

Kick ‘em all out? Anti-politics and post-democracy in the European Union

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“¡Que se vayan todos!” (“Kick ‘em all out!”)

A popular slogan on mobilisations against the entirety of the Argentine political class during the country’s 2001 economic crisis

“French statesman Georges Clemenceau said war was too important to leave to the generals. I’m beginning to think Europe is too important to leave to the politicians.”

European commissioner Neelie Kroes in *Het Financieele Dagblad* (8 February 2013)

One of the more cringeworthy moments of the last few years of sometimes ideological, sometimes street-fighting - but rarely parliamentary - combat between the European superintendents of austerity¹ and their subjects came in October 2012 when German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s visited Athens. Two Greek protesters dressed in Nazi regalia rode through the streets imitating conquering soldiers from a wartime newsreel. They burnt a flag emblazoned with a Swastika as a piece of radical theatre mocking the Berlin-led imposition of cuts and structural reforms.

Thousands of police were enforcing a ban on all gatherings and protests across much of the city, which became awash in tear-gas when citizens rejected this lockdown. The anger at Merkel’s visit was more than understandable given the profound Troika-orchestrated social destruction being wrought in the country and the less-than-democratic means by which this is being instituted. In any case, one is not looking for analytical complexity in the banners and slogans – or fancy dress – of demonstrators. A march, a protest, a strike is a performance, not an academic treatise.

Nevertheless, the incident, along with the usual Merkel effigies with scribbled black Hitler moustaches, was a gift to German and international media, providing them with the perfect telegenic moment to reinforce the narrative of German generosity (or in EU-speak “solidarity”) for their bailing out of Athens, and of Greek ingratitude and fecklessness.

When one of the most urgent tasks at the moment is to break this false north-south narrative and overturn the racist stereotypes of industrious (Protestant²) northerners

¹ For the sake of legibility, I use the term “austerity” as shorthand for the full panoply of policies of both austerity and structural adjustment imposed by the European political class and their national compradors. But in truth, the two are not synonymous, as liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and wage deflation (the four horsemen of structural adjustment) do not necessarily require a cut in public spending, in fact they often entail an increase in public outlay.

² I mention “Protestant” parenthetically not because any member of the European political class (so far as I know) has made mention of the religious differences between northern and southern Europe, but due to neo-liberalism’s continued dependence upon Max Weber’s narrative of capitalist success being a product of Protestant hard work and frugality – the Protestant work ethic – a narrative that few northern Europeans outside of academia would be able to reference explicitly, but regularly do so *implicitly*. The culture “knows” southerners are lazy. And the Weberian narrative is alive when EU

and work-shy, corrupt (Catholic/Orthodox) southerners, and to remind “ordinary” German people that they have more in common with Greek protesters than they do with their own elites, the Nazi uniform incident was very much an own-goal however cathartic it may immediately have been to the nearby protesters who raucously applauded the ersatz Schutzstaffel [Stormtrooper] unit.

Beyond the profound offence the incident caused in Germany, it illustrates how much of a loss we are at in terms of having a vocabulary to describe what has happened to Europe since the crisis.

It must be acknowledged that Merkel is plainly not a Nazi. There is no German military occupation of Greece or Italy (or of Portugal, Spain, Ireland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Latvia etc.) For all the attacks on Roma and immigrants across the bloc that have increased since the crisis, a “Final Solution” has not been proposed. For all of the shifts in fiscal-policy decision-making away from democratically elected parliaments to unelected bureaucrats and diplomats within European institutions, the EU is not a military dictatorship.

So when critics point out the extra-democratic turn of the EU in its crisis response the EU’s defenders and spokespersons laugh derisively at such arguments, saying that the bloc is manifestly not North Korea or Belarus. The charge of anti-democratic manoeuvring is, they could say, an exaggeration akin to the teenager tearfully calling their parents fascists for not letting them go to the disco.

But the sloppy convergence in the media and in popular understanding of the terms “despotism”, “authoritarianism”, “dictatorship”, “autocracy” and “totalitarianism” – which all mean slightly different things – leaves us without a language to describe precisely what has happened.

Between norms of liberal parliamentary democracy and Nazi dictatorship there is a spectrum of democratic and less-than-democratic forms. I want to argue that it would be useful to revisit why it is we chose the democratic forms we did, and that in doing so we will find that the EU crisis-response lies somewhere on this spectrum a good distance from the liberal democratic ideal.

To those who say: “Who cares about the liberal democratic ideal? It is insufficiently democratic anyway and we must go further,” I would respond that I don’t disagree with you.

However, the eighteenth century revolutionary transformation from monarchic autocracy to bourgeois democracy was manifestly a great advance and should not be sneezed at, as anyone in Tunisia or Egypt will tell you today.

Additionally, it is precisely through this withering away of democratic norms that the reversal of the left’s gains of the last 70 years is being achieved.

President Herman van Rompuy, for example, speaks of a “northern culture of competitiveness” and “southern culture of solidarity” that need to learn from each other. He is invoking here the Protestant-point-of-view archetypes of the loving, jovial, fecund but feckless southern Mama versus the austere, cold, sexless but sensible northern Hausfrau. Both stereotypes are overtly racist, of course.

In the struggle against despotism, questions about how far democracy should be extended (to the economic realm, for example) are suddenly up for debate in a way that they have rarely been in the past. It is in the struggle for democracy that we can ask these other questions. A Grand Unifying Theory, if you will, of social justice struggles - from trade union rights to women's rights to economic equality - is a tale of the steady extension of the realms that should be opened up to democratic decision-making.

My point here is that the struggle for European democracy is not parallel to the fight against austerity. The latter is in fact a subset of the former. The fight for European democracy is what is fundamental.

Simultaneous to what I will describe as the European "post-democratic turn" has been the development - dating back at least a couple of decades now in Europe and beyond - of a popular mood of "anti-politics" that is the obverse of post-democracy.

Depending on its particular flavour, anti-politics can exist as a cynical apathy that buttresses the neo-liberal post-democratic turn, or even wishes for an outright authoritarian turn with the arrival of a strongman saviour. But anti-politics can also be the germ of the overthrow of post-democracy if it embraces a progressive road that transforms anti-politics into the construction of (rather than just demand for) popular self-government.

The good news is that this means that all is in play. The bad news is that unless progressive forces get their act together it is the non-democratic forces that will further exploit this flux.

Post-democracy

In 2004, British sociologist Colin Crouch authored a slim volume analysing the late-New Labour conjuncture that unfortunately did not receive the recognition it deserved for its highly functional novel insight that can be applied well beyond the Blairite geography.

Crouch's key illumination was his recognition that in the UK in the 2000s, and indeed throughout the West, the pageant of democracy continues, but without substance. It is not that we have collapsed into autocracies. Formally, elections proceed with regularity, but the possibility of change is excluded with all policies - at least within the economic realm - coordinated outside the normal democratic channels.

This is distinct from the traditional critique that bourgeois politics is dominated by elites ('Twas ever thus. What is new here?) The argument is rather that while "virtually all the components of democracy survive within post-democracy,"¹ decision-making is on the one hand being taken out of the hands of elected parliaments and placed in the hands of experts, and on the other transformed into private, treaty-based negotiations between government leaders.

In brief: the pageant of democracy continues, but the substance is steadily hollowed out.

It is this hollowing out of democracy that permits still greater political dominance by capital – and because a reversal of the left's historic post-war gains can be partially but not fully achieved democratically, ultimately *post-democracy* is the mechanism through which the unravelling of the post-war compromise between capital and labour will be completed.

While elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals experts in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given to them. Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests.²

Long before the crisis struck, the EU was already one of the world's premiere exemplars of post-democracy in action, having steadily metastasised from a customs union

¹ C. Crouch, p 22, *Post-democracy* (Polity Press, 2004).

² Crouch, p 4.

to a quasi-government with far-reaching legislation covering most policy areas (in theory the EU has restricted competences but in reality there are always legal grounds to be found to extend its superintending realm should the desire be there for it to do so). Without going into the details of the European legislative process, suffice it to say that power is shared between the unelected civil servants of the European Commission (Europe's executive), and the legislative chamber of the European Council/Council of Ministers, representing different configurations of national ministers depending on the policy topic up for discussion (agriculture ministers, foreign ministers, etc., up to first ministers – the European Council, which is the Council formation of the bloc's presidents and prime ministers, the supreme legislative chamber of the EU.) The European Parliament is the sole directly elected chamber of the three main EU institutions. Unlike any other parliament in the Western world, it does not have the power to propose legislation and can only amend it. This power is nothing to sneeze at, but it is a crippled chamber compared to national counterparts.

Understanding the nature of the Council is crucial to grasping the post-democratic nature of the EU. It is the primary law-making body of the EU. While *most regulations* are decided by the Commission independently, laws are first proposed by the Commission and the Council then decides whether it will give its approval. In reality, the Commission rarely if ever proposes anything on which it has not already sounded out with the Council.

Meetings of the Council of Ministers are largely held in secret except for a handful of pre-selected televised sessions (which are made all the more banal as a result). The Council maintains its own secretariat general and has begat some 250 committees that supervise the Commission's implementation of laws and "working groups" that examine legislative proposals.

This network of committees is in turn controlled by the Committee of Permanent Representatives, or Coreper. This brings together national officials with the status of ambassadors - the heads of the permanent representations (essentially the embassies to the EU from each of the member states) or their deputies - to meet multiple times a week to prepare the agendas of Council meetings and carry out its orders. Examinations of Commission proposals are usually first performed by Coreper, for example. This clutch of diplomats is the highly secretive power behind the throne. Around 70% of EU legislation is decided, in effect, in these working groups, another 15% is set in Coreper and just 15% is actually discussed and negotiated in the Council.

What we have here is a senate-like legislative chamber whose individual members may be representative of their "district" (their nation), but which meets in secret and is never the subject of a general election. It would be like having a parliament to which members are elected individually but a government the electorate could never vote out, nor could they reject or overturn the current policy path.

The legislative decision-making apparatus is not parliamentary but intergovernmental and takes place primarily between diplomats behind closed doors. In truth, this is a form of treaty making rather than legislating, a method that historically was the

realm of war, peace-making, and espionage. Great swathes of policy areas have been taken out of the domain of public, contestatory parliaments and placed in the hands of diplomats and civil servants.

This replacement of national democratic legislative processes with treaty-making intergovernmentalism is not unique to the EU, even if the EU is the ideal nonpareil of this model. The United Nations Security Council, the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, even the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the International Whaling Commission, are all noodles in the alphabet soup of the construction of international governance without *government*.

Many policy areas require international governance, from climate change to managing the global economy to tackling internet child pornography, antibiotic resistance and even near-Earth asteroid tracking. International governance structures are being built to tackle these – all on a post-democratic basis. Our task is to transform this globalisation process into a democratic one.

Europe's post-democratic turn was not pre-ordained. EU leaders have for decades given lip service to the problem of what they termed the bloc's "democratic deficit." It may well be that some were genuinely concerned about this. Some of the original visionaries of the European project assumed that the sub-democratic wrinkles of the EU framework would eventually be ironed out with the steady development of a United States of Europe, with a governmental cabinet and first minister drawn from a fully democratic European Parliament. One can certainly fault these visionaries for their top-down approach, but there is no question that their vision was ultimately a democratic one.

But the intergovernmentalist approach – the not-quite-democratic halfway house between national democracy and international democracy – gradually came to be embraced as an end in itself and the democratic end-point was shelved. These structures are much more efficient than a democracy and certainly are more predictable (more capable of providing "legal certainty") but are also more malleable by capital.

The first clear signal that a post-democratic consensus had emerged and all efforts at overcoming the democratic deficit would be abandoned was the EU elite response to the defeat of the European Constitution at the hands of French and Dutch referendum voters in 2005. Despite this rejection, an almost identical version of the constitution returned in 2007, this time going by the name of the Lisbon Treaty. In 2008, Irish voters still rejected the tarted up Constitution-cum-Lisbon-Treaty. Within hours of the vote, Brussels was demanding a fresh vote, a wish that they were ultimately granted. With the help of a well-funded fearmongering campaign, Ireland voted in favour in 2009. Ireland had also been forced to vote twice on the Nice Treaty after initially rejecting it in 2001, but the quadruple "do-over" of the European Constitution took post-democratic manipulation to another level. European power-brokers had announced that it would indeed, pace Brecht, be simpler if the government dissolved the people and elected another.

In 2011, that inflection-point year of the eurocrisis, EU power-brokers moved forward with ever more radical structural changes to fiscal governance and ever greater interference in the democratic process, and in three cases effectively overthrew governments. Any remaining anxiety about Europe's democratic deficit was set aside.

“They made us look like an occupied government”

The European Central Bank, like all “independent” central banks, is a legislative chamber of a sort as well, but solely concerned with monetary policy. It also represents another mechanism through which a policy area is taken out of the hands of parliaments, in this case with a painful set of disciplinary instruments at its disposal. Monetary policy was deemed “too important” to be “politicised” – in other words, too important to be decided democratically.

Most citizens in “programme countries,” a euphemism for their diminished-sovereignty status in return for bailouts, will be familiar by now with the dreaded quarterly arrival of inspectors from the troika – austerity and structural adjustment monitors from the EC, IMF and ECB. After seeing this humiliating and almost total surrender of fiscal sovereignty, Portuguese PM Jose Socrates, and more recently his Spanish counterpart Mariano Rajoy, balked at suffering a similar indignity. It took a financial coup d’etat by the ECB to bring Socrates to heel. “I have seen what happened to Greece and Ireland and do not want the same happening to my country. Portugal will manage on its own, it will not require a bailout,” he declared. A few days after he finally succumbed in April last year, it emerged that the ECB chief had forced his hand by pulling the plug on the state. When Portuguese banks announced they would no longer purchase bonds if Lisbon did not seek a bailout, Socrates had no choice but to request an external lifeline. Later in the week, the head of the country’s banking association, Antonio de Sousa, said that he had had “clear instructions” from the ECB and the Bank of Portugal to turn off the tap. Even hardened cynics in Lisbon and Brussels were staggered, privately saying the ECB had crossed a line.

In August 2011, the ECB swooped in to rescue Italy and Spain in a massive bond-buying programme after yields approached the level Greece and Ireland had faced when they applied for aid from international lenders. A secret letter made public by Italian daily *Corriere della sera* from then ECB chief Jean-Claude Trichet and his successor Mario Draghi delineated the quid pro quo for this assistance: still further austerity and labour market deregulation. The letter told the Italian government exactly what measures had to be instituted, on what schedule and using which legislative mechanisms. The ECB, unelected and unaccountable, was now directing Italian fiscal and labour policy in secret. Even Silvio Berlusconi said at the time: “They made us look like an occupied government.”

Markets had conniptions when Greek PM George Papandreou announced in October 2011 that he would hold a referendum before his government could agree to a second bailout and still deeper austerity. On 2 November 2011, the “Frankfurt Group” (GdF for short, as per the letters on their lapel badges identifying them to security) – an unelected, self-selected octet established last October, reportedly in the backroom of the old Frankfurt opera house during the leaving do for Jean-Claude Trichet – called him in for a dressing down.

The GdF at the time comprised IMF chief Christine Lagarde; German chancellor Angela Merkel; French president Nicolas Sarkozy; newly installed ECB chief Mario Draghi; EC president José Manuel Barroso; Jean-Claude Juncker, chairman of the Eurogroup (comprised of the 17 states who use the single currency); Herman van Rompuy, the president of the European Council; and Olli Rehn, EU commissioner for economic and monetary affairs. They had decided that they had had enough of this man who was incapable of forcing through the level of cuts and deregulation they demanded.

Days later, Papandreou pulled his referendum and resigned. He was replaced by unelected technocrat Lucas Papademos, former ECB vice president and negotiator when Greece applied for its first bailout. The troika had gone one step further than the manoeuvre that forced the Portuguese leader to sign up to a bailout against his will: they had for the first time toppled a government and suspended Greek democracy, installing one of their own. Days later, they would do the same in Italy.

If the toppling of Greece’s prime minister was more of a European-politburo group effort, albeit with the ECB at its heart, most analysts are clear that the overthrow of Berlusconi, untouchable even after 18 years of court cases and corruption scandals, was effected directly by the ECB. As Italian bond yields soared to 6.5%, near the danger zone at which Athens, Dublin and Lisbon signed up to bailouts, it was widely reported that ECB chief Draghi was pressuring Berlusconi to step down. This was signalled by very limited Italian bond-buying by the ECB on the Monday before he resigned to be replaced with ex-EU commissioner Mario Monti. This bond-market weapon at Frankfurt’s disposal was of an order of magnitude greater than any domestic pressure from within Berlusconi’s own party or the opposition.

Toppling two prime ministers in a week served as a muscular, unambiguous warning to other governments that the ECB giveth and the ECB taketh away. When Spanish PM Mariano Rajoy was dragging his feet in requesting a bailout, aware that he would be surrendering his country’s sovereignty, pressure was mounted on Madrid to capitulate. In perhaps a polite reminder to Rajoy of their role in Berlusconi’s ousting, ECB governing council members publicly encouraged him to avoid delay.

Moves towards an EU “Fiscal Union” first unveiled in June 2012 by the self-selected quartet of the presidents of the European Council, European Commission, Eurogroup and ECB go well beyond the less-than-democratic centralised EU review of national budgets and fines approved in 2011. It is a move towards a still deeper pooling of sovereignty but without democratic oversight.

A fully-fledged “Fiscal Union” remains incomplete and as of writing is the topic of vigorous debate between national capitals, but if approved Brussels would be given the power to rewrite national budgets. If a country needed to increase its borrowing it would have to get permission from other eurozone governments. This is in line with the vision of political union outlined by ex-ECB chief Jean-Claude Trichet in 2011 when still in office – of a centralised veto over national budgets jointly wielded by the commission and council “in liaison with” the ECB, with overspending governments “taken into receivership.”¹

The ECB vision, expressed on a number of public occasions by Trichet and subsequently his successor, was described by the former as a “quantum leap.” It involves two aspects: a radical liberalising programme of labour market deregulation, pension restructuring and wage deflation on the one hand; and on the other for fiscal policy to be taken out of the hands of parliaments and placed in the hands of “experts” – in the long-term an EU finance ministry – in the same way that monetary policy has been removed from democratic chambers and placed in the hands of Frankfurt.

Orthodox analysts are quite sympathetic to the goals of the central bank. Jacob Funk Kirkegaard of the Petersen Institute, the Washington economic think-tank, wrote: “The ECB is in a strategic game with Europe’s democratic governments,” an overtly political strategy that is “aimed at getting recalcitrant eurozone policymakers to do things they otherwise would not do.” The bank “is thinking about the design of the political institutions that will govern the eurozone for decades.” For Kirkegaard and a number of other long-time ECB watchers, the main target is ultimately not Spain or Italy, but France, historically resistant to more binding eurozone fiscal rules viewed as a radical infringement of its sovereignty. By doing little in the face of market attacks on Spain and Italy, Frankfurt is warning Paris and its new president that it has no choice but to accede to its vision of technocratic fiscal governance.

Challenged by journalists to explain how such important powers could be taken out of the hands of elected representatives without a serious erosion of democracy, Jose Manuel Barroso said in 2011 that there is no threat to popular sovereignty so long as the member states in the eurogroup vote to give away these powers to civil servants.

In terms of democracy, let’s be clear. When democratic member states in full respect of constitutional rules entrust some entities with some powers, this is a fully democratic process and absolutely in respect of democratic principles.

He compared the transfer of fiscal policy to independent experts to the transfer of monetary policy to central banks that has occurred in many countries over the past two decades.

¹ All of this is a very much simplified discussion of the series of treaty manoeuvres in the last couple of years that steadily ratchet up the fiscal discipline while removing democratic accountability: the European Semester system, the “Six-Pack”, the Euro Plus Pact (successor to the Stability and Growth Pact,) the Fiscal Compact, and “Fiscal Union.”

Just as in our own countries, when we give some powers to a central bank, it is of course not accountable to a parliament, but of course the central bank was created through democratic procedures and is an institution that is absolutely built on a sound democratic architecture.

The European Parliament has failed to defend democracy against these manoeuvres. Since the start of the crisis conservatives, liberals, Greens and social democrats have consistently voted in favour of drives toward deeper economic integration that takes decisions out of the hands of elected chambers. Indeed, the sole EU institution with a direct electoral mandate has gone further in insisting on a gelding of democracy than even the Commission or Council of Ministers would have done.

Every few generations it seems we must remind ourselves what democracy is and why it is important. At the time of revolutionary France and America, some favoured an extension of democracy to the widest possible geometry. Others viewed the masses with suspicion and, while opposing absolute monarchy, felt that it would be in society's best interest if the cleverest, most educated and most virtuous held the reins of power. At the birth of the United States the more egalitarian Thomas Jefferson believed in equality of political opportunity (admittedly only to white males) and favoured "plain folk" and the "yeoman farmer" over the "cesspools of corruption" inhabited by financiers, bankers and industrialists. His nemesis was the proto-technocrat Alexander Hamilton who feared ordinary people's capacity for self-government, their tendency for "factiousness" (i.e. politics) and the "unsteadiness" of governments. Hamilton instead preferred rule by elites. "Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens...that our governments are too unstable and that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties," he wrote in the *Federalist Papers*.

Every time there is an election, EU power brokers are petrified that the voters will upset the apple cart. Their response is to warn voters, obliquely in the case of the larger states and more directly in the case of the less powerful ones, to "be responsible." In other words: do not vote the wrong way. Brussels repeatedly seeks out cross-party assurances that the economic policies of the outgoing government will stand whoever wins the election. In this way, voters are allowed to vote for whoever they like, and subjects that are unrelated to fiscal policy such as gay rights or food packaging are still open to discussion, but fiscal policies cannot change.

In those cases where voters have rejected Brussels' directions and backed the anti-austerity voices of left or right, immediately after an election EU power-brokers will put into operation efforts to minimise the fall-out, demanding governments of national unity or technocratic administrations.

But post-democracy is not simply a case of getting rid of democracy. As Crouch argues, parties and elections continue to be relevant.

Politicians in many countries are becoming alarmed at growing voter apathy and declining membership in parties. This is the interesting paradox

of the political class. It wants as much as possible to exclude the mass of citizens from becoming actively involved in probing its secrets, organising oppositional activities, disturbing the tight control exercised by the politico-business elite.

But it desperately wants us to offer passive support. It dreads the possibility that we might lose interest in its activities, fail to vote for it, give no money to its parties, ignore it. The solution it sees is to find means of encouraging the maximum level of minimal participation. If it is worried about voter apathy, it thinks about extending the voting hours of polling stations, or of enabling voting by telephone or the internet.

Crouch also argues that the obverse of the post-democratic turn at the level of European (and international) political elites is a post-democratic “suspicion of politics” (and what I will call anti-politics) from below, a cynical rejection of the entire political class as inevitably venal and out to swindle the public, as exemplified in the song by Jarvis Cocker².

The negative model, for all its aggression against the political class, shares with the passive approach to democracy the idea that politics is essentially an affair of elites, who are then subjected to blaming and shaming by an angry populace of spectators when we discover that they got something wrong.³

Anti-politics is pervasive. I’ll buy anyone a decidedly nice bottle of scotch if they can find me a street anywhere in the Western world where nine out of ten passers-by when asked what they thought of politicians did not respond with some variation of: “Well, they’re all corrupt, lying bastards, aren’t they?”

There are ever sounder reasons to think so. The 2012/2013 banking scandals in Greece, Spain and Italy implicated leading figures in government, and from traditional parties left and right, in efforts to protect themselves and their friends and family from the taxation rules mere mortal citizens are subject to. Instead of outrage the more common reaction was a shrugging “Well, what do you expect from these crooks?”

Deference to authority of all descriptions has broken down entirely. This is to be welcomed if it is channelled in a progressive direction, but it can go in other directions as well.

² J. Cocker, “Cunts are Still Running the World”, Polydor 2007.

³ Crouch p 14.

Anti-politics, the nursemaid of technocracy

The anti-political attitude, as Crouch points out, can also actually be exploited by our rulers to buttress the idea that some or all governance issues should be taken out of the hands of politicians. Anti-politics can endorse the post-democratic turn.

[The] post-democratic growing suspicion of politics...an atmosphere of cynicism about politics and politicians, low expectations of their achievements, and close control of their scope and power...suits the agenda of those wishing to rein back the active state, as in the form of the welfare state and Keynesian state, precisely in order to liberate and deregulate that private power.¹

In 2012, a group of Dutch entrepreneurs launched a firm, Mars One, which proposed to establish the first human colony on Mars by 2023. This mission would not be funded by or directed by the public sector. Instead a private company would make all the decisions and the money would come from the private sector through advertising and sponsorships for the “Big Brother” style televised game show that would first pick the colonists and then follow them through their tribulations on the red planet. Now, I am as space exploration-obsessed as the next kid, but this all struck me as a travesty of the noble pursuit of extraterrestrial discovery and I simply do not believe that the true costs (in the trillions rather than the roughly €1 billion the entrepreneurs are claiming) will be swallowed by the private sector.

Even more striking to me was how in a YouTube video promoting the scheme, Dutch Nobel-prize-winning theoretical physicist Gerard ‘t Hooft, who backs the project, blithely dismissed the democratic, public-sector-directed exploration of space in a statement intended to reassure audiences that this would not be a waste of their taxes. He did so in classic anti-political fashion, correctly assuming that his audience held a visceral distaste for politicians.

“As for financing,” he said, “this is going to be a private enterprise. Only private firms are going to contribute. *No political mumbo-jumbo*. No tax-payers’ money will be involved.”²

¹ Crouch p 23.

² Mars One promotional clip, uploaded 6 June, 2012 (emphasis added): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4tgkyUBkbY>

Few people would support an explicit proposal to do away with democratic control over an issue, but when 't Hooft or EU leaders or anyone else says that a particular issue “shouldn't be politicised,” or is “too important to be distorted by politics” many people would actually concur, even though the post-democratic structural consequences of the two statements are indistinguishable.

Analyse the language here and see how EU power-brokers exploit people's cynicism about politicians. Upon the first visit to Brussels in November 2011 of the technocrat prime minister of Greece, ex-European-Central-Bank man Lucas Papademos who was installed after centre-left leader George Papandreou was effectively removed by the Frankfurt Group, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso warned that the eurozone cataclysm was so serious that we no longer have time for “political games.”³

When Mario Monti first visited Brussels after he was installed as premier by the same group, Barroso said that the EU existed as a mechanism to take such decisions out of the hands of politicians and avoid public scrutiny:

After the Second World War, the countries that founded the European Community created supranational institutions, and now we have the European Commission, the European Court of Justice and the ECB. Why? Precisely to have independent assessment and monitoring and also if possible independent enforcement mechanisms that are not subject to political manoeuvring.

I don't want to beat up on Barroso alone. The entire EU political class – elected or otherwise – regularly and unashamedly makes similar comments. I'll give you another from Jean-Claude Juncker, the Luxembourgish prime minister and until recently, long-standing chair of the powerful Eurogroup. In 2011, at a small Brussels think-tank function, forgetting that reporters were present, he for once spoke quite frankly about the need for secrecy, saying: “I'm ready to be insulted as being insufficiently democratic, but I want to be serious.” Economic policy discussions were simply too sensitive, he said, and holding them in public potentially put “millions of people at risk.” “I am for secret, dark debates,” he joked at the time, adding that despite his Catholic upbringing he had often “had to lie.”

The parachuting of Monti into the Palazzo Chigi is an object lesson in the exploitation of the anti-political attitude for post-democratic ends.

Berlusconi is a more than dubious political character to be sure, and there is vast corruption across the spectrum of the Italian political class. But it should be self-evident to any democrat that it is for the Italian people to rid themselves of their tyrants, either through the ballot box or via the streets, not for a shadowy group of unelected figures in Frankfurt and Brussels to orchestrate his downfall.

³ Leigh Phillips, EU observer – “The EU techno-party is hollowing out democracy”, 30 November, 2011 <http://euobserver.com/opinion/114425>

And yet, and I can report here from my experience as a reporter in the European capital, many of the young professional expat Italians in Brussels – many of them friends of mine who profess strong commitments to human rights, civil rights, environmental protection, etc. – cheered his ousting, backed the undemocratic way he was removed, and supported the imposition of technocrat Monti precisely because “*the economic crisis is simply too important an issue to be left to the corrupt class of Italian politicians.*”

We even had a slick, Michael-Moore-style but pro-Monti documentary from the former editor of the classical liberal Economist magazine, Bill Emmott, which attempted to exploit this anti-political sentiment against the Italian political class to further shock-therapy aims. *Girlfriend in a Coma*, which took its title from a song by seminal Eighties sensitive indie favourites The Smiths and featured Benedict “Sherlock” Cumberbatch as the voice of Dante Alighieri, endorsed the full EU austere package of “reforms”: further public sector cuts, spending limits, flat taxes, privatisation and labour market deregulation. It targeted the usual villains of trade unions and over-spending as well as the Italian specificities of corruption, nepotism, the mafia and the denigration of women.

The film billed itself, in an almost “Occupy” style, as the “Campaign to Wake Italy Up.” It wanted to create a movement, an Italian Spring, by specifically targeting the young Italian diaspora – the million or so expatriate Italians outside the country, many of them graduates. Viewers were encouraged to upload their own ideas to the film’s website, while the oven-ready hashtags #wakeitalyup and #italiandiaspora were waiting to go viral (albeit presumably only amongst bilingual ex-pats.)

Regardless of whether they saw the film, youthful expat cosmopolitans did endorse Monti in much greater numbers – he received his highest share of the vote (30%) in the ‘Italian expats in Europe’ voting region, compared to 9% in Italy. Emmott was on to something. It is not so much that this expat class is economically conservative as just economically illiterate. These are Bush haters and Obama lovers. They’re members of Amnesty International and they bike to work. And they’ll say that they support democracy and think that they mean it. But at the same time, when you really push them, they say that they don’t trust ordinary people to vote “the right way.” They support EU efforts to take fiscal decision-making out of the hands of parliaments lest voters spend their way to oblivion. After a few drinks, they dismiss “most people” as stupid. A few drinks more and they call them “the mob.” It’s this lack of trust in regular people, this unacknowledged attitude that there is a group of experts who know better than everyone else, this belief that there need to be checks on democracy, that frightens me. *Girlfriend in a Coma*’s emphasis on the bright, young, hyper-educated Italian diaspora speaks volumes about the filmmakers’ lack of confidence in all other sorts of Italian voters.

Crouch has words for this class too, or at least the NGO-professional cohort within this group, although this may be uncomfortable for some who feel that their work is above all about strengthening human rights and democracy.⁴

Since roughly the 1980s, there has been an expansion in the number of non-governmental organisations, causes and pressure groups in Brussels at the same time as membership in electoral parties has dwindled, and they appear to be ever growing in importance. Crouch asks: “Do these not constitute the embodiment of a healthy positive citizenship?”⁵

He answers “No” to his own question. These are alternatives to electoral politics as well.

The world of politically active causes, movements and lobbies belongs to liberal rather than democratic politics, in that few rules govern the modalities for trying to exercise influence. The resources available to different causes vary massively and systematically. Lobbies on behalf of business interests always have an enormous advantage... threaten[ing] that unless government listens to them, their own sector will not be successful... Non-business interests can rarely claim anything so potent as damage to economic success.⁶

In its own complicated way, the rise of the NGO supports the post-democratic turn in that it is co-incident with the demise of the mass political party as the mechanism through which change is attempted to be achieved and embraces lobbying in its place. It is an end-run around democracy.

Many NGOs have done and continue to do good work. But this is beside the point. The question must be asked: why can “good work” no longer be achieved through normal democratic channels instead of lobbying?

To be sure, the comparison does not work completely. The success of many NGOs depends to a good extent on the mobilisation of people behind them (even if in some – though not all - cases “the people” are objects to be marshalled for this or that purpose in an attempt to demonstrate to those being lobbied how representative an NGO’s position is, and “the people” are not a self-organising force, deciding democratically on the course of action.) Can we really say that the rise of the NGO contributed to the post-democratic turn, or is the NGO just a response to an already existing post-democratic/anti-politics phenomenon?

Either way, Crouch is right not to reduce the question of NGOism to a simplistic Manichaeian division between “white-hat” and “black-hat” lobbying (NGOs vs corporate

⁴ Although in my experience as a bar-hopping wingman of many an NGO worker whether in Brussels or in the evening after some godforsaken international MacGuffin conference somewhere else, after a few beers their own criticism and recognition of the contradiction at the heart of what they do is far more piercing than anything Crouch has to say.

⁵ Crouch, p 15.

⁶ Crouch, p 18.

lobbyists) and to instead explore the post-democratic/anti-political ecology in which both exist.

Fascism, the acme of anti-politics

It should be obvious by now, in the wake of the steady growth enjoyed by far-right parties in many European countries since the start of the crisis, that the anti-political mood is fertile ground for some rather nasty developments indeed.

From Hungary's Jobbik, with its Magyar Garda (Hungarian Guard) paramilitary association and their anti-Roma pogroms and unashamed antisemitism, to the unreconstructed neo-Nazis of Greece's Golden Dawn (polling 14% at the time of writing) whose gangs of black-shirted bruisers drag immigrants off public transport and break up immigrant market stalls in full view of a sympathetic police, Europe's new far right is soaking up the anger, cynicism, apathy and fear of people who have abandoned all hope in the political class. Italy's Lega Nord, France's Front National (whose 17.9% for Marine Le Pen in the 2012 presidential elections now seems like a solidified voting bloc and no longer simply a protest vote), Denmark's Folkparti, the Netherlands' far-right "lite" of Geert Wilders – there are few countries left without a far-right party now solidly part of the mainstream.

This is not to say that the rise of the far right is a simple function of austerity, crisis and the anti-political mood. There are a range of complications involved. Support is not consistent and the anti-political mood is a harsh mistress. With allegiances to political parties that once went back multiple generations now lasting less time than it takes a fresh internet meme to come and go, voters will dump a far-right party with as little regret as any other. Golden Dawn was not the first such party to profit from the Greek cataclysm. Laos, a hard-right Greek Orthodox party historically on the fringes of the country's political scene, shot up like a rocket but was wiped out following its support for the EU-IMF bail-out. Similarly, Geert Wilders' anti-austerity turn is a product of his attempt to revive his fortunes after he was associated with the cuts to social programmes of the liberal-conservative coalition he had been holding up.

It is undeniable, however, that if the "Kick out all the bums" attitude is not channelled in a progressive direction it can be absorbed by the far right instead. The rise of this form of anti-establishment politics is inexorably linked to the incapacity of traditional social democracy¹ to present a constructive channel for fury at elites. The rise of the far right is the twin of the collapse of social democracy. Of course, it is not as simple to say that all blue collar voters have switched from social democracy to

¹ By "social democrat" I am sweeping together the rainbow of European labour, "Socialist," social democrat and, to a certain extent, Communist parties. This is perhaps unfair, as there have been ideological distinctions between them, of course. But for the purposes of this discussion, they all have played and continue to play a similar role on the centre-left of the spectrum.

the far right. This is demonstrably false. With the (instructive) exception of Greece where Pasok, the country's traditional centre-left party, has been all but wiped out, a clear majority of working people in almost every European country continue to vote for social democrats.

But voter abstention is soaring, particularly amongst the working poor, and the far right go fishing in these abstentionist waters. Italy's anti-immigrant and regionalist Lega Nord (Northern League) has soaked up such support in areas that until the 1980s were strongholds of working class activity and mobilisation that its breakthrough in 2008 allowed then leader Umberto Bossi to claim that his was "the new working class party."²

Equally in France, the Front National does best in de-industrialised areas and peri-urban commuter belts amongst low-paid private-sector workers, the unemployed and small shopkeepers bankrupted by competition with the out-of-town hypermarkets. "It is a vote that has taken root east of a line from Le Havre in the north to Perpignan in the south, and is made up of the victims of globalisation," according to sociologist Sylvain Crepon who specialises in the demographics of the Front National. "The Front National scores well among people living in poverty, who have a real fear about how to make ends meet."³ Consistently across Europe, the empirical evidence supports the thesis that being in the category of those viewed as surplus by the market economy and abandoned by social democratic parties "significantly raises" the probability of voting for the extreme right.⁴

A 2011 poll for Greece's Kappa Institute found that 30% of respondents wanted the country to be led by "a group of experts and technocrats" and 22.7% wanted "a strongman" to resolve the ongoing crisis.⁵ In this case, we can see the anti-political mood supporting both the technocratic and fascist routes. A more recent survey in France for *Le Monde* made similar findings: 82% agreed that politicians act principally in their own interest, 72% said that "the democratic system in France does not work well and no one represents my ideas," and a full 87% of respondents expressed a desire for a "real leader to restore order."⁶

² International Viewpoints journal, May 2008, Lydia Cirillo <http://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1465>

³ BBC report, 24 April, 2012, Hugh Schofield, "What next for Marine Le Pen's National Front?" <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17824436>

⁴ Kai Arzheimer and Elizabeth Carter, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol 45, Issue 3, pages 419-443, May, 2006. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00304.x Their survey covered six European states: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Norway. Note that this was carried out prior to the crisis.

⁵ Leigh Phillips, *EUobserver*, 17 May, 2011, "The junta of experts tells us: "Vote how you like, but the policies cannot change"" <http://euobserver.com/opinion/32501>

⁶ Gérard Courtois, *Le Monde*, 24 January 2013, "Les Crispations Alarmantes de la Société Française" *Francaise'* http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2013/01/24/les-crispations-alarmanantes-de-la-societe-francaise_18121655_823448.html

It is transparent that post-democracy and anti-politics are mutually reinforcing. The anti-political mood is exploited by the post-democratic elites to support the removal of great swathes of legislative subjects (and in particular fiscal policy) from the realm of democratic contest. At the same time, the deepening social dislocation that the policies of austerity and structural adjustment have imposed in this post-democratic fashion alienate electorates still further, deepening the anti-political sentiment.

For a growing number this has led to a desire for a strongman, but it does not need to be this way. We've identified here that anti-politics can push in two directions: support of post-democratic technocracy or support of fascism - a strongman or paramilitary force to "restore order." The difference between the two lies primarily in their attitude to force, to minorities, and their auras of "respectability." But in terms of their relationship to democracy - and their agreement on the need to curb the excesses of democracy - the two are essentially identical. They are both varieties of despotism.

Anti-politics and self-government

There is a third direction that anti-politics can take; a progressive and truly democratic direction. There is the possibility that the rejection of the political class transforms itself into a belief in self-government – *the idea that we ordinary people are capable of governing ourselves* - and the desire for a transcendence of liberal political and economic structures that, however much they should be defended against despotism, are themselves far from fully democratic.

Indeed, a rejection of the governing classes is the most fundamental prerequisite for the achievement of genuine democracy.

“¡Que se vayan todos!” (Kick ‘em all out!) was the famous slogan of the Argentine piquetero movement of 2001 and their caceroleros (noisy street protests banging pots and pans) when the government saw its legitimacy collapse entirely. New found solidarity and local decision-making sprung up from urban gatherings in their thousands to local neighbourhood assemblies, work committees addressing people’s needs, and occupations of factories that in many cases turned into industrial self-management. The conclusion of Argentina’s 2001/2002 movement is well beyond the remit of this paper, but suffice to say that we see similar dynamics at play in Iceland’s 2009 “revolution”; the 15-M/Indignados movement of squares in Spain; the carnation-wielding demonstrators that fill Portuguese squares singing the revolutionary anthem “Grandola, Vila Morena”; Bulgaria’s February 2013 protests that toppled the prime minister, and the interplay between Greece’s left-wing Syriza party and the popular protests and general strikes in that country.

In September 2012, thousands of Spanish protesters surrounded the parliament in Madrid carrying a large banner emblazoned with the slogan of the Argentine piqueteros: “Que se vayan todos!” The centre-left daily El Pais noted that this demand was made “*sin distinción*” (with no distinction between the different parties), a demand that “experts” warned demonstrated the emergence of anti-democratic populism.¹ On the contrary, it is through these movements that democracy has the best chance of being revived and extended.

As much as we should be optimistic about these developments, not all grassroots movements that emerge in resistance to austerity have a democratic character or should be blindly cheered on.

¹ Anabel Díez, El Pais, 30 September, 2012 “‘Que se vayan todos’, sin distinción’ http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2012/09/30/actualidad/1349030757_905661.html

While I've set out three main roads of anti-politics (liberal/technocratic, fascist/authoritarian, and progressive/self-governing) this does not mean that these roads do not at times cross paths. The liberal-technocratic governance of Greece has, for example, been accompanied by a steady ratcheting up of civil repression: arbitrary arrests, police violence, excessive use of tear gas on crowds, rounding-up of dissidents, mass jailing of immigrants, collusion between the police and far-right paramilitary, militarisation of labour, and intimidation of the media.

But we should also consider the hybrid phenomenon of the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) of comedian Beppe Grillo in Italy, the *quintessenza* of anti-politics.

Anti-political and pan-ideological

There should be no time for the lazy category of “populism” that the EU political class applies without ever really defining it to any politics that does not fit within the narrow confines of the liberalising Brussels centre-left-centre-right consensus. For example, both Syriza and Golden Dawn, two parties of radically different perspectives on almost all questions, are lumped together. So too in France is the *Front de Gauche* of Jean-Luc Melenchon and the *Front National* of Marine Le Pen, and in the Netherlands the *Socialistische Partij* and the *Partij van de Vrijheid* of Geert Wilders. Since the Italian elections in February, Beppe Grillo and even Silvio Berlusconi have been cast as “clowns” out to destroy the eurozone by both the German tabloid *Bild* and the *Economist* magazine.¹ When the category of “populism” is so broad and encompasses such widely differing sets of politics it ceases to have any meaning.

The soft-Keynesian policy proposals of the likes of Syriza, Melenchon and the Dutch SP are crisply to the right of the positions of the post-war social democratic parties of northern Europe that ushered in the welfare state through to the end of what the French call *Les Trentes Glorieuses* – the 30 glorious post-war years of labour-capital compromise. A useful comparison is the 1945 election manifesto of the British Labour Party which promised to nationalise great swathes of the economy, take the Bank of England under democratic control, and deliver public healthcare, full employment and progressive taxation that would squeeze the rich until they squeaked. Their continental counterparts were scarcely any different. By this logic, Clement Atlee, Olof Palme, Willy Brandt and Bruno Kreisky - the giants of European social democracy - were all populists and demagogues. For contemporary European social democrats to describe the likes of Melenchon and Tsipras as populists is to deny their own origins and to denigrate their greatest achievements.

The success of Beppe Grillo’s M5S in the February elections, in which they won the most votes of any party, has thoroughly destabilised the political ecology of the country (alternatively it could be argued that the destabilisation of Italy’s political ecology allowed Cinque Stelle to succeed). The centre-left coalition led by the Democratic Party of Pier Luigi Bersani mustered little more support than scandal-ridden Berlusconi and is unable to form an effective or durable government. Markets had their predictable “Democracy - what a bitch” moment, with share prices swooning across the continent

¹ The Economist 2 March, 2013 “Send in the clowns: How Beppe Grillo and Silvio Berlusconi threaten the future of Italy and the euro” <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21572763-how-beppe-grillo-and-silvio-berlusconi-threaten-future-italy-and-euro-send>

and sovereign bond yields spiking across the eurozone periphery to levels not seen for months.

Again we heard the demand “*Tutti a Casa!*” (Que se vayan todos!/Kick ‘em all out!) as M5S soared from 1.8% support in 2010 to 24% within two years. Almost two out of every three voters backed anti-austerity parties and a full 90% did not vote for the party of European austerity – the Monti coalition. Grillo’s intransigence in refusing to join any coalition (as of the time of writing) makes the country effectively ungovernable at least in terms of the Brussels-Frankfurt consensus. This is without question the first major victory of the anti-austerity resistance. Not the Indignados, not the Greek general strikes, not Tsipras or Melenchon have achieved this.

We could even say that Grillo has been braver than Tsipras in that he campaigned on an explicit platform of withdrawal from the euro and said that M5S would buy back €600bn in Italian bonds from foreign holders while delivering a painful haircut to them – in effect a default – while Syriza has been more coquettish on these questions. That a plurality of Italians – historically one of the most pro-European of EU member states – could confidently endorse a break-up of the euro is a remarkable change in fortunes for the bloc. It changes everything. It is transparently clear that the European elite are losing popular consent for the union even amongst its most committed subjects. The challenge to the political legitimacy of the European Union has arrived at the heart of the project.

There are also aspects of Grillo’s movement (or movement of movements – a coalescence of different campaigns over public water, green energy, etc.) that appear at first glance to have replicated the best horizontal, maximally democratic aspects of Occupy and the Indignados and the resistance movements that have come before: the Seattle-to-Genoa altermondialist movement of the late 1990s/early 2000s. His “*Grillini*,” the 163 fresh-faced new deputies and senators, most of them in their 20s and 30s, were selected through online voting and arrived in Rome to take up their seats bringing with them little more than backpacks and sleeping bags. Grillo repeatedly declares: “We’re not a political party; we’re a civic revolution.”

There are those who would say that at this early point in M5S’ existence it is too soon to be overly judgemental or sectarian towards the phenomenon. They argue that the fact that it is not an expressly progressive movement has so far not undermined its theoretical transformative potential. A number of progressives emerging from what autonomist commentator Federico Campagna² (a critic of M5S) describes as the Italian “ruins of the post-2001 movements” (altermondialist, *Rifondazione Comunista*, *Tute Bianchi*, *No Globo*, autonomist, anarchist, etc.) have involved themselves with this new force.³

² Campagna is a collaborator of the Italian autonomist philosopher Franco “Bifo” Berardi and the co-editor of the collection of anti-austerity resistance manifestos *What We Are Fighting For* (2012 Pluto Press).

³ Novara radio programme “‘Five Star Shaman’ – The Meaning of Beppe Grillo” 5 March, 2013 <http://novaramedia.com/2013/03/five-star-shaman-the-meaning-of-beppe-grillo/>

But I want to argue that there is sound reason for reticence regarding Grillo and M5S. For the purposes of this essay I am less interested in some of the political positions of the grouping than the question of whether M5S represents a transcendence of the anti-politics that buttresses liberal/technocratic and/or fascist/authoritarian post-democracy – in other words a progressive/self-governing anti-politics – or whether instead it is some sort of as-yet-unresolved contradictory hybrid form.

Nevertheless, the party's political prescriptions and the particular anti-political flavour of M5S are not unrelated. Rejection of austerity and corruption combine with a focus on public water, environmentalism and a sort of copyleft, digital-rights activism and emphasis on broadband development. Many commentators have referred to the similarities between parts of a Green programme and the Pirate Parties in Germany and Sweden (which are themselves also the beneficiaries of the anti-political mood), and they are not wrong. But Grillo and his Grillini cook up a pan-ideological salmagundi of ideas.

Notably, he is not unfriendly toward the fascists of Casa Pound, a far-right social centre squat named after the fascist sympathising American poet Ezra Pound, whose estimated 5,000 members are known for their murderous attacks on immigrants, but which also provides housing for impoverished families.⁴ Simone di Stefano, a Casa Pound leader and candidate for president of the Lazio regional government, approached Grillo and said: "They ask me if you are a fascist." Grillo responded "This is a question that doesn't regard me. We are an ecumenical movement. If a guy from Casa Pound wants to enter the Cinque stelle, and he meets the criteria, he can do that." The pair chatted in front of cameras for some time and endorsed many of each other's positions.

Grillo approvingly quotes Mussolini, opposes citizenship rights for the children of immigrants born in the country, and has said: "The unions are outdated. We no longer need them. We should do as the US does." He argues that so long as workers are represented on company boards in corporatist fashion unions can be done away with.

Even Grillo's anti-austerity position is not as unequivocal as it seems. He backs a slashing of public debt via "cutting waste and with the introduction of new technologies." His desire to see a break up of state firms such as the railroads, Telecom Italia and the public power companies surely is no different to the Monti programme and the demands by Brussels, Frankfurt and Berlin. The M5S mayor of Parma, Federico Pizzarotti, elected in May 2012, has overseen a programme of municipal cuts.

Grillo is silent on questions of taxation and appears not to have any analysis of the global economic crisis other than an unexceptional fury at the mysterious puppet-masters of "Big Finance."

These perspectives are clearly a contradictory mess - public water but private electrics? Were M5S to extend its position in an election in six months' time say, and rather than complete its "civic revolution" in fact be the superintendent of fur-

⁴ "Italy's fascists stay true to Mussolini's ideology," The Guardian, 6 November, 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/06/italy-fascists-true-mussolini-ideology>

ther austerity and structural adjustment, can we be confident that it would have any greater popular support than Monti?

Internally, the movement is run on a rigidly hierarchical basis and is the personal property and will of Grillo and his partner, web marketing guru Gianroberto Casaleggio. There are no conferences or branches. Members that diverge from the duo's perspective are briskly and pitilessly drummed out of the party.

When all this is put together, M5S appears less a replication of Syriza, the Indignados, the Portuguese demonstrators, the Front de Gauche, et al – an anti-austerity movement with Italian characteristics – than a genuinely novel phenomenon, an authoritarian pied piper dressing up his charges in red, green, yellow and black livery: red for anti-austerity, green for environmentalism, yellow for liberalism, and black both for the flirtation with fascism and the dalliance with anarchism.

Parts of M5S do appear to represent an anti-politics of the progressive third kind, but other parts repeat neo-liberal-technocratic and authoritarian anti-politics. In this way it is different from pretty much anything that has come before.

It is anti-politics, *ne plus ultra*.

A Strasserism for the twenty-first century

My best guess is that M5S is unsustainable. The ideological contradictions are too profound. The pressures on the party now that it is in the role of kingmaker will be considerable and, unlike Syriza or the Front de Gauche, it simply does not have the structural analytical chops to deal with the economic and political tempest that surrounds it.

This is not to suggest that the likes of Syriza or the Front de Gauche are not also having difficulties dealing with the world-historical nature of the circumstances they find themselves in. But even the sharpest progressive critics of the paths that Syriza and the Front de Gauche have chosen could not deny that within their ranks and in their leadership lies a defined analytical framework to describe the crisis which M5S does not have.

If M5S can be said to have any analytical framework it is the base, uninformative belief that there is “La Casta,” an ill-defined “caste” of venal characters, traitors, who need to be done away with. It is La Casta versus the “honest people.” It is the anti-political analysis of Vaffanculo! (Fuck off!)¹

Why is the Italian case important? The matter goes beyond the scale of the Italian economy, its debt levels and its role in the *global* economy which puts Greece in the shade. This case is important because M5S is the extreme example of the weakness that is common to all resistance movements.

In many ways M5S’ categorisation of the enemy as a “caste” of traitors is not so different from Occupy’s nebulous “99% versus the 1%.” But while the latter is a useful slogan on a homemade cardboard placard and the starting point for a more thorough analysis and deeper understanding of class, markets, financialisation, unemployment, and - in the case of the Indignados and the rest of the European anti-austerity resistance - the eurozone and the EU’s structures, Grillo’s “caste” is a moralistic endpoint. That said, the 99% analysis is still structurally weak and needs to be transcended.

In the years leading up to the crisis there was a desire, usually unspoken but sometimes explicitly expressed, for a fresh disaster, a true catastrophe to rock international capitalism that would “wake people up.” More sensible analysts recalled that economic crises tended to be very bad indeed for progressive forces. Empirical evidence shows that it is actually during the high points of economic cycles with near full employment

¹ See for example his Vaffanculo Day: <http://www.beppegrillo.it/eng/2007/06/vaffanculoday.html>

that progressive demands are achieved and that in downturns, dark, fearful ideologies take hold. Moreover, heading into the last economic crisis of the current scale, the Great Depression, progressive forces were markedly more hegemonic. There were mass social democratic and Communist parties and even sizeable anarchist sympathies in many jurisdictions that were linked to militant trade unions confident in the power they wielded. Heading into the current crisis, progressive forces were scattered, weak, minoritarian and on the defensive.

This is to say: anti-politics is not enough. It can be swayed and bent in some very anti-democratic directions.

Some have argued that Beppe Grillo and M5S have prevented the birth of a domestic version of the Indignados or Syriza. They have it the wrong way round. It is the lack of a domestic version of the Indignados or Syriza that gave birth to M5S. When M5S collapses under the weight of its incoherence, there will still be nothing in Italy on the level of these other European movements that can begin to imagine, let alone construct, an alternative.

My great fear is the arrival of a combination of a nationalist Keynesian response to the crisis and a vicious anti-immigrant programme. A variety of anti-politics that arrives with this set of ideas, fronted by a charismatic figure and/or movement, will be very popular indeed.

It is uncomfortable for the left to discuss this topic but it must be broached. We use the term “far-right” to describe all those wretched formations beyond the pale of the conservative mainstream but this is historically inaccurate. The original Fascists, in Italy, and the Nazis, in Germany, did not see themselves as just a harder version of conservative forces. There is a reason why Hitler’s party was called the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* – the National *Socialist* German Workers’ Party.

I do not see any reason why amidst Europe’s current climate of deep anti-immigrant racism a contemporary variation on this theme of nationalism, hatred of internal (and external) racial enemies together with a social programme of defence and protectionism could not be widely embraced, perhaps with a dash of localist environmentalism and digital-rights decoration - a Strasserism for the twenty-first century, if you will.

Strasserism describes the “left-wing” strain of Nazism associated with the Strasser brothers, Otto and Gregor Strasser, which was ultimately crushed in 1934 during the Night of the Long Knives. The National Socialists, like Mussolini, had promised a “national revolution” which the Strassers and the head of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), Ernst Roehm, took at their word demanding robust action to do away with poverty, enact wealth redistribution and topple elite power. Otto Strasser called for wide-ranging land reform that would break up the vast estates of the aristocracy and advocated cooperatives and a system of artisanal guilds. A confused, pan-ideological muddle, the Strasserites favoured “productive capital” over opposed “Jewish finance” and attacked Jews on a supposed anti-capitalist basis. As per German Marxist August Bebel, this was *Der Antisemitismus ist der Sozialismus der dummen Kerle* – Antisemitism, the socialism of fools.

Marine le Pen for her part has overseen something of a Strasserite policy turn from her father's regime, emphasising a defence of working people against immigrants and unpatriotic capitalists. There are echoes of this in Wilders' defence of pensions and social programmes for the honest, modest, hard-working mythical Dutch couple, Henk and Ingrid, who face destruction at the hands of lazy immigrants and the depredations of foreign EU masters.

This is not to describe M5S as explicitly Strasserist and catching out a naïve member of the Grillini for some pro-fascist comments is insufficient for describing the nature of the movement as a whole, however worrying what was said may be.² But we should be on our guard when confronted with such a pan-ideological hodge-podge. It is not enough to celebrate the anti-politics of M5S for tapping into "a mood of anger and resistance and a desire for change." So, frankly, did the SA.

Just as it is uninformative of supporters of the EU austerity strategy to categorise any new variety of anti-politics as "populism," it is also important for opponents of the austerity strategy to not blindly celebrate these groups. Instead it must be asked what kind of anti-politics a new phenomenon represents, whether it is democratic itself and whether it has a response to the post-democratic structure (and for that matter the broader economic crisis), or is it just a confused ideological mess?

In the coming years, with the spreading collapse in legitimacy of political elites, all sorts of new-fangled anti-political formations will be thrown up and we must interrogate whether they ultimately buttress post-democracy or prefigure its overthrow.

² Shortly after the election, daily newspaper La Stampa discovered a blog post of Roberta Lombardi, a member of the party freshly elected to the Chamber of Deputies, in which she praised Mussolini's ideology saying: "Before it degenerated, the ideology of fascism had a socialist-inspired sense of national community and a very high regard for the state and the protection of the family."

A critique of his ideas & actions.



Leigh Phillips

Kick 'em all out? Anti-politics and post-democracy in the European Union
01 March 2013

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