Paolo Gerbaudo: digital media and transformations in activism and contemporary politics

Paolo Gerbaudo: a mídia digital e as transformações no ativismo e na política contemporânea

Interview with PAOLO GERBAUDO[a]
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DIRECTOR OF THE Center for Digital Culture at King's College London, where he works as a Senior Lecturer in Digital Culture and Society, the Italian sociologist and political theorist Paolo Gerbaudo, obtained his PhD in Media and Communication at the Goldsmiths College, where he worked under the supervision of Nick Couldry. Apart from his academic work, Gerbaudo also acted as a journalist covering social movements, political affairs and environmental issues. His research interests relate to the role of social media in contemporary activism, the transformation of political parties, populism, political communication (particularly in the digital environment), and youth subcultures. He knows the Brazilian reality, addressed in one of his books, *The mask and the flag* (2017), in which he conducts a global analysis of the wave of protests (2011-2016) of the so-called "square movements" – which corresponds, in the Brazil, to the mobilizations of June 2013. Gerbaudo was in São Paulo, at the beginning of March this year, as a speaker at the event "Living on the edge: studying conviviality-inequality in uncertain times", promoted by Mecila – Maria Sibylla Merian Center Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America. On this occasion, he spoke about "The rhetoric of control and the new common sense of the populist era", one of his most recent concerns, addressed in an upcoming book.

Gerbaudo has so far published, in addition to several articles, three books – *Tweets and streets* (2012), *The mask and the flag* (2017), and *The digital*

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party (2019), in which the connections between technologies, particularly digital, social, and political mobilization processes are analyzed from different angles. These and other works by the author are discussed in this interview for **MATRIZes**. The three books mentioned are being translated into Portuguese, and they will be published, in chronological order, by the São Paulo publisher Funilaria, starting with *Tweets and streets*, in February 2021.

MATRIZes: I'd like to start the interview with a provocative question: Manuel Castells, an enthusiast of social networks mobilizations, has taken the Ministry of Science Innovation and Universities in Spain, precisely by the Podemos' quota. Does that fact represent some symbolic value, for you, regarding the theme of your investigations?

Paolo Gerbaudo: Yes, I think that the nomination of Manuel Castells as the Minister for University Education in Spain is great news for some of us, because he's a very famous and respected social scientist and for a very long time has worked on a number of issues that are very relevant for social scientists like me; mainly the role of social movements, their transformation in the course of time, starting from the 80s and then obviously the network society, which is the most famous theme he has developed in his scholarship, in the informational society trilogy and so on. He has been a very important figure for Indignados and for Podemos, being, in a way, a sociologist that has explained what those movements were about and the technological action. Therefore, I think it is, in a way, something great for him but also mainly for the collective movement in Spain and around the world. He is an important intellectual figure and now has been given such an important responsibility, and I think, from the first things he has done by now as a minister, that they are already bringing some very positive changes to the Spanish educational sector with scholarships for students and more funds for research. So, yeah, I really compliment his nomination and I think he's going to do a great job as minister of Education in Spain.

MATRIZes: Now, about your work, you have been studying digital activism, arguing that political, cultural, and social values shape it, not technology itself. I'd like to know if the process of constructing that argument was eminently theoretical or if it was linked to your field observations. In other words, by initiating the research for *Tweets and streets* (2012), did you already have that perspective, or was it built along with the empirical investigation?

PG: I would say that my research has always been oriented towards a kind of theory-informed empirical research in a way it is a merge of the two things: empirical research in one hand – in depth empirical research, in getting to know social phenomena – and in the other hand theoretical concepts, theoretical questions that I utilize in order to understand the kind of dynamics and logic of action of social movements, in particular, and political phenomena, more generally. I think these two poles are not opposed at all; actually, they're strongly complimentary in social research. At the beginning of my research, for example, in my PhD studies, I was inspired by grounded theory as an approach. The idea is that you start your analysis with no theoretical conception whatsoever about the phenomenon you study, and then the theory emerges organically from your involvement with the phenomenon, and then you just increment it progressively. You develop and work on a hypothesis and then it is confirmed or disproved, or improved, filtered, corrected, until you come to a final version of understanding of a human phenomenon. Actually, though it was, in a way, my initial inspiration, I don't think I was a good kind of grounded theory scholar in the sense that I always, anyway, was informed by theoretical assumption, inevitably, in a sense. You know, through our reading, our knowledge of different authors, of different concepts and theories, we inevitably bring those lenses to the study of social movements, to the understanding of the phenomena that we study. In the case of my early studies, for example, about organization of social movements, I was very informed by these questions of "leaderlessness", and horizontality and the criticism of that. So that was my intuition that, in a way, that paradigm wasn't working, I would say I was more informed actually by empirical experience, in the sense it was not whatever Leninist or hierarchical belief I was bringing to the research, but it was more like realizing, "I mean, look at this, this discourse doesn't really explain what's going on"; what was going on instead is a different form of leadership, right? Therefore, I tried to conceptualize this new form of leadership through this concept of *soft leadership*, *choreography of assembly* and so forth. So basically, to try to summarize, I would say that theory and empirical research, as far as I'm concerned, always go hand in hand because they inevitably have to do that.

MATRIZes: These concepts of *choreography of assembly* and *soft leader* in the mentioned book aim to be a theoretical alternative to the metaphors of network (Castells, 1996, 2009) and swarm (Hardt & Negri, 2000, 2005). Do you believe that they can also be applied to conservative movements

with a strong use of technology? Could software and robot orchestration be seen as practices of some right-wing soft leaders?

PG: I think that idea of soft leadership was a way to explain where, especially in the recent social movements, you don't tend to have a strong personal leadership – in this sense, you tend to have more a kind of invisible leadership. So, the idea of soft leadership was precisely to explain that you have leadership, without having leaders. When it comes to other movements, most notably right-wing movements, they instead tend to have personalized, charismatic leadership. And they are defined by one person. As is the case for example of Salvini in Italy or Bolsonaro in Brazil or Donald Trump, right? These are all movements that are headed by actually widely recognizable personalized leadership figures. So, I wouldn't say that concept of soft leadership could be generalized across the board. In a way, you have soft leadership in social movements, and the "hyper-leader", as I describe in *The digital party*, and political parties; they are two kinds of leadership, two different forms of leadership. They have some similarities, because both forms of leadership are in a way trying not to be seemed as leadership or trying to be seemed as a charismatic leadership. They are a not a formalized leadership, but they're quite distant types of leadership.

MATRIZes: In your analysis, since *Tweets and streets*, the role of emotions connecting social networks and riots is highlighted. This was a rare perspective until then, but several authors, like Castells, in *Networks of outrage and hope* (2012) – began to highlight this element in recent social movements. The role of emotions seems to be learned by the contemporary right-wing, through the use of slogans with a strong emotional appeal, like "Make America Great Again" (Trump), "Take back control" (Brexit) and, in Brazil, with messages spread by Bolsonaro's supporters, trying to create outrage about his opponent. I believe that Jeremy Corbyn's campaign also tried to use an emotional tone. But apparently the right-wing, in institutional politics, has been capable of doing a better use of the language of emotions. Do you agree with this observation? And how do you evaluate that aspect?

PG: Yeah, I would say that, in a way, emotions are universal in the history of society. There's no aspect in society that's completely unemotional. Famously, Hegel said that "nothing great in history was achieved without passion"; and passion includes many things, like emotions, determination, will, desire. Yet, it can be said, for a long time, emotions were an undercurrent in politics, that they were almost invisible, because

the dominant logical politics were technocratic, based on a cognitive paradigm of expertise, of well-informed experts that are going to tell us what's good for the economy and society. In this period of crisis, with the rise of populist political movements on both the left and the right, we start to see emotions at the forefront of politics, with different leaders trying to mobilize very profound desires and fears in the electorate, by utilizing an emotional language. The right is very good at doing that, also because is often unscrupulous in mobilizing even the worst fears and preoccupations of the people. The left is often too conscientious in doing that. I would say, Corbyn, in a way, emotionally… He was often criticized for being a bit uncharismatic, for having problems in connecting with people and communicating emotions. It was because of his buttoned-up and serious way, and decent persona, while Boris Johnson has a bumbling personality, also kind of jokey personality and quite vicious in attacks, perhaps he had managed to play more of this emotional game. I would say that's fundamental for the left to recognize that emotions are vital to politics, that if we want to win in politics, we don't need just to convince people, we don't need just to inform people or just to tell people what we think, what's the truth, what's the right line. We also need to kind of excite people's hearts, and speak to people's fears and hopes, people's desires because it's decisive to mobilization. Actually, the words "emotion" and "mobilization" carry a similar origin in that they both refer to "movement", to set things in motion and get people to take action.

MATRIZes: Your analysis of social network users' avatars (Gerbaudo, 2015) approaches these objects as memetic signifiers, which would combine inclusiveness and virality. Your emphasis is in the role played by these artifacts in the collective identity, in the construction of a sense of *us*, which differs from the theorization of Bennett and Segerberg's connective action (2013), that emphasizes personalization in protest activity. However, you highlight that this kind of identity construction takes the risk of ephemerality. My question is, nowadays, can't we – for better or for worse – expand your argument to most of the content created by activists in digital environments?

PG: Yeah, I mean, I would say that my difference from Segerberg and Bennet was that they, and many other authors, in fact, thought that is positive that we're moving beyond collective identity. And collective identity was long deemed to be a condition for social movement mobilization; it is not anymore, as people can be basically mobilized without asking

them to adhere to a "we". People can simply be mobilized at a personal level, by creating personalized action frames. My idea is that this is not the case: collective identity and identification are still very important in contemporary movements, we see proliferation of identities of all kinds. And, often, many social movements are precisely about creating a new identity that people can subscribe to. Think about movements like "Yo Soy 132", in Mexico, think about "Me Too", even in the name it says that, like *me* personally adhering to a struggle, to a cause. Think about the "Gilets jaunes", think about "Occupy Wall Street", "We're the 99 Percent"; there's always this kind of emphasis on the *we*. And I think there's, in a way, something on social media that is very effective at facilitating it, precisely because, on the one hand, it is true that social media are personal, moved around personal profiles and personal connections, personal networks, yet, that's not the end of the process. That could be a starting point for people to engage in processes of collective identification. For example, saying "Yes, I'm an individual, but I adhere to a cause, I subscribe to an identity". And to me, with protests memes and protest profile pictures adopted by activists that was pretty clear. People changing their profile to a standard profile picture of the movement, a protest picture, for example the mask of Anonymous, the image of Khaled Said or adding a badge of a movement or a cause to your profile, signifies precisely that: regardless of the fact that you're an individual, you can adhere, you can embrace other identities. And I think this process of evocation of a *we*, on the political category, is in a way instrumental to political organization.

MATRIZes: In *The mask and the flag* (2017), you point out that the media environment that promoted the movement of the squares changed, and now the window of opportunity represented by social networks is closed (p. 144). You indicate, then, the need to come back to the discussion about constructing platforms under activists' control. But how to avoid that these platforms assume the same "ghetto" features that the infrastructures created by digital activism pioneers? In other words, that they don't become a preaching space for the converted or, in the current term, echo chambers of like-minded people, which seems to undermine the logic of cyber-populism?

PG: Yes, I think this shift was a decisive one in the recent social movements because previous movements in the anti-globalization era operated with this idea of the possibility of creating, in a way, a microcosm, a world within the world, an alternative world, a world in which many

worlds can fit. As Subcomandante Marcos would have it right, the idea that you cannot change the capitalist system, the dominant system, but you can create your own small pocket of resistance within that space. And that was mirrored in many practices, for example, the creation of spaces such as the social centers, communes, protest camps, those kind of places in which people can gather and create alternative practices and conduct a life more in line with their values and beliefs. And it was also manifested online, in the fact that people created their own websites, their own forums, their own spaces for self-management and for an autonomous life. Now, there's nothing wrong with that, I think it is, an important aspect of many social movements in the past, for example, race struggles of black people often began in that way, by creating clandestine and subterranean places where people could speak and gather and start formulating ideas of resistance. Yet, there's a point where social movements that want to change society cannot contend themselves with just occupying oasis of resistance, within the desert of capitalism, and they need to actually move to the next stage of fighting for power, of fighting for hegemony, of fighting for society at large. Now, in the movements of 2011, that kind of political purpose was manifested in an attempt to take social media, just to say "okay, we need to use this space. It is through that space, which is not a political space, it's a commercial space, it is a space for pop culture, for celebrity culture and advertisement, but this is also a space where millions of people are discussing and having conversations, so we need, in a way, to occupy this space, right?", to use that kind of "Occupy Wall Street" trope. Now, though, the problem is that increasingly it appears that kind of strategy has its limits, because on one end the right has also occupied these spaces; many Facebook groups, many of YouTube, Twitter, has been occupied by the right, while the left was first to claim those spaces, now they are in conflict and competition. Secondly, we realize more and more that the spaces for actual alternative expression online are shrinking and shrinking, because of the increasing commercialization and emphasis on monetization of all these platforms. So, what that means is before Facebook's algorithm allowed people to see a lot of what political pages were producing, now, their organic reach, the number of people seeing these posts from political pages is shrinking and shrinking. Why? Obviously, because Facebook wants those pages to pay for visibility in order to promote their content. So, that means that the visibility is increasingly costly in monetary terms for political and activist groups, and we realize that, by and large, we've been, perhaps, over dependent on social media. That's, in a way, very risky to a political group to completely

depend on one platform that one day may decide to cancel you, to ban you, because you are not abiding to community guidelines. So, what's the solution to that? I don't really know for sure. I mean, I know there are many activists trying to develop alternative platforms and one possibility is that new platforms, also commercial, are being merged and activists may partly migrate there and occupy those spaces, to have an alternative space, in case existent social media become more inhospitable. But what I would say is that what it's required right now is a kind of cross-platform, pragmatic strategy, in which activists basically use everything that's available to them, keeping their feet in different pairs of boots, so that when certain spaces close, they have an alternative space to invest in.

MATRIZes: In your discussion about the rise of digital parties, you argue that "What defines the digital party as a new party type is not simply the embracing of digital technology but the purpose of democratisation which digital technology is called to fulfil" (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 14). Although the definition certainly applies to the cases studied (and you discuss the quandaries of democratization), doesn't that leave out the possibility of parties or States with strong use of digital technology and authoritarian tendencies? I think so, at least to talk about the Brazilian case, in the new party that the president Bolsonaro intends to create, but also in the Chinese government and the strategies of surveillance of the public opinion by the so-called Social Credit System (Richeri, 2019). I notice that this observation (about leaving out the right-wing parties) is also made in the review of your book by Hall (2019).

PG: Yes, so what I would say is that this digital party format with its aim of creating democratization out of digital technology is specifically in very peculiar, specific countries. that define the digital party as a new party type: Spain, Italy, part of the US, the UK and others where there was this very strong movement from below with people asking a real democracy, a different kind of democracy, away from the current one, that many people felt was offered by those in power. Now, obviously, it is not a given that in other countries, in other systems, in other parties, that democratization aim is fulfilled and actually digital politics can be also very authoritarian, as it is definitely the case with people like Bolsonaro and many others, where digital technology is more used as means of propaganda and persuasion, trying, in a way, to trick the public to accept your line. Or, it can be used in a kind of full democracy

situation, in which simply the fact that people are liking posts or sharing posts or giving a kind of digital acclamation to political content is rather problematic as proof of legitimacy, which is not the case. It is what Salvini is doing, he's basically using his political page as sort of constant referendum machine where a great number of likes, tens of thousands of likes he gets on any posts, he uses to basically claim he has the people with him. So, I would say that, again, as was the case for *soft leader* or *hyperleader*, the concept of *digital party* as an idea of the use of digital technology for the purpose of democratization is just one very specific scenario. There are many other parallels, depending on the specific political circumstances and organizations we're analyzing.

MATRIZes: In your recent commentary to the State of Nature (http://bit.ly/39ohzlW) website, by answering if the social media became a dividing force, you pointed out that the debate about social media and politics had, in fact, a 180° turn, going from a hopeful tone concerning democratic potential to a pessimistic one, tending to see it as right-wing weapon. Your stand in front of that is that left-wing activists shouldn't leave the digital trench, but promote efforts towards a political education, both online and offline, to neutralize right-wing populism. Do you see, currently, inspiring examples of that happening or is this an aspect still to be developed?

PG: I think, by and large, it still something to be developed. We need the political pedagogy, we need political training, we need to form new digital cadres, new digital agitators, new digital propagandists, because the right is now hegemonic in many social media platforms. Take, for example, YouTube: is it filled with right-wing ideology, with alt-right activists, and they're often very young, often teenagers or in their early twenties, producing videos that are widely viewed, with millions of views sometimes, and very influential among certain publics. The left is often still quite tied to a kind of antiquated way of thinking about political communication, focusing a lot on written communication and not enough on visual and video communication, which I think is central in social media. There are many interesting examples of social media activism that we're seeing, alternative media, Novara Media, for example, in Britain, and many other groups that are doing interesting things, but I would say that there's still so much to be developed, especially in terms of preparing, giving people the skills and the tools, and the expertise, to use social media effectively as a mean of political persuasion.

MATRIZes: Although your proposition is valid, some may criticize it by arguing that, by that alone, it would have little effect in a media environment that tends to value aspects such as shallowness, high speed of information and automatization of human communication. For this reason, some, like Christian Fuchs, when answering the same question, defend to tax the platforms (Google, Facebook, particularly) to fund a digital media public system, in Europe. Others support digital media regulation – here in Brazil this is an important question, after Bolsonaro's win, using a lot of fake news spread on social media and WhatsApp. How do you see these questions?

PG: I mean, I completely agree on the fact that digital companies need to be taxed, it is a scandal that companies like Facebook, Google and Amazon are not paying their fair share and by not paying their fair share of taxes they're also posing unfair competition to other companies. Digital companies, but also non-digital companies, as it is the case with Amazon, have been destroying so many libraries and bookshops and small shops in the local economy of many countries. We see that on many cities around the world these days, with all this shutter of the shops. I don't know if it's already the case in Brazil, but, for example, in Europe it is very visible, many small shops are forced to close because people are purchasing things on Amazon. And it is very unfair that while those shops are paying taxes to the full amount, often, Amazon is let go without paying their fair amount of taxes. Then there's also a need for regulation of these companies, they need to respect local law, they need to respect the law of the country where they operate. They cannot be allowed to become channels for fake news, for propaganda, for hate speech, for many serious breaches of civility and good politics in these countries. Now these companies are taking their own measures, for example, Facebook is introducing moderators for that's flagged as having hate speech, but definitely much more needs to be done by the state to make sure these companies abide by local laws. <aqui>

MATRIZes: I was, at the same time, sad and surprised by the fact, written about in your acknowledgments of the book *The mask and the flag* (Gerbaudo, 2017), of the murder of an Italian PhD student, in Cairo, in 2016. Have you ever felt your life in danger, in the context of your research? If so, what did you do about it?

PG: I never really felt in danger because often when you're in real danger you don't feel it, so it wouldn't even be a fair representation of what condition you're in. Obviously, by going to many protests, also in countries

with quite totalitarian police forces, I've been, sometimes, in situations that were kind of complicated, I would say. So, you get to be kind of, in a way, worried about what might happen to you, but, really, I think there's something quite significant when you're in those events. It isn't really about me or about an index of my relative courage or bravery, but usually when people are in these situations, they're not afraid because, in a way, you don't really have control about anything. When you're in a crowd situation, when you are in a situation which some clash with police may happen or you may be subjected to whatever risk, it is a remarkable thing about human beings: they're not as scared as one would think. Why is that? This is an interesting thing about individuality and collectivity. In an interview in Cairo, a woman told me that when she was in the crowd it was like their individual self-perception was lifted. She was in a very dangerous situation, on 28 January 2011, crossing a bridge in the moment when many people got killed, and she was pushed by the crowd. She had no choice but to go in the direction from where danger was coming, but, basically, she said she wasn't there anymore, she was part of a crowd. She was part of a social body. Therefore, in a way, she wasn't thinking about her death, or about the risk for her body, she was thinking more about "I'm part of this mass of people and I'm going to do whatever happens, because ultimately it is not really a choice because I cannot escape, I want to be here and I want to do what it requires". I mean, for social researchers the risks are way more distant than for the actual activists that are at the center of these events. I am very sorry has about what happened to many people in some of these countries, people being subjected to jail, imprisonment or exile. So, I mean, it is very sad, it shows how politics often takes a toll in people's lives. It can be war, it can be death, other people can be mutilated, for example, many people in the "Gilets jaunes" movement have lost their eyes or have become disabled because of their participation in protests, other people escaped from the country or were forced to move away, others are still falling in depression or into drug addiction. So, there's really a kind of sad predicament that is the cost of politics anyway.

MATRIZes: Researching mobilizations that suffer repression can produce ethical conundrums between what to show and what to hide for the safety of the subject. Did you ever see yourself in a situation like that?

PG: I would say, in my research I try not to speak about things that can be controversial, so I think it is kind of choosing safety, at least for the movements. I basically only engage in discussing aspects of social

movements that are public, that are, in a way, non-violent, also because these movements I've studied were mostly non-violent, they're usually not the type of movements engaged in massive violence. So, yeah, I wasn't really facing ethical conundrums. I mean, other situations may present more serious ethical conundrums, but I think that wasn't the case with the movements I've studied.

MATRIZes: Most of your empirical works seems to value some kind of "handicraft" in the researcher's work. Is that something you are really looking for? Delegating tasks, like interviews, to other people, during your investigations, or do you tend to seek total control of your data? Do you ever see yourself working on a team project?

PG: I would love to work on a team project; the problem is that I never got funding to do so. Therefore, mostly, up to now, I've done individual work, partly because, despite having applied several times for a research funding for big projects, I've never really managed to get it. I think there's a lot of value in collaborative work, in team projects, in involving other people, gathering data. Obviously, there are also problems with that, in the sense that is more difficult, and perhaps slower to come to an agreement about the interpretation of these movements. It's more complex, it requires a lot of administrative organizational skills to manage large projects, and it's also difficult in terms of authorship, especially in a sense of writing monographs, since writing collective books is quite difficult. Is it often not prized by the publishing system either because there's this idea of the "individual author": one brain who sees everything and interprets everything. But I think there are very fertile ways in which collective work about social movements can develop a collective understanding of social phenomena.

MATRIZes: What are your current projects?

PG: I'm currently working on a more theoretical book about political theory on the populist era, in that it follows on from the neoliberal era of globalization; it could be called post-globalization era or the post-neoliberal era. The era we've been living in, God knows since when, perhaps since 2010, 2011, soon after the Financial Crisis and is continuing now and becoming more apparent to the political stage and probably will become more apparent, still, with the new crisis, because it means that in the coronavirus health crisis, what is really concerning are the economics effects. And the effects of that are likely to become quite severe for the

financial system, for the global economy, and then we are, unfortunately, likely to have very bad consequences on people's lives with companies failing, people being laid off, governments sinking in debt. So, we don't know, we all wish nothing bad happens, but from the looks of it, there may be some quite severe economic consequences. That wheel is likely to project farther the situational crisis of capitalism and it's likely to make more people angry about the system; they're dissatisfied with the system because they don't have a job, they don't have a livelihood, economic or social security. So, my prediction is that we're likely to see a further growth of discontent in the coming years and also of this kind of organic crisis in this populist moment as people realize globalization is, in a way, faulty, that we're moving towards a post-globalization world in which these very long global value chains; manufacturing in China, design in the U.S. and mining in Congo, are becoming more unsustainable, economically, and riskier and less secure. In my perspective, and this is basically the fundamental claim in the book, is that the priorities of politics are changing, that key issues in contemporary politics are protection and control. Protection are the demands of society, to defend society's ability to survive and reproduce itself and maintain a sense of stability and common purpose. And control as the ability of political communities to exert and influence on their collective destiny, right? Something that globalization is upsetting. These two demands, protection and control, are becoming central to the political agenda. We see them mobilized, the news media, politicians, on both the left and the right, are often talking about protection, we read that people want to be protected. So, what the book tries to do is to develop a philosophical understanding of what this discourse is about, what it tells us about the world that's embryonic, now, that's emerging, slowly, painfully, from these crises. Besides that, as for the projects, I'm still working on social media and populism, doing social media analysis of various political movements and that's something I want to develop further in the future, looking at the nature of the public sphere at the time of social media, its kind of central logic and how it differs from pre-digital public spheres. **M**

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