

## CHAPTER 17

# The Movement Party – Winning Elections and Transforming Democracy in a Digital Era: Reflections on Paolo Gerbaudo’s Chapter

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Are political parties changing fundamentally in the digital age? In his contribution to this edited volume, Paolo Gerbaudo advances a compelling case that they are, focusing on parties across the Left-Right spectrum, like the Five Star Movement in Italy or Podemos in Spain. As a response to Gerbaudo’s argument, I would like to focus on two interrelated points: first, that the evolution of the political party form may be better explained by changes in communication technologies rather than by the influence of models of economic organisation; second, that the platform (or ‘digital’) parties described by Gerbaudo are also *movement parties* that are constituted around contradictory objectives – to win the electoral game and to transform the system of representative democracy – a contradiction which may explain their organisational structure.

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Gerbaudo convincingly suggests that what he terms the ‘digital party’ has three key characteristics: it is based on an infrastructure of digital assets located on the Cloud, it serves as a forum of interaction for the grassroots, and it resembles a start-up company in its agility and ‘high mortality rate’. However, the strengthening of the party grassroots does not lead to a less hierarchical party structure, according to Gerbaudo. It simply thins the middle layer of party cadres and creates a ‘hyperleader’ who acts as the embodiment of the party.

In tracing these changes, Gerbaudo argues that ‘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.’

Following Revelli, Gerbaudo argues that in the industrial era the party was conceived as a Fordist factory, adopting a hierarchical and bureaucratic structure to coordinate a mass of participants. After the end of the 1960s, party organisation developed along a post-Fordist model with an emphasis on nimbleness, while power was concentrated in the hands of a few technocrats. Often dubbed ‘the television party’, this new formation aimed to appeal to a broader electorate, rather than simply represent the interests of a specific political class. In this historical trajectory, the platform/digital party constitutes the latest form that corresponds to new types of economic organisation as represented by start-up and digital companies like Facebook and Google.

While Gerbaudo’s analogy between economic and political organisation is evocative, his essay does not provide a detailed explanation as to why these forms are related. Gerbaudo also implies that the prevalent organisational models in a given era emerge from the economic rather than the political sphere. Thus, the political parties of the industrial age followed the organisational model of the factory and not vice-versa. But why would this be the case? The reasons are not immediately apparent, particularly when we consider that the organisation of companies and political parties is constituted around different objectives. The former aim at the production and selling of goods and services at a profit, while the latter are oriented towards winning elections and seizing control of the state.

An alternative and perhaps more fitting explanation could be that the parallels between models of economic and political organisation partly stem from developments in communication technologies, rather than from the direct influence of economic forms on political ones. Thus, economic organisation was transformed by new technologies of production and distribution that affected the coordination of the factory in line with capitalist demands around flexibility and cost reduction. At the same time, the evolution of the political party form resulted from concerted efforts to appeal to the electorate within an increasingly ‘mediatized’ political system (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999) and in a changing media environment.

The organisation of the party up until the Second World War centred on the coordination of local volunteers who would disseminate leaflets, knock

on doors, recruit new party members and mobilise potential voters to attend political rallies. In this pre-modern age of electoral campaigning, as Norris (2000) calls it, the party machinery was based on the partisan press and on direct interactions between party volunteers and the electorate. The rise of the mass media, with the emergence of radio in the 1930s and particularly with the advent of television, ushered electoral campaigning into a ‘modern’ phase. As Gerbaudo also alludes in his analysis of the ‘television party’, the political party form during the modern period centred on the use of television for electioneering. The strategic appearance of the party in broadcast media was controlled from behind the scenes by a small group of party technocrats and ‘spin doctors’ in a ‘war room’ model of campaigning. The party thus became increasingly centralised, while the influence of the grassroots was weakened. The organisation of political parties was infused with the news values of television with regards to ‘the scheduling of political events ([...], the language of politics [...], and the personalisation of its presentation (with a sharper focus on top leaders)’ (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 212). From the 1980s onwards, electioneering entered a ‘third age’ (ibid) of postmodern campaigning in response to the rise of 24-hour rolling news, the proliferation of television channels and the fragmentation of media audiences. Political marketing and the micro-targeting of voters, together with sophisticated polling techniques, became crucial aspects of electoral campaigning (Norris 2000).

Within this context, the advent of the Internet and social media is associated with two countervailing dynamics. On the one hand, it has heightened individual micro-targeting through the collection and analysis of personal data and the growth of political advertising on digital media platforms. On the other hand, the Internet has facilitated the coordination of grassroots volunteers which has brought door-to-door campaigning back to the fore. This became evident in the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama in 2008, which used digital media to mobilise party volunteers on the ground, and also launched MyBarackObama.com, a campaign-owned social network site (Chadwick 2013). The explosion of discussion forums and email lists, as well as the ease of online referenda and consultations, have allowed the political party base to have greater input into the formulation of party policy.

What this brief historical sketch demonstrates is that the evolution of the political party form is better explained by the parties’ response to a changing media and political environment than by the influence of dominant forms of economic organisation. Where economics seems to play a greater role is in shaping the political conditions that underlie this drive for organisational change – namely, the interrelated crises of capitalism and representative democracy. As Gerbaudo suggests, platform parties have emerged at a time when trust in political institutions is low, while citizens feel alienated and disempowered from politics. This is accentuated by the economic crisis of the last decade, which has resulted in cuts to the welfare state and a slew of austerity measures. Governments seem both unable and unwilling to address the growing gap

between rich and poor, and to ensure that economic activity benefits the many rather than the few. The rise of anti-establishment feeling has fuelled a wave of protest against political corruption and the undue influence of economic interests on the political system. It has also led to demands for more direct control of and participation in politics, a demand that has manifested in different ways, from the assertion of national sovereignty, to fears over the control of borders and unchecked immigration, to calls for more direct and participatory democracy, for a more decentralised system that challenges the concentration of power in the hands of the few.

The organisational form of platform parties has emerged in response to these political conditions and in some cases as a direct result of protest movements. The Five Star Movement arose out of protest against political corruption, while Podemos is linked to the Indignados movement of 2011, which attempted to prefigure a different kind of democracy based on direct participation, transparency and the rejection of central leadership.

The platform parties analysed by Gerbaudo are thus *movement parties*, which points to a fundamental change to the objectives that these parties form around. Social movements revolve around a conflict that challenges the limits of the political system in which they arise (Melucci 1996). Therefore, the movement component of contemporary platform parties means that they aim not only at getting elected but also at radically changing the system of representative democracy of which they are part. The latter objective means that the political party is not simply a machine of electoral campaigning, but also a space for experimenting with new forms of party (and national) governance. These experiments allow the party to channel more authentically the demands of ordinary citizens, and provide it with ideas about innovating governance if it ever finds itself in power.

Yet, as experiments in governance, digital parties do have differences among themselves in the ways they design grassroots participation, which may reflect their different positions across the political spectrum. If these parties are platforms, as Gerbaudo suggests, then their platform design can be revealing of their broader desires around democracy, political participation and the power of the party base. A focus on this architecture of participation can also help us to distinguish parties that are truly committed to a vision of radical democracy from those that simply adopt the discourse – but not the actual practice – of grassroots participation as a cynical ploy to win more votes. For example, on-line referenda can be more authoritarian than democratic when the party base does not have input in the formulation of questions. The political economy of the party's digital platforms can also provide clues as to its experimentation with new forms of governance. For instance, Rousseau, the digital platform of the Five Star Movement, belongs to the private company of one of its founders, Gianroberto Casaleggio, a company now run by his son Davide after Gianroberto's death. This allows the owner of the company to profit from the party platform and to become a gatekeeper without holding an official position within

the party (Politi and Roberts 2017). By contrast, Podemos believes in making the software code of its platform freely available, arguing on its website that open source equals open democracy (Podemos n.d.).

However, the two objectives around which movement parties are organised are not always commensurable. Movement parties aim at both winning the electoral game by following the rules of the existing system *and* at moulding their organisation around a model of democracy that does not yet exist. This may explain the contradictory presence of the hyperleader and the superbase in current platform parties. Hyperleaders help the party to win elections in a communication environment that is still characterised by the personalisation of politics. At the same time, and as Gerbaudo suggests, the rise of the superbase constitutes a key aspect of these parties' radical democratic politics.

But is it perhaps too early to identify with certainty the new type of party that is emerging? Are we still in a phase of transition? If this is the case, then the movement party may still shed some of its characteristics, particularly those that are carry-overs from a previous era, as it completes its transformation. In this scenario, the figure of the hyperleader can be considered a remnant of the past or of a dated and no longer desirable present: of a system of representative democracy based on media spectacle, personalisation and empty rhetoric. The fact that many of these leaders are white, male, middle or upper class adds to this sense of *déjà vu*. One hopes that the hyperleadership will be cast aside once the superbase finds better ways to win elections and govern itself.

I am not suggesting this as a possible development but as one that we may wish and strive for. In an age of interregnum, when 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci 1971, 276), Michels' iron laws are thrown in disarray and the hegemony is challenged. In such times, identifying the new system that may emerge from the turmoil is not only a matter of political analysis. It is also a matter of envisioning and experimentation, of prefigurative practices and self-fulfilling prophecies that require political will, courage and imagination.

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