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## **Afterword. Propositions on the Organizational Form** 2019

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## **Afterword**

# **Propositions on the Organizational Form**

**Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter**

## **Media and Organization**

The quest of organization haunts us. If anarchists were once said to defy authority, nowadays we defy organization. Structures are perceived to hold us back and pin us down with the iron cage of identity. The solidified social limits our freedom with its demand of never-ending "engagement." How desperate is it to live your life as an insulated rebel without a cause? Instead, we should ask, what is pure organization? Is there a new core that we could define and design? What's commitment outside of today's technosocial conventions? Are there bonds that create ties, unhinged from procedure, unfettered by bureaucracy? Is there a form of conspiracy that operates without all the tiresome preparations? Mutual aid and local self-organization come to mind, but what if we're forced to pursue organization of the unorganizable? Does a self-evident General Will exist that does not need to be discussed and exhaustively questioned? Having arrived at this point, we can clearly see the romantic undertone of the Critique of Organization. What's a lean revolution, an effortless regime change? Can we presuppose a hive mind that performs like an automaton? Humans, coming together, create the Event, simply because of an inner urge to experience relations without guarantees.

90 What does organization mean in a culture of shrinking commitment? Nowadays, the decision to commit is one made after a cost-benefit analysis. Options are kept alive as possibilities of transactions with higher returns. Everyday life, as Randy Martin (2002) so insightfully analyzed, is infused with financialization. Intimacy now bears the cold face of nihilism. Once life is unburdened of fixed dates and routine tasks, the horizon of choice fuels the desire to defer any obligation. This is the logical extension of post-Fordist labor regimes predicated on flexibility without a future. A social desert blooms in the techno-abyss of weak ties.

What are the prevailing forces, conditions, and events that galvanize organization, as distinct from disorganization, entropy, indifference, flexibilization, or outbursts without an agenda? Reinhold Martin's concept "media organize" is a key injunction in this book on organization. For Martin, media are defined by their organizational function: media organize. At the core of this thesis is the production of order that generates patterns and relations. Constituted through material properties and the partitioning work of form, the order of media is a way of distinguishing different organizational dynamics and forces. Similarly, organizational tendencies, practices, and capacities become a way to define media and distinguish one medium from another. Organization is coupled with form. The question of organization for us has, for many years, been key to political design within a world of persistent crisis, struggle, even chaos. What governs in a world in which the ordering work of government is in near-total disrepute?

The Cambridge Analytica controversy of early 2018 prompts us to ask, first, whether geopolitical forces condition or organize media to organize. Cambridge Analytica-Facebook very deliberately decided to touch down in the United States as the primary test-bed; the rest of the world was not so relevant. They are part of the larger FANG "plat-formatting" of economy and society (Mackenzie and Munster 2019), along with TenCent, Baidu, and the Chinese logistical media juggernaut. In this regard, media do indeed organize. However, it is not really possible to return to the media format as

we have known it during the era of broadcast communications. Is the platform itself the core of the problem or part of the solution? There is a post-Hegelian dilemma here: what comes after the synthesis? Usually implosion and collapse. No apotheosis. What are the counterforces that can challenge the platform? The federation of decentralized platforms? Post-platform—is that all there is? It might be premature to answer these questions. It's early days for the platform as form.

In the wake of Cambridge Analytica–Facebook, we find ourselves asking what's organization after social media? We can trawl through the Marx–Bakunin–Lenin debates, even read them on repeat mode in the “Jodi Dean” retro style that wants to make the American Communist Party Great Again, but there is no point in recuperating the worn-out organs of the party. Another option is the party–movement hybrid, a party of parties, a federation of political entities, which was extensively discussed in the context of Syriza, Podemos, and DiEM25, each an initiative that came out of the 2011 uprisings. A leap-frogging of technomodernity happened when enough noise gathered around the squares, from the Arab Spring, via WikiLeaks and Anonymous, to Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, which makes one think that yes, maybe social media do indeed organize. But organize what? Those “early” years, not even a decade ago, situated organization as a media event that facilitates consciousness raising and acts as a tool for pressure groups and lobbyists to turn the party into something with social momentum. But the revolution never happened. And it never will. The scale of crisis has shown that no amount of coalition building among nations will fix the living hell of the future-present. The corporate-run nation-state does not offer any solutions either. This is why so much of the political energy these days is focused on the municipal level, including city-to-city networks (Caccia 2016).

Let's hear more about the Protestant colleges before they became absorbed into the military–industrial–educational complex. And what about Norman Foster's new Apple campus in Cupertino, California? How has that complex devoted energies and decision-

92 making to transform the organizational logic and production of knowledge and subjectivity? Will it be an organizational model rolled out elsewhere across the world, like the glass-and-steel skyscrapers were in the twentieth century? We fully agree that architecture mediates and organizes the world to which it refers. What would happen if we were to run architecture-as-media alongside networks-as-organization? Architecture as a complex of social relations, infrastructural capacities, engineering standards, and aesthetic styles distinguished the mode of organization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This set of protocols has not gone away but is now complemented by architecture as a computational parameter in the modeling of algorithmic governance tasked with prediction and preemption coupled with the extraction and amplified abstraction of data from the toils of labor and the social production of value.

If we are to think organization in relation to networks (power laws, scale-free networks, weak ties vs. strong ties), then our focus might be directed toward post-platform media—what are the media of organized networks defined by strong ties, and what is it about their properties that engenders particular organizational tendencies? Indeed, do media matter within postdigital conditions when environment is increasingly understood as the background mediating system through which communication is signaled and relations are forged? Environment organizes as media slip away.

## **Inevitable Incorporations**

Recent decades are defined by a complete upending of modern models of organization. Indeed, there has been a breakdown of traditional organizations. Political activists, movements, and theorists (from cybernetics to post-humanism) are dogged by disorganization as the dominant condition. The entrepreneurial monopolies don't mind this at all. They work out how to siphon data and wash it with a magic wand that spits out value.

How to understand organization in times of neoliberal clouds, personalized networks, and advanced forms of non-commitment? The performance and management of work are, in fact, highly organized, yet require of workers some sort of antiwork attitude. Tasks are not just routines. Sure, there is TaskRabbit, and there's no doubt that freelancers find a routine in the struggle to make some coin. But, like Amazon Mechanical Turk, the key task here is to ensure that the human is no longer distinct from the machine. Traditionally, routines would vary over the course of the day or change in season. By contrast, the task of the machine is to never end, just keep chugging along and, ideally, accelerating as time elapses.

Universities are heading in the same direction, where much that used to be understood as *Bildung* is now an exercise in automation. As Stefano Harney notes, in the algorithmic institution, "most managers have already been replaced by machines. They are just too dumb to know it" (Schapira and Montgomery 2017). According to Harney,

the consultant is nothing more than a demonstration of access. He or she can show up in your workplace and open it up in ways you thought were protected, solid. His presence is proof that you are now newly accessible. No one needs to listen to a consultant. He is just a talking algorithm anyway. But he has made his point by showing up.

Organization needs to exit the innocence of immanent planes, endless assemblages, and the allocation of distinct tasks and management of issues. Organization also offers us a parallel world to the constant highs and lows of our not so private lives and states of mind. The managerial discourse of fluidity is rampant across institutional settings within advanced economies and defines the culture of organization disconnected from the world to which it refers. There is no backup plan for the unbearable lightness of commitment. Organization within conditions of contemporary media

94 will need to devise strategies alert to the parameters of platforms and apps that shape perception and cognition. What happens when contract workers walk away from the job but categorically deny they are on strike? Why does such a profound depoliticization encapsulate such acts of refusal? How has this come to be understood as another lifestyle option rather than some collective instantiation of shared experience that demands revolt? The end of the contract is not internalized as the humility of being fired; rather, dignity upholds the narrative of legitimate existence within a managerial paradigm that work, similar to life, has a beginning, middle, and end. As much as vulnerability is a common condition, it cannot be named as such because it violates the self-invested code of liberty that props up portfolio careers. Atomization is one of the core problems for organization within situations defined by platform participation.

Herein lies the predicament. If you are not the cool kid hooked on the delusion of entrepreneurial self-invention, where are you other than cast adrift, gravitating toward the ugly sentiments of populist politics that define the alt-right and similar formations? How has populist politics organized as movements, while the radical Left seems as incapable as ever to crystalize a collective imaginary that is in sync with the current social media condition? How to get rid of all these real existing resentments? How can alt-right be sabotaged and denied access to the collective unconscious of today's potential rebel forces? Fast updating, ever-changing timelines, snappy and dark comment culture—this is the grammar of media that is not about having dialogues, debating issues, or sharing material but rather dominated by motives such as trawling, shitstorm, anger, aggression, frustration, and despair. These are the core elements of the social media condition. Habermas's idealized public sphere is nowhere to be found in this environment of terminated futures. Alt-right is not at all marginal (and faces its own organizational problems) but in fact occupies the space of the new norm. The access to power through Breitbart and similar platforms is, these days, very different from the logic of representational media that

mirrored the old corridors of power with its think tanks, consultants, lobby groups, and political parties. The networked media of platforms that attract and then agglomerate social disaffection are able to mainline the people to the figureheads of power. This is why Trump, for instance, has been able to maintain such high approval ratings despite the disoriented Left in the United States puzzling over their failure to extend the path to glory.

## Think Tank Theory

How can we imagine doing radical research outside of the established academic institutions and large mainstream media? Is this possible anyway? Social movements have always undertaken their own research, comparable to political parties and their “scientific offices.” These days, NGOs produce tons of reports. Up until the 1990s, this work was imagined as an intellectual practice allocated deep inside the social movements themselves. The work mostly comprised investigative journalism, activist research into corporations, mapping extreme-right-wing networks and organizations, nuclear energy deals, and related lobby campaigns of multinationals that supported the apartheid regime in South Africa. This type of “indy research” was done to inform the movements themselves and provide them with info-ammunition in the fight for the hearts and minds of the people (sometimes confused by many with “public opinion”).

If we consider Amsterdam in the 1980s, we find a blossoming of research undertaken by groups of the nonaligned. There were separate autonomous research collectives that monitored racists and neofascists (FOK), a group that followed police and secret service activities (Jansen & Jansen), an outfit that investigated speculation and gentrification in the city (SPOK), and even a theory and humanities arm of the squatters movement (ADILKNO/Agentur Bilwet). In some instances, the groups were linked to specific archives or magazines, as was the case with radical feminism. The last thing these research collectives wanted to do was to produce dull policy papers.



96 None of these groups used the corporate term *think tank* or *scientific bureau* (attached to a political party), even though that's arguably what they were. Perhaps it was enough to be in a collective? But in these terms, there is no explicit connection with thinking. The pondering time of thinking didn't seem to be very sexy (that was something associated with the sequestered and therefore apolitical work of scholars); neither was collective research considered to be situating your group inside a tank. But, then, why call yourself a foundation (a legal term, controlled by lawyers and notaries), or an institute, for that matter, the very symbol of one's desire to be part of official reality and its "institutionalization"? NGOs were also on the radar back then, although they were associated with the United Nations and de facto ministries of the state. Often enough, their "non" was, and still is, a farce.

Over the past decade, the Better Think Tank Project (BTTP) of the Munich art duo Ralf Homann and Manuela Unverdorben has looked at the issue of think tanks from an artistic perspective. The duo investigates the politics and aesthetics of think tanks as a dominant form of knowledge production. What's the appeal of the motor behind the current innovation madness? Are think tanks deadly boring? What do we gain from a copy-and-paste of these kind of forms other than mimicking their sociospatial culture (such as "the office")? We asked the duo why there aren't any leftist think tanks (Lovink 2018): "When the entrepreneur Anthony Fisher wanted to use his fortune to influence British politics and asked Friedrich von Hayek which party to support, he got the hint not to waste time and gain instead decisive influence in the battle of ideas by funding research in structural forms like think tanks. Think tanks are a better tool to persist the myth of an objective truth."

Their responses are worth reading at length: "It's a common misunderstanding that think tanks are actually creative units, let alone were established with this intention. Think tanks label themselves 'independent' but still push their backer's agenda and accomplish credibility by pretending to be neutral and to conduct serious research. However, instead of actual academic research

they operate as echo chambers, multipliers of the neoliberal ideological agenda. There is no real eagerness in thinking up new ideas, because they already possess the ‘truth.’ Instead, they aim to influence public opinion, to intervene in policy-making and to spread their program.”

The Munich simulation duo are all fired up: “To dance at the Capitalist Ball is a lot of fun! But be beware of misunderstandings. If it should happen that the think tank dress code would change to hoodies then we also would reflect on that. Still, we watch the developments in the NGO field critically, especially when NGOs are acting as think tanks. Progressive movements should be based on solidarity and organizational forms of solidarity.”

Since 2005, we have been working together on the idea of “organized networks.” Recently, we brought together our writings in a book called *Organization after Social Media* (2018). Radical think tank theory can be considered a contribution to this project, albeit from the opposite direction, as think tanks are usually allocated to the space of bricks and mortar. Organized networks, by contrast, are tight virtual networks, defined by their “strong ties,” with dispersed contributors that do without expensive office spaces. However, what organized networks and think tanks have in common is a commitment to be there for the long haul. Such a proposal is anathema to the brave “orgnet” comrades condemned to spend their days in coworking spaces, in cafés, and at home at the kitchen table. How did we end up in such a neoliberal trap? How can we transform that temporary precarious work into a long-term sustainable project without falling into the NGO predicament? We urgently need new forms and cultural imaginaries to conspire. One of the many ways to get there is through the deconstruction of hegemonic formats. How can we envision the radical or post-think tank as a form?

Writing from Milan via email, Alex Foti (pers. comm., May 10, 2018) reports on his latest initiative to set up a think tank and explains his motivation to use this particular term and organizational format. “Nick Srnicek and others highlighted the role of the Mont Pelerin

98 Society in establishing neoliberal orthodoxy from the fringes by means of think tanking. While we cannot forego an analysis of the revolutionary subject, which in my opinion is the precariat, it is true that all forms of the Left are at a historical low (certainly in Europe). We need an intellectual strategy to rebuild values and ideology and wage successful battles against oligopolistic capital and win the mortal combat with nazi-populism from Washington to Ankara. Closer to our Milanese reality, we are witnessing a conservative return to old Marxist-Leninist certainties even among young sections of the movement, and a concomitant renewed emphasis on work and the working class at the expense of universal basic income and the polygendered, multiethnic precariat. The idea is to merge the intellectual curiosity of today's student movement with cognitarians from previous waves of protest (2001 and 2010 in Italy). The name of our think tank is still tentative as we have only gathered informally, but I like best ALIEN INTELLIGENCE: The Post-capitalist Exoplanet."

Whether think tanks are the most strategic radical form to chime with our times remains to be seen. We need examples to bounce around our ideas and concepts. Hit-and-run actions that result in loose coalitions falling apart once the event is over should no longer be encouraged, if not straight out rejected. Think tanks are worth exploring and experimenting with to see whether a leftist politics can be designed within what historically has been an alien machine. Put bluntly, the downward trajectory of the Left has reached a point where there is no option: invent new organizational and institutional forms or inhabit and remake existing ones. Unless the Left gets serious about this, it will only further consign itself to irrelevance as the planet endures prolonged crisis.

## **Sovereign Media and the Organization of Emptiness**

The current economy of sharing and the business of data extractivism are the key techniques of contemporary platform capitalism

(Srnicek 2017), which only goes so far as a concept or model of media and organization. Lacking nuance and bound to the logic of expropriation, the narrow spectrum of platform capitalism is less about dominant social media networks than it is about the total lack of sovereignty, dignity, and empathy as a mentality, self-image, and survival tactic to overcome technonihilism and its unconscious maneuvers that steer and capture the online self. There's something rich and intriguing about standing up and taking back one's information destiny. This is what we call *sovereign media*, a declaration and act of creating autonomous data and network infrastructures. Such interventions go beyond occasional radical gestures and the spectacle of the event.

Sovereign media configure territory and power in a world thoroughly enmeshed with media systems and technological agents. The underlying technics of media platforms also bear upon the production of subjectivity, organizing perception, cognition, and sociality in ways that unsettle and reorient modern understandings of the primary organizational forms that govern labor and life (the church, state, firm, union). But this unsettling of dominant organizational forms is also a productive process. "Organization is the central and basic material element of the constitution of the subject" (Negri 2005, 147). There's a latent formalist tendency within the dictum "media organize." Let us not forget that media also organize subjects, and the struggle that underpins such a process is the work of politics and the political.

As negative technologies without a megaphone, sovereign media disappear into the sea of noise. They are subtractive machines, clawing back "data assets" from centers of control. A great example here is the use of off-the-grid Bluetooth networks as the primary technique of organization for the umbrella movement in Hong Kong. This distributed mode of communication during the 2014 occupation and summer of skirmishes ensured the absence of a centralized archive for the surveillance machine of authorities. Denied the capacity to correlate information and generate a data universe of the movement, authorities instead had to infiltrate

100 the many gatherings and actions in the hope of compiling partial personas of rebels with a cause. Such instances in which total knowledge is disabled as a result of distributed forms of communication also register an epistemological crisis. This is the crisis of neopositivism, which has undergone a resurgence over the past decade as new quantitative techniques have emerged with the advent of big data analytics. Long weary of the critical lessons of post-structuralism, the humanities and social sciences have embraced neopositivism to legitimize claims of knowledge. Not only, then, does the mode of communication adopted by the umbrella movement instruct us about how to organize in strategic ways that trouble, if not undermine, contemporary techniques of policing, but it also signals a more substantive crisis that pertains to how the world is known, how subjects are produced, and, subsequently, how politics is organized.

In asking the question how media organize politics and subjectivity, we must take care not to be distracted by the seduction of reproduction. To do so would be a fatal political and conceptual mistake. What is clear from the history of movements is the medium specificity of their emergence. Whether it is pamphlets or fax machines, videos or mobile phones, Twitter or Facebook, political organization is always technological but also social and historical. The audacity of insurrection is made possible by media of organization tied to the organization of passions that endure.

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