

CHAPTER 16

The Platform Party: The Transformation of Political Organisation in the Era of Big Data

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1. Introduction

To each generation its constitution, famously proposed Condorcet, arguing that the institutional system necessarily had to adapt to historical changes. To each generation its form of organisation, one could quip in response, witnessing the constant historical change that has invested the political party in the course of history. When one utters the word ‘party’, i.e. political party, the mind flies, at least for most people on the Left, to a very specific form of party, to what the French political sociologist Maurice Duverger (1959) called the ‘mass party’, the type of party that emerged at the height of the industrial era. But many other forms of party have existed in history such as the party of notables that was prevalent in the 19th century. And after the decline of the mass party new types of parties have emerged such as the so-called catch-all party and the cartel party described respectively by Otto Kircheimer (1966) and by Richard Katz and Peter Mair (1994). We are now at a time when a new party type is

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emerging, its birth-pangs being visible in a number of new political formations that have arisen in different political countries around the time of the financial crisis of 2008. This is what in this chapter I discuss as the 'platform party' or 'digital party' namely the 'party type' that corresponds to the digital society, in the same way in which the mass party reflected the nature of the industrial society.

The platform party may also be described as 'digital' because of its adoption of digital technology as a key means of communication and organisation. This emerging template incarnates the new forms of organisation, the new values and social relationship that are dominant in a digital society. Examples of platform parties are manifold, and available in very different national contexts. Among the most representative are Podemos in Spain, the Five Star Movement in Italy, the Pirate Party in Northern European countries, La France Insoumise in France or organisations such as Momentum in the UK. These formations have been described, as 'digital parties', 'Internet parties' or 'network parties' because of the way they have presented themselves as the champions of the new forms of organisation and of new values of the digital society.

Such digital character is visible at different levels of depth in both their external communication and in their internal organisation. Externally, these formations have harnessed the power of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter or dedicated YouTube channels to build a vast base of supporters and sympathisers. Internally, they have developed a number of online decision-making platforms to invite all registered members to discuss and vote on policies, candidates and leadership. Yet these features do not seem sufficient to classify these parties as belonging to the same set. There is more to their commonality than meets the eye, something that makes it justifiable to associate them with one another, even while other parties that also make use of digital technology are excluded from this association. Why can we claim, for example, that Momentum is a digital organisation while the (British) Conservative party is not? Or on what grounds can we argue that the 5 Star Movement better corresponds to the ideal type of the platform party than does its adversary, the centre-left Partito Democratico? What do the formations cited above, that straddle the Left/Right divide, often claiming to transcend it altogether, have in common? What form of organisation is typical to the digital party? And how do platform parties reflect the nature of digital culture, and of the new forms of subjectivity and power that emerge in the era of social media and Big Data?

Platform parties are not simply parties which use digital technology in a purely instrumental sense, as a way to achieve specific ends, while otherwise maintaining the organisational forms and dynamics of the past; instead the change is far more profound and systemic. These parties pursue a far-reaching restructuring of their organisational forms and their philosophy in ways that are coherent with the nature of a digital society and its drive towards directness, disintermediation, interactivity, adaptability and instantaneous responsiveness (Van Dijck 2013). These formations betoken an attempt to mend and simplify

politics, thus responding to the perception of a yawning gap between the citizenry and the political process. They strive for customisation, adaptability and interactivity, in a way that makes them resemble social media and app platforms such as Facebook, Airbnb or Uber.

This organisational restructuring is informed by a strong ‘participationism’, i.e. by the belief that the unrestrained participation of ordinary people in discussions, decisions, and actions is a force for good. Yet this attempt does not lead to a condition of pure horizontality, and to a wholesale end of representation and hierarchy, as some of the most fervent evangelists of digital disintermediation would lead us to believe. In fact, while eliminating some of the forms of intermediation existing in bureaucratic mass parties, and in particular the so-called intermediary levels, of the apparatchiks, the bureaucrats, and the local cadres, platform parties do not go as far as eliminating leadership at the top. On the contrary, many of these parties are characterised by strong leadership. They are as much ‘participationist’ as they are ‘presidentialist’. Within them the drive towards disintermediation takes the form of an organisational polarisation, in which the hyperleader – a charismatic, mediatised and celebrity-culture informed leader – mirrors himself in and allies himself with the superbase – a highly activated and responsive digital assembly of all party members or ‘users’, that finds new opportunities of day-to-day participation in social media conversations and in discussions and decision-making conducted on the online ‘participatory platforms’ set up by all these formations.

2. From the Industrial Party to the Platform Party

In each historical era there tends to be an analogy between the mode of production, and what we could call the ‘mode of organisation’, namely the set of organisational mechanisms, practices and structures that are prevalent at the time. In other words, political parties are historically specific: they are not organisational structures imposed on society from above, but phenomena that in order to be effective necessarily contain and reflect the social tendencies which are specific to any given society in different historical periods.

As argued by Italian political scientist Marco Revelli the mass party incarnated the logic of production of the industrial society, the organisational structures and forms of social experience proper to that period. The party came to resemble the Fordist factory, by establishing a solid and heavy organisational structure marked by a strong closure towards the outside, and hierarchy and vertical integration on the inside. The mass party was thus a perfect mirror of industrial society, with its tendency to ‘gigantism to incorporate large masses of men in a stable way, by arranging them in solid and permanent structures’ (Revelli 2013). ‘The party was conceived as a factory where politics had to be produced through collective “political work”, as if it were a sort of manufacture, inspired by the Taylorist criteria of efficiency and rationalisation. In this structure

the militants were the equivalent of workers on the assembly line, the local cadres the production technicians, and the central committee the corporate management body' (ibid). Here we encounter the party as a 'Modern Prince', to use the expression of Antonio Gramsci in *The Prison Notebooks*: a neuralgic centre through which to coordinate political action, to conquer the state and at the same time to control society, following the logic of the vertical integration of the great Fordist factory (1971).

This organisational model came into crisis due to a series of profound economic and cultural transformations that began to develop from the sixties, largely due to the crisis accumulation model of Fordist capitalism that weakened the working class and the old bourgeoisie. The rise of new protest movements, the student protests of 1968, ecological movements, feminism and urban protests were the sign of the growing complexity of a society that was becoming more and more difficult to integrate vertically. The rampant individualism and consumerism of the neoliberal era superseded the political militancy of the industrial era.

The mass party crisis opened the way for a new party form that was discussed in political science through a series of concepts: 'professional-electoral party' (Panebianco, 1988) 'catch-all party' (Kirchheimer, 1990) and the 'cartel party' (Katz and Mair, 1995). It seems fit for the purpose of our analysis to note that these terms ultimately point to the same trend: the emergence of a new 'light' post-Fordist party as an alternative to the mass party. The 'television party' is the term I prefer to adopt in this analysis because this is a party for which television, rather than the press or the party newspaper, becomes the main channel of communication with the electorate, and a substitute for a committed militancy. This turn involves a profound transformation in the organising structure of political parties. First, the platform party is a party that loses the support of an active base of militants and experiences a severe decline in the number of registered members. Secondly, it is a party that no longer has the heavy bureaucratic structure of the mass party, but adopts a light structure that looks more like an electoral committee, as expressed by the concept of 'professional-electoral' party. Thirdly, it is a party that, unlike the mass party, no longer has clearly defined social bases, and seeks opportunistically to draw its support from different socio-demographics according to circumstances, so it is also described as a 'catch-all party', or even as an 'opinion party', a party no longer based on predefined economic interests but chasing fleeting wishes and opinions.

The television party is a type of political party that Italians know well because it is the one that has been manifested in the political venture of Silvio Berlusconi and his 'party-company' Forza Italia. For this party a central role is played by the media process on account of its access to television and its power of influence on the population, which, in Berlusconi's case, was guaranteed by his ownership of half of the national television frequencies. It is also a party that introduces a strong personalisation of politics, in which the face of the

leader, adopting the role of an actor giving a political performance, becomes the central source of recognisability, and the means of building a sentimental connection – to use the term of Antonio Gramsci – between the citizens and the party (1971). It is also precisely because of its almost complete reliance on television appearances as a means of connection between the leader and the people, that the television party thus loses the support of an active militancy.

Following the analysis of Revelli, the television party manifests the transformation of the production mode into a post-Fordist society. This party no longer resembles the Fordist factory, but rather service companies, particularly those in the field of communication and advertising, which are the vanguard of the post-industrial service economy. It is significant that Silvio Berlusconi founded Forza Italia on the territorial network of his Publitalia advertising company and on the media firepower of his television channels. The television party internalises marketing and advertising techniques used to understand and manipulate the people's desires. It is a party populated by a small army of communications consultants, pollsters and spin doctors. It sees politics as an extension of the sphere of consumption, and looks at the citizenry as an 'electoral market', which can be treated just like any other market of goods and services, and where the strategic area is represented by centrist voters, more likely to swing between parties. It is also a party that generates a passive attitude in the electorate, which recalls the 'couch-potato' habit of TV viewers. A party that, transforming politics into a variety show, forces citizens into apathy and disillusionment.

Building on this model, we can argue that we now stand at a new stage in the evolution of the party-form. The profound shifts in the mode of production signalled by the diffusion of social media and of apps, and by the rise of Web 2.0 companies such as Facebook, Twitter, Uber, Airbnb and many others, is engendering the rise of a new party type. The digital party, reflects in its *eidōs* the new tendencies that are emerging in a 'network society' (Castells 2011), much in the same way in which the mass party reflected the nature and tendencies of the industrial society and the television party the emerging trends of the post-industrial era. Thirdly, the platform party is not a class party. Rather it is a party marked by strong inclusivity and an interclassist tendency. While relying for electoral support on the lower and younger sector of an impoverished middle class, these parties for the most part do not appeal to classes, but to individuals as part of those classes. Fourthly, it is not an ideological party, or at least it is not ideological in the narrow, twentieth-century sense of the term. The platform party does not have a long-term messianic vision to change society, but rather has a preference for issues that are felt to be concrete and immediate.

To summarise, using an expression of startup and software jargon, the platform party is a 'light' and 'agile' yet powerful party structure. It is light in its organisational skeleton, but powerful in the depth and intensity of the participation of its members; it is agile at the top and highly reactive at the base. It thus conjoins two features that seemed irreconcilable in past parties: a lean directive

structure and an active, though mostly in the limited sense of ‘reactive’, militant support base.

3. The Party as a Platform

The platform party is the form the political party adopts in the era of social media and apps, at a time when new forms of communicating, working, and purchasing online are revolutionising all sorts of social patterns. How does this change in technology lead to a modification in the nature of the party? What difference do social media and online platforms, heavily used by formations such as Podemos, the Five Star Movement and Pirate Parties, make for the digital party? Following our foregoing discussion on the analogy between the mode of production and the mode of organisation, it can be said that the platform party internalises the new forms of social experience of the digital age, and the forms of production, consumption and interpersonal relationships that are prevalent in it. Central to these trends, is the role played by digital platforms, which is at the origin of the platform party alternate name: ‘digital party’.

In political science, the term ‘platform’ is normally used to refer to political parties’ political platforms, namely the set of policies they pursue and propose to the electorate. Yet in the context of the digital party we have a rather different kind of platform in mind. The platform hinted at here is the digital ‘platform’, a term used to describe the logic inherent in a set of online services, from Facebook and Twitter to consumer apps such as Uber and Airbnb, that have come to define the era of social media and Big Data. Digital platforms, such as those used by these and other companies, are mini operating systems, execution environments of various programmes and applications, enabling users to accomplish a diverse set of activities: socialising with friends and acquaintances (Facebook); publishing personal thoughts or news (Twitter); finding sentimental and sexual partners (Match.com, Tinder); ordering a taxi (Uber, Grab etc.); or reserving accommodation (Airbnb, Booking.com etc.).

Over the last few years a lot has been said about the nature of such platforms and their social, political and economic consequences. Media theorist Joss Hands (2013, 1) has defined platforms as “‘Cloud’-based software modules that act as a portal to different types of information, with nested applications that aggregate content, often generated by the “users” themselves’. In his recent book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek (2016, 43) has approached them as ‘digital infrastructures that allow two or more groups to interact’. They are therefore positioned as ‘*intermediaries* that connect multiple users: customers, advertisers, service providers, manufacturers [...] and even physical objects.’ The key aspect of online platforms is the way in which they disintermediate social and economic relationships. However, this process of disintermediation carries a more complex reality. By disintermediating, in fact, platforms create new digital intermediaries which go hand in hand with new power relationships.

The disintermediation/re-intermediation introduced by digital platforms revolves around a series of key elements: their dependence on data and information generated by users as expressed in the term ‘user-generated content’; their high degree of personalisation; their aggregative logic which allows, for example, people with similar interests to know each other, or producers and consumers in a certain location to connect, or advertisers to target a niche market; the partially closed or ‘enclosed’ character of such systems, as a means of harnessing ‘network effects.’ Online platforms seek to respond to the extreme mutability of contemporary society and economy by building systems able to intercept consumer demand instantaneously; by developing complex forms of intelligence on the behaviour and consumer choices of individuals; by creating new services to quickly respond to new needs (or creating new needs); and by ‘perturbing’ pre-existing markets through new forms of brokering, as expressed in the discourse of ‘digital disruption’ used to describe companies such as Uber and Airbnb.

Platform parties reflect different elements of this new platform logic that underpins the world of social media and apps. First the platform party integrates in its operations a series of online platforms, ranging from social media such as Facebook and Twitter for external communication, to various instant messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram for internal communication. Secondly, platform parties have developed their own dedicated discussion and voting platforms: the so-called ‘participatory platforms’ that have become a symbol of their attempt to build forms of direct and participatory democracy. These formations adopt digital companies’ logic of data mining, aggregation and analysis adapting it for the purpose of creating consensus and political mobilisation. Similarly to what happens with companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Airbnb, platform parties unite in the same ‘database’ citizens who, despite their individual idiosyncrasies, are united by common interests, demands and wishes. See for example, the way in which France Insoumise has used the NationBuilder software to enlist half a million supporters to the campaign of Jean-Luc Melenchon, by simply having them hit the button ‘je soutien’ (I support). Or witness how other parties have used participatory platforms and social media accounts to gather thousands of supporters, often in a very short time-span. Online platforms thus become not just a participatory architecture for these parties, but effectively also an organisational ‘scaffolding’ that serves to compensate for their lack of a dependable bureaucratic structure, found in twentieth-century parties and trade unions.

4. Cloud/Start-up/Forum

Adopting the platform logic of digital companies, the platform party comes to reflect some of the typical functions and characteristics associated with digital culture. This tendency of the platform party is visible in various ‘faces’

of the platform party that correspond to different aspects of its operation: the cloud party, the start-up party and the forum party.

First, the platform party is a *cloud party*, an agile party which alike online software platforms is accessible by every device and every place. In this context, digital communication becomes a substitute for physical infrastructure such as the offices, circles and sections that constituted the organisational structure of traditional parties. The platform party is also a *start-up party*. It shares the rapid growth rate of start-ups, their ability to quickly scale up to respond to growing consumer demand for their products and services. This dynamic is paralleled by the similarity of these parties to social movements – which is why they are often described as ‘movement-parties’ – but also in the ‘gaseous’ and extremely flexible nature of such formations that results from their lack of a dependable and stable organisational infrastructure. However, start-ups are also characterised by a high degree of ‘child mortality’. And indeed while many platform parties are formed few mature from a start-up to an established company.

Decisive for the success of these formations is the launch phase and the creation of an enthusiastic supportive atmosphere. Platform parties try to excite the enthusiasm of the base, using highly emotional communication on their social media channels, and staging symbolic events demonstrating the support they enjoy, occasions in which their phantom online crowd of supporters is temporarily manifested as a physical crowd.

The platform party is ultimately a party whose success depends heavily on the degree of participation of its supporters, and on the discussions they develop on its organisational and communicative platforms. Therefore it can be described as a *forum party*, to refer to the online discussion forums that sustain its everyday existence and which constitute the site of a permanent digital assembly of all members where the most diverse topics are debated from current news, to policies, even to candidates and leadership. This participatory feature of the platform party is inscribed precisely in its platform nature, which makes the party akin to a sort of ‘container’, whose content is process-oriented and largely dependent on the ongoing interactions of members.

Participation in the life of platform parties can take different forms, with a higher or lower degree of formalisation. On the one hand, participation takes place on social media and with ongoing discussions on such channels as Facebook and Twitter that end informing the positioning of these formations. On the other hand, it is pursued in a more formalised way on the decision-making platforms that constitute the true heart of digital parties, and where dilemma decisions with important consequences for the life of these political organisations are taken.

Podemos, Five Star and Pirate Parties have established their own participatory platforms, which constitute the most important organisational innovation such platform parties bring to the fore. These platforms have gained great importance in marking the difference between these parties and traditional

parties accused of being deaf to the will of the base. These participatory platforms appear to cater not merely for the desire to participate but also for the extreme fragmentation and dispersion of post-industrial society.

The digital forum, like the forum of antiquity, is a gathering space, a meeting place where individuals otherwise prey to atomisation can participate in collective discussions and adopt common identities. This aggregative operation has similarities to the logic of applications such as Uber and Airbnb and the way they profile users and gather them in micro-niches. If in the case of commercial platforms the purpose is to connect consumers with producers of a given service, in the case of platform parties it is to aggregate all those who are interested in a certain policy and in a related public good (such as clean air or public education). The platform party is an aggregation system that responds to a social condition in which the mass – the key metaphor which informed the mass party of the industrial era – is not a starting point, but rather the result of a lengthy political process sustained in discussions and deliberations conducted on the Internet, and achieved by means of identification with a charismatic the leader, who acts as a spokesman for the ‘general will’ emerging from such interactions.

5. Superbase and Hyperleader

The promise that is at the heart of all the platform parties is a new democracy beyond the deep crisis of existing democracy. These parties are animated by the diagnosis that the growing inequality, insecurity and injustice of contemporary society is the result of the disconnect between voters and those they elect, and the betrayal of a political class increasingly detached from the needs of ordinary people. In response to this condition, platform parties have used digital technologies as a means of building new forms of democratic participation appropriate to the social experience in the digital age. The promise of radical democracy made by platform parties revolves around the lofty project of direct and participatory democracy, in which citizens entirely bypass their representatives. However, this techno-utopian narrative does not coincide with reality. The adoption of more or less radical forms of digital democracy does not lead to the total elimination of organisational hierarchies and of the asymmetry between the base and the vertex which is inherent in the party form, but to a radical redefinition of such relationships.

To understand this restructuring we have to return to one of the classic debates on the nature of the party-form and on the problematic relationship that exists between democracy, organisation and representation, raised in the early twentieth century by Robert Michels (1915). Michels argued that parties were characterised by an iron law of the oligarchy that could be summed up as follows: democracy requires organisations; organisations are characterised by an oligarchic tendency, and are inevitably dominated by a small ruling class;

therefore democracy is impossible. These contradictions between democracy and organisation resurface in the context of the digital party.

Platform parties are presented as radically democratic parties that want to give citizens a direct say on collective decisions, thus eliminating forms of mediation suspected of distorting the democratic process. However, and here is the paradox, they are often characterised by the presence of highly centralised and unifying charismatic leadership. How can these two trends coexist?

To solve this puzzle, we need to understand precisely what kind of disintermediation is offered by these parties. Hereby, disintermediation involves a strengthening of organisational extremes – the base and the vertex – at the expense of the intermediate structures, the party bureaucracy and the party cadres. The platform party refer to the base as a synonym of the membership, but also to the emergence of a ‘superbase’ – to use a term used in chemistry to describe an extremely basic and reactive compound – that is, a situation in which the members acquire strong negotiating power thanks to their ongoing participation in online discussions and voting. This is however accompanied at the other extreme by the emergence of a ‘hyperleader’ who enjoys great power and freedom of action. The superbase derives its power from its participation in decision-making platforms which, as previously discussed, host consultations on various proposals and political issues.

These democratic processes offer new possibilities for the involvement of ordinary members in decisions that were previously controlled by delegates. Furthermore, they have facilitated interesting experimentations with new forms of participatory policy development. However, a number of issues point to the limited democratic quality of these forms of online participation. First, doubts have been raised over the level of influence possessed by the staff of these platforms in the timing of consultations and in the formulation of questions. Second, the low frequency with which such consultations are convened has been criticised. Third, in some cases, there have been allegations of manipulation of such consultation, which may well be the case when voting is conducted on proprietary systems with no external validation, as has often happened in the case of the Five Star Movement. Finally, most of the times these consultations have returned highly expected results, with super-majorities supporting the options favoured by the party leadership. Rank-and-file rebellions have been very rare. One of the most notable ones happened in January 2014 in the Five Star Movement, when the base voted for the repeal of the illegal immigration offense in spite of contrary recommendations made by Grillo and Casaleggio.

Strengthening the power of the base does not mean, however, that these parties create a horizontal decision-making space, as libertarians advocating direct democracy would want. The superbase mirrors itself in a hyperleader, a highly centralised and personalised leadership that materialises itself in the body of the charismatic leader. This is a phenomenon that does not only affect platform parties. In the era of Trump, Sanders, Mélenchon, Salvini and Marine le Pen,

this tendency is manifested in the most diverse contexts, and in particular in anti-establishment and populist formations, whether of the right or of the left.

The term ‘hyperleader’ was used in Podemos’s internal debate to describe Pablo Iglesias’ role. The hyperleader was understood in this context as a charismatic leader who has the task of representing the party and its members in the media sphere. Similar, has been the role of Beppe Grillo, in the early phase of the Five Star Movement, when he lent his symbolic capital, accrued through a long career as comedian, to the movement.

The hyperleader is often also the founder, the one individual without whom the party would not exist, much in the same way as it happens with founders of digital companies such as Jack Dorsey for Twitter or Mark Zuckerberg in the case of Facebook. It is indicative that in the European elections of May 2014, the symbol that the voters found on the ballot next to the word ‘Podemos’, was not the circle logo of the party, but the photo of Pablo Iglesias with his determined and angry face. There are obvious similarities between the hyperleader and the figure of the ‘benevolent dictator’ seen in a number of digital culture phenomena from Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, to Linus Torvalds, the founder of Linux. As is the case with these figures, the hyperleader presents himself as the ultimate guarantor of the party and its founding principles.

The superbase intervention is mostly reactive rather than active, requiring constant retroalimantation from the hyperleader, and the conflicting alliance between the two serves to crush intermediate levels – the official, heavy bureaucratic structures of traditional parties – which many suspect to be distorting popular will. However, this does not mean that platform parties do without such intermediate structures altogether. They rely on the presence of a tiny but strategically important ‘political’ staff responsible for managing their resources, communication channels and platforms. In some cases, this structure recalls social movements, heavily depending on the free labour made available by volunteers. In other cases, however, it may come to assume the features of a ‘political enterprise’, a party-company, to revive a concept used to describe Forza Italia from the 1990s.

This type of distortion – and it could not be called otherwise – is clearly visible in the case of the Five Star Movement, whose logo is registered as a trademark and in which management of the decision-making platform is assigned to a private company, Casaleggio Associati, whose role goes far beyond mere communication consultancy but is closer to an outsourced political management firm. Undoubtedly, this is an organisational model that ensures a high level of efficiency compared to most traditional political parties, but it is efficiency gained at the price of democracy and transparency.

The new forms of authority and organisation that are emerging within platform parties will be a matter of debate for many years. What can however already be said at this stage is that emerging formations as the Pirate Parties, the Five Star Movement and Podemos have managed to subvert a tired political

system, and have demonstrated a remarkable ability to experiment with new forms of organisation which display great potential and have facilitated the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of people who were previously distant from the political process. Yet, digital parties also display major contradictions between the claims of direct participation and disintermediation they put forward, and their reliance on a charismatic and highly and centralised leadership. It remains to be seen whether these contradictions may be successfully resolved, or whether the platform party may end up substituting the iron law of oligarchy, with another iron law centering on the benevolent, and sometimes not too-benevolent, dictatorship of the hyperleader.

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