Party organization in the digital age

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review of

Introduction

Well before the publication of Paolo Gerbaudo's third book, *The digital party,* I knew that I had to read it – not only because its subtitle refers directly to my own two major research interests (political organization and digital technology), but also because of Gerbaudo's reputation as a highly prolific and equally respected scholar. *The digital party* follows nicely in the footsteps of the author's first two monographs, in the sense that it combines the theme of digitally mediated political activity, as explored in *Tweets and the streets* (Gerbaudo, 2012), with the theme of left-wing populism, as explored in *The mask and the flag* (Gerbaudo, 2017). However, whereas his two first books focus exclusively on the so-called 'movement of the squares' (Arab Spring, Occupy, Indignados, etc.), Gerbaudo's new book picks up a question that has been haunting activists and political theorists since the somewhat disappointing fall of these mass mobilizations: How is it possible to translate the revolutionary message of protest movements into a progressive force for change? As argued by Micah White, one of the key initiators of the Occupy movement:

> I call Occupy Wall Street a constructive failure because the movement revealed underlying flaws in dominant, and still prevalent, theories of how to achieve social change through collective action … The failure of our efforts reveals a truth that

will hasten the next successful revolution: the assumptions underlying contemporary protest are false. Change won't happen through the old models of activism. Western democracies will not be swayed by public spectacles and mass media frenzy. Protests have become an accepted, and therefore ignored, by-product of politics-as-usual. (White, 2016: 27)

But what models of activism will bring change? One answer, alluded to by White as well as several other contemporary thinkers, points to the wave of new political parties that currently sweeps across Europe. As Jodi Dean (2016: 4) puts it in her recent book, *Crowds and party*: 'Through what political forms might we advance? For many of us, the party is emerging as the site of an answer'. But how are we to conceptualize and understand this wave of new parties? What sets them apart from parties that are more traditional and perhaps less democratic? These are the research questions at the heart of Gerbaudo's book. While some observers refer to these new parties as 'movement parties' (della Porta et al., 2017) or 'hybrid parties' (Chironi and Fittipaldi, 2017) to highlight the mix of horizontal and vertical structures that often characterize such organizations, others classify them as 'radical parties' (Husted and Hansen, 2017) or 'populist parties' (Ramiro and Gomez, 2016) to emphasize their counter-hegemonic logic of articulation. Gerbaudo takes an entirely different approach, labeling them as 'digital parties' or 'platform parties', thereby choosing their innovative use of digital information and communication technology as *the* defining feature.

According to Gerbaudo, a handful of political parties fall into the digital category. The most obvious example is the *Pirate Party*. Founded in 2006 by a Swedish IT-entrepreneur as a protest party concerned with copyright laws and internet freedom, the pirates have today grown into an international union of parties, represented in almost 40 countries worldwide. What makes the Pirate Parties an illustrative example of 'the digital party' is their uncompromisingly positive attitude towards digital technology, as expressed in manifestos and policy initiatives. *Podemos* in Spain and *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy also qualify as digital parties (the latter more than the former), due to their ongoing reliance on digital technology for mobilizing support, coordinating events, and facilitating decision-making. Finally, brand-new organizations like *France Insoumise* and the *Momentum* fraction of Britain's Labour Party are also considered representatives of the digital model of party organization. What unites all these formations is, according to Gerbaudo, that they unanimously 'profess to be more democratic, more open to ordinary people, more immediate and direct, more authentic and transparent' [4], and that they strive to realize these objectives through digital technology. Hence, while digital technology seems to be everywhere in contemporary party politics (think of Donald Trump's use of Twitter), digital parties allow online platforms to mediate some of the most basic activities within

the organization. In these parties, digital infrastructures not only *supplement* but sometimes also *substitute* old-fashioned organizational structures:

> In older organisations, such as traditional political parties, the use of digital technology tends to concern intra-organisational processes and the external communication of parties to their targeted publics... Digital parties proper, as those discussed in this book, are the ones that bring digital transformation to their very core, to their internal structure of decision-making, rather than using digital communication simply as an outreach tool. [13-14]

As such, Gerbaudo's main argument is that the notion of 'the digital party' represents a new model of party organization as well as a more general trend within contemporary party politics. While most parties today struggle to adapt to a digital reality that affords novel opportunities for outreach and intra-party democratization, a small group of parties have taken these trends to the extreme. Obviously, this has consequences for the organization of these parties. It means that the boundaries of the organizations become much more permeable than previously, and that decision-making processes are more inclusive than they used to be. However, it also means that power relations become more opaque, and that the relative transparency of formal rules and regulations is sacrificed at the altar of structurelessness and spontaneity. Although Gerbaudo never offers a final verdict on the normative value of digital parties, he remains skeptical of their ability to eliminate social hierarchies and instigate real social change. In his analysis, digital parties respond to very real problems (voter apathy, mistrust, and disengagement to name a few), but they have yet to deliver on their promise to reinvigorate democracy and representative politics more broadly.

Participationism and plebiscitarianism

The book's nine chapters cover different aspects of the digital party. For instance, chapter 2 investigates the support base of digital parties from a socio-demographic perspective, concluding that the average voter is young and tech-savvy but also economically marginalized – a 'connected outsider' in Gerbaudo's terminology [45]. Another aspect is explored in chapter 8 where Gerbaudo ponders the leadership style found in digital parties. According to Gerbaudo, what leaders like Beppe Grillo (Movimento 5 Stelle), Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), Rick Falkvinge (the Swedish Pirate Party), Jeremy Corbyn (Momentum), and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (France Insoumise) have in common is that they personify the party to the extent that their name becomes almost synonymous with the organization. This means that the leader has to serve as an object of identification for a multiplicity of political identities, effectively rendering him (for it is somehow always a man) a 'hyperleader', in the sense that he has to represent a wide chain of political demands. To do so, leaders of digital parties

often employ a charismatic leadership style that allows them to assume the role of venerated talismans who embody the authentic spirit of the party, rather than day-to-day leaders who make tough decisions. The management of the organization is then left to 'hidden demiurges' [160] like Gianroberto Casaleggio in the case of Movimento 5 Stelle or Iñigo Errejón in the case of Podemos who operate(d) well out of public sight.

Like any good book, *The digital party* has a few peaks where the author's knowledge more clearly shines through. The first peak arrives in chapter 4 with Gerbaudo's discussion of 'participationism' as a type of ideology common to digital parties. The argument here is that digital parties often appear ideology-less, because they avoid identification with 'thick' ideologies like liberalism or socialism and claim to view political issues through a neutral lens (see also Husted, 2018). In lieu of ideological grounding, the parties commit to participation as 'the normative criteria of a good politics, making legitimate only those processes that actively engage ordinary citizens while being suspicious of top-down interventions' [81]. While there is obviously a democratic ambition embedded in this type of 'prefigurative politics' (Maeckelbergh, 2011), Gerbaudo argues that the overriding focus on citizen involvement comes with some important caveats. For instance, it tends to privilege form over content, in the sense that what matters to digital parties is not so much 'the ultimate result, but the procedure adopted to obtain goals, the feeling of recognition and the transformative experience earned by those involved in the process' [90]. Furthermore, the ideology of participationism quickly turns into a 'tyranny of people with time' (i.e. those who have the time for complex online deliberations), obscures the persistence of power structures, and neglects many peoples' legitimate desire for political representation.

Another peak is the book's detailed analysis of different platforms used by digital parties to coordinate events and facilitate decision-making. In chapter 6, Gerbaudo takes the reader on an interesting journey through four participatory platforms: *LiquidFeedback* (used by Pirate Parties), *Rosseau* (used by Movimento 5 Stelle), *Participa* (used by Podemos), and a designated platform for decision-making hosted on the France Insoumise campaign website. Besides exhibiting an in-depth understanding of the software underlying these platforms, Gerbaudo convincingly argues that 'although they are presented simply as neutral tools for decision-making, they inevitably carry some biases in their design' [122]. For instance, a common feature across all the platforms is that they allow party members to deliberate on various policy issues and move towards a more consensus-based type of decision-making. In practice, however, examples of proper member-driven policymaking are extremely rare, if not altogether non-

existing. Podemos, for instance, has seen no such policy proposals reaching the official political program. As Gerbaudo puts it:

> ... the reality of online democracy to date paints a rather pessimistic picture. Despite the promise to allow for more bottom-up involvement in the political process, with authentic engagement from the base of participants in important decisions, its implementation has been rather disappointing. It is true that digital parties have conducted interesting experimentations that may prefigure the shape of a future democracy to come. But for the most, online decision-making has ended up seriously under-delivering on its lofty promise. [127]

Although this observation contrast starkly with the techno-optimist hype surrounding many discussions of digital technology and democracy, it confirms the findings of several researchers working in similar settings. For instance, Margolis and Resnick (2000) famously claimed that the disruptive potential of online media is 'normalized' by the practical reality of party organizations and other political actors. More recently, Husted and Plesner (2017) followed an 'open-source' process of policymaking in a Danish party and found that the digital platform involved in the process afforded a dis-engaging and 'affirmative' type of participation from party members. The overall picture painted by such accounts is that online deliberation is a very difficult thing to achieve, particularly in political parties where the centralization of power often constitutes an inescapable 'iron law' (Michels, 1915/1962). To describe the type of engagement that digital parties offer, Gerbaudo coins the term 'plebiscitarianism 2.0', with the word plebiscite signifying a direct yes/no vote. It is a term that points to the somewhat gloomy conclusion that online platforms generate most participation not when they facilitate proper deliberation, but when they host intra-party referenda on pre-defined questions that leaders propose and members either accept or reject. For instance, some of the most engaging activities on Movimento 5 Stelle's platform has been referenda concerning the expulsion of elected representatives accused by the leadership of violating 'party rules of conduct' [135]. This is indeed a sobering antidote to the idealized vision of digital technology as an enabler of edifying dialogue, consensus-based decision-making, and deliberative democracy more generally.

The perils of technicism

Other parts of *The digital party* are less exciting. For instance, Gerbaudo's attempt to compare digital parties to media corporations like Amazon or Facebook seems a little far-fetched. Although both types of organizations subscribe to a 'logic of platforms' [66], which means that they (1) 'collect massive amounts of personal data', (2) 'are based on a free membership model', and (3) 'rely on the free labor of their members' [70], there are apparent differences between multinational

corporations and party organizations. For one, while FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google) have been accused numerous times of compromising public interests in the name of profit maximization (e.g. Zuboff, 2019), digital parties derive their legitimacy precisely from the ability to serve public interests. Whether they succeed or not is obviously a matter of opinion, but one cannot deny that the *raison d'être* of large media corporations is fundamentally different from that of political parties. As such, Gerbaudo's discussion of how the digital party 'mimics Facebook' [66] is constantly haunted by the question: Why make the comparison? And more specifically: How does the comparison help us to understand political parties that in many respects seem very different?

Arguably, the more deep-rooted problem with the characterization of digital parties as akin to media corporations has to do with a tendency, not uncommon to organization studies, of categorizing organizations according to technology (think of Joan Woodward's work on industrial organizations or Charles Perrow's work on complex organizations). Clearly, there are some advantages of doing so. For instance, it helps us appreciate that technology plays an important role in most organizational configurations. However, when assuming technology to be a 'world-fact' that somehow 'defines the very plane on which society and the economy operates' [68], we risk falling into a technological determinist trap that prevents us from seeing that technology is not the only factor governing human affairs. There are obviously many other processes and dynamics at play, which cannot be assumed nor described prior to empirical analysis (see Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Leonardi et al., 2012; Plesner and Husted, 2019). Throughout the book, Gerbaudo is at pains to strike a balance between what he calls the 'twin evils of uncritical celebration and preconceived criticism' [6] of technology's role in contemporary party organization. In my opinion, he clearly succeeds in striking this balance in terms of normativity (i.e. celebration vs. criticism), but he fails at resisting what Grint and Woolgar (1997) call 'technicism'; that is, the inclination to assume technologies to have certain undeniable qualities that are largely unaffected by human interpretation and interaction. Or, as Gerbaudo puts it himself:

> Technological effects proceed from the material properties of media apparatuses (...). Each technology elicits certain kinds of behavior and carries significant organisational implications. [68]

But is that necessary always the case? And if so, can we know these implications in advance? Allow me to provide an example. In the introduction, Gerbaudo anticipates the comparison between digital parties and media corporations by noting that the digital party is a 'platform party' because it integrates 'the data-driven logic of social networks in its very decision-making structure' [5].

However, large parts of the book are devoted to showing precisely the opposite; that the empirical reality of party organizations constantly obscures the ambition of implementing this data-driven logic in practice. One notable example is the infamous 'Letter to the Meetups' (i.e. supporters organizing around the Meetup platform), authored by the Movimento 5 Stelle leadership in the wake of the party's 2013 electoral success. In the letter, the leadership forcefully asserts that Meetup organizers do not represent the party externally, and that they are no longer allowed to use the official party logo. Gerbaudo interprets this as a 'complete slapdown on local groups, a redefinition of the party on the ground, motivated by the not too hidden intention of quashing grassroots' criticism' [101]. Despite the ambition of harvesting the democratic potential of digital technology to fundamentally alter the conventional mode of party organization, Movimento 5 Stelle's parliamentary entry thus served as an occasion for the party leadership to centralize power in a way that closely resembles the process of oligarchization described by Michels (1915/1962) more than a century ago. Hence, in this example, the material properties of media apparatuses did not carry significant organizational implications. It may be that the technology had the *potential* to elicit these democratic changes, but this is evidently not the same as what happens in practice.

To me, such examples show the perils of characterizing organizations solely according to their core technology. Throughout the book, Gerbaudo not only speaks of 'digital parties', 'platform parties', 'internet parties', and 'cloud parties', but also of 'television parties' and parties that resemble Fordist factories or 'machines'. The first pitfall associated with this type of categorization is that one risks lumping together organizations that, in many respects, are very different. For instance, although it is certainly true that the Pirate Parties and Podemos use digital platforms to coordinate various activities, the two have undergone remarkably different political developments: the former began as a very particular project concerned with copyright laws but ended up as a much more universalized project advocating any number of progressive issues, whereas the latter emerged from the highly universal message of Los Indignados (*¡Democracia Real YA!*) but ended up representing a particular set of left-wing ideas. As such, while the pirates have experienced a process of universalization, Podemos has matured through to a process of particularization (see Husted and Hansen, 2017). The second pitfall of technicist categorization is the exact opposite: that we risk differentiating parties that, in many respects, are very similar. For instance, although Movimento 5 Stelle use digital technology for the stated purpose of intra-party democratization, the example above vividly shows that Beppe Grillo's party suffers from many of the same deficits that has made political parties objects of contempt for centuries (see Ignazi, 2017).

As a justification for classifying parties according to technology, Gerbaudo enlists Gareth Morgan's *Images of organization*, noting that 'organisations are often themselves understood as instruments to achieve certain ends, with the word *organisation* deriving from the Greek *organon,* meaning "tool" or "instrument"' [67]. But as Morgan (1980) shows in his celebrated book, organization studies offers a variety of images to choose from. The machine metaphor is but one out of many. It is clearly a familiar image in the literature on party organization, but perhaps the time has come to look for new ways of describing political parties.

The value of immersion

This brings me to my final comment, which has less to do with specific modes of categorization and more to do with categorization as such. Surveying the literature on party organization, one quickly discovers that the classics of this field are characterized by a common trait: the urge to typify. From Weber's (1968) *charismatic party* and Duverger's (1954) *mass party* to Kirchheimer's (1966) *catch-all party* and Panebianco's (1988) *professional-electoral party* to Katz and Mair's (1995) *cartel party* and Gerbaudo's (2019) *digital party*, the tendency to box-up different political parties seems almost unstoppable (for an overview, see Krouwel, 2006). Of course, the benefit of constructing such typologies is that they allow for cross-contextual comparisons, which – by the way – is another highly prevalent feature of the party organization literature. In fact, most scholars concerned with the organization of parties would probably consider themselves part of the scientific community known as comparative politics (see, for instance, the book series on comparative politics published by Oxford University Press).

The scholarly hegemony of comparative politics is one reason why *ephemera* is currently preparing a special issue that seeks to push the party organization literature in new directions, most notably towards an in-depth understanding of what Barrling (2013) has called 'the inner life of the party'; that is, the internal dynamics of these fascinating establishments. One of the main objectives with the special issue is to cultivate a so-called 'immersive' approach to party studies. By immersion, we refer to the research strategy of embedding oneself in the empirical messiness of political organizing, based on the premise that one must be 'neck deep' in a particular research setting to generate knowledge about it (Schatz, 2009: 5). Immersion can be achieved in several ways, just as the level of embeddedness can vary from one case to another (Geddes and Rhodes, 2018), but participant observation is usually considered the 'defining method' (Kubik, 2009: 27). Although research strategies centered on participant observations frequently involve both toil and trouble (Jorgensen, 1989), 'the scholarly payoffs are commensurate' (Harrington, 2016: 134). According to Schatz (2009),

immersion contributes to the study of organized politics in at least four ways: It helps challenge generalizations, it expands the boundaries of what is normally considered political, it often leads to epistemological innovations, and it establishes a normative grounding.

Turning the last page of *The digital party*, I could not help feeling that an immersive research strategy would have benefitted Gerbaudo's otherwise excellent work in at least two ways. First, had he embedded himself more completely in the practical reality of digital parties, he might have been able to correct the few factual inaccuracies that have snuck into the text[1]. Secondly, had he employed the same ethnographic approach that made *Tweets and the streets* such an interesting read, instead of relying so heavily on interviews with party elites (see the book's appendix), he might have been able to challenge the typology-saturated generalizations that characterize more orthodox studies of party organization and provide a much needed insider perspective. Hence, instead of the somewhat far-fetched attempt to compare Netflix and Podemos, on the grounds that both organizations rely on a 'logic of platforms', we might have gotten even more in-depth accounts of technology's role in organizing the inner life of the party[2]. This would have allowed Gerbaudo to ask questions like: What kind of organizational culture does digital platforms afford, and how does ordinary party members relate to and make sense of the technology? Crucially, this is not to suggest that *The digital party* does not contain many insightful and detailed observations. It clearly does, and I would strongly recommend it to anyone interested in contemporary party politics. My point is rather that if we want to fully understand the new wave of parties that currently sweeps across Europe, we also need new modes of explanation. Developing yet another typology (whether technology-centered or not) and comparing it with older ones will only get us so far.

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1   For instance, Gerbaudo suggests that the founder of the Pirate Party, Rick Falkvinge, is a former liberal politician [8]. Though Falkvinge was active in the youth branch of the Moderate Party, he never served as a politician and not for the Liberals. Furthermore, Gerbaudo notes that 'the manager' of the file-sharing site Pirate Bay was sentenced to prison in April, 2006 [56]. This is incorrect. Four people were sentenced to prison, and the trial was held in April, 2009. The subsequent growth in members of the Pirate Party, mentioned by Gerbaudo on the same page, also occurred in 2009 (thanks to Martin Fredriksson for pointing out these inaccuracies).

2   In the introduction, Gerbaudo notes that the book 'stems from long standing and in-depth empirical analysis' and that it relies on the same methodological approach as his previous work, including 'direct observations' and 'hands-on knowledge' [6]. Unfortunately, this firm empirical grounding is sometimes lost in the effort to categorize the digital party as a unique model of party organization.

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