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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"This is not a party": elements for a sociology of movementism based on the case of La France Insoumise

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Abstract

European political parties are facing a slow erosion of their electoral and activist base. Due to multiple interrelated factors, traditional parties have become increasingly disembedded from society. In an attempt to escape this decline, several political organisations that emerged after the 2008 crisis have taken a movementist turn. These organisations (1) present themselves as "movements" rather than "parties", (2) provide strategic support to social movements, and (3) explore a way of operating that is intended to contrast with that of traditional parties, and which values freedom of movement. Podemos, the Five Star Movement and La France Insoumise are emblematic of these developments; La République en Marche too, albeit in a slightly different form. This article proposes a novel conceptualisation of movementism, proceeding in two steps. In the first step, drawing on 36 months of research and around a hundred interviews with La France Insoumise, we will show what movementism means *for the actors* who claim to be part of it, stressing the plurality of meanings attributed to this phenomenon. In the second step, drawing on a comparative approach that sets La France Insoumise into a broader landscape, we will propose an ideal type of the "movementist party"—one capable of opening up a new field of inquiry for political scientists and sociologists.

Keywords Political parties · Movementism · Social movements · La France Insoumise

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Introduction

The party label has been discredited. Often perceived as ineffective or even obsolete organisations, political parties are facing a structural erosion of their activist membership (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000) and an increase—also structural—in abstention, electoral volatility and party disidentification. This crisis—documented by numerous studies—does not signal the disappearance of political parties, but it is forcing them to reinvent themselves (Martinache and Sawicki 2020). One of the survival strategies currently in vogue is to disguise their party identity in order to present themselves as "movements" (Lefebvre 2018), as illustrated during the 2017 presidential election in France by La République en Marche (Dolez et al 2019; Gougou and Persico 2017) and La France Insoumise.

This article focuses on the latter organisation and is based on data from ethnographic observations carried out over 36 months, a corpus of archives (leaflets, videos, websites, publications on social networks, press) and about a hundred interviews (Cervera-Marzal 2021). "La France Insoumise isn't a party, it's a movement" is a statement that I found in almost all my interviews. So we may reasonably hypothesise that this denial of the party label contributes to the cohesion of La France Insoumise's symbolic identity (Close and Gherghina 2019).

Nevertheless, when we look in detail at the comments that accompany this statement, we see that not all respondents give it the same meaning. "This is not a party" can mean that La France Insoumise (henceforth LFI) does not want to be paralysed by internal struggles, does not want to be locked into an electoral repertoire of action, has no links with other left-wing parties, wants to abolish the implicit hierarchy between grassroots activists and cyberactivists, wants to reduce the conditions of entry into the organisation, is not inclined to equip itself with intermediate structures or hold congresses, etc. The term "movement" thus lends itself to a plurality of meanings, and sometimes even to contradictory uses. So can it really contribute to cohesion?

To address this question, the first part of the article is based on an analysis of the discourse of Insoumis activists and leaders. I will show that adherence to the movement-form stems from two distinct grammars (those of *efficacy* and *horizontality*), which are superimposed in the remarks of Jean-Luc Mélenchon—the founder of LFI—but which can also enter into contradiction when activists believe that the promise of horizontality made by the movement's founders is not being kept. While the vast majority of the Insoumis are attached to the "movement" as a shared symbolic identity, this comes at the cost of a misunderstanding between actors who do not share the same culture or interests.

In the second part, we will leave aside the formal elements of this movement (the use of "movement" as a label) in order to focus on its material elements. The difference between a political *movement* (such as LFI) and a political *party* (such as the Parti de Gauche) is not just a matter of a label (or *rebranding*, to use commercial vocabulary). In other words, the movement-form is accompanied by substantial practical and organisational transformations. To study these transformations, we will compare La France Insoumise with three other cases (La

République en Marche, Podemos and the Five Star Movement) in order to show that the organisation created by Mélenchon in January 2016 is a prototypical example of the *movementist* mutation of political parties in contemporary Western Europe.

Moving beyond the party-form: towards more efficacy or more horizontality?

From (left-wing) party to (citizen) movement

In 2012, when he first ran in the French presidential election, Jean-Luc Mélenchon put himself forward as president of the Left Party (Parti de Gauche, PG) and spokesperson for the Left Front (Front de Gauche, FdG), a coalition of several parties including the PG and the PCF (French Communist Party). Five years later, when he set his sights on the presidency for the second time, Mélenchon was no longer the candidate of a *left-wing party* (or *front*) but that of a *movement* that saw itself as part of *civil society*. As stated in *Les principes de la France insoumise*, an eleven-point document adopted after 96.43% of members voted to approve it in November 2017:

> "**1. La France Insoumise is an evolving movement**. It seeks to invent a new form of civil society gathering. […]
> **3. La France Insoumise is an open and popular movement.** It does not ask for either an entry card or membership fee, and brings together all those who act to promote the programme *The Future in Common*. […]
> **4. La France Insoumise is a benevolent and inclusive movement.** Internal competitions, personal conflicts and clashes between tendencies have no place here. […]
> **6 La France Insoumise is an action-oriented movement.** Its activity is organised in the form of action campaigns throughout the country. […]
> **7. La France Insoumise is a movement that is immediately useful.** A significant part of its activity is devoted to concrete solidarity-based actions. […]
> **8. La France Insoumise is a network movement.** It is a federation of action groups that are formed voluntarily by the Insoumis.es on a geographical, professional, functional or thematic basis. […]
> **9. La France Insoumise is a collective and transparent movement** […].
> **10. La France Insoumise is a polycentric movement.** […]
> **11. La France Insoumise is a movement that is preparing to govern**."

As Rafael Cos and Nicolas Bué (2021) have shown, France insoumise attaches more importance to its manifesto than most of its political rivals. In this founding manifesto, La France Insoumise is never defined as a "political party", even though it is defined as such in legal terms—as indicated by the statutes filed by LFI at the sub-prefecture of Palaiseau at the end of 2016—and in the eyes of sociologists—if we rely on Max Weber's definition (1995, p. 371), LFI does indeed meet the criteria of a political party. The party label is not just avoided by the Insoumis; it is

explicitly rejected. Thus, during the opening speech of LFI's third national convention (25 November 2017), Jean-Luc Mélenchon explains: "We're not going to elect leaders; we don't need them […]. We're not going to introduce personal struggles […]. The strength of La France Insoumise is that it is a movement, not a party. It doesn't need homogeneity of thought but homogeneity of action, which is why it is entirely focused on action […]. There will be no thought police, but everyone is called upon to show the greatest cohesion, the greatest discipline in action".

3 months earlier, in Marseille (28th August 2017), during the closing speech of the summer conference of LFI, the rebel leader had already set out the philosophy of his movement: "Enough talk, enough discussion. More action! No blabla—struggle!" In an interview given on 18th October 2017 to the newspaper *Le 1*, he clarified his thinking:

> La France Insoumise "is a movement. We don't want to be a party. The party is the tool of the class. The movement is the organised form of the people. The idea is to connect up the movement, its form and its expression: the network. I know it's not easy to understand for senior politicians who carry around their old scripts from the sixties, but the aim of the France Insoumise movement is not to be democratic but collective. It refuses to be divisive, it wants to be inclusive. It has nothing to do with the logic of a party. Moreover, it must be a useful body. So the comrades distribute food, go and get clothes, help people apply for the social benefits they are entitled to. And otherwise, the movement just campaigns. So when people ask us where the leadership is, it may sound strange to you, but there is none. Those who observe us are locked into a binary perspective that contrasts verticality and horizontality. But the movement is neither vertical nor horizontal, it is gaseous. In other words, the points connect transversely: you can have a bit of the top, a bit of the base, a bit of the base that becomes a top."

So why privilege the movement-form over the party-form? When we read the *Principles* of the movement and listen to its founder, two types of justification emerge. On the one hand, being a movement allows for gains in terms of "action", "usefulness" and "cohesion". Movements are considered more *effective* than parties, which are paralysed by clashes between tendencies, battles over commas and egos. On the other hand, being a movement allows for gains in terms of "inclusion", "benevolence" and "openness". Movements are considered more *horizontal* than parties, which are perceived as bureaucratic and pyramidal machines, whereas La France Insoumise is an organisation that "doesn't need a leader" and has "no leadership".

The grammar of efficacy

These grammars of horizontality and efficacy are closely intertwined, as we have just seen, in Jean-Luc Mélenchon's remarks. From an analytical point of view, however, it is important to distinguish them. The compatibility of these two grammars is not self-evident (Pleyers 2012). Several of my interviewees believe that the

movement-form is *more effective* but *less horizontal* than the party-form. Speaking about the 2017 campaign, for example, Clémentine Autain told me: "The absence of spaces for internal confrontation saved us time and energy to begin with. But in the end it did us more harm than good; it ends up in 'the movement gets stronger by purifying itself', people leave because they don't feel represented, because their voice couldn't be expressed, because they don't feel the decisions are legitimate".[1] In the eyes of this Insoumise deputy, the movement-form—which ensures discipline and efficacy—should have been limited to the presidential campaign, then faded away in favour of a more "democratic" and "pluralist" mode of organisation: "An electoral campaign is not the time for democracy! An electoral campaign is: we all hit a nail on the head at the same moment; it isn't the time for disagreements, it isn't the time for democracy. But between two campaigns, it has to breathe. This isn't what was done. In a campaign, you can't take three weeks to decide: you go there, you strike, you have opponents. But after the campaign, that's precisely the time when you sit down, debate, discuss strategy, and rework the project. That requires debate, internal debate".

François Cocq, a member of the candidate's inner circle during the 2017 campaign, made similar comments: "I take complete responsibility for the way LFI functioned in 2017: the fact that a small group of Bolsheviks staged an attack, in short. I claim that and I have no problem with doing so. I still take responsibility for it and I think we should continue to do things this way in periods of attack".[2] This is an observation shared by Nicolas Framont, a parliamentary collaborator of La France Insoumise, who joined the Jean-Luc Mélenchon's movement after having fully invested in the Nuit Debout mobilisation (spring 2016): "Joining LFI meant accepting the leadership completely. So I mourned Nuit Debout, I tested the opposite, and frankly, it was super effective".[3] In a 1917 article, Max Weber analysed the reasons for this effectiveness: "Political action is always governed by the 'principle of the few', that is, by the superior political agility of small groups exercising leadership. In modern states, this Caesarist tendency is bound to last" (1994, p. 174).

This remark by the German sociologist sheds light on one of the reasons why, in view of the 2017 presidential election, Jean-Luc Mélenchon abandoned the PG and the FdG in order to launch LFI. During his first candidacy in 2012, Jean-Luc Mélenchon represented a coalition of political parties and, as spokesperson for this heterogeneous group, he had to watch his words in order to deliver a public discourse that respected the internal balances and compromises patiently worked out between the different components of the Front de Gauche Left Front (Front de Gauche, FdG). He would later confide that he felt held back by the "endless Byzantine negotiations" within the Left Front leadership. "I'd had enough of being constantly called into question, and at every opportunity" (Mélenchon 2016, p. 299). Independently of the FdG and the chaotic alliance with the communists, internal tensions also appeared within the Left Party (Parti de Gauche, PG), the small party over which Mélenchon

[1] Interview with Clémentine Autain, conducted on 22 October 2020.
[2] Interview with François Cocq, conducted on 20 June 2019.
[3] Interview with Nicolas Framont, conducted on 28 January 2019.

presided. In July 2015, in Villejuif, the PG held its fourth congress. On this occasion, Mélenchon almost got overthrown twice; first by his activist base, then, in the aftermath, by a fraction of the leadership led by Eric Coquerel.

A pretender to the Elysée Palace unable to hold his own troops together? Can you ensure the unity of the nation when you cannot manage to ensure the cohesion of barely 2000 activists? This double shock made Mélenchon reflect seriously, and it was following this episode that he decided, in January 2016, to bury the Parti de Gauche in favour of a "citizen's movement" that François Delapierre, his closest adviser (who died in June 2015), had been praising for two years. As a leader of the PG, who would later become a collaborator of LFI parliamentary group, told me: "In 2015, Mélenchon had announced that he was going to withdraw from the PG. At the time, I, like most of the PG cadres, didn't understand what this meant. We thought that he was going to withdraw from politics, to dedicate himself to intellectual work, that he was going to leave the political and media scene. In fact, it turned out to be the opposite, he withdrew from the PG in order to bypass its authorities and run in the elections with LFI".[4]

The operating—or rather the absence of rules (Freeman 1972) and the vagueness that reigns at all levels—of La France Insoumise make it possible to contain internal confrontations (the "droit de tendance"[5] does not exist within LFI; the major strategic and programmatic decisions are taken by the leader without being submitted to open debate or to a vote of the members) but also to prevent the emergence of intermediate cadres. Jean-Luc Mélenchon distrusts such cadres (who weakened his authority within the PG on the eve of the 2017 presidential elections). He regularly vilifies "local baronies". No one should stand between the leader and his base of supporters. This is how La France Insoumise operates; in doing so, it differs from most left-wing parties in which, from the local committee to the national secretariat via the departmental federation, there is a stack of democratically elected intermediate structures.

In short, La France Insoumise has a lighter, more centralised and therefore a priori more effective structure than traditional political parties. This in any case is the wager of LFI's architects and, in the eyes of several respondents, the main comparative advantage of the movement-form. Most of these respondents have a long history of party involvement behind them. They are not fooled by the personalised nature of La France Insoumise. During the interviews, some of them stressed at length the democratic deficit and the lack of pluralism within their organisation.

[4] Interview conducted on 18th September 2018 with a collaborator of the France Insoumise parliamentary group who had been an activist in the Left Party for several years and who wished to remain anonymous.

[5] Most French political parties have a statute that explicitly permits any grouping ("*tendance*", or tendency) within the party to set up its own organisation *inside* the party. This "droit de tendance"—literally "right to [create a] tendency"—means that within the party there are several organisations, several groupings (e.g. a right grouping, a left grouping), each with their own elected representatives among the leadership and their own funding. This allows pluralism and democracy to thrive within the party. But in LFI, this "droit de tendance" does not exist; indeed the statutes explicitly state that members do *not* have this right.

They described the national conventions as "American-style *shows*" during which participants are invited to listen passively to the leader's speech. They underline the "plebiscitary" character of electronic votes, where more than 90% of members ratify choices made by the leadership beforehand. They point to the financial asphyxiation of the action groups. They complain about the opacity that pervades decision-making. The grammar of horizontality—which consists in praising the "democratic", "polycentric", "rhizomatic" and "transparent" character of La France Insoumise—is absent from their discourse.

The grammar of horizontality

The grammar of horizontality does emerge, however, among some of the movement's top officials. As Manuel Bompard, appointed "coordinator" of La France Insoumise by Mélenchon in November 2017, confided to a journalist from *Regards*: "La France Insoumise is a movement […]. We did not want to create a political party, in a traditional, pyramidal, hierarchical form".[6] In the same vein, during my interview with him, Gabriel Amard—son-in-law of Mélenchon and leader of LFI in Auvergne-Rhones-Alpes for the 2021 regional elections—insisted several times on the "horizontal", "molecular" and "collaborative" character[7] of the movement-form. La France Insoumise, he adds, operates "with cooperation, co-construction, co-management, which call on collective intelligence". In this sense, it is the antithesis of the "vertical corporalisation" that reigns in political parties. In the latter, the floor is monopolised by "experts, knowledgeable people, who develop their ideas behind closed doors and then come to convince [everyone else] at all costs of the accuracy of their analysis".

It is difficult, when we know how La France Insoumise really works, to see in this discourse anything other than a stratagem whose objective is to attract activist novices into the ranks of the Insoumis. Political parties have a bad press. Distancing oneself from them—even if it means exaggerating their defects and adding to their discredit—is therefore a strategy that can pay off in terms of activist recruitment. Moreover, Gabriel Amard's words—and his beguiling description of the movement-form—echo those I heard from several respondents whose first experience of political engagement was with La France Insoumise.

The promise of horizontality made by the movement's spokespeople can indeed help give rise to new activist intentions and resonate with the aspirations of activist novices. In an interview, Taha Bouhafs (22 years old, and a first-time activist) remembers, for example, that when he joined La France Insoumise, he thought of it as "an ultra-democratic movement, something too good, the Sixth Republic was here!"[8] A year later, he left the movement disillusioned, sharply criticising its "opacity" and the domination of the "national" over "people from the provinces". Another

[6] Manuel Bompard, Interview in *Regards* ("La Midinale"), 11 June 2019, available at http://www.regards.fr/la-midinale/article/manuel-bompard-federer-le-peuple-c-est-ramener-la-gauche-au-peuple.

[7] Interview with Gabriel Amard, conducted on 1st April 2019.

[8] Interview with Taha Bouhafs, conducted on 17 October 2019.

first-time activist, Baptiste Mongis (30), tells me: "In LFI, it's a new form of activism, scattered, horizontal, with real freedom for the action groups. That's what I liked about it. I know about all the comments saying that Mélenchon is the patriarch, who oversees everything from above. I went to check. It's not true!"[9] Laëtitia Pison (31), also a novice in politics, told a similar story: "For me, national conventions are a positive thing. The fact that it's participatory, it makes a change from other parties".[10]

But first-time activists' adherence to the grammar of horizontality rarely withstands the test of practice. In several cases that I observed, these new activists gradually distanced themselves from this discourse, which ended up seeming suspicious, unfounded, or even false to them. The *discrepancy* between the grammar of horizontality promoted by the movement's leaders and the daily reality of La France Insoumise's operation can give rise to tensions. As Séverine Enjolras (about 40 years old, a first-time activist), a member of an action group in Paris' 20th arrondissement, told me: "I remember talking to Danièle Simonet [a Paris councillor close to Mélenchon, and a member of LFI's core leadership]. She came to our meeting and gave us a whole speech on polycentrism, on the fact that the movement was organised into lots of small centres of action, horizontally, without the hierarchical thing of other parties, something inspired by sociocracy, a very horizontal organisation, with geographical centres and centres of activity that carry out the actions they want to, which are very autonomous and which function in a network. She was really into this. But we actually wanted to have representatives, at the level of the arrondissement, to pass on information. But she didn't believe us, she said: "this will put authoritarian formalism back into the movement, it's not possible, we have to keep this form of organisation which may seem vague to you but which allows for freedom".[11]

That said, the grammar of horizontality should not be confused with a promise of democracy. As Jean-Luc Mélenchon makes clear in the interview mentioned above, "the aim of the France Insoumise movement is not to be democratic" but to be a "useful body", oriented above all towards "action". "Just one instruction: don't wait for instructions": this paradoxical phrase is frequently used by the Insoumis leader. It is a matter of encouraging initiatives taken by the base. As long as these initiatives remain respectful of the programme *The Future in Common*, they can be carried out without prior authorisation from the national leadership. Nonetheless, it is difficult to implement this form of activist "self-organisation" in practice, because local groups are in a situation of material scarcity. La France Insoumise does not provide its action groups with premises, and it gives them few financial resources. The action groups are therefore forced to find places to meet by themselves (a café, a municipal hall, an association's premises, sometimes for a fee) and money to finance their activities.

[9] Interview with Baptiste Mongis, conducted on 25 September 2018.
[10] Interview with Laëtitia Pison, conducted on 18 January 2019.
[11] Interview with Séverine Enjolras, conducted on 31 October 2018.

An operational misunderstanding

The Insoumis' enthusiasm for the movement-form thus rests on multiple and potentially contradictory motivations. When we look at the statement "FI is not a party" in relation to the social characteristics of those who make it, certain patterns appear. Thus, the former members of the PG who have migrated to La France Insoumise are essentially trying to justify their disinvestment from the PG arenas in favour of a "movement" they judge to be more flexible and responsive. The newcomers to activism, for whom LFI has provided the first experience of political engagement, are above all concerned to distance themselves from the "traditional parties", which are depicted as places of indoctrination and verticality, and to stress their attachment to "the people" rather than to "the left". The Insoumis leaders who have Mélenchon's confidence are attempting to defend the "gaseous" organisational model that Mélenchon established in his own interest and that of his restricted entourage. Meanwhile the members of the action groups are seeking to praise the freedom of initiative enjoyed by the base and the conviviality that prevails in meetings.

In short, if the statement "FI is not a party but a movement" helps knit the groups of actors that make up LFI together, then this cohesion is in fact paradoxical, since the meaning of "movement" varies from one insubordinate to another. To address this paradox, I propose to bring in the notion of a "*working* misunderstanding", originally coined by Marshall Sahlins in an entirely different context (Sahlins 1999, p. 399). As we have just seen, behind a façade of unanimity, the rejection of the party label is shared by groups of actors who have neither the same interests nor the same political culture. But thanks to its floating character and the multiplicity of uses to which it lends itself, the signifier "movement" favours collaboration, or even cohesion, between these groups of actors. In this sense, the misunderstanding has a certain effectiveness. It defuses the potential conflict between the grammar of efficacy and the grammar of horizontality. As Marshall Sahlins puts it, the misunderstanding—which in our case concerns what is meant by "movement"—"allows for a congruent attribution from two different cultural orders of a special meaningful value to the same event" (Sahlins 1982, p. 82).

The question that then arises is whether this is really a misunderstanding (in the sense of an accident) or whether this misunderstanding is knowingly maintained by the Insoumis leaders in the hope of rallying political novices to their "movement" who are seduced by the promise of horizontality and novelty. Within La France Insoumise, defections are numerous and rapid, to the extent that it is no exaggeration to speak of a haemorrhage. By my count, between May 2017 and May 2019, the membership was divided by ten; it went from about 60,000 to about 6000 activists. Compensating for these departures with new recruits is thus an important issue, and is something the emphasis on the movement-form can help address.

Political parties' movementist turn in post-2008 western Europe

The first part of this article examined "movement" as a symbolic reference; this is why I focused on discourse analysis (of semi-structured interviews, Mélenchon's speeches, founding documents of La France Insoumise, etc.). I have shown that the unity of the signifier "movement" covers a plurality of potentially contradictory meanings (grammar of efficacy vs. grammar of horizontality). If, *in the end*, "movement" constitutes a source of cohesion between actors who do understand the same thing by this word, then this is by virtue of the operational misunderstanding that is established between these actors.

I would now like to push the sociological analysis beyond these symbolic considerations by widening our focus in two ways. First, through a geographical expansion: La France Insoumise will now be compared with three other cases (La République en Marche, Podemos and the Five Star Movement) in order to show that, far from being an exception, LFI is part of a global transformation of contemporary European political parties. Second, through an analytical expansion: our approach, which has so far focused on actors' discourse, will now take into account their practices. In other words, it is helpful to take a materialist approach to movementism, which should not be reduced to semantic innovations (i.e. the reference to "movement" rather "party") alone. Movementism is also, and above all, manifested in repertoires of action and modes of organisation.

But the sociologist wishing to make 'movementism' an analytical category is immediately confronted with a major epistemological difficulty: just as the use of "populism" as an analytical concept is rendered difficult by its role of political weapon or anathema, the ambiguous status of the "movement" label might create some difficulty when one wants to use it as an objective category. Considering that this label is both contested by the activists themselves in their internal disputes and used as tool in their external relations to distinguish themselves from other political actors, the analyst should take some precaution to "neutralise" the concept as much as possible before using it.

Three precautions need to be taken here. Firstly, the concept of "movementism" will henceforth be used in a purely descriptive way. In other words, the sociologist, unlike the actors he is studying, does not consider that political *parties* are an 'obsolete' form and that political *movements* are in essence the bearers of 'modernity' and 'democratic progress'. Secondly, in order to avoid misunderstandings and definitional struggles between the political actors, the sociologist will endeavour to give a definition as precise as possible of what he means by 'movementism'. This definition, which is based on three criteria (culture, strategy, organisation), will be provided in part 2.3. Thirdly, it is not enough to give as neutral a definition as possible. It is also necessary, if possible, for this definition to be operational, i.e. measurement. We will return to this delicate question of measurement at the end of Sect. "The grammar of horizontality".

Political parties with a lack of social roots

According to the *Barometer of Political Confidence* (wave 12) drawn up in February 2021 by CEVIPOF, only 16% of French people trust political parties and 79% do not trust them. By way of comparison, and to understand the extent of this mistrust, note that, according to the same *Barometer*, 28% of respondents trust the media, 32% trust trade unions, 38% trust banks, 69% trust the police and 81% trust hospitals. Parties come last among the nineteen types of organisation whose trustworthiness is measured by CEVIPOF. Party leaders are accused of putting their personal interests above the public interest, of indulging in battles of egos, of making promises they never keep and do not even believe in, of misappropriating public money for the benefit of their inner circle, of dramatising petty differences and of being driven by an excessive thirst for power. Parties are perceived as pyramidal, hierarchical, bureaucratic apparatuses, machines for formatting and indoctrinating individuals. In the age of digital technology, networks and horizontality, parties have supposedly been rendered obsolete by their rigidity and verticality. Their image has been permanently dented and it is understandable that most of them are trying to re-establish their reputation by changing their name or by flatly rejecting the label "party". They are trying to fall into line with the new spirit of capitalism, whose key words are "network", "flexibility" and "participation" (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, p. 434).

The damage is deep, deeper than a simple matter of image. For at least three decades, we have seen a structural increase in abstention, a constant erosion in the number of members, an embourgeoisement of recruitment, an ageing of the cadres, a dwindling of activism and the intensity of commitments, a weakening of anchoring to particular geographical areas, a questioning of the centrality of the programme, a tendency to de-ideologise, and a retreat into the management of public resources. The gradual social disembedding of political parties is due to multiple factors that interact with each other: an increased dependence on the state and its funding and, concomitantly, a reduction in the importance of membership fees and therefore of activists' influence within the party; the preponderance of elected representatives over activists; the weakening of sociability and solidarity within professional circles that used to be recruitment pools for political parties (factory workers, teachers, health and social care workers, etc.); the erosion of religious identities (Catholics) and professional identities (farmers) that used to influence electoral behaviour; the convergence of programmes and public policies around a neo-liberal consensus that tends to transcend the left–right divide; the outsourcing of campaign material, and even of the political programme's development, to communication and marketing professionals; the growing influence of social networks in information practices and in the politicisation of young people; etc.

In the last century, parties played a central role in the symbolic and material structuring of political life. Today, this era seems to be over. But, contrary to the prophecies, parties have not disappeared (Offerlé 2017). They have retained their place, despite the difficulties, so much so that even a wealthy outsider (Silvio Berlusconi, Andrej Babis, Emmanuel Macron, etc.) who wants to take on power from a position outside the so-called "traditional" parties is forced to create their own party structure (Hloucek et al. 2020). As for the so-called "populist" leaders, they may

thunder against the political parties, but they ultimately equip themselves with a party organisation when they start campaigning. Finally, even followers of libertarian ideology (Pirate Party) and real democracy (Podemos) end up moulding themselves into the party-form they have long decried in order to influence the course of events. These different examples show that the issue is not that of finding out if (and when) political parties will disappear, but that of studying their transformations in a context which, it is true, is unfavourable to them, and where they are forced to reinvent themselves to survive. These transformations are manifold; they may involve the creation of new party organisations (Della Porta et al. 2017) or organisational reforms within "old" parties (Gauja 2016; Escalona 2018), for example the introduction of open primaries or the diversification of ways of engaging (Scarrow 2014).

The current mutations of the party-form are reflected in a series of terminological innovations in political science: business parties, populist parties, platform parties, digital parties, anti-party parties, decartelised parties, committee parties, movement parties, etc. The common denominator of these different types of party is their desire to revitalise themselves through contact with society and its component parts (companies, associations and/or mobilisations).

Regenerating political parties through contact with society

Even if not everything can be reduced to this single factor, it is reasonable to think that many difficulties currently encountered by political parties are related, in one way or another, to the fact that they have gradually become disembedded from society, to the point where they now seem like organisations detached from the ground. This is the diagnosis pronounced by numerous political science studies (for a non-exhaustive overview: Katz and Mair 1995; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Scarrow 2014; Lefebvre 2020). This diagnosis is also shared by some politicians, including Daniel Cohn-Bendit—for whom "a party is a shield, a closed structure, almost genetically sealed off from society" (Cohn-Bendit 2013, p. 12)—and Emmanuel Macron. In the book-manifesto published in 2016 when he entered the campaign, the future president asserted that "our political parties are dead from not having confronted reality" (Macron 2017, p. 44). Five years earlier, in an article in the journal *Esprit*, Macron was already concerned about the system's presidentialisation, to which, in his view, political parties actively contribute. Like the "media" and "polling institutes", "political parties" live in "preparation for this presidential spasm around which everything contracts" and do nothing to ensure that "debates can take place and develop in an appropriate way and in a suitable time-frame" (Macron 2011, p. 106–107).

Since parties suffer from this disconnection, the architects of La République en Marche (LREM) have logically sought to anchor their movement in civil society. As Richard Ferrand, secretary general of LREM, congratulated himself on 11th May 2017, on the eve of the legislative elections: "Our candidates signal the definitive return of citizens to the heart of political life. […] 52% of them come from civil society […], in other words, they have never held an elective mandate and today do

not hold any political mandate"[12] (quoted in *Mediapart*, 18 May 2017). The mischievous sociologist will point out that the civil society in question is mostly that of the well-off, as illustrated by the fact that the average monthly salary of LREM deputies (before they enter parliament) is €4,739 net (compared to an average monthly salary in France of €2,219).[13] But for our purposes, the important thing is to note the desire to re-anchor political organisations in society, whatever one's conception of this "society" might be.

In this sense, there is indeed a proximity between Emmanuel Macron's movement and that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. As the latter explains in a long theoretical reflection on the necessary renewal of forms of political organisation, the objective is to "unite the movement and the people from whom it has emerged".[14] La France Insoumise seeks to anchor itself in society through social parity measures and the setting up of rights trailers in working-class neighbourhoods. Social parity aims to promote candidates who reflect the population. In the 2019 European elections, for example, the list of seventy Insoumis candidates contained 10% blue-collar workers; yet while blue-collar workers account for 20.3% of the active French population, they made up only 4.9% of volunteers to be on the Insoumise list. "The criterion we set ourselves", one of the stalwarts of the nomination committee explained to me, "does not exist anywhere else in the political world. You have gender parity, but we also practice social parity: on our lists, not a single socio-professional category must be represented at less than half of what it represents in the French population. This inevitably leads to disappointment. But it's thanks to this criterion that we're investing a truck driver from Gardanne instead of a guy who's a teacher in Paris, a super-activist who knows Mélenchon and who wrote part of the programme".[15] As for the access to rights trailers, they drive Insoumis activists to meet the inhabitants of working-class neighbourhoods in order to inform them of their rights and talk to them about the programme *The Future in Common*. But these trailers' lack of logistical preparation, their sporadic mobilisation—too infrequent to really be useful—and their sometimes bleak and/or paternalistic outlook have led to criticism and disappointment even among those who run them. They mainly serve as a showcase, with the leadership not hesitating to highlight them in the media.

Podemos has similar ambitions. As Joan Subirats, a professor of political science who became a Barcelona city councillor on the *Barcelona en Comú* list in 2019, explains, "the 15M [the Indignados of 2011] revealed, in a striking manner, the crisis of the party form as a mechanism for mediating citizens' demands" (Subirats 2015, p. 166). Podemos seized this window of opportunity by presenting itself as *the* political force capable—in the words of Iñigo Errejon, its main strategist—of "connecting with the social discontent" (Errejon 2015, p. 68) born of the 2008 economic crisis. Indeed, when Podemos first entered parliament (in January 2016), its 69 deputies were more representative of the Spanish population than the elected

[12] Quoted in *Mediapart*, 18 May 2017.

[13] Data from declarations to the Haute Autorité pour la Transparence de la Vie Publique.

[14] Jean-Luc Mélenchon, "The people and the movement", blog post, 2 November 2016.

[15] Interview with Mathieu Bosque, conducted on 19 October 2018.

members of other parties. Its parliamentary group was the youngest (the average age of Podemos deputies is 39.9 compared to 47.4 for all deputies), the most female (50% women among Podemos deputies compared to 39% for all deputies) and the most working-class (in terms of income and wealth) in the Congress. The attempt to anchor itself within society is also manifested by the fact that—as I had the opportunity to observe during my fieldwork within Podemos (in Barcelona from September to December 2016 and Madrid from September to December 2017)—meetings of the circles (local groups) are regularly held outdoors (in open and accessible places, such as parks) and activists carry out actions in support of many social struggles (the defence of public services, the fight against evictions, the anti-TAFTA mobilisation, anti-nuclear human chains, etc.). However, the institutionalisation of Podemos (which became part of the government in January 2020) and the professionalisation of its leaders have shifted its centre of gravity towards the state and distanced it from its contestatory roots (Cervera-Marzal 2018).

Political parties are also attempting to reconnect to society via the Internet. Faced with a shrinking number of activists, traditional parties (PS, UMP) have seen digital technology as a way of opening up to new members and new modes of engagement (Theviot 2016, 2018). As for the new parties (Podemos, the Pirate Party, La France Insoumise), their structure is based on a digital platform that makes provision for discussion forums, internal consultations and external communication (Gerbaudo 2019). The clearest example of this is that of the Five Star Movement (M5S), born in 2009 from the meeting between a comedian fond of political satire, Beppe Grillo, and the entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio, head of an IT consulting firm. The "non-statutes" of the M5S state that it "is not a political party", that it has no physical address, that its only seat is the Web and that it "coincides with the website www.movimento5stelle.it" (Dousson 2018, p. 75). As the movement's official anthem (*Ognuno vale uno*, i.e. "All are equal") declares, in its refrain: "We are not a party, we are not a class, we are citizens, full stop!" The actual operation of the M5S is more complex, since from the outset, power has been monopolised by the tight-knit inner circle of the two founders. Nonetheless, through its organisational structure—which gives a prominent place to cyberactivism—and the sociological profile of those who the M5S has given an opportunity to start a career as elected representatives, this movement helps (within the limits mentioned) to re-embed party action in society.

M5S, PDM, LFI and LREM, which have neither cards nor membership fees, first appeared as digital platforms where anyone could register with a few clicks. Subsequently, these platforms, backed up by other digital tools, served as information transmission belts, forums for debate and support for voting by registered members. The notion of a party-platform highlights the importance of these forms of digital activism—registering, getting information, debating and making decisions. However, this concept should not be allowed to overshadow other forms of activism, such as donations of money and occasional involvement in primaries or election campaigns. In addition, the existence of the platforms depends on the human, IT and financial resources needed to run them. Not all "subscribers" (over 400,000 at PDM and 500,000 at LFI) are activists (far from it: PDM and LFI have reached a maximum of around 30,000 activists, giving a ratio of activists/ subscribers of

around 10%) and not all activists are registered on the platform (due to a lack of skills linked to age, a refusal to communicate their personal data or a simple omission). Finally, while the notion of party-platforms makes it possible to describe a relatively recent reality (cyberactivism), it also raises a number of questions: Who runs these platforms? Are they really a remedy and an alternative to the bureaucracy of "traditional" parties? How do they work? What algorithms do they use? What is their legal status? What happens to the data? Who controls the content? How do party members use it? What is the significance of the asymmetry between the ease with which people can sign up (free of charge and in just a few minutes) and the difficulty of unsubscribing (the procedure to follow is nowhere to be found)? Why, how and by whom can some registrants be excluded, i.e. have their accounts deleted against their will? In what way does opening up voting to the whole population encourage a plebiscitary logic and a dispossession/demobilisation of the most committed grassroots activists?

Movementist parties

The four cases discussed above position themselves at different points on the left–right spectrum, as evidenced by the political groups they have decided to join in the European Parliament: Podemos and La France Insoumise are members of the The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL), La République en Marche is a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the Five Star Movement has not been a member of any group (non-attached) since 2019, whereas it had sat in a far-right group (EFDD) in the previous legislature (2014–2019).

Despite these ideological differences, these four political parties share a number of characteristics that, I believe, allow them to be placed under the same category—that of a *movementist party*.

What is a movementist party? This ideal type is characterised by the conjunction of three dimensions—culture, strategy, and organisation—that Angelo Panebianco (1986) lists in his typology of political parties:

The invention of a movementist culture

In its rhetoric and its internal and external communication, a movementist party rejects the label “political party” and prefers to present itself as a “movement”. But it is not enough to call oneself a “movement” to be a movementist party, otherwise the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP; 2002–2015) and the Mouvement Démocrate (Modem; 2007-present) would belong to this category. It is also necessary to firmly reject the label “political party”—something that the UMP and the Modem do not do.

Moreover, this lexical preference for “movement” must be widely shared among activists. Members of the Modem and the UMP generally see themselves as members of a political party. This is not the case for those of M5S, PDM, LFI and LREM who, in their great majority, take offence at the fact that their movement might

be described as a "party"; at least in the early years of their existence. After five years of existence, Podemos has evolved towards a more traditional party form, for example by reintroducing membership fees. And, in 2023, Podemos members now admit that their organisation constitutes a "party". In France, LREM underwent a similar evolution when it became Renaissance in September 2022. As part of this re-foundation, the organisation introduced internal dues and intermediate echelons. Like Podemos, Renaissance now admits the qualifier "party". These developments prompt the sociologist to adopt a gradual, diachronic and dynamic conception of "movementism", which should not be a fixed and definitive category.

The name of the movement should also not refer to any ideology. In the past, France had a socialist party, a communist party, a liberal party, a conservative party and/or an environmentalist party. Nowadays, there is a preference within movementist parties for pragmatism over ideology, action over theory, movement over doctrinal rigidity (König and Waldvogel 2021). Movementist parties often have names that evoke movement: "en marche (on the move)", "nous pouvons (we can)", "Insoumis (rebellious)", and so on.

Finally, beyond the label "movement", the entire activist vocabulary has been renewed: "action groups" replace "sections", "points of contact" replace "secretaries", and "thematic conventions" replace "congresses".

A strategy to support social movements

Movementist parties aim to reduce the gap between traditional political parties and society. They think of themselves as in tune with the trends, developments and movements in society. They see themselves as the missing link between society and the state. Movement parties are trying to link up with social mobilisations that claim to be "political" while avoiding "institutional politics" (Reungoat et al 2022).

Most movementist parties thus seek to get closer to social movements in three ways: by cooperating on certain actions (strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, etc.); by encouraging their members to take part in social mobilisations (activist multi-positioning, entryism); and by integrating some of the demands of social movements into their electoral programme. M5S does this in relation to climate and anti-corruption mobilisations. Podemos does this in relation to struggles to defend public services (*mareas*), mobilisations against evictions and the right to self-determination in Catalonia. And LFI is doing the same in relation to democratic aspirations of the *gilets jaunes* (Abrial et al 2022), trade union mobilisations (pension reform, reform of the railway workers' statute, etc.) and climate mobilisations.

The case of LREM poses a difficulty, however. It is difficult to say that Emmanuel Macron's movement "supports social movements". In this sense, LREM corresponds imperfectly to the ideal type of movementist party: it satisfies the first criterion (movementist culture) and the third criterion (movementist mode of organisation) in the definition of a movementist party, but not the second criterion (strategy of supporting social movements). Unless we understand "social movements" in a (very) broad sense—that is, if we do not reduce social movements to trade union mobilisations (against pension reform, for example) and popular mobilisations (the *gilets jaunes*, for example). Employers' mobilisations, which demand that the labour

code and the welfare state be dismantled, are also mobilisations originating from society, i.e. mobilisations whose origin is outside the political sphere. More than any other party, LREM is a political receptacle for employers' demands, as shown by this movement's sources of funding (Piketty and Cagé 2023), electorate, program and political staff (Dolez et al 2019).

A mode of internal operation that is intended to contrast with that of traditional parties, and which values freedom of movement

Movementist parties exhibit a strong distrust of the operation of so-called "traditional" parties, which are seen as sclerotic, pyramidal, rigid, dogmatic, obsolete and ineffective machines. So movementist parties explore alternative modes of operation and membership, which aim to be "flexible", "inclusive", "intelligent", "efficient", "reactive", "disruptive", "gaseous". In a word, a *modern* way of operating (Ignazi 2020).

M5S thus takes the Web and digital technologies as its model in order to implement a "transparent", "participatory" and "decentralised" way of operating. LREM is implementing a form of managerial organisation inspired by start-ups (selecting candidates for nomination on the basis of CVs; organising volunteers into teams; benchmarking). LFI and PDM are trying to invent a way of operating that combines the best of popular education, community organising and new social movements.

You can become a member of a movementist party online, for free, and can cancel at any time (Achury et al 2020). Joining does not oblige you to be an activist, and each activist is free to define how and to what extent they engage. The aim is to lower the cost of joining the party and to individualise how members engage, leaving them as much freedom of movement as possible, whether to move within the organisation, or to move between the outside and inside.

Movementist parties claim to be more democratic than the old parties, but in reality they often operate in a centralised way that reinforces the founder-leader's authority to the detriment of the activist base, which is deprived of the prerogatives it had in the traditional parties (Pedersen and Rahat 2021). Moreover, movementist parties are generally created "from above" (by a leader with a high level of media, economic and/or political capital) and operate in a personalised manner, with fairly weak local roots (Friedman and Friedberg 2021), despite a discourse that extols the merits of horizontality and self-organisation.

Finally, movementist parties are trying, albeit with mixed success and without really giving themselves the necessary means, to broaden their repertoire of action and bring activities that had been abandoned or outsourced back into the activist space—activities such as the training of activists; development of the political program; preparation of campaign material; concrete local aid in terms of access to health care, food or rights.

The ideal type of the movementist party developed above is never found in its pure state in reality. But we have now considered four examples (LFI, PDM, M5S, LREM) that give us a fairly accurate idea of the phenomenon. Given their geographical (Spain, France, Italy) and ideological (on the left–right axis) diversity, these four

examples suggest that political parties' movementist turn is not an isolated trend that can be reduced to a single country or political family.

To sum up, our ideal type of movementist party is based on three criteria: a cultural and discursive criterion (do party members present the party as a "movement"?), a strategic criterion (does the party form alliances with movements from civil society?) and an organisational criterion (does the party seek to invent new ways of operating?). These three criteria have the advantage of being easy to measure: the party's leaflets, founding texts and communication documents can be subjected to a lexicographical analysis; the party's activities can be listed, its financial expenditure tracked, and its degree of cooperation with social movements assessed; and finally, the internal workings of the party can be objectified (are there congresses? internally elected bodies? when do they meet? etc.). On the basis of these objective, and sometimes even quantifiable, elements, it is possible to distinguish between movement parties and traditional parties, without getting caught up in the classification struggles mentioned in the first part of this article.

Conclusion: research perspectives on movementist parties

Phases where the boundaries between movement and party dissolve have been highlighted by studies on the birth of social democratic parties (Ostrogorski 1993; Michels 2015), the French Communist Party (Lavau 1969; Kriegel 1970; Pudal 1989; Mischi 2020), the emergence of mass parties (Neumann 1956; Duverger 1992), the political influence of citizen mobilisations (Offe 1985; Rohschneider 1993; Giugni 2004) and contemporary protest parties (Deschouwer 2008; De Waele and Seiler 2012). Recent monographs—on Samoobrona (Pellen 2013) and the Mexican Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Combes 2005)—also draw attention to the bridges between parties and movements.

But these studies, which deal with phenomena from the last century, are interested in social mobilisations that have turned into political parties or that have put pressure on political parties. The notion of movementist parties, however, does not denote social movements that have been transformed into political parties (as was the case with the first workers' parties at the end of the nineteenth century) but, on the contrary, to political entrepreneurs (Pablo Iglesias, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Emmanuel Macron, Beppe Grillo and their respective entourages) that have been transformed into political parties. These political entrepreneurs try to distinguish from their rivals—the other parties engaged in electoral competition—by revitalising themselves through contact with social movements, from which these political entrepreneurs borrow an imaginary, modes of action and/or modes of operation. In other words, movementist parties are political parties in their own right, but these parties play a specific card—that of movementism—in order to escape the decline that currently affects most political parties. Iglesias, Mélenchon, Macron and Grillo, we should remember, entered politics long before converting to the movementist logic and founding their own party.

In other words, the notion of *movementist party* can lead to a misleading parallel with historical antecedents such as the labour movement and the environmental

movement. Indeed, in these two cases, we see a *bottom-up* dynamic, i.e. social mobilisations (the labour movement, the environmental movement) which gradually give rise to party organisations (socialist and communist parties, green parties). However, in the cases of LFI, PDM, LREM and M5S, the dominant dynamic seems to be the opposite, i.e. *top down,* since these are organisations created from above, on the initiative of a self-proclaimed leader who already has solid partisan capital. The leader is surrounded by a tightly knit team of political entrepreneurs who control the organisation's main resources (finance, website, nominations, programme writing).

Rather than a movement that has mutated into a party, PDM and LFI are party coalitions (the Parti de Gauche and Ensemble in France, Anticapitalistas and a minority fraction of Izquierda Unida in Spain) that adopt a movementist communication strategy. This movementist turn allows the parties to face a context in which they are weakened in three ways: by the discrediting of the label "political party", by the disaffiliation of activists, and by the dealignment of the electorate. In this respect, should we not distinguish between the movement → parties of the twentieth century and the party → movements of the 21st? This second category does not, moreover, apply exclusively to the radical left, because centrist formations such as LREM and M5S also seek to erase their party dimension by putting forward a movement rhetoric, associated with a managerial imaginary of horizontality, flexibility and pragmatism.

This movementist turn made by certain European political parties in the 2010s invites us to open up a field of research whose main questions are the following: are movementist parties destined to normalise, to return to being parties just like all the others after a few years of existence? Or are they, on the contrary, the harbinger of a generalised transformation of political parties, which will sooner or later affect traditional parties if they do not want to become obsolete? What happens when a movementist party moves from opposition to government, as happened to Podemos in 2020 and the Five Star Movement in 2018? Does movementism allow political parties to re-embed themselves in civil society? Can it stop the erosion of activists and activist sociability that affects most parties? Is movementism a strategy that pays off electorally? How will movementist parties manage the internal differences that are becoming more pronounced over time? Is movementism a new phenomenon, or does it bear some resemblance to the environmentalist parties that appeared in the 1970s?

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