

Xabier Barandiaran, Antonio Calleja-López, Arnau Monterde, and Carol Romero, **Decidim, a Technopolitical Network for Participatory Democracy: Philosophy, Practice and Autonomy of a Collective Platform in the Age of Digital Intelligence**, Berlin, Germany: Springer, 2024, 149 pp., \$49.99 (softcover).

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There are explanations aplenty for *why* things are the way they are: It is globalization, it is the network society, it is an ideology of transparency, it is the virtualization of work, it is the new flat earth, it is Empire. We are drowning in the *why*, both popularly and scholarly, but starving for the *how* (Kelty, 2008, p. X).

A couple of global democratic crises ago, this author formulated this introduction to the cultural significance of his historical and ethnographic research on Free Software. Understood as the composition of five practices—namely, creating a movement, sharing source code, conceiving open systems, writing copyright (and copyleft) licenses, and coordinating collaborations, Free Software could then be read as “an experimental system whose infrastructure is the Internet and whose ‘hypotheses’ concern the reorientation of knowledge and power” (Kelty, 2008, p. 15). The ascertainment that such a commons system was a pioneer in understanding the deep reach of the aforementioned reorientation made way for the emergence of “recursive publics,” who

respond to governance by directly engaging in, maintaining, and often modifying the infrastructure they seek, as a public, to inhabit and extend—and not only by offering opinions or protesting decisions, as conventional publics do (in most theories of the public sphere). (Kelty, 2008, pp. 9–10)

This assertion of the decisive materiality of political orders resonates with Hannah Arendt’s (1998) questioning of the classical preeminence of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*. Notwithstanding, it also challenges her lament about the modern reversal within the latter that eventually relegated *action*, “the political activity par excellence” (Arendt, 1998, p. 9), on behalf of *work* and *labor* (domains of the “hows”). Kelty (2019) noted that 50 years after the appearance of *The Human Condition*, one former student of Arendt’s, Richard Sennett, took up that challenge to make the case that we are in no blind spot for thinking and feeling as we engage in making a living or a world we can inhabit. More accurately, he substantiated that *matter matters*, drawing on Free Software as an exemplary case of “craftsmanship,” which encompassed not just skilled manual labor but also “serves the computer programmer, the doctor, and the artist; parenting improves when it is practiced as a skilled craft, as does



citizenship" (Sennett, 2008, p. 9). Best of all, persisting with the ancient Greek cult of Hephaestus (the master god of craftsmanship), Sennett (2008) proposed for craftsmen the ancient Greek word *demioergoi* (from *demios*, people, and *ergon*, work, literally "workers for the people").

Amid our current global democratic crisis, coupled with the rise of capitalism based on personal data extractivism, the appearance of ***Decidim, a Technopolitical Network for Participatory Democracy: Philosophy, Practice and Autonomy of a Collective Platform in the Age of Digital Intelligence*** by Xabier Barandiaran, Antonio Calleja-López, Arnau Monterde, and Carol Romero could not be timelier. Paraphrasing Kelty, one could suggest that the study of this free digital platform born in Barcelona in 2016 goes well beyond computing to address *the political significance of Free Software* as characterized above. Truthfully, this book inquires further into the reorientation of power and knowledge brought about by "the 2011 wave of networked movements of the squares" (pp. 13–14), the subsequent bottom-up responses to "governance," "government" and "governmentality" (pp. 40–41), the development of "a public-common model of infrastructure for democracy" (pp. 43–44), the writing of "a social contract" (pp. 69–70), and the coordination of citizen participation (and care) as skills improved with practice.

In this regard, the book offers a synthetic, well-informed and up-to-the-minute review of contemporary academic and public policy debates on those prominent issues. Combined with it, and halfway between a democratic manifesto and how-to manual, readers will find a detailed guide on the "political," "technopolitical," and "technical planes" (p. 7) that makeup Decidim as "*a public-common free and open, digital infrastructure for participatory democracy*" (p. 1; emphasis in original). If anything, I could note that some of its prolific theoretical references deserve a more careful elaboration (e.g., the juxtaposition of "digital capitalism," "platform capitalism," "informational and cognitive capitalism," "surveillance capitalism"), and that some of its challenging neologisms (e.g., "common government," "surwilling," and "subwilling" or "AI as commons and for commons") are left barely sketched.

Personally, however, the most inspiring contribution of this book lies elsewhere. First clue: Although sometimes neglected in book reviews, do not skip the About the Authors section (pp. XV–XVI). Even if it offers just a glimpse of the decade-long *vita activista* of some of them, it makes it quite clear that they have all been deeply involved in the founding and current maintenance of the Decidim project. Either as participants in the Spanish 15M movement and/or the subsequent municipalist initiatives that won the elections in many Spanish cities in 2015 (pp. 2–3) or as public officials committed to democratic innovation, they all ended up converging around the Barcelona City Council for Participation led by Gala Pin.

One way to summarize the singularity involved therein is arguing that the choral authorship of this book expresses accurately the process of nurturing the Decidim project, as authors "express ideas, but they also express *infrastructures* through which ideas can be expressed (and circulated) in new ways" (Kelty, 2008, p. 26). Unsurprising, then, that the community coordinating this whole recursive process is called "Metadecidim" (pp. 89–92). But we could as well celebrate the forgers of this document as contemporary *demioergoi*, whose *work for the people* enables them to "ask, 'Why?' as well as, 'How?' about any project" (Sennett, 2008, p. 11), and thus to craft a *white paper* of an innovative sort: one emerging from participants in the 15M squares movement who later became academic experts in its "technopolitic" dimension (Toret et

al., 2015) and now share a situated account of a municipalist experiment that has reached a wide international adoption (pp. 5–6).

If in our current global crisis of democracy we could often paraphrase the famous French politician Georges Clemenceau to ascertain that when one wants to bury a decision, one creates a digital participatory platform, all the previous nuances testify to Decidim's commitment to the human condition of action Arendt (1998) calls *natality*. Proposed as "the central category of political [. . .] thought" (Arendt, 1998, p. 9), natality's "character of startling unexpectedness" (Arendt, 1998, p. 178) can be seen both as immunization against the "*participatory washing*" denounced in the book (p. 125) and as a stimulus for analyses of "the deliberative quality" of Decidim (Borge, Balcells, & Padró-Solanet, 2019).

The same can be claimed of Decidim's commitment to *plurality*, the human condition that binds action to the *presence* of others, as explained by Arendt (1998): "the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do [. . .] is the price [. . .] for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all" (p. 244). Hence, to the *diminished reality* resulting from "Digital Reductionism, Click Participation and Digital Divides" (pp. 58–59) typical of the abovementioned participatory simulacra, the authors oppose the notion of "augmented event" (Toret et al., 2015, pp. 93–96) to highlight "the amplifying effect that digital technologies can have in connection with face-to-face encounters and events, the multilayered dynamics that can take place between local sites and hybrid media systems" (p. 74).

I am afraid, though, that the authors do a disservice to plurality and natality with their repeated acritical acknowledgement that the proprietary developer platform Microsoft GitHub is "where the code lives" (p. 97). Having achieved such excellence, one might expect that the "heirs to Hephaestus" (Sennett, 2008, p. 25) behind Decidim overlooked neither the debates on "the proper depth of recursion" (Kelty, 2008, p. 235) surrounding Linus Torvald's creation of git in 2005 nor the ongoing deployment of European Union General Data Protection Regulation-compliant Gitlab-based distributed Free Software forges (e.g., Framagit.org and LaForgeEdu<sup>1</sup>). Ultimately, in our current global crisis of democracy, one cannot overemphasize the multilayered dimension of participation in a recursive public such as Metadecidim: "The closer we get to a world in which every individual is his or her own private collective, the farther we get from the possibility of individuals living in and through others as instances of real collectives" (Kelty, 2019, p. 255).

## References

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://docs.forge.apps.education.fr/>

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