

Deregulating the struggle: Network organisation and party organisation

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Since the global revolts of 2011, there has been a wave of tweeting, blogging and theorising regarding the “network effect” on revolutionary movements. This article will critique Manuel Castells’ claim that horizontal networked forms of organisation were responsible for the Egyptian revolution in 2011, and that autonomous mass self-communication, facilitated by social media, represents a new model of individual freedom, focusing upon the Egyptian revolution, given its pivotal role in the Arab revolutions. The article argues that the timing of the Egyptian revolution can only be fully understood through a political economy analysis of neoliberalism and capitalist crisis. Equally, the role of traditional social actors and political parties cannot be ignored. Rather than being made redundant by the “network society”, traditional collectivist organisation, such as political parties and trade unions, have been essential characters in the Egyptian revolution. Likewise, traditional print media has also played a role in the revolutionary process in Egypt. This article attempts to reorient theoretical discussion to the communicative tools best suited at a particular juncture in the social struggle, rather than fetishizing particular technologies or social formations.

The past thirty years have been marked by a neoliberal economic discourse. This article will employ David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism as an ideology proposing that human wellbeing can best be achieved by empowering individual entrepreneurial freedoms through institutional frameworks that guarantee strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). As Terry Flew aptly summarises, neoliberalism is an often invoked, but ill-defined concept (Flew 2012, p. 3; Mudge, 2008, p. 703). Although Flew has a number of criticisms of Harvey’s approach (2012, pp. 20-21), he affirms that Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism, as a fundamentally economic discourse, is employed consistently. Harvey argues that advocates of free markets now occupy positions of ideological influence in universities, “think tanks”, the media, in governments and other key state institutions (2005, p. 3) and that, consequently, neoliberal thinking has become hegemonic.

The Left has so far failed to challenge this hegemony. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 corresponded with a crisis in the radical Left. While the collapse of so-called communist states provided a space for the genuine radical Left, it also demoralised many and led to a barrage of propaganda by the Right insisting that there is no alternative to capitalism (Fukuyama, 2012). The degeneration of the Left caused by the last three decades of neoliberalism has led many radical thinkers to theorise new methods of struggle that promote various forms of autonomous horizontal organisation (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Virno, 2004; Holloway, 2010; Shirky, 2008).

Networked individualism is the latest vogue in autonomous organising and has been popularised by mainstream discourse on the “Arab Spring” of 2011, which widely hailed the revolutions as social media uprisings (Ramadan, 2014, p. 5). This article will focus on a critique of networked individualism, as espoused by Manuel Castells, though an examination of the Egyptian revolution, as Castells (2012, p. 178) claims that this new form of organisation originated from experiments in Egypt and Spain and then spread globally through the Occupy movement. Networked individualism rejects formal leadership structures and any form of “vertical authority” (Castells, 2012, p. 179).

This article considers Castells’ theories as primarily based on a new conceptualisation of determinism – “network determinism” – introduced by Castells in *The Network Society* (2010): “networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in the processes of production, experience, power and culture” (p. 469). For Castells, this new morphology has made the organisations and political parties of the industrial age redundant (2007, p. 250).

This article employs a political economy approach to argue that the Egyptian revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak in 2011 was not the product of new horizontal networks of organisation and that, far from being redundant, traditional organisations such as political parties and trade unions played a significant role in the revolution. Furthermore, unions and political parties have traditionally accommodated network structures, such as strike committees and campaign groups. However, they also utilise “vertical authority” or representative structures of formal leadership and majority rule, such as national conferences and the passing of formal motions, for instance. This article argues that vertical structures are necessary, especially when facing a highly centralised state machinery, such as the Mubarak regime, for democratic decision-making and coordinated action.

Theorising the struggle

Castells believes that the rise of globalisation, along with the rise of information and communication technologies, has fundamentally transformed capitalism, decentralising power and leading to the rise of networks of power. Thus, culture and society is now characterised by network logic. This is the foundation of Castells’ (2010; 2004; 2000) seminal trilogy on the network society. Although this article cannot make a comprehensive intervention into debates about whether capitalism has been fundamentally transformed by neoliberalism, globalisation, technology, or numerous other facets of post-modernity, it is important to acknowledge these controversies as necessary background to Castells’ network determinism.

Castells is certainly not the first, or even the most famous theorist to envision a discontinuity with the industrial society of the twentieth century. Alain Touraine (1971), who was Castells’ doctoral supervisor, is best known for being the originator of the term the “post-industrial society”. Many other well-known theorists have also made significant contributions (Bell, 1973; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Foucault, 1998). As Frank Webster (1995, p. 267) points out, the hypothesis of a fundamental discontinuity between industrial capitalism and modern society has an ideological character. It concurs with the view, characteristic of neoliberal ideology, that we can do nothing about change and must adapt to existing political realities. Castells (2007) employs the language of computing to describe how citizens can “reprogram” the network society from within by connecting networks of “counterpower”. Castells (2012, p. 2) argues that the Internet needs to be understood as an autonomous space of communication beyond the control of governments and corporations; a “crack” in which to organise alternative spaces under capitalism. Castells’ (2012, pp. 230-231) definition of autonomy is “the capacity of a social actor to become a subject by defining its action around projects constructed independently of the institutions of society, according to values and interest of the social actor”. Other theorists stress the *continuity* of capitalism in modern society (Schiller, 2000; Fuchs, 2012; Harvey, 1989; Webster, 1995). This article argues that theorists who centre capitalism at the core of their critical approach are better placed to analyse modern society.

According to Flew, Castells has been “the most significant social theorist of new media in the last two decades” (2008, p. 60). His ideas also have authority beyond academia, within the new social movements themselves, in part because he was a “marginal” participant in the *Indignatos* movement in Spain (Castells, 2012, p. 18). He has released a book on the global uprisings entitled *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012). His ideas have also had an influence on prominent commentators of the recent global revolts. Journalist and former BBC economics editor Paul Mason has written extensively on the global rebellions and, like Castells, has been an active participant in them. Beginning as a series of blog posts on his website, Mason’s *20 Reasons Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere* became popular enough to be transformed into a book: *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (2012). In the book, Mason states that Castells:

...foresaw that the combined impact of the social network and the individualistic self would facilitate a clear break with the old forms of organization, including parties, unions and permanent campaigns (Mason, 2012, p. 138).

In the context of dominance of neoliberal discourse, the idea that old forms of organisation and resistance needs to be “deregulated” appears commonsensical. Journalist and activist Laurie Penny states in the

Guardian in 2010 that “Thatcher, Reagan and Blair deregulated oppression. In order to be properly effective, rebels have to deregulate resistance”. Penny explains, “deregulating resistance will mean deregulating the organisations that control resistance, making them more anarchic, more inclusive and more creative”. Many theorists, popular commentators and participants in the revolts have repeated this prediction (Penny, 2010a; 2010b; Shirky, 2008; Sennett, 2006; Standing, 2011), with similar statements that closely resemble the language of individualism. Given the popularity and influence of these ideas, it is important to understand their most influential and articulate advocate.

In his new writings on the global revolts, Castells applies theoretical framework previously formulated in his work *Communications Power* (2009). The main themes that constitute this framework are: communications power is the central form of power today; the Internet allows the construction of communicative autonomy; and that contemporary social movements online, and offline, are socially networked movements, for which social media are of crucial importance. What underlies this framework is Castells’ (2012, p. 230; 2009, pp. 116-136) belief that a “cultural transformation”, arising from the social movements of the 1970s, has changed human behaviour. While Castells (2012, p. 230) rejects liberal individualism, he labels this trend “individuation”, which he claims is distinct from individualism because it can be geared towards collective goals and action. Power in the network society is “multidimensional” and “organized around networks programmed in each domain of human activity according to interests and values of empowered actors” (Castells, 2012, p. 7). Power is exercised in the network society by network programmers (media companies, public institutions, publishers, technicians) and “switchers”, such as media moguls who connect media, cultural, political and financial networks (Castells, 2009, p. 429). Consequently, counterpower is exercised by reprogramming networks around alternative interests and values. According to Castells (2007, p. 248), reprogramming is made possible by the rise of a new form of autonomous social communication: mass self-communication. This communication is “self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception” (Castells, 2007, p. 248). This means that “social movements exercise counterpower by constructing themselves in the first place through a process of autonomous communication” (Castells, 2012, p. 9). Castells (2007, p. 250) believes the autonomy afforded by mass self-communication has facilitated “a clear break with the traditional forms of organization of parties, unions and associations of the industrial society”, seeing this as a positive development, insofar as it increases the autonomy of the individual.

This is the basic theoretical framework that Castells (2012) employs in his analysis of the recent global revolts. From the outset, subtitled *Networks of Outrage and Hope* “Social Movements in the Internet Age” explicitly focuses the analysis on technology. Using terms such as the “Internet Age” or “digital age” advances a media and technology centrism. Castells could equally have subtitled the book: Social Movements in the Age of “Neoliberalism”, “late-Capitalism” or “Global Crisis”. Although choosing the technology and communication-centric option ignores the multidimensionality of society, this article does not consider Castells a technological determinist; despite the claims of a number of his reviewers (see Garnham, 2004; Webster, 2004; 1995). Castells argues that it is network logic that primarily produces social determination at a higher level, rather than technology – thus, he can be better understood as a network determinist. For Castells, the causal power of network flows becomes *more* important than the content of networks and the particular interests they represent. Castells calls this preference “the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action” (2010, p. 469). This pre-eminence causes Castells to privilege form over content, which I argue limits his analysis of the Egyptian revolution. Instead, it is important to see the dialectical relationship between the organisational form and the political content of an organisation or permanent campaign group. Neither form nor content is deterministic; both operate in a dialectical relationship with the other, as well as with other external social entities. In constructing an analysis of a social movement or political party, internal organisational mechanisms must be weighed against ideological currents within the entity, as well as external ideological pressures from other organs of society. Networks are not homogenous, nor are they autonomous from broader capitalist social relations.

Castells (2012, p. 229) conflates social relations with the communications tools that *facilitate* mediated communication:

the fundamental form of large scale, horizontal communication in our society is based on the Internet and wireless networks... it is through these digital communications networks that the movements live and act.

However, it is important to acknowledge here that Castells (2012, p. 222) does allow for interaction between mediated and face-to-face communication by conceptualising a dialectical relation between the online “space of flows” and the offline “space of places”, envisaging the “space of movements” as a hybrid space made up of the interaction between online and offline spaces. Castells (2012, p. 222) calls this hybrid of cyberspace and urban space the “space of autonomy”; this space is “the new spatial form of networked social movements”. Castells (2012, pp. 10, 81) does strongly argue that power is unequally distributed in these “spaces” and “flows”, because capitalist corporations are more dominant. He states that it is essential that movements “build public space by creating free communities in the urban space”, yet; it is the networks formed in cyberspace, the “space of flows”, which extends these movements into the urban space. Thus, it is digitally networked relations that inform offline social relations. On the contrary, even a completely mediated society where all relations are fully realised in media networks, and social and media networks are equivalent, networks would still be based on bodies, minds, rules and resources of all kinds (van Dijk, 1999, p. 133). Media networks cannot exist without resources from technology, the economy and society. Furthermore, individuals’ values and interests are *socially* constructed and shaped by the institutions of society. Individuals cannot construct meaning autonomously. Observations of virtual communities show that members of online groups bring with them, as a kind of baggage, all strictures, identities and mental states they have learned in offline groups (Mantovani, 1996; Lea and Spears, 1992; van Dijk, 1997). Jan A.G.M. van Dijk (1997) also privileges the network form; however, he does not go as far as Castells in claiming that networks are the basic units of modern society, arguing that networks increasingly link units, but these units are still individuals, groups, organisations and communities. Networks are not the content of society, nor are network relations equivalent to society.

The context in which the communications “revolution” has taken place is the Cold War and neoliberalism. The Internet is a product of militarism and imperialism. Its infrastructure and content are also owned and controlled by corporations and capitalist states. Yet, the Internet is, simultaneously, something that is used by millions in the struggle to resist the logic of neoliberalism. Therefore, virtual networks and technology are embedded in the pre-existing, antagonistic relations of social actors. It is not the “morphology of communications networks” that creates society and social change, but human actors embedded in antagonistic and contradictory economic, political, ideological and technological structures. This does not deny human agency. In fact, subjective political intervention and political leadership are crucial.

Leadership

Network determinism assumes that politics will inevitably flow from organisational form. Due to structures of overlapping networks, Castells (2012, p. 221) believes that movements “do not need a formal leadership, command and control centre, or a vertical organization to distribute information or instructions”. The role of the Internet in this development “goes beyond instrumentality: it creates the conditions for a form of shared practice that allows a leaderless movement to survive, deliberate, coordinate and expand” (Castells, 2012, p. 229). Even at a cursory level this formulation is problematic. Who decides what instructions to issue and who has the authority to issue them? Castells does acknowledge that some individuals may become more influential than others by dedicating themselves full time to a movement. But he asserts that they are only accepted in this role as long as they do not make major decisions by themselves (Castells, 2012, p. 225), despite the fact that there is no mechanism for accountability. An empirical study conducted by Paolo Gerbaudo (2012) in his book *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* challenges the supposition of Castells and others that the Internet creates leaderless movements. Gerbaudo (2012, p. 139) finds that although contemporary social movements claim to be leaderless networks, there are “soft leaders” that make use of social media for choreographing protests. In most cases, “a handful of people control most of the communication flow” (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 135). This shows that the rejection of vertical, hierarchical structures does not create leaderless movements. In fact, only hierarchical structures can make dominant voices answerable to the ideas they

proselytise. At worst “leaderless” movements are exclusive and undemocratic, at best, in practice; they are a recipe for inertia.

A contemporary example of decisive, democratic leadership within hierarchical structures, which also accommodates network structures, comes from modern Egypt. The Egyptian Independent Tax Collectors’ Union was formally founded in 2008 from a national network of delegates from locally elected strike committees built up by activists in local committees in the Property Tax Authority (Alexander, 2012, pp 101-125). Its first general assembly was attended by approximately 4000 delegates (Alexander 2012: 101-125). It was one of the first independent non-government unions under Mubarak. Its example was important in laying the groundwork for the growth in independent unions during and following the revolution. A leadership of elected, accountable delegates allows democracy and speed of action. Obviously, this is the ideal and not the norm. But it illustrates the efficacy of political organisation. Rank and file democratic structures are organisational forms that have always had to be argued for politically within the trade union movement. They also combine grassroots network structures within vertical structures of representative democracy. This demonstrates the essential connection between content and form.

Consciousness

The interaction between what might be termed “consciousness” and social action is very complex. Castells reduces human consciousness to overly simplistic, pseudo-scientific equations. Anger is a “triggering” emotion and fear is a repressor. Fear is overcome by identifying with others in the process of communicative action:

Enthusiastic networked individuals, having overcome fear, are transformed into a conscious, collective actor. Thus social change results from communicative action that involves connection between networks of neural networks from human brains stimulated by signals from a communication environment through communications networks (Castells, 2012, p. 219).

For Castells (2012, p. 237), “the more the movement is able to convey its messages over the communications networks, the more citizen consciousness rises”. This view of consciousness is too prescriptive. It is highly problematic to posit a direct proportional relationship between the level of availability of information and the level of consciousness. Egyptian activists, both on and offline, had for at least a decade been organising and spreading revolutionary ideas, but it seems it is only at particular moments that large numbers of people become open to these ideas and are prepared to act on them. I argue, it is economic and political crises that create these moments. Castells does acknowledge that the revolutions are connected to economic, political, military, ideological and cultural contradictions of power (2012, p. 12; also see p. 79). However, in stressing the subjective aspects of individual consciousness, he negates historical and economic analysis by merely listing objective conditions, rather than exploring their impact on the political terrain in which individuals socially develop their ideas.

To address the political situation requires a thorough, multidimensional theory of capitalist crisis. Thus, a comparison between Castells’ analysis of the global crisis and David Harvey’s model is particularly instructive. Harvey and Castells are the “two leading writers in urban analysis” and have “both been strongly influenced by Marx” (Giddens, 2006, p. 900). Harvey’s theory of crisis is multidimensional. He envisages seven dimensions: the economy, nature, culture, the state, consumption, technology and organisation. These “moments” are all integrated *via capitalism* and advance an overall crisis of capitalist accumulation that feeds back into the other levels (Harvey, 2010). Harvey comments that theorists tend to take one of these “moments” and use them as a “silver bullet” that causes all change (2010). This includes technological determinists, such as Tom Friedman; daily life determinists, like Paul Hawken; labour process determinists, “autonomistas” such as Nergi and Virno, and so on (Harvey, 2010). This article argues that network determinists such as Castells should be added to this list.

The strength of Harvey’s analysis is that he re-centres, rather than decentres, capitalism in his critical approach. He situates the global crisis as a crisis of capitalism, both *economic* and political. In contrast, Castells (2011, pp. 45-59) plays into neoliberal ideology by separating the two aspects; “this is not an economic crisis. This is a political crisis”. Moreover, Harvey (2010) writes that groups that rule out all forms

of hierarchy abandon “any prospect whatsoever for democratic response not only to the problem of the global commons but also to the problem of continuous capital accumulation”. Accordingly, the anti-party sentiment that is widespread in the new social movements is understandable, given the political legacy of Stalinism, but can only lead the movements into a cul-de-sac. This article rejects the idea that the network structure is a panacea for the problems that social movements face, but it also recognises the abuse of concepts such as Lenin’s “democratic centralism” to justify repressive and anti-democratic one-party dictatorships in Russia, China and elsewhere. Network and hierarchical structures do not have to be counterpoised. As long as there are democratic structures in place, some forms of hierarchical organisation can facilitate democracy by holding leaders to account. As has been shown, lack of leadership structures can lead to undemocratic unofficial leadership.

Castells (2012) focuses on the global social movement of 2011 as primarily political struggles for democratic reform. Focusing on democratic reforms, rather than economic rights, is entirely compatible with neoliberal discourse. Marxism points out that one of the ways that capitalists rule, ever since the classical economists discovered the “economy” in the abstract, is by emptying capitalism of its social and political content and perpetuating a strict conceptual separation between politics and economics. Castells’ theories strengthen, rather than challenge, this conceptual division. Accordingly, this article will briefly outline the economic and political context in Egypt before proceeding to an analysis of the role of vertical organisation, such as political parties, unions and permanent campaign groups, during the revolution.

Political economy

The policy of the Mubarak regime in the 1980s and 1990s was the selective adoption of free market principles that favoured its creditor states and the International Monetary Fund (El-Sayed El-Naggar, 2009, p. 36). These reforms included measures such as reducing the average tax on imports to 9 per cent in 2004 (El-Saied El-Naggar 2009, p. 40), while simultaneously under-investing in infrastructure. The contradiction between the speculative economy and under-investment in the means of consumption, as well as attacks on living standards, proved a volatile mix when the Global Financial Crisis hit in 2008. Neoliberalism made Egypt highly dependent on exports to Europe, tourism revenues and imported foodstuffs, such as wheat (Naguib 2011, n.p.n). It also made the country more vulnerable to crises by increasing inequality and undermining any mechanism for the government to shield the economy from global crises, such as the dramatic rise in world food prices. Politically, the Global Financial Crisis could not have come at a more politically inopportune moment for the regime. However, Castells (2012, p. 220) is right to point out that “social movements do not arise just from poverty or political despair”. Not only was there mass resentment to neoliberal policies, but in the decade leading up to the revolution there had been a bold return to street protests by Egyptian activists.

Indeed, the 2011 revolution was prepared for by a decade of social movements. These “cycles of protests” (El-Mahdi, 2009) in solidarity with the second Palestinian Intifada and against the Iraq War, and for democratic reforms within Egypt, culminated in a strike wave that began in 2004, but continued well into 2008 (Benin, 2009, p. 77). This wave of industrial militancy was described by former Director of Middle East Studies and Professor of History at the American University in Cairo, Joel Beinin, as “the largest social movement Egypt has witnessed in over half a century” (2009, p. 77). Over 1.2 million workers and their families engaged in some form of action (Beinin, 2009, p. 77). I argue that this momentum had an impact on what appeared to be an entirely spontaneous explosion of rage on 25 January 2011.

“The people want the downfall of the regime!”: Organisation during the uprising

In 2011, Christopher Wilson and Alexandra Dunn conducted a survey called *The Tahrir Square Project* (2011). The survey shows that face-to-face interaction (93%) was the most important form of protest communication during the 25 January revolution, followed by television (92%), phones (82%), print media (57%), SMS (46%), Facebook (42%), e-mail (27%), radio (22%), Twitter (13%) and blogs (12%). Although Wilson and Dunn did discover some promising applications for social media as tools for protest, they surmise that the most immediate conclusion that could be drawn from the data was “that digital media was not as central to protester communication and organization on the ground as the heralds of Twit-

ter revolutions would have us hyperbolize” (2011, p. 1263). These figures are important because Castells (2012, p. 56) claims it was “spontaneous, largely leaderless, multimodal networks that enacted the Egyptian revolution”. Castells (2012, p. 54) states, “most prominent among these initiatives was the network created around the Facebook group ‘We are all Khaled Said’”. Given the importance that Castells, Mason and others place on this Facebook page, it is appropriate to examine its origins and political trajectory in some detail.

“We are all Khaled Said” was set up and chiefly administered by a Google executive named Wael Ghomin. It was one of the first groups to release a call for the 25 January protests, along with the April 6 Youth Movement, a youth movement formed in 2008 in solidarity with textile workers in Muhalla al-Kubra who were planning a strike for that date (Shehata, 2011). The page was set up to bring justice to Khaled Said, a man who was brutally beaten to death by Alexandrian police on 6 June 2010. The page organised a number of “Silent Stands” in solidarity with Khaled Said. Participants in the “Stands” congregated at various locations around Egypt to hold hands in symbolic and silent disapproval of the state’s treatment of ordinary Egyptians. The first Silent Stand on 18 June 2010 was a modest success; however, it was not as large as a previous confrontational demonstration held for Khaled Said outside the Interior Ministry, organised by seasoned activists from the April 6 Youth Movement and other groups (Ghomin, 2012, pp. 78). Where the Silent Stands were most successful was in transferring virtual activism into real-world action. Importantly, these actions did not take place in a digital vacuum, but in the context of the politically charged atmosphere in Egypt at the time, including: upcoming elections in November 2010, the investigation into Khaled Said’s death and the anniversary of the 1952 revolution (Ghomin, 2012, pp. 97-98). The second Silent Stand was organised on 25 June, this coincided with a pre-existing demonstration coordinated by several political organisations; including Kefaya, an important pro-democracy group that emerged in 2004; the National Association for Change; the Youth for Justice and Liberty, and the April 6 Youth Movement (Ghomin, 2012, p. 93). Ghomin (2012, p. 79) acknowledges that “it is true that movements and organizations like Kefaya, the April 6 Youth Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, and others were the first to mobilise people on the street”. Kefaya played an important role in reinvigorating Egyptian street activism (Brownlee, 2007, p. 149). This suggests that offline activism and the external political terrain were crucial to the modest success of Internet initiatives.

The self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and the unfolding Tunisian revolution had a significant impact on the political environment in Egypt. On 13 January, Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali gave his now famous speech acknowledging that Tunisians would no longer tolerate humiliation (Ghomin, 2012, p. 131). This is when Ghomin decided to publish coverage of the Tunisian revolution. Before Ben Ali’s flight to Saudi Arabia, Ghomin deleted a post about the Tunisian protests by his fellow administrator Abdel Rahman Mansour. Any mention of Mubarak had also been off-limits on the page (Ghomin, 2012, pp. 122-123; also see p. 142). Less than three weeks later, with the toppling of Ben Ali and the mounting anger of Egyptians, Ghomin (2012, p. 136) changed the name of the planned 25 January event from “Celebrating Egyptian Police Day” to “January 25: Revolution Against Torture, Poverty, Corruption, and Unemployment”. Ghomin (2012, p. 136) admits “this was ironic, given that I had clearly stated on more than one occasion that I was not a revolutionary”.

The networked communities around the page “We Are All Khaled Said” provided an important space of dissidence for those angered by the regime (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011, p. 1348), but it was Egyptians frustrated by economic inequality, as exemplified by the core slogan of the revolution “bread, freedom and social justice!”, who had been radicalised by political events within Egypt and inspired by the Tunisian revolution that gave the impetus to the 25 January uprising. People’s actions are not only determined by the ideas available to them, but also their political, social and economic environment. Thus, by focusing on communications morphology, Castells fails to adequately contextualise social change.

Offline organisation during the revolt

While Castells and Mason acknowledge that the majority of Egyptians did not find out about 25 January protests directly through Facebook campaigns (Castells, 2012, pp. 53-92; Mason, 2012, pp. 5-24), they ignore that most planning was also conducted offline. Malcolm Gladwell (2010) argues that physical meetings are better at facilitating “strong ties” between activists. The events of 25 January appear to bear

out this claim. Diverse activists from pre-existing organisations, including representatives from six youth movements, workers' rights groups and the Muslim Brotherhood, met daily for weeks in a cramped living room in Agouza on the west bank of the Nile in the lead up to the occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square. These activists formed the core of the leadership of the Revolutionary Youth Movement who later stepped to the fore as representatives of the occupation in Tahrir (Coker and Levinson, 2011). Twenty protest sites were announced and published online by cyber-activists such as Ghomin. However, the activists did not tell anyone of their plans for an undisclosed twenty-first protest site in Bulaq al-Dakrou. It was these seasoned activists from political organisations that were responsible for amassing what appeared to be a spontaneous mobilisation of slum dwellers from Cairo's western edge that congregated in front of a neighbourhood sweet shop and caught security forces flatfooted (Coker and Levinson, 2011). It was this mobilisation that broke through the security cordons to Tahrir. Egyptian security forces were specialists in demobilising protests and dissuading ordinary Egyptians from spontaneously joining them. It took meticulous and centralised planning to succeed where so many demonstrations had failed. Days before 25 January, the activists' organising committee sent small reconnaissance teams to walk the protest routes at various speeds to synchronise how the separate protests would converge at the meeting point, Hayiss Sweet Shop (Coker and Levinson, 2011). On 25 January, security forces predictably mobilised at the advertised locations. Meanwhile, four field commanders chosen from the organisers' committee dispatched activists in groups of ten. Only one person per group knew their destination. In these small groups, the protesters amassed a crowd of 300 at the sweet shop. Organisers knew that if they failed to attract ordinary working-class Egyptians en route they would be easy prey for security forces. The protesters, unmolested by security forces, attracted hundreds of the working-class and poor residents of Bulaq al-Dakrou. By the time security forces had redirected officers to the surprise location the crowd was large enough to overwhelm them (Coker and Levinson, 2011). None of the other marches organised at mosques or around the city succeeded in reaching Tahrir through the maze of pre-planned security cordons (Coker and Levinson, 2011). The Bulaq al-Dakrou mobilisation occupied Tahrir for several hours until midnight. This short-lived occupation emboldened people to join the protests the following Friday that retook Tahrir and stayed there until the overthrow of Mubarak.

The brief occupation of Tahrir on 25 January was a "tipping-point". Had activists decided to focus their attention online and not carry out the difficult and dangerous work of leafleting, hours of conversations with locals in working-class areas without Internet connection, testing out potential locations and routes for protests, 25 January would most likely be a footnote in history books. It seems clear that the 25 January occupation was not organised by networks ignited by any Facebook page, but by experienced activists who were centrally organised and members of traditional campaign groups and political parties.

The great social experiment: Disconnecting the internet

Castells (2012, p. 66) acknowledges that the Mubarak regime's disconnection of the Internet did not negatively affect the mobilisations. In fact, shutting down the Internet from 27 January to 2 February had two outcomes that positively affected mobilisation. First, it infuriated many who felt it was time to take a stand and forced some who had so far only engaged in cyberspace to join the street protests (Alexander and Aouragh 2011, pp. 1350-1351). It also revealed unexpected opportunities, as blogger Haisam Abu-Samra (2011) testified: "it removed distraction and gave us a singular mission to accomplish". Social media played a role in informing the world of the events in Tahrir (Ghomin, 2012, pp. 235-236), but it played only a very minor role in the events themselves. Even if the Internet had been blocked before 25 January, there is nothing to suggest this would have changed the course of the revolution. During the Tunisian revolution there was heavy government censorship, so much so that bloggers named the mysterious Internet censor "Ammar 404" after an error message (Ben Mhenni, 2009; 2008). Higher levels of Internet censorship did not save Ben Ali. Castells (2012, pp. 61-66) goes into great detail about how a minority of activists managed to circumvent the Internet blackout by various technical means. However, as the *Tahrir Square Project* documented: "disaggregating altered media behaviors shows that respondents consistently turned to traditional media such as Satellite TV, telephone, and live communication in the face of all information blockages" (Dunn and Wilson, 2011, p. 1262).

During this phase of the Egyptian revolution, when the Internet and mobile phone networks were blocked, the primary channels of mobilisation were predominately unmediated. Participants testified to being unaware of what was happening elsewhere in the city until they returned home to watch Al-Jazeera (Alexander and Aouragh, 2011, p. 1354). The turning point in each area came when activists in the streets were able to persuade enough local people to join them in order to overwhelm security forces (Alexander and Aouragh, 2011, p. 1354). This appears to have been achieved by attracting locals to march through chanting and face-to-face communication at Friday prayers, where activists intervened to encourage the announcement of a call to march (interview with Alexander and Aouragh, 2011, p. 1354). Prominent blogger and member of the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists Hossam El-Hamalawy (interview in Alexander and Aouragh, 2011, p. 1354) recalls how this process unfolded in Nasr City on 28 January: “it was like an advancing army, you know, we were taking one square after the other, clashing with the police”.

Finally, it was the intervention of the organised working-class on 10 and 11 February, which complemented the Tahrir protests with a huge strike wave, that convinced the Egyptian military Generals that they had to sacrifice Mubarak to save the system. There was a wave of mass strikes by workers in the week before the resignation of Mubarak on 11 February that brought key sections of the economy to a standstill, such as the Suez Canal, textile, steel and transport workers, and even the Generals’ own factories (Naguib, 2011, n.p.n). The strikes disorganised the power of the government and felled Mubarak; however, the independent trade union movement that was just beginning to form in Tahrir was too immature to impact the character and direction of the revolutionary movement post-Mubarak (Alexander, 2012, pp. 101-125).

Castells (2012, p. 67) acknowledges that “some reports indicate that fear of the movement extending to the industrial labor force was a factor in influencing the business-wary Army generals to sacrifice the dictator on the altar of their own profits”. But ultimately Castells suggests that people overcame their fear of previous decades because online social networks brought them together. This, coupled with the positive inspiration of the Tunisian revolution, Castells argues, was enough to topple a thirty-year dictatorship. Castells (2012, pp. 80-82) does also identify disunity in the ruling elites as a factor. All of these aspects are true *to a certain degree*. But only political economy can adequately explain the timing of the revolts and the cause of the disunity and fragility of the regime. Castells (2012, p. 80) states that the revolution happened “without warning or strategy” and that the initial calls for the protests “were not different from those that took place in previous years, only to be easily dissolved by thugs and the police”. Again, Castells ignores the cycles of protests in the decade leading up to the revolution and the meticulous planning and organisation of traditional actors that made the occupation of Tahrir possible.

Conclusion

In June 2013, while watching tens of thousands stream towards Tahrir Square, Egyptian cartoonist Andeel wryly commented: “What we are witnessing today is a defeat of Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg and a thunderous triumph for Xerox!” (Iskandar, 2013). A lot has changed in Egypt since 2011 when media pundits could declare the triumphant of Facebook and Twitter revolutions. Today, we are faced with a far more complex equation. Communicative tools should not be abstracted from their political and economic context. Networks of cyber-activists organised via social media did not ignite the 30 June, 2013 protests in Egypt, which have been estimated as the largest protests in history (within a single country). They were organised by activists in the Tamarod (Rebellion!) Movement, frustrated with the Muslim Brotherhood’s failure to implement the demands of the revolution post-Mubarak (Iskandar, 2013). Launched in April 2013, the movement called for early presidential elections via the collection of *paper* signatures by grassroots volunteers that canvassed universities, city and town squares, villages on foot to amass 22 million signatures (Iskandar, 2013). Mahmoud Badr, co-founder of the movement and official spokesperson, began his political activism as a coordinator of Kefaya. He announced the movement’s intentions to form a political party on his official Facebook page in 2014 (*Aswat Masriya*, 2014). The success, in terms of mobilisations, suggests the enduring relevance of old media and traditional organisation, despite the bloody military coup that followed and the Tamarod movement’s subsequent accommodation to the military.

This demonstrates that form does not necessarily determine the politics of an organisation; whether networked, vertical or otherwise.

Castells' network determinism and search for a single new social morphology leads him to fetishize one mode of communication and one set of communicative tools. This only hamstrings social movements. Egyptian activists during the 2011 revolution shifted between digital and non-digital tools, as the circumstances dictated (Aouragh and Alexander 2011, p. 1346). It is worth considering whether different audiences are more engaged and activated by different communicative tools. The Tamarod movement suggests that traditional print media still presents some interesting possibilities. Different organisations need different communicative tools. The types of tools employed are also contingent on objective conditions. For example, organisations operating under conditions of illegality, such as the Muslim Brotherhood under Mubarak, have to employ very different organisational forms and communicative tools to student union activists in Britain. As well, more attention needs to be paid to the risks of social media as activist tools. They are, equally, surveillance tools in the hands of security forces. For instance, Ghomin was forced to delete the Facebook event for 25 January because state security was using the attendees list to arrest people (Ghomin, 2012, p. 190). It is important that activists around the world are aware of the duality of communicative tools.

Traditional print media are still powerful communicative tools for turning awareness into activity. Some evidence from the Egyptian revolution also points to the potentialities of social media platforms in conveying information to an international audience during a protest movement (Dunn and Wilson, 2011) and as spaces for collective dissidence (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011, p. 1348). This article suggests that in the Egyptian experience at least, the main task of activists was to build cross-organisational links between traditional oppositional forces, which could be considered a form of networking within the framework of traditional organisations, and focus on on-the-ground organisation. In these tasks, social media is not a sufficient organisational tool in itself. Face-to-face communication and traditional organisations were essential in building the necessary trust and homogeneous organisation necessary to overthrow Mubarak.

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