

## OPENING:

### NETWORKING MINDS, CREATING MEANING, CONTESTING POWER

No one expected it. In a world darkened by economic distress, political cynicism, cultural emptiness and personal hopelessness, it just happened. Suddenly dictatorships could be overthrown with the bare hands of the people, even if their hands had been bloodied by the sacrifice of the fallen. Financial magicians went from being the objects of public envy to the targets of universal contempt. Politicians became exposed as corrupt and as liars. Governments were denounced. Media were suspected. Trust vanished. And trust is what glues together society, the market, the institutions. Without trust, nothing works. Without trust, the social contract dissolves and people disappear as they transform into defensive individuals fighting for survival. Yet, at the fringe of a world that had come to the brink of its capacity for humans to live together and to share life with nature, individuals did come together again to find new forms of being us, the people. There were first a few, who were joined by hundreds, then networked by thousands, then supported by

millions with their voices and their internal quest for hope, as muddled as it was, that cut across ideology and hype, to connect with the real concerns of real people in the real human experience that had been reclaimed. It began on the Internet social networks, as these are spaces of autonomy, largely beyond the control of governments and corporations that had monopolized the channels of communication as the foundation of their power, throughout history. By sharing sorrow and hope in the free public space of the Internet, by connecting to each other, and by envisioning projects from multiple sources of being, individuals formed networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments. They came together. And their togetherness helped them to overcome fear, this paralyzing emotion on which the powers that be rely in order to prosper and reproduce, by intimidation or discouragement, and when necessary by sheer violence, be it naked or institutionally enforced. From the safety of cyberspace, people from all ages and conditions moved towards occupying urban space, on a blind date with each other and with the destiny they wanted to forge, as they claimed their right to make history – their history – in a display of the self-awareness that has always characterized major social movements.

The movements spread by contagion in a world networked by the wireless Internet and marked by fast, viral diffusion of images and ideas. They started in the South and in the North, in Tunisia and in Iceland, and from there the spark lit fire in a diverse social landscape devastated by greed and manipulation in all quarters of the blue planet. It was not just poverty, or the economic crisis, or the lack of democracy that caused the multifaceted rebellion. Of course, all these poignant manifestations of an unjust society and of an undemocratic polity were present in the protests. But it was primarily the humiliation provoked by the cynicism

and arrogance of those in power, be it financial, political or cultural, that brought together those who turned fear into outrage, and outrage into hope for a better humanity. A humanity that had to be reconstructed from scratch, escaping the multiple ideological and institutional traps that had led to dead ends again and again, forging a new path by treading it. It was the search for dignity amid the suffering of humiliation – recurrent themes in most of the movements.

Networked social movements first spread in the Arab world and were confronted with murderous violence by Arab dictatorships. They experienced diverse fates, from victory to concessions to repeated massacres to civil wars. Other movements arose against the mishandled management of the economic crisis in Europe and in the United States by governments who sided with the financial elites responsible for the crisis at the expense of their citizens: in Spain, in Greece, in Portugal, in Italy (where women's mobilizations contributed to finishing off the buffoon-esque *commedia dell'arte* of Berlusconi), in Britain (where occupations of squares and the defense of the public sector by trade unions and students joined hands) and with less intensity but similar symbolism in most other European countries. In Israel, a spontaneous movement with multiple demands became the largest grassroots mobilization in Israeli history, obtaining the satisfaction of many of its requests. In the United States, the Occupy Wall Street movement, as spontaneous as all the others, and as networked in cyberspace and urban space as the others, became the event of the year, and affected most of the country, so much so that *Time* magazine named "The Protester" the person of the year. And the motto of the 99 percent, whose well-being had been sacrificed to the interests of the 1 percent, who control 23 percent of the country's wealth, became a mainstream topic in American political life. On October 15, 2011, a global network of occupying

movements under the banner of “United for Global Change” mobilized hundreds of thousands in 951 cities in 82 countries around the world, claiming social justice and true democracy. In all cases the movements ignored political parties, distrusted the media, did not recognize any leadership and rejected all formal organization, relying on the Internet and local assemblies for collective debate and decision-making.

This book attempts to shed light on these movements: on their formation, their dynamics, their values and their prospects for social transformation. This is an inquiry into the social movements of the network society, the movements that will ultimately make societies in the twenty-first century by engaging in conflictive practices rooted in the fundamental contradictions of our world. The analysis presented here is based on observation of the movements, but it will not try to describe them, nor will it be able to provide definitive proof for the arguments conveyed in this text. There is already available a wealth of information, articles, books, media reports, and blog archives that can be easily consulted by browsing the Internet. And it is too early to construct a systematic, scholarly interpretation of the movements. Thus, my purpose is more limited: to suggest some hypotheses, grounded on observation, on the nature and perspectives of networked social movements, with the hope of identifying the new paths of social change in our time, and to stimulate a debate on the practical (and ultimately political) implications of these hypotheses.

This analysis is based on a grounded theory of power that I presented in my book *Communication Power* (2009), a theory that provides the background for the understanding of the movements studied here.

I start from the premise that power relationships are constitutive of society because those who have power construct the institutions of society according to their values and inter-

ests. Power is exercised by means of coercion (the monopoly of violence, legitimate or not, by the control of the state) and/or by the construction of meaning in people's minds, through mechanisms of symbolic manipulation. Power relations are embedded in the institutions of society, and particularly in the state. However, since societies are contradictory and conflictive, wherever there is power there is also counterpower, which I understand to be the capacity of social actors to challenge the power embedded in the institutions of society for the purpose of claiming representation for their own values and interests. All institutional systems reflect power relations, as well as the limits to these power relations as negotiated by an endless historical process of conflict and bargaining. The actual configuration of the state and other institutions that regulate people's lives depends on this constant interaction between power and counterpower.

Coercion and intimidation, based on the state's monopoly of the capacity to exercise violence, are essential mechanisms for imposing the will of those in control of the institutions of society. However, the construction of meaning in people's minds is a more decisive and more stable source of power. The way people think determines the fate of the institutions, norms and values on which societies are organized. Few institutional systems can last long if they are based just on coercion. Torturing bodies is less effective than shaping minds. If a majority of people think in ways that are contradictory to the values and norms institutionalized in the laws and regulations enforced by the state, the system will change, although not necessarily to fulfill the hopes of the agents of social change. This is why the fundamental power struggle is the battle for the construction of meaning in the minds of the people.

Humans create meaning by interacting with their natural and social environment, by networking their neural networks

with the networks of nature and with social networks. This networking is operated by the act of communication. Communication is the process of sharing meaning through the exchange of information. For society at large, the key source of the social production of meaning is the process of socialized communication. Socialized communication exists in the public realm beyond interpersonal communication. The ongoing transformation of communication technology in the digital age extends the reach of communication media to all domains of social life in a network that is at the same time global and local, generic and customized in an ever-changing pattern. The process of constructing meaning is characterized by a great deal of diversity. There is, however, one feature common to all processes of symbolic construction: they are largely dependent on the messages and frames created, formatted and diffused in multimedia communication networks. Although each individual human mind constructs its own meaning by interpreting the communicated materials on its own terms, this mental processing is conditioned by the communication environment. Thus, the transformation of the communication environment directly affects the forms of meaning construction, and therefore the production of power relationships. In recent years, the fundamental change in the realm of communication has been the rise of what I have called mass self-communication – the use of the Internet and wireless networks as platforms of digital communication. It is mass communication because it processes messages from many to many, with the potential of reaching a multiplicity of receivers, and of connecting to endless networks that transmit digitized information around the neighborhood or around the world. It is self-communication because the production of the message is autonomously decided by the sender, the designation of the receiver is self-directed and the retrieval of messages from

the networks of communication is self-selected. Mass self-communication is based on horizontal networks of interactive communication that, by and large, are difficult to control by governments or corporations. Furthermore, digital communication is multimodal and allows constant reference to a global hypertext of information whose components can be remixed by the communicative actor according to specific projects of communication. Mass self-communication provides the technological platform for the construction of the autonomy of the social actor, be it individual or collective, vis-à-vis the institutions of society. This is why governments are afraid of the Internet, and this is why corporations have a love-hate relationship with it and are trying to extract profits while limiting its potential for freedom (for instance, by controlling file sharing or open source networks).

In our society, which I have conceptualized as a network society, power is multidimensional and is organized around networks programmed in each domain of human activity according to the interests and values of empowered actors.<sup>2</sup> Networks of power exercise their power by influencing the human mind predominantly (but not solely) through multimedia networks of mass communication. Thus, communication networks are decisive sources of power-making.

Networks of power in various domains of human activity are networked among themselves. Global financial networks and global multimedia networks are intimately linked, and this particular meta-network holds extraordinary power. But not all power, because this meta-network of finance and media is itself dependent on other major networks, such as the political network, the cultural production network (which encompasses all kinds of cultural artefacts, not just communication products), the military/security network, the global criminal network and the decisive global network of production and application of science, technology

and knowledge management. These networks do not merge. Instead, they engage in strategies of partnership and competition by forming ad hoc networks around specific projects. But they all share a common interest: to control the capacity of defining the rules and norms of society through a political system that primarily responds to their interests and values. This is why the network of power constructed around the state and the political system does play a fundamental role in the overall networking of power. This is, first, because the stable operation of the system, and the reproduction of power relationships in every network, ultimately depend on the coordinating and regulatory functions of the state, as was witnessed in the collapse of financial markets in 2008 when governments were called to the rescue around the world. Furthermore, it is via the state that different forms of exercising power in distinct social spheres relate to the monopoly of violence as the capacity to enforce power in the last resort. So, while communication networks process the construction of meaning on which power relies, the state constitutes the default network for the proper functioning of all other power networks.

And so, how do power networks connect with one another while preserving their sphere of action? I propose that they do so through a fundamental mechanism of power-making in the network society: switching power. This is the capacity to connect two or more different networks in the process of making power for each one of them in their respective fields.

Thus, who holds power in the network society? The *programmers* with the capacity to program each one of the main networks on which people's lives depend (government, parliament, the military and security establishment, finance, media, science and technology institutions, etc.). And the *switchers* who operate the connections between different networks (media moguls introduced in the political class,

financial elites bankrolling political elites, political elites bailing out financial institutions, media corporations intertwined with financial corporations, academic institutions financed by big business, etc.).

If power is exercised by programming and switching networks, then counterpower, the deliberate attempt to change power relationships, is enacted by reprogramming networks around alternative interests and values, and/or disrupting the dominant switches while switching networks of resistance and social change. Actors of social change are able to exert decisive influence by using mechanisms of power-making that correspond to the forms and processes of power in the network society. By engaging in the production of mass media messages, and by developing autonomous networks of horizontal communication, citizens of the Information Age become able to invent new programs for their lives with the materials of their suffering, fears, dreams and hopes. They build their projects by sharing their experience. They subvert the practice of communication as usual by occupying the medium and creating the message. They overcome the powerlessness of their solitary despair by networking their desire. They fight the powers that be by identifying the networks that are.

Social movements, throughout history, are the producers of new values and goals around which the institutions of society are transformed to represent these values by creating new norms to organize social life. Social movements exercise counterpower by constructing themselves in the first place through a process of autonomous communication, free from the control of those holding institutional power. Because mass media are largely controlled by governments and media corporations, in the network society communicative autonomy is primarily constructed in the Internet networks and in the platforms of wireless communication. Digital social

networks offer the possibility for largely unfettered deliberation and coordination of action. However, this is only one component of the communicative processes through which social movements relate to society at large. They also need to build public space by creating free communities in the urban space. Since the institutional public space, the constitutionally designated space for deliberation, is occupied by the interests of the dominant elites and their networks, social movements need to carve out a new public space that is not limited to the Internet, but makes itself visible in the places of social life. This is why they occupy urban space and symbolic buildings. Occupied spaces have played a major role in the history of social change, as well as in contemporary practice, for three basic reasons:

1. They create community, and community is based on togetherness. Togetherness is a fundamental psychological mechanism to overcome fear. And overcoming fear is the fundamental threshold for individuals to cross in order to engage in a social movement, since they are well aware that in the last resort, they will have to confront violence if they trespass the boundaries set up by the dominant elites to preserve their domination. In the history of social movements, the barricades erected in the streets had very little defensive value; in fact, they became easy targets either for the artillery or for the riot squads, depending on the context. But they always defined an “in and out,” an “us versus them,” so that by joining an occupied site, and defying the bureaucratic norms of the use of space, other citizens could be part of the movement without adhering to any ideology or organization, just by being there for their own reasons.
2. Occupied spaces are not meaningless: they are usually charged with the symbolic power of invading sites of state

power, or financial institutions. Or else, by relating to history, they evoke memories of popular uprisings that had expressed the will of citizens when other avenues of representation were closed. Often, buildings are occupied either for their symbolism or to affirm the right of public use of idle, speculative property. By taking and holding urban space, citizens reclaim their own city, a city from where they were evicted by real estate speculation and municipal bureaucracy. Some major social movements in history, such as the 1871 Paris commune or the Glasgow strikes of 1915 (at the origin of public housing in Britain), started as rent strikes against housing speculation.<sup>3</sup> The control of space symbolizes the control over people's lives.

3. By constructing a free community in a symbolic place, social movements create a public space, a space for deliberation, which ultimately becomes a political space, a space for sovereign assemblies to meet and to recover their rights of representation, which have been captured in political institutions predominantly tailored for the convenience of the dominant interests and values. In our society, the public space of the social movements is constructed as a hybrid space between the Internet social networks and the occupied urban space: connecting cyberspace and urban space in relentless interaction, constituting, technologically and culturally, instant communities of transformative practice.

The critical matter is that this new public space, the networked space between the digital space and the urban space, is a space of autonomous communication. The autonomy of communication is the essence of social movements because it is what allows the movement to be formed, and what enables the movement to relate to society at large beyond the control of the power holders over communication power.

Where do social movements come from? And how are they formed? Their roots are in the fundamental injustice of all societies, relentlessly confronted by human aspirations of justice. In each specific context, the usual horses of humanity's apocalypses ride together under a variety of their hideous shapes: economic exploitation, hopeless poverty, unfair inequality, undemocratic polity, repressive states, unjust judiciary, racism, xenophobia, cultural negation, censorship, police brutality, warmongering, religious fanaticism (often against others' religious beliefs), carelessness towards the blue planet (our only home), disregard of personal liberty, violation of privacy, gerontocracy, bigotry, sexism, homophobia and other atrocities in the long gallery of portraits featuring the monsters we are. And of course, always, in every instance and in every context, sheer domination of males over females and their children, as the primary foundation of a/n (unjust) social order. Thus, social movements always have an array of structural causes and individual reasons to rise up against one or many of the dimensions of social domination. Yet, to know their roots does not answer the question of their birth. And since, in my view, social movements are the sources of social change, and therefore of the constitution of society, the question is a fundamental one. So fundamental that entire libraries are dedicated to a tentative approach to the answer, and so, consequently, I will not deal with it here, since this book is not intended to be another treatise on social movements but a small window on a nascent world. But I will say this: social movements, certainly now, and probably in history (beyond the realm of my competence), are made of individuals. I say it in plural, because in most of what I have read of analyses of social movements in any time and society, I find few individuals, sometimes only the one hero, accompanied by an undifferentiated crowd, called social class, or ethnia, or gender, or

nation, or believers, or any of the other collective denominations of the subsets of human diversity. Yet, while grouping people's living experience in convenient analytical categories of social structure is a useful method, the actual practices that allow social movements to rise and change institutions and, ultimately, social structure, are enacted by individuals: persons in their material flesh and minds. And so the key question to understand is when and how and why one person or one thousand persons decide, individually, to do something that they are repeatedly warned not to do because they will be punished. There are usually a handful of persons, sometimes just one, at the start of a movement. Social theorists usually call these people agency. I call them individuals. And then we have to understand the motivation of each individual: how these individuals network by connecting mentally to other individuals, and why they are able to do so, in a process of communication that ultimately leads to collective action; how these networks negotiate the diversity of interests and values present in the network to focus on a common set of goals; how these networks relate to the society at large, and to many other individuals; and how and why this connection works in a large number of cases, activating individuals to broaden the networks formed in the resistance to domination, and to engage in a multimodal assault against an unjust order.

At the individual level, social movements are emotional movements. Insurgency does not start with a program or political strategy. This may come later, as leadership emerges, from inside or from outside the movement, to foster political, ideological and personal agendas that may or may not relate to the origins and motivations of participants in the movement. But the big bang of a social movement starts with the transformation of emotion into action. According to the theory of affective intelligence,<sup>4</sup> the emotions that

are most relevant to social mobilization and political behavior are fear (a negative affect) and enthusiasm (a positive affect).<sup>5</sup> Positive and negative affects are linked to two basic motivational systems that result from human evolution: approach and avoidance. The approach system is linked to goal-seeking behavior that directs the individual to rewarding experiences. Individuals are enthusiastic when they are mobilized towards a goal that they cherish. This is why enthusiasm is directly related to another positive emotion: hope. Hope projects behavior into the future. Since a distinctive feature of the human mind is the ability to imagine the future, hope is a fundamental ingredient in supporting goal-seeking action. However, for enthusiasm to emerge and for hope to rise, individuals have to overcome the negative emotion resulting from the avoidance motivational system: anxiety. Anxiety is a response to an external threat over which the threatened person has no control. Thus, anxiety leads to fear, and has a paralyzing effect on action. The overcoming of anxiety in socio-political behavior often results from another negative emotion: anger. Anger increases with the perception of an unjust action and with the identification of the agent responsible for the action. Neurological research shows that anger is associated with risk-taking behavior. Once the individual overcomes fear, positive emotions take over, as enthusiasm activates action and hope anticipates the rewards for the risky action. However, for a social movement to form, the emotional activation of individuals must connect to other individuals. This requires a communication process from one individual experience to others. For the communication process to operate, there are two requirements: cognitive consonance between senders and receivers of the message, and an effective communication channel. The empathy in the communication process is determined by experiences similar to those that motivated the original

emotional outburst. Concretely speaking: if many individuals feel humiliated, exploited, ignored or misrepresented, they are ready to transform their anger into action, as soon as they overcome their fear. And they overcome their fear by the extreme expression of anger, in the form of outrage, when learning of an unbearable event suffered by someone with whom they identify. This identification is better achieved by sharing feelings in some form of togetherness created in the process of communication. Thus, the second condition for individual experiences to link up and form a movement is the existence of a communication process that propagates the events and the emotions attached to it. The faster and more interactive the process of communication is, the more likely the formation of a process of collective action becomes, rooted in outrage, propelled by enthusiasm and motivated by hope.

Historically, social movements have been dependent on the existence of specific communication mechanisms: rumors, sermons, pamphlets and manifestos, spread from person to person, from the pulpit, from the press, or by whatever means of communication were available. In our time, multimodal, digital networks of horizontal communication are the fastest and most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication in history. The characteristics of communication processes between individuals engaged in the social movement determine the organizational characteristics of the social movement itself: the more interactive and self-configurable communication is, the less hierarchical is the organization and the more participatory is the movement. This is why the networked social movements of the digital age represent a new species of social movement.<sup>6</sup>

If the origins of social movements are to be found in the emotions of individuals and in their networking on the

basis of cognitive empathy, what is the role of the ideas, ideologies and programmatic proposals traditionally considered to be the stuff of which social change is made? They are in fact the indispensable materials for the passage from emotion-driven action to deliberation and project construction. Their embedding in the practice of the movement is also a communication process, and how this process is constructed determines the role of these ideational materials in the meaning, evolution and impact of the social movement. The more the ideas are generated from within the movement, on the basis of the experience of their participants, the more representative, enthusiastic and hopeful the movement will be, and vice versa. It is too often the case that movements become raw materials for ideological experimentation or political instrumentation by defining goals and representations of the movement that have little to do with their reality. Sometimes even in its historical legacy, the human experience of the movement tends to be replaced by a reconstructed image for the legitimization of political leaders or for the vindication of the theories of organic intellectuals. A case in point is how the Commune of Paris came to be in its ideological reconstruction, in spite of the historians' efforts to restore its reality, a proto-proletarian revolution in a city that at the time counted few industrial workers among its dwellers. Why a municipal revolution, sparked by a rent strike and partly led by women, came to be misrepresented has to do with the inaccuracy of Karl Marx's sources in his writings about the Commune, mainly based on his correspondence with Elizabeth Dmitrieva, president of the Women's Union, a committed socialist Commune who saw just what she and her mentor wanted to see.<sup>7</sup> The misrepresentation of the movements by their leaders, ideologues or chroniclers does have considerable consequences, as it introduces an irreversible cleavage between the actors of

the movement and the projects constructed on their behalf, often without their knowledge and consent.

The next question for the understanding of social movements has to do with the evaluation of the actual impact of the joint action of these networks of individuals on the institutions of society, as well as on themselves. This will require a different set of data and analytical instruments, as the characteristics of institutions and of the networks of domination will have to be brought into confrontation with the characteristics of the networks of social change. In a nutshell, for the networks of counterpower to prevail over the networks of power embedded in the organization of society, they will have to reprogram the polity, the economy, the culture or whatever dimension they aim to change by introducing in the institutions' programs, as well as in their own lives, other instructions, including, in some utopian versions, the rule of not ruling anything. Furthermore, they will have to switch on the connection between different networks of social change, e.g. between pro-democracy networks and economic justice networks, women's rights networks, environmental conservation networks, peace networks, freedom networks, and so on. To understand under which conditions these processes take place and which are the social outcomes that result from each specific process cannot be a matter of formal theory. It requires one to ground the analysis on observation.

The theoretical tools I have proposed here are simply so, tools, whose usefulness or futility can only be evaluated by using them to examine the practices of networked social movements this book intends to analyze. However, I will not code the observation of these movements in abstract terms to fit into the conceptual approach presented here. Rather, my theory will be embedded in a selective observation of the movements, to bring together at the end of my intellectual journey the most salient findings of this study in an

analytical framework. This is what I intend to be my contribution to the understanding of networked social movements as harbingers of social change in the twenty-first century.

One last word about the origins and conditions of the reflections I am presenting here. I have been a marginal participant in the Barcelona *indignadas* movement, and a supporter and sympathizer of movements in other countries. But I have kept, as is usual in my case, as much distance as I could between my personal beliefs and my analysis. Without pretending to achieve objectivity, I have tried to present the movements in their own words and by their own actions, using some direct observation and a considerable amount of information: some from individual interviews and some from secondary sources that are detailed in the references to each chapter and in the appendices to this book. In fact, I am in full accordance with the basic principle of this leaderless movement of multiple faces: I only represent myself, and this is simply my reflection on what I have seen, heard or read. I am an individual, doing what I learned to do throughout my life: investigate processes of social transformation, with the hope that this investigation could be helpful to the endeavors of those fighting, at great risk, for a world we would like to live in.

## NOTES

- 1 For an excellent, analytical and informed overview of the social movements that sprung up everywhere in 2011, see Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (2012, Verso, London).
- 2 For my characterization of the network society, see my book, *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996; 2010, 2nd edn. Blackwell, Oxford). For a succinct presentation of my network theory of power, see my 2011 article, "A Network

Theory of Power,” *International Journal of Communication* 5, 773–87.

- 3 For a presentation of a historical analysis of urban social movements, see my book, *The City and the Grassroots* (1983, University of California Press, Berkeley), pp. 15–48.
- 4 W. Russell Neuman, G. E. Marcus, A. N. Crigler and M. MacKuen (eds.), *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of emotions in political thinking and behavior* (2007, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL).
- 5 I have discussed the contributions of the theory of affective intelligence to the study of socio-political mobilization in my book, *Communication Power* (2009, Oxford University Press, Oxford), pp. 146–55.
- 6 A pioneer analysis of the rise of contemporary networked social movements is Jeff Juris’s *Networked Futures* (2008, Duke University Press, Durham, NC).
- 7 I discuss the historical record of the Commune of Paris in my book, *The City and the Grassroots* (1983): 15–26.