3 Populism 2.0
Social media activism, the generic Internet user and interactive direct democracy

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1. INTRODUCTION

The much celebrated adoption of social media as Facebook and Twitter in the popular protest wave, or in short ‘popular wave,’ of anti-austerity and anti-establishment politics of 2011–2013—exemplified by protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Indignados, and by the rise of new digital parties such as the 5 Star Movement in Italy and the Partido X in Spain—should not be seen much as a new step in the linear evolution of Internet activism. Rather, the use of social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter—as platforms of organization, recruitment and mobilisation—constitutes in many respects a veritable rupture in this trajectory. The shift towards the use of commercial platforms of communication not only belies practical motives of efficiency—such as the aim of reaching more people—but also reflects a different world view than the one pervading radical politics in previous decades. Specifically it manifests a break with the approach that underscored the anti-globalisation movement, which put much emphasis on the need to construct autonomous and self-managed platforms, epitomised by the development of alternative news sites as Indymedia and alternative Internet service providers (ISPs).

For anti-globalisation activists the Internet was to a great extent a continuation of their small-group politics of affinity groups, collectives and social centres, all networked together in unstable federations (see, e.g., Juris 2008). For the activists of the popular wave instead, corporate social media have been appropriated and turned into an expansive medium of mass mobilisation (Gerbaudo 2012). Social network sites come to constitute the tools for an emerging anti-establishment digital mass politics that in this chapter I explore through the notion of ‘populism 2.0.’ Populism 2.0, not to be intended in a pejorative sense, designates an ideology or more precisely an ideological orientation that sees social media as means to address ‘the people,’ in the sense of the totality or near-totality of the political community, as perfectly captured by the famous Occupy slogan ‘we are the 99 per cent.’ Traditional populism, starting with People’s Party in the U.S., used the mass media of the press and later broadcasting as the key channel through which to address that nebulous entity that goes under the name of the ‘people’
Contemporary activists are using the Web 2.0 of social network sites to fulfil very much the same purpose. They strive to make use of the massive reach social media facilitate, as well as of their interactive features, such as liking, sharing, commenting and re-tweeting, to construct a new form of mass politics fitting a society pervaded by the diffusion of social network sites and faced with the social consequences of the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

Trying to capture the spirit of populism 2.0, in this chapter I analyse different forms of ‘social media activism’ to be understood in the basic descriptive sense as activism supported by social media platforms. I look at the development of social media activism across different social and political movements that have emerged during the ‘popular wave,’ paying attention to the emerging discourses, practices and imaginaries that accompany the use of social media. Specifically, I focus on a selected number of social movements and political parties that have been at the forefront of this political wave. I utilise two sets of case studies, with two cases each: (1) the use of social media in the popular movements of 2011–2013, with particular reference to the Indignados in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the U.S.; (2) the use of social media within emerging digital parties connected with the popular wave, focusing on the cases of the anti-establishment and anti-corruption 5 Star Movement party in Italy and the Partido X in Spain. Admittedly, these case studies display some important differences that will be discussed in some detail. Nevertheless they can be analysed together, as part of the same ‘population,’ because they have looked at each other as part of a common political wave, and have shared a number of practices and visions, including the use of social media as political tools.

Having sketched out the general purpose and scope of this chapter, its argument can be now summarised as follows. Contemporary social media activism comes to reflect some rhetorical features traditionally associated with populism, but updated in a way that fits the dynamics proper to the communicative architecture of Web 2.0, with its valuing of interactivity and participation. In this context, traditional features of populism (appeal to unity, anti-establishment and anti-institutional rhetoric, strive for direct democracy, suspicion of intermediaries) come to be matched with a set of tropes that make up what we could call the ‘ideology of social media’ (interactivity, openness, directness). Emerging movements and parties in the popular wave utilise these social media features as means to appeal to a highly diversified yet homogeneous mass of Internet users and to address the ideal subject of the ‘generic Internet user’ to be mobilised against economic and political elites. The product of this adaptation is the rise of an interactive and participatory populism: a populism 2.0.

The adaptation of populist logics to the communication ecology of social media will be understood in detail by focusing on two axes (see Table 3.1), at which we can appreciate the matching of universal populist features with the particular material affordances of Web 2.0: (1) the ideal subject that is the addressee of mobilising efforts; (2) the unifying demand that underlies
mobilising discourses. At the level of the ideal social subject, we see an adaptation of the traditional imaginary of the ‘common man’ that in its various adaptations punctuates the history of populism, into the figure of the generic Internet user. At the level of the unifying demand we witness the adaptation of the demand for direct democracy that constitutes a typical feature of populist movements since the time of the People’s Party in the U.S. (Mény and Surel 2002) into the project of an interactive democracy, or a democracy 2.0. We can now look at these two levels in more detail.

1. Within movements of the popular wave, communications come to be addressed to the ‘generic Internet user’ (GIU), as a Web 2.0 adaptation of the populist *ideal subject* of the ‘common man.’ The generic Internet user is an imaginary ‘average’ Web 2.0 user. This is a subject whose subscription to a number of services, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+ or YouTube, is seen as automatically qualifying him/her as a target for mobilising appeals. The GIU is addressed regardless of his or her political, cultural or social affiliations. He or she is targeted simply based on the techno-utopian assumption that by being an Internet user he/she will most likely share with other Internet users a common suspicion towards established bureaucracies, as well as direct access to uncensored information, likely to make him/her a conscious political subject (see, e.g., Mason 2012).

2. The traditional populist demand for direct democracy is translated into the project of an interactive democracy or a democracy 2.0. Democracy 2.0 designates a democratic project that makes use of the interactive features of Web 2.0, such as liking, commenting and sharing. These features are adopted as the means of a permanent consultation, of a plebiscitary cyber-democracy, based on the principle of ‘one like, one vote.’ Movements and parties of the popular wave continuously measure their support and assess the viability of their claim to represent the totality of the citizenry through these tools. In certain cases they also ask for these practices to be integrated into existing institutions as is evident with the case of emerging ‘Internet parties,’ such as 5 Star Movement and Partido X. Democracy 2.0, besides being a crucial demand, also acquires the role of a source of identification for these formations. This idea and its multifarious avatars becomes for these movements the “empty signifier” (Laclau 2005), that element that allows for their identity to hold together regardless of their internal differences.
The main body of this chapter is structured around an analysis of these two levels, which will be looked at in depth in dedicated sections. Before entering this empirical discussion, I will spend some time developing a theoretical framework to make sense of the relevance of populist logics for an understanding of social media activism. Furthermore I will provide some background information about the different movements considered in this chapter. Then, after conducting the empirical analysis of the two levels of populism 2.0, I will turn to its political implications. Specifically, I will scrutinise its emancipatory promise and look at two fundamental threats lying in the road of populism 2.0: (1) *techno-plebiscitarianism*, as seen in the tendency to upset the principle of pluralism, and (2) *techno-proceduralism*, as seen in the obsession with methods and the comparative neglect of substantive demands beyond the very demand of democracy 2.0.

2. POPULISM IN THE ‘MASS SOCIAL WEB’

At first talking of ‘populism 2.0’ or social media populism appears incongruous, given that the connotations associated with these two terms seem to be at odds with one another. Social media and the Internet more generally are associated with the imaginary of the network, of a one to one structure, in which every node maintains its autonomy, as popularised in the scholarship of Manuel Castells (see, e.g., 1996, 2000). The term ‘populism,’ instead, immediately conjures up ideas of mass politics, homogeneity and strong collective solidarity. So how is it possible that these apparently opposite poles come together? In which way do current forms of activism developed on social media resemble populist logics? As I will demonstrate in this theoretical section, there are surprising resonances between the features of Web 2.0 and typical characteristics of populist politics. Populism’s traditional emphasis on unity of otherwise atomised individuals chimes well with social media’s combination of an individualistic framing of the user and the increasing massification of the platforms sustaining his or her interactions (Gerbaudo 2013a). This resonance between populist politics and Web 2.0 proves particularly fecund at a time of widespread political discontent and in the aftermath of the global economic crisis of 2007–2008, which has affected a wide and diversified array of social demographics.

The first obstacle to be overcome in developing a discussion of populism 2.0 is the fact that in public debates the very term ‘populism’ is mostly used in a pejorative sense. In Europe in particular this term has been used to refer to right-wing xenophobic politics, as exemplified by phenomena as the Lega Nord in Italy, the English Defence League and Jobbik in Hungary. This pejorative use of the term, however, overlooks the long history of progressive populism, from the Russian *narodniki* to the American People’s Party, to end with the socialist neo-populism of Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales. Furthermore, it is possible to see behind some stigmatisations of
populism, regardless of its progressive or regressive nature, a certain elitist attitude with the tendency and to look with fear at those occasions in which people mobilise outside of pre-established structures (Mény and Surel 2002). This negative understanding of populism has also dominated the debate about the transformation of populist politics in a digital era, as seen in the work using notions as “network populism” (Bratich 2011) or “digital populism” (Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler 2012).

My own discussion of populism treats this term as a neutral, rather than pejorative, notion that can in each specific occasion assume regressive or progressive qualities. My understanding of this concept is informed by the work of Gramsci on the notion of ‘people’ and of the ‘national-popular’ (1973) as well as by the neo-Gramscian theorist Ernesto Laclau’s analysis of populism as a political logic, present to varying degrees in most forms of politics (2005). In Gramsci’s work the ‘people’ constitutes a category that transcends notions of class. The ‘people’ is an “amorphous” mass (Gramsci 1973, 72) that has often been reduced to passivity throughout history, and whose activation and mobilisation constitute a fundamental challenge for emancipatory politics. It is on this vision of ‘the people’ as an expansive, almost all-encompassing category that Ernesto Laclau has built his influential analysis of populism (see, in particular, 2005). For Laclau, contrarily to well-established theorists of populism as Margaret Canovan (1981, 2005) and Paul Taggart (2000), populism is not a specific ideology. To the contrary populism is a transversal political logic, which revolves around the anti-sectional appeal to the ‘people’ as the totality of the political community, and which can be utilised by both the Right and the Left.

Central to populism as a political logic is fundamentally an allergy for divisions among ‘the people’ and a connected emphasis on unity, or more specifically popular unity. According to Laclau this condition is enforced when a “chain of equivalence” is built across an array of demands. In this context, one of the many demands comes to act as “empty signifier,” a demand that by having lost its specific meaning is capable of condensing all other demands (2005, 73–77). When this happens the political space is split into two neatly separated camps, with possible nefarious consequences for power-holders that have to confront broad-based movements. This part of Laclau’s account, and its emphasis on the unifying logics of populism resonates well with Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell’s argument that populism is an ideology that “pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who were together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice” (2008, 3). What matters greatly from a political perspective at this level is that the regressive or progressive character of populism depends to a large extent on the ‘others’ against whom ‘the people’ are pitted and united, regardless of whether they are migrants and ethnic minorities (as in the case of right-wing populism) or economic elites and corrupt politicians (as in the case of progressive populism).
But how does this emphasis on popular unity typical of populism sit with the individualised user experience characteristic of social network sites as Facebook and Twitter? The key logical step to solve this brain-teaser is that while populism is constantly animated by the desire to recompose ‘the people’, this ambition stems from a diagnosis of society as ridden with individualisation. Populist movements appeal to an ideal subject that is seen as highly atomised, and thus in need of a process of reintegration in the social body. Fundamental in the populist narrative is the figure of the ‘common man’ in all its multiple avatars: the hard-working man, the ‘average man,’ the working poor, the unwilling unemployed, the unrepresented citizen. Populist movements appeal to individuals rather than to classes or to other pre-established collective aggregations. They appeal to them on the basis of a sense of common victimisation in front of large-scale organizations, be they corporations or the state, that act against their interests. This social imaginary undergoes a powerful re-adaptation in social media activism, with the ideal subject of the common man now updated to the figure of the ‘generic Internet user’ as the imaginary addressee of populist appeals.

Appeals to popular unity and the role played by the common man as an ideal subject are not sufficient to grasp the nature of populism. Another important feature is the role played by direct democracy as the central demand of populist movements. Yves Mény and Yves Surel have interestingly argued that populism should be understood in opposition to constitutionalism (2002). Constitutionalism is a legalistic vision of politics concerned with the defence of institutions and law and order seen as the only bulwark of true democracy. Populism instead puts stress on popular sovereignty, and advocates for forms of direct intervention of the citizenry in the decisions affecting them. It is significant at this level that populist movements, starting with the People’s Party in the U.S., have been the main proponents of institutions of direct democracy, including referenda and popular initiatives. At this level, we find a peculiar resonance between populism and anarchist politics, which similarly to populism has criticised representative democracy and argued for forms of grassroots democracy as practised in assemblies or workers’ councils. Naturally there are important differences between these traditions. Yet, at the same time, there are also interesting parallels that are highly relevant to get to grips with the specificity of contemporary protest culture, and the rise of anarcho-populism, as a marriage of anarchism and populism at its centre (Gerbaudo 2013b).

So far we have excavated the meaning of populism beyond the pejorative meaning often associated with it. But what about populism 2.0? This notion—that has sometimes been utilised in journalistic descriptions of emerging movements and parties—identifies, in my own use of the term, the connection between some typical populist traits and some of the specific affordances of Web 2.0. This connection needs to be appreciated at two levels: (1) the individualisation of user experience, which is conducive to a re-adaptation of the discourse of the common man as an atomised agent, who needs to be recomposed in the collective body of ‘the people’; (2) the mass
character of the contemporary web, which chimes well with mass appeals of the popular type. These two contradictory trends should be seen as a contemporary manifestation of the complementarity between the imaginary of the common man and the imaginary of the mass that, as we have seen, lie at the root of populism.

Individualisation is a process that is highly relevant to understanding the nature of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is a term that has often been used to describe the contemporary web dominated by social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and are characterised by the centrality of so-called user-generated content. Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison have described social network sites as

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (2007, 210)

Typical of social network sites is thus the framing of individual users (rather than groups or activities) as basic nodes or units in the network. Social network sites and the type of user experience available in them can thus be seen as the most extreme reflection of the contemporary individualised society (Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), and in particular of that situation that Barry Wellman has captured with the notion “networked individualism”: a condition whereby people rather than places “become the portal” of social relationships (see Wellman and Haythornwaite 2002, 17).

The contemporary Web 2.0 is, however, not just a ‘social web’ based on one-to-one social connections. It is also increasingly a mass web, shaped by mass and broadcasting logics of communication. With the momentous expansion in the user base, Web 2.0 has rapidly become a sort of new mass medium, very different from the pioneering and highly elitist medium that was web 1.0. Total Internet users in 2012 stood at 2.7 billion people, around 40 per cent of the world population (ITU 2013). For comparison, in 2001, at the peak of the anti-globalisation movement only 8 per cent of the world population and 30 per cent in developed countries had access to the Internet (ITU 2013). Facebook’s surpassing of the one billion users’ mark in October 2012 represents a truly historical moment, marking the point at which social network sites are capable of reaching user bases previously associated only with TV mega-events such as the Football World Cup final or the Super Bowl.

This process of massification of the web forces us to rethink the models through which we have tried to understand its working. The understanding of Internet communications can no longer be exclusively reduced to ‘molecular’ processes of networking and narrow-casting that dominated the analysis of web 1.0. Rather what we are witnessing here is the return in new forms of those mass logics of broadcasting that were traditionally
associated with mass media, of radio, television and the press. This return of mass logics can be seen in the operations of popular political Facebook fan pages and Twitter accounts, followed by tens and hundreds of thousands of users. Castells, the theorist of the network society, has himself begun acknowledging this shift, when talking of a “mass self-communication” logic (Castells 2009) in the contemporary web. Yet he and other theorists working within the framework of network theory have struggled to fit the empirical trend towards massification in their pre-established theoretical models that propose a tendency towards increasing autonomy and diversity. The study of social media activism can provide some very interesting insights to make sense of this contradictory host of processes. Specifically in the continuation of the chapter I will focus on two main questions: (1) what are the ways in which the movements and parties of the popular wave tap into the potentials of this massified Web 2.0?; (2) how do they rejuvenate populist rhetorics to fit the dynamics of social network sites?

3. SQUARES’ MOVEMENTS AND NET PARTIES

The phenomenon of populism 2.0 analysed in this chapter needs to be understood in the context of the politics of the ‘popular wave.’ The term “popular wave” designates a “cycle of contention” (Tarrow 1998, 24) against austerity politics and a corrupt political class sparked by the economic crisis of 2007–2008 and the widespread discontent the crisis caused, with rising levels of unemployment and cuts to public services. This political wave has seen its initiation in the so-called squares’ movements, ‘take-the-square’ or occupation movements of 2011, such as the Indignados and Occupy Wall Street, which have taken inspiration from the Arab Spring to construct a new popular protest politics. These movements have been characterised by an effort to reclaim public space as a space for radical politics, as seen in the tactic of all-out protest camps. Furthermore, they have made use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook to construct new arenas of participation and decision making. Besides these movements, we have also seen the rise and development of new ‘digital’ or ‘net’ parties that share much in their vision and methods with Occupy and the Indignados. The most prominent of these is undoubtedly the 5 Star Movement, led by comedian Beppe Grillo in Italy, an anti-establishment party that has won a sizeable number of MPs in the 2013 parliamentary elections. Another example of this wave of net parties is the case of Partido X (X Party), a political formation emerging out of the Indignados movement in Spain, and appealing to common citizens to overthrow the corrupt political class. Let us now look at these different emerging movements and parties.

The Indignados movement emerged in Spain with the 15 May 2011 protests against the economic crisis and political corruption. Protesters occupied Puerta del Sol in Central Madrid, taking inspiration from the occupation of
Tahrir square during the Egyptian revolution. For around a month they created general assemblies to discuss solutions to the crisis, and occupations spread to tens of other cities and towns in Spain, and abroad. After the main protest camps were lifted in June, the movement developed into a series of ‘indignant marches’ across the country, with a number of subsequent protests against the Spanish government and the situation of increasing social distress. Crucial in the movement culture was the use of social network sites, including Democracia Real Ya’s Facebook page, which was one of the key platforms in the mobilisation, as well as Twitter accounts, blogs, websites and other web-based media.

The Occupy Wall Street movement followed in the footsteps of the Indignados. It launched an occupation of Zuccotti Park, on the 17 September 2011, nearby the site of the New York Stock Exchange. The movement campaigned against the consequences of the economic crisis on unemployment and social welfare, and attempted to create new spaces of democracy and self-help. It developed into hundreds of protest camps all over the U.S., mobilising diverse sectors of American society united in their anger against the economic system and against the political class. The movement, which was originally named with a Twitter hashtag as #occupywallstreet, made use of the micro-blogging site, as well as of Facebook and Tumblr to build public support and mobilise participants. After an upsurge in support and visibility Occupy progressively faded away from public view. A wave of evictions in mid-November 2011 proved a death blow for the movement and sparked a debate about organizational and political alternatives.

The MoVimento 5 Stelle (5 Star Movement) is an Italian political party campaigning against corruption and social injustice. The party (although activists maintain it is not a party but a movement) was founded by the maverick comedian Beppe Grillo, in collaboration with his Internet guru Gianroberto Casaleggio. Its origins hark back to the ‘Amici di Beppe Grillo’ (Beppe Grillo’s friends) local electoral lists launched in 2005, and to the V Day of 2007, from which the party takes its middle V in the word ‘movimento’ (V for the Italian insult “vaffanculo”—fuck off, directed at the political class). Progressively the movement has fielded candidates in the local and regional elections, until the national elections of 2013, where it won 25.55 per cent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and secured a strategic position in the Senate. The movement has made ample use of the blog of Beppe Grillo, one of the most popular blogs in the world, of MeetUp groups, Facebook pages and Twitter channels, and has experimented with online voting systems to decide on various issues and select candidates.

The Partido X, also known by the alternate name Partido del Futuro (Future Party), is a political formation that appeared publicly in Spain in January 2013. Its founders are connected to the Indignados movement and the free software movement. The party struggles for what it calls ‘democracy 4.0,’ which is a direct democracy facilitated by electronic technologies of communication. Its slogan ‘democracia y punto,’ translated as ‘democracy full stop,’ condenses
well the programme of the party, whose four demands all have to do with
democratic rights. Specifically the party asks for: (1) transparency in public
administration; (2) wiki-government and wiki-legislation—that is, a system
of online consultation for governmental decisions; (3) right to a real and perma-
nent vote—that is, the possibility to vote online on issues of concern when they
are debated in parliament; (4) institution of referenda and popular initiatives.

These various groups are admittedly highly different from one another. First,
Occupy and Indignados are protest movements, while the 5 Star Movement
and Partido X are parties, although very peculiar ones, given that they come
close to the typology of so-called ‘protest parties.’ Secondly, there is an impor-
tant debate to be had as to the political orientation of these groups, and their
location on the left and right spectrum. Indignados and Occupy have been
widely considered as progressive movements (see, e.g., Gitlin 2012), because
of their raising the issue of class and inequality and because of how much
some participants in these movements have declared themselves neither Left
nor Right. While the Partido X’s call for transparency and direct democracy
might fit with a radical liberal platform, it can be considered left wing because
its initiators stem from the autonomous movement in Barcelona and Madrid
and because of its rhetorical opposition to neoliberalism and austerity politics.

Regardless of their differences, these various cases share some important
similarities that justify analysing them en bloc. First and foremost, they share
a common oppositional culture that is visible in their use of common icons,
including the famous Guy Fawkes mask from the V for Vendetta movie,
in their anti-establishment position and in their faith in the Internet and
social media as providing a new space for democracy, or a ‘democracy 2.0.’
Secondly, participants in these parties and movements have often seen one
another as part of a common popular wave of protest and radical politics
(Gerbaudo 2012), fighting against the financial system and the old party poli-
tics, and striving for new forms of democracy. This sense of commonality is
indicated, for example, by the meeting between Adbusters editor and Occupy
initiator Micah White and Beppe Grillo in October 2013, and the declara-
tions of sympathy on behalf of the Occupy movement made by White.  

Given the controversy that has surrounded it, it is worth saying a few
additional words about the ideology of 5 Star as an odd case within the
popular wave, yet one that stands to represent much of the complexity of
this political cycle. The 5 Star Movement is difficult to pigeonhole in famil-
lar categories, and to locate in the left-right spectrum. Indicative is the policy
platform presented by the party at the 2013 general elections in Italy. The
twenty main demands were topped by the demand for a citizen’s income.
This has been a typical demand of the radical Left in Italy, one promoted
by many Marxist autonomists, including Antonio Negri. The party pro-
gramme also included policies on renewable energy and public transport,
which have been traditionally associated with Green parties. The party has,
however, been sometimes characterised as right-wing because of its position
on a number of other issues. The most important question in this context is
the issue of migration. Grillo has often declared himself against birthright citizenship. In one occasion he overturned a decision taken by some of his MPs to reform the law on migration and abolish the crime of clandestinity. The party has also often been accused of totalitarian tendencies, because of its scathing attacks against journalists and politicians opposing it, and of its ambition to represent 100 per cent of the population. Another issue of contention has been the role played by the non-official leaders of the movement, Grillo and Casaleggio, and their resistance to debates about the organizational structure of the party. Since the elections Grillo has often assembled the party MPs in away-days where he has dictated the political line, and he has expelled a number of representatives of the party who had publicly raised criticisms about the party’s conduct and the role of Grillo.

All in all, it is apparent that the 5 Star Movement is a reflection of the ambiguity of the new wave of dissent in the popular movements that have emerged since the beginning of the crisis. These movements are characterised by composite popular fronts that cut across traditional political divisions and class allegiances. This also means that possible authoritarian deviations of this movement constitute a serious risk, as it is highlighted by the contradictions between proclamations of absolute democracy and a reality of top-down decisions taken by Grillo and his clique. However, these fallacies by no means allow terming the movement ‘fascist’ as some critics have proposed. It is important to continue scrutinising the actions of the 5 Star Movement and to keep an eye out for possible authoritarian involutions. Yet, at the same time, as many in the Italian Left have understood, it is important not to demonise this party, and to acknowledge the importance of the political innovations it has put forward.

Before moving to the empirical analysis of the various case studies, it is imperative to make a brief methodological note. These different case studies are analysed by making use of: (1) the dataset of interviews, observations and social media messages collected for my book *Tweets and the streets* (Gerbaudo 2012); (2) archival documents collected for my new research project about digital parties, including party’s programmes, manifestos, declarations and selected social media messages. While empirically informed, the aim of this chapter is theoretical, in that it aims to construct a theory of populism 2.0, and of its different traits. For this reason, I will refer to specific cases, documents and quotes with parsimony, and only for the purpose of exemplification.

4. THE GENERIC INTERNET USER AS THE NEW COMMON MAN

An Internet connection and a Facebook account: that is everything you need to be part of the ‘people’ at the time of Web 2.0, one could jokingly say to capture the gist of the communication of the movements and parties of the popular protest wave. For contemporary popular movements, social
network sites such as Twitter and Facebook have become the means through which to address Internet users as the new prototypes of the ‘common man’ of populism: the ordinary hard-working citizens, victimised by an unfair political and economic establishment (see, for example, Kazin 1998). In the discourse of movements and parties of the popular wave of radical politics, the common man is translated into a figure that I name the ‘generic Internet user’ (GIU). The generic Internet user, as an imaginary average Internet user, becomes the ideal addressee of the all-encompassing appeals made by social media activists, which in the anti-sectional spirit proper to populism intend to reach everybody regardless of her political, cultural or religious inclinations.

If one looks at the manifestoes and self-descriptions of movements like the Indignados and Occupy, one immediately encounters actualisations of the traditional figure of the ‘common man’ as the tiny individual which together with other tiny individuals makes up that great collective body that goes under the name of the ‘people.’ In the manifesto of Democracia Real Ya, the organization that launched the 15-M movement in Spain, activists described themselves as “normal, ordinary people” and went on to declare, “we are like you: people who get up every morning to study, work or find a job, people who have family and friends. People who work hard every day to provide a better future for those around us.” In the “We Are the 99 Percent” Tumblr blog, where supporters of Occupy Wall Street could post their pictures and stories, one would find the following description:

We are the 99 percent. We are getting kicked out of our homes. We are forced to choose between groceries and rent. We are denied quality medical care. We are suffering from environmental pollution. We are working long hours for little pay and no rights, if we’re working at all. We are getting nothing while the other 1 percent is getting everything. We are the 99 percent.

What we find here appear as contemporary re-adaptations of the classic hero of populism: the common man, as the hard-working person, victimised in many different ways by the system, and in urgent need to unite against the “1 per cent [who] is getting everything.” A somehow similar logic is reflected in the discourse of the citizen and citizenship, that has often appeared in the indignados, as well as in the Partido X that has called itself a “citizens network” (Red Ciudadana), and has used the motto “only the citizenry can stop them” (solo la ciudadania puede pararlos). These expressions have lead to talking, within the Spanish debate, of the rise of an ideology of “citizenism,” opposing entire citizenry to corrupt institutions in way that strongly resonates with populist logics.

If we stopped here, we could just say that the Indignados and Occupy simply propose a re-edition of traditional populist rhetoric, with no substantial change. Yet, what is more interesting is how these appeals of a populist
flavour are actualised to fit the condition of society at the time of social networks. In this context, the very experience of online connectivity becomes itself an element of “commonality” to be invoked when searching for the “common” of the contemporary common man. This situation leads to a transfiguration of the populist “common man,” into the imaginary figure of the “generic Internet user.” People, or better citizens, are not appealed to only based on their grievances, but also on the assumption that their possession of online connectivity and the experience of everyday interactivity afforded by it predisposes them to active political participation. For example, in the case of the “We are the 99%” Tumblr blog, website users were asked to take a “selfie” of themselves while holding a message stating their specific conditions. In this context, a practice of digital popular culture as ubiquitous as the selfie is turned into a means of collective political identification, allowing an highly diverse public of users to express their shared sense of belonging to the 99%. These all-encompassing appeals to the “generic Internet user” are often accompanied by motivational assertions, calling people to break out of their individualised condition and to use their connectivity as a springboard to join a collective mobilisation. This is exemplified by expressions such as the one found on Occupy Together’s website stating that “the #occupy movement is driven by individuals like you coming together to create real change from the bottom up.” In these messages, the “generic Internet user” is ambivalently framed as, on the one hand, someone who is atomised and isolated, alone in front on the screen, and, on the other hand, as someone who in her possession of online connectivity can be easily turned into an active participant.

This adaptation of the imaginary of the common man into the imaginary of the generic Internet user is often found in connection with expressions as ‘Internet people’ or ‘people of the web’ that have become prominent in activist discourse, as a sort of designation of the broader constituency of contemporary movements. Slogans such as ‘power to the Internet people’ or ‘we the Internet people’ have appeared on many websites connected with the Occupy and Indignados mobilisation. Many of my Occupy interviewees referred to the ‘web people’ or alternatively the ‘Internet people’ as a sort of backdrop of the movement. They were those who were following the events from home, because they could not make it to protest camps. But it was also more generally a term for all ‘the people’ who had joined the movement after being informed about it on the web. The similar expression ‘people of the web’ is a figure that has been explicitly referred to by Beppe Grillo and other members of his party, the 5 Star Movement, as the designation of the social base supporting the anti-establishment political formation. These expressions manifest an adaptation of a long-standing populist tradition, in which often ‘the people’ have been identified with one medium. A relatively recent example is the phenomenon of the so-called “fax people,” a term for those citizens supporting anti-corruption judges in Italy in the early 1990s, by sending them solidarity fax messages (Tarchi 2003).
To sum up, what matters in the notion of ‘generic Internet user,’ as an ideal addressee for social media messaging, is that Internet users are seen as possible participants, regardless of their social and economic status, and social and political affiliations, the possession of internet connectivity being seen as a sufficient condition for their participation in protest movements and net parties. The GIU is framed as one grain in the heap of sand that goes by the name of ‘the people,’ or better ‘the Internet people’: an individual whose small contribution is invisible, yet instrumental to the success of the collective. The availability of an Internet connection and a social media subscription becomes a condition to be an active part of the 99 per cent. This framing is based on the assumption that an Internet connection automatically predisposes people for active political participation. Populism 2.0 thus incorporates much of the techno-utopianism that dominates current debates about the Internet (see, e.g., Shirky 2008; Mason 2012). It operates with the idea that the Net automatically provides a horizontal infrastructure where democracy can flourish. This aspect leads us straight to the second axis of populism 2.0: the level of political demands, where we see the updating of the ideal of direct democracy in the idea of an interactive democracy or a democracy 2.0.

5. DEMOCRACY 2.0 AS DIRECT DEMOCRACY

At the heart of the popular wave lies a recurrent stress on the need for a ‘real democracy’ and more specifically a direct democracy to supersede what activists see as the inauthentic representative democracy manifested in parliamentary and party politics. This orientation is clearly visible in a number of practices and slogans: from the general assemblies that have become such a powerful icon for the Indignados and Occupy Wall Street to the slogan ‘they don’t represent me,’ often heard in the Indignados protest camps of Madrid and Barcelona, to end with the name of Democracia Real Ya (Real Democracy Now), the leading organization in the Indignados protest wave. Of course, this demand for new and alternative forms of democracy is anything but new. In fact, it constitutes a new instance in a long array of democratic struggles that have been intensifying since the 1968 student protests, and were manifested in movements such as ecologism, feminism and the anti-globalisation movement. What is specific about contemporary movements is the fact that demands for democracy are increasingly tied to an idea of the ‘digital’ as constituting a new terrain for expanding democracy. More specifically, activists in the movements and parties of the popular wave see social media as creating the opportunity for a ‘democracy 2.0.’ This adaptation involves the utilisation of the Web 2.0 logic of interactivity, and features such as likes, comments, re-tweets and similar form of interactions and connected metrics as the means of a sort of informal digital mass democracy, following the principle of ‘one like, one vote.’

The notion of democracy 2.0 builds on the strong resonance between the values of contemporary activists and the deep valuing of participation
embedded in social media and connected discourses. The term participation, often mentioned by activists in connection with their discussion of new forms of democracy, was precisely the term used by the Internet guru Tim O’Reilly to spell out the specificity of Web 2.0 vis-à-vis Web 1.0, based on a logic of publishing (O’Reilly, quoted in Mandiberg 2012). In marketing circles this valuing of participation has been seen in discussions around the term ‘prosumer’ as a consumer who at the same time is also a producer. Authors such as Jay Rosen have argued that the contemporary media ecology completely departs from the logic of mass media, whereby the idea of a passive audience or public becomes untenable (Rosen quoted in Mandiberg 2012). Furthermore, social media gurus such as Clay Shirky (2008, 2010) have contributed in turning the ‘amateur’ (Keen 2007) into the new hero of Web 2.0. All in all the narrative of Web 2.0 resonates with typical populist discourses in casting the generic Internet user into a new avatar of the common man of populism: the atomised individual fighting against big power structures, as discussed in the foregoing section.

Crucial to the political deployment of such a participatory imaginary of Web 2.0 is an emphasis on the emancipatory character of disintermediation and directness. Activist discourse in the ‘popular wave’ is accompanied by a profound critique of all intermediary structures, be they corporate or governmental, seen as alienating individuals from their right to participate directly in public affairs. Activists attack parties, trade unions, politicians and institutions as parasites which prevent the ‘directness’ of a genuine democracy. A clear example of this discourse comes from Beppe Grillo, who has drawn inspiration from socially minded IT entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti’s idea of “democracy without parties” (1951), whereby the representative system is substituted by a network of self-governed communities, and from Simone Weil’s manifesto On the Abolition of All Political Parties (2013). Similar is the gist of the discourse of Partido X. In one of his campaign videos, Partido X has declared its intention to “do away with the political class, and all intermediaries.”7 Besides net parties, the protest movements of 2011 were also imbued with a deep valuing of directness and disintermediation. This can be seen in the discourse of people such as Fabio Gandara, one of the founders of DRY (Democracia Real Ya, Real Democracy Now), who explained that the main contribution of social network sites was the fact that “they gave people the impression that they could participate directly in public affairs” (Gerbaudo 2012, 88).

Concretely, what these movements often propose in combination with this critique of existing democracy is a form of digital democracy or e-democracy (see, e.g., Wilhelm 2000): the use of electronic platforms as means for decision making and voting. In order to analyse the nature and implications of this emerging democratic process it is necessary to take into account the different notions that have emerged in the field of digital democracy. Christian Fuchs has summed up this debate as revolving around three different visions: (1) representative digital democracy, (2) plebiscitary digital democracy, and (3) grassroots digital democracy (2008, 234–237). Of specific interest for comprehending what is meant by democracy 2.0 are
the latter two. Plebiscitary digital democracy is an electronic adaptation of plebiscitary democracy manifested in referenda and popular initiatives, in countries such as France, Switzerland and Italy. It is enacted in practices such as online surveys, online polls and online voting, where much emphasis is laid on the numbers as quantitative measures of the general will of the public (ibid., 235). Grassroots digital democracy puts instead an emphasis on the qualitative and community-based character of participation, and it is connected with ideas of self-management (ibid., 237).

While arguably digital grassroots democracy was the model dominant among anti-globalisation activists who pioneered the use of the Internet as a political means, the notion of democracy 2.0 utilised by activists in the popular wave possibly approximates more to what Fuchs names “digital plebiscitary democracy” (ibid., 234). This change in the model of digital democracy has largely to do with the shift in scale brought about in the transition to Web 2.0. The anti-globalisation movement utilised its own autonomous platforms as spaces for small group politics, often involving a few hundred individuals. By using social media platforms instead contemporary activists scale up to the level of mass politics, and become concerned once again with claiming mass support for their proposed lines of actions. In this context, the utilisation of social media platforms appears as a contemporary adaptation of the traditional populist striving for ‘direct democracy’ or plebiscitary democracy that, as Mény and Surel have observed (2002), has constituted a traditional cause for populist movements.

This striving for a digital direct democracy is visible in the development of a number of activist online voting platforms. This includes the Pirate Party’s Liquid Feedback project and e-vote initiatives such as GeneralWill.org and OpenAssembly.org. In the case of Spain the most famous example has been the Democracia 4.0\(^8\) project, launched by some information freedom activists connected to the Indignados movement in Madrid, which was approved by the assembly of Puerta del Sol. In Italy, the 5 Star Movement has launched its own online consultation to decide the candidates to run in the 2013 parliamentary elections, in which 20,252 people participated; it used an online polling system to poll supporters about which candidate for the presidency of the Republic to vote for in parliament. These are undoubtedly all interesting experiments. But they are still small scale phenomena that involve only a core of activists. Much more important in terms of overall reach is the way in which the groups of the popular wave have been using their social media platforms as means of mass direct democracy.

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have acquired the role of an informal voting system, operating on the principle of ‘one like, one vote,’ in which liking, sharing or re-tweeting assumes the nature of a vote of confidence on a certain message or proposal. Activists I interviewed in Spain, Egypt and the U.S. agreed that the response of Internet users constituted for them an indicator of their support for a certain course of action or a certain message. Some of them used features such as polls available on
Facebook fan pages to ask page users to express their opinion on different issues. But more generally they considered the number of likes, tweets and shares they received as an indication of approval/disapproval for a certain proposal, on the basis of which they could decide whether to go ahead or to change plans. Within social media activism the number of likes/shares/re-tweets comes to constitute a crucial source of legitimacy. These metrics, of which Web 2.0 abounds, come to indicate the extent to which a certain message or proposal is really backed up by bottom-up enthusiasm, a decisive factor in order to secure its ultimate success. They become the means for a permanent consultation, a sort of ongoing ‘temperature check’ by which to gauge the mood among the social base of parties and social movements.

6. TECHNO-PLEBISCITARIANISM AND TECHNO-PROCEDURALISM

The experimentation developed by parties and movements in the popular wave opens up important opportunities for a new emancipatory politics matching the affordances of the ecology of social media. At the same time, however, it also raises important risks that need to be carefully scrutinised. Many activists, such as the Spanish Javier Toret, have with good reason celebrated the power of the emerging ‘techno-politics’ that we see across the parties and movements of the popular wave. However, it is also important for sympathetic academics to be able to identify the risks involved in this venture and the possible distortions that can arise. Such critical assessment is what I intend to perform in this discussion section, focusing on two crucial dangers faced by the groups subscribing to the ideological orientation of populism 2.0: (1) techno-plebiscitarianism and (2) techno-proceduralism.

The emergence of a digital plebiscitary democracy entails a risk of techno-plebiscitarianism, to be intended negatively as an authoritarian exacerbation of the centralising tendencies inherent in digital plebiscitary democracy. Plebiscitary democracy has often been criticised for the risk of impinging on the rights of minorities and the principle of political pluralism (Mouffe 2005). In the case of Occupy the claim to be the 99 per cent has been criticised by people of colour and gender-based groups, who felt that this naming ran the risk of diminishing their own specific identity. In the Italian case, furthermore, Beppe Grillo’s claim about his wish to win 100 per cent of the votes, and thus eliminate all party factionalisms, has sparked parallels with fascism. Some of these criticisms are no doubt exaggerated, and sometimes they reflect a stubborn attachment to political minoritarianism that leaves little room for constructing a truly emancipatory politics. Furthermore, some groups such as the Partido X have put much emphasis on the need to defend difference and have devised complex internal decision-making mechanisms precisely to allow for different views to be taken into account. But it is evident that unless popular movements accept that they are not really the totality of the political
citizenry but only a “partiality that wants to be a totality” (Laclau 2005, 87), they might run the risk of being turned towards authoritarian ends.

Another problem connected with techno-plebiscitarianism is the continuing presence of invisible forms of leadership, despite claims to horizontality (see, e.g., Mason 2012). Fuchs has rightly noticed how one of the problems with plebiscitary democracy is that the selection of the issues on which ‘the people’ are asked to vote is almost invariably in the hands of few charismatic leaders (2008, 226). The risk is that participants can end up only approving or rejecting a plan that has already been devised by someone else. Social media activism reflects some of these problematic aspects of plebiscitary democracy.

In fact, as I have argued in my previous work (Gerbaudo 2012), there continue to be forms of leadership in social movements of the popular wave, and the same applies to emerging parties, as the role of Beppe Grillo in the 5 Star Movement blatantly demonstrates. In this context, we see the presence of clear asymmetries between organizers and common participants, even though the border between these two categories is porous and the way in which leaders are selected is often meritocratic. Common participants have indeed some room for intervening on decisions and influencing the debate that takes place on social media platforms. However, the interaction that is hereby offered is, in all earnestness, often more a form of reaction than a symmetrical two-way interaction. It is true that the ‘generic Internet user’ can have his or her say heard, more than it would have been the case in a traditional bureaucratic party or movement. But often this say takes the form of a reaction to something that has already largely been ‘pre-packaged,’ so to speak, something which he/she can like or not like, re-tweet or not re-tweet, or comment upon positively or negatively. In other words the influence of participants is often rather limited in qualitative terms and often is reducible to quantitative actions approximating a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ vote, adding to the tallies.

The almost obsessive focus on the issue of direct democracy that has been documented in the foregoing section raises a second risk: the danger of technoproceduralism. Contemporary popular movements put much stress on the need to construct a new political process, and they see in social media promising means to fulfil this task. Yet, at the same time, they sometimes reflect a certain degree of political vacuousness in their tendency not to put forward substantive economic and social demands, beyond the very demand of direct democracy. While I don’t think that there is a predetermined solution to this riddle, or that this solution goes under the evergreen name of ‘communism’ (see Badiou 2012), I share with Alain Badiou a suspicion towards the overemphasis on democracy that has characterised movements and parties of the popular wave. This is because democracy as such is a procedure (Schumpeter 1947), and struggling for a procedure alone, irrespective of its ends, seems self-serving, especially at a time of economic and social emergency such as the one we are currently living in. Unless parties and movements subscribing to populism 2.0 dissociate themselves from this obsession with methods and begin working on a more coherent and substantive political programme, they
will run the risk of fizzling out and further exacerbating that very political
cynicism from which they have drawn so much energy.

7. CONCLUSION

In the current situation of anti-political cynicism that dominates a sizeable
number of western countries in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial
crisis, social media, and the valuing of participation attached to them, have
come to offer protest movements and emerging parties a powerful channel
through which to construct new forms of engagement with that “amorphous”
(Gramsci 1973) social base that goes under the name of the ‘people.’ The
means of communication of Web 2.0 have come to be utilised as a platform of
interpellation of the common people, now identified with the generic Internet
user of Web 2.0. This user is invited to participate in these movements and
parties of the popular wave, with the promise of a democracy 2.0, an interactive
direct democracy, in which the affordances of social network sites are seen
as providing a horizontal system of decision making, capable of superseding
the discredited institutions of parliamentary democracy and party politics.

In the social media activism practised by movements such as the Indignados
and Occupy Wall Street, or in Internet parties such as the 5 Star Movement
and the Partido X, we find valuable attempts to reinvent democracy, and in
so doing to deal with the crisis of representation and the crisis of legitimacy
of traditional democratic institutions. These practices testify to a renewed
desire to participate in political decisions and in collective action that can
be read as a positive reaction to the situation of economic and political
despair affecting many western countries in the aftermath of the crisis of
2007–2008. Yet it is evident that populism 2.0 also raises a series of contra-
dictions and risks that need to be carefully scrutinised. The major risk faced
by this orientation is no doubt techno-plebiscitarianism. The practice of a
digital plebiscitary democracy, through both formal and informal modalities
of online voting, can bring about a disregard for the right of minorities and
lead to new authoritarian involutions, as seen, among others, in the case of
the role of Beppe Grillo in the 5 Star Movement. Furthermore there is a risk
of techno-proceduralism. In their obsession with web procedures and tools,
often emerging movements and parties do not appear sufficiently concerned
with political content and run the risk of not devoting enough attention to
developing a coherent political programme.

In conclusion, the emergence of populism 2.0 constitutes a powerful man-
ifestation of the possibilities and threats that characterise the current era of
global economic crisis, political innovation and fast diffusion of social net-
work technologies. Social media activism represents a terrain for construct-
ing new forms of mass politics, and thus supersedes the minoritarianism that
characterised the communications of the anti-globalisation movement and
other forms of radical politics in previous decades. Furthermore, activists
have found in the promise of a digital direct democracy a powerful unifying demand to pull together very different constituencies, and to construct a sense of civilisational mission. It remains to be seen to what extent populism 2.0 will sidestep the dangers of techno-plebiscitarianism and technoproceduralism and deliver on its promise of democratic renewal. Yet this vision has already influenced a profound reshaping of activist understanding of communication technologies and favoured the development of a digital mass politics whose potentials are enormous.

NOTES

1. The term ‘populism’ is not used in the usual derogatory sense but in the sense of politics of the ‘people,’ as discussed, among others, by Ernesto Laclau (2005).
2. My use of the term ‘ideology’ is not in the Marxian sense of ‘false consciousness’ but in the sense used within the Gramscian current of analysis that sees ideology as an action-oriented system of values and beliefs that allows different groups to make sense of the world (Gramsci 1973).
7. Partido X: Democracia y punto. #DemocraciaYPunto. Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5n3mkLi2qo.

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