Twenty years of Networks, Streets and Struggles

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Introduction

The growth of internet access together with new developments in the field of information technology have transformed the way in which political activism and protest movements arise, expand and reverberate. The appropriation of technological instruments by extensive publics has contributed to the advent of distributed networks revolving around social protests that interwave shared webs of meaning, action and reflection. This article constructs a genealogy of the appropriation of IT for social causes, from the early stages of the Internet, the global solidarity network with the zapatistas in the nineties, the global justice movement, to web 2.0 and the cycle of global action that erupted in 2011 with the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados, and occupy Wall Street in the US, among others.

Methods

The present work is based on comprehensive research which consisted of studying and following closely the EZLN since 1994 in Chiapas where I lived for 6 years. All that time until now that I live in México City, I made qualitative research on zapatismo, on the global justice movement and on the

uprisings in Spain in 2011 with the Indignad@s, and in México with the #YoSoy132. I used netography and I conducted fieldwork and interviews with activists. In this paper, I make reference to my own publications on the subject and an enormous amount of bibliographic and documentary material which I have gathered throughout the years.

Results and Discussion

Over the last two decades, social movements have developed experiences in linking up networks as well as in common reflections about the very impact of their collective action. One of the inaugural cases of the use of the Internet for a social cause was the spontaneous formation of an international network of solidarity with the Zapatista National Liberation Army, which burst onto the scene in Chiapas, Mexico, on January 1, 1994. At that time, cyberspace was still virgin territory —for example, the Mexican government did not open a Web site for the President's Office until September 1996— and activists around the world put together a network that gave constant visibility to the defense of the rebel indigenous communities and exhibited great capability for decentralized action (Rovira, 2009). The Zapatista movement, conceived as a laboratory of "political otherness" capable of having worldwide impact and of breaking with Leftist orthodoxies, has been a source of inspiration for reticular and global justice struggles.

Thinking about considering the Internet not only as a means of communication, but a space for subversion ignited among artists and hackers right at the moment of the biggest upsurge of Zapatismo, and in close relation to the defense of the indigenous rebellion. This is how Ricardo Domínguez of Electronic Disturbance Theater explains it: "In '97 the Zapatista struggle took off again. We wanted to do something electronic, and the Anonymous group in Italy got in touch and showed us the Netstrike they were already doing. We created FloodNet, a script that sends petitions to any page you want. The first action brought together 18,000 people in four hours" (Molist, 2002). The idea that the Internet was not just a means of communication, but a space for disruption is part of the call to "electronic civil disobedience" (Stefan Wray, 1998).

In 1999, when the anti-globalization or global justice movement broke onto the scene in Seattle against the World Trade Organization, the networks had already matured. Independent press and video communicators created an information center, the Independent Media Center (IMC), or Indymedia, with an online virtual platform that would later be replicated in hundreds of places around the world. The "Indymedia Big Bang" presupposed an "epochal change in the form of public action and its documentation" (Hayek, 2002). *Active*, a software created in Australia by Matthew Arnison and expanded by other technicians, made it possible for anyone to send not only texts, but photos, video footage, and audio files. Communicative activism in all its splendor changed the slogan that until then had ruled the relationship of the social movements with the communications media to, "Don't hate the media; be the media."

On February 15, 2003, more than 10 million people marched in the world's main cities against the war, answering the largest single simultaneous global call for mobilization ever. Nothing stopped the United States' plans. With the military offensives against Iraq and Afghanistan, the overall frameworks that the social struggles appealed to, such as human rights or democracy, stopped being effective; it was precisely the world's greatest power that trampled them in the name of the "war against terrorism." Suffice it to mention the prisons in Guantánamo and Abu Graib… The "security" discourse devoured any appeal of a mobilized public. Post-Berlin-Wall capitalism abandoned the straitjacket of the promise of democracy and did as it pleased, unfettered. I think that that moment was the close of the cycle of the global justice movement.

It was around 2004 that Web 2.0 appeared: digital social networks and micro-blogging. It was a possibility for "autonomous construction of social networks controlled and guided by their users" (Castells, 2012: 221). Experiences like "fast mobs" or "smart mobs" came about (Lasen and Martínez, 2008); other authors talk about intelligent multitudes (Rheingold, 2004) or "the global crowd" (Bruck Morss, 2014). In Spain, between March 11 and March 14, 2004, something emblematic took place: through SMS mobile phone messages, the citizenry countered the media and government discourse attributing to ETA the attack on Madrid's Atocha train station. The "mobilization" was so widespread that it changed the outcome of the elections in three days. Many other examples can be found worldwide: from Iran's Green Revolution —regardless of its controversial forms— to Obama's 2008 campaign and its use of social networks for an election.

In late 2010, Pentagon cables were disseminated by the Wikileaks cyber-activist group, and in 2013, Edward Snowden's revelations about U.S. government global espionage through the NSA demonstrated that in the new technological age, the secrets of those in power are no longer safe —but neither are the freedoms of citizens. Over these years, the Anonymous network flowered in defense of Wikileaks and spread worldwide with its local variants, applying tactics of attacks against corporate and government Web sites, but also going out onto the streets wearing Guy Fawkes masks, making them a global icon.

That is when a new global cycle emerged, radically different from the global justice movement: much more local and national, but at the same time connected. Starting in 2011, the Arab rebellions began, followed by revolts in Southern Europe. These are urban insurgencies that challenge the power of the states. In many cases, participants massively occupied squares: the 15M and Plaza del Sol in Spain; Tahrir Square in Cairo; Qasba in Tunisia; in the Pearl Roundabout in Manama, Bahrein; in Greece's Sintagma Square; and on Telaviv's Rothschild Boulevard against hikes in housing costs. The occupation of Wall Street in New York spread to 1,000 cities of the United States in 2011. In Mexico, thousands of young people poured onto the streets in 2012 under the slogan #YoSoy132. The defense

of Istanbul's Gezi Park gave rise to a massive movement in June 2013, as did the Passe Livre for access to public transport in Brazil, or the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong 2014.

All these unique and contextualized mobilizations have something in common: they seem to be self-convened on the Internet based on spontaneous indignation that goes viral, and from there spills into the urban space. In addition, although their objectives are diverse and they do not have a common ideology, "In all cases, the central issue is democracy. They are movements for democracy" (Castells, 2013). But they are not fights for democracy circumscribed to the framework of national states, but rather in whose practices and discourses emerges a stronger idea of democracy that surpasses national identities and that aspires to a global scenario for a life in common.

They are insurgencies (Arditi, 2012) that challenge the state with very concrete demands, but at the same time have no programmatic platforms. Although the anti-globalization movement also took to the streets, it did so in accordance with its foes' agenda: the world economic institutions, clearly the enemy to attack or block wherever they met. These new insurgencies emerge unexpectedly and their arrival on the scene reveals a will to be prefigurative, building spaces for common experimentation with much more individualized participation. While the global justice movement managed to bring together on the same stage many political families and activists from different groups, collectives, unions, and NGOs from different parts of the world, in the case of these insurgencies, the ones taking to the streets are not organized or previously politicized people.

Conclusions

Politics stops being a restricted sphere of the life of society, inhabited by political parties, institutions, and opinion leaders, or even a space run by the mass media, with its journalists as gatekeepers of what is said and what is not said. Politics also stops being a question of counterpublics (Fraser, 1997), or of organized groups of activists with elaborated ideas about emancipation. The demand for non-delegation, for speaking in the first person appears with unprecedented radicalism. For that reason, this kind of politics breaks with the logic of "friend and foe" that in his time Carl Schmitt (1996) defined, as shown by the fact that it does not take on board the distinction between left and right. The issue of identity loses importance and the capacity for inclusion is based more on dignity and the fact of sharing human life. As networks, those insurgencies can not be defined as a finite count of numerous parts, but multiplicities organized around the principle of perpetual inclusion. "While networks can be individuated and identified quite easily, networks are also *more than one*" (Galloway and Thacker, 2007:60). It is the unity and heterogeneity flow of a networked structure what allows individual participation in building the commons without mediation or representation.

The watcher is watched from the global street. Transparency and accessibility are the resource of every democratic revolution. In this last decades, corporations and business have taken by assault what

should be the common space of communication. The powerful use technologies for secrets, espionage, and criminalization. But communication in the hands of the multitudes is the possibility of unmasking, exhibiting the authoritarianism of the 1%.

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