Is the Current Political Turmoil of the 'Information Age' Revolutionary?

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Is the Current Political Turmoil of the 'Information Age' Truly Revolutionary? A Brief Critique of the Conception of an Internet-Driven Revolution in Social Movements

In June 2011, only a few months after the beginning of the events of the so called Arab Spring, which brought unexpected political turmoil to countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East, Alec Ross, a senior adviser to the United States Secretary of State, gave a speech in which he addressed the importance of social media in facilitating and accelerating the mobilization for these popular uprisings. According to him, the new internet tools were devolving "power from the nation state […] to individuals and small institutions". For Ross, the new media is so important for the current political situation that the internet could be considered nothing less than the 'Che Guevara of the 21st century'.[1] This account of the revolutionary role that the new media can play in contemporary societies was not exclusive of U.S. government officials. Even before the Arab Spring, some of the most important international news

outlets were praising the use of social media by activists during protests in Moldova, in 2009, and Iran, in 2010. Headlines talking about Twitter Revolutions[2] or Facebook uprisings[3] became common in newspapers, websites and TV channels around the world.

This new phenomenon soon began to attract attention from academics. Countless scholars and analysts wrote about how the new means of communication are facilitating the mobilization and coordination of movements of political dissent. Clay Shirky, for example, discussed how the new 'more complex and more participatory' communication environment gives people not only 'greater access to information', but also 'more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action'.[4] According to Shirky, by enhancing the communication between citizens, social media gives to loose groups of people an ability to mobilise and 'coordinate action' that was 'exclusive' of organised parties and bureaucratic social movements a few decades ago.[5]

But maybe the most influential scholar who has addressed the 'revolutionary' role of the new media is the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells. Much more than tools to facilitate organisation and mobilisation, Castells sees social media as part of a tectonic transformation in society. By promoting the ability of single actors to communicate with many others without the mediation of states or corporations, in a process that he calls 'mass-self communication'[6], the internet was affecting the very relations of power and the way movements of dissent organise themselves. According to him, since mass self-communication – the communication from many to many – is based on 'horizontal networks'[7], it is promoting the emergence of horizontal social structures which are 'less hierarchical' and 'more participatory' than the vertical and bureaucratic structures of power that characterised most of the 20th century. As a consequence of this new 'Information Age'[8], he sees the emergence of a new 'Network Society'.[9]

For Castells and other authors, the development of movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish *Indignados,* and many others, are a strong indication of this new phenomenon. Showing no clear leadership, a 'rejection' for formal ways of organization, 'distrust' for traditional political parties, and relying on the 'internet and local assemblies for collective debate and decision-making',[10] these movements were able to mobilise millions around the world and win political battles. But, as dubious as the reputation of Che Guevara – a hero for some, an insurgent for others – these networked structures are being adopted not only by peaceful and democratic activists. Criminal groups and terrorist movements are also organised in 'transnational networks' which, in the case of Al-Qaeda and its various segments,

'comprise organised but independent groups which adopt the name, spirit and methodology […] and seek convergence, yet neither full integration […] nor unified command-and-control'.[11]

This new networked structure and the use of new communication technologies give to these movements an 'ability to project their ambitions over long distances'[12] that was not seen in previous insurgencies.

As we can see, for Castells and others, the new means of communication which characterise the so called 'Information Age' are bringing a revolution to the way social movements and insurgencies are organised. But despite the undeniable transformation brought to our society by these new tchnologies, a critical approach to these views is relevant. Although the term 'revolution' is a disputed one with many possible meanings, it can be argued that to classify a phenomenon as 'revolutionary' implies that it represents an unquestionable 'break from the past',[13] bringing consequences that are not just different from the previous situation, but also with no precedent in history.

In this essay, it will be argued that although the networked structures of these new social movements and new terrorism undoubtedly represent a shift from the hierarchical and centralised forms of the Maoist and Leninist models, they are not unprecedented. Over a hundred years before the Internet, anarchists and other movements showed similar forms of organisation. More than that, by using historical examples it will be argued that the new technologies cannot be even accounted as the most important factor which made the rapid spread of the Arab Spring possible. As Weyland argues, the so called Springtime of the Peoples, in 1848, showed similar patterns.[14] In the following pages, I will demonstrate that the view that we live in 'unprecedented' and 'exceptional' times – which Morozov calls 'epochalism'[15] – as well as the disregard for the ways insurgencies and social movements evolved along history can bring important limitations to our understanding of these phenomena. By overlooking the ways in which networks

were formed and how they behaved before the internet, we run the risk of 'overestimating the capacity' of this form of organisation and of forgetting its possible limitations.[16] More than that, by adopting an approach which sees the new technologies as determining the ways insurgencies and social movements are organised – a technological deterministic[17] approach – we can also miss the complexity of these very movements, failing to understand these phenomena and their multiple causes in a more comprehensive manner.

Networks

Before discussing these issues, it is important to understand why some authors such as Castells consider that the so-called 'Information Age' brought unprecedented changes to the ways insurgencies and social movements organize themselves. In order to do that, a brief overview about how movements of political dissent evolved in the last hundred years is necessary.

In the first decades of the 20th century, we saw the emergence of insurgent movements in many parts of the world which were characterised by a high degree of centralisation and discipline. Vladimir Lenin, maybe one of the most influential ideologues of this kind of organization, saw the hierarchy of the Communist party as a means to maintain the cohesiveness of the group in order to better confront the opposition from the government and reach the objective of a social revolution. The centralisation was a reaction to what he saw as the failures of trade-unionism, which he classified as the 'spontaneous working-class movement'.[18] In his words, only a 'centralized, militant organisation […] can safeguard the movement against thoughtless attacks and prepare it for attacks that hold out the promise of success'.[19] The triumph of the revolution in Russia in 1917 was followed decades later by the victory of the communists led by Mao Tse-tung in China. Adopting an hierarchical and centralized model similar to Lenin's,[20] Mao nonetheless adapted his insurgency to the geographical, demographical and economic situation of China. Mao developed what became known as the 'theory of people's war', which, as Mackinlay states, 'created a methodology for mobilizing a population on an industrial scale'.[21]

The triumphs of the revolutions in Russia and China inspired numerous insurgencies and social movements worldwide. They created a paradigm of political dissent according to which hierarchical and centralised organisations were viewed as crucial to achieve social revolution. However, in the second half of the 20th century, scholars started to diagnose a different pattern in social movements. As Luther Gerlach noticed in 1971, three of the most important movements of the 1960s in the U.S. – black power, environmental activism and the new-Pentecostal religious movement – were structured in a way that was completely different from the Leninist paradigm. Far from being composed by centralized parties or organizations these movements were segmentary, composed of a range of diverse groups, or cells, which were formally independent from each other. Despite the independence of these 'cells', in Gerlach's words, these movements did 'not constitute simply an amorphous collection' of groups, but a 'reticulated' or 'networked' structure in which the diverse groups communicated with each other, had overlapping members, shared 'common objectives' and took part in joint activities. More than that, these movements didn't have a centralized leadership, but were polycephalous, with 'many leaders […] not only within the movement as whole', but even 'within each movement cell'.[22]

Gerlach saw the segmentation and decentralization of these movements as a result, among with other factors, of ideologies which favoured the power of the individual, competition and ideological differences among the various groups[23]. According to him, the cohesion of these networks was provided by some common ideological beliefs and 'lines of kinship, friendship and other forms of close association' which were 'extended and facilitated by telephone and letter [and] [c]irculating newsletters'.[24] But if for Gerlach the form of organization of these social movements was not unprecedented – but similar to 'segmentary lineage systems found in many African, Middle Eastern and Asian tribal societies'[25]. For Castells, the advent of the internet was a crucial factor in the radicalisation of this process.

More than facilitating the communication within these networks and simplifying the process of mobilisation and decision-making in organisations with no formal hierarchies, Castells sees the internet as a causal factor in the emergence of networked structures in contemporary societies. According to him, the forms of communication that prevail in a given society 'conditions' the individuals' 'mental processes'. As a consequence, for him 'the

transformation of the communication environment directly affects the forms of meaning construction, and therefore the production of power relationships'. [26] As we saw above, Castells considers that there has been a fundamental transformation in the way we communicate nowadays: different from the hierarchical mass communication from 'one to many' provided by newspapers, radio and TV, the internet induced the emergence of 'mass-self communication', which is 'based on horizontal networks'.[27] It is this very transformation in communications that, in his own words, 'determine the organisational characteristic of the social movement', paving the way for 'less hierarchical' and 'more participatory' structures that represent a 'new species of social movements'.[28] As we can see for Castells, the horizontal structures currently displayed by insurgencies and social movements are not a consequence of ideological concepts or strategic decisions taken by actors or any other set of factors, but a direct result of the emergence of the internet.

Analyzing the recent uprisings in the Arab world, the Occupy movement and the *Indignados*, Castells finds some common characteristics of this 'new species of social movement'.[29] Just as the groups studied by Gerlach in the 1960s, Castells sees these movements as being networked, with no 'formal leadership, command and control centre'.[30] Additionally, he sees these movements as 'usually start[ing] on the internet' but being consolidated in the occupation of public spaces. For Castells, these movements are also 'local and global at the same time', meaning that they are 'connected throughout the world'. They are also 'spontaneous in their origin' and 'viral', implying that the 'demonstration effect of movements […] inspires mobilisation' in other parts of the world. Another important characteristic of these movements is a 'rejection of political representatives' and traditional structures of power. According to Castells, this means that the horizontal structures and lack of formal leadership is not only an 'organizational procedure', but also a 'political goal'.[31]

As we can see, for Castells, the internet is not only supporting a revolution in the way social movements and insurgencies are organized, but is also creating a whole brave new world. But this focus on the role of the new communication technologies in determining the ways movements of political dissent are organized has a fundamental problem: it ignores that social movements and insurgencies in the past showed similar characteristics.

Old New Insurgencies

Insurgencies and social movements, just as any other social phenomenon, are influenced by the relations of power and the economic, social and cultural characteristics of the societies in which they are inserted. As Mackinlay explains, the techniques and forms of organisation of these movements 'cannot have a rocklike permanence' and are always evolving 'in order to reflect the nature and the development of the population which seeks to use them'.[32] For this reason, we have to understand the movements of political dissent as historical processes, where actors are always adapting themselves to the conditions of their societies, but, at the same time, are taking decisions and trying to learn from the successes and failures of previous processes. Insurgencies, thus, have always multiple causes and multiple forms.

One of the most important advantages of adopting a historical approach to analyze these movements is that it allows us to understand the field of social movements and insurgencies not as an unified one, but as a diverse phenomena where multiple groups with a 'plurality of […] forms, content, social bases, and meaning to participants' coexist.[33] Although the hierarchical and centralized forms of organization became a paradigm for insurgencies and most of the labour movement in the 20th century, these groups coexisted with a number of others which adopted very different forms of organization. The working class movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, was far from unitary. In Calhoun's words, it was actually 'multidimensional and only provisionally and partially unified', being composed of groups with diversified ideologies, different ideas about organization and agendas which ranged from the conditions of work of women and children to access to public services.[34] Even networked movements were already present at the time. Actually, as Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones argue, throughout history 'opposition to the state has often taken a networked approach', as exemplified by the movements of resistance to the Ottoman Empire in 19th century Greece and the 'loosely organized, dispersed resistance' of the Muslim Brotherhood to the Egyptian state. According to them, 'informal, loosely structured networks of religion and political activism' have actually a 'long history' in the Middle East.[35] As we can see, networked social movements are far from being a new phenomenon, predating the Internet by centuries.

Moreover, the similarities between the so called 'new social movements' of the 'Information Age' and movements which took place in Europe and the United States during the 19th century are striking, which raises questions about the actual relevance of new technologies in determining the kind of organisation adopted by the contemporary movements. As Calhoun remembers, among many of the 19th century groups of utopian socialists and communitarians, for example, there was strong 'rejection of conventional politics' and 'deep convictions against organizing for the pursuit of political power'.[36] In many cases, this 'anti-hierarchical ideology' made 'direct democracy' – or horizontal organization, we could say – a 'regulative norm' for them, just as it happened with the Occupy movement or the Spanish *Indignados*.[37] Besides that, many of these movements at times combined with each other, and 'movement activists were joined into networks that crisscrossed specific movements'.[38] Interestingly, these movements also formed international networks, with participants in different countries being linked 'not only by communications, but by a pattern of migration in which people […] moved from one country to another without leaving their movements'.[39]

Not only 'peaceful' groups of the 19th century adopted networked structures similar to the ones we see today, though. Alike the global Jihad – which is not formed by a 'specific organisation', but by a set of more or less formal organizations' which range from 'fairly centralized' to 'decentralized' groups that sometimes cooperate with each other, [40] anarchists adopted loosely and non-hierarchical structures to carry out campaigns of bombings and assassinations which 'appeared' to be 'global' to their contemporaries.[41] This form of organization was a direct consequence of the anarchist ideology, which – as the name suggests – rejects any kind of hierarchy. This radical horizontalism made anarchists even more loosely organized than islamist networks such as Al-Qaeda: there is no historical indication of 'terrorist training camps or central command posts' among anarchists, for example.[42] As Jensen states, most of the anarchist attacks 'were due to spontaneous individual actions, sometimes with the help of a few friends',[43] in a truly horizontal way of organization which promoted self-generated actions, as we can see. Yet, this did not prevent anarchists to manage the perpetration of significant coordinated attacks, such as the 1905 assault against the Spanish king Alfonso XIII in Paris – which was probably 'the product of an elaborated international plot originating in Spain' according to Jensen – or the failed the attempt to detonate thirty bombs that were mailed to a number of American officials in 1919.[44]

The communication of ideas and deeds today is certainly easier and faster than in the past. People from all over the world can communicate instantly to each other and events happening in any part of the world can be followed in 'real-time' by virtually any user. This is an important component of the 'virality' which, according to Castells, characterizes new social movements. But even this aspect is not completely new. Long before the Internet or the telephone, news about uprisings and revolutions could reach distant places with an impressive speed, inspiring activists and paving the way for new revolts. Maybe the best example of this happened in 1848, during the so called Springtime of the Peoples. The 'wave' of revolutions in 1848 started with the overthrow of the French king Louis Philippe, in February 24th. Within only three days, the revolution reached Mannheim, quickly spreading to other German cities and reaching Vienna, Berlin and, on March 20, Copenhagen.[45] The wave of uprisings also fuelled new revolts in Italy[46] and even inspired revolutionaries in Brazil (in April) and in other parts of Latin America.[47] In a time when the telegraph networks in Europe were still restricted[48], trains and ships were crucial to the rapid spread of the news about the revolution[49]. The news inspired activists to try to 'emulate'[50] the triumph of the French revolutionaries in their own countries, in a similar processes to what happened after the deposition of Ben Ali in Tunisia in 2011.[51] Just like the Arab Spring, the wave of protests in 1848 was largely 'leaderless, amorphous, and fluid'.[52] But also likely to what happened to the revolutions in the Arab world, the 1848 uprisings largely achieved a 'low rate of successful advances toward liberalism and democracy'.[53]

Almighty Networks?

This 'low rate' of effective success of both the Springtime of the Peoples and the Arab Spring illustrates some of the limitations of the networked form of organisation which currently characterizes many social movements and insurgencies. These limitations, though, are occasionally overlooked by the current literature. In 1971 Gerlach wrote about what he called an ideological 'bias against segmented structures' by academics and even activists[54], nowadays – as Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones state – there is 'a near consensus […] about the superiority of networks to other social organizations'.[55] The most commonly cited advantages of networked movements is that

horizontal structures allegedly facilitate efficient communication and information processing, have 'scalability', or capacity to easily grow and recruit new members, are capable to adapt easier to new situations and environments, are more resilient to external attacks, and have a superior capacity to learn and innovate'.[56] A historical perspective on insurgencies and mass movements, though, raises a number of questions about the actual extent of some of these advantages and sheds light to other limitations.

In the case of the Springtime of the Peoples, Weyland suggests that the ways revolutionaries processed information were crucial to the defeat of the movements, in a similar process to what happened during the Arab Spring. Since these movements did not have formal leaderships or hierarchies, the decisions to emulate the French movement in 1848 were taken by 'ordinary people in their families and small informal networks'[57]. The lack of political experience of these activists and the precarious information to which they had access[58] triggered a process that Weyland calls 'bounded rationality'[59], by which activists were led to process information in a way in which some 'drastic' events were 'disproportionate[ly]' taken into account, while other relevant information was disregarded. More than that, this led people to 'overrate the similarities' between their contexts and the one of the previous (and successful) uprising[60]. Thinking that a victory could also be reached in their countries, activists rushed 'into action without seriously evaluating opportunities and risks'[61]. After a few victories of the quarante-huitards, though, the old order was restored in virtually all countries within months. What is interesting here is the political mistakes committed by the activists are possibly related to the very networked structure they adopted. As Weyland suggests, the process of bounded rationality is more likely to happen in networked structures than in hierarchical organisations, where experienced leaders can make decisions which are probably more 'attuned to the prevailing power constellation and [which] t[ake] advantage of political openings'.[62]

In addition, the examples of the Springtime of the Peoples and the Arab Spring also demonstrate that networks are not always superior in their capacity to innovate and adapt to new contexts. Although the rapid mobilisation of multitudes in both processes was striking, sudden changes – such as early defeats or even early victories – may quickly demobilise this kind of movement. Since the ties between the activists are weaker,[63] fear or even widespread satisfaction with an early victory can compromise the movement as whole. As Weyland states, these organisations can face difficulties to maintain 'collective pressure over time and pursue a cumulative strategy of gradual reform'.[64]

In the case of smaller clandestine networks, such as the ones formed by criminals and insurgents, the problem can be the opposite. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones demonstrate how in some cases the lack of formal hierarchies can turn strong personal ties 'based on kinship and previous bonding experience' very important. These strong bonds among members can actually makes changes such as 'physical movement and relocation' more difficult than in more bureaucratic organisations.[65] But networks also suffer with other crucial limitations. The lack of formal command-and-control structures can make the achievement of objectives which requires complex coordination and obedience to established plans – as with most insurgent activities – more difficult.[66] Additionally, this kind of structure increases the 'likelihood that an ill-judged action will undermine the entire network'.[67] But more than that, the horizontal structure may make these organizations more susceptible to internal conflicts than their more hierarchical counterparts, as exemplified by the turbulent history of internal divisions of the PLO, for instance.[68]

This does not mean, however, that networked organizations – triggered or not by the internet – are in any way inferior to hierarchical ones. Just as any other form of organisation or technique of dissent, they can be suitable for some political and historical contexts and to achieve some kinds of objectives, while not for others. Many social movements and insurgencies adopted in their early years a networked form and later derived to a more centralized one, such as the Basque group ETA, for example[69]. Others, like Al-Qaeda, had a hierarchical structure which lately was transformed into a more horizontal one.[70] In any case, if insurgents of any kind wish to survive politically and militarily, they must be constantly ready to adapt and change. What is important for us as researchers is to always bear in mind that no organizational structure or communication technology can offer a 'magical solution' to the challenges faced by these movements.

Conclusion

It was not the intention of this paper to trivialize the impact of the new technologies of communication on insurgencies and other social movements. By showing that movements in the past displayed similar structures and behaviours, the intention was to highlight the limitations of explanations which rely solely on the power of new technologies to address the current political scenario. These techno-deterministic explanations have a number of limitations and prevent us from understanding the phenomenon of political dissent in all its complexity, disregarding, for example, important disadvantages of networked structures. Insurgencies are an ever-evolving phenomena, and the view that we live in a time with no parallels in history does not help us to predict whether the current political situation will evolve to a truly revolutionary scenario or if it will lead to the re-emergence of previous patterns of organisation.

But besides being academically problematic, these accounts can also have another dangerous consequence: the views that we are witnessing the emergence of an unprecedented kind of political dissent can lead policymakers to advocate unprecedented ways to combat them. This view is reflected in the perspective that 'it takes a network to fight a network', which is increasingly widespread among security forces and scholars.[71] In my view, such ideas can pave the way for methods of counter-insurgency which disregard accountability and the rule of law, leading to violations of human rights and democratic principles which will certainly produce more grievance and political dissent.

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