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THE NETWORK DYNAMICS OF MOVEMENTS

Recent events, such as the uprisings during the so-called Arab Spring, the anti-corruption movement in India or the protests against social and economic inequalities in Europe and beyond, have triggered a debate among activists, scholars and policy makers on how new social movements are being organised. Most of the publications on this topic, such as Eric Kluitenberg's *Legacies of Tactical Media*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Declaration* or Gabriella Coleman's fresh from the press study about *Anonymous,* implicitly or explicitly tackle the problem of political organisation, in particular the question of leadership, representation and decision-making.[1] Rodrigo Nunes' essay *The Organisation of the Organisationless*,[2] of which an edited version is published here, takes up these threads and knits them into a fine analytical piece. Opposing the binary scheme between horizontality and centralism, which is most often taken into account when explaining organisational models, Nunes proposes a different approach to analyse the formation and mechanics of recent social and political movements. Neither the Leninist vanguard nor the libertarian imagination of a *per se* democratic network are, therefore, suitable concepts for understanding the transformations in interventionist politics since the turn of the millennium. In fact, the network itself, respectively the discourse about networks has gone through a considerable transformation since the Hungarian-American physicist Albert-László Barabási and his colleague Réka Albert proposed a scale-free topology around the same time.[3] Other than the hitherto dominant model of a random network, which fostered the idea of equally distributed nodes within a network, the term scale-free network indicates the existence of power-law distributions: some nodes, which are called hubs, have a proportionally

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1 Cp. Eric Kluitenberg, *Legacies of Tactical Media,* Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures, 2011; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration*, New York NY, Argo-Navis, 2012; Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous*, New York NY, Verso, 2014.
2 Cp. Rodrigo Nunes, *Organisation of the Organisationless: Collective Action after Networks*, London & Lüneburg, Mute & Post Media Lab, 2014.
3 Cp. Albert-László Barabási and Réka Albert, "Emergence of Scaling in Random Networks", *Science*, 286, 1999, pp. 509–512.

high degree of connectedness while most nodes are comparatively poorly connected.[4] In this sense, most real-world networks – from the World Wide Web to neuronal and social networks – do not resemble the popular image of the (information) superhighway, equally connecting different localities within a specific territory, but rather an air traffic system, where a small number of large airports are responsible for most flight connections, in contrast to a large number of small airports with very few flight connections. The finding of scale-free distributions following a power law is henceforth challenging the conventional notion of a network that, in many cases, is still seen as a horizontal entity, evoking an emancipatory hope amongst political activists.

For Nunes, whose inquiry is largely based on insights into the protest movement against the *2014 FIFA World Cup* in Brazil, recent upheavals have shown that the organisational form of protest cannot be characterised by horizontality anymore, but rather by what he calls "distributed leadership".[5] Ever since the *alterglobalisation movement* in the late 1990s, collective political actions – including those which are labeled 'hacktivism'[6] – have changed fundamentally in their organisation: even if classical institutional players such as political parties, unions or interest groups still play a crucial role in the ability of a movement to organise itself, they do not 'naturally' seize leadership within the movement anymore. This does not, as explained before, correspond to the libertarian dream of a movement without leadership, but, in fact, there are multiple leaders, on different layers, reorganising the movement over time. As Nunes states, new social movements "are not leader*less*, but […] leader*ful*",[7] taking into account that the leadership role can, potentially, be occupied by anyone within the movement. A look at new collectives such as the loosely connected transnational network called Anonymous may help to clarify this idea. In its self-conception, the group identifies itself as an "Internet gathering" with "a very loose and decentralized command structure that

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4 The power-law distribution is also responsible for the naming of these networks: they do not have an average degree of connectedness, which is why their degree of distribution is scale free.

5 Cp. Nunes, pp. 33ff. In this context, it may be fruitful to look beyond the field of social and political movements and to take other discourses into consideration. For example, recent debates within management studies do approach the question of distributed leadership from a business-oriented point of view and, thereby, offer interesting perspectives on the phenomenon: cp. Richard Bolden, "Distributed Leadership in Organizations: A Review of Theory and Research", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13, 2011, pp. 251-269.

6 Cp. Clemens Apprich, "Upload Dissident Culture: Public Netbase's Interventions Into Digital and Urban Space", *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*, 2(2), 2010, pp. 79-91, pp. 83f.

7 Nunes, p. 33.

operates on ideas rather than directives".[8] Thus, Anonymous and its many offshoots and associations, such as LulzSec, AntiSec, TeamPoison and the Peoples Liberation Front, no longer resemble a classical NGO like, let's say, Greenpeace, with its statutes, official members and formal hierarchies. Neither does it make sense to compare them to former activist groups such as Subversive Aktion in Germany or the Yippies in the US, because the latter were still run, or at least driven by specific and identifiable leaders (e.g. Abbie Hoffman, Dieter Kunzelmann, Rudi Dutschke). In contrast, Anonymous' gatherings assemble different, and sometimes even differing individuals, groups and interests, without forming a political entity. This does not, however, mean that the collective itself is power*less*, in the sense that it would not be able to make decisions over its actions. On the contrary, the diversity of actions associated with Anonymous has shown how power*ful* distributed leadership can be; even if it is not always clear how decisions are being made and who is speaking in the name of whom.

It is the finding of this dynamic aspect of scale-free networks that makes Nunes' essay so valuable. Until now a lot of effort has been put into scrutinising the topological properties of these networks, in particular the existence of power hubs. These crucial nodes within a network profit from a phenomenon which, in another context, is best known as the 'Matthew effect', where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This means that a central node (i.e. a hub) is more likely to attract newly emerging nodes, because of its strategic role within the network.[9] But such a 'preferential attachment' would consequently favour existing players to take the lead, which, in turn, contradicts the aforementioned structural openness of social movements and activist groups. Here is where Nunes comes in, when he mentions the possibility of a node which is not a hub to "act as a vector of collective action".[10] This is deemed important, because it means that a node (e.g. a member of a network) can occupy a 'vanguard-function' over a specific period of time, without necessarily becoming a hub or permanent leader in the process. Nunes' thought-provoking piece, therefore, gives us a handle to understand dynamic forms of organisation, which go beyond the mere assertion of absolutely horizontal (i.e. democratic) networks as well as the conventional assumption of highly vertical (i.e. hierarchic) structures. Having said this, some terminological inconsistencies seem to emerge when we take a closer look at the network term being in use.

For Nunes, the whole trick is to replace movement with network-system in order to be able to "see *organisation* as a continuum stretching

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8   Anonymous, "ANON OPS: A Press Release", 2010.

9   Cp. Alberto-László Barabási and Eric Bonabeau, "Scale-Free Networks", *Scientific American*, 288, 2003, pp. 50–59, p. 55.

10 Nunes, p. 38.

from lesser to greater degrees of *stabilisation, formalisation and consistency*".[11] While this trick may allow us to go beyond the network-movement, thereby also taking those into consideration who do not see themselves as part of the movement, it reintroduces the rather static term of system. Even if the network-system is "a system of different networks […] which constitute so many interacting layers that can neither be reduced to nor superposed on each other",[12] the notion of the system, at least from a system-theoretical perspective, entails the problem of a system boundary. Thus, as soon as a network becomes a system it is defined by a boundary between itself and its environment, and, in consequence, ceases to be a network – because a network, by definition, consists of an open structure.[13] On the other hand, a system can become a network by dissolving its boundaries, because every node within a network can be seen as a transit point with potentially endless connections going through it. In this sense, the network and the system are mutually incompatible, assuming that a network is neither stable nor fixed, but comes into being only during the process of network-building itself. The network is always in the making, and rather than 'systemic thinking' it is this perspective that underlines the dynamic aspect of social and political movements.

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11 Nunes, p. 27.
12 Nunes, p. 20.
13 Cp. Stefan Weber, *Medien – Systeme – Netze. Elemente einer Theorie der Cyber-Netzwerke*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2001, p. 58.