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From Opera to Real Democracy: Popular Constitutionalism and Web 2.0

Elizabeth Dale¹

On March 17, 2011 the conductor Riccardo Muti stood in the orchestra pit at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma and, in the presence of the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and the Italian President, Giorgio Napolitano, denounced the Italian government's cuts to funding for the arts and culture. He then invited the entire audience to join the opera's chorus in an encore of Va' Pensiero, the hymn of the Hebrew slaves in Nabucco, to protest the cuts. Within two days of the sing-a-long, the Italian government reversed the course it set more than ten months before and agreed to a tax that would be used to restore funds to the arts and culture budget. This article traces how and why these acts of protest in Italy developed, succeeded, and then were appropriated by transnational activists interested in encouraging popular constitutionalism. Because the entire process made considerable use of Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and Twitter, this case study simultaneously explores how a popular protest became a successful expression of popular constitutionalism, and considers how the messages of that protest evolved across a transnational public sphere that encompassed Web 2.0.

Introduction

"The indignant can go to the opera;
but only in Rome."

On March 17, 2011 the conductor Riccardo Muti stood in the orchestra pit at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma and, in the presence of the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi and the Italian President, Giorgio Napolitano, denounced the Italian government's cuts

to funding for the arts and culture. He then invited the entire audience to join the opera's chorus in an encore of *Va' Pensiero*, the hymn of the Hebrew slaves in *Nabucco*, to protest the cuts. Within two days of the sing-a-long, the Italian government reversed the course it set more than ten months before and agreed to a tax that would be used to restore funds to the arts and culture budget (Ross, 2011).

The events of March 17 were the culmination of a year's worth of popular constitutionalism (Isin, 2009; Kramer, 2004), expressed here by a direct democracy that worked through a multifaceted public sphere to force the Italian government to change its policy. But the story of that moment in Rome on March 17 does not end with the change in policy by the Berlusconi government. Within days, Muti's sing-a-long was picked up by activists outside of Italy, including quite a few supporters of the nascent *indignados* movement. In the spring and into the summer of 2011, these activists tweeted, blogged and commented on those moments in the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, citing them as examples of how citizens could stand up to governments. In the words of one blogger, the sing-a-long in Rome on March 17 was a "model of civic protest".

At each step of that process, from the first days of the Italian protest against the budget cuts to the transnational efforts of the supporters of the *indignados* movement, participants made considerable use of Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and Twitter. This article unpacks the Opera protest and its transformation into a transnational symbol of dissent in order to see what it tells us about how popular constitutionalism expresses itself in the public sphere in the twenty-first century. While doing so, it also considers how, and to what extent, Web 2.0 played a role in that process.

The idea that popular constitutionalism may act successfully, and do so in a public sphere that includes Web 2.0, is in tension with recent scholarship. Most studies of the public sphere assume its role to have declined over the course of constitutional history (Habermas, 1989; Glipstrud, 2010). When the public sphere originally arose at the end of the era of absolute monarchies, it was an extra-constitutional site, an unofficial space where the bourgeoisie, otherwise excluded from government, were able to assume a constitutional role. Inside the public sphere they debated government actions, articulated alternative positions, and pressed arguments for changes in policy. Because of their economic power and the threat they posed to the security of the regime, they were often able to use the public sphere to effect change. And so the sphere became a site of popular democratic action within undemocratic political systems (Fraser, 1996, pp. 58-62). Often thought of as the space for discussion and rational debate, the public sphere also provided a home for the popular, sometimes violent protests against government action of popular constitutionalism (Ryan, 1998; Kramer, 2004).

But over time, with the rise of more democratic institutions and processes (in large part because of pressure from the public sphere), the public's constitutional role was

altered. Popular constitutionalism fell into disfavour (see, e.g., Kramer, 2004) and the public sphere itself was transformed and ultimately weakened as a constitutional force (Fraser, 1996). An initial round of changes, which provided constitutional protections for various activities related to the public sphere, such as rights to freedom of speech and press, strengthened the public sphere. But the rise of the market economy and commercial press weakened the powers and authority of the public in several ways: News media and other forms of discourse and exchange became commercialised, voters increasingly were cast as consumers choosing between different political views, and popular culture and celebrity replaced information as the focus of coverage (*ibid.*, pp. 64-65). The rise of technology reinforced those transformations by advancing social and economic interests at the expense of political engagement and by creating barriers to communication, while increasing workloads deprived people of the time to commit to public life (Schiller, 2009; Sunstein, 2007). Meanwhile, the creation of representative legislatures and parliaments transferred popular authority from the people themselves to their legislative agents. This institutional transformation split the public sphere into two unequal parts. As the legislature became the strong sphere of debate and action, the people themselves were left with a greatly weakened space of publicity and little political power or constitutional authority (Fraser, 1996, pp. 74-77).

While early accounts expressed the hope that Web 2.0 offered a way to resuscitate the public sphere and reinvigorate the people's constitutional role (Shirky, 2008), recent literature has been sceptical about its possibilities (Morozov, 2012). Popular accounts of 'Twitter Revolutions' in the Middle East (Sullivan, 2009) or the Facebook Constitution in Iceland (Siddique, 2011), were countered by studies arguing that social media has very real limits as a tool for political action. Some of these arguments are socio-economic, questioning the political utility of social media in those places where social media is often not available to any but the economic elite (Good, 2010, pp. 528-529). At least one recent study of the Egyptian Revolution argues that traditional sources of organisation such as labour organisations or football clubs, and communication relying on satellite TV, telephones and face-to-face sessions were far more important than Twitter feeds or Facebook for organising protest and resistance (Wilson and Dunn, 2011, Fig. 3). Other studies argue that the limits of Web 2.0 are as much psychological as structural, and that participation in social media actually weakens activism because it encourages passive participation. Clicking 'like' or re-tweeting a message, according to this argument, is too often used as a substitute for taking to the streets or engaging in other acts of public protest (Morozov, 2012). Still others note that Web 2.0 offers as much opportunity for governments to control and monitor citizens as they do for popular action (*ibid.*)

In this article, I argue that the case of the sing-a-long in Rome on March 17

suggests that there is a role for Web 2.0 in popular constitutionalism and the public sphere. On one hand, as the study of a year-long popular movement, this article suggests that social media can play a role by helping a national movement keep its ideas alive, encouraging discussion and providing a means of publicising a successful frame. On the other, as a study of how one part of that successful national movement was appropriated and interpreted in a variety of ways by another transnational movement, it is an example of how Web 2.0 allows ideas to be reused by different publics in a variety of ways.

I. Opening Acts

Problems of Culture

To the extent that the events in Rome in 2011 offer evidence of popular activism within the public sphere, it was in an unexpected venue. By most accounts, modern Italy has an alienated and impotent public sphere (Viroli, 2010; 2012; Parks, 2011). Its history as a unified constitutional order dates back 150 years, and in its current manifestation as a constitutional republic it has existed for more than half a century (Adams, 1953). But in recent years its government has been notorious for its corruption, and its public sphere infamously co-opted by its former Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, who controls most of the media (Parks, 2011; Colombo, 2006, p. 5; Stille, 2010). Opponents charge that Berlusconi used political power to dictate information and his control over information to shape government policy; this combination all but erasing the space between entertainment and government, effectively reducing politics to spectacle and citizens to a passive, celebrity seeking audience.

As I write, the Berlusconi government has fallen and been replaced by an unelected government of technocrats in order to reassure the country's creditors and stave off financial collapse. Some argue that the Italian economy is in danger of imminent collapse; others suggest that its economic problems, while severe, are not of the magnitude of those of Greece or Spain. But even before the most recent financial crisis began in the summer of 2011, the Italian government had been making severe cuts to its national arts and cultural budget (Galli, 2009, p. 13; Owen, 2010). One report estimated that the Italian government's share of the cultural budget had declined more than 30% since 2006 (Manfredi, 2011). In late Spring 2010, the Italian government passed a law known as the Decreto Bondi, which was named after the Minister of Culture, Sandor Bondi. The bill was projected to cut the budget for the Ministry of Arts and Culture by more than 14% between 2010 and 2011, and the law required significant changes to the contracts governing the staffing of Italy's opera houses. By one estimate, 2,000,000 jobs

would be lost and some theatres would have to close (Manfredi, 2011; Owen, 2010; Kimmelman, 11 Dec 2010).

Prior to passage of the Decreto Bondi, popular reaction to these cuts and reforms was mixed. The Berlusconi government was widely believed to be hostile to a wide range of cultural activities, from archaeology to opera, and many tied the Decreto Bondi to that hostility (Owen, 2010; Quadruppani, 2009, p. 15; Kimmelman, 6 July 2010; Pullela, 2010). But in the years after the global financial collapse in 2008, the Berlusconi government was able to credibly justify the reforms as a necessary way to reign in the country's powerful unions at a time of fiscal crisis (Wakin, 2010). That silenced most criticism, but with passage of the Decreto Bondi popular resignation came to an end.

The Italian Public Sphere

The shift in popular attitude was not immediate. As it became more certain in the late winter and early spring of 2010 that the Decreto Bondi would pass, activists turned to the public sphere to rally popular opposition to the cuts. Their efforts evolved in three interconnected stages over the next eighteen months. The earliest activities took forms familiar to those versed in social movement literature: Wall posters denounced the cut, and these were reinforced by a series of strikes and street protests organised by artists working together with political parties and activist groups. In April, for example, musicians, singers and dancers in Florence marched through the streets behind a double bass case, borne like a coffin by several musicians acting as pallbearers (Mattioli, 2010).

In addition to these traditional forms of protest, activists turned to other, more contemporary tools. Facebook was an early resource (Nicoletti, 2011). The Facebook page, *Quelli che dicono No al Decreto Bondi sullo Spettacolo*, which would serve as a chronicle of the protest, was established in May 2010. It opened with a statement that quoted Article 1 of the Italian Constitution:

Italy is a democratic republic, founded on work. Sovereignty belongs to the people and is to be exercised in a manner consistent with the limits of the constitution.

And the description of its aims declared that the movement was:

For those who realize that the Italian State is destroying art. For those who believe that the cuts should cover the politicians, whose only knowledge of art is to go on TV to say thousands of nonsensical things, without ever doing

anything positive. For those who realize that this decree will take away jobs, giving misery and sadness, while the unions and the politicians watch with bellies full of serenity and work.

Activists in this early period of the Italian protest also turned to other elements of Web 2.0 to build their movement. Protests were published on YouTube, and activists tweeted messages about those clips or other popular actions against the law. But these early protests lacked a coherent frame; different actors cast their opposition to the Decreto in a variety of ways. For those behind the Facebook page, *Quelli che dicono No*, the law was an unconstitutional assault on labour in general, and on cultural workers in particular. For many of the artists, the law was an assault on arts and culture.

As might be expected, many of the protests during this first stage took place before the bill was actually passed. But postings on the Wall at *Quelli che dicono No* continued to record street protests and other calls to action through the summer and into the fall and winter. Other protests were posted on YouTube, including impromptu performances in city streets, sit down strikes by musicians in various theatres, protests outside performances, and speeches denouncing the law. There was a brief flurry of attention to the Decreto Bondi in November 2010, when the collapse of the House of Gladiators at Pompeii led to calls that Bondi resign or be replaced as Minister of Culture. But over the fall of 2010 activism in relation to the question of arts funding began to die down.

December, which brought the opening of Italy's opera season, revived the movement. Protests of the earlier period continued; opening nights at opera houses were often the targets of street protests. But a second protest also emerged and began to receive more attention. On the evening of December 7, 2010, the conductor Daniel Barenboim opened the opera season in Milan by delivering a speech denouncing the budget cuts to the audience at La Scala. This was not the first time a world famous musical figure had decried the budget cuts. Indeed, Barenboim himself spoke out against them in May 2010 (Mattioli, 2010; Owen, 2010). But when he spoke at opening night at La Scala, Italy's most famous opera house, those comments received national and international coverage.

Barenboim effectively reframed the protest's argument. While he claimed to speak on behalf of all those who worked in music in Italy, he did not cast the cuts to Italy's cultural budget as an attack on cultural workers as workers, as *Quelli che dicono No* had done. Instead, he challenged the cuts as a violation of Article 9 of the Italian Constitution, which committed the Republic to protecting and preserving Italian culture. This redefined the focus of the dispute, shifting it away from issues of economic necessity and labour relations by reframing it as a problem of constitutional failure. It also tied the attack on the cuts to the cultural budget to the broader, and increasingly vital, objections

to the Berlusconi government (Hooper, 2011).

Barenboim's speech, which he followed by leading the orchestra in the Italian national anthem, received fourteen minutes of applause. His remarks were also prominently endorsed by Giorgio Napolitano, President of the Italian Republic, who had been in the audience at La Scala that night. La Repubblica TV posted a clip of the speech on its website on December 7, 2010 and it was posted on YouTube that same day. *Quelli che dicono No* and several blogs picked the story up, emphasising Barenboim's appeal to Article 9 of the Constitution. A handful of people sent out tweets about the speech, often linking to the YouTube clip. But while coverage of Barenboim's message immediately after the opening night was fairly broad, its impact was not particularly deep. There were no tweets about it after the middle of December. Likewise, blog coverage died down quickly and there were no comments on the YouTube clip after January 2011. Even the Wall on *Quelli che dicono No* turned its attention elsewhere, and began to report on musical performances and general politics. Although it did not generate lasting attention, Barenboim's speech did re-energise the arts community. In the weeks after he spoke other internationally recognised musicians echoed his objections at subsequent performances (*La Repubblica*, 2011). But the government stood firm by its claim that it had to take the steps it was proposing. Asked about Barenboim's statement, Sandor Bondi replied that he was saddened by the fact the cuts had to be made. He added, however, that the cuts were necessary and something that was happening all over Europe.

II. Denouement

Teatro dell'Opera di Roma

The third, successful iteration of the movement's protest occurred in Rome during the celebration of Italian unification in March 2011. The Berlusconi government had declared March 17, the 150th anniversary of the day that Victor Emmanuel II became King of the united Italy, a national holiday and the start of a celebration that would last for the rest of the year. However, popular response to the celebration of Italian unity was mixed. Arguments that Italy should become a federation, weakening the ties (and financial obligations) between the richer north and the poorer south meant that some towns and communes declined to participate in the celebrations (Demilio, 2011). At the same time, growing hostility to the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his government contributed to popular ennui. Yet during the week of the celebration a second conductor, Riccardo Muti, was able to use those events to reframe the conversation about the cuts to the cultural budget in a way that forced the government to back down.

Like Barenboim, Muti made his protest at the opera, though in contrast to

Barenboim he made it twice. The first time was during the opening of Verdi's *Nabucco* at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma on March 12, and the second was at a special performance to mark unification on March 17. In each instance, Muti seized moments in the middle of the performance when the audience called for an encore to speak out against the budget cuts (Bone, 2011). Where Barenboim framed his protests legalistically, relying on the language of Article 9 of the Italian Constitution, Muti instead offered brief narratives that tied together the opera he was conducting, the unification of Italy, and the cultural budget. While his message both nights was fundamentally the same, he offered a different story each time.

On March 12th, Muti reminded the audience that the performance of *Nabucco* on March 9, 1842 "had pushed the Italians to unite together and start the revolution in the cause of freedom and independence." He then expressed the hope that "celebrating the 150th anniversary of the unity of Italy, *Nabucco* will not be tonight the funeral march of the [Italian] culture." After calling for Italians to unite in defence of Italian culture, he invited the audience to join the chorus in singing the encore of *Va' pensiero*, "not just for patriotic reasons."

Five days later, at the special performance of *Nabucco* in celebration of unification, Muti repeated the process. Following a call for an encore of *Va' pensiero*, he once again addressed the audience. This time, he told a more personal tale, noting that he had spent most of his life travelling around the world to make music. When he looked at Italy from the perspective of age and experience, he said, he was saddened by the sense that "we" were trying to destroy Italy by killing its culture. He asked the audience to join the chorus in singing the encore to help fight against that destruction, lest Italy, like the land of the Israelites, be "bella e perduta" [beautiful and lost] (Cappelletto, 2011). In interviews that followed the performance, he asserted that Italy's musical heritage was particularly important because it was a way to "aggregare persone, culture, religion, populi diverso" [unite people who were diverse in culture, religion and background] (ibid.).

Both sing-a-longs were shown on Italian television. The encore of March 12 was on news shows after the fact; the encore on March 17 was broadcast live on the Italian station RAI 3, which was showing the performance of *Nabucco* as part of its coverage of the unification celebration. Clips of both were quickly posted on YouTube; within hours the clips were reposted on blogs, and tweeted and retweeted on Twitter. The day after the sing-a-long on March 17 government officials met with Muti and then declared that they would reconsider the cuts to the cultural budget. The unions remained skeptical and threatened strikes and protests on March 26, but before the week was out the government announced that it was going to rescind 150 million Euros to the cultural budget and the Minister of Culture, Sandro Bondi, was dismissed and replaced. By the end of the month, the government formally advised Muti that it would restore the entire

cut, permanently, and pay for it with a .01 Euro tax on gas (Bandettini and Bentivoglio, 2011).

Program Notes

The long campaign leading up to the shift in government policy in March 2010 is an example of popular constitutionalism in action – a successful effort on the part of the people to make the government change its course. But the campaign’s ultimate success also can be read as confirmation of the criticism that the public sphere, even in mature democracies, is not equally accessible to all (Elster, 1986, p. 103). In this view, it took an elite man – Riccardo Muti – to make the message of the movement stick.

There is, however, another way to interpret these events. Across the span of a year, changes of space and audience, messages and messengers, came together to frame and reframe the movement’s message within a public sphere that stretched across many spaces, both real and virtual, until they finally hit upon a frame that worked. The first street protests in the spring of 2010 raised the issue of the cuts. The sheer number of these protests over the summer and autumn kept the attacks on Italian culture and cultural workers in the public eye. People who planned to attend events that were cancelled by strikes, walked past musicians protesting in the streets, or saw symphonies and concerts performed by musicians wearing street clothes, were forced to confront the message that something was amiss, even if they chose to ignore it. Others received the message indirectly, through postings to Facebook that recorded the events with pictures and messages, and through YouTube news clips or tweets.

These efforts raised popular awareness, yet in this initial stage the message they carried played into the government’s argument for cuts to the cultural budget, rather than challenging it. To the extent that the early strikes and protests were tied to larger issues of labour, rather than to the specific claims of culture, it was easy for opponents to collapse protests over the cuts to the cultural budget into other cuts in Italy and other parts of Europe. This reinforced the government’s argument that the cuts were an essential, if unfortunate, response to the global financial crisis. When he built on those earlier protests in December 2010, Daniel Barenboim reframed the message in a way that strengthened the protest. By tying the cuts to the Berlusconi administration’s general indifference to the arts and Italian heritage, he separated the cuts from the financial crisis of 2008 and tied them to a longstanding problem (see Kimmelman, 2011). At the same time, by connecting the cuts to the Italian constitution, Barenboim elevated the problem, making the dispute a question of constitutional obligation. Once seen in this light, the Berlusconi administration’s decision to cut the cultural budget became not simply a matter of budget choices, but rather a dereliction of constitutional duty. Though the point was not explicit,

the suggestion that Berlusconi's administration ignored its constitutional obligations resonated with a rising chorus of objections to the government's conduct. And Barenboim's message was further strengthened by the fact that it was *he* who made it, guaranteeing that it would be covered in some international newspapers, musical blogs and tweets.

Yet just as the message at the first stage was limited by some of its elements, there were weaknesses at this second stage. The most obvious arose from the combination of medium and messenger. The scene of Barenboim's protest was a performance of Wagner's *Die Walkure* (ibid.). As such, it was an unlikely and not terribly persuasive vehicle from which to call on the government to protect Italy's cultural heritage. It was not simply that Wagner was not Italian; the association of Wagner's works with the Nazis made his operas sufficiently controversial half a century later that Barenboim had published a lengthy article the day before opening night explaining why Wagner's music should be performed (Barenboim, 2011). The already fragile argument was further limited by the identity of the messenger himself. Barenboim's international reputation as a conductor and performer is beyond dispute; his lifelong commitment to music's role as an instrument of peace is unquestionable. But he is neither Italian nor a resident of Italy, and when he spoke of the harm the cuts posed to 'nostro paese' it was incongruous.

At this second stage, then, the combination of a non-Italian using a German opera as a platform to appeal for the protection of Italian culture undermined Barenboim's demand that the Italian government respect its constitutional obligation to preserve the nation's cultural heritage (see Tarrow, 2005). However, Barenboim's intervention succeeded in reframing the issue as a matter of constitutional concern, and helped bring the problem to international attention (which strengthened the possibility that the cuts would have an impact on tourism). But the limits of the message and the messenger kept his appeal from doing more. Still, by reigniting attention to the issue of the cuts, Barenboim's message laid the groundwork for the third stage of the protest, when Riccardo Muti reframed the issue once again. The success of Muti's message, in turn, rested on his ability to manipulate several different elements.

The first of these was structural. There were street protests before the performances of the opera in March: activists distributed flyers inside the theatre, and on the evening of March 17, in the presence of both the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister, the Mayor of Rome opened the opera with a brief statement condemning the cuts. All these efforts helped prime Muti's audience by calling attention to the issue. At the same time, Muti had the obvious advantage of being an Italian national making his remarks during performances of an Italian opera.

Additionally, *Nabucco*, as Muti noted in his remarks on March 12, was not just

any Italian opera. The opera and its composer, Giuseppe Verdi, were associated with the *Risorgimento*, the decades' long effort to unite Italy under a single rule (Loomis, 2011). The chorus *Va' pensiero*, which was the subject of the calls for an encore at both performances, had its own place in Italian historical memory. Although scholars call the association into question, that chorus has long been associated with the cause of Italian patriots during the struggle for unification. Because of its mythic value, *Va' pensiero* was a popular anthem at protests, including protests of the Decreto Bondi, and patriotic events. And in his remarks on March 12 and 17 Muti astutely tied those elements together into a narrative that made concrete Barenboim's abstract arguments about the government's constitutional obligation to preserve Italian culture: Culture meant music like *Nabucco*, and music like *Nabucco* had helped define Italy in the past and would continue to give the Italian people something to unite around in the future (Davis, 2002, pp. 10-11).

Emotion is another strong element of the messages of movements, and Muti's own life added both emotion and drama to the events in Rome (Flam, 2005). In February, an undetected heart condition caused him to faint and suffer a serious fall while conducting an orchestra rehearsal in Chicago. As a result of that fall, the sixty-nine year-old Muti had to have surgery to repair a cracked jaw and have a pace maker implanted (Von Rhein, 2011). Reports of the opening day of *Nabucco* routinely quoted officials at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma to the effect that Muti had elected to ignore his doctors' advice that he should not to conduct so quickly after his surgery. The result was to make Muti himself a symbol: he was an Italian who had come back to Italy to show his commitment to Italian music, its cultural heritage, and its historic unification, even at the risk to his own health. In stories published after the sing-a-longs, Muti downplayed the risk to his health, but at the time the sense that he was defying his doctors orders helped emphasise the importance of his message.

The earlier strikes and protests, and Barenboim's speech at La Scala were directed at the Italian government and the Italian people. By treating the people of Italy as part of their audience, those efforts implicitly equated the people with the Italian government. Muti changed that dynamic when he responded to the calls for an encore by inviting the entire audience to join the chorus in singing *Va' pensiero*. That transformed the people's role. They were no longer aligned with the government as passive auditors; they were messengers involved in the demand that their government change its policy. The result was an emotional and powerful popular appeal. The film clip of the sing-a-long encore on March 17 shows the entire audience on its feet, many singing, and ends with shots of the members of the orchestra chorus on stage wiping away tears. And the sensation of being part of the movement was not confined to the people in the theatre; many commentators on YouTube noted the power of the performance and claim that they cried as they watched as well.

It is unclear whether Muti was formally part of an organised campaign. In interviews, he repeatedly denied that his comments were pre-planned, insisting that the decisions to have the sing-a-longs on March 12 and 17 were spontaneous responses to audience sentiment. At the same time, the printed flyers that fluttered through the air in the Teatro during the encore, some of which proclaimed “Muti, Senator for life” (a deliberate reference to a similar slogan used about Verdi during the Risorgimento), suggest some planning was involved, though these flyers may have referred to another campaign to get Muti and Claudio Abbado declared senators for life. And in the YouTube clip from the first encore on March 12, Muti appeared to be reading from prepared notes, which suggests that he planned beforehand to present a specific message, rather than respond at the moment. It was clear, however, that Muti intended his remarks and the performances of *Nabucco* to build on the earlier work by others and to lay the foundation for further protest. In an interview in *Corriere della Sera*, an Italian paper, on March 14, 2011, Muti expressed the hope that there would be a “mobilization” before March 21, 2011, a day that he was scheduled to perform at the Chamber of Deputies with the orchestra for the Teatro dell’Opera di Roma. Muti also insisted that the events of March 12 and March 17 were a popular protest. While newspapers (and politicians) tended to credit Muti with sole responsibility for the victory, Muti repeatedly demurred that he was only “the tip of the iceberg.”

And ultimately Muti was right. It is true, of course, that a crucial element of the protest’s success was Muti’s ability to find a frame that was both local (in the sense of being tied to the particular history and circumstances of the country) and general (in the sense that the problem was cast as a national issue, rather than the problem faced by a small group of people or discrete community). But while his framing helped bring the movement’s message home, the earlier actions, from the street protests to the speeches by Barenboim and other famous musicians, had prepared the ground by educating his audience about the problem. At the same time, his message was enhanced by the way in which it appeared. On March 17, Muti’s speech was immediately echoed in the audience’s sing-a-long, which made the crowd the messenger. Their message of protest was presented live on national television, which made it immediate for everyone who viewed the opera that night. When the clip of the broadcast was then posted on YouTube it could be shared with an even wider audience over the following weeks and months. This suggests that the message was meaningful not just because an important man communicated it, or because it was framed in a particularly dexterous way. Rather, the message was important because it made the audience participants, rather than observers. In the process his message became their message, and encore became a popular civil protest.

III. 'An Elegant Clown Slap in the Face of Europe'

Taking a Local Act Global

In an interview he gave after the first sing-a-long, Muti was asked if he considered his activities political or musical. In his answer he disclaimed any intent to act politically, asserting: "I am a musician, not a politician" (quoted in Cappattello, 2011). The earliest discussions about the events in Rome tended, likewise, to emphasise the artistic aspect of the protest, and were published in the arts and culture sections of newspapers, or on blogs about opera and classical music or Italy. But that quickly began to change, as a number of commentators from around the world cast the encore as a moment of political protest. This interpretation began in Italy; Italian blog *Perbeno* quoted extensively from a newspaper interview with Muti after the performance on March 12 and declared "All should be standing at *Va' pensiero* with Riccardo Muti". But it quickly crossed the country's borders. The Schiller Institute, a European think tank associated with Lyndon Larouche, described the sing-a-long in Rome as a mass strike in action. A blog published by a French branch of Attac, an international group that worked for social justice and opposed neoliberalism, reprinted an account of the sing-a-long in a post emphasising that the encore had been a popular challenge to the Berlusconi government's cuts to the culture budget. Lyonel Kaufmann, a professor in Switzerland, discussed the sing-a-long in a post he published in early May. There, he argued that the performance of *Va' pensiero* in Rome was evidence that the chorus was a "symbol of patriotic resistance as it was in 1842." And in an essay posted at the end of that month, Paulo Pedroso in Portugal argued that Muti transformed Verdi's chorus into a civic manifesto. The next month, Oregon Expat wrote that the moment at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma was "a marvelous reminder that sometimes, a small act can make a big difference." A variation on that point was offered on one of the YouTube clips of the sing-a-long by the commentator *zarbithechti*, who suggested that the sing-a-long demonstrated the power of artists to speak out against corrupt politicians everywhere.

A number of commenters to the YouTube posts echoed that idea that the protests in Rome on March 12 and 17 of 2011 had a universal appeal. Several of these comments explicitly tied the sing-a-longs to the popular movements alternatively known as "los indignados" or "Real Democracy Now!" The movements were composed of loosely connected networks of activists in Spain, Greece, Great Britain, France, Germany, and parts of Latin America, and had been formed in response to the austerity budgets, the financial crises that led to them and the governments that had enabled the crises and then approved the austerity budgets (see Douzinas, 2011). The movements took as their mission statement the pamphlet *Indignez-Vous!*, by Stéphane Hessel, which called on the

people to become indignant with injustice and engage in resistance to neoliberal ideas and the governments that embraced them. And they called for direct, participatory democracy and non-violent citizen action.

This connection between the sing-a-longs in Rome and the indignados was made explicit in a comment on a YouTube clip of the March 17 sing-a-long by *MilidiuUtamaro*, who closed by declaring: “We are all indignati.” In June, the blog *Que Quieres*, posted the YouTube link to the March 17 sing-a-long (along with a translation of Muti’s comments into Spanish) and added:

We are experiencing a period of peaceful movements of citizens against the current political system in Europe. Now we are all like the indignados who began in Spain and have spread like wildfire through all the European capitals.

The blog *La Lamentable Penya*, which followed the indignados movement, made a similar point in May. It posted a Spanish translation of Muti’s speech on March 17, along with a YouTube clip, and quoted Muti as declaring that the events in the Teatro dell’Opera di Roma that night were “an actual revolution.” In the same way, a tweet in May by *olgag*, linked the Muti clip to the hashtag #YesWeCamp, which was associated with the indignados in Spain.

The connection between the sing-a-longs in Rome and these popular transnational constitutional movements also was made by those who had clear ties to the *indignados* and real democracy movements. A blog for the *Comite pour une Nouvelle Resistance* made the point in a posting that linked to the YouTube of the sing-a-long at the Teatro dell’Opera di Roma on March 17, 2011. The entry provided a translation of Muti’s speech in French, and added the note “The performance was transformed into a political forum”. In June, the Spanish language online journal *Democracius*, which covered the indignados movement extensively, posted the YouTube showing Muti’s March 17 speech, which it characterised as an attack on Berlusconi, and proclaimed that it demonstrated the indignados could go to the Rome opera. Comments on a blog post about the indignados in *El Confidencial* also referred to the “awesome and exciting” events in Rome and linked to Muti’s speech.

Interpreting and Reinterpreting the Message

As they borrowed and shared the story of the sing-a-longs on Web 2.0, commentators offered a variety of interpretations of those events in Rome. Quite a few interpretations chose to highlight Muti’s personal role. On March 23, 2011, Gianpiero Petriglieri, a

professor of organisational behaviour at INSEAD posted an essay on the Harvard Business Review Blog Network arguing that Muti's performance was an example of "engaged artistry" representing a successful dynamic between leaders and followers. It was, he argued, a model for CEOs and other business leaders. In other accounts, the events in Rome in March 2011 were significant because Muti personally denounced Berlusconi's policies, bravely speaking truth to power and prompting the audience to join him in response. That point was echoed on May 13, 2011, the Catalan blog *Penúltim Tram* linked to a YouTube clip of the March 17 performance of *Nabucco*, and noted that Muti "converted a traditional concert into a protest directed at Berlusconi." The author expressed the wish that the people of Catalan could achieve a similar level of activism.

The same interpretation was offered in comments to the clip of the March 17 sing-a-long posted by *gimmoXR*. There, for example, *lamochiladeana* from Argentina invited Muti to come to Buenos Aires to speak out against similar government actions. On that same clip, commenter *peguiber* declared that Muti was a "living example of peaceful rebellion." *299manuel*, another commenter on that same post expressed the hope that other artists would follow Muti's lead and speak out against those in power who value only economic interests. And a number of tweets also emphasised Muti's part in the protest, often taking their lead from titles of various YouTube clips (which invariably focused on Muti). The latter often linked to a blog post that excerpted the article about the sing-a-long in *The Times* of London; both the post, on the French-language blog *AgoraVox*, and the *Times* article emphasised Muti's role. Other tweets that emphasised Muti's role did so by pointing out the important role artists played in protest movements, as the tweet by *adrianaberto*, sent on May 23, 2011, did.

But many of the Web 2.0 treatments of the sing-a-longs associated with the *indignados* movement interpreted the sing-a-longs differently. Several of these posts followed Muti's lead and emphasised that the sing-a-longs were collaborative acts. One Portuguese blogger asserted that the protest on March 17 before Berlusconi and the other representatives of the government, was a "harmonious and strong public outcry". On July 29, 2011, another Portuguese blogger, Cezar Lorenzini posted about the sing-a-longs in Rome, praising Muti for providing "an example of civil activism and demonstrating that the people (in this case the audience) are dissatisfied with what is happening in Italian politics." In a post on June 35, 2011, yet a third blogger from Portugal, António E. Pereira, emphasized that Muti led the crowd and made the call for public collaboration in the protest.

The idea that the sing-a-longs were a popular protest was echoed in the tweet by *gotasdeopera* sent on May 26, 2011: "The opera as a vehicle of rebellion. The evening in which Muti and the Italian people sang 'Va pensiero' to say that's enough." Another tweet about the sing-a-long on March 12, described it as the "bis del pubblico con Muti"

(audience encore with Muti) that attacked the cultural budget cuts. And other tweets about the first encore on March 12 made a similar point, referring to it as a moment of popular protest. Early tweets about the March 17 sing-a-long made a similar point, often tying the popular encore to larger political trends in Europe. In one tweet, from March 18, 2011, *Tibaert* referred to the “bis del pubblico con Muti.” That tweet linked to an article describing the event as a popular protest, and a blog post that compared cuts to the cultural budget in Batavia to Mao’s Cultural Revolution.

The emphasis on popular, collective action was consistent with the ideals of the *Real Democracy Now!* movement and the argument in Hessel’s book. Another interpretation, which framed the sing-a-longs as an attack on government corruption as embodied by Berlusconi, picked up on the theme of the *indignados* movement. On May 23, 2011, Felix J. Tapia linked to a YouTube clip of the March 17, 2011 sing-a-long and excerpted a story from the Spanish-language paper *El Comercio*. While Tapia did not make the point explicitly in his post, the article he excerpted on his blog tied Muti’s protests to the *indignados*-led demonstrations and protests in Spain, closing with the hope that:

Hopefully, sooner rather than later the movement of our thoughts [va pensiero] will go in the right direction and will be translated into action that builds a different world in which those who succeed are not corrupt or sinister characters like Berlusconi or Dominique Strauss-Kahn, but are like those who clean hotels that go for 3,000 euros a night.

These various interpretations of the sing-a-longs in Rome in March were not calls for immediate activism. But they provided an opportunity for people inside and outside of Italy to debate and explore the meaning and the role of civic protest, as the blogger Cezar Lorinzini noted in his post from late July 2011:

What you see, blog readers, happened in Rome, the Italian capital, in an Italian theater, at the presentation of an Italian opera directed by an Italian maestro, before a crowd of Italians. But the lesson you can take from this memorable moment is universal.

We [also] have suffered under a government of illiterates, who in addition to not providing what is required by the Constitution (health, justice and security) make light of the culture and future of our nation. Not to mention the corruption that is rampant at all levels of government (to steal a billion,

million and thousands in other prefectures).

It is worth watching the video because for a quarter of an hour it provides an exciting demonstration of civil action that we can learn from.

Conclusion

The scholarship of popular political (or constitutional) movements assumes that while the public sphere can sometimes serve as a space for effective democratic action in authoritarian and transitional regimes, it is typically an impotent site for democratic action in the established constitutional orders of the West. But the yearlong efforts in Italy to challenge the Decreto Bondi, and the evidence of their appropriation by activists in other countries, suggest ways in which popular constitutional movements can work even in the established constitutional democracies of Europe.

The sing-a-longs in March 2010 were the culmination of that process, and their success suggests that sometimes, at least, popular constitutionalism can change a government's course. The various tools of Web 2.0 used by participants did not make that success happen, though they did help keep the protests against the cuts to the cultural budget alive long enough for the sing-a-longs to have their impact. And, once the sing-a-longs had occurred, social media helped preserve the moment and enabled its dissemination. There is no evidence that all the blogging, tweeting, and liking of those events in March in the Teatro prompted anyone else to stand up and speak truth to power. But the different interpretations and discussions of the sing-a-longs on blogs, in tweets, and in the commentary on the YouTube posts demonstrate that social media gave people outside of Italy the chance to discuss the possibility and purpose of that popular protest.

Note

¹ I appreciate the research suggestions and comments I received from Kendal Broad, Lyriisa Lidsky, Michael Schoeppner and Amar Vedi. Unless otherwise noted the translations in this article are my own.

Editors' Note

Elizabeth Dale's article involves a discourse analysis of social media, including blogs, YouTube videos, Facebook groups, Twitter, and comments made on webpages. To save space, we have excised references to these sources. We have also limited most references to newspaper articles to a single reference per point. However, a fully-referenced version of Elizabeth's paper can be accessed at the Social Science Research Network: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2225780>

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