The Lessons of 2011: three theses on organisation
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It is over one month late, but here are some developing notes on the year just gone by. They are lessons on organisation; but rather than try to fit new events into old theories (or vice-versa), they attempt to reflect on the actual practices that produced the many uprisings and mobilisations of the last year – in the spirit of Negri's *dictum* on Lenin, that 'organisation is spontaneity reflecting on itself'. Their main goal is to think beyond regular media representations of the movements that spread across the world in 2011, which tend at once to overvalue the role of social media (so that they appear as driven exclusively by 'spontaneous' one-to-one networking) and to reduce them to their visible side (the camps, the assemblies).

They are written by someone who, having spent most of 2011 in Brazil, did not have the luck of having first-hand experience of any such movements; as such, they rely on texts and discussions with friends who had such experience as both participants and organisers. It is up to the reader to decide whether distance, in this case, has its advantages. While they have been brewing for some time, one recent fact that played an important part in bringing them together were my conversations with my friend Javier Toret, twitterer for Democracia Real Ya; some of these were recorded in the form of an interview and can be watched (in Spanish) [here](#).

1 – It is possible to have a mass movement without mass organisations

This lesson, as quite a few others, is not entirely new; it is something that has been known since 1968 at least, or since the late 1990s if we are to eschew the classical references and stick to more recent history. It is nonetheless worth repeating. It is also worth phrasing in this way, since what sometimes gets lost in the fog of war is the fact that, instead of being a complete rewriting of history, the questions thrown up by present developments can be translated into the language of more traditional debates in a way that is illuminating.

What matters is not only the extent to which mass organisations (parties, unions – with the notable exception of the strikes in Egypt, and local support by unions in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia) were seen as 'part of the problem', or simply not invited; but also the extent to which they were questioned *as mass organisations*. In the face of a large, heterogeneous, developing, *live* movement, their capacity to mobilise seemed limited by comparison – and the *quality* of their representation of said mass seemed too stale, too inflexible, too slow, too much of a *representation* to matter.

To say this, of course, does not tell us anything about the staying power of these movements – whether a choice not to form mass organisations will not entail a progressive loss of momentum –, nor does it say anything about whether mass organisations as such are an outdated proposition. It says something about the state of *existing* mass organisations, and the potentials that reside in the encounter between widespread discontent and technological tools that allow for mass, multipolar communication outside the mass media.

It also says something about the crisis of representation, and how it will be a long time until it is solved. Some were quick to point out the 'failure' of movements in Tunisia, Egypt and Spain, in the sense that the forces that eventually came to power were not much better than the ones that were removed from it. This is misguided to the extent that it fails to recognise that these movements are clearly playing a much longer game than can be measured by electoral cycles. Nowhere is this clearer than in the issue of the critique of representation itself: at the moment, these movements are exercising in regard to political representation what Colectivo Situaciones

have called *poder destituyente*, de-instituent power. They do so while also exercising a constituent power whose future and direction is as yet impossible to predict. It may result in new political forms, new mechanisms of representation, new institutions or, at the very least, new organisations; it may result in all of those at once. But right now, their main function seems to be that of flushing the system – and not only is this not established over night, enhancing contradictions in the short term (Spain now has a government elected by 30% of the population, while polls indicate that around 70% agree with the *indignados*, who the new government seem to be in a collision course with) may just be an effective way of doing that in the longer run.

2 – Organisation has not disappeared; it has changed

Again the paradox: a lot of the debate of 2011 took place as if the alterglobalisation moment had never happened. This became obvious when it came to discussions on organisation. One particularly interesting instance was the dispute between Laurie Penny and Alex Callinicos in *The Guardian*; while the former might be too young to remember this debate the first time round, it is easy to imagine the latter might have made the exact same case (maybe even in the exact same newspaper) ten years ago.

There is a double irony in the alterglobalisation moment's invisibilisation. On the one hand, that it marked the first attempt to elaborate the transformations to organisational practice brought about by the development in communication technology and above all the advent of the internet. On the other, that it already manifested the same *tabula rasa*, new dawn attitude that some adopt today: new technological conditions have changed the way we organise forever, it is all about connected individuals now, there is no more place for the hierarchies associated with more traditional forms of organisation, which now belonged to the past. (Herein lies, of course, a third irony: that, as has often been the case with the 'modern' attitude of announcing the present as a total break with the past, it appears retrospectively as an anticipation of something that was then yet to come: for the 'new technological conditions' of ten years ago – mostly mailing lists, camera-less phones and Indymedia – pale in comparison to the web 2.0 and the spread of the access to the means of production of information that we see today).

The problem is that different things seem to get mixed up in the discussion. Kinds of activism characteristic of older forms of organisation (and hence more traditional, top-down, hierarchical) – such as 'factory floor' or 'door-to-door' organising; generally things that require a greater degree of organisational consistency from those doing it – are lumped with the organisational form itself. As a consequence, the argument flits from claiming that *some organisational forms have lost their reason for being* to *some forms of activism have become superfluous.*

This slippage was lent some credence by the thesis concerning the 'tendential hegemony' of immaterial labour in the contemporary composition of labour – if all labour *tends* to resemble more and more the networked, immaterial production of forms of life, 'political composition' would equally *tend* in the same direction. Elsewhere I have tried to explore the different possible meaning of both 'tendency' and 'hegemony' in this formulation, with some sceptical results. Whatever one makes of that thesis, however, it is important to bear in mind a distinction between 'weak' and 'strong ties', much of which was made by an article by Malcolm Gladwell that made some impact in late 2010: social media are fabulous tools when it comes to spreading information and fostering low-involvement forms of action ('share', 'like', 'retweet', 'donate'); they are not, left to their own devices, as good when it comes to developing dependable relations, commitment, and what it sometimes takes to really get an action or campaign off the ground. Nowhere is this more evident than in the usual discrepancy between the amount of people who say they will attend a Facebook event, and those who actually do: expressing an

intention to attend is, in social media etiquette, equivalent to manifesting support; it does not signal any actual commitment.

One of that text's strongest conclusions was that 'Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice'. In other words, social media are an excellent medium for 'weak-tie' activism, but the development of strong ties requires greater organisational consistency than 'clicktivism'; one's number of followers on Twitter is not equivalent to the amount of people one can turn out to a demo or action.

The fact that the year 2011 would seem to some extent to have contradicted this conclusion does not, I think, detract from the main point conveyed by the weak/strong tie distinction, but only highlights one possibility that Gladwell seems to have underestimated: that, under certain special conditions, the quantity of connections enabled by social media can indeed produce the quality of stronger ones – and that this could be generally construed as a marginal effect of weak ties that grows in special occasions).

The way the media presents things is, as usual, not helpful. Judging from much that was written in 2011, one would think that all that happened was either produced by a sole individual (the 'leader' of this or that movement; Stéphane Hessel's pamphlet, *Indignez-vous…*) or the result of someone creating an event on Facebook and thousands of people turning up on the date. Both amount to the same thing, to the extent that it is always as if an isolated initiative taking place where there was nothing before snowballs into epic consequences.

But it was evidently neither. Even the one instance that seems the closest to the 'spontaneous uprising' narrative, Tunisia, can arguably be described as starting with strong ties: Mohamed Bouazizi's shocking act of self-immolation first galvanised a small circle of friends and family who tried to make sure the information about what had happened, and the protests that followed, got out of Sidi Bouzid. From then on, the story got picked up by Al Jazeera, there was support from the local trade union branch and student groups ('The major driving force behind these protesters is the Sidi Bouzid [Tunisian General Labour Union branch]', claimed a local; an 'aggressive Internet campaign called on fellow citizens and unions to set up committees to support the uprising in Sidi Bouzid. Lawyers and student unions were among the first to take to the streets in an organized way', according to a Project on Information Technology and Political Islam report) and longer-term activists and media critics of the government began to speak (and act) out.

The movement, in other words, was not simply from weak ties to strong ties, the internet to the streets, but (small-scale) strong ties to weak ties (on the larger scale of people who heard of what happened) to strong ties (activist groups and individuals becoming involved on a larger scale) to a broader fringe of weak ties becoming strong ties as things gathered momentum. The geographical spread, from the countryside to Al Jazeera, social media and Youtube, then to the capital and abroad, where each relay produces not only a greater number of informed people, but also people who are active, illustrates this; and it is not too much to imagine that communication among individuals was not only taking place through media, social or otherwise, but also through meetings and nascent or pre-existing organisations.

It is well known that there were activist groups in Egypt that had tried for quite some time to find channels for the expression of mass opposition to the Mubarak regime; after many frustrated attempts, the events of the Jasmine Revolution – as well as the viral spread of information enabled by social and outside corporate media, and the mobilising tools offered by former – provided them with an opportunity that they seized. It is true, someone did create a Facebook event calling for the January 25th 'Day of Anger' (ironically, to coincide with Police

Day); but this someone was not any 'concerned citizen', but an already existing Facebook group with over 40,000 members, 'We are all Khaled Said'. Interestingly, the date seems to have been proposed by an ordinary poster, but was then taken up by the page admin – which created the event and started posting advertising material, including videos, in the run up to it. And as the idea of a protest on that date caught on, it was no doubt worked out in greater detail by several already existing and then-sprouting organisations and affinity groups.

This is to say that the idea according to which the communication that made the Arab Spring (or 15M and Occupy) possible is simply of the individual-social media-other individuals kind is false; what happens is a much more complex relay between already established hubs – either communication nodes with a large following and credibility or 'strong-tie' groups – and a long tail of ties with decreasing intensity. This answers the question of how there can be mass movements without mass organisations: social media amplify exponentially the effects of relatively isolated initiatives; but that they do so is not a purely miraculous phenomenon, but requires the relay through hubs and 'strong-tie' groups that can begin to translate 'chatter' into action. As that happens, under propitious conditions, the spread of information also aids the development of strong ties down the long tail (once a friend or family member goes to a demo, or you see stirring images of one, you are more likely to go, and so on).

So we can speak of 'spontaneity' only provided that we understand the new flows of information and decision-making as also being necessarily routed by previously existing networks and more tightly-knit affinities; certainly not in the model of an ideal, 'spontaneous' 'association of individuals' who previously existed as individuals only. This is even clearer in those cases, such as 15M and Occupy, were there was a clearer organisation process prior to things 'kicking off' (a step-by-step explanation of the former's process, which went from February to May, can be found here.)

It is interesting to speculate on how the beginnings of both the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions are tied to death and sacrifice – of Mohammed Bouzizi and Khaled Said, above all. There is no greater test of commitment, or the strength of ties, than being ready to die for the cause. A fascinating account of the development of the 'We are all Khaled Said' page speaks of a moment, around January 7th, when 'the page forces itself not only to look at the results of torture but to study them, as a way of coming to terms with the need to place oneself in danger deliberately'; the tone of the admin voice changes, and a poster comments: 'I think it's time really, a revolution? Civil strikes everywhere. People will get arrested, people might die but NO PAIN NO GAIN.' The relation between years of police abuse and violence, and then the irrepressible resolve demonstrated by protesters in those countries – the way in which the risk of taking action being the highest was turned into the most fundamental 'strengthener' of ties: the disposition to die together if need be, and the solidarity that it creates – seems clear.

3 – The primary organisational form of 2011 was *not* the assembly

At the most evident level, the primary organisational form employed by movements in 2011 was the camp: from the extraordinary example set by Tahrir Square in Cairo, the model spread to Winsconsin, Israel, Spain (where, however, it occurred as an unplanned result of the 15 May demonstration) and then, after Occupy Wall Street (like Israel, initially devised as a camp) and the October 15 day of global action, to the rest of the world. It was the most powerful meme, which is unsurprising how it provided the most stirring images and, with Egypt, the most resounding, captivating victory. (Curiously, Daphni Leef, the person credited with starting the camp in Tel Aviv, is quoted as having the 1920s US Hoovervilles as a reference. For debates on

the possibility that the Israeli protests were to some extent 'astroturfed', see the correspondent Wikipedia [page](.).)

Yet it is important to bear in mind the precise connection between form and goal that made Tahrir into a victorious symbol: for more than simply a meme, it was a tactic that consisted in gathering the mass movement in one place and making a very concrete, if very simple and negative, demand: people will not move until Mubarak steps down. (Even then, of course, it would not have managed to achieve its goal had the regime not realised they were losing control of several other parts of the country.)

As the camp became a meme, this connection was lost; interestingly, the first tweet from @acampadasol – the first Twitter account of the first 'spontaneous' (i.e., again going from strong ties to developing strong ties along the long tail) camp in Spain – stated that 'we shall stay here until we reach an agreement'; who 'we' was, and agreement with whom, were things left unstated in the microblogging website's peculiar syntax. By the time it got to the various worldwide 'Occupy' that sprung after October 15, this tie was lost. The same can be said about other related memes, such as the 'human mic', which started out as a practical solution to a ban on amplification at Zucotti Park in New York, but then became a marker of a certain 'Occupy' way of doing politics, even where the original impediment that had elicited it did not exist.

This is not to say that the subsequent iterations of the camp meme were in no way tactical; they were, except the tactic was different. In the absence of such clear-cut negative demands as existed in Egypt and Winsconsin, what they were doing was not trying to enforce a collectively-shared will, but attempting to create the political space in which a collectively-shared will could continue to be constructed and strengthened, and a social force capable of affecting change – through 'contamination' and/or by enforcing its shared will – could appear. (In this sense, if their 'diminishing tactical returns' progression resembles what happened to the counter-summit cycle of the alterglobalisation movement, to criticise them for that without recognising the other function they exerted – as Badiou, for instance, did [back in 2003](.) in regard to the latter – is to fail to see the whole picture.)

The strength of camps such as the ones seen in Spain, Israel, and several Occupy lay in providing a focal point for widespread dissent. In terms of 15M's 'from the web to the streets' motto, we could visualise them as a moment when social networks that already existed in the virtual and non-virtual worlds collided with one another, were reshuffled, and given greater consistency by direct contact and co-presence. It was also more than that, as they provided a space in principle accessible to all, regardless of any previous experience of activism or insertion into the social networks that were present there. Finally, they did so while also exposing people to the challenge or sharing a space and its running, which, if it can be rather testing, can also be conducive to the development of stronger ties. In other words, what these later camps did was to act on the conditions of possibility of politics: in the context of a deep social malaise, a profound sense of disempowerment and of being unrepresented, and the impacts of a severe crisis on a highly atomised sociality, they functioned as a space where the tissue of relations that could be called 'the political', at least for those who were there, could be partially (re)constituted.

The whole difficulty was that, while they did that, both outsiders and insiders also sought to find in them concerted political action and clear position-taking beyond the act of camping. They had, so to speak, to *grow up in public*. All this in a situation whose tactical coordinates were not time-bound: it was not a matter of holding the space until something specific happened, but of holding the space until… – with no obvious idea of what that would be, and facing the very difficult, possibly impossible task of deciding it on the spot with very large numbers of very diverse people.

Much was made of the general assemblies that seemed to be the bread and butter of these camps. It is no surprise that they should catch the eye like they did, considering how at once impressive and quaint they looked (cue the *de rigueur* journalistic remark on hand gestures…), but also how they seemed to respond to a grievance against the widespread experience of a democratic deficit: one of the most repeated comments made by participants speaks of everyone's ostensible gladness with being given a voice in front of others.

One should, for that reason, be slow to dismiss the importance of these spaces; and if virtual networks were the original medium for affective spread and contagion, the 'reshuffling' enabled by open mic spaces where you can meet people who sound to you like they are 'talking sense', thus starting new relationships and getting into other networks, as well as the sheer power of listening to people you would otherwise never meet who share the same feelings and stories, cannot be underestimated.

It is undeniable, however, that the very difference in intensity between moving 'from the internet to the streets' can produce an overvaluation of the assembly in the face of everything else. During the Arab Spring, Christian Marazzi compared the logics of contagion proper to financial markets and to the events taking place in the Mahgreb. In the former, it is the deficit of information that leads to mimetic behaviour that, in the frantic heights of a speculative bubble, becomes entirely self-referential and disconnected from any observation of dynamics outside itself – always assuming some other (ultimately the market Big Other) knows something 'we do not know'. In the latter, he saw an excess of information as leading to an 'imitation of oneself' whose material referent is the very social body. In these terms, the risk that assemblies carry with them could be described as a fetish of presence – of restricting the 'oneself' to be imitated to the assembly itself, losing sight of non-presential affects as well as the 'others' of that experience, which in turn is erected into a less inclusive, less connected 'you just had to be there'.

This dynamic can be amplified by the very tendency of media representation to present assemblies as the core of these movements. I believe, however, that if we take a step back from their more visible manifestations to see the process that both led to them and kept them alive, what becomes apparent is that their key organisational form, while in its own way also open and horizontal, was not the assembly.

We could call it distributed leadership: the possibility, even for previously 'uncharted' individuals and groups, to temporarily take on the role of moving things forward by virtue of coming up with courses of action that could provide temporary focal points for activity. I have previously referred to this as 'diffuse vanguardism': the capacity 'to ignite large-scale effects without any sort of [previously existing or at a proportionally large scale] decision-making procedure'. It is the capacity of coming up with something that has the 'fairy dust' of a replicable idea that 'makes sense' for others – which applies, to begin with, to those examples seen above of the first outliers, groups or individuals, who started networking towards mass actions that would then develop into camps and, eventually, assemblies.

What makes this kind of leadership different is the fact that it does not require a previous 'leader' or 'vanguard' status, be it by virtue of an already established position as endowed by fairy dust or being deemed capable of mobilising vast numbers of people (like a traditional mass organisation). The latter point is particularly interesting, as one of the things that, in the present environment, appear to work in favour of an initiative is the fact that it is 'anonymous' or, as one would say in sports language, 'unseeded' – it is only natural that, if the present crisis is to a great extent one of representative democracy, there should be some degree of suspicion towards 'representative' names. At the same tie, producing an initiative that resonates and gains traction will often demand more than just 'throwing an idea out there'; it entails setting an example to be followed, and thus depends on it being embodied in a smaller group that can make it happen.

Such seems to be the case with arguably the most important development to take place after the camps – the focus on anti-eviction actions and occupations with a view to providing housing for victims of foreclosures. Again, a mediation takes place that goes via strong to weak ties, producing strong ties in the process; but successful new initiatives will often require relatively 'low entry levels', which can increase in militancy with time (one example would be UK Uncut actions in Britain).

The logic of distributed leadership characteristic of 2011 struggles is that of the pack, as described by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*; but this, as Catherine Malabou has pointed out, is not unlike that of Hegel's *Werkzeuge* of universality, if we discount the latter's teleologism. Interestingly, it could be noticed that [more optimistic](#) readings of such movements, while ostensibly predicated on something like 'collective intelligence' rather than history, appear to rely on a teleology according to which said intelligence, rather than responding to conjunctural problems with the resources, human and otherwise, at its disposal at any given time, is also in the long run 'working out' the solutions for the problems being faced today. (An extreme case of presence fetish, where assemblies and working groups figure as stand-ins for humanity as a whole.)

But it would be naïve to think that such leadership, while distributed, is so in an entirely even way; social media provide a good, if necessarily partial, visualisation of which communication hubs carry more weight than others, as seen [here](#) and [here](#), for instance. While this does not correspond to a simpler, 'levelling' conceptualisation of horizontality, is not in and of itself 'undemocratic' either….

Hier bricht das Manuskript ab.