construction of new political organisations. One of the most successful examples of a digital party is the Five Star Movement (FSM) in Italy.

This paper presents the evolution of the FSM in relation to the political philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The crisis of conventional participation (Mair, 2013) and the spread of new communication technologies have breathed new life into direct participation with the name of its theorist, Rousseau. But, after having elevated Rousseau to be its major inspirer, the FSM seems to have recently changed its position. The analysis of this evolution leads us to three theses: first, the reference to Rousseau (and to 'horizontal' democracy) had a mainly symbolic value for the FSM; second, as the facts of 2021 show (revision of the statute and abandonment of the "Rousseau" platform), this reference weakened when the party was 'normalised', being confronted with the action of governing; third, without denying the value of citizen participation and the innovative capacity of the FSM, this evolution confirms that the Rousseau ideal is difficult to realise in a complex society, despite the use of new technologies, due to a series of fundamental problems.

The article proposes a theoretical and qualitative research, linking theories and observations together in a continuous and close interaction between the conceptual and empirical worlds (Dey, 2003). From the empirical point of view, a direct observation of the "Rousseau" and "Skyvote" participation platforms was carried out first of all. Secondly, an in-depth documentary research was undertaken, both through the analysis of primary documents (Beppe Grillo's shows and rallies, media interventions and interviews by Gianroberto Casaleggio, statements by leading exponents of the Movement) and through the analysis of secondary documents (news on the use of the "Rousseau" platform, news articles from leading Italian newspapers) (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). This observation was instrumental for formulating an interpretative process regarding the evolution of the FSM in relation to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideal participatory model.

The first part of the paper (sections 2 and 3) consists in an analysis of the theoretical foundations of the FSM, and in an explanation of the reason why, at the outset, the philosopher Rousseau was explicitly chosen as the main ideologue. In 2016, the FSM built a participation platform on the Internet, namely "Rousseau": the choice of this name was not accidental. According to Rousseau's perspective, the citizens of a representative democracy believe they are free. However, he believed that they are wrong, because they are only free during the election of members of parliament. As soon as the parliamentarians are elected, the citizens become slaves again. At the heart of Rousseau's philosophical proposal is the 'liberation' of citizens through their direct involvement. There were several points in common between the Italian party and Rousseau's theories. The similarities concerned, for example, the preference for the imperative mandate, the methods for seeking the general will/common good (centred on civic virtues such as honesty, or on intolerance towards traditional intermediate bodies), the figure of the Legislator/Guarantor (a charismatic figure who intervenes 'from the outside' in decision-making processes, present both in the republic of Rousseau and in the FSM), and the pedagogy (in the book *Émile* and in the FSM platform).

However, this Rousseauian project, which characterised the foundation of the FSM, has weakened considerably in recent years (section 4). After having carried out an analysis of the original project, in the second part we will investigate the fall of the Rousseau myth within the FSM. Especially after the electoral victory in 2018, the Movement entered a phase of 'normalisation', moving

closer and closer to traditional parties (Biancalana and Colloca, 2018). FSM has been permanently governing Italy for four years, although with different majorities and premiers. The party organisation no longer consists only of the founders and militants who expressed their will through the digital platform, but also of numerous ministers, deputy ministers, parliamentarians, regional and municipal councillors, and mayors. The year 2021 seems to have been decisive in terms of the normalisation process: the statute of FSM has been reformed, moving away from the Rousseauian notion of the organisation, and the initial platform, which bore the Geneva philosopher's name, was even abandoned, and replaced by the alternative platform (called "Skyvote").

In our view, this evolution is unsurprising because there are several problems that can arise when digital parties try to realise a political project inspired by Rousseau (section 5). Not only could some rights experience a regression owing to technology (security and voter anonymity, and limits on participation owing to the digital gap) but, most of all, the Rousseauian ideal pursued through the use of ICTs would not respect the cognitive and social characteristics of human beings (bounded rationality and society's specialisation). The issue of participation inequality emerges. On the contrary, parties allow citizens to participate and express their opinion without giving them hard tasks. Moreover, as will be explained in section 5, the ideal achieved might lead to issues regarding the quality of the decisional output. A continuous, intense, and direct participation might lead to questionable outcomes such as directism, extremism, particularism. On the other hand, 'traditional' representative democracy promotes the bringing together of people, compromise, mediation, and elaboration.

Because of the recent evolution of the FSM, and the fundamental problems that we have tried to illustrate, it seems that the experience of 'political directism' promoted by FSM is, in fact, incorporated and 'normalised' in Italian representative democracy (section 6). We have not witnessed a 'disintermediation' of political representatives towards a model of 'horizontal' democracy, but it rather seems that the forms of representative parties are being renewed. Technologies could be used to foster communication, and to increase it, but they hardly lead to a Rousseauian direct participation. The benefits of representative processes were explained by Habermas (1992) and concern the relationship between the centre and the periphery. Representative institutions (the centre) have an important role to play in unburdening activities (and allowing society to produce wealth), but their role cannot be independent of people's power (the periphery). When a new problem arises, citizenship comes into play with its legitimising and political functions. Perhaps a digital party such as FSM could try to increase membership inclusion through ICTs, and effectively innovate parties, but within representative democracy, without realising Rousseau's ideals.

2. The rise of the 'cyber-optimistic' approach in the FSM

In *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2015), Castells describes the crisis of political legitimacy in Western democracies. However, in a situation characterised by thousands of individual voices, the Internet emerges as a new space for participation. Online, people can meet one another and create networks, which allow individuals to share purposes and messages. Italy has been a particularly interesting workshop in terms of this approach: during the great recession (2007-2013), the Italian political

systems were shaken by the eruption of the FSM, known for having made extensive use of digital tools.

FSM was founded in 2009 by comedian and political activist Beppe Grillo, and digital entrepreneur, Gianroberto Casaleggio. Gianroberto passed away in 2016, but his son, Davide Casaleggio, picked up his political legacy. The narrative that emerged from the analysis of the founders' discourses has been defined as 'cyber-optimistic' (Biancalana, 2014; Mosca et al., 2015; Mosca, 2018). Coherently, from the very beginning of the Movement's life, the Internet was chosen as the main arena for the political challenge - and this is why the Movement earned the name "digital party" (Gerbaudo 2018). From the very beginning, the Internet has been a fundamental channel for coordination and organisation, with a clear division of functions: Grillo's blog furnished cues and ideas for organising activists' communication, the Movement's blog provided coordination and discussion tools, while the websites of regional and city bodies led campaigns on a local level, together with Meetup groups and also posting the candidates' profiles on various social networks (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013). Finally, a digital platform for participation was added.

The Movement was meant to prompt modes of 'direct democracy' in contrast to representative democracy, and to be fiercely 'anti-party'. According to the founders of the Movement, ICTs are the instruments for achieving this aim, because they are assumed to create a telematic 'agora' where citizens can communicate and take decisions about political matters in real time (De Rosa, 2013, Mosca et al., 2015). In its vision of Internet-based politics, the FSM aimed to provide a moral offset to what was proclaimed to be the corrupt and elitist Italian political system. Casaleggio (2018: 39) wrote that "our experience is proof of how the Internet has made the established parties, and the previous organisational model of democratic politics more generally, obsolete and uneconomic". The narrative used by the FSM was aligned with digital utopianism: a deterministic belief in the power of technology to bring about a positive change (Natale and Ballatore, 2014). The Internet was understood as an 'ontological' creator of horizontal, transparent, participatory and non-hierarchical processes (Biancalana and Vittori, 2021). According to this approach, the FSM would not be organised like other parties (with a recognised central office, a chief decision-maker and professional politicians). Rather, the backbone of decision-making would consist of members making their will known through the party platform. To this end, Casaleggio developed a new online platform for the movement, which was launched in 2016.

"Rousseau" - the name of the digital platform - was not a random choice. From Casaleggio's point of view, the promise was to achieve direct democracy through ICTs aimed at overcoming the flaw that Rousseau attributed to representative democracy: the citizens of a representative democracy erroneously believe that they are free, whereas they only are free when they vote for Members of Parliament; once these MPs are elected, citizens become slaves once again (1762a, III, 15). In a representative democracy, decisions concerning the entire community are not taken directly by its members, but by purposely-elected persons. In contrast, in a direct democracy, citizen participation should be open to anyone and should be direct. According to Casaleggio (2017: 14), Rousseau's name was chosen for the platform as he believed that the only way to know what people want is to ask them. As Gherardi (2019: 103) writes: "The symbolic meaning of choosing Rousseau's name becomes crucial from the point of view of the fundamental pillars of Five Star Movement's political proposal:

debate over representative democracy's deviations, moralisation of politics itself and a call to a new direct democracy which, through the Internet, would actively involve illuminated and virtuous citizens".

The "Rousseau" platform became the 'operational system' of the FSM (Deseriis, 2017). According to the website, rousseau.movimento5stelle.it (no longer available), "Rousseau" was "Five Star Movement's direct democracy platform. Its aims are the administration of Five Star Movement when it comes to electoral matters (Italian and European Parliaments, regional and town councils) and the participation of registered members to Five Star Movement's life, for example through writing laws and voting to choose electoral rolls or to annul a position in the Movement". It was a digital participation platform where members might discuss, amend, and vote their own legislative proposals (these functions were called "Lex Parlamento", "Lex Regionale" and "Lex Europa"), and they also were able to choose their representatives, local as well as central administrators (this function was called "Vota"). Other functions of the platform were intended for "Sharing" (sharing legal proposals and town and regional documents), "Fund Raising", "Call to action" (to give life to initiatives for active citizens), "E-Learning" (online courses about institutional activity - through this tool both politicians and citizens could deepen their knowledge of political, economic and legal issues), "Web Shield" (legal support for sued bloggers).

The aim, which was inspired by writings of philosopher Rousseau, was to achieve as much direct participation as possible, using technology in order to complete and replace the traditional form of participation (and of parties) of representative democracy. Thanks to the "Rousseau" platform, the community could have direct participation in deliberations. Because of the ideological importance of the digital platform, it is assumed that Davide Casaleggio was one of the leaders of the Five Star Movement without holding a formal position. His importance lay in his enhancing of the movement's use of the Internet.

3. The theoretical foundations of the "Rousseau" platform

Rousseau is the author to whom we owe the theorisation of democracy as a system founded on people's power. In particular, Rousseau is generally considered as the founder of the idea of democracy in its most radical form, i.e. direct democracy.

According to Rousseau's doctrine, the State originates through a contract by which everyone gives up unlimited freedom, not in order to submit to a sovereign, but rather to receive the same renunciation by all other citizens. Thus, the pact must be made by equal individuals and be in the 'hands of community', not in the hands of an alien power such as is found in the case of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (Fetscher, 1972, 92-93). While Hobbes thought there were only subjects, Rousseau believed that the pact produces citizens who are equal in front of the "general will", and that citizens are conceived as a moral body which becomes the bearer of their own requests.¹ In line with this

¹ According to Rousseau, every individual gives up his anarchical will to submit to the unanimous will of the State but, as a member of the sovereign body, he is able to make the law by which he swore to abide and therefore remains free.

foundational pact, Rousseau believed it is better to entrust the direct exercise of power to all people (Noone, 1970; Putterman, 2010). Sovereignty can neither be represented nor alienated: basically, sovereignty coincides with “general will”, and will cannot be represented.

The result is that sovereign power is exercised by the assembly of all members of the community gathered together, and that every law expressed by the general will must aim at the common good, and not at favouring certain groups (e.g. a party or a corporation). Thus, sovereign power is inalienable and cannot be exercised by one or more elected representatives in the name of citizens. Commissioners can be chosen, but only for executive tasks, and can be dismissed at any moment. The absence of the imperative mandate is rejected. The mandate is imperative and can be revoked at any moment.

In this model, presented in the book *The Social Contract* (1762a), the distinction between everyone’s will and the general will is particularly important: the former is a mere sum of individual wills and is thus the expression of the prevalent private interests in a given situation; the latter is prescriptive and aims at common interest, i.e. common good (1762a, II, p.3). Rousseau also investigates where and how to find this will, and how to let it express itself and support its expression. He believes that the only way to determine the general will is by consulting every single citizen, since all citizens together form the community. Nevertheless, the consultation of all citizens might also fail to show the general will (in the event that the interviewed citizens only pursue their individual profit instead of common interest). Thus, the general will might emerge if at least the majority of citizens is virtuous enough to favour the general interest over individual profit (Fetscher, 1972, 113).

The conditions to make general interest prevail are of a moral kind (Rousseau believed that patriotic virtues and feelings are fundamental, for example), but are also related to the mechanisms and the characteristics of the voting process. For instance, he thought that the particular and conflicting interests of individuals are usually annulled by summing up the votes, and that the final result displays the general will². Consequently, there must be no organised groups or parties for the general will to emerge, since they might unite and impose their will, to the detriment of the community (1762a, II, 3). Thus, the formation of groups, parties or associations of this kind should be avoided.

However, in spite of ethical and institutional antidotes, Rousseau wondered how to entrust the crucial and hard task of elaborating the Republic’s laws to a shapeless multitude of citizens, especially when it comes to preparing a constitutional draft. As explained by Casini (1999, 41), who summarised Rousseau’s line of reasoning, people always yearn for the good on their own, but are never able to see where it is on their own; it is therefore necessary to show them the right path. According to Rousseau, citizens need a guide called a “Legislator”. This figure is not representative of a clique or of an illuminated élite, but rather is a charismatic person, the creator of a fair system of cohabitation rules, who is able to facilitate the emergence of human beings’ fundamental

² It is thus assumed that the egoistic and individual wills of bad citizens are contradictory, and just end up neutralising each other, allowing the general will to stand out.

kindness and good sense. The Legislator does not have the task of exercising power directly, but acts through the technique of persuasion and the ability to use pedagogic illustration (1762a, II, 7). He gives spirit to the political body but does not have power over the will which moves the body (Fetscher, 1972, 128).³

The main elements of Rousseau's theory were reflected, in a symbolic way, in the foundational narrative of the FSM. There were many similarities, e.g. the role of the preference for the imperative mandate (generally absent in representative democracies), the ways to seek the general will/common good (focused on civic virtues such as honesty or intolerance of intermediate bodies), the role of the Legislator/Guarantor, a charismatic person who intervenes in the decisional processes from the outside, the style of party pedagogy (in the "e-learning" section of the platform). Of course, while these analogies are mostly symbolic, they are significant, since they show how modern the Rousseauian ideal is, and how it has even affected Italian democratic politics.

The first analogy concerns the imperative mandate. According to Rousseau, creating a State where people may gather to make laws is not enough: it is also necessary to appoint rulers who only have definite executive tasks, and the right of people to revoke the mandate has to be maintained. Thus, people's deputies are not their representatives, but only their commissioners. The FSM coherently defines MPs as mere "spokespersons", i.e. people who have no decision-making autonomy (or just a limited amount of autonomy) and who only have the power to speak in the name of the people they represent, strictly respecting the mandate given by the platform's registered members.

The second analogy concerns the ways in which the general will might be sought. As explained earlier, Rousseau makes a distinction between everybody's will and the general will: the former is a mere sum of individual wills and is thus, the expression of prevalent individual interests in a given situation, while the latter is normative and aims at the common good. Rousseau gives two possible answers to the question of where and how to find this normative will. The first is linked to moral conditions, and thus, to patriotic virtues and feelings – and this is why it is so meaningful that the FSM's main motto is 'honesty', a moral virtue, and not 'less taxes' or 'for the many, not for the few'. The second is linked to structural conditions: the individual and contrasting interests of individuals must be annulled. Consequently, the formation of parties must be avoided, or at least restricted. It is evident that the FSM is a party, albeit a digital one, but it must be noted that it has defined itself as a "movement".

The third analogy concerns the role of the Legislator/Guarantor. Rousseau wondered how it is possible to entrust the hard task of the Republic's law-making to a shapeless multitude. As discussed

³ As a matter of fact, the Legislator's duty is not part of the Republic's Constitution: who "makes" the Constitution and affects law-making is not himself a member or a body of the State. The Legislator is obviously a problematic figure who is needed to achieve the general will; at the same time however, it also shows how hard it is for citizens' interests to emerge independently and directly. According to Rousseau, people are not always the main actors of the political process, on the one hand because they are easily deceived by skilful men who try to impose their will, on the other because the general will might only be sought thanks to a virtuous Legislator, a honest and charismatic leader. What comes out, then, is a concept which strays from direct democracy and comes nearer to a charismatic idea of the relationship between people and leaders (Talmon, 1952).

earlier, since people always seek the good, but are often unable to do so on their own, they need a charismatic and moral leader, referred to as the “Legislator” by Rousseau. Its role is not included in the organisation; rather it is external. The Legislator’s task is to prompt people to act, but he has no power over their will, and this is exactly Beppe Grillo’s role, as he is called the “Guarantor” by the FSM. Beppe Grillo is (with Casaleggio) the creator of the Movement, and his role has been fundamental during the formation phase (the same phase in which the Legislator is particularly important, according to Rousseau) and still intervenes from the outside, with no formal power, but with charisma.

The fourth analogy, pointed out by Stockman and Scalia (2020), is linked to the previous one, and relates to the pedagogy. In Rousseau’s book, *Emile* (1762b), an orphan is educated by his tutor. Emile is removed from society at birth, in order to have a good, moral upbringing away from the corrupting influence of his environment. The goal is for Emile to become a member of the political community once he has been educated to be independent and critically-minded. However, freedom and independence seem to be an illusion, because he plays with and explores just those materials, and in just those ways, and therefore learns just those lessons that the master has chosen for him. Something similar happens on the Rousseau platform: in the ‘E-learning’ section, informative content is intended to function as a free peer-training platform. However, much like “Emile must be taught to love virtue because he is not able on his own to discover the wisdom to govern his actions in accordance with reason” (Reisert, 2003: 145), platform users are also guided in an attempt to overcome the powerlessness that stems from lack of knowledge and allows them to engage in purposeful action – guidance which will strengthen the FSM’s ultimate aims.

4. The fall of the “cyber-optimistic” approach in the FSM

Since its foundation, down to the most recent political elections in Italy in 2018, the FSM has greatly increased its popular support. The electoral success of February 2018 has allowed the FSM to bring 338 representatives into parliament (227 deputies and 111 senators). To these, 11 Members of the European Parliament were added in 2019. The influence of the FSM increased even at local and regional levels: the party elected hundreds of municipal councillors, regional councillors, and also the mayors of important cities (Chiara Appendino, mayor of Turin, and Virginia Raggi, mayor of Rome, in 2016). Entering representative institutions and government is always a critical move (Pedersen, 1982), even more so in the case of anti-establishment parties, because of the ‘risk’ of normalisation. The party must adapt to new codes of conduct, and it could lose its original spirit. This is what happened, as we shall see, to the FSM, which has recently introduced a series of organisational innovations.

Numerous studies have reported that the push towards direct participation was the setting up of a strictly hierarchical organisation, in which Casaleggio and Grillo had the last word on the most important decisions (Biancalana and Piccio, 2017; Giacomini, 2021). According to Gerbaudo (2018), in the original party there were “hyperleaders” and “superbase”. “Hyperleaders” were the founders, without whom the organisation would not exist. They presented themselves as guarantors of the founding principles. The “superbase”, on the other hand, was the mass of members who ex-

pressed themselves through the digital platform. The “superbase” was mirrored in the “hyperleader”, and the “adversarial alliance” between the two reduced the importance of the intermediate levels, the bureaucratic structure of parties (which Rousseau suspected of distorting the will of the people). However, in recent years, the role of the intermediate bodies within the organisation has progressively increased.

As Tronconi (2018) pointed out, the party’s entry into representative institutions changed its internal balance, and introduced a challenge: alongside the party in central office and the party on the field, there was, at this point, a substantial party in public office. Over time, and on several occasions, the statutes and rules of the party were reformed, and intermediate bodies and a party-like structure were created. A first sign of this trend emerged in November 2014 when a “directorate” of five parliamentarians was announced on the blog, and confirmed on the same day by the vote of the members. From that moment on, parliamentarians were intended to be not only mere spokespersons: they were granted autonomy. The aim was to create a core leadership group (with a bureaucratic structure) that went beyond the two founders and included the most influential MPs. This was the first explicit break with the Rousseauian principle of the ‘alliance’ between the “hyperleader-legislator” and the “superbase-general assembly”. Later, in September 2016, Grillo himself (Gianroberto Casaleggio had passed away a few months earlier) announced that the directorate was dissolved, while issuing new rules which established the figure of the “political leader” (*capo politico*) of the party. Since 2017, the “political leader” (essentially a party secretary, in the person of MP Luigi Di Maio) has acquired a substantial role within the party.

Moreover, a new “*statuto*” was approved in August 2021. According to Coduti (2021), its characteristic feature is that it tries to adopt – at least in part – the typical organisation of the party. Instead of the “political leader”, the figure of the President is established. This position is currently held by Giuseppe Conte, former Italian Prime Minister (2018-2021). This monocratic figure is more incisive than the old political leader. The President is responsible for determining the political direction of the FSM. However, the most relevant aspect is that, while the “political leader” had a role linked to the participation of the Movement in the political elections, that of the President is aimed at the management of the party (and at strengthening the bureaucratic structure). The President has been given numerous powers to appoint and chair the bodies of the Movement, as well as a relevant role in the management of resources. In addition, he has support offices that provide him with a more structured position, and the ability to exercise effective management of the movement (e.g. he is assisted by a secretarial office). These are significant innovations, which in many respects equate the President with the leadership of traditional parties.

The Guarantor (in the person of Beppe Grillo) maintains his importance in the new statute (he is defined as the “guardian” of the “fundamental values of political action” of the FSM and “has the power to interpret the statute”), but with changes. The Guarantor will have less power of interdiction over deliberations. In addition, under the 2017 statute, within five days of the online consultations, the Guarantor (or the “political leader”) could request a re-run of the votes on the platform. This was a prerogative that allowed the Guarantor to override the outcome of any consultation, without having to clarify the reasons for such an intervention. In the new statute, this power is limited to cases where flaws, irregularities or violations of the statute have been detected while voting

that would have altered the results. This new rule, requiring a precise motivation, circumscribes the hypotheses by which the Guarantor can deprive the result of the consultations of their effectiveness. The power of the Rousseau-like “legislator” within the FSM is thus reduced.

Between “hyperleader” and “super-base”, new intermediate bodies are developing. Firstly, the National Council is a new body in the organisation, and is intended to assist the President of the Movement. It is a potentially wide-ranging organ, as in addition to the President, it could be composed of Vice-Presidents, the Presidents of national and European parliamentary groups, possible representatives in the government, coordinators of specific committees, and some territorial organisations. Secondly, the Assembly of the FSM is going to assume more responsibilities. In addition to approving the political documents proposed by the President, electing the Treasurer, proposing guidelines for the adoption or amendment of regulations, deciding on amendments to the statute, the dissolution of the Movement, or the devolution of its assets, the Assembly will also elect the President, elect committee members, vote against the President and the other committees, approve the budget, decide on the revision of the charter of principles and values, and decide on the amendment of the code of ethics. Although the Assembly can still be bypassed by consultations through the Internet, these changes could strengthen the Assembly’s role, both by virtue of the number of powers and of the importance of some of them.

According to President Conte, “The Movement has a new structure, with new bodies and new roles”. Even clearer is MP D’Uva, who declared: “in terms of structure we are getting very close to the form of the party”. While in the past, based on Rousseau’s theory, the FSM adamantly refused to consider itself a party, the situation has now changed radically on this point. There is no doubt that the new statute adopts – at least in some crucial parts – the typical organisation of a party. The statute seems to enhance the value of the President, who is destined to take care of the management of the Movement, its organisation and its functioning, with the support of a structure that should foster organisational capacity. This could also allow for a greater structuring of the organisation, which could become more articulated, and also from a territorial point of view, more stable. The National Council has been created, and the powers of the Assembly have been strengthened. There is no mention of the imperative mandate, another notion that previously had linked the FSM with Rousseau’s “horizontalist” philosophy. References to moral virtues such as honesty (formerly clearly preponderant) are juxtaposed with more traditional political values, such as social justice, respect for the commons and for the environment.

Finally, the FSM has decided no longer to use the “Rousseau” platform as managed by Casaleggio (who has retired from the Movement), and to replace it with another IT platform (entitled “Skyvote”). The symbolic reference to the theorist of direct democracy is thus definitively lost. “Skyvote”, according to the company that manages it, allows for the modernisation and simplification of the voting processes typical of parliamentary, elective, and administrative assemblies, and of public and private companies, thanks to a legally-validated digital process. “Skyvote” has been used by various organisations such as the CISL school union, the Lazio and Lombardy orders of journalists, RAI and the Italian Football Federation. Even a political party has used “Skyvote”: the Democratic Party of Ancona. The fundamental aspect is that “Skyvote” only allows for voting. It is therefore more limited than “Rousseau”. For example, the E-Learning function is no longer available. In

its place, the new statute provides for the construction of a more “traditional” political training school. The fourth analogy between Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which Stockman and Scalia (2019) identified as the pedagogy of individuals, has also been weakened.

5. Why the Rousseauian ideal is hardly practicable: Three issues

The latest events indicate a change in the party’s structure and image. From being an organisation inspired by Rousseau that wanted to bring direct participation into 21st-century politics, the FSM has become more and more party-like, ‘normalising’ itself. In our opinion, Rousseau’s approach is extremely difficult to implement in practice, not just because the FSM has entered representative institutions and has changed its internal balance, but also due to three issues: the issue of insecurity, the issue of participation inequality, and the issue of the overcoming of the representatives.

The first problem concerns the digital platform itself. Deseriis (2017) questions the running of the platform on a proprietary source code, which doesn’t seem well-aligned with the values of transparency and openness. Other criticisms concern data management, and protecting personal information from security threats (Federici, Braccini, and Saebø, 2015, p. 292). For example, it is alleged that in 2017 the platform was twice hacked: registered members’ and elected representatives’ data were stolen, and this led to a debate about the possible manipulation of votes on the platform (Frediani and Lombardo, 2017). In addition, a journalistic investigation found that members of the platform could vote several times, without any hindrance (Angius, 2020). Finally, in 2019, the Italian Privacy Authority fined “Rousseau” for its security flaws. According to the authority, the FSM platform did not guarantee anonymity and lent itself to vote manipulation (Giacobini 2019).

Theoretically, e-voting might involve risk: in the case of paper ballots, the citizen may control his actions; in the case of electronic voting, the citizen generates a signal which not only leads to pixels forming on the screen, but also to a series of imperceptible operations. In the first case, scrutinising the voting process can be carried out by any citizen. In the second case, only a small minority of citizens (computer technicians) would be able to carry out verifications. When it comes to security and checking the validity of the expression of the general will, digital voting risks being less controllable by the citizens, compared with a paper ballot.

A second point arising from the Italian experience of the “Rousseau” platform is participation inequality. In 2013 fewer than 100 votes were often enough to become a Parliamentary candidate (and subsequently an MP) of FSM: the votes of one’s friends could thus be sufficient. Luigi Di Maio, who was vice president of The Chamber of Deputies from 2013 to 2018, and prime ministerial candidate in 2018, only needed 189 votes (Corbetta, 2017). In the following years, the participation rate has not grown substantially. Not all registered members might spend time on political reflection, and this might lead to the self-selection of effective participants.

Human beings do not have limitless minds, nor an unlimited ability to calculate. Simon (1982) studied the effective calculation abilities of individuals and described them as being “bounded rational”. Human beings are “cognitive economizers” (Tversky and Kahneman, 2000) in that they must cope with a great number of stimuli and make many decisions every day. They must choose

which issues they should spend their (limited) cognitive resources on and politics may only be one out of various interests for many people. That's why participation inequality appears to be an emerging problem for the platform (Federici et al., 2015); it is already a well-known issue of the internet in general. Even if users have the ability to browse and generate content, those who perform this action are in a minority. Nielsen (2006) describes this phenomenon as the "90-9-1 rule": online communities consist of 90% lurkers (i.e. passive observers), 9% users who produce their own content sporadically and 1% of users who produce content assiduously. An active attitude is adopted by only a small number of online users. Society's specialisation must also be taken into consideration, as it is growing fast as society progresses (Durkheim, 1893). A continuous and intense participation is hardly feasible in a society which encourages specialisation in terms of activities.

Participation inequality could also be linked to the digital divide: there are people who are able to participate in political life by means of technology, and people who just cannot (Norris, 2002). FSM has never released statistics about the age of the "Rousseau" platform participants. However, we do know that FSM lures young voters in particular:⁴ elderly citizens would most probably be excluded from digital voting. Using digital instruments could amplify already existing social, economic and cultural gaps (Warschauer, 2003; Fuchs, 2009). The digital gap might be reduced in the future, but could also intensify, not only because it might follow other gaps (economic, social, cultural, etc.), but also because digital innovation is very fast, and individuals' skills soon become inadequate. If political participation is linked to IT skills and keeping up-to-date is difficult, a changing but permanent form of exclusion might arise. The issue of digital divide might give life to a paradox: digital democracy is meant to prompt citizen's participation in terms of quantity, but might jeopardise the right to participate, which was thought to be assured. Those who are excluded, as a result of the digital gap, will not have the opportunity of participating in practices involving digital instruments.

The third observation leads to the issue of the overcoming of the representatives. Although their "traditional form" is going through a crisis, parties have carried out important activities for the functioning of democracy and will continue to do so. Firstly, parties are a response to the problem of the bounded rationality (and impulsiveness, and emotionality) of citizens. Politicians are also rationally limited, but they are experts in the political field (most of them have been interested in the problems that afflict society for many years). Schumpeter (1942) wrote in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*: "Party and machine politicians are simply the response to the fact that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede, and they constitute an attempt to regulate political competition" (283).

It is important to highlight parties' ability to gather people with the same attitude and values, representing more than just the interest of a single individual. Parties mediate between individual interests and thus participate in the formation of a collective interest through the constant presentation and organisation of ideas, positions and plans (Neumann, 1956; Ware, 1996). Thus, it is partic-

⁴ According to Ipsos, in the 2018 elections 35.4% of the voters under the age of 49 voted for the Movement, compared with 27.1% of voters above the age of 65.

ularly important for parties, not only to manage public opinion and guide requests towards the centre of executive power, but also to spread the concept and the meaning of a broader community among its supporters (Lapalombara and Weiner, 1966). Bringing people together is also important nowadays, since the manifestation of interests also occurs outside of political organizations (contrasting interests still need to be reconciled).

The absence of the imperative mandate for representatives is a mechanism for mediation between different interests. As Bobbio explains (1984, 39-41), there is a tight relationship between the role of the representative as a delegate, and the representation of individual interests, and also between the role of the representative as a fiduciary, and the representation of general interests. As an example, Bobbio explains that a communist labourer will not vote for a non-communist labourer, but will vote for a communist who is not a labourer. This means that party solidarity – and thus “general” interests – is stronger than category solidarity – and thus “particular” interests. Through the imperative mandate, F5S MPs would have found it very difficult to respond effectively to the needs posed by particular situations (including the Covid 19 pandemic), because they would have little autonomy, and would perhaps have been less linked to general interests. However, this original position has been disproven by their practice in that they have participated in the formation of three different governments in the same legislature.

Another problem related to overcoming the autonomy of MPs is ‘directism’ (the idea that citizens’ will has to be expressed directly. The closer we come to direct participation, the riskier it is that ‘directism’ (Fishkin, 1991) might emerge. With no representatives, the direct expression of people’s power (e.g. through the “Rousseau” platform) might be immediate, and lose the positive aspects of mediation involving full-time politicians. A further risk is extremism, the prevailing of ‘hot-tempered’ and impetuous positions as opposed to ‘cold-minded’ and more reflective positions. According to Sartori (1987, 214), the theory of participatory democracy implies that the characteristics of small intense groups – i.e. groups which feel intensely the problems of the *polis* – will spread and pervade the social body. Thus, it is necessary to politicise all citizens, with the key factor being ‘intensity’. The problem is that intensity stimulates not only reflection, but also a form of passionate attention which activates action (Rokeach, 1960). Sartori believes that people might have an extreme vision of things – “black or white” – either completely good or completely evil.

These problems seem to have been precisely addressed by the ‘new course’ of the FSM in 2021, both in terms of the reform of the statute, and with the replacement of the “Rousseau” platform with the “Skyvote” platform, which gave new centralities to the elected representatives and to the former prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, who became President of the Movement (to the detriment of the “guarantor-legislator” Beppe Grillo, and the “superbase-general assembly”).

6. Final remarks. From the symbolic function of Rousseau to the ‘normalisation’ of FSM in representative democracy

In conclusion, we recall the three theses proposed in this article. First, the reference to Rousseau (and to ‘horizontal’ democracy) has had a mainly symbolic value for the FSM. We have asserted that there are at least four analogies between the Movement and Rousseau’s philosophy (the preference for

the imperative mandate, the ways to seek the general will/common good, the role of the Legislator/Guarantor, and the style of pedagogy), and that these similarities are not accidental. However, they were mainly 'cosmetic' analogies. For instance, the "Rousseau" platform offered a showcase for the legislative initiatives of the M5S MPs, followed by a disorderly list of low-quality and largely ignored comments. In any case, parliamentary bills have a largely symbolic function because they are rarely scheduled for discussion.

As explained by Biancalana and Vittori (2021), in FSM, ICTs have had mainly a symbolic function. Digital tools were used not so much to give members more power, but above all to give them the impression that they could influence the party's decision-making processes. Of course, this does not mean that the innovation of the FSM was irrelevant: writing about party reforms, Gauja (2017) acknowledged that the symbolism of change, and the discourse surrounding it, can be as important as the substance, having an impact on citizens' perceptions. The feeling of participation was certainly important for the initial success of the Movement, because it can have positive effects on members' identification with the party, or its positioning in relation to other parties in the public sphere, i.e. on its public image. After the start-up phase, the Movement has decided to move away from this symbolism, focusing on more substantial (and traditional) issues such as social justice, innovation, green transition, and respect for the environment.

Second, as the recent revision of the statute and the abandonment of the "Rousseau" platform show, the FSM-Rousseau link weakened when the party 'normalised', confronted with the action of governing. In truth, some authors (Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2016, 156) have already described the FSM as a movement party: the FSM has never been a movement as such, if by this term we mean a dense informal network of collective actors who share a distinct collective identity, using mainly protests as their modus operandi (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 20-21). According to Tronconi (2018, 176), "the movement created by Grillo and Casaleggio had, in its two leaders, not only an idealistic, but also an organisational reference point; it had precise rules of inclusion and exclusion of militants, a political manifesto and a statute. It was, in other words, a formal organisation". In the last period, the party organisation has been further strengthened with the creation of new roles (including that of the President) and reinforced organs (the Assembly, the National Council) composed of elected members and assisted by functionaries. "The party has, by now, lost some of its original characteristics and aspirations of radical renovation of the political process" (Tronconi, 2018, 177), and the indulgent self-description of a totally horizontal movement, guided by the collective intelligence of the Internet, and inspired by the Rousseauian principles of direct democracy, can no longer be accepted. The parliamentarians themselves (e.g. D'Uva) recognise that the Movement has become, to all intents and purposes, a party.

Third, without denying the value of citizen participation and the innovative capacity of the FSM, the evolution of the Movement confirms that the Rousseau ideal is difficult to substantiate, despite the use of new technologies, due to a series of fundamental problems. In this article we have identified at least three such major problems: the issue of insecurity; the issue of participation inequality; the issue of the overcoming of the representatives. In the light of the above-mentioned considerations and the FSM experience, I claim that it is very difficult to achieve a Rousseauian democracy

fully, and that it is more advisable to opt for the representative system, modified and renewed by ICTs in some sectors (Couldry, 2012).

Communication technologies are increasingly intruding into democratic processes, but probably they do so by supporting or innovating representative democracy, and not by replacing it with a digital democracy inspired by the Rousseauian model. In our opinion, the Rousseauian ideal achieved through ICTs (digital direct democracy) might be impractical and undesirable. Not only could some rights experience a deterioration, owing to technology (security and voter anonymity, limits to participation owing to the digital gap), but most of all:

- The ideal would not respect the cognitive and social characteristics of human beings. On the contrary, representative democracy allows citizens to participate and express their opinions when appropriate and necessary, without asking too much of them.
- The Rousseauian ideal might lead to issues about the decisional outputs in terms of the quality of democracy. A continuous, intense and direct participation could lead to risks such as directism, extremism, and particularism. On the other hand, representative democracy promotes the grouping together of people, and the encouragement of compromise, mediation and elaboration, despite not being perfect.

Of course, these observations do not imply that democracy cannot (and should not) be sustained by digital instruments. This is already happening and will continue to happen in political communication, public participation and institutions, even in an invasive way (Giacomini, 2018). What is meant here instead, is that the (at times massive) use of ICTs in the democratic system might complete and support representative democracy. It is not even the case that the FSM, which was originally inspired by the direct democracy philosopher Rousseau, is actually still sticking to representative democracy, in contrast to what it claimed at the outset, and that it is 'normalising' itself. FSM is not a movement in the strict sense. It is actually a party – the symbol of representative democracy.

Due to structures based on 'light' functionaries and elected representatives who, with the Guarantor, constitute the centre of the party (the President, the Assembly, the National Council), the FSM does not establish disintermediated (direct) digital participation, but rather 'new intermediated' processes which involve citizens through digital instruments, but always with the filter of leadership and a bureaucratic structure. Generally, the benefit of representative mechanisms was explained by Habermas (1992) and concerns the relationship between the centre and the periphery, also within parties. Representative organisations (the centre) have an important role to play in 'unburdening' activities of the base, even if this role cannot be independent of peoples' power (the periphery). When this routine 'gets stuck', i.e. when a new problem arises, the base comes into play with its legitimising and political functions. This structure of representative democracy and parties, pointed out by Habermas, considers that believing in a continuous and intense participation of people (such as in the Rousseauian ideal) would be an illusion. The reality contemplates a great automatisisation of the political project.

Despite the crisis faced by parties and the digital revolution in communication, even the most loyal adherent to Rousseauian philosophy did not really take part in a 'revolution' leading to direct democracy. Rather, the forms of representative democracy and its main characters (parties) seem to

be evolving. These innovations, though, are still not overcoming representative democracy today, they rather, seem to be making a 'hybrid' of it with new (digital) elements.

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