

The Party Has Logged On - “Digital parties”, Hyperleaders, Social Roots, Base & Class

Monday 18 February 2019, by [MAISANO Chris](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2019).

After decades of decline, left parties are in the midst of a renaissance. But without a commitment to social roots in the working class, twenty-first century “digital parties” could decline just as their predecessors did.

Contents

- [Why Parties?](#)
- [Platform of a New Type](#)
- [Hyperleader/Superbase](#)
- [Base and Class](#)

Peter Mair began his posthumous 2011 book [Ruling the Void](#) with a blunt declaration: “the age of party democracy has passed.” While the party form had obviously not disappeared, Mair argued that the traditional parties were no longer capable of organizing and sustaining democratic politics as we have known it.

For a long time, Mair’s bleak prognosis appeared accurate. During the neoliberal era, parties across the advanced capitalist world became increasingly detached from their traditional social bases. Distinctions between parties of the Left and Right were blurred as they coalesced around a common neoliberal agenda. Party members drifted from the ranks, voters stayed home from the polls, and elections became the domain of spin doctors, PR consultants, and media moguls. If you wanted a picture of the future, it was the image of [Silvio Berlusconi](#) grinning horribly, forever.

The Left invented the mass party, and the Left has suffered the most from its decline. Once mighty [socialist](#) and [communist](#) parties have collapsed in country after country, and Germany’s SPD — the original mass party of the Left — could be [next on the list](#). Its collapse would be a truly historic event marking the end of an epoch reaching back to the earliest days of the socialist movement.

But while twentieth-century mass parties are mired in deep crisis, the party form itself is in the midst of an unexpected renaissance. The emergence of new “digital parties” around the world clearly shows that parties are not obsolete, and that party democracy may yet be revived in a new form.

The 2008 crisis marked a crucial turning point. The scale of the crisis delegitimized the old parties, pushed millions into organized political activity for the first time, and reactivated many militants who had given up on politics. It gave rise to a broad array of [new formations](#) across the political spectrum, from the Pirate parties and the [Five Star Movement](#) (M5S) in Italy to [Podemos](#) in Spain, [France Insoumise](#), [Momentum](#) in the UK Labour Party, and in its own way, [Democratic Socialists of America](#) (DSA). The party form has been rejuvenated by the return of fundamental political conflicts over power and resources that were effectively buried during the years of neoliberal consensus.

These new parties, however, differ from their predecessors in important ways. In his new book [The Digital Party: Political Organization and Online Democracy](#), Paolo Gerbaudo takes stock of this new party form and considers its potential to revitalize democratic politics. Regardless of their ideological coloration, the new parties share a common commitment to a “real democracy” of transparency, participation, and immediacy facilitated by digital technology platforms. While the party question isn’t on the resurgent US left’s agenda in quite the same way, it’s worth learning lessons from other countries where activists are working through similar problems and issues.

Gerbaudo’s analysis makes it clear that the digital party responds to legitimate and widespread dissatisfaction with the traditional parties, as well as the need to update the party form to meet the needs of the times. These parties, however, suffer from a number of serious weaknesses that must be rectified if they are to fulfill their promise and avoid the depressing fate of their predecessors.

Why Parties?

Marx and Engels distinguished themselves from their rivals on the Left by stressing the central importance of political action to the working-class movement. In their view, the working class had to organize itself politically in order to win the “[battle of democracy](#),” and the formation of parties was an indispensable aspect of this project.

Parties are of crucial importance not simply because they are the main tool for contesting elections and winning government office; they are also a crucial means by which a movement constitutes itself as a political actor and gains the skills and experiences it needs to effectively exercise political power. Parties also play a key role in defining social conflicts, organizing individuals into classes and blocs, and articulating collective political identities to bind them together.

Elections are the political arena that people engage with the most, where we can most efficiently test the popular appeal of our ideas and proposals. They are also one of the few venues we have to advance a comprehensive political program that is not constrained by the pressures of single-issue campaigns and trade union fights.

Outside of the electoral arena, movements typically express themselves through militant but limited pressure tactics that address the needs and interests of one particular group. They may be able to win victories that make people’s lives easier, but they usually have to do so in a way that does not allow them to advance an alternative governing vision for the whole society or challenge the political leadership of the ruling class.

Even the most politically oriented labor struggles like the ongoing wave of public education strikes are limited in this regard, because they are necessarily discontinuous and episodic. Even the best unions that make broad working-class demands beyond their own members’ immediate interests are fundamentally sectional because they primarily organize particular groups of workers to deal with their specific employers.

The experience of direct fights in workplaces and communities can often lead participants to an

understanding of the need for fundamental social change. That commitment, however, needs to be sustained and developed beyond the immediate circumstances that give rise to strikes, protests, and issue campaigns. This is the role that a party or political formation, conceived of as an organization of “[permanently active persuaders](#),” can play in articulating how those specific fights relate to the broader social transformation that is needed to consolidate gains and extend them as widely as possible.

The types of political action that representative democracy makes possible, namely election contests between parties with competing programs, are an important reason why the socialist movement has generally been wary of referenda, plebiscites, and other forms of atomized democracy. By going around intermediaries like parties and “directly” to the people, these mechanisms may appear to be more democratic than elections. But in many cases, they reduce citizens to a mass of individuals asked to answer a simple Yes/No question handed down from above. As such, they’ve long been a favorite tool of strongmen looking to cover themselves with a veneer of democratic legitimacy.

Indeed, many of the new digital parties make extensive use of such mechanisms in their internal decision-making processes. They can play a positive and legitimate role in giving the grassroots a say on important questions, but Gerbaudo’s analysis makes it clear that these ostensibly more horizontal, participatory, and democratic processes have often strengthened the position of party leaders relative to their members.

This is why it is crucially important for political organizations to maintain intermediary structures between the top leadership and the base, and to delegate a significant amount of authority to democratically legitimated bodies. Otherwise, as Gerbaudo perceptively notes, they run the risk of creating an “aristocracy of participation,” in which members with the most time or resources to spare enjoy undue influence in organizational life.

Platform of a New Type

As the electoral expression of the grassroots revolts against austerity, the digital parties seek to carry out an ambitious and contradictory project. They are an attempt to translate the autonomist, anti-representational spirit of Syntagma Square, the 15-M movement, and Occupy into the very institutions of representative democracy. In order to square this circle, their leaders and supporters have sought to remake the party through the kinds of digital communications and social media platforms that, for better or worse, have transformed the experience of daily life for billions of people around the world.

As Gerbaudo describes it, the digital party “is the translation of the business model and organizational innovation of digital corporations to the political arena.” Like the big social media platforms, they are data driven, tend to have a free membership registration process, and have very lean organizational structures with a limited central staff. Unlike the mass parties that preceded them, digital parties lack the extensive network of physical structures, intermediate party functionaries and cadres, and local branches and sections that used to play a key role in making decisions and setting party policies.

They also draw their support from a different social base. While the classical mass parties were inextricably linked to well-defined social classes, the digital parties draw upon a much more amorphous and unstable support base.

Gerbaudo calls them the “People of the Web,” a mass of “connected outsiders” whose relatively high levels of education are undercut by persistent economic precarity and a general sense of alienation from traditional politics and institutions. They tend to be young, unorganized by unions, churches, and other social organizations, and extremely reliant on digital communications technologies and social media platforms. These are the legions of young and disaffected people who have swelled the ranks of Podemos, France Insoumise, M5S, Momentum, and DSA in a very short period of time.

Many of these formations have developed or adapted software to create their own online discussion and decision-making spaces. These are ostensibly intended to facilitate the highest degree of direct membership participation possible and have displaced the intermediary party structures which are often held responsible for smothering the authentic, unmediated will of the people. The Pirate parties were pioneers in this field, but since their initial burst of success, they’ve been overtaken by a postcrisis crop of formations led primarily by M5S and Podemos.

Beppe Grillo, the pied piper of M5S, initially developed his massive following through a popular blog managed by the late Gianroberto Casaleggio, a digital Svengali whose firm continues to administer Rousseau, the party’s “operating system.” While its political profile differs significantly from the incoherent M5S, Podemos has also invested significant organizational resources in online platforms.

The party runs extensive discussion and decision-making spaces intended to allow members to participate in online “consultations” on key questions like candidate selection and party policies. It was used, for example, in a recent [referendum](#) on the leadership of Pablo Iglesias and Irene Montero, who faced a firestorm of criticism for purchasing a luxury villa outside Madrid (they survived).

While these online platforms are often hailed as the means to achieve a real democracy in the party and, through it, the state, their practical effect on internal party dynamics has been far more ambiguous. While Gerbaudo recognizes the positive potentials embedded in the new technology, he is right to focus much of his attention on the potentially more insidious forms of power relations they tend to facilitate.

Hyperleader/Superbase

The utopian claim of online direct democracy is that it allows for the greatest degree of bottom-up initiative, participation, and accountability possible. By clearing out the layer of functionaries associated with the older party forms, the digital party promises to combine mass participation with the kind of immediacy and open-endedness that is so important to the People of the Web.

This relentless focus on organizational process, however, has tended to promote form at the expense of content, and masked the emergence of new and even steeper internal hierarchies.

All of the new digital parties are closely associated with a charismatic leadership figure whose name is virtually synonymous with the organization itself. As Gerbaudo argues, these parties are defined by a distinct organizational dynamic he calls “distributed centralization”: a “hyperleader” surrounded by a small coterie at the top, and an engaged but largely reactive “superbase” at the bottom.

While the intermediate level of party cadres has largely disappeared, mediation itself is far from eliminated. In Gerbaudo’s view, it has become more concealed *and* more centralized, handing party leaders a convenient tool to “concoct the impression of non-existing or weak and purely facilitatory leadership.”

France Insoumise offers one of the clearest examples of this emergent [organizational dynamic](#). While he characterizes the organization as a “[gaseous](#)” network [1], founder and presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon is its unquestioned leader. He describes himself as its “keystone,” and there is no other figure in the organization that comes anywhere near him in terms of political significance.

While it claims hundreds of thousands of supporters, one joins France Insoumise simply by submitting a short online form; membership dues or any other kind of payment is not required. Its [statement of principles](#) insists that it is not a party but rather a movement gathered around its program, [The Future in Common](#). It also promotes itself as an “action-oriented” movement where internal political debates and conflicts have no place.

Indeed, there are no elected intermediate officials between the locally based “action groups” (none of which are supposed to exceed a very small number of people) and Mélenchon himself at the apex. They are free to act on the basis of the party program however they like, but they have no real say in any of the major decisions confronting the party. Such authority is reserved for *le tribun* and a small circle of trusted advisors.

This is not to condemn France Insoumise as hopelessly flawed. It has played an important role in partially filling the space left behind by the crisis-ridden Socialist and Communist parties, and Mélenchon was easily the best candidate in the 2017 presidential election. The party’s strong aversion to internal conflict and factionalism is an understandable reaction to the self-marginalizing sectarianism that has long plagued the radical left.

But as Pablo Castaño Tierno [argues](#), “getting rid of voting and attributing most of the power within France Insoumise to non-elected individuals does not seem a sustainable means of avoiding these pitfalls. Divisions will arise at some point within FI (as they do in all political organizations) and the lack of democratically legitimized bodies capable of making decisions and resolving conflicts will then be a serious limitation.”

France Insoumise and the other digital parties have attracted a massive number of supporters very quickly. But the kind of facile “participationism” that characterizes much of their internal life threatens to constrain their further development, as well as their ability to eventually carry through a transformation of the state and society.

Base and Class

The digital party, as well as the broader “[populist moment](#)” that spawned it, is a reflection of the current weakness of working-class collective organization as well as an attempt to overcome it. Following Chantal Mouffe, Gerbaudo argues that the breakdown of the old parties, unions, and social organizations means that the personal charisma of the hyperleader might offer a temporary solution to the problem.

Despite the obvious dangers this poses, there is probably no way to avoid it, at least in the short term. Forty years of neoliberalism has disorganized the working class and undermined the mass political parties that gave it shape through much of the twentieth century. In the current period, leadership figures will continue to play a key role in giving voice to widespread discontent and assembling people from disparate social locations into a more coherent political project.

The big question, of course, is whether these leaders are willing and able to stimulate mass organization beyond their own projects, and whether the new formations they’re associated with can ultimately outgrow their current dependence on them.

In many respects, the left populism of the new digital parties stands well over a century’s worth of socialist strategic thinking on its head. In 1853, Marx [argued](#) that the working-class movement would have to go through decades of struggles and setbacks to not only change society but prepare itself to exercise political power effectively. Engels echoed these remarks forty years later when he [advised](#) the movement that “long, persistent work” was required to prepare the masses to carry out “a complete transformation of the social organization.”

The new formations are, in effect, attempting to reverse engineer this process by racing into government office as fast as possible (i.e., the Podemos “electoral war machine”) and then using it to consolidate their base of support outside the state. There is a logic to this strategy, but it also runs the considerable risk of suspending a left government in air and leaving it vulnerable to political counterattack. The experience of Syriza in office is a cautionary tale in this regard.

This problem could be mitigated to a significant extent if the new parties of the Left succeed in rebuilding a strong base in workplaces and working-class neighborhoods. With a few exceptions, however (Corbyn and Sanders come to mind), left populists tend to disavow class politics in favor of a discursive framework that pits “the people” against “the oligarchy” or “the caste.” This kind of “[transversal](#)” approach aims to win support from across the political spectrum, and is grounded in the notion that the distinction between left and right, based as it was in the conflict between the working class and the bourgeoisie, is obsolete.

This approach has clearly paid quick dividends at the polls, and it recognizes that the traditional left has become discredited in many countries. But it downplays the political salience of material interests and reinforces the idea that parties can aspire to represent anyone regardless of their class position. The upshot is a degree of political incoherence that can make it difficult to communicate what exactly the party plans to do if and when it’s voted into power.

While left populists routinely claim the mantle of Antonio Gramsci, it’s difficult to reconcile their disavowal of class politics with his perspectives and commitments. As he argued in the [Prison Notebooks](#), “intellectual and moral reform has to be linked with a programme of economic reform —

indeed the program of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every intellectual and moral reform presents itself.”

The core of any effective hegemonic project must be a new political economy that underpins the revolution in values that left populists are rightfully concerned with achieving. In that sense, Margaret Thatcher was a much better Gramscian than many of his epigones when she [explained](#) the basic premises of her political project: “economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.”

To his credit, Iglesias seems to have recognized this and is currently attempting to [reorient](#) Podemos toward class politics and labor struggles. And here in the US, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others [raising the demand](#) for a [Green New Deal](#) have wisely linked the need to deal with climate change with an economic program for working people.

The old mass parties of the Left [declined](#) not simply because of antiquated organizational structures, but because they implemented policies that attacked and disorganized their traditional base. Updating the party form to fit the present moment is an indispensable aspect of rebuilding a political alternative to capitalism. But if the new digital parties of the Left don't commit themselves to a project of reorganizing the working class and meeting its interests, they may flame out as quickly as they appeared.

Chris Maisano

P.S.

• Jacobin. 02.11.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/02/mass-party-structures-internal-democracy>

• Chris Maisano is a contributing editor at Jacobin and union staffer in New York. He is a member of Democratic Socialists of America.

Footnotes

[1] ESSF, article 42236), [Jean-Luc Mélenchon, le mouvement « gazeux » et la France insoumise](#) : <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42236>