

Network movements and the new 'social atmosphere'

At the crossroads - Europe's social movements respond

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New forms of social mobilisation by networked movements have created a new "social atmosphere" that is already having an irreversible impact on other more traditional social and political actors and their practices.

This is the first piece of a new TNI series of articles: At the crossroads - Europe's social movements respond.

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"We are the social network." This slogan adorned a huge banner on the demonstration in Rio de Janeiro on 17 June 2013 [1]. The banner from that #17J, the day when the *Passe Livre* (free fares) protests became a rebellion, explains more about the new paradigms of collective mobilisation than many doctoral theses.

Of the twenty people or so who held the banner, none had political party, union or political organisations' flags. A few days after the "We are the social network" demonstration, some organisations of the traditional left tried to join the protests with their usual methods: closed identities (symbolic colours, banners), unity structures (blocs), hierarchies (leaders, spokespeople) and identifiable political messages. They were trying to be part of the crowd that was taking to the streets of the main cities of Brazil, and also reacting to the advance of conservative groups that were trying to take the leadership of the protests against the government of Dilma Rousseff. The 'crash' between traditional organisations and the multitude reached its peak on 21 June at Paulista Avenue, the main street in São Paulo. The demonstration moved towards Brigadeiro subway station. On the left side, heterogeneous protesters (skaters, LGBT groups, Anonymous mask-wearers, families) walked in a dispersed way, without party symbols. On the right side, organisations and leftist movements occupied the street, marching in a bloc and waving flags.

The protesters on the right side of the avenue would fit quite well with the definition of 'social movement' proposed by Lorenz von Stein in 1846: "An aspiration by social sectors (classes) to achieve influence over the State, due to inequalities in the economy."

But how could we define the people on the left side of Paulista Avenue, or the people who held the

“We are the social network” banner in Rio? Would the concept of the ‘multitude’, used by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, suffice? How about the definition of ‘swarm’, a biology concept recycled by Kevin Kelly to explain collective behaviour in the era of networks? Do the formats and methods of social movements remain useful? Or do we need new paradigms and/or terms?

Multiple belonging versus militancy

Social movements are still alive. However, they don’t seem to explain the explosion of revolts that have been shaking the world since the Arab Spring. It is an open secret that movements and mass organisations are not leading or convening the planetary wave of protests. But the identity-based movements that flourished in May 1968 (environmentalist, feminist and anti-military, to name a few) and the more recent anti-globalisation movements do not have a clear leading role either. Interconnected occupations and revolts in recent years more resemble the concept of a ‘network’ than that of a ‘movement’. Even the much-used term ‘community’ does not explain the initial explosions of phenomena such as the 15M/Indignados in Spain, the Mexican #YoSoy132 or the Turkish #DirenGezi.

The urbanist Domenico di Siena [2] establishes clear differences between a ‘network’ and a ‘community’. The network is “a social structure made up of groups of people who are connected by one or several types of relationships” and who share “knowledge or common interests”. A network tends to work horizontally, “is based on information and membership is flexible”. The community, according to di Siena, is woven by “feelings of belonging and often works with a certain hierarchy”. In a network there is “more freedom”. Networks can generate communities. The interaction of communities can create new networks. Both terms build feedback flows and are not exclusive.

But there is a point where the differences between networks and communities and classic movements sharpen: the type of belonging. Networks are ruled by the concept of ‘multiple belonging’ used by researcher Mayo Fuster. These are liquid, specific, and multiple belongings. “One can be there without being there always,” as the Dispersed Committee [3] of Barcelona puts it. A person can belong emotionally to a network without participating in traditional militancy. One node can be part of many networks. And open networks with multiple links and weak social relationships are more likely to introduce new ideas than communities or movements with many ‘inbred’ ties. The network study based on the Twitter hashtag #ProtestoRJ, used during the wave of demonstrations in Rio de Janeiro, seems to confirm that weak network nodes can lead a revolt over a specific period of time [4].

Network systems

The puzzle seems more complex than ever. It is not only complex – the sum of its parts seem to create a shape that exceeds its own boundaries. These are pieces that fit into other organisms, into other puzzles. Multiple belongings, collective identities spilling over the edge of traditional collective formats, cross-relationships that blur affective communities, movements that no longer identify as ‘left’ or ‘popular’, actions defined as ‘tactics’ rather than as ‘movements’ (like the Black Bloc that has re-emerged in the streets of Brazil), events (such as the ‘March of the Whores’ in Quito) that define themselves as a ‘space’. What is happening in the global social ecosystem? While Clay Shirky [5] spoke years ago about “organising without organisations”, Adrià Rodríguez, researcher at the Global Revolution Research Network (GRRN) of the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), uses the concept of a ‘network system’: “A network system is a complex network with multiple nodes which are organically linked in a form of constant change.” The phenomenon of ‘emergence’, popularised

by Steven Johnson and characteristic of complex systems, helps to understand the social processes of network systems. Emergence is the process driving a system that is not reducible to the properties of its constituent parts.

Network systems, in the words of Brazilian researcher Rodrigo Nunes, are along those lines: “Network systems are not a mere aggregate of individuals; they are internally differentiated, with more dispersed areas and more dense, more organic and more organised nodes. The network system can host everything: traditional movements, parties, unions, small collectives, informal networks of friends, and individuals.” However, the theory of network systems might be insufficient. Couldn’t the US Tea Party, Al-Qaeda or the elites who use tax havens to plunder the planet be defined as network systems?

On the one hand, the concept of ‘techno-politics’ complements the concept of a ‘network system’. A techno-political network system, then, would be a set of citizen nodes that reappropriate technology to reshape political participation and mobilisation methods. On the other hand, speaking about ‘network movements’ represents a quantum leap. Adrià Rodríguez’s definition is one of the most inspiring: “Network movements go beyond the sociological category of social movements. They are articulated through the network, and they reach and involve a much greater number of nodes than traditional social movements.” Arnau Monty, another researcher at the GRRN, emphasises the importance of practice over ideology: “The forms of cooperation of network movements no longer rely on big unitary ideological dogmas, but on connecting practices.” And what is it that defines the ‘network movement’ mentioned by Arnau Monty? What makes it different from the ‘network system’? Permanence over time, among other things, would justify the conceptual leap.

However, several studies by the 15MDataAnalysis group [6] show an important detail: network movements are changing and hybrid. In addition, there is a pattern that keeps repeating over time in techno-political network systems: the temporal distribution of leadership. Some nodes lead during a specific period of time, a certain action or campaign. They later give way to other nodes. And even later, after a latency period, they re-emerge, re-connected and multiplied. When many thought the Spanish #15M was dead, its network system was vital to the virality of the struggle in Gamonal, a working class neighbourhood in the city of Burgos that was fighting a road construction project. The case of Spanish Citizen Tides (las mareas ciudadanas), one of the most relevant transformations in the 15M-Indignados process, is especially interesting. The organisation of the Tides - where unions and political parties have failed to impose their methods - represents a radical change in collective organisation. The Tide phenomenon could be defined as a networked post-trade unionism, or as a collective self-organisation oriented towards the commons. For example, the White Tide, which has just blocked the privatisation of public health in the Madrid region, erases the boundaries between doctor and patient. With its aggregating architecture of participation, it transforms health into a commons. The collective action converging in the Tides network movement unconsciously preserves its shape, maintaining the life of the common social body.

Atmospheric rhizome

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari used the concept of ‘rhizome’ - a type of root that can grow and multiply in unexpected directions - to describe the kind of grass-roots and non-hierarchical organisation found in social movements. However, the era of interconnected revolts, beyond rhizomes and organisational undergrounds, has more aerial traits. It is a landscape of floating roots and branches, like the one imagined by architects Rahul Srivastava and Matías Echanove in their Airoots studio in Mumbai [7]. A lush landscape creates something similar to the air we breathe. Philosopher Amador Fernández-Savater refers to the 15M-Indignados as a new “social climate” [8].

In this metaphor there is an 'atmosphere' - not only 'air', but other properties analogous to temperature, humidity and so on - that lubricates social relationships.

That is why network movements are more than a transformation of social movements or network systems. Network movements are a new ubiquitous social atmosphere. They are a global atmosphere that imbues, like it or not, collectives, social movements, networks, political parties and trade unions. Those who do not adapt will have trouble surviving in this new, more inclusive, explosive and unpredictable social atmosphere.

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Notes

- 1 <http://pt.globalvoicesonline.org/2013/06/20/protestos-brasil-internet-de...>
- 2 <http://urbanohumano.org/p2purbanism/urbanismo-emergente-ciudadania-y-esf...>
- 3 <http://comitedisperso.wordpress.com/about/>
- 4 <http://medialabufrij.wordpress.com/2013/08/05/protestorj-atores-menores-f...>
- 5 http://books.google.com.br/books/about/Here_Comes_Everybody.html?id=mafZ...
- 6 <http://datanalysis15m.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/tecnopolitica-15m-resu...>
- 7 <http://www.airoots.org/>
- 8 <http://blogs.publico.es/fueradelugar/1438/%C2%BFcomo-se-organiza-un-clima>

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