

Revolutionary Organization in the age of Networked Individualism

Andrew Flood

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The revolutions and revolts that swept the world in 2011 took almost everyone by surprise. One of the first strong attempts to explain why they happened is Paul Mason's 'Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere.' He argues that "the materialist explanation for 2011...is as much about individuals versus hierarchies as it is about rich against poor." By far the most provocative element of his book is the idea that communications technology, in particular the internet, is transforming the way people behave and that a significant contribution to the revolts of 2011 lie in these changes. If he's right it had profound consequences for the form and structure of revolutionary organisations including anarchist ones.

In Mason's book these new people are the Networked Individuals. One critic of the concept Barry Wellman provides this useful summary of what he terms Networked Individualism. He says it is "the move from densely-knit and tightly-bounded groups to sparsely-knit and loosely-bounded networks. Each person is a switchboard, between ties and networks. People remain connected, but as individuals, rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Each person operates a separate personal community network, and switches rapidly among multiple sub-networks.. the organic and multi-dimensional relationships of communities are being transformed into narrow digitally-enabled, highly individualized, networked relationships; perhaps most widely recognizable as Facebook "friend"-ings accompanied by Facebook "like"-ings as a possible substitute for shared community values and norms." jcmc.indiana.edu

Mason uses sociologist Richard Sennett's conception of the networked individual as one with "weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy." Mason shows how the individual freedoms that were won in the period from the late 1960's were not, as many think, a unique step forward in history. In terms of such freedoms we are not in fact always moving forward making gains; gains won can, and have been, rolled back by reaction — sometimes slowly and sometimes in jumps. He references the period before World War One and its "zeitgeist of globalized trade, technological progress and sexual liberation... followed by a century of economic crisis, militarism, genocide and totalitarian rule."

Referring to the movement of the 60's and the 1962 Port Huron statement in particular, he rejects the idea that the break with collectivism that statement represented was "the doomed precursor of neoliberalism" and instead argues that it failed because it was premature. Premature because technology was not developed enough to allow freedom for the majority and premature because "the forces of collectivism, nationalism and corporate power were, at that point, stronger than the forces fighting against them."

The Network effect

At the heart of the concept of the Networked Individual is the Network Effect. Basically the more people that use a network the more useful it is. If you were the first person in the world with a phone, it would have been of no use. When two people had a phone it would still have been of very limited use to either of them. The more people had phones the more useful they became to each individual with a phone. They become most useful to everyone in the phone network when everybody not only has a phone but has it on them at all times. One statistic stood out for me in the entire book: "Facebook put on six-sevenths of its user base in the three years after Lehman Brothers went bust." In terms of the Network Effect this means we should

have expected a massive increase in Facebook's influence in that time, far more than the 600% growth alone would suggest.

That 'network effect' is the reason so many of us are stuck using Facebook even though we dislike its corporate greed, unethical methods and use by the police and other state forces as a surveillance tool. Almost all of us make the judgment that these disadvantages, all of which are significant, are outweighed by the advantage of not only being able to reach out to hundreds of similar activists, but also thousands or even hundreds of thousands of random folk. There are attempts to set up alternative activist social network sites, but very few of us use them because the only people there are a rather small minority of other activists.

The transformation of people

The argument Mason makes is not trivial: these communications technologies are transforming people. In the book he launches into a description of how the transformation of people who play multi-user online computer games affects real world interactions: "a woman tweeting at work or from the front line of a demonstration is experiencing the same shared consciousness, role-play, multifaceted personality and intense bonding that you get in World of Warcraft." He follows up with a listing of tweets (about Libya) that he received over ten minutes with the comment that this "beats any ten minutes of Counter-Strike ever played."

Later in the same chapter he returns to the theme, saying "observers of the early factory system described how, within a generation, it had wrought a total change in the behavior, thinking, body shapes and life expectancy of those imprisoned within it. People grew smaller, their limbs became bent; physical movements became more regimented. Family units broke down. Why should a revolution in knowledge and technology not be producing an equally frantic — albeit diametrically opposite — change in human behavior?"

The use of social networks substitutes for the strong ties that used to exist amongst workers when we all left the same streets every morning to work in the same factories or down the same mine. Under such conditions the social pressure to stand by your fellow workers and act collectively was enormous, but your connections seldom extended far from that pit village or industrial district. You were dependent on the union or party leadership for coordination and information from afar. The ties generated by networks may be very much weaker; they require very little commitment but they also have a very much greater reach.

The orthodox left tends to bemoan and wish for a return to those earlier days when mass labour intensive factories concentrated and disciplined thousands of workers in the way that both Leninist parties and many unions found useful. It's no coincidence that leftist terminology from that period is riddled with military terms and analogies — the working class was literally an army that was ordered into battle. Left to one side in that longing for the old days is that while these methods might have looked efficient on paper, in historical reality they were a disaster. The imposed centralized discipline created the mechanism by which small, well meaning or otherwise, minorities could impose an increasingly brutal discipline to ensure that what the party considered the correct course was taken. Stalin's gulags could not have existed without the centralized discipline required to command millions to both enter and operate that system. In 1956 at the British Communist Party's conference those few who tried to raise the Russian invasion of Hungary were drowned out by mass chants of 'discipline, discipline'

The role of the revolutionary organisation in the networked age

If the central thesis of the book is correct, that is that the advent of mass one to many communication in the form of the internet is transforming both production and the way people behave then there is a strong argument to radically re-examine everything we understand by revolutionary organisation. This after all is a very, very different situation than that faced by any previous generation of revolutionaries for whom mass communication was non-existent unless you had built the mass organisation that could produce finance, and distribute a daily paper.

What is our model

The current model of revolutionary organisation for all of the far left and most of the anarchist movement draws on organisational models that are derived from the organisations built under the old factory system. That is they are based on strong ties between people and a relatively high level of discipline, either self or collectively agreed in the case of anarchism or imposed from above in the case of the various types of Leninism. Anarchist organisations tended to allow considerably more autonomy to local sections but they were still largely expected to stay within the confines set by the decisions of regular conferences and statements of aims and principles. They certainly are not based on "weak ties and multiple loyalties" – indeed many anarchist organisations would rule out being a member of other anarchist organisations.

The point here is not that the new tendency towards "weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy" makes it impossible to construct such organisations. Clearly they continue to exist and recruit. As is the case for unions, which are organised on the same basic lines but limit themselves to the economic sphere of struggle. The point is that perhaps it is no longer possible to imagine these organisations building into the sort of mass forms that would be needed to co-ordinate revolution as once happened in Russia in 1917 or Spain in 1936.

We are also at least a decade into a process where it has become apparent that attempts to impose that old model of organisation on the emerging movement have shown very little success and in many cases have done considerable damage. There is little to be gained from a debate over whether these changes are good, bad or indifferent for revolutionaries, the point is that they are happening. We either find new ways of organising around "weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy" or we retire to the sidelines to comment, archive and hold the occasional meeting about the Spanish revolution.

Giving full consideration to this question is the task of another article (or indeed a shelf of books and decades of experimentation) but what can be said is that we are talking here not of a theory but of an emerging process that can already be observed and learned from. One that is over a decade old. From Zapatista solidarity to the Seattle WTO protest through to Tahir, Real Democracy & Occupy the methods of the old left have not been to the forefront of emerging moments of struggle. Instead we have seen the development of a largely new set of structures and methodologies that do indeed reflect the "weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy" of those drawn into involvement.

Where the terrain has been such that the advantages of the left organisations in terms of the concentration of resources has put them in the driving seat the result has often been ugly and disempowering. The old left controlled the anti-war movement at the time of the 2003 invasion of

Iraq and was unable to do anything to slow or halt the drive to war despite the mass opposition. The old left, if we understand it to include the union leaderships, controlled the mass union marches and token strike of 2008–2010 and were unable to halt or even slow the drive to austerity. In both cases the price of failure included massive levels of demoralization that made many less willing to engage in future activity even if it also resulted in an angry minority.

Just about the only terrain the old left has advanced on in Ireland is the electoral one. This perhaps not only because the crisis has made anti-capitalist politics popular but more fundamentally because the crisis of organisation arising from this new age of “weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy” is destroying the traditional organisations of the political party system of the right at as great if not greater a rate than it has destroyed those of the left. The meteoric rise of the Tea Party network over the more traditional Republicans in the Republican Party in the US being one example. The electoral gains of the left are of course also on a terrain that is best suited to “weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy”. Taking 3 minutes to vote for someone every 5 years as a very weak commitment. This is why while tens or hundreds of thousands voted for the radical left at the election, the next demonstrations called by the same organisations attracted only hundreds.

In the last couple of years many on the left, including the WSM have started to try to shift their organisational structures and engagement models from the traditional forms to new forms. In Ireland initiatives like ‘Claiming Our Future’ are very obviously based on trying to find ways to work with a large network of people with “weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy” rather than try and recruit them into a single organization. There is probably a very interesting question around just how conscious such organisations are that they are attempting a fundamental transformation and how much it is simply a reaction to the changing world around us and in particular the new technologies that are available.

Lessons from the summit protests

My experiences in the early summit protest movement led me to sit down and write a relatively detailed discussion of the emerging networks and the role of technology in revolutionary politics back in 2004, published as ‘Summit Protests & Networks.’ www.wsm.ie The argument I made back in 2004 was that while some “see the two organisational methods as in competition with each other. This need not be so, in fact for anarchists both forms should be complementary as the strengths of one are the weaknesses of the other and vice versa. The rapid growth of the movement has strongly favoured the network form, it’s now time to look at also building its more coherent partner. That is to build specific anarchist organisations that will work in and with the networks as they emerge.”

This was perhaps an acceptable fudge but one that avoids rather than answers the central issue. There are models of revolutionary organisation that would be based on a very small revolutionary cadre influencing much larger mass movements but experience has indicated that even in the internet age it is hard for a small group to ramp up mass influence fast enough in a crisis. Previously I’ve argued that at an absolute minimum a revolutionary organisation should aim to recruit one person in 1,000 into its ranks, around 6,000 as a target for the island of Ireland. Our experience of the early days of the crisis is that the small numbers that the left had in the unions meant that although arguments could and were won in union branches where there were active

leftists this was a tiny minority of branches so the argument was lost overall. At least at that point in time internet reach did not compensate for a lack of people on the ground to make the arguments.

I think this rough maths still applies but what does make sense is to recognize that the costs of maintaining a large loose periphery in terms of both time and money are magnitudes less than they used to be because of the new technology. Up to now it simply wasn't possible never mind worthwhile for a small number of volunteers to maintain contact with large number of individuals with "weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy." When my political involvement started that could only be done though addressing envelopes and licking stamps, something that very quickly became too expensive and time consuming.

Coherent organisations in networks

There is a political issue here as well though. When you have a coherent organisation intersecting a network it will have an influence on that network a magnitude or two greater than the number of members it has should allow. The internal dynamics of a coherent organisation will mean that its members will be immersed in a culture of regular political discussion and education and will almost certainly have discussed issues in outline long before they appear in the network at a formal level. They will also have faster, more reliable and more trust worthy contact through their coherent organization with members in other cities than almost anyone in the network will have.

That sort of formal intervention is mirrored by the similar abilities that the informal leaders that arise within networks will have. Both can only be guarded against through good process, awareness of such potential threats and a practice of challenging them and defusing them as they arise. But while the experience of doing so can be an informal one, based around people with experience and who are not inclined to abuse that to become the informal leadership themselves, at least in the early stages of networks appearing and expanding, such skills will be few and far between.

Part of the role of the revolutionary organisation has to be then to build the needed skills within the network to identify and diffuse such problems as they arise. It can also carry over these skills from one network to another in both time and space as its activists accumulate knowledge and experience.

Do we still need to build the revolutionary organisation

What about building the organisation itself. Does this new 'networked individual' and the ease of one to many internet communications mean that the size of a revolutionary organisation no longer matters. That the three men and a dog organisation 'with the right ideas' are as important as an organisation of thousands?

I think size still matters when it comes to organising in real world meetings but I do think the new technology changes the way a coherent organization should operate. It now makes sense to see our work in network forms of organisation as also being a way of accumulating engagement over time with a very large number of people most of whom will never join a coherent revolutionary organisation in normal circumstances. To use the WSM as an example the 7,200 people

currently following us via Facebook would have been impossible to find never mind retain contact with 20 years ago, As of now every one of them has the potential to see a link to each new article published on our site and to not only thus read it but also recommend it to their friends. Doing this via the postal system would have cost in the region of 3,000 euro and dozens of hours stuffing envelopes.

In the past these realities necessitated that volunteer based revolutionary organisations had what has been called an 'engagement cliff' between a very dedicated hardworking membership and the broad mass of the population. Leninist parties tried to get around this through ploughing a lot of resources into having their leadership as paid full timers. This gave them greater resources to maintain contact with a larger periphery but in doing so created very ossified organisations that magnified the problems inherent in centralized top down parties as that core group monopolized communications within the organisation and between the organisation and its periphery.

In any case the revolutionary anarchist organisation can never be more than a guiding light. Unlike Leninists we do not aim to be the physical leadership of the revolution, we do not seek to put our organisation in power. The anarchist concept of instead being a 'leadership of ideas' ties rather well into a movement composed of people with "weak ties, multiple loyalties and greater autonomy" because it addresses the weak spots of such a movement without being in opposition to its fundamental characteristic of both individual and collective autonomy. In such a system the coherent anarchist organisation aims to be a scaffold along which many of the major nodes of a network can rapidly grow and link up as they are needed, a scaffold that gets reconfigured and hopefully increases its effectiveness with each new round of struggle.

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