IJoC | Latin American Struggles

The Network Prince:
Leadership between Clastres and Machiavelli

RODRIGO NUNES
Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Although networked movements have often been described as leaderless, I propose that they not only display different kinds of leadership phenomena but, when understood in their own terms, also function in a similar way to the "societies against the state" described by Pierre Clastres: as systems whose functioning controls leadership, power, and (formal) organization by maintaining them in a fragile state. Whereas primitive societies aim to prevent change, however, networked movements exist in shifting conjunctures in which they must intervene and thus are under the imperative to act. The *distributed leadership* that characterizes them at once inhibits the autonomization of leadership and presupposes its emergence as a condition for action. Rather than choosing between centralized leadership and total leaderlessness, therefore, networked movements must balance two demands (controlling and eliciting leadership) in tension with one another—inhabiting a non-disjunctive space that I describe as "between Clastres and Machiavelli."

Keywords: networks, social movements, leadership, distributed leadership, society against the state, Pierre Clastres

Si nous avons un prince, disait Pline à Trajan, c'est afin qu'il nous préserve d'avoir un maître.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine
et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*

Two recurring features of responses to the uprisings that have irrupted around the world since the Arab Spring have been a tendency to read their organizational practices from the supposedly prevailing ideologies among participants and to define them in negative terms—as leader*less*, *un*organized, etc. Against the first tendency, which downplays material trends and assumes more of a fit between ideas and practice than might actually exist, it should be possible to describe the conjuncture in which protesters act prior to appealing to what they think; their ideas no doubt determine what they do, but material conditions determine the field of application those ideas can have. In broad terms, this

Rodrigo Nunes: rgnunes@yahoo.com

conjuncture is characterized by the convergence of three historical tendencies, at least two of which appear irreversible for the moment: the increasing mediatization of social life, specifically the use of digital networks, which generates a growing potential for what Manuel Castells (2011) has called "mass self-communication"; the vertiginous drop in organizing costs resulting from that, which enables the complex collective coordination that in the past would have only been possible through formal organizations (Bimber, Flanagin, & Sthol, 2005; Shirky, 2008); and the crisis of existing mechanisms of representation. If that is so, we can expect expressions of social dissent in the near future will continue to take the forms seen in the last few years; all the more reason to develop the collective capacity to interpret and shape these phenomena. Doing so requires that, against the second tendency, we understand them in their own terms: according to what they are rather than what they are not.

It was with an analogous inversion of perspective that Pierre Clastres staked out his field of study in political anthropology. His argument was that as long as we describe primitive societies according to what they lack (history, a separate organ of political power), we make our own societies into the normative standard for all others, instituting them as the fully developed *telos* for which primitive society would be the embryonic form, thus positing the passage from one to another as a necessity.[1] That is, we foreclose the possibility of encountering something truly different from us. For that reason, argued Clastres (1977, p. 169), rather than be content to describe them negatively, as "unfinishedness, incompleteness, lack," we should attempt to grasp indigenous societies in their positivity, "as free will not to allow anything slide out of its being that could change, corrupt or dissolve it." This is why he proposed that talk of societies "without state" and "without history" be abandoned: Primitive societies lack an economy because they are *against* the economy, they lack a state because they are *against* the state, and what is to be understood is exactly how they function so as to stave off the emergence of those things.

This article aims to contribute to an understanding of networked movements by looking specifically at the ways in which leadership operates in them. The basic idea is not only that these movements, regularly described as "leaderless," do in fact display different kinds of leadership but also that they function in such a way that places leadership under constraints, neutralizing some of its effects and holding back its autonomization. Like those "societies against the state" hypothesized by Clastres, they restrain the full blossoming of leadership and (formal) organization, maintaining them at a relatively inchoate, fragile state.[2]

---

[1] I use "primitive" not only to follow Clastres' terminology but also because it is probably the term that most clearly conveys the inappropriateness that any other alternative (such as "premodern") also suffers from.

[2] To be clear, my interest in Clastres stems from the parallels that can be drawn between networked movements and the "society against the state" thesis, as well as the questions regarding power that the latter makes thinkable, rather than any particular commitment to the ethnographic accuracy of that thesis—which was, as is known, first developed by Clastres before he came into direct contact with any indigenous societies (Moyn, 2004, pp. 58–59) and has not failed to be accused of overgeneralization (Descola, 1988) and Rousseauism (Amselle, 1979).

Leadership in networked movements thus exists in a state of tension between the tacit acknowledgment of its usefulness for the network-system[3] and the effort to keep it under control. This effort is more than a mere manifestation of anti-authoritarian sentiments or postpolitical anxieties around commitment and collectivity, even if those certainly have a part to play: It can be positively understood as a way of keeping a space open in which new initiatives and directions can potentially appear. What is more, this openness is, in ways that will become clear, itself a mechanism of control. The phrase "between Clastres and Machiavelli" therefore refers both to the two poles that define that tension (the need for leadership to assert itself, the desire to keep it under check) and to the imperative that networked movements find themselves faced with, as political conjunctures impose increasingly complex problems upon them, to negotiate new balances between those competing demands so as to neither inhibit initiative to the point that the network-system cannot respond nor lose all diffuse control over emergent leaders.

Beyond Leaderlessness

Before we get to the ways in which leadership functions in networked movements, it might be necessary to make the case that these movements do indeed display leadership phenomena. After all, their "leaderless" and "spontaneous" quality is one of the traits most remarked upon by outsiders and activists themselves. To pick but one example out of several possible: Writing of Occupy Wall Street, but in terms clearly meant to be generalizable, Manuel Castells (2012) observes that, on top of "the deliberate absence of formal leadership," there was "no traditional leadership, no rational leadership and no charismatic leadership. And certainly no personalized leadership" (pp. 178–179). It would be unsurprising, then, if the kind of discussion proposed here struck some as misplaced. That is, however, part of my point: It only appears to be so if we accept that absence of *formal* organization is synonymous with absence *of organization*; that absence of *formal*, *traditional,* or *charismatic* leadership amounts to absence *of leadership*; and so forth.

Antonio Gramsci (1977a) offered a well-known reductio ad absurdum of naïve ideas of spontaneity in the form of a *coincidentia oppositorum*: "in history there is no 'pure' spontaneity," which would be tantamount to "pure mechanicity" (p. 328). We can break the argument compressed therein into three steps. First, an action that involved no amount, however small, of deliberation would be indistinguishable from the conduct of automata that did no more than act according to what external causes, their own hardwired programming, or necessary laws of society or history fully determined them to do. Second, because humans are not fully (or unilinearly) determined in such a way, no external cause, however powerful, can produce the same behavior in a large number of people at once. Therefore, third, a

---

[3] Though I occasionally speak of "movement" for the sake of simplicity, I prefer using "network-system"—a concept developed at length in Nunes (2014, pp. 15–30)—as a way of suspending any assumptions, which "movement" inevitably suggests, of unity of identity, outlook, goals, etc. This stresses the difficulties of making generalizations about these phenomena as if they possessed something like a unified collective intentionality while retaining some capacity to refer to them in the singular (as a system of interacting networks). This is indeed central to my argument: Although different sectors of the network-system might organize differently (horizontally, vertically, formally, etc.), distributed leadership describes the protocols of the network-system *as a whole*.

change of behavior in a human group will always spread from a few initial centers of deliberation, however elementary and ad hoc they might be. Even if there are no previously existing decision-making mechanisms or structures to coordinate collective action, a new conduct will be diffused along existing networks starting with a relatively small number of initiators, which act as "elements of 'purposeful leadership' [*direzione consapevole*]" (p. 328) in the absence of formally appointed or previously recognized leaders. These initiators, or others who followed in their step, may then take it upon themselves to keep on consciously steering the group in different directions. Even "the most 'spontaneous' movement" (p. 328) only *appears* to be leaderless to subsequent external observers who cannot reconstruct the process through which that diffusion took place.[4]

Rather than embodying the edifying tale of previously unrelated "ordinary people" coming together around a cause, the uprisings of recent years depended for their initiation and development on several relatively small, relatively consistent organizing cores—some recent, some long running, some assembled during the process.[5] These would be the people coming up with dates, places, and formats for protests; working out messages, informational material (videos, flyers, posters), and basic infrastructure (common tents, medical and legal support); running the most popular Facebook pages and Twitter accounts; and so on (Aouragh, 2012; Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Ghonim, 2012; Judensnaider, Lima, Ortellado, & Pomar, 2013; Kroll, 2011; Monterde, Carrillo, Esteve & Aragón, 2013; Rodríguez, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Toret, 2013). At the same time, in the course of these uprisings, groups and even individuals would occasionally acquire sudden notoriety by virtue of actions they carried out, materials they produced, calls they issued, and so forth. Sometimes that notoriety would result in continuing prestige (quantitatively measurable by an increase in social media followership, for instance), which in turn meant a greater capacity to influence the behavior of others.

Evidently, those two things are sides of the same coin. Mediatization, the spread of digital networks in particular, radically amplifies the cascading potential of social networks, resulting in protests that scale up much faster than in the past and can build up to dimensions that would often have required the work of large rank-and-file structures.[6] This makes small, more or less open structures of more active

---

[4] I do not think that paraphrasing Gramsci's insight in terms of networks and diffusion either betrays the spirit of this passage or imports foreign ideas into his thought, in which a sensitivity to network thinking can be glimpsed, for example, in his reflections on the "molecular" absorption of individuals into ruling groups that is characteristic of *trasformismo*, or in a passage like the following, which effectively describes the process of identifying and targeting the hubs in a social network: "the Pope understands the mechanism of cultural reform of the popular-peasant masses better than many in leftwing laicism; he knows that a large mass cannot be converted molecularly; it is necessary, in order to speed the process up, to conquer the natural leaders [*dirigenti*] of the large masses, that is, the intellectuals, or to form groups of intellectuals of a new kind" (Gramsci, 1977b, p. 908).

[5] Speaking of "organizing cores" stresses that it is only in exceptional cases that "leader" (or "hub") will refer to a singular individual; I normally assume these to be groups, even if small ones.

[6] Throughout this article, "social network" refers to the realm of offline interactions among individuals, and "digital network" refers exclusively to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter; "network" refers to both.

nodes, at times even individuals on their own, capable of mobilizing a long tail of less active ones, exercising influence well beyond the size of their membership or reputation or even the circles of self-described activists. This potential is in principle open to anyone for as long as whatever they are offering the network-system is widely acknowledged as valuable and manages to reach a large or sufficiently well-connected audience that will make it circulate.

The minimal definition implied here is that leadership involves the initiation of behavior ranging from emotive or intellectual attitudes, gestures, words, etc. to complex collaborative actions that will be adopted or adapted by others. At this level of generality it is evidently hard to distinguish between those instances in which "initiation" already involves a series of complex collaborative actions, such as taking the first steps to setting up an antiforeclosure campaign, and those such as a lone individual creating a meme that will travel widely. It may be, however, that conceiving of collective action in network terms—as a diffusion process—forces us to see the difference between those things as one in degree rather than in nature. Networks shape individual choice by providing the informational and affective context in which decisions are made so that a modulation introduced into the network can produce a significant alteration of the probability that any number of individuals will adopt a practice suggested by or compatible with the original modulation. Although it is possible to influence the behavior of others even inadvertently by routing information, more precise and elaborate effects depend on the work of carefully honing a message, building alliances, setting up basic infrastructure, creating strategically targeted channels and platforms (face-to-face meetings, websites, online forums, social media profiles), producing and circulating material. Given that they belong on the same continuum, however, the two things stand in proportional relation to each other, like a message in a bottle and an e-mail. The more complex a task—coordinating a street protest as opposed to an online petition, for instance—the more its success is likely to depend on complex preparatory work and hence also a backbone of committed activists. As movements go from largely consensual oppositional targets ("The people want the regime to go." "If the fares don't go down, the city will stop.") to situations in which the positive, determinate content to be given to that opposition comes into question, the need for more complex work and thus also for more purposeful and consistent organizing cores tends to grow. We could therefore say that more organic organization of the kind offered in the past by mass organizations has not disappeared; like most other things in the world, it has been downsized.

Leadership phenomena can thus be pictured as stretching along a continuum or "transductive series" (Simondon, 2005) that goes from punctual incidents in which information or affects routed by a node produce changes in the behaviors of others to targeted, increasingly purposeful efforts at producing that same effect, followed by the progressive stabilization of influentials or leaders (which can be groups, individuals, Web pages, etc.), all the way up to the formalization of decision-making mechanisms and leadership structures. The polyvocity of Gramsci's terminology is very appropriate: Leaders (*dirigenti, direzione*) are, at the most elementary level, those who indicate a *direction* for collective action and are only secondarily *directors* recognized by others. While it is possible to identify some relevant breaks along the way, the most important being formalization itself, at no point on that continuum is there a passage

---

That means both that I do not reduce networked movements to online interactions and that the points made here are generally assumed to be applicable to online as well as offline exchanges.

from "no leadership" to "leadership": Total absence of leadership in a network-system would entail networks in which the actions of nodes have absolutely no impact on others—clearly a contradiction in terms. On the other hand, leadership evidently varies in amplitude and intensity, according to how wide and deep its influence spreads.

This allows us to distinguish between leadership as function and as position, as potential and as event. A *position* of leadership might derive from publicly manifested personal qualities, adherence to tradition, or to explicit, formally binding procedures, which roughly map onto Max Weber's (1994) tripartite scheme of charismatic, traditional, and legal authority, respectively—allowing (as Weber does) for some measure of combination among them. These are all closer to the end of the spectrum that corresponds to greater stability and formalization. A leadership *position* should therefore be seen as the stabilization, formal or not, of a leadership *function*, that is, of an exercise of leadership. But a position does not automatically translate into that exercise: A nonappointed official may be the most influential in the day-to-day running of an organization, and history tells of several cases in which traditional or charismatic leaders became figureheads for backstage operators. A position, therefore, corresponds to a *potential* that may or may not be exercised, or that may be exercised to varying degrees.

In network terms, a position of (potential) leadership is something that can be quantitatively expressed as a node's degree; that is, the number of ties that it has and thus the audience that it may be capable of reaching.[7] This is one of the reasons why networked organization cannot be conceived as the perfectly symmetrical, flat medium it is sometimes supposed to be, nor be said to eliminate power differentials and leadership phenomena, nor be treated as an ideal market of ideas and initiatives: It is always slanted in favor of more connected nodes, both in that those with a larger audience are more likely to be heard and that new nodes coming to the network are more likely to connect to them (the mechanism known as "preferential attachment"). This is easily observed in digital networks such as Twitter, in which the accounts with most followers in principle have the most potential to influence the actions of others; but it is equally the case in offline social networks.[8]

Distributed Leadership and Society Against the State

What networked organization *can* do, as we have seen, is enable nodes with little previously observed leadership potential to trigger changes of conduct in a substantial number of other individuals through a series of cumulative effects.[9] Leadership as *event* is not necessarily the actualization of a

---

[7] This is indicative of potential, not its exercise, which is why network metrics as ascertained at a certain moment do not necessarily tell us what is going or might go on.

[8] The difference between potential and exercise can be seen in González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer, and Moreno's (2013) differentiation of a "following-follower" (who follows whom) and a "mentions" network (actual interactions among nodes). While the first registers potential, the second indexes if and how it is exercised*.*

[9] González-Bailón et al. (2013) observe that, in the quadripartite typology of "influentials," "broadcasters," "hidden influentials" and "common users" that emerges out of plotting "follower-following" and "mention" networks together, even the latter (the vast majority), despite starting from small personal areas of

potential, and it may come entirely out of the blue, as with the YouTube video that sparked the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico. This is when, in the absence of any procedures, precedents, or historical laws to assign them that role, a group or even individual focuses collective attention and action in a direction, acting like a network-system's "vanguard-function" (Nunes, 2014) or its "cutting edge of deterritorialization" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 298): something that *leads* only to the extent that it is *followed*. It does not necessarily depend on the possession of qualities such as the exceptional, personal "*gift of grace,*" or charisma" (Weber, 1994, p. 312), nor does it even entail an individualizable source: History does not record the names of the first Czechoslovak demonstrators who decided to jingle his or her keys during the Velvet Revolution, and even in those cases when the sources are traceable, the information is often irrelevant because it is the diffusion process that matters.[10] It might, on the other hand, result in a boost to a node's potential, that is, in a sudden increase of its "audience" (Sánchez, 2014, para. 13).

Leadership as event is thus the opposite end of the spectrum from formalized leadership: The exercise of a function in excess of any pre-established potential,[11] it is logically anterior to the stabilization or formalization of leadership positions (charismatic, traditional, or legal) and organizational arrangements. In fact, given that organizations or traditions and the positions they establish do not spring into the world fully formed like the goddess Athena, we could say that leadership as event is their genetic condition: the "structural germ" around which a "taking of form" (*prise de forme*) can take place "little by little," *de proche en proche* (Simondon, 2005).[12] In line with the idea that there never is such a thing as

influence, might occasionally reach audiences as large as those of "broadcasters" and "influentials." Likewise, "hidden influentials," while nowhere near as central to the overall network as the media corporations and celebrities that figure among "influentials" and "broadcasters," are nonetheless central to the specific flow of information surrounding the protests, helping shape their identity and framing.

[10] As Juan Luiz Sánchez (2014, para. 13) points out, in such cases "authorship does not matter more than interaction. No author . . . represents all the energy, all the plurality of aspirations and interaction that a message is capable of setting in motion".

[11] It would be more accurate to say that there is no previously *individualizable* potential, as the potential that is exploited in this case is a property of the network, not of any one individual.

[12] Gilbert Simondon's (2005) philosophy of individuation is of interest here for a number of reasons. Generalizing a paradigm taken from crystallography, it depicts individuation as a process in which a structural germ polarizes (gives direction to) a hitherto isotropic milieu that is metastable (containing potential energy and thus susceptible to changing phase if perturbed), propagating across the milieu and structuring it at the same time (transduction). Whereas physical individuation occurs all at once, consuming all potential energy until it attains a stable state, the individuation of more complex individuals remains open for longer, moving from one metastable state to another—not a definitive result but an ongoing "theatre of individuation" (p. 27). This is why Simondon talks of living beings as "nascent crystals" and, in a well-known turn of phrase, the animal as "an inchoate plant" (p. 152). This system offers useful elements with which to think of leadership in general, the continuum that goes from the simplest to more elaborate forms of leadership, and distributed leadership as efforts to slow down the stabilization of parts of the network-system (and the structuration or *prise de forme* that their propagation could produce) in order to extend metastability over time. In the concept of "transindividuality," Simondon

"no leadership" or "no organization," thinking in this way entails that the ground out of which leadership and organization emerge is not the *absence* of those things but a situation in which *the potential* for them appearing exists. Now, the situation in which the potential is greatest for leadership to emerge from anywhere is one in which authority, the monopoly of force, etc., are not concentrated at any single point. The less institutionalized and concentrated power is, the more a society or group is open to the unexpected novelty of new directions. The opposite of concentrated leadership is thus not the absence of leadership but a condition in which, less encumbered by formal or informal strictures, the leadership function is freer to circulate: *distributed leadership*.

It is distributed leadership rather than the general assemblies that existed during the square occupations of recent years that best explains decision-making in networked movements; it suffices to think that assemblies usually result from initiatives taken outside of assemblies or any widely shared decision-making procedures.[13] General assemblies are only one topos in a broader topology, and the most general and constant framework of interaction among groups and individuals in this topology, which remains operative regardless of the ideologies and conceptions of political action those groups and individuals might hold, is distributed leadership.[14]

How does this situation compare to Clastres' thesis? In Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (2010) apt summation, what characterizes a society against the state is "the *symbolic neutralization* of political authority and the *structural inhibition* of ever-present tendencies towards the conversion of power, wealth and prestige into coercion, inequality and exploitation" (p. 12). This is realized through both "the *political control of the economy*" and the "*social control of the political*," which expresses itself in the "separation between the function of leadership and coercive power and the submission of the warrior to the suicidal quest for ever greater glory" (p. 13). The positivity of society against the state is therefore defined by a negative function: It preserves the unity of primitive society by restraining the tendencies that would lead to divisions—that is, crystallized differentials in power and wealth.

---

also provides an alternative to both sociological individualism and holism adequate to the understanding of network-being presupposed in this text: A network-system is not only a system of interacting networks, it is also a transindividual milieu of exchange and contagion.

[13] Of the three most iconic square occupations of 2011 (Tahrir, Puerta del Sol, and Zucotti), only the last one was ever decided at an assembly, and even then a small, self-appointed one. In Mexico, the first assembly took place after the first large protest and the first communiqué issued under the #YoSoy132 name; in Brazil, general assemblies played a secondary role in most cities. On the other hand, network-systems like Occupy and 15M have remained active and capable of producing initiatives (15MpaRato, Occupy Sandy, etc.) in the absence of camps and assemblies.

[14] #YoSoy132 activist Mariana Favela (in press) observes that the "formal 'structure' constituted by the *asambleas* of #Yosoy132 was incapable of comprehending the diversity and dispersion inherent to overflowing insurgences even though it was useful in the beginning to facilitate the response to the demands of the corporate media and the public opinion. It is a common and repeated mistake to reduce #YoSoy132 to the formal structure of *asambleas* or to the spokepersons—rotative and revocable—that were chosen for them. That formal structure is only a feature of a wider composition based on collaboration, spontaneity and creativity."

It is by maintaining three different separations that society against the state pursues this negative function. The first is that between military leadership and political leadership, from which follows the second, that of the exercise of leadership in general from the "monopoly of force." Military leader and chief may or may not be the same person, but the fact that the two serve separate functions entails that neither in principle ever has at his disposal a coercive apparatus that can be used *within* society. Military command exists to be used against the enemy, which leaves both chief and military leader with no capacity to enforce their decisions internally.[15] Behind these two roles lies the most general separation, the one between power and prestige. Prestige, the chief's only capital, is far more volatile and precarious than the power of a stabilized separate political authority. The chief is valued only insofar as he proves himself "the efficacious instrument of his society," placing "at the service of his group his technical competence as warrior, his courage, his dynamism" (p. 178), "oratorical gift, skill as a hunter" (p. 176), generosity, and capacity to fulfill his primary role as the one who "pacifies disputes (…) not by using a force that he does not possess and which would not be recognized, but by relying on the sole virtues of his prestige, his fairness and his word" (p. 28).

Hence the "permanent fragility of a power ceaselessly contested" (Clastres, 1977, p. 34), or at least permanently contestable: The chief is "never assured any of his 'orders' will be executed" and thus "depends on the good will of the group" (p. 34). The continuity of his position depends on the continuity of his prestige, which in turn depends on the good exercise of his functions—in which "success is never certain, as *the chief's word has no force of law*," and failure means that his prestige "may well not survive, since he has given evidence of his powerlessness to do what is expected of him" (p. 176).

Limited at one end by the need to perform his functions adequately and thus demonstrate his continued usefulness for the group, the chief is limited at the other by "the obligation . . . to constantly manifest the innocence of his function" (Clastres, 1977, p. 41). He is "under surveillance; society watches to make sure the taste for prestige does not become the desire for power" (Clastres, 2010, p. 169). Occasionally a chief may attempt to "trespass the strict limit assigned to his function" and to "substitute his own personal interest for the collective interest" (Clastres, 1977, p. 178). However, if his "desire for power becomes too obvious, the procedure put into effect is simple: [His people] abandon him, indeed, even kill him" (Clastres, 2010, p. 169).

Fragile Leadership

---

[15] This is Clastres' (2010, p. 280) later position on the subject: "contrary to an opinion that is as false as it is widespread (that the chief has no power, *except in times of war*), the warrior leader is at no moment . . . in a position . . . to give an order which he knows ahead of time will not be disobeyed." Yet that opinion was the one Clastres himself (1977, p. 27) held when he wrote his first essay on chieftainship. As Moyn (2004) observes, that early admission of the military leader's power meant war required further integration into the society against the state thesis, which was the problem Clastres was working on at the time of his death.

Whereas societies against the state constantly strive to "maintain power and institution, command and leader apart from each other" (Clastres, 1977, p. 136), in distributed leadership it is first of all the inhibition of institution itself—through a proliferation of positions whose coexistence has the effect of keeping each other in check —that maintains leadership in a condition of fragility.[16] To the extent that the network-system remains polycentric, no full-blown centers can emerge, and vice versa.

This results in the same separation between *word* and *power* observed by Clastres: "An order: there lies the very thing the chief could not issue" (1977, p. 136). The more compact an organizing core, the less of a fixed membership or followership it has, the smaller its capacity to enforce any of its decisions, and thus the more dependent on the good will of others it is. Yet this weakness is often not be seen by either "leaders" or "the led" as necessarily a bad thing. For the latter, the inhibition of "separate organs of political power" (Clastres, 2010, p. 163) both staves off the pitfalls of total hegemony of a node over the network-system and maintains a certain openness to fresh initiatives potentially coming from anywhere. For the former, it means it is possible to avoid the dangers of scaling up as an organization while retaining the potential to produce large-scale effects. Not having the imperative to recruit allows organizing cores to grow selectively, keeping internal relations relatively informal and structureless, inhibiting (though not halting) hierarchizing tendencies, and minimizing the risk of debilitating internal dissensus.[17]

For the network-system as a whole, openness to initiatives or leadership as event enables innovation; for example, it was the impromptu encampment at Madrid's Puerta del Sol that effectively created the conditions for prolonging the 15M movement in time. On the other hand, much of that innovation might become stuck in the short term, producing quick responses that do not necessarily amount to a coherent strategy in changing conjunctures; longer-term thinking requires a certain continuity that depends on the stabilization of organizing cores. Likewise, the fact that there are many different levels and modes of adhesion and participation, from the biggest hubs and densest clusters to the outer peripheries of the long tail, entails less identitarian closure and the capacity to reach beyond activist circles. The drawback, however, is less political cohesion and the risk that concrete messages and goals will become diluted in generic consensuses, while producing more precise decisions could become

---

[16] Inhibition comes in degrees just as much as organization does—it holds back without ever rendering institutionalization impossible as such.

[17] The internal structure of Partido X (2013), the electoral alternative ultimately eclipsed by Podemos in Spain, was explicitly designed in such a way as to make the most of these advantages, consisting of widening circles of participation to determine policy around a small, tight kernel with (supposedly) exclusively executive responsibilities. It was a similar logic that led to the institutional form adopted by Podemos in its foundational congress, with the small group of founders, now instated as the party's Coordination Council, at the center. Apart, of course, from the much greater impact Podemos has had, the reason why a similar way of relating "core, periphery, outside" (Jurado, 2014) provoked more controversy in one case than the other seems clear: While Partido X's founders openly laid out the structure before inviting participation, Podemos elicited participation (especially through its circles) before the terms of the relation between organizing core and members had been made clear. In that way, the officialization of that core could not but be experienced as a closing down (see Nunes, 2015).

virtually impossible. This is especially evident in large general assemblies, and that is where one advantage of relatively supple organizing cores becomes obvious, as they are normally able to work out action plans more quickly and in better detail than most assemblies ever could. A rejection of *formal* accountability—not having to run their initiatives past internal or external constituencies to which they would be bound by some specific set of procedures—thus offers them gains in decision-making efficiency and, at least in principle, *internal* accountability and democracy (the smaller the unit, the easier it is to challenge leaders). That comes, of course, at the cost of never being "assured any of [their] 'orders' will be executed"; because they only lead to the extent they can get others to follow, they are permanently dependent "on the good will" of the network-system. Weak formal accountability is then compensated by strong diffuse accountability.[18]

As can be seen, while some degree of leadership is necessary for a movement to keep on moving, both organizing cores and the network-system at large can find advantages in a situation in which leadership remains relatively fragile. It is between these two poles that distributed leadership moves, negotiating trade-offs such as the ones described above. That these are trade-offs means there is no wrong or right in them. For example, there is no correct answer to whether a large, heterogeneous network-system is always preferable to a smaller, more homogeneous, more manageable one; the opposite of "too heterogeneous" is not "homogeneous" but "less heterogeneous," and it is up to agents to find solutions appropriate to each moment. Each situation will pose new problems, which is why there can be no stable state in distributed leadership.

There is, however, an immanent optimality to it. The preservation of a certain balance among existing hubs whereby they neutralize each other to some extent, preventing any single one from hegemonizing the whole network-system, at once avoids the autonomization of any one center of power, maintains the network-system's relative independence from its hubs and more organic clusters, and keeps the space open for new vanguard-functions to emerge. Yet the preservation of this equilibrium is itself constantly balanced against the imperative to act, which will usually demand creating new differentials of power or strengthening those that already exist—and no doubt there are certain thresholds beyond which tendencies toward centralization and the autonomization of leadership can no longer be controlled.[19]

At least below those thresholds, however, hubs are subject to a mechanism of continuous legitimation that makes their capacity to *direct* (give direction to) dependent on criteria like those faced by the indigenous chief. On one end, the capacity to preserve or enhance their prestige by continuing to originate or give visibility to initiatives and information widely recognized as valuable; on the other, innocence: their perceived network ethic, or whether they are seen as acting cooperatively and in the general interest or with a view to enhancing their own power.[20] The larger a hub grows, and hence the

---

[18] In Nunes (2015), formal and diffuse accountability are shown at work in developing movement strategies regarding electoral politics in Spain.

[19] I point out some of these tendencies in Nunes (2015).

[20] There is another objective factor that affects nodes' capacity to influence collective action: the transformations that the network-system itself undergoes, including the appearance of new hubs, the

closer its leadership potential moves to the threshold beyond which it can no longer be controlled, the more scrutinized it will tend to be. For as long as it remains relatively fragile, however, its power can be put in check by suspending cooperation—suspension of cooperation and exclusion from networks being precisely, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p. 126) observed, the equivalent of death in a network world.[21] That is the surveillance of the indigenous chief updated for the online panopticon.

An example of a growing hub restrained by the network-system is found in the case of Brazilian independent media collective Mídia Ninja in the context of the 2013 protests. Much valued at the height of the demonstrations for establishing a "protester's perspective" against mainstream media and police narratives with their livestream coverage, Ninja's prestige took a drop soon afterward (Torturra, 2013). Along with its mother organization, the controversial Fora do Eixo network, it was accused of duplicitously exploiting the group's business-social movement, closed collective–open network ambiguity, and privately appropriating collective organizing work by presenting itself to politicians, institutions, and corporations as the key movers behind large mobilizations ("Mais um relato," 2013; "Acabou a magia," 2013). Its behavior was widely deemed as antithetical to the cooperative ethos of activism, the constant drive to expand its own network resulting in aggressive cooption, exclusion, and manipulation tactics. Even one of Ninja's original advantages—bucking the natural tendency toward fragmentation by aggregating material from around the country in one place—came to be seen as a risk: The more prestige and collaboration it accrued, the less visible the alternatives to it became. That discomfort translated into many people ceasing to share or publicize Ninja content and erstwhile collaborators leaving the network to start their own collectives. Although Ninja still has a large online followership, the backlash certainly dented its prestige and stymied its rise, exposing it to competition from other vehicles.

The Network Prince

Whereas Clastres (2010) hypothesized that an early premonition of the "fatal misfortune" (p. 175) that "has denatured man by instituting a division in society" (p. 173) guided society against the state, understanding why people make the kinds of choices that sustain distributed leadership need not appeal to a problematic "sociological *intentionality*" (Clastres, 1977, p. 39). Rather than an uncanny prescience, we could first of all point to very present experiences of a legitimacy crisis of representative institutions in general, and particularly to those that once had (or even monopolized) the role of channels for social dissent. Of course, as some have noted, contemporary "mistrust of collectivity" (Dean, 2009, p. 235) is as much a product of neoliberal subjectivation as it is of institutional failure (see also Gilbert, 2013). It is also true that a diffuse anti-authoritarianism is probably the most widespread ideology among today's activists. Yet it should be noted that, before being a choice that some agents can justify according to a political ideology, digitally enhanced networked organizing is the spontaneous extension of everyday networking practices into the field of politics, as well as what has allowed individuals to organize in the absence of mass organizations in the first place. In other words, the positive advantages of distributed

---

bridging of previously distant clusters, and increased redundancy, which contribute to reducing the centrality of existing hubs.

[21] A sanction suffered in one part of the network-system does not prevent a node from being embraced somewhere else, such as when individuals go from prestige among activists to media notoriety.

leadership assert themselves before the negative, inhibiting function; they are embraced for the affordances they offer—their pragmatic value—regardless of whether they are also perceived as realizing or prefiguring the political ideals that individuals might hold.

More importantly, negative and positive aspects are sides of the same coin. The more the leadership function can circulate, the more organizing cores remain relatively fragile, with no single hub attaining total hegemony over the network-system; the more it is impossible for anyone to monopolize the capacity to orient collective action, the more that function is open to being occupied. Inhibiting the stabilization of one or very few centers of power is more than a goal in itself, though some agents might represent it as such. It is a *condition* for retaining openness to leadership as event but also the *effect* of the proliferation of initiatives or vanguard functions that follow from it. Much like society against the state, there is something recursive, autotelic about distributed leadership, which concerns the regulative maintenance of that relative openness within certain bounds. The proliferation and circulation of leadership ultimately depends on a certain degree of proliferation and circulation of leadership.

Thus, whether individuals are acting out of a healthy (or unhealthy) mistrust of representation and organization, professed political principles, an everyday understanding of network logic, or simply exploiting potentials available to them, their actions contribute to maintaining the balances that characterize distributed leadership—which is what tends to emerge when a majority of individuals are looking to maximize possibilities of action while minimizing centralization and the autonomization of power. They need not represent themselves as pursuing distributed leadership in order to produce and reproduce it, but calling what they do "distributed leadership" certainly offers a more comprehensive description of what results from what they do than hypostasizing this or that political ideal (horizontality, anarchism) held by some and not by others.

The inseparability of positive and negative aspects restates something said above: Preserving the balances that keep distributed leadership going is a goal balanced against the imperative to act. Movements do not exist so as to have the best possible internal democracy but in order to transform existing conditions, and for a network-system to become incapable of acting is just as undesirable as one hub taking it over. Fear of hierarchies, structures, and representation, healthy as they can be in themselves and in their side effects, can sometimes verge on fear of organizing or making decisions altogether, inhibiting initiative to the point that acting becomes impossible. In those cases, ideas such as "process," "movement," or "multitude" start to function much like the chief's ritual discourse, which places the tribe's "cause and origin . . . totally beyond human control" (Viveiros de Castro, 2010, p. 29), positing a "heteronomic transcendence" as "guarantee of the immanence and autonomy of social power" (pp. 29–30). When movements are turned into substances to which properties such as horizontality originally and necessarily apply, initiatives can start to be seen not as immanent transformations but as what will inevitably "change, corrupt or dissolve" (Clastres, 1977) a much-prized horizontality. Change thus ends up being seen not as prolonging the movement's existence in new directions but as ending it—as if in order to stay true to itself the process had to be safeguarded from the actions of its own participants.[22]

---

[22] This can be heard in an Occupy Wall Street participant's protest against the creation of a spokescouncil on the grounds that "through the Spokes Council working groups become organizations and they become

It is therefore essential to emphasize that distributed leadership and vanguard functions mutually presuppose each other. If the point of preventing centers of power from growing beyond control is to make sure that power circulates freely, and if that free circulation manifests itself in the occurrence of initiatives not regulated by any overarching decision-making mechanisms, one can say that it is *so that* vanguard functions can exist that there is distributed leadership. In the absence of broadly accepted structures or procedures, that is in fact the *only* way the network-system taken as a whole can move forward.

Lying somewhere between an impossible ideal (perfect flatness and symmetry) and a danger to be avoided ("winner-takes-all"[23] dynamics in which a hub hegemonizes a network-system), distributed leadership depends on the capacity of a relatively small number of relatively compact hubs to activate a long tail of less active, less organized nodes. Its optimality supposes not eliminating this disparity in favor of absolute horizontality but maintaining it while keeping it under control, both through the emergence of new hubs and submitting existing ones to the need for continuous legitimation. Neither "*contemplative nostalgia* of the One" (the party) nor relentless "mechanical dissolution of the One" into an undifferentiated multiple (Clastres, 1977, p. 148), distributed leadership not only can live *with* some lack of democracy, in the sense of power differentials and a constitutional lack of universally recognized procedures, it in fact lives *off* it. If the only true institutionalization of freedom consists in not fully institutionalizing it—in allowing some room for the other of institutionality: the power to make, unmake, and transform institutions—democracy's absence is also its ground.

According to Althusser (1997), in the "void of the conjuncture" (p. 114) of Machiavelli's Italy, "the new Prince might come from anywhere and might be anyone: ultimately he might start from nothing and be nothing at the start" (pp. 132–133). Retaining something of that void, preventing it from being fully occupied—that is where networked movements resemble societies against the state. Unlike these, however, which strive to stave off change, networked movements require change to occur and are therefore obliged to constantly renegotiate the balance between initiative and diffuse control, unaccountability and accountability, openness and consistency, heterogeneity and homogeneity. The contemporary equivalent of the thesis that "to found a republic, one must be alone" (Machiavelli, 1950, p. 141) would be that, when introducing an innovation into a network-system that will help steer collective action in a valuable direction, one will often find oneself operating outside any pre-established procedures. Yet this is not quite the "absolute void" of "absolute beginnings" that Althusser (1997, p. 114) discusses. A network-system is not only constantly opening political opportunities (Machiavelli's *occasioni*) for those capable of seizing them, it is what must be tapped into if an initiative is to become viable. Whereas Machiavelli's beginnings always involve the consideration of military might (hence coercive power), would-be network princes start out fragile like indigenous chiefs, with nothing to go on but the prestige that their proposal may command. It is not even that "when the result is good . . . it will absolve [them] from blame" (Machiavelli, 1950, p. 139): There will be no result unless they can garner support.

---

parties. . . . [This] shows a misunderstanding of what exactly we're doing here. Occupy Wall Street is never, and will never be an organization" (Gray, 2011).

[23] See Bianconi and Bárabasi (2001).

In one sense, then, network-systems create the conditions for and require the emergence of vanguard functions that can move them in different directions, like *il volgo* (the popular mass) requires the Prince to intervene between itself and *i grossi* (the aristocracy). On the other hand, for as long as would-be princes remain relatively weak and institutionalization remains relatively low, the network-system retains a diffuse control over them for which there are no written laws and which depends on that lack to exist. Fear, not laws; that is Machiavelli's discovery regarding "the *general form* of political constraint" (Althusser, 1997, p. 108). So if the network requires princes to emerge, it at the same time exercises over them the same *paura senza odio*—fear without hatred—that Machiavelli (1950, pp. 60–63) recommends the Prince should nurture in his subjects.

In short, distributed leadership is, like Machiavelli's Italy, a propitious terrain for opportunists. But opportunism is not a bad thing per se: It means no more than the capacity to seize the opportunities available in a conjuncture, having the *virtù* to match *Fortuna*. There are good and bad opportunists, depending not only on their capacity to make the most of *occasione* (which in itself demands great sensitivity to one's environment) but equally on how well they can sustain the scrutiny of the network-system, continuing to act as efficacious instruments, demonstrating a good network ethic, manifesting their innocence. At least for as long as one is fragile, remaining legitimate requires one to understand how narrow, in such a situation, the limits of legitimacy are: Listening more than speaking, presenting oneself as vehicle more than protagonist, and so forth. A realization, if through unexpected means, of the Zapatista motto "*mandar obedeciendo*": "to rule by obeying."

References

Acabou a magia: Uma intervenção sobre o Fora do Eixo e Mídia Ninja [The magic is over: An intervention on Fora do Eixo and Mídia Ninja]. (2013, August 16). *Passa Palavra*. Retrieved from http://passapalavra.info/2013/08/95885

Althusser, L. (1997). Machiavel et nous [Machiavelli and us]. *Écrits philosophiques e politiques* [Philosophical and political writings] (Vol. II, pp. 39–168). Paris, France: Stock/IMEC.

Amselle, J.-L. (Ed.). (1979). *Le sauvage à la mode* [The fashionable savage]. Paris, France: Sycomore.

Aouragh, M. (2012). Social media, mediation, and the Arab revolutions. *Triple C*, *10*(2), 518–536.

Bianconi, G., & Barabási, A-L. (2001). Bose-Einstein condensation in complex networks. *Physical Review Letters*, *86*, 5632–5635. doi:10.1103/PhysRevLett.86.5632

Bimber, B., Flanagin, A., & Sthol, C. (2005). Reconceptualizing collective action in the contemporary media environment. *Communication Theory*, *15*(4), 365–388. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2005.tb00340.x

Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The new spirit of capitalism*. London, UK: Verso.

Castells, M. (2011). A network theory of power. *International Journal of Communication, 5*, 773–787.

Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Clastres, P. (1977). *La societé contre l'état: Recherches d'anthropologie politique* [Society against the state: Essays in political anthropology]. Paris, France: Minuit.

Clastres, P. (2010). *Archaeology of violence*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Dean, J. (2009). *The communist horizon*. London, UK: Verso.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2004). *Mille Plateaux*. Paris, France: Minuit.

Descola, P. (1988). La chefferie amérindienne dans l'anthropologie politique [Amerindian chieftainship in political anthropology]. *Revue Française de Science Politique*, *38*(5), 818–827.

Favela, M. (in press). Redrawing power. *Social Justice Journal, 45*.

Gerbaudo, P. (2012). *Tweets and the streets: Social media and contemporary activism*. London, UK: Pluto.

Ghonim, W. (2012). *Revolution 2.0: A memoir*. London, UK: Fourth Estate.

Gilbert, J. (2013). *Common ground: Democracy and collectivity in an age of individualism*. London, UK: Pluto.

González-Bailón, S., Borge-Holthoefer, J., & Moreno, Y. (2013). Broadcasters and hidden influentials in online protest diffusion. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *57*(7), 943–965. doi:10.1177/0002764213479371

Gramsci, A. (1977a). *Quaderni del carcere* [Prison notebooks] (Vol. I). Turin, Italy: Einaudi.

Gramsci, A. (1977b). *Quaderni del carcere* [Prison notebooks] (Vol. II). Turin, Italy: Einaudi.

Gray, R. (2011, November 8). Occupy Wall Street debuts the new spokes council. *The Village Voice*. Retrieved from http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2011/11/occupy_wall_str_25.php

Judensnaider, E., Lima, L., Ortellado, P., & Pomar, M. (2013). *20 centavos* [20 cents]. São Paulo, Brazil: Veneta.

Jurado, F. (2014, November 17). Podemos: Centro, entorno y afuera [Podemos: Core, periphery, and outside]. *El Diario*. Retrieved from http://www.eldiario.es/zonacritica/Podemos-nucleo-entorno-afuera_6_325527451.html

Kroll, A. (2011, October 17). How Occupy Wall Street really got started. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/10/occupy-wall-street-international-origins

Machiavelli, N. (1950). *The prince and the discourse*. New York, NY: Modern Library.

Mais um relato: Quais os problemas do Fora do Eixo? [Another report: What is wrong with Fora do Eixo?]. (2013, August 12). *Passa Palavra*. Retrieved from http://passapalavra.info/2013/08/82408

Monterde, A., Carrillo, R., Esteve, M. & Aragón, P. (2013). #YoSoy132: Un nuevo paradigma en la política mexicana? [#YoSoy132: A new paradigm in Mexican politics?]. IN3 Working Paper Series. Retrieved from http://journals.uoc.edu/index.php/in3-working-paper-series/article/view/2066/n15-monterde-carrillo-esteve-aragon-es

Moyn, S. (2004). Of savagery and civil society: Pierre Clastres and the transformation of French thought. *Modern Intellectual History, 1*(1), 55–80. doi:10.1017/S1479244303000076

Nunes, R. (2014). *Organisation of the organisationless: Collective action after networks*. London, UK: Mute/PML.

Nunes, R. (2015, June 1). Spain: From networks to parties . . . and back. *Viewpoint Magazine*. Retrieved from https://viewpointmag.com/2015/06/01/spain-from-networks-to-parties-and-back/

Partido X. (2013). How does it work? Retrieved from http://partidox.org/how-does-it-work

Rodríguez, P. (2011). Como se gestó el 15M? [How was 15M prepared?]. Retrieved from https://storify.com/pablobuentes/que-es-y-como-se-gesto-el-movimiento-15m

Ryan, Y. (2011, January 26). How Tunisia's revolution began. *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved from http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/01/2011126121815985483.html

Sánchez, J. L. (2014, December 11). No importa quién mandó el SMS del 13-M. [It doesn't matter who sent the 13-M SMS]. *El Diario*. Retrieved from http://www.eldiario.es/zonacritica/da-escribiera-SMS_6_333926615.html

Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. London, UK: Allen Lane.

Simondon, G. (2005). *L'Individu à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* [The individual in light of the notions of form and information]. Grenoble, France: Jerôme Millon.

Toret, J. (2013). Tecnopolítica: La potencia de las multitudes conectadas. [Technopolitics: The power of
        connected multitudes]. *IN3 Working Paper Series*. Retrieved from
        http://www.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/in3-working-paper-series/article/view/1878

Torturra, B. (2013, December). Olho da rua [Street eye]. *Piauí.* http://revistapiaui.estadao.com.br/edicao-
        87/questoes-de-midia-e-politica/olho-da-rua

Viveiros de Castro, E. (2010). Introduction: The untimely, again. In P. Clastres, *Archaeology of violence*
        (pp. 9–51). Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Weber, M. (1994). The profession and vocation of politics. In P. Lassman & R. Speirs (Eds.). *Political
        writings* (pp. 309–369). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.