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Imagined Networks.

Media and the Organisation Metaphors of Collective Actions

The medium, the movement itself
as a new medium, is the message.

(Melucci 1985, 801)

- Look I'm trying to find the virtue of a leaderless movement where everyone's voices are heard.
- That isn't the point. We want everyone to look at Occupy Wall Street and ask themselves the question, 'Why is this happening?' I think that's been taken care of.
- But what happens after people ask themselves that?

The Newsroom, Season 2, episode 4.

Introduction

National Precarious Researchers Network, Solidarity Purchasing Groups Networks, Rainbow Parents Network, High School Students Network, Suspended Coffee Network, Network of Knowledge, Lilliput Network, Lenford Network, Solidarity Economy Network.

Networks: many civil society organizations and social movements define themselves using this term. Most of them have a website and, today, use social network pages or profiles. Often the network metaphor looks like a perfect analogy for the thick net of relationships the movement is made of, rather than the indication of a 'reticular community' based on the use of the web and of digital media. We aim here to investigate a): the reason why these collective mobilizations choose to define themselves through this metaphor and b): their relationship with the use of media tools.

Studies on 'Social Movements' have long focused on the role played

by communication technologies in identity construction and on the role of collective action coordination to increase creativity and collective proactive capacity (Tilly, 1978; Bimber, Flanagan, and Stohl, 2005; della Porta, 2009; McCaughey and Ayers, 2013; Tilly and Wood, 2013; Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015). The purposes and self-definition of the organization of a social movement are crucial in defining its structure and its identity building process (Hunt and Benford, 2008; Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Diani, 2013). Organisational studies have also focused their attention on the metaphors used to image and describe a structure or community and its identity (Koch and Deetz, 1981; Grant and Osrick, 1996; Morgan, 1998).

Network as an organisational image

The word network, as a noun and as a definition, is both ‘a metaphor’ to define the organization and ‘a proposal’; the vision of what it aspires to represent. The network metaphor looks like the perfect analogy for the structure of the movement, its organization, and more significantly the way in which different people unravel their subjective experience of being part of a social movement. All movements work as a web. To put it better, they can be defined as social networks, and studied as «complex and highly heterogeneous network structures» (Diani, 2003: 1). The pioneering work by Mario Diani attests to the effectiveness of analysing the form and density of networks and connections a social movement is shaped by (Diani, 1995; Diani and McAdam, 2003). The network metaphor and the use of social network analysis tools have long since been used in the study of social movements and contentions protests.

However, the hypothesis we suggest here is different. Something changes radically when the movement itself defines the network as «the image of their communion» (Anderson, 2006: 6). It tries to function as network. To take the shape of ‘that’ web. These organisational forms seem to emerge similarly both from «new social movements» born in the Seventies and Eighties of the twentieth century: they had a segmentary, polycentric and networked structured described by Gerlach and Hine (1970) at that time. This frame seems to impose itself also recently, even more compellingly, when information and communication technologies have allowed to reproduce faithfully such technological

connectivity, while also offering an apt metaphor to describe them. However, this organizational model was not exempt from criticism, since it is inappropriate for ensuring efficacy and efficiency in collective action (Melucci, 1989). Today the definition of network appears to magically sort out all risks and idiosyncrasies towards top-down and institutionalised organisational forms. This vocation emerged strongly in the media-policy framework, and subsequently in scientific debates since the ‘rise’ of the Seattle Global Justice Movement in November 1999 (della Porta, 2009). Its «Lilliputian strategy» – as imagined by Brecher and Costello – will inspire one of the founding organizations of the Genoa Social Forum born in Italy in 2001, the Rete di Lilliput (Saroldi, 2003; Castagnola, 2004):

«Just as the corporate strategy creates worldwide production networks linking separate companies, the Lilliput Strategy envisions strong local grassroots organizations that embed themselves in a network of mutual aid and strategic alliances with similar movements around the globe». (Brecher and Costello, 1995: 106)

Around this specular opposition is an emphasis on the ‘networking’ structure: on the one hand, the network appears to be the best tool for dealing with a contender functioning as a web, on the other the reticular configuration corresponds to the use of the web and digital technologies as organisational infrastructure. It is thus on one side coherent with the *Zeitgeist*, the best way to oppose, an isomorphic form of the institutions of the network society. We can also see the categories ‘chosen’ by these movements as ‘endured’ properties. The network image is the modern myth to institutionalize organisations, hence the movements organisations. Organising a movement as a network today still appears to be the most rational and effective way to achieve a collective action (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Selznick, 1996; Powell and DiMaggio, 2012). Since the paramount definition by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) where the ‘Seattle movement’ was defined, scholars have used it to define this new form of collective action particular to Net-Activism:

«Connective action networks are typically far more individualised and technologically organised sets of processes that result in action without the requirement for collective identity framing or the levels of organisational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities». (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 751)

Reference here is combined indissolubly with the image of a network portrayed by information technologies. In one of its founding documents *Una vita da rete* (document 5) the Rete di Lilliput is described as follows:

«We conceive the network both as a common frame beyond which various forces and knots can find an interest in acting together towards single topics and as the use of the *Internet as the privileged tool* to build up alliances». (Bologna & Rete di Lilliput, 2001: 61 our emphasis)

The shape-network¹ is something that allows to simultaneously weld and differentiate, to «*recombine* social fragmentation showing the various actors involved a common escape route», combined with the awareness that «today, we have no more opportunities of rigid and monochromatic gatherings». The representation is that of a construction made by leave gaps and weak ties (della Porta *et al.*, 2006). Such a trend has also designed contemporary forms of mobilisation which are more and more rooted in digital networks. In these terms the metaphor of the web appears fully consistent with «the new social morphology of our societies» (Castells, 2011: 500). If on the one hand social movements tend to use narratives and organisation forms such as the «networking logic» of new processes of production, experience, power, and culture, on the other hand highlight the strength particular to such logic, building up isomorphic opposition towards the powers of the network society.

It is not fortuitous that Manuel Castells himself, probably the most acute analyst of the passage to the Network Society, also became the storyteller of contemporary «networked social movements» (Castells, 2013). Leaderless and decentralized, diverse and digital, movements, without precise strategies and objectives, where preserving debate and rallies appear to be an aim *per se*. Where «the process is the message». Just as in the media of the network society.

¹ Seemingly, in the following years (2002-2007) the Networks and Districts of Solidarity Economy and the 'RES board' coordinating the existing local networks were created. The «Charter for the Italian Solidarity Economy Network (RES)» so defines the «Network strategy»: «to strengthen and expand the realm of the solidarity economy we are experimenting in different places the network strategy consisting of the construction of circuits where goods, services and information made in solidarity circulate and thus create space for a different economy» (p. 2).

Media as organisational technologies

It should thus by now be clear that every movement has its own defining technology (McLuha, 1964; Bolter, 1984), while each medium shapes the organisational forms of movements and social actors. The organisational model of social movements referred to a precise organisational metaphor and to a specific medium. When the movement, before 1977, worked as a political party, its own communication structure was the newspaper; its voice. The party had 'one' positioning and 'one' policy. It was easily recognisable and shared so that it could be «technically reproduced» uniformly and repeatedly for its militants and leaders. Party newspapers were that voice. The structure appeared similar, the secretary of the party, his leading team, paired with the newspaper editor in chief, whose task was to collect the rumors and news from the peripheries and masses to choose and to sum up, to synthesize. Similarly to press capitalism, press information constructed the identification with the party newspaper as effect of similar views, as identification and belonging (Downing, 2001; Pasquali and Sorice, 2005). As in the case of the rise of nationalism according to Benedict Anderson's analysis, the newspaper created «an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers» (2006: 64). Seemingly, in recent times to subscribe to a mailing list or a Facebook group, despite not representing the affiliation to a party or to an association, allows one to enter a fellow-reader's community, that (at least apparently) will share the same information, and will know the same things. The transitory and 'light' feature of these networks and movements should not surprise us, since they are built on tools which can be easily dispersed through space and grow temporarily and almost instantly borders and news, creating an also temporary and instant belonging. Rooted in the same tool of latest news, of journalism, or 'live' news, its working mechanisms remains similar to that introduced by Harold Innis in his analysis of the history of the media (1950): it is a medium emphasising the 'space' – «the immediacy of the transmission from remote and the control of the territory» – against media emphasising time, continuity and cultural steadiness (Miconi, 2001: 41). The newspaper-party, like the web-network allows the construction of organizations throughout the national (and international) territory in a cheap and instant manner (Earl and Kimport, 2011), but this same focus on the space dimension hardly allows to be consolidated through

time via this medium exclusively so as to generate steady and ‘heavy’ identities.

The network is an organisation more explicitly based as an ‘oral space’ of co-existence and community, built on praxes and narratives and not on rules, positions or belongings which, as Czarniawska (1997) recalls, are rooted in their repetition. To some extent, motivation and boundaries are reconstructed every day, and their being together is built on conversation and connectedness. To operate, the network must constantly talk, account and share information. The newspaper constructs a univocal message, which once defined and constructed spreads itself as it is. The network is conversely rooted in the hope that «more people join and help reshape the message» (Jenkins, 2011; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). The former publishes a headline; the latter a hashtag. It is so true that hashtag features the way in which new social movements define and act.

Each #movement thus becomes a network. Social network sites can then become its organizational form and its means of expression. The purpose is no longer to achieve a specific goal, rather instead «Refusing to anchor a singular meaning» but willing to «keep[s] the conversations alive», to «provoke discussion» (Jenkins, 2011). To keep the net on line.

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