On 24–25 February 2013, the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Stars Movement, M5S), a political organization officially founded by comedian Beppe Grillo only in 2009, obtains 8,700,000 votes in the elections for the lower chamber (Camera dei Deputati), where it secures 109 MPs, as well as 54 in the Senate. Corresponding to 25 per cent of the vote, this figure makes M5S very close to the Partito Democratico (PD) as the party in the country with most votes. Although M5S cannot be regarded as an offspring of the global justice movement (GJM) that had mobilized in Genoa in 2001 or against the Iraq war in 2003, nor of the subsequent struggles for public morality and in defense of the commons, it cannot be dismissed as a mere expression of anti-politics sentiments either. This is actually the first time in the country that many elements of progressive social movements’ agendas co-exist with strong disdain for the established political class within an organization with such a strong parliamentary representation. In this chapter we are going to identify the main lines of contention in the country in the 2000s, paying special attention to the following: the global justice and peace campaigns of 2001–3; the opposition to major public works (grandi progetti); the initiatives in support of legality and against (political) corruption; the new wave of contention in 2011 and the emergence of M5S as a major national political actor. We do not claim to provide a thorough account of all the important campaigns that have taken place over the decade. Rather, we look at some processes that are in our view illustrative of the changes that have occurred in the repertoires and organizational forms of contention, and in patterns of social movement representation. Space limitations prevent us from considering the role as promoters of collective action played by right wing organizations like CasaPound, an association connecting grassroots groups that define themselves as “Fascists of the third millennium,” follow a model quite close to left-wing social centers, address many themes of the GJM, and attempt to reformulate classic issues of the right-wing agenda such as migration (Toscano and Di Nunzio, 2012).
Global and local justice activism

Since the 1990s, many have tried to combine environmental, women’s, peace, human rights, and development issues, central to the “new social movements” agenda (Melucci, 1996), with issues of social exclusion and workers’ rights. The crisis of the traditional political cleavages facilitates alliances between organizations from the leftist and the Catholic tradition, promoting both activist campaigns and voluntary work on issues such as cooperation for development, environmental crises both in the North and in the South of the world, labor exploitation, in particular child labor, human rights, and peace issues. Catholic peace and development organizations like Beati costruttori di pace, Pax Christi, and Mani Tese join with environmental groups like Legambiente, grassroots unions like COBAS and cultural associations of the left like ARCI in promoting a counter-summit against the G7 summit in Naples in July 1994 (Reiter, 2007: 54). Italian support for NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, approved by the center-left government in 1999, renders the relationship between civil society actors and the institutional left more problematic, but the climax of global justice initiatives is reached in 2001. In July, more than 800 groups join the Genoa Social Forum to challenge the G8 summit, hosted by the newly appointed right-wing government led by Mr. Berlusconi. The meeting will be mostly remembered for the death of a local protester, Carlo Giuliani, during clashes between the military police and activists from centri sociali (social centres), the serious damages to property by small sections of demonstrators, mostly linked to the black bloc, and the unprecedented levels of police violence inflicted on peaceful demonstrators (della Porta et al., 2006). The meeting also vividly illustrates the heterogeneity of the actors mobilized on global justice issues. Some are closest to eco-pacifism, promoting voluntary and solidarity action, fair trade, critical consumption, alongside anti-war and large scale environmental campaigning. Apart from the Catholic organizations or Legambiente, which we have already mentioned, environmental groups like WWF also play a role alongside innumerable local initiatives, coordinated by Rete Lilliput.2 Others focus primarily on the critique of neo-liberal policies. These include Attac Italy and organizations from the institutional left, such as ARCI, or FIOM, the metalworkers’ union of the major left-wing union CGIL.3 More critical sectors of the movement, such as the centri sociali and tute bianche (literally “white overalls,” from their chosen outfit) and the Network for Global Rights, voice a broader anti-capitalist critique. They have a complex relation to more radical sectors like the anarchists or the black bloc, whose boundaries are admittedly vague (Reiter, 2007: 56–60). Despite the violent repression in Genoa and the difficult political climate following the Twin Towers attack in NYC in September 2001, global justice mobilization continues in the Fall of that year with the organization of the European Social Forum, which mobilizes – this time without incident – hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in Florence in November.

Initiatives on global justice issues continue in the years that follow, through the formation of local social forums, with about 170 being recorded as active in the spring of 2003 (Reiter, 2007: 60). With the intensification of US and allied forces’ intervention in Afghanistan and later Iraq, global justice activism increasingly overlaps with peace activism. On 15 February 2003, a vast demonstration takes place in Rome against the imminent attack on Iraq, with over 80 per cent of the participants expressing some level of identification with the GJM (della Porta and Diani, 2004). The demonstration is promoted by the Italian branch of the international coalition Stop the War, with the support of about 400 associations, 350 local councils and 136 MPs. It is preceded and followed by innumerable and diverse local initiatives: occupations of buildings, parades, sit-ins, hunger strikes, prayer vigils. Hugely attended marches occur in various cities on the days following the start of the war (20 March), and again in Rome on 12 April.
with about 250,000 demonstrators. On 12 October 2003 the annual peace march from Perugia to Assisi, promoted by Tavola della pace, attracts more than 300,000 people.

After the end of 2003, peace mobilization fragments, and most of the organizations involved in the 2003 campaigns go back to their main areas of intervention, such as defense of the commons, housing, migrant rights, infrastructure, environment, land conservation. Global justice initiatives experience a variable degree of success in the following years. In July 2009, the G8 summit in L’Aquila is challenged by only a few thousand protestors. While this is in line with diminishing attendance at counter-summits and European social forums over the decade (Andretta and Chelotti, 2010), a new phase of intense activism develops in 2011, although it fails to reach the heights and diffusion of the Indignados and Occupy campaigns across the globe (Zamponi, 2012). The most important event of the period will be the demonstration that takes place in Rome on 15 October 2011, as part of the international day of mobilization against economic inequality and the influence of the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund on politics. Endorsed by several political groups on the left of the PD as well as by critical unions, and voicing strong opposition to the neoliberal policies adopted by the government led by the economist Mario Monti, the protest turns violent, as hundreds of hooded demonstrators attack property and clash violently with the police, with over 100 people injured and 13 arrested.

Throughout the 2000s there are recurrent attempts to bring labor issues back to the core of social movements’ agendas. Alongside actions promoted by established “official” (CGIL, CISL, UIL) and “critical” unions (such as COBAS, particularly strong in the public sector), a number of networks mobilize on behalf of workers without basic rights and protection in both the highly qualified and unqualified tertiary sectors. Broadly identified under the label “movimento di San Precario,” combining a reference to job precariousness with one to the Christian tradition, these initiatives expand the agenda from job-related issues, on which traditional unionism focuses, to the pursuit of broader rights for the individual citizen. They somehow manage to transform the traditional May Day celebrations, previously dominated by established unions, into occasions for representing broader issues associated with unemployment, precarious jobs, and citizenship rights (Mattoni, 2012; Murgia and Selmi, 2012). Concerns about unemployment and welfare cuts are also voiced at recurring protests by high school and university students against neoliberal reforms of the education system, for example on the occasion of the Onda Anomala (Anomalous Wave) campaign against cuts to the educational budget and the reform of the education system promoted by the Berlusconi government in the fall of 2008, and of similar initiatives in the spring of 2009, in the fall of 2010 as well as (this time against the Monti government) in the fall of 2012 (Sciolla, 2009).

Fighting for the land: local initiatives against grandi opere

In a phase in which large-scale mobilizations are few, because of the weakening of the GJM following 9/11 and the end of the peace campaigns of 2003, and because of the lack of strong mobilizing structures capable of mobilizing huge numbers of people, local struggles take on a new role. Actions against existing plants, damage to local communities, and plans to build new large infrastructure projects with a strong environmental impact (such as those against high-speed trains, or the bridge over the Strait of Messina, or the US military base in Vicenza) attract much broader attention than the areas directly affected and turn in some cases into major national confrontations (della Porta and Piazza, 2008).

The “No Dal Molin” campaign opposes the conversion into a US air force base of the Dal Molin airport, located on the outskirts of the artistic and monumental city of Vicenza, in the
north-east region of the Veneto. Originally agreed between the US government and Silvio Berlusconi’s government, the plans are confirmed by the center-left administration led by Romano Prodi between 2006 and 2008. The protest campaign starts in 2006 and peaks in February 2007, when about 200,000 people from all over the country demonstrate outside the airport; a few weeks earlier, a protest camp has been set up. From that moment the conflict becomes a major issue for peace and nonviolent campaigners across the country, to whom the local campaign is strongly indebted in terms of repertoires of action, networking practices, and narratives.

At the other extreme of Northern Italy in Piedmont, the “No TAV” protest campaign against the construction of a 57 km tunnel in Val di Susa as a part of a new high-speed railroad (TAV – *Treno Alta Velocità*) between Turin and Lyons is a long-lasting mobilization. It starts back in 1991, promoted by the environmental associations and the mayors of the valley, worried about the environmental and health impact of the excavation works on the local community. In its early phase it consists primarily of information campaigns, promoted by local residents, environmental groups and concerned technical experts from the University of Turin, in dialogue with local institutions. Mobilization in the valley grows after 2000, supported by local “No TAV” citizens’ committees, left-wing parties of a communist or environmental persuasion, rank-and-file unions, farmers’ associations, social forums, etc. Local activists also start playing a role in broader campaigns and initiatives, such as the 2001 Genoa and Florence Social Forums, and the French campaigns against high-speed railroads. In November 2005, the violence of the police, intervening to evict the occupants of a protest gives the campaign a national dimension, with a large media coverage of the event, followed by a series of rail and road blockades in the valley and by marches held in solidarity throughout Italy (40,000 people). While the Prodi center-left government (2006–8) slows down work on the building sites, though without abandoning the project, works restart in 2009 following Berlusconi’s return to power the previous year. On 22 May 2011 activists establish a permanent protest camp in Chiomonte, where excavation work on the preliminary tunnel is supposed to begin. The site will become a major ground of confrontation between protestors and police. At times violence will break out, e.g. on 3 July 2011, when, following a peaceful demonstration with about 60,000 in attendance, some demonstrators lay siege to the building site, which is heavily guarded by the police: in the resulting confrontation about 200 people get injured, 90 per cent of them police officers, and five demonstrators are arrested. The conflict continues up to the present day with periodic traffic blockades and other initiatives, also boosted by the electoral success of M5S, which has an explicit “No-TAV” stance. Throughout the conflict, local administrators play a major role in the opposition to the project, often in explicit contrast to their parties (even at the regional level, the PD is also in favor of the project). Operating through a mix of institutional procedures and public events, the “No-TAV” mayors fail, nonetheless, to gain any attention not only from the government but also from the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, who refuses to meet them on the occasion of his visit to Turin in March 2012, while protests continue.

**Fighting for public morality**

Apart from their environmental impact, critics blame big infrastructural projects for the opportunity they open up for large-scale bribes. For example, protestors against the location of waste-disposal areas in Southern Italy insist that they are being largely managed by criminal organizations. Accordingly, mobilizations on *grandi opere* partially overlap with actions on moral and legal issues, the defense of the *stato di diritto*, the equality of citizens before the law, the fight against organized crime as well as corporate crime and its depenalization by the Berlusconi
government. While protests have addressed political corruption across the political spectrum, the personal position of Berlusconi as a defendant in innumerable court cases, and as a womanizer driven by a macho culture, has attracted most attention. It is possible to identify a few major waves of mobilization on these themes.

First to emerge is the so-called “movimento dei girotondi” (literally, “circles movement”/“round dances movement”), which between 2002 and 2003 promotes in many Italian cities actions in support of basic principles of legality and democracy. The newly elected Berlusconi government is not the only one to come under attack, as criticism extends to the leadership of the major center-left Democratici di Sinistra. The name of the campaign comes from its original, distinctive form of action, creating human circles around the buildings of public institutions that need protection from their enemies: law tribunals, public broadcasting stations, etc. While girotondi are usually seen as originating from leftist milieus, they have appealed to people of different political persuasions on issues like democracy, defense of the constitution and of freedom of information, and independence of the judiciary. The campaign originates from an appeal that the then chief justice of Milan, Francesco Saverio Borrelli, makes in January 2002 to the citizenry in defense of the judiciary and the basic principles of law. After a first, small demonstration in front of the Ministry of Justice in Rome, a number of public actions occur, including major demonstrations in Florence, with about 15,000 people (January), the first girotondo with 4,000 people in Milan two days later, and in Rome on 2 February 2002. This last event, organized by center-left parties, turns into an explicit critique of the traditional left leadership, as popular film director Nanni Moretti vehemently accuses them of political ineptitude and lack of vision. On 23 February in Milan, 40,000 people commemorate with Nobel laureate Dario Fo and other prominent intellectuals the tenth anniversary of the start of the Milan investigation that undermined the political system that emerged from WWII. The event, promoted by the magazine MicroMega, is followed by a march in Naples that attracts about 20,000 people. After March the focus moves to the Italian public broadcaster RAI, and Berlusconi’s supposed attempt to reduce its pluralism. For a few months, the network “Girotondi per la democrazia” promotes in several cities an agenda that combines the above-mentioned issues with broader criticisms of Berlusconi’s government, targeting for example the reform of the school system promoted by secretary for education Letizia Moratti. However the movement loses momentum and by September is virtually finished. Its trajectory is illustrative of a pattern of a quick rise and a similarly quick disbanding that is quite recurrent in the decade.

A new wave of mobilization corresponds to the start of the second Berlusconi government of the decade in 2008. Regarded as one of the earliest examples of a digital movement in Italy, the Popolo Viola is established originally to oppose attempts by the new Berlusconi government to pass legislation intended to rescue its leader from his legal problems. Under particular attack comes the so-called lodo Alfano, a piece of legislation passed in 2008 that grants immunity to the four highest roles of the state, including the prime minister, from any legal procedures during the period of their incumbency. The opposition against this act, which will be erased by the Constitutional Court the following year, is coordinated through a number of Facebook pages that enable forms of self-organization. The first public event in the “offline” sphere takes place in Rome in December 2009, the “No Berlusconi Day,” demanding the resignation of Berlusconi as prime minister and denouncing the crisis of consensus that affects the Italian political class as a whole. Mobilizations continue in 2010. In September splinter groups from the Popolo Viola form the Rete Viola (“Violet Network”), which advocates an organizational model based on local meetings of activists, promoting real-life rather than virtual participation, and coordinated through a national body elected on the basis of principles of direct democracy. Rete Viola
promotes several militant initiatives. The first, a protest in front of Berlusconi’s villa near Milan, which attracts huge media coverage, degenerates into clashes with the police in which activists from social centers also participate. The agenda of Rete Viola goes beyond legal issues, however, to include unemployment and labor issues, environment, health, and the commons.

The Popolo Viola represents one of the first instances of collective action that largely emerged from the connections existing on the Web between sites associated with several localities and events: it consists of local groups scattered across the country, and communication between groups relies heavily on social networks and the Web (Facebook pages, activists’ blogs, dedicated Web TV channels for the streaming of events, an official website, online discussion groups, etc.). This organizational form aids in facilitating communication between dispersed actors but also, and most important, in ensuring multipolar and non-hierarchical forms of coordination (Mosca and Vaccari, 2011). These allow for a multiplicity of perspectives and for different degrees of involvement by specific organizations in any specific campaign or cause; they also contribute to the growth of critical communities that are not associated with a specific location and can neither easily rely on previous organizational forms, nor on the workplace or the local community as foci for mobilization. Several campaigns are mainly located in the virtual sphere, with a few key events conducted offline. One example is the “Se non ora quando?” campaign (If not now, when?). On 13 February 2011 almost a million people (not only women) take to the streets in different Italian cities to express outrage at Berlusconi’s machismo and his indictment for underage sex and prostitution, but also to address broad issues linked to women’s condition in the country (Saraceno, 2012). In a reversal of the most usual pattern, the huge public initiative of February 2011 is not so much an outcome as an inspiration for the establishment of the network, which promotes both offline and (primarily) online activities in the following years (Pavan, 2012). ICT is also particularly helpful in the case of initiatives on issues of broad relevance but unlikely to attract huge constituencies, and therefore mostly promoted by small epistemic communities of like-minded people, such as those on communication rights, or for open software (Padovani and Pavan, 2009).

A distinctive role is played by anti-mafia mobilizations, particularly in Sicily, where they have gained momentum after the killing in 1992 of senior prosecutors Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino. In 2009, the brother of Paolo Borsellino, Salvatore, is among the promoters of the “red diaries movement,” after the color of his sibling’s diary, which has mysteriously disappeared from the scene of the killing. The campaign calls for truth to be revealed and justice to be obtained for the mafia killings of the early 1990s. It also aims at protecting, once again, magistrates from the attacks brought against them by politicians and journalists close to Berlusconi. The latest episode in this ongoing confrontation takes place in Milan in March 2013, when Berlusconi’s MPs literally invade the tribunal to voice their support for their leader, the victim of a “persecution” by Milan judges, and a counter-demonstration occurs the following day with Mr. Borsellino among the participants. The anti-mafia initiatives are also interesting in that they suggest the spread of “critical consumption” to new terrains. Between 2004 and 2006 groups are founded in Palermo and Catania with the goal of supporting those storekeepers who report extortion from criminal gangs, and inviting consumers to patronize stores whose owners refuse to pay pizzo, the slang term for criminal protection – hence the name “Comitati Addiopizzo” (“Farewell Pizzo Committees”) (Forno, 2013). Of course, support for businesses that resist organized crime is just one form of critical consumption. A large part of sustainable consumption and fair-trade activities is coordinated through Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (literally, “Solidarity Purchasing Groups”), local networks of citizens coordinating their purchasing practices with a view to supporting greater social and environmental sustainability. While members of these groups cannot be equated with standard social movement activists, they represent a
specific community of people sharing similar worldviews and lifestyles, culturally close to many themes of the GJM, as well as of the most critical and socially engaged sectors of the Catholic church (Graziano and Forno, 2012).

The rise of Movimento Cinque Stelle

The “five stars” in the name of M5S represent its five core themes: the safeguarding of public water and the environment, the growth of public transport and Internet connectivity, and sustainable development. It originates from the civic engagement of Beppe Grillo, a well-known comedian, who after reaching popular fame in the 1980s, was denied further access to the national media for his explicitly anti-establishment stances. In the years that follow he performed in highly successful live shows, in which he voiced his opinions on public issues such as political corruption, sustainable development, the criticism of global corporate and financial dominance, or the alternative potential of technology. The creation of his own blog (beppegrillo.it) in 2005 quickly turned Grillo into an influential opinion maker, acknowledged by international media like *Time*, while disconnected from, and indeed in explicit confrontation with the established Italian media scene. The growing influence of the blog led in 2005 to the creation of a number of local groups of sympathizers, coordinated through the meetup.com web platform.

Meetups are the main channel for promoting a series of initiatives aiming primarily at the moralization of Italian politics and in defense of the commons. On 8 September 2007, the first “V-Day” promoted by Grillo attracts 50,000 people at a meeting in Bologna and more in other Italian cities, where 350,000 signatures are collected in support of proposals for new laws preventing people with criminal convictions from serving in the Italian parliament, limiting MPs to two terms, and restoring the old voting system with personal preferences for candidates in national elections. A similar event occurs on 25 April the following year, this time with public subsidy to the media system, regarded as dependent on political parties, as the main target. In 2008 there are also the first instances of participation in local elections with “citizens’ lists” (*liste civiche*). The failure of Grillo’s attempt to run for the post of secretary of the Democratic Party (PD) prompts his decision to enter the electoral arena directly. On 2 August 2009 Grillo announces the foundation of Movimento 5 Stelle. After good results in the regional elections in Piedmont in 2010 and in Molise in 2011, the local elections of May 2012 see 150 “grillini” elected as city councilors and four as mayors, including in an important city like Parma. In October 2012, M5S becomes the largest party at the regional elections in Sicily, with 15 per cent of the vote. Its elected members collaborate with the center-left regional government despite not joining it formally.

The great success of the 2013 elections is probably due to the capacity of M5S to combine the many elements of a GJM agenda (environmentalism, opposition to *grandi opere*, minimum wage for all citizens) with a very strong and aggressive – in many ways, populist – critique of the political class, labeled as a “*casta*” (caste) in its entirety, that resonates with disenchanted sectors of the right-wing electorate. Survey data on voters suggest that they have grown to match almost perfectly the profile of the Italian population in both territorial location and social profile, with a very strong presence (around 50 per cent) among the under twenty-fives (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013).

The overall structure of the M5S combines multiple modes of coordination (Diani, 2013). At one level it is still close to the original model of an online community which connects different local groups and individual sympathizers. Local “*organizers*” promote meetings and other local activities, enabling the shift from the virtual to the offline sphere. The *Movimento* can thus be regarded as a web-like structure consisting of micro-organizations conducting a heterogeneous
range of activities. These groups have considerable independence and are only loosely coordinated, at the central level, by the blog, and therefore by Grillo and his team. Control is strict, however, when it comes to constituting an electoral list associated to M5S, in order to compete in elections. On that issue, one needs to receive approval from Grillo himself. Candidates must meet some requirements, such as not to be members of any political party or political organization, have no criminal convictions (even subject to appeal), and not have served on any local council or in any national assembly for more than one term. Another element of centralization has to do with the management of the website, which plays a central role in the life of the organization. This is entrusted to a company specializing in web marketing, Casaleggio Associati. Gianroberto Casaleggio,\textsuperscript{13} despite his preference for acting “behind the scenes,” is actually a co-founder of M5S with Grillo. His company is responsible not only for the management of the blog but for the Meetup network, the organization’s communication strategies, publishing books and pamphlets, and organizing Grillo’s tours. The organizational model adopted by M5S seems close to franchising in business, with the brand Cinque Stelle legally owned by Mr. Grillo.

Finally, despite its rhetorical insistence that there be no leaders and that “uno vale uno” (“any member is worth one”), the success of the M5S has not changed – if anything, it has reinforced – the process of personalization that has been going on for a long time in the Italian political system. Although activists refer to Grillo as a mere spokesman (“megaphone”) for the movement, on crucial issues of national relevance such as possible support for a center-left government, or the vote for the president of the Republic, other prominent members of the organization have always aligned with the “leader.” Moreover, the centralization and lack of internal discussion have been pointed out not only by unsympathetic media, but also by some activists of the organization, frustrated, for example, at the ban on appearing on talk shows and the limitations to the contacts that movement representatives in the elected assemblies may have with the media. This has led to expulsions, particularly in Bologna in the fall 2012. However, this particular structure has probably so far spared M5S from the factionalism that has marred the innumerable left-wing groups that since the 1970s have tried to act as political representatives of anti-establishment stances. It has also made the organization more visible – for better or worse – to public opinion. It is, of course, questionable how long this model will survive now that the organization has a significant presence in Parliament and has faced difficult decisions following the elections. In the negotiations for the new government in the spring of 2013 the M5S representatives in Parliament displayed a substantive lack of autonomy vis-à-vis their “leader,” Grillo. Dissenting voices (or those who did not abide by the rule of not participating in TV talk shows) found little room within the party, with at least six MPs expelled or leaving the parliamentary group in dissent with the official line between the spring and the summer of 2013.

Conclusions: changing patterns of representation?

While the 2000s have been rich in protest actions, it is more disputable whether coordination between them has been enough to secure the passage from “protest” to “social movements” proper (Diani, 1999). To this end, it is useful to look at the cultural schemata (or frames) with which actions are interpreted. Frames are essential for giving some level of commonality to phenomena of protest that might as well develop in total independence and disconnection from each other. One can indeed speak of social movement processes – as opposed to mere single-issue campaigns – to the extent that there are shared representations of the world that provide some meaningful connection between themes and issues, and some criteria for defining the
collectivities involved in them (Diani, 1992 and 2013). Narratives need not be fully comprehensive nor have fully coherent agendas, but actors need some common ground to be able to recognize what connects them to each other and differentiates them from their opponents. In the absence of such characteristics it is difficult to think of collective actors able to change the balance of power within a polity. In Italy up to the 1980s, such a role has been played by some version of anti-capitalism, even allowing for the libertarian nature of some of the great campaigns of the 1970s such as those on abortion and divorce. Since the emergence of environmentalism in the 1980s, however, such ideological glue has lost its power, without really being replaced by any comparably broad narrative. In the 2000s, opposition to capitalism and neo-liberalism as such does not represent even in the case of the GJM the most diffuse narrative, trying to assign meaning to the different actions undertaken in those years. The most common theme is the need for a democratization of the political process from below, coupled with attention to social justice, eco-pacifism, and themes of public morality (Reiter, 2007: 67–71).

Now, several of the themes listed above are certainly present – with variable emphasis – in M5S’s program too. But are they enough to provide the basis for a new major political actor, or at least to enable M5S to play a coordinating role for movement sectors? In order to address the question properly we need to reconsider – if very briefly – the relation between civil society, alternative social movements, and the political system. In the 1970s, for all their differences and conflicts, the traditional left and the social movements of the time shared a similar cultural model, critical of capitalist society, and their activists often coexisted in organizations (e.g. the unions, or the cultural associations of the left such as ARCI) that acted as a bridge between movements and parties. Since the 1980s the link between social movements and traditional leftist ideology has become weaker, with the spread of ideas close to the “new social movements” model of personal transformation (Melucci, 1996). Coupled with the growing professionalization of political parties, the relation between social movements of the 1980s or 1990s (most conspicuously, the environmental movement) and the party system has taken the form of ad hoc collaborations on specific issues in a political field characterized by the fragmentation of previous ideological references. There has been, however, an element of continuity in two respects at least. On the one hand, the established parties of the left (the Communist but also the Socialist party in the 1970s, the Democratici di Sinistra in the 1990s, following the disbanding of PCI in 1991) have secured a strong share of the support of people active in the social movement sector, and incorporated several of their issues into their own agenda. On the other hand, attempts to give social movements a direct political representation have kept following a bottom-up approach, with (some) local groups of a movement creating local party branches, linking into regional and ultimately national structures, while keeping strong ties to civil society groups. Parties as diverse as Democrazia Proletaria, Verdi (the Greens), Rifondazione Comunista, and more recently SEL (Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà) have all followed similar paths, combining critical views of established parties with a will to collaborate on specific issues.¹⁴

The same pattern of complex webs of alliances between multiple, heterogeneous actors with a variable relation to the established political parties of the center-left can be found in most of the mobilizations of the 2000s. For example, the networks mobilizing on behalf of migrants’ rights include organizations created by migrants themselves, as well as organizations close to political parties, unions, and the Catholic church, alongside other radical movement organizations (Pilati, 2010). This is also evident in the composition of the committees that support the call for four referendums aiming at abolishing laws enabling the privatization of water resources, reintroducing nuclear power, banished in the late 1980s in the aftermath of the Chernobyl accident, and allowing Berlusconi not to give evidence in court on the ground of his public commitments. For example, the committee mobilizing in particular on public water
includes many of the major Italian cultural associations such as ARCI or voluntary groups such as Mani Tese alongside grassroots unions, established unions, Church-related organizations, or local branches of the PD, SEL, or the Greens, and indeed of M5S. The referendum, held in June 2011, results in a resounding success for the proponents, with a 95 per cent rate of approval for all proposals, and more than 50 per cent of electors actually taking part in the vote.

What appears problematic in Italy in the 2000s is, however, translating these single-issue alliances into a broader political project, and eventually into parliamentary politics. First, it is disputable whether the PD would be able to offer social movement activists the same space that the PCI offered social movements of the 1970s and 1980s. While local chapters of the PD have been involved in virtually all the campaigns of the 2000s, the leadership’s attitude toward those campaigns has swung between cautious (as in the case of the referenda on public water and nuclear energy) and vehemently hostile (as in the campaigns against high-speed trains). To judge by the electoral results of 2013, PD has only marginally profited from the wave of mobilization that led to success in the June 2011 referenda (one should remember that the absolute majority of the electorate voted not only against the privatization of water but also against laws protecting Berlusconi’s interests in courts). It is actually M5S that seems to have gained most of the benefits in electoral terms.

At the same time, it is far from clear whether M5S should be seen as an expression of the social movements of the 2000s. The answer to this is ambiguous. It is certainly the case, and it is reflected in the biographies of the M5S MPs, that many M5S activists and groups have been involved in local initiatives, close to the GJM or to other campaigns such as the one on public water. But the conversion of a group of local and/or single-issue campaigners into a national political actor is not automatic. Likewise, it is certainly true that the decision that M5S took, following the vote of its registered members, to propose Stefano Rodotà, a highly respected law professor, as president of the Republic was shared by many movement activists who were not particularly close to M5S, but recognized the role that Rodotà has played in defense of the commons, particularly as a promoter of the referendum on public water. This candidacy, which was rejected by the PD in favor of a new alliance with Berlusconi to re-elect the outgoing president, Giorgio Napolitano, may have been the first ground on which to test a new alliance between M5S, the SEL party, which also voted for Rodotà in opposition to Napolitano’s re-election, the growing number of dissenters within the PD, and many movement activists.

At the same time, some distinctive traits of M5S may prove a major obstacle to the consolidation of such alliance. First, the rigid exclusion of any strategic, and not purely contingent, collaboration with any group somehow linked to existing political parties may cast doubt on the opportunity for social movements to form close links with a party with such a limited coalitional capacity (the formation of a new government supported by both the PD and Berlusconi may be at least partially blamed on M5S’s refusal to support a vote of confidence in a government led by the PD leader Pierluigi Bersani). The heavy dependence of M5S on a non-elected leadership when it comes to decisions of national importance may also be a serious problem, especially in light of the fact that a withdrawal by Grillo and/or Casaleggio may deprive activists of the Web infrastructure that enables them to act as a national rather than a mere local political actor. Finally, one should not ignore M5S’s outright rejection of the left–right distinction. Not focusing one’s approach on anti-capitalism is one thing; claiming that left and right are meaningless, empty categories is quite another, at least for activists of social movements. Rather than the emergence of a unified political actor, the immediate future may well see the consolidation of M5S into an anti-political, populist force, and the emergence of a new political group, including SEL, movement activists, and PD dissenters, with relatively little in common.
Notes

1 Only 148,116 votes separate the two: see http://elezioni.interno.it/ (accessed 24 April 2013).
2 The Lilliput Network is a network of various associations, groups and individuals that since the late
1990s have coordinated various grassroots associations involved in protest campaigns on global justice
and solidarity.
3 The CGIL as a confederation decides not to take part in the Genoa mobilization, although they will
become fully involved in the aftermath of it (Reiter, 2007).
4 The Peace Table is an original permanent network involving civil society entities (NGOs and social
movements) and local government institutions that every two years organizes the march for peace
between Perugia and Assisi and the Assembly of Peoples of the United Nations Organization.
5 See e.g. http://torino.repubblica.it/cronaca/2012/03/06/news/napolitano_in_visita_a_torino_non_
 incontra_i_sindaci_no_tav-31022341 Interestingly, in March 2013 the president will have no problems
meeting the representatives of Berlusconi’s MPs after they storm the law courts in Milan in protest
against their leaders’ judicial “persecution” (http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/
repubblica/2013/03/12/pdl-corteo-assedio-al-tribunale-basta-perseguitare.html?ref=search) (both
accessed 27 April 2013).
6 The party disbands in 2007 to found, with former Christian Democrats from the Margherita, the
Democratic Party (PD).
7 The name “Violet People” comes from the desire to adopt a color that is not associated with any of
the existing political parties.
8 Empirical information for this section comes primarily from Biorcio and Natale (2013), Corbetta and
Gualmini (2013), and Bordignon and Ceccarini (2013).
9 Meetup (or meetup.com) is a social network, founded in 2001 in the US and later imported to Italy,
that enables people to set up meetings on any subject of interest to them throughout the world. On
21 April 2013 the website beppegrillo.meetup.com reports 1,173 local groups (including very few
located abroad) and over 140,000 registered members.
10 Here “V” stands for “vaffanculo,” a quite crude invitation to politicians to “bugger off.”
11 In order to join the organization it suffices to embrace its ideas, commit to respecting the basic principles
outlined in the “non-statute,” and contribute to the diffusion of the program, downloadable from the site.
12 By April, 2013, the collaboration is under strain, as even in Sicily M5S regards the PD as too close
to Berlusconi’s party.
13 Gianroberto Casaleggio has developed a senior career in telecommunications, first at Olivetti, later at
Telecom Italia before starting his own business in 2004. He has also authored books and multimedia
products that summarize his vision for a future society centered on the Web.
14 Democrazia Proletaria (Proletarian Democracy) starts as an electoral coalition of several left-wing political
groups in 1975 and operates until 1991, when it joins hard-liners from the disbanded Communist
Party in the new Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Party of Communist Refoundation, PRC).
The Federazione dei Verdi (Federation of the Greens) is created in 1990 out of the merging of two
Green political networks that have run in elections in the late 1980s. Both PRC and the Greens have
gone through a number of splits and new alliances, with declining electoral success (in the national
elections of 2008 and 2013, the coalitions of which they are both part fail to elect any MPs). Sinistra,
Ecologia e Libertà (Left, Ecology and Freedom) is founded in 2009 by a group of left-wing and
environmental groups. Thanks to its electoral alliance with the Democratic Party it gets 37 MPs in
the lower house and 7 in the senate at the February 2013 elections. Later, relations between the two
parties dramatically worsen following the re-election of Giorgio Napolitano as president and the
formation of a government including both the PD and the PDL.
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