Pouring Digital Soul into Social Movements. The Enhancement of Self-Transcending Knowledge through the Use of New Media and Its Impact on Contentious Politics

Oana OLARIU*

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1. An overview on the status of the "Common Man" in social change theories

A qualitative reading of the main theories regarding collective behavior, social movements and social change would highlight a continuous shift in fermenting worldviews that go from total disregard for the common individual to his absolute centrality. So, it becomes arguable that the paradigm-shift that occurred *via* the evolution of the digital medium has profound effects not only on the way people interact with each other, but also on their main style of gaining and instrumenting knowledge.

The field of social movement study registers five main directions in explaining the social change. The first direction consists in regarding protesters as a mad crowd and the individual as anonymous and lost in what came to be known as "mass" (Lee 2011: 257-272). The second direction attributes rationality to groups and represents a replica to the previous interpretation (*Ibidem*: 260-268). A third line of understanding collective action implies a systematic modulation of the political field that changes itself and by that, it creates space for marginal actors to express themselves (*Ibidem*). The fourth path in explaining social change depicts itself as a qualitative shift from the previous cognitive schemes of understanding social dynamics and departs from the rationalistic worldview that characterized the previous ones. This time, social movements are understood *via* keywords as "schemata" (Goffman 1986) and "social movement narratives" (Polletta 1998a: 137-159; Polletta 1998b: 419-446). This perspective pays tribute to the cultural sociology. The last wave of framing the process of social change is, this time, patented by the new paradigm of the digital era. As the field of neuropsychology registers new advances in understanding the brain functioning and states the communality of thoughts and emotions as intertwined phases of the same neural process of reasoning, a similar vein regarding the unity of emotionality and mind

* "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania.

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erupts through social sciences; emotions are coded as active values and synthetic principles (Tejerina, Perugorria 2012). As it will be argued later, this will profoundly change the process of social change, since it will strongly affect both the dynamic of mobilization and the context of self-receding from a movement.

2. Social Action as Deviancy

Collective gatherings that demand public accountability and pretend social changes are perceived with deep skepticism by scholars of the mid-twenties who are mainly disturbed by the raise of fascism and different kinds of radical nationalist movements. A pathological vocabulary is used to describe mass behavior, on the one hand, and the state of the individual, on the other. The mad crowd that acts violently and irrational (Le Bon 2009) or the exhausted individual, suffering from anomie and the lack of self-conscience (Durkheim 1995), are symptomatic concepts for theories that explain the social change as a breakdown of institutions that can no longer keep in track the mass of no-names, which creates an organic system with a specific behavior based on anonymity, contagion, conformity on one hand, and hysteria, primal impulses and exacerbation, on the other hand. The metaphor of the "silent flock" (Lippmann 2010) that describes the mass audiences is also indicative for the scholarly shared worldview of the time. The common individual is actually absent in this interpretation of the world. He is swept by society as a system, while the society itself is regarded as degraded and ill in its every attempt to change itself. Resistance to change, hierarchical order viewed as right and just, large social distance aimed to maintain the *status quo* create a consistent mental schemata that frames as a failure and as a sign of madness every attempt of social change that irrupts from down to top, from grass-roots to the elites. This worldview is based on the disregard of the common human being who supposedly has no value in himself, but only as a part of a system designed to be controlled and directed in a top to bottom manner.

3. Collective behavior is "awarded" with rationality

As social movements of civil rights enflamed the global arena, a new generation of pundits aimed to prove the wrongness of past interpretations over social change. Breakdown theories were, though, replaced by the theory or resource mobilization (Tilly 1977) that dominates the seventies and the eighties. Commonly shared, the main view in this period was that social change is the result of a precise calculus of benefits over costs and a strong focus was directed towards grass-roots organization (Buechler 2004: 47-66). As a replica, the theory of resource mobilization does not challenge the basic assumption of the previous one and shares with it the same basic valuation of rationality and clear order. Its departure from the previous frame of thought consists in the fact that it argues in favor of the masses that are now perceived as organized groups, having the same amount of rationality as the institutional assemblies (Snow, Soule, Kriesi 2004). The common individual still lacks distinct features and is not yet considered valuable by himself. However, based on this new theoretical apparatus that dignifies structure in an area previously regarded as amorphous, the model of political process is articulated, thus the cognitive liberation is considered a necessary factor for social change (McAdam 1999). This concept will truly open a new path for

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understanding social movements in connection with the common individual, not just in relation with systemic shifts, which are instrumentally moderated by leaders and elites who direct masses of indistinct followers.

4. From Rationality to Comprehension. The significant "no-name"

The value of the common individual is first regarded and immersed into a new, expanded worldview that spots the significance of the ordinary one in impacting reality, once that symbolic interactionism and cultural sociology are brought into the field of social movements. Because McAdams' model of political process implied that cognitive liberation is essential for social change events, scholars of the nineties bred a fresh interest for cognitive schemata (Goffman 1986) as paradigmatic in explaining different phases of protests and social contention. The role of collective and individual narratives in modelling reality is more and more recognized, as sharing personal stories is considered to be a basic mechanism for the diffusion of principles which bring resonance and structure at the social level (Polletta 1998a: 137-159). Individual testimonials are now considered as the most valuable dimension of social change processes and the common individual is invested with a passive power to impact the world by his ability to share his life experience within communities (Polletta 1998b: 419-446). Because life stories are means to communicate world visions which are, in turn, regarded as the very fabric of social change, a breach is opened into the paradigm of rationality. The role of emotions starts being reinvestigated by this new generation of pundits who mark the beginning of the 21st century (Tejerina, Perugorria 2012; Lee 2011; Ganz 2011; Effler 2010). It is the first time when common individual is awarded with the passive power to impact the world he lives in. From now on, *via* successive shifts within the shared worldview, the common individual will gain centrality.

5. Network theories and the first wave of empowering the ordinary individual

On the fertile soil of recognizing the impact of individuals who enable social change by continuously fomenting the challenge of prescribed social order with each shared personal testimonial that inspires, denounces and reinterprets publicly accepted values, the paradigm shift brought by the internet takes place. As the common individual was attributed with complexity and subjectivity and by that, with the passive power to influence social reality, now the frame is once more extended as digital mediums facilitate interconnection and shrinks once more the social distance. If sharing personal testimonials highlighted the intimacy of connection and diminished the perceived isolation of individuals by enacting closure at the mental level, the digital revolution extends this closure to the level of direct action.

As it was the case of extended rationality attribution that was awarded to the previously underestimated social segment, the first age of the internet marked the extended power attribution that brought a symbolically egalitarian space where traditional empowered actors encountered newly empowered actors. In other words, the new worldview implies that the state-representatives start losing their monopoly on social impact and exercised control, while the common individuals gain the same

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ability on the basis of a new more reciprocally balanced relation between themselves and officials.

The model of decentralized democracy, based on the metaphor of the "termitarium" (Shirky 2008) explains the basics of coherent and socially constructive behaviors of individuals who, by no centralized disposals, but by their own initiative, engage in social life in an autonomous, yet not chaotic, way. Order is created, as Shirky argues, not by following imposed rules, but by being interconnected. This model was first enabled on the case summary of an event which dates back in 2002, when American bloggers reacted to Trent Lott's discourse about the presidential campaign of Storm Thurmond from 1948. In an autonomous, yet synchronized manner, bloggers revealed a fundamental incompatibility between the principles exposed by senator Lott and his public function. Their reaction conducted to Lott's dismissal.

On the same line of highlighting the ability of common individuals in determining the action of traditional actors of power there had been argued that virtual community empowers the act of conversation that becomes influent and decisional at the public level and not just in the private space, as it was the case before (Howard 2010).

As the Web 2.0 evolves and people get used with direct communication and networked interaction, the principles of decentralization get deeper and deeper into the collective consciousness crystalizing the full development of a new worldview that states the centrality of the common individual in a physical world which is media-orientated. The last shift in the evolution of mental schemes used in both reception and activation of a certain statute of the common individual in the context of social change marks a qualitative leap. A brand new worldview is launched into the public arena. New studies suggest that the good world is no more perceived in terms of rationality and hierarchical order, but in terms of decentralization, horizontal development, self-organization of individuals, gift economy and free shared knowledge and resources (Falkvinge 2013; Shirky 2008; Brafman, Beckstorm 2006; Lebkowsky, Ratcliffe 2005; Steven 2002). As it will be argued in the next section, this new worldview, enabled by the paradigm shift in communication, normalizes a type of knowledge that was previously associated with very limited social segment. Implications that will be discussed as self-transcending knowledge (Scharmer 2000) rely to specific motives to action and by that, new repertoires of social action are assumed to gain momentum in the near future.

6. Direct action and self-organization: the common individual fully empowered

Just as it was the case when the common individual was attributed with complexity and consciousness in the nineties, when scholars focused on the role of storytelling in social change and inflicted by that a qualitative departure from the previous cognitive schemata used to place the ordinary man into a specific position across the social order, the end of the first decade of 21st century enables another qualitative leap. After gaining the recognition of symbolic equality with state actors regarding the power to determine and control public policies, the common individual is perceived as entitled with the power and the right of direct action and self-organization.

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Leaderless organizations and decentralized social movements are best described by the model of emergent democracy (Steven 2002) and by the model of extreme democracy (Lebkowsky, Ratcliffe 2005). Both models describe the behavior of common individuals who base their actions on a deeply connected style of life that generalize a representation of the world based on universalist principles, where the center is everywhere and the periphery, nowhere.

Another model, developed by UNESCO scholars, Media Oriented New Humanism has both descriptive and prescriptive value, as it stands for the emergent reality, and not for the already-established one. It holds five important dimensions:

> a) […] it must situate the human person at the core of this media civilization […] just as in Renaissance the humanists managed to place human beings at the center of a world that had previously been organized by theology. b) […] new awareness must drive the primacy of the critical sense towards technology and thus replace this trusting and rather unselective attitude that prevails today and forces us to unconditionally accept technological innovation. […] c) […] must help to foster a sense of autonomy in a context in which global communication can engender dependence and very subtle forms of intellectual subjugation; d) In the sense that, while Renaissance humanism was characterized by a "discovery" of new "worlds" […] giving rise to an "encounter" – often violent – between cultures and civilizations, the new humanism in the global communication society must prioritize a new sense of respect for multiplicity and cultural diversity and must support media development with the goal of consolidating the new culture of peace; e) […] capable of reviving the classical idea of the cosmopolitan, universal citizen, with very clear rights and responsibilities, that entail a planet-wide commitment (Tornero, Varis 2010: 25-26).

As it can be easily observed, the new worldview that attributes centrality and autonomy to the common individual enables new styles of action and establishes different social change paths. A close look to how contemporary decentralized organizations work will highlight another profound transformation at the level of knowledge acquisition that impacts all the process of social engagement and disengagement.

7. The wisdom engrained in new media use. Decentralized communities

There are fundamental differences between decentralized communities and centralized ones. In the first instance, there is no one to command and control an open community and secondly, the responsibility is assumed by each member, with no diffusion or delegation (Falkvinge 2013: 13-30; Brafman, Beckstorm 2006: 57-83). There are also significant differences regarding the motives and the process of gaining membership. While a centralized organization attracts members with benefits derived from the social and economic status that it's able to provide, a decentralized organization is joined only on the base of either gift economy (Falkvinge 2013: 31-50), or shared ideology in order to maximize the personal meaning (Brafman, Beckstorm 2006: 140-159).

Decentralized organizations that spurred on the basis of digital social networking and Millennial Generation, in general, as the major group of the digital natives, have been criticized because of what it was perceived as instability and lack of loyalty and consistency (Millennial Impact Report 2013). However, there are, again, important features regarding the specific process that regulates internal

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functioning of decentralized organizations, which are by default in opposition of those presupposed by their critics who operate an interpretation based on principles that describe the functioning of centralized organizations. The ideal type of decentralized functioning implies a membership that varies and it cannot be either measured or controlled (Brafman, Beckstorm 2006: 133-159).

Another important difference between decentralized vs. centralized functioning refers to the economic structure. While a centralized structure manages a clear amount of material capital which is distributed on the basis of specific meritocracy standards, a decentralized organization does not have a constant material capital and the one that is held is evenly shared across the whole community and not directly distributed (*Ibidem*: 57-97). There is also a major difference between these two types of organization with respect to structures and role functioning. While the repertoire of possible roles is stable and protected *via* specific rituals across a centralized organization, there is no division of roles across a decentralized one, where everybody is completely free to do whatever one decides (*Ibidem*). The power and knowledge are also evenly distributed across the network, and not associated with specific criteria or socio-economic and professional status, as it happens in centralized systems (*Ibidem*). Regarding the financial dependency between members and organization, it is important to be mentioned that it is very subtle in the case of decentralized networks, where crowd funding is the norm and self-financing the most occurring case (*Ibidem*).

The crisis scenario is also very different when a decentralized community is spotted. When attacked, it tends to become even more decentralized, accelerating the type of behavior of cancerous cells. In other words, when a cell or branch is annihilated, the whole system tends to replicate itself, expanding even more. Again, it is important to keep in mind that crisis encountered by decentralized organizations are always different in nature by those encountered by centralized ones. When a centralized organization passes through a crisis, it tends to become even more centralized, simplifying its structure by renouncing at bankrupted branches, reducing the personnel and the path of communication by shrinking the possibility of horizontal communication. Capital is used to protect the leadership and members find themselves in a more constrained position (*Ibidem*).

When crisis hits a decentralized organization, members become even more active, displaying a more autonomous behavior characterized by an enhanced diversity of individual initiatives. New ways of action are enabled and no strain is experienced while losing capital that is generally volatile, recreated and enriched on a regular basis *via* free individual contributions (*Ibidem*).

8. Self-transcending knowledge as "normal" across decentralized communities

A comparative reading of some critical inquires about the specifics of the digital natives highlights strong similarities, even though they were conducted across different fields of knowledge. In a paper published in 2012, for example, Todoroi considers that truly proficient digital surfers will develop a cognitive style based on imagination, intuition, insight, improvisation and incubation due to the variety of digital instruments that facilitate creation, direct action and cross validation. The

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Model of the New Humanism Media Oriented, as it was already presented also predicts the enhancement of critical abilities due to the overwhelming amount of information accessible on the web that requires no more to be absorbed or memorized, but interpreted and instrumented (Tornero, Varis 2010). In the field of urban economy, the same observations are retained: individuals digitally proficient are highly interconnected and creative users of technology. They form a new bohemian class, or a creative class that comprises individuals with high levels of autonomy, individualism, spontaneity, social immersion and reactivity towards both contexts that could endanger their freedom and opportunities to enlarge it (Florida 2012).

A look over Millennials, the social group with the most density of tech-savvy individuals, envisions a generational portrait that retains the following basic qualities: strong sense of both individualism and communitarianism, ludic and creative attitudes towards life, instability, deep involvement into work, with no barriers between personal life and professional life because work reflects their passion, strong rejection of work that doesn't express their talents, disregard for social and economic status, high levels of creativity and tolerance but also strong sense of social justice (Howe, Strauss 2000).

The cross-reading of all these descriptions based on different methodological apparatus used by scholars of different fields of knowledge strikes through the amount of similarities.

Now, as in the field of knowledge management is known, there are three types of knowledge: explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge and self-transcendent knowledge. The explicit knowledge is based on knowing what, how, why and from whom (Scharmer 2000: table 1). Tacit knowledge or knowledge gained by doing is characterized by "knowledge in use", "theory in use", "metaphysics in use" and "ethics/aesthetics in use" (*Ibidem*). Self-transcending knowledge or the artists' kind of knowledge is, in turn, based on "reflection-in-action", "imagination-in-action", "inspiration-in-action" and "intuition-in-action" (*Ibidem*).

An overlook on the evolution of worldviews alongside the continuous expansion of the concept of the common individual indicates that first mentioned worldview could be associated with explicit knowledge, while the first qualitative shift of the previous worldview corresponds to the tacit style of knowledge. The last worldview, articulated on the basis of full centrality of the ordinary person and shared by decentralized communities of tech-savvy individuals clearly reflects the self-transcending knowledge type.

9. Conclusions: The rise of the quixotic motive for action

A recent experimental study that investigated the motives that activate people to engage in helping others revealed that those who share Communalist and Egotistic world-visions get involved in bettering others' situation only on a limited basis of time and costs, while those who share an Universalist world vision – and, therefore, act on the motive of bettering the world (the quixotic motive) – profoundly engage in helping others, despite high costs in time and energy (Salgado, Oceja 2011: 145-155). The profile of those aroused by the quixotic motive (*Ibidem*: 148) is similar with those descriptions associated with decentralized networks of tech-savvy individuals. In the

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field of social change and social movement, these findings suggest that, despite the instability of the new movements of contesting, the path is not going to be abandoned and most of the transnational decentralized communities are going to grow stronger in their demands to access a life that is self-organized and not regulated by institutions.

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Pouring Digital Soul into Social Movements. The Enhancement of Self-Transcending Knowledge through the Use of New Media and Its Impact on Contentious Politics

The following paper is based on the main theories about the emergence of a conscious society due to the general evolution of technologies which empower artistic expression and autonomy. Because self-transcendence is one of the main features praised by optimist researchers of internet-related fields and digital instruments are ingrained in contemporary protests, there is a high need of understanding how self-transcendence shapes the process of collective actions. In order to develop a model to analyze social movements through the lens of self-transcending ability of a group, theories of knowledge and existential psychology should be mastered alongside with theories of social movements and new-media studies. However, even though the scientific literature abounds in papers that investigate the connection between new media and contemporary protests, researches about the role of self-transcendence in contentious politics are scant, if not absent, altogether. The paper comes to fill this gap by trying to articulate a preliminary model that acknowledges the role of the self-transcendent styles of thinking over the unfolding of contemporary contentious movements.

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