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NOTHING IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE

OPENNESS, HORIZONTALITY AND
THE MOVEMENT OF MOVEMENTS

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Networked, horizontal forms have been at the centre of many of the political debates of the last ten years, and have often been treated alternatively as the limit (by their enemies) or the solution (by their proponents) to the problems of organisation of resistance to global capitalism. This has unfortunately meant that critiques carried out ‘from the inside’ – i.e. by those who have experienced and share a general belief in them – have been much rarer than those carried out by partisans of other forms of organisation. The result has been much back-patting and triumphalism, but few discussions of anxieties and frustrations that seem widely shared, a problem that is only enhanced by the fact that so often it is felt that horizontality must be defended from its detractors.¹

It is this kind of internal critique that this paper attempts to carry out. In order to do so, it envisages a demystification of openness and horizontality, showing how it is often presented in complete absence of context and pointing to its inherent contradictions and dead ends. The point of doing this is not to engage in another debate along the lines of ‘less’ or ‘more’ horizontality, or horizontality versus verticality. Rather, the idea is to render these very notions problematic, and by affirming their problematic nature, to argue for a democratic practice that tackles this nature head on.

1. BEFORE OPENNESS AND HORIZONTALITY, THERE WAS OPENNESS AND HORIZONTALITY

One can start by asking the question why openness and horizontality have become so central recently. Two answers seem possible. The first one concerns the growing disappointment with 'real existing socialism' that erupted in the events of 1968 and was very present (and increasingly outspoken) in progressive movements all over the world, culminating in a strange aftertaste of consternation and indifference when those regimes crumbled *circa* 1989. In this narrative we have a learning process where the lessons of Eastern Europe – whose mistakes were universalised, in either their practical or theoretical form, to almost everywhere through the work of Communist and Socialist parties of all shades – made subsequent waves of people struggling for social transformation wise enough to know what not to do, though still in the dark, and in some cases frankly disillusioned, as to what could be done. While this process is undeniable, it is clear that it alone cannot account for the move towards the open and horizontal organisation of struggles seen in recent years. In fact, one could say it is more capable of explaining the rise of identity politics, single-issue campaigns, NGOs and/or the sheer surrender of many people to the idea of an inevitability of the world as it is/was, and the neoliberal stance taken by many Left parties and trade unions.

What is relevant about the 'rise' of openness and horizontality is not that it means a substitution of one total theory of organisation by another – that could maybe explain why people would value them highly – but the fact that something like 'network' has a place today in the vocabulary and practice of organisations and companies that remain hierarchical. In other words, what is relevant is not that these ideas have become important, but that they have become *practised*. Even if we say that openness and horizontality are the new ideology – and an across-the-board one at that – the ideology as such only exists because it has become (or is perceived as in the process of becoming) materially possible on a large scale.

The bulk of the answer therefore has to lie in a material process. One current narrative of this process identifies it with a restructuring in the most 'advanced' sectors of capitalism (which, it is argued, exerts a hegemony that re-structures all other sectors), commonly called the passage from Fordism to post-Fordism. This passage can be initially characterised by two processes. First, the transformation in the relation between the productive process, on the one hand, and what is supposedly outside it, on the other, namely: consumption, market-research, 'market-making', 'customer relations'. Second, the 'singularisation' of the product:

We are witnessing today not really a growth of services, but rather a development of the 'relations of service'. The move beyond the Taylorist organisation of services is characterised by the integration of the relationship between production and consumption, where in fact the consumer intervenes in an active way in the

composition of the product. The product 'service' becomes a social construction and a social process of 'conception' and innovation. (...) The change in this relationship between production and consumption has direct consequences for the organisation of the Taylorist labor of production of services, because it draws into question both the contents of labor and the division of labor (and thus the relationship between conception and execution loses its unilateral character).²

This transformation is in turn only possible through the socialisation of the material means through which this new relation between production and consumption can be established, i.e. means of communication. The internet adds another layer to this process, since it is a multipolar (many-to-many) means of production and circulation of content, as opposed to a one-to-many medium such as television (even though TV channels establish their own many-to-one media, through surveys, polls, mechanisms to observe the audience's behaviour, etc.). The large scale massification of these media, and a multipolar medium like the internet in particular, is thus the chief material cause behind the 'renaissance' of openness and horizontality. It is only within the horizon of a social life that has become networked that a politics of networking as such can appear. And it is only in a politics of networking that openness and horizontality can appear as a goal.

'Networks' and 'open spaces', therefore, are ambiguous by nature. On the one hand, they are what we perceive as the conditions of possibility of horizontality, the means by which it can be achieved. On the other, they are only partial actualisations of the idea they make possible – and make possible not only as their instantiation, but also as idea, since it is only within the horizon of a politics of networks and open spaces that horizontality becomes a means and a goal.³

This is not to deny that many social and political groups in the past have practised open and horizontal ways of organising. While this is obviously true, they were always faced with the practical impossibility of extending this internal relation to the whole of society, or even to large numbers of people, because of the lack of material means through which to do that. Such groups could only propose this as a desirable future by means of some kind of eschatological argumentative device, such as an 'end of history' in the classless society of communism. Faced with its material limits, horizontality had to 'stay small', and could only 'think big' in a 'march of history'. What is important about horizontality today is that the material conditions for its existence are perceived as being given, at least in potential, *in the present*. This explains the emphasis on horizontality as means and goal: through working horizontally, we are developing horizontal forms of cooperation. In other words, we are developing both the very social fabric that we want to produce and the means through which it can be produced. Organisation and politics coincide. In the past, the non-separation of means and ends has been a point of principle or ideology. Now it is a simple matter of practice. And since large-scale media of communication, and the internet – by virtue of

its multipolarity – in particular, seem to provide the conditions under which this process is possible, it is no wonder that the models of networking, openness and horizontality we work with are largely derived from them. It is common to point to the practice of free and open source software communities as the ‘vanguard’ of this democracy-to-come.⁴

2. OPENNESS AND HORIZONTALITY – AND THEIR CONTRADICTIONS

This, it must be said, is the *ideology* of openness and horizontality. It is a way of charting the present and perceiving lines along which the future can be constructed. The ideology is thus secondary in existence to the present itself, i.e. to the existing practices of horizontality and openness, and their condition now. The distinction is important: it highlights the fact that it is the concrete practices that create the conditions of possibility in which the ideology is produced. Therefore the ideology can only be a theoretical production that shares the same situation, and limits, as the practices.

In this sense theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice. But it is local and regional ... and not totalising. ... A theory is exactly like a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself.⁵

2.1. FIRST CONTRADICTION: ONE OR MANY HORIZONTALITIES? DEPENDENCE ON MATERIAL CONTEXT

Again, the point here is not to say ‘horizontality is something that happens to people with internet access’, but to highlight the difference between a model that springs from certain practices and models that spring from different ones.⁶ In other words, there can be many horizontalities.

This is why the universalisation of certain ideas of openness and horizontality suffers precisely from the problem of abstracting these ideas from their material contexts. What kind of horizontality can we speak of when referring to a social movement such as the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement (MST)? This has over a million members, many of whom are illiterate (despite efforts in popular education), has little access to any means of communication, has no territorial autonomy (unlike the Zapatistas) and is under a constant campaign of criminalisation from the media and the danger of attacks from landowners’ henchmen. It is true that it is a movement with a strong Marxist-Leninist influence; but that does not stop us from asking what form of horizontality it does or could have. The problems of applying a model become clear if we look at the five ‘ways in which the kind of openness identified’ in free and open source software communities ‘practically correspond to specific moments of organisation in the social movement’, listed by Jamie King: the organisation of meetings and discussions; their documentation; decision-making; the organisation of demonstrations; the organisation of actions.⁷



The MST as a movement (i.e. through its leadership) does take part in global networking through *Via Campesina* and the World Social Forum. Many of the material conditions that make networked politics possible in Europe, however, are absent from the realm of possibilities of the vast majority of their membership: time-flexibility; high mobility; language skills; technological literacy; the access to means of communication, particularly the internet. Inversely, the frustration many people sense in attending something like a social forum (or many of them in succession) is the realisation of the existence of a restricted number of ‘hyperactivists’ who can attend all these networking spaces. (Of course, as soon as one has this first-hand realisation, it means that one is already part of this group!) This is the moment where real-existing networking runs against the real-existing differences in material conditions of its ‘wider environment’.⁸ And by fetishising one model of horizontality, one will incur in the need for the same distinction made in liberal democracy, between ‘formal’ and ‘material’ democracy or access.

2.2. SECOND CONTRADICTION: SUPERNODALITY

A ghost haunts networked politics: the ghost of the supernode. If networked politics is based on communication flows, the supernode can be seen as ‘not only routing more than their “fair share” of traffic, but actively determining the “content” that traverses them.’⁹ The definition already points to one attribute of

the supernode: hyperconnectivity. In other words, some individuals are ‘more networked’ than others, a quality that can be derived from material conditions such as the ones described above (high mobility, time-flexibility, etc.) and others that are more contingent, such as knowing the people who are particularly relevant in a situation, ‘having been around longer’, being friends with other individuals or whatever. To these one might add personal attributes, such as being a good speaker, charisma, and so on.

In all networks, these characteristics – which are, so to speak, external to the network itself – will apply in different ways to different individuals, and contingency will distribute others in an equally random fashion. Therefore, it is safe to say there is no given way of preventing the occurrence of supernodes. Also, it is clear that it is not a matter of ‘a malicious will to power’,¹⁰ but a function of the way networks (and groups generally) work. For example, one may become a supernode as a result of a temporary group or task-related need or by being active in periods of hypoconnectivity of a network. And of course, since there are no formal structures to be seen, the possibility of these informal hierarchies becoming sedimented is high.

Of course, this is only the network-age variation of the process described in Jo Freeman’s classic text about informal structures within the American feminist movement, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*.¹¹ But her final conclusion is not that the way to counter these tendencies is a return to democratic centralism or the Leninist party. She proposes instead ‘a few principles we can keep in mind that are essential to democratic structuring and are politically effective also’. These include: ‘diffusion of information to everyone as frequently as possible’; ‘equal access to resources needed by the group’; and ‘rotation of tasks among individuals’. All of these are common practices of groups who profess openness and horizontality today. We could say, then, that she does not have anything to say to those who, even using these principles, keep on coming across the same problems she identifies. But maybe we are asking the wrong question.

2.3. THIRD AND FOURTH CONTRADICTIONS: NO SUCH THING AS AN OPEN SPACE; DETERMINATION AND INDETERMINATION

If networks are the ‘permanent’ structures of our model of horizontality, ‘open spaces’ are the temporary coming together of these structures. But how open is an open space? Many of them are based on hallmarks (Peoples’ Global Action, Dissent!) or charters of principles (World Social Forum) which define an inside and an outside. They work, therefore, by exclusion. Others (such as the *Caracol Intergalactika* – one of the ‘barrios’ within the International Youth Camp at the World Social Forum), without having anything of the kind, allow the identity of the groups organising it or the process by which it is organised to exercise a ‘soft power’ of exclusion. Before the *Caracol Intergalactika* of 2005, for example, a chat discussion took place where one participant raised the question about the poss-

ibility of the youth wing of a Communist Party wishing to take part in it. There was consensus, however, that there was no need to create a distinction, because the identity of the space itself created it. The very idea of an 'open space' is contradictory – for it to be opened, it must be opened by someone, for some purpose and with some people in mind. No matter how open this first determination is, it always already creates an exclusion.

This leads to a larger problem: the fact that every determination is a closure – every saying 'this is the problem', 'this is where we stand', 'this is what we have to do now' narrows down the terms of a debate and therefore (at least in thesis) excludes people who think differently, in the same way that hallmarks, for example, do. As a consequence, any determination of a goal, position, analysis, etc. beyond the constitutive terms of the open space is perceived as negative, because it reduces diversity. Discussions of this kind are considered only possible within smaller affinity groups, which means that more defined positions and strategies are the properties of small groups and/or individuals, and do not belong in the debate of larger networks or spaces. In this way, horizontality always posits its own limit: while it can produce decisions in small groups, the possibility of doing so in larger groups is very limited, and even – since having overarching goals, positions, etc. is a potential danger to diversity – something to be avoided.

2.4. FIFTH AND SIXTH CONTRADICTIONS: DEPENDENCE ON PRACTICAL CONTEXT; DIVERSITY OF TACTICS VERSUS CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

The movement that became visible on a world scale for the first time in Seattle has, from there to here, found various solutions to the problem of how it relates internally when networks come together. Seattle was a surprise not only because of the 'coming together' that took place, but also because of the nature of that coming together: a broad coalition of very loosely related groups, some with interests considered contradictory, coming together through a process of open, horizontal networking – without a previous conference, the debate of a ten-point programme or anything of the kind. That was not only this movement's first show of strength, it was also the first time a networked politics was affirmed loud and clear on such a scale.

This capacity to come together in an *ad hoc* fashion, with very little other determinations besides a common objective, has been described as 'swarming'. Swarming occurs when the dispersed units of a network of small (and perhaps some large) forces converge on a target from multiple directions. The overall aim is *sustainable pulsing* – swarm networks must be able to coalesce rapidly and stealthily on a target, then dis sever and redisperse, immediately ready to recombine for a new pulse.¹²

While activists widely celebrated this definition – and the irony of a think-tank specialising in military studies being the first to pin them down – one part

of it is often overlooked: 'on a target'. At a summit protest, of course, the target is given – the whole point of the summit protest is precisely finding something which can, for a few days, physically represent capitalism to the world. Once the summit is over, however, the question of what being 'anti-capitalist' means opens up again.

The lynchpin of swarming is the principle of diversity of tactics. The goal (or target) being given in advance, the most effective way to go about arriving at it, and the only way of respecting the diversity of approaches of the groups involved, is agreeing that each group is entitled to follow its own approach. The problem is that this principle was arrived at as a solution to the question of swarming, i.e. situations where the objective is already given, such as summit protests. When a commonality has to be produced, where some sort of agreement has to take place, there is very little that diversity of tactics can do. That most of the swarming moments of this movement have been summit protests cannot obscure this. In fact, it could be that it is the automatism of the ready-made solution that explains the persistence of the summit protest as the tactics by which this movement is recognised.

We could go as far as saying that a too-automatic application of the principle of diversity of tactics is in contradiction with the principle of consensus decision-making. It is always possible not to come to any conclusion by applying the former, and simply decide to 'agree to disagree'. The latter implies that differences cannot be approached as absolutes, consensus being precisely the method of working through them and coming up with new syntheses. Perhaps this last contradiction is simply the practical extension of the fourth one, between determination and indetermination.

3. ANTI-GLOBALISATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The first three contradictions show that horizontality is a practical and logical failure: (i) the opening of spaces proceeds by exclusion; (ii) all forms of external factors, including but not only material conditions, distort horizontal networks from the outside, creating differences between nodes; and (iii) these differences reintroduce through the backdoor hierarchies and informal structures that we desire to be free of. The three last contradictions point to the fact that, if swarming and the principle of diversity of tactics was the great victory of networked politics, it may have been a self-defeating one. Because diversity of tactics points to a larger contradiction between decision-making and diversity – every time something is decided, diversity is reduced.

These points probably sum up people's frustrations with openness and horizontality in their practical experiences. On the one hand, horizontality in practice does not live up to itself as an ideal, and always ends up creating exclusions and/or informal structures and hierarchies. In the email discussions on the future of Dissent! following the G8 summit, some of the positions expressed that feeling:



Dissent! should not go on, because it has served its purpose (creating the political and material conditions for the swarming in Scotland), and any attempt to move beyond that is bound to degenerate into some sort of proto-Leninist group, with a small clique of people moving it behind the scenes and defining agendas for the movement. Or, it has served the purpose of facilitating the summit mobilisation, but it has already failed the purpose of being horizontal, and therefore should not move beyond.

On the other hand (which might exist as either opposition or complement to the first point), horizontality does not seem effective: it is impossible to make decisions, it is impossible to see the whole picture, and the only thing it's useful for is facilitating moments of swarming, where lots of single-issue (or single-minded) small groups can come together without any problems, precisely because there is very little to be decided. This could be seen in other moments of the same email debate: some people supported the idea of taking Dissent! forward and made their proposals as to what the next things to focus on were; others replied that this would be the problem with continuing to use Dissent!, because everyone would try to impose their pet issue on everyone else as soon as there was no more G8 summit to unify people's attention.

Two great sources of frustration and dissatisfaction are two of the oldest practical debates – and this is probably because they are really two great *non*-debates that always take place, but never really happen – namely, our relation-

ship with the media and the use of physical force. The two issues, despite being always discussed, are almost always solved by some form of application of the principle of diversity of tactics or some sort of interpretation of consensus decision-making. Practically, this means that ‘pacifists’ in the ‘violence’ debate are defeated, since their goal is to stop ‘violence’ from happening. And, in the ‘media’ debate, there is the outcome that, ‘since we do not have consensus on whether to talk to the media, we cannot talk to the media’, which in turn facilitates the emergence of groups and individuals who, by being alone in talking to the media, become *de facto* representatives. But since from the start the whole point is couched in terms of diversity of *positions*, this ends up meaning a fetishisation of what positions *are* – i.e. general maxims of behaviour that compose some kind of overarching theory of what politics, social change, ‘revolution’, etc. is – and hardly ever what the positions can be in that situation, that is, how the general maxims that individuals and groups have applied to that particular practical context. This is where the feeling of the debate never actually happening comes from: positions are taken from the start to be absolutes that do not suffer any inflection according to practical, situational contexts – and in fact are absolutely impervious to any debate and can never be changed. Therefore, it becomes a question of one position winning and the other one losing, but this winning/losing can never be acknowledged since making such decisions is bad, because it reduces diversity, and so on...

In the wake of Seattle, debates around tactics often took on an abstract tone. The question of what constitutes ‘violence’ was posed, and while dogmatic pacifists moralistically condemned property destruction, others imbued it with a veneer of liberatory significance of its own. As the ACME Collective argued in their communiqué on the Seattle Black Bloc, ‘When we smash a window, we aim to destroy the thin veneer of legitimacy that surrounds private property rights. At the same time, we exorcise that set of violent and destructive social relationships which has been imbued in almost everything around us.’

Insofar as these debates proceeded on a terrain of absolutes, the discussions skirted the question of context. Those arguing for the enforcement of nonviolent guidelines were faced with a context in which nonviolent discipline could no longer be enforced and reacted with condemnation and differentiation. ‘The revolution we are trying to create didn’t and doesn’t need these parasites,’ argued one activist in a Seattle Weekly article. On the other hand, property destruction was often conflated with revolutionary anti-capitalism. It provided a way to seemingly distinguish ‘reformist’ from ‘revolutionary’ tactics. The strategic question of when and where property destruction could be effectively utilised was often left unanswered.¹³

Opinions and grand theories become defined as the private property of individuals and small affinity groups, but not desirable on larger levels. Since no substantive larger-level agreement is desired, this means that groups and indiv-

iduals hardly ever get a chance to challenge and be challenged in a practical debate on what it means to be doing something there and then. At its best, debate actually takes place (often because something really needs to be decided), and some will have a feeling of ‘why can we not have this more often?’ At its worst, it can feel like attending a convention of tiny communist groupuscules (each with their theory of revolution, manifestos, literature) who are different only because they are capable of working together once a year under the only agreement that they all should ‘be different together’.

To these two internal problems – the feeling that horizontality always fails in practice and the feeling that it promotes immobility of ideas and decisions – can be added to an external problem: how do horizontal groups relate to what is viewed as ‘non-horizontal’? This is the horizontal dilemma – if I place horizontality and openness as political means and ends, how can I relate to those who do not? If I reject them, I am closed and sectarian; if I work with them, I am indirectly supporting hierarchical, vertical practices.

Like every false problem, it only exists in absolute terms. If you turn ‘political parties’ or ‘universities’ or anything else into a concept that is defined by certain features, such as having a hierarchical structure – and this feature excludes that concept from participating in the concept of horizontality, defined in opposition to ‘verticality’ and hierarchy – then you create a conceptual problem of difficult resolution. But if these things are not fetishised and turned into concepts, but rather treated in the particular context in which the relation may or may not happen, then what kinds of relationships can be established in this situation? What is the nature of the work they are doing? Who are the people they are working with? What goals can be achieved? What strings are attached? The question then ceases being about an idea, and becomes instead a practical problem which requires more information (rather than a theory of organisation and revolution) and eventually a practical solution.

Fetishisation, of course, works both ways: it is also possible to fetishise horizontality. The problem is that it becomes a word – like ‘anarchism’, ‘socialism’, etc. – with a normative value that is abstracted from all the actual practices and social contexts it is drawn from. The problem of this ‘identification with oneself’ – turning a self-image into a norm – is that this restricts one’s capacity to transform oneself, congealing into an ideal that not only (for a social movement) is restrictive to its capacity to act and enter into relation with what is different, but also becomes blind to its own cultural, class, gender, etc. context.

The reverse side of this ‘self-identification’ is that, once one realises oneself as a minority against a majority that is either non-mobilised or identifies with control (or minorities that propose alternatives of control, such as communist parties) – that is, once one sees that there is very little in the immediate environment to relate to – the concrete, immediate other is substituted by an abstract other that is either absent by definition (‘this is a middle class movement; if only



we had the working class with us...') or by distance (the 'beautiful resistance' of movements in the global South, many of which are often hierarchical themselves). What is immediate and near is devalued in favour of an ideal.¹⁴

4. BENEATH THE NETWORK THERE IS A NETWORK

*The source of this idea was a natural reaction against the overstructured society in which most of us found ourselves, the inevitable control this gave others over our lives, and the continual elitism of the Left ... The idea of structurelessness, however, has moved from a healthy counter to these tendencies to becoming a goddess in its own right.*¹⁵

Hopefully the point of painting the disheartening picture of horizontality above will by now become clear. If the concept is, as shown above, contradictory and unworkable, there is only one way to go: decide this is a false problem and ditch the concept. *Nothing* is what democracy looks like – horizontality is not a model (or a property that can be predicated of things) but a practice. And as a practice, it remains permanently open to the future and to difference. As soon as one says 'this is what it looks like', one is closing the door to all future and different things that might come under that name. The point here is not that horizontality is problematic, but that democracy as such is problematic. And problematic means just that: permanently open.

By deciding upon an ideal model of what it should be like, all we are doing

is creating a transcendent image that hovers above actual practices. Because it is cleansed of the 'impurities' of this world, it will serve all sorts of purposes – ideological propaganda; eschatological device ('when everyone is horizontal, horizontality will reign'); rhetorical device (as when a group accuses another of not being horizontal); absolute indeterminacy ('the more is decided, the less open it is'); and being that thing in comparison to which everything always falls short. Meanwhile, back in the immanence of the only world that actually exists, we will keep on suffering with its limits. By becoming this transcendent ideal, horizontality and openness – themselves not unfamiliar to business and management discourses – can become very similar to liberalism. The dream of 'absolute openness' means that openness is only possible if we abstract all concrete differences. Also, nothing can ever be affirmed, for that would contradict openness.

Jo Freeman criticised structurelessness on these two accounts: how it informally allowed for the differences it formally excluded; and how it made feminist groups less rather than more effective. We have seen that what she had to propose back then had little to tell us about our impasses today, since her proposals were all more or less incorporated in the current repertoire of horizontal practices. If the other models available today – liberal, representative democracy and different shades of Leninism – do not seem to solve any of these problems (and create others of their own) and are rejected in principle, what are we left with?

Freeman cannot answer because she is looking for principles, for mechanisms. Since we more or less have those, and are still not happy with them, we should look for something else. If horizontality and democracy are problematic by nature because they refer to practices and not mechanisms, what we are looking for is an ethos – a 'becoming open'.

This does not mean the absolute indeterminacy of never producing any principles or mechanisms. On the contrary, they have to be produced, reproduced and deconstructed according to needs. Dissent!, for example, came up with a very good solution to the eternal non-debate on media. The CounterSpin Collective was, perhaps, another contradictory application of the principle of diversity of tactics ('if there's no consensus on not talking to the media, then it is possible to talk to the media'), but it was a workable, practical solution to the age old problem that did not place anyone in charge of 'representing' the network, while at the same time creating a channel for people who wanted to give interviews, or simply to divulge press releases.¹⁶

What it does not mean either is the fetishisation of diversity and differences. In fact, the whole attitude that constrains debates because 'diversity must be left alone' and which so often squanders good opportunities for the better understanding of positions, the collective development of syntheses and the overcoming of contradictions dealt with as insurmountable smacks of liberalism. Not only because it takes differences as givens, but also because it reduces them to individual property, be it of a person or of a group.

This accepts two of the tenets of liberalism: first, an irresolvable distinction between individual and collective good; and second, the liberal concept of individuality. It ignores that, beneath and before every political network or group, individuals are always already part of the larger network of communication, meaning, narratives and power relations of life. Therefore, there cannot be a private opinion, as much as there cannot be a private individual. Michelangelo's *David* is only a particular actualisation of a web of themes, models, techniques, materials, tools, etc. that stretch far beyond the man who sculpted it. This also puts the lie to any ideas of 'individual revolution': 'revolution in one person' is an impossibility because there is no action that is not always already social. 'Localism' has to mean more than living up to one's ideal of communal living in a house with friends while the world outside, along with the neighbours, goes up in flames.

Nothing here is calling for an ethics of sacrifice or normalisation. On the contrary, an ethos of openness would be one of plasticity: ceasing to be an individual does not mean becoming like everyone else, but maximising one's capacity to perceive how one has become what one is now, and what is contingent in that – and therefore one's capacity to adapt and change. Giving up on ideas of authorship and ownership of collective processes, giving up one's proper name (in a deeper sense than just by having a web persona), while never being afraid to affirm things, and then revise them again; sensing when is the right moment for an intervention, and when it is time to let things move even if one does not agree; being able to deal with supernodality in a way that is capable of bypassing it without burning anyone out. Nothing can be either absolute indetermination or total determination: the art lies in learning how to move between the two. It is between absolute openness (as indetermination) and total closure that a political practice of openness-as-a-problematic may happen.

[S]uch intentions demand constant development of new organisational models adaptable to constantly changing situations. The issue is no longer to express a common way of struggle, nor a unified picture or one-dimensional solidarity, neither an ostentatious unity nor a secretly unifying sub-culture, but the profound understanding and the absolute will, to recognise the internal differences and create flexible groups, where different approaches connect with each other reasonably and for mutual benefit.

It's about political communication in the best sense: networking understood as situational negotiations that are based on the possibility of changing one's own standpoint as well as the standpoint of the other. Rather than being based on some spurious qualifications of good versus evil, this approach instead seeks out the basics of a reasonable and practical temporal togetherness.¹⁷

The work of networking social movements and groups has already been going on for a while: if we keep coming back to the same discussions and they sound like they never happened, this is cause for thought. The first step in movement-building is believing one is in a movement, that is, in something that

moves with a movement of its own. This means that both the individual sense of time has to be relativised in favour of the larger time of this movement, which stretches indefinitely between past and future, and the individual sense of space has to be relativised in favour of all the different positions that are or can be occupied in the larger spatiality of this movement. It is an ethos of the networked individual that is necessary. The latter must be simultaneously aware of and transformed by everything that happens in this larger network, and ready to sense what spaces in the network could and should be occupied.

The problem with traditional Marxist groups is the transformation of an analysis into a philosophy of history that grounds a practice. This means that everything will always have to be absorbed within the larger totality of this theory. There are objective laws of the development of history, and the task is to interpret them correctly and, through that, to identify what the right practice for the moment is. It is no wonder that, with such a regime of truth, all political applications of Marxism became known by proper names – Leninism, Stalinism, Trotskyism, etc. – the oracular task of correct interpretation is not one that can be shared. Surely networking moves beyond that; but it cannot be simply to ‘devolve’ the power of ‘correct interpretation’ to individuals, by banning any large-scale agreements while fostering a fetishised ‘diversity’. A networked sensibility demands both the openness to sense the non-totalisable whole of the network, and to be transformed by it, and the determination to act upon that whole in the way that seems the most effective for the network. It is like becoming a Lenin and a proletarian, all at the same time.

5. THIS REVOLUTION, AND THE NEXT ONE

*A black balloon drifts across the dusty cement floor, pushed by an invisible draught. Printed on it in small, white letters are the words, ‘Everything is connected to everything else’.*¹⁸

But beneath the network there is always a network.¹⁹ And before the internet, mobile phones, radio and digital TV there was one already. To say that is both to put the lie to a transcendent ideal of absolute openness, where all relations of power are dissolved, and to refer to perhaps the largest impasse of all the open, horizontal political networks today: that of effectivity.

The point of these networks cannot be simply their enlargement; even though there is a lot of work to be done in bringing more groups across the globe together. Achieving that – in itself an utopian goal – would only ensure that all mobilised groups of the world would know more about each other and would be more capable of working together, supporting each other and swarming every now and then. The network that exists ‘underneath’ these political networks is the web of social relations that at once reproduce and always transform themselves slightly everyday. This is a web of relations of power, in the sense of ‘actions upon actions’, of creating fields of possible actions by excluding the possibility of others;

'domination' is just a species in the larger genus of 'power relations'.²⁰ Neighbours, parents, workmates, employers, bus drivers, policemen; everyone belongs in it, including political networks. All work for its reproduction in one way or another, and no one is necessarily good or bad for that reason.

This reinforces the point made above about individuality. If every relation is an 'action upon an action', there is no individuality in the classic sense; an individual is the plastic reconfiguration of its outside. The difference between networked politics and previous forms of political organisation is that it places *non-linear connection* above *linear accumulation*; and two things never connect, never enter in relation, without becoming a third thing.

A politics of linear accumulation has much simpler goals: the point is to expand, bring more people into the cause, until there are enough of them to storm the Winter Palace. Swarming has played in the past and is going to play in the years to come an important role, but it seems highly unlikely that it is ever going to achieve its 'anti-capitalist' objective of, well, putting an end to 'capitalism'. Even if it did, the immediate results probably would not differ much from what came after the Winter Palace. It is crucial to notice that when the authors of *Networks and Netwars* described the 'war of the future', the kind of political organisations they saw as the most successful were single-issue campaigns that could have great achievements through networking and swarming.²¹ Anti-capitalist counter-summits are obviously not a campaign in the same sense, as they in and for themselves have no goal that can be delivered; neither getting a law passed, nor storming a palace, nor winning the elections. The conclusion is that there is only so much that swarming can do, and much still to be invented.²²

What was given up with the idea of linear accumulation was the idea that there is a goal. Once you have a goal that can be identified with achieving an action – taking the state apparatus and using it to promote the 'transition to communism' – and this goal is identified as the completion of the entire process, you enter the realm of linearity: history marches towards an end, and the role of the 'revolutionary' is to speed it up. One of the central problems of Western thought from the Enlightenment to today is that of the 'next revolution'. The first was the one that created the conditions for what we have today: the nation-state, property relations and liberal democracy. Identifying the point of the next one, the one that would change this particular configuration, has been the problem ever since. In this period, the linear solution – the one that identifies one point as the end, and identifies this end with itself – has been largely discredited because all 'ends of history' always had to be enforced, and history stubbornly went on.

This is why the problematic nature of horizontality is its openness towards the future, and why its non-linearity will always move beyond any closure of the 'this is what it looks like' kind. If horizontal movements today try to produce this closure, they will just be left behind. Even though we call the moment where the configurations of power came to be the way they are now the 'first revolution',



this cannot be identified with any singular point in history. It was the result of an open development, which went through the Enlightenment and the bourgeois revolutions and has not stopped transforming itself ever since. This is the problem with 'capitalism': it is a name given *a posteriori* to an historical development that is still in movement, not – like 'communism' or 'anarchism' – the description of a desirable place where history comes to an end.

We do not even know what capitalism is, how could we know what its overcoming is? This is why any particular understanding of what openness and horizontality are cannot be allowed to simply become the new dogma. It is clear that enlarging the political networks that already exist is not an end in itself. These can only be effective – beyond swarming-effectiveness – by grounding themselves in a thorough politicisation of social relations. This might entail employing (both as 'going back to' and 'reinventing') other, older forms of political action: house visits, neighbourhood organising, community projects. These will, in turn, entail practices that might be looked down upon by 'horizontal' activists, such as campaigning to have laws passed, lobbying councils, collaborating with religious groups, trade unions, etc. Examples of this in the preparations for the G8 in Scotland can be found in the Trapeze collective working within and across academic institutions, the negotiations with local councils in Stirling and Edinburgh, which made possible the rural convergence space and the urban camping area respectively. It is in the network inhabited by parents, neigh-



hours, bus drivers, migrants, mental patients, even policemen (who are people with employers, parents, neighbours...) and of course 'activists', in all the different subject-positions they may occupy here – that horizontal movements may find the *transversalities* that cut across it and are capable of bringing about change.

While the question of what this can mean has to remain a practical, problematic (and therefore open) one, it is possible to say here what this does *not* mean.

This does not mean a mystical appeal to 'a working class politics'. As argued above, this kind of reification of 'the workers' is not only just the reverse side of a lack of clarity in the politics of horizontal movements ('the rage of Caliban seeing his face in a glass'),²³ but also empirically inaccurate, given that these movements are not deprived of a social base (chiefly that of the new productive subjects created by the processes of restructuring described in the beginning). What it means is that issues that are very much at stake in both the productive and political practices of these individuals – such as the struggle against intellectual property – are relevant for myriad other areas (genetically modified organisms, pharmaceuticals, education), and commonalities must be built between these struggles that go beyond the automatic, 'rent-a-swarm' model of the 'solidarity action'. In creating concrete relations, subjectivities are produced that are much more than a reified idea of 'worker' or 'activist'.

This does not mean 'localism', if that is understood as creating local spaces

by and for 'activists', be they social centres, newspapers, etc. While these initiatives have undeniable value, they are tools, not ends, and must be considered in their capacity to create interfaces between struggles and subjectivities – not in a quantifiable capacity of making people 'join the club'.²⁴

Finally, this does not mean abandoning any of the horizontal practices that exist today, but pushing them forward, exposing them to new situations, creating and recreating them, even by making mistakes. It is in the word 'transversality' that we find the reason why resorting to practices that are 'older' does not necessarily mean going back in history and returning to old, Marxist-type linearity. The point is finding the contexts in which horizontal practices can enter or open new spaces, meet new situations, establish different relations by identifying in the present lines of conflict, points of leverage and conjunctural possibilities that link different struggles and create commonalities between what is different. If horizontality means putting connectivity above accumulation, there is one answer to the age-old 'what is to be done': connect.

- 1 Four 'insider' critiques which I have referred to throughout the writing of this article are: C. Hurl, 'Anti-globalization and "diversity of tactics"'. At http://auto_sol.tao.ca/node/view/1334?PHPSESSID=b1f39f9f3af6c81b80a12ceb2b01a75d; J.J. King, 'The packet gang', Mute (Winter/Spring 2004). At http://www.metamute.com/look/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1e&IdPublication=1e&NrIssue=27e&NrSection=10e&NrArticle=962e&ST_max=0; S. Lang and F. Schneider, 'The dark side of camping', at <http://makeworlds.org/node/44>; R. Nunes, 'Networks, open spaces, horizontality: instantiations', ephemeria: theory and politics in organization, vol. 5, no. 2 (May 2005). At <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-2/5-2nunes2.pdf>
- 2 M. Lazzarato, 'Immaterial labour'. Archived at <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>.
- 3 R. Nunes, op. cit.
- 4 The fact that openness and horizontality are present in management techniques and even some strains of liberal democratic thought today show even more clearly how these ideologies are all derived from the existence of the material conditions found, above all, in the internet.
- 5 G. Deleuze and M. Foucault, 'The intellectuals and power', at <http://info.interactivist.net/print.pl?sid=03/01/13/0056200>.
- 6 For example, the way of organising of the Zapatistas is often attributed to Indigenous practices; and they do not seem to see the coexistence of horizontal organising and the EZLN's more hierarchical structure as an insurmountable problem.
- 7 J. King, op. cit.
- 8 Jamie King extends this insight to free and open source software communities, 'the most open system theoretically imaginable': 'limitations to those who can access and alter source code are formally removed. But what then comes to define such access, and the software that is produced, are underlying determinants such as education, social opportunity, social connections and affiliations.' *ibid*.

- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 At <http://www.anarres.org.au/essays/amtos.htm>.
- 12 J. Arquilla and D. Ronfeldt (eds), *Networks and netwars. The future of terror, crime, and militancy*. Santa Monica, Ca.: RAND Publications, p. 12. At <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1382/MR1382.ch1.pdf>.
- 13 C. Hurl. 'Anti-globalization and "diversity of tactics"'.
 14 Another recurrent source of frustration for activists is, of course, the feeling that these movements can be self-referential and subcultural, and that a good deal of 'closedness' is brought about by their being limited to certain social and cultural profiles. Susanne Lang and Florian Schneider also point out how the incapacity to move from swarming to an actual debate may be solved by attracting state repression and thus, by conjuring a 'bad other', creating a fictitious unity of 'being on the right side of oppression' that substitutes a real, problematic unity that cannot be created in practice. Cf. S. Lang and F. Schneider, *op. cit.*
- 15 J. Freeman, *op. cit.*
- 16 There was a discussion on the night when the police surrounded the rural convergence centre in Stirling on whether to collectively write a statement and submit it to the assembly in the morning, and, there being consensus, issuing it as a statement on behalf of the camp. In the end it was decided against it, but it opens a debate for the future: in what moments can the mandate of the working group be extended, under what conditions and through what process?
- 17 S. Lang and F. Schneider, *op. cit.*
- 18 Notes from Nowhere (eds), *We are everywhere. The irresistible rise of global anticapitalism* (London: Verso, 2003) p. 63.
- 19 Referring to the web of social relations as being 'beneath' activist networks is, of course, entirely metaphorical: there can be no separation between 'us' and 'society', as we are all involved in relations where we are employers, employees, parents, sons, neighbours, etc. This separation is, however, created by ourselves when we speak in terms of 'us' and 'the others', 'activists' and 'passives'; we ask ourselves how we can communicate with these people, and yet this communication takes place everyday as a precondition of our social existence. When we speak of our horizontal activist networks as if they were the rightful space of this ideal, transcendent horizontality in society, we are paradoxically placing ourselves in a vertical place above the web of social relations. The term 'beneath' here should be then understood as describing this false dichotomy to question it – which becomes a real practical problem, however, by being posed – rather than accepting its existence. For a development of these themes, see 'Give up Activism', at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no9/activism.htm>; B. Trott, 'Gleneagles, Activism and Ordinary Rebelliousness', this book, pp. 213–233.
- 20 M. Foucault, 'Le sujet et le pouvoir', in, *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001) vol. II, pp. 1041–1062.
- 21 J. Arquilla and D. Ronfeldt (eds), *op. cit.* In fact, distinguishing these from the 'dark side' of the netwar – terrorist networks, hooligans and organised crime – they welcome their potential 'liberalising effects' (p. 7). Their appreciation of Seattle lies somewhere between 'hooliganism' and 'extremist single-issue campaign'.

- 22 A good example of what swarming can do, of course, is to be found in the blockades of the first day of the G8 summit. Small groups with little coordination among each other were a lot more effective (as well as more impervious to police infiltration) than a large mass of people gathering in one place. As I have pointed out, however, this is a case where the goal is given from the outside (blockading the roads, stopping traffic, shutting the summit down) rather than having to be constructed through political debate.
- 23 O. Wilde. *The picture of Dorian Gray*. Archived at <http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/lit/horror/ThePictureofDorianGray/Chapo.html>.
- 24 *'The activist role is a self-imposed isolation from all the people we should be connecting to. Taking on the role of an activist separates you from the rest of the human race as someone special and different. People tend to think of their own first person plural (who are you referring to when you say 'we?') as referring to some community of activists, rather than a class. For example, for some time now in the activist milieu it has been popular to argue for 'no more single issues' and for the importance of 'making links'. However, many people's conception of what this involved was to 'make links' with other activists and other campaign groups. June 18 demonstrated this quite well, the whole idea being to get all the representatives of all the various different causes or issues in one place at one time, voluntarily relegating ourselves to the ghetto of good causes.'* In: *'Give up Activism'*, op. cit. This is a classic text in arguing that social change does not require 'more activists' as in a process of linear accumulation.