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# CROWDS WITHOUT A MASTER: A TRANSNATIONAL APPROACH BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

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This text stems from a historical study. The research focused on the cultures and practices of leadership and authority between 1890 and 1940 in France, Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union (Cohen 2013). Fieldwork, mostly in Brazil but also in Russia and France, must be added to the latter study.<sup>1</sup> This historical study can be connected to present-day movements because the question of authority and leadership seemed central in a lot of them since the 2000s (antiglobalization) and mostly since 2010 all over the world. This reflection is shared here, trying to draw some cross-movement ideas in order to think about the contemporary.

This will be perhaps too optimistic of a view of the situation, but it is much easier to have a pessimistic and black one. To say it in a few words, it seems that, at a world scale, the year 2010 is going beyond the year 1968.

## **Three traits**

The main movements did occur out of the prosperous old Europe and out of the United States, which means out of the countries' founders of modern democracy.

Then, one common and striking trait is that nearly all of these movements were leaderless. This is similar to the French May 1968 events that were not led by one or some leaders. The difference is that these present movements did not want revolution as we wanted it in '68. In '68, the aim was a better revolution than the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century we knew. Today, it seems to be no longer a hope in the best revolution. The leaderless characteristic and the nonrevolutionary characteristic were common to the recent movements, be they against dictatorships or against democracies.

Third, what seemed at stake was the invention of new forms of democratic legitimacy and even more, it seems to me, the reinvention of politics: the beginning of a long process to come.

I would like to develop here what are mostly assumptions.

One major feature was *presence*, a presence on the streets and in the squares. The word "occupation" is also correct, but it sounds a little bit too fixed when taking into account also the demonstrations. So, what was important was the presence, under multiple forms, of various groups in the streets—a street presence (Göle 2013).

This presence was insisting, nearly stubborn. It is very striking in the case of Maidan. People were coming from very far and the more so when the situation was very dangerous. They did not withdraw under the police's deadly fire (Kourkov 2014 and Maidan 2014).

### **Leaderless movements: Tunis, Maidan, Istanbul, Brazil...**

In Tunis in December 2010, people discovered that they were without leaders, and further they claimed affirmatively that they did not want leaders. This does not mean there were no organizations, but these organizations were often working to avoid having leaders. An excellent example is the Brazilian Movimento Passe Livre (MPL), or the Free Fare Movement, that initiated the "June Days" (*Jornadas de Junho*) equipped with the following principle: MPL "is a horizontal, autonomous, independent and nonpartisan movement, but not anti-partisan," already experienced in some Brazilian cities since 2003 (MPL 2013).

Although with *no party*, and often with no organization or leaders, these movements displayed very accurate addresses to the government. Be it Ben Ali's, Mubarak's, or Yanukovich's clear off, or the preservation of Gezi Park, or the refusal of the 20 centavos price raise, or even the occupation of Taiwan's parliament by young people against a trade agreement with China this year: the crowds had a moral economy that was devised by the crowds themselves (c.f. Thompson 1971). As the MPL said, to fight for 20 centavos was already a political fight (Carlotto 2013; see also Judensnaider et al. 2013).

Can one say that there was a *critical reflection* of the crowds about the history of the twentieth century, when all kinds of leaderless movements were discredited as mobs or as bad crowds?

Actually, this century was under the motto of Gustave Le Bon's crowd psychology. Le Bon published his *Psychologie des foules* in 1895, and it immediately became an international bestseller, with translations in many languages at once. One of the more important sentences that Le Bon repeated with various forms in the book is, "Men forming a crowd cannot do without a master" (Gustave [1895] 1963: 115). This was not only the belief of capitalist, religious, or military elites, but also of some elites of the socialist movement.

Lenin wrote his essay *What Is to Be Done?* in Stuttgart in 1902. This book intended to found the necessity of avant-garde and of professional revolutionaries, and it not only said that workers needed “an organization of leaders” but also that without these professional leaders, the crowd could not but wrongly go toward economic aims and not toward revolution. Lenin shared with Le Bon a conception of the bad crowd. A reading of *The Crowd* can be felt in the second part of *What Is to Be Done?*, even if Lenin would never recognize his reading of Le Bon (Lenin [1902] 1963).

Le Bon was read by everybody: industrialists, politicians, educators, army officers, psychologists, sociologists; one can prove that Durkheim borrowed from Le Bon, which was, as for Lenin, a silent reading (see Durkheim 1924)<sup>2</sup>. Only organized and hierarchized protest movements could exist in the twentieth century. All other kinds were smashed as the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War. The definitive failure of twentieth-century communist revolutions was the sign of no future for a socialist revolution (this disappearance of the revolutionary horizon was anticipated in the late 1960s and '70s by some events such as the military crash of the Prague Spring, the results of the Great Cultural Proletarian Revolution in China, the publication of *Archipelago Gulag* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and the election of a Polish pope). Nowadays, nobody can neither diagnose that crowds need leaders nor affirm to them that they need leaders. Even private companies are putting their command system under criticism. The age of the Lebonian bad crowd is over and the one of the Thompsonian reasonable crowd is beginning again (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Thompson 1971).

One more point, about *technology*. What was said in the early 2000s—that new technologies were changing the way people were mobilizing—was only partially true. The new technologies were not first. What was first was the massive critics of twentieth-century compulsory leadership and hierarchy. Social networks and communication technologies are extremely important to support this will of horizontality, but they are not the cause of it. All of the communication technologies are able to support horizontality. There were worldwide movements well before the telephone. In fact, the latter could be used to bypass hierarchical lines. Powers knew it very well. First, it was even used by dictators such as Stalin to arbitrarily blur the hierarchical lines when it was useful to them. Stalin called up people—scholars or artists—across the hierarchy and put this way a pressure to bear on various bureaucracies. Second, some of the institutional customers of the telephone tried to impede its horizontal use in setting only vertical lines within their organizations in order to make it only a hierarchical tool. But this use could not spread very widely, and the telephone proved to be an excellent tool for equalitarian social relationships.

In fact, all kinds of electronic devices proved to be a formidable assistance to horizontality. This is well known. But something very significant also appeared. Not only did networking foster mobilization and its quickness (e.g., flash mob), but it created new ways of collective reflection through networks and blogs.

One of the more striking examples is the MPL's use of blogs. A post became famous in Brazil, dating from the moment when this group withdrew from São Paulo's demonstrations on June 22. It has been published on the site *Passa Palavra*: "Did the people awake us? The perplexity of the left in facing the revolts." The author publicly asked about the aims of the demonstrations and about the continuation: "The situation is putting ourselves in face of an emergency, this of reformulating our position in the street fights and of reaffirming the centrality of the core work. We contend as being critical the importance of the social movements established in the suburbs." This post was followed by thirty-one substantial commentaries. What was previously discussed beyond the curtains of the Politburos became fully open and public, without regard to police surveillance or government enemy, insofar as publicity of opinions was more important than the dangers of surveillance (Ferreria 2013). There was a similar phenomenon in Bulgaria. There was a fifty-days demonstration against the government in Sofia in summer 2013. They were also nonparty and leaderless demonstrations. After some days, the police ended up using violence against them. The people then deliberated on social networks and blogs to appraise the situation. The question was to move to violence or not. The end result was not to (see Lazarova 2014). So, new ways of open and *collective deliberation* were created on the spot, ways to think together as a public political elaboration, exposed and controllable by everybody (Vinogradoff 2014). That was, it seems, a very important democratic innovation of these years.

Now, another aspect. A very important effect of these leaderless movements was to throw the governments into confusion. The governments—or, more broadly, the people in charge—are in need of persons to talk to. The leaderless movements posed a problem, for example, for Erdogan, who invited representatives or spokespeople to talk to, but they refused to do so. In Brazil, the MPL was invited to take part in the reform of public transportation, but it replied that its place was in the street demonstrations. The address was in the street, the thought in the address, the reflexion in the blogs, the force in the presence, the will in the obstinacy of the presence. The governments had to think by themselves, in trying to test the accuracy of their responses, even, as usual, not understanding what was happening.

This discomfort was also this of *the media*. The media need speakers, too. If needed, they invent them, as was the case of Maidan. They decided that Klitschko and two other former powerful politicians could play the role of spokespersons. The Maidanists did not refuse them but stuck to their peculiar way of forming an opinion and let it be known through mass meetings (Kourkov 2014: 32–33, 94, 132, 136).

The media may also try to influence the event they are trying to report. They were not satisfied in Brazil, with only very simple claims as the price of transportation. They assured that corruption was as important, and corruption came to the front. But it did not deeply affect the way opinion was shaped. The claims for public investment in health and education, not only in global sport events, were an invention of the crowds.

There were other issues.

In the fights within democracies, there were often *urban stakes*. The 20 centavos demand was to be understood as a first step in a struggle for the right to the city, as Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey put it, for a more democratic and shared city, exactly as in Istanbul (Lefebvre [1968] 2012; Harvey 2012). In Rio the urban problem is very peculiar because of the high level of speculation in particular for territories where the favelas of the center are located: to conquer the favelas will mean new high-standing housing with unobstructed best view in the world (Faria 2013). The MPL raised up another stake in Brazil about free public transportation creating mobility that would pay for it.

*Aesthetics* was also very present in these movements. Aesthetics is the form of the presence, or, as one may also say, presence is the mode of existence of aesthetics: works of art are present not only in the private but in the public spaces, even where one does not expect them. There is aesthetics of ordinary things or life but in the case of these demonstrations, it was quite deliberate. Actually, there is a *battle for the meaning* between the media and people in action, but there is also a *fight for aesthetics* (Legume 2012). It is not only a fight in the city landscape for speculators as in Rio. In Istanbul, the population repainted the gray public city stairs with color, and in Sofia, a ballerina danced in front of the demonstrations (Duclert 2014). Actually, as [Dimitra Kofti](#) and Jana Tsoneva presented during Tallinn conference, a battle around aesthetics took place here: workers in a factory despised the exhibition of beauty in the manifestations as desperately middle class; at the same time, some media were showing how dirty some of the demonstrators were, mainly those not from ethnically Bulgarian communities. In São Paulo, Brazilian Indians from all the country marched in October and demanded demarcation, wearing all their colored feathers.<sup>3</sup>

Retaining violence was something very present in recent years' demonstrations, even when there were black blocs, as it was clear in São Paulo and Rio: something like a shared tactics for using violence or not, not without deep tensions within the movements. The black blocs were composed of more popular people than ordinary demonstrators. This is another sign that the crowds are able to demonstrate self-control (Corrêa and Pedrosa 2014; see Van Deusen and Massot 2010). This is true not only for demonstrations in democratic but also in dictatorial frameworks, as in Egypt and Tunisia.

From the point of view of violence, there was actually a difference between democracies and dictatorships. There were victories in democratic settings: in Istanbul, Gezi Park has been preserved; in Ukraine, Yanukovich had to leave power, leaving the place for another and more complex struggle for life with a barbarian neighbor Putin; in Brazil, there has been a historical victory all over the country about the price of public transportation. Fighting dictatorships was still more difficult. In Tunisia and Egypt, the crowds came twice—in Tunisia to throw Ben Ali out and then to criticize Islamist power of Ennahdah. They apparently won a second time, but now the revolutionary people of 2010 and 2011 are with great attention and scrutiny prosecuted and put in jail (Allal and Geisser 2011). It is worse in Egypt: the courageous revolutionary masses expelled Mubarak from power but got the Muslim Brothers. They also returned to the streets to claim their discontent. And they won again; Morsi was also expelled. But this was through an army coup, and the army is now practicing not only a horrible repression of the Muslim Brothers but also the systematic arrest of the revolutionary young people they fear most for their own sake. In Ukraine, everybody knows that what was unbearable for Putin was the freedom Maidan took. He began to brutally react at the very moment demonstrations began to occur at the same time in the west and east of Ukraine with identical slogans against corruption. At this point, it began to be too much for Putin.

Some democracies are former dictatorships. This was extremely important in Brazil.

First, there is the National Truth Commission (*Comissão Nacional da Verdade*), approved in 2011, that mobilized many people throughout Brazil to recall the crimes of the dictatorship between 1964 and 1985. One of the commission's focuses was the recent violence in the favelas by military police, who do not hesitate to shoot dead young, and often black, people in the favela. This was made possible, as many people said, through the lack of *memory work* about the crimes of the police during the dictatorship.

The very repression of the demonstrations was, and is, a memory attractor. The governor of Rio de Janeiro, who led the harshest repression in the country in and since June 2013, was called "Dictator." Seeing the *caveirões* (armored military vehicles) appear in the streets against peaceful demonstrations was a reminder of the quasi-military occupation of the favelas with such vehicles and a recall of the older dictatorship. So, the memory of the dictatorship was very active. Among the activists, many were and are passing from one political activity to another. Many were active in such-and-such commission for truth or direct action toward former torturers or physicians who were helping the former.

Interestingly enough, 2013 demonstrations in Brazil were also the opportunity for Indians to reclaim their land rights at a country scale.

Now a point about democracy and the hypothesis of its new development as dual.

Crowds are addressing representative democracies, but they do not feel represented. The movements did not want representation. "We are not represented" was a slogan in June in São Paulo. It meant both: Dilma Rousseff does not represent us, and we do not want representation (Braga 2013). This was not a will to destroy representative democracy but to politically exist by the presence and the address.

There might be at the same time a democracy with leaders as Max Weber thought it. His charismatic leader, mainly in *Politics as Vocation*, was intended to be the missing Führer for a German democracy unable, according to him, to select the right leaders. A good democracy must pay itself with "chefs," as he put it—then, no idea of leaderless democratic movements (1965, 1978). It was the classical conception of democracy as Alexis de Tocqueville thought about in his *Democracy in America*: "In this system, citizens get out of dependency one moment in order to indicate their master, and then get back to it" (1986: 649). The stubborn presence and address to governments offer a new kind of *democratic legitimacy*. Actually, one could say that the street constantly played a role in the history of French democracy. Even protests from the right may win on the street in France. In Brazil, there nearly has not been massive street activism during more than twenty years of redemocratization (Nobre 2013, 2014). Lula arrived on the nation scene first in leading workers strikes and demonstrations and second in creating the Workers' Party. Signing a new way of practicing democracy, a placard could be seen in Rio in June 2013 with the phrase, "There will be no peace for politicians."

Many commentators in sociology or philosophy regret that Max Weber did not conceive a fourth kind of legitimate authority that could have been parliamentary

democracy. But we might even add a fifth: the authority of street movements remaining leaderless and designing well-thought fight goals. It seems that a process will spread as a constantly renewed duality between representative democracy and street direct democracy (Monod 2012: 254). This cohabitation should not be regulated as participative democracy is. Any regulation, but the right to talk and to demonstrate, would impede the freedom of spreading of these critical movements.

The practical analysis of Brazilian and other crowds of the 2010s takes us back to the reflection of Jean-Jacques Rousseau about "the act by which a people became a people" (1762 I-5). What was striking during those last years might be called the democratic self-institution of peoples that did not show up among the creators of modern Western democracy. Egypt and Tunisia, as Yemen and some other countries, were paying this extremely dearly. But it is likely that all these many movements were the beginning of a long course of a global reinvention of the democratic game and of politics itself.

### *Résumé*

In the whole world, crowds without a master formulate accurate, rational, and insisting demands. These crowds are no longer those of the twentieth century, who were told that they needed leaders. We will compare and follow circulations from one country to another and mobilize history as the crowds are doing to criticize it in practice. Other aspects have to be comparatively studied: the meaning of the city and its social uses, as well as the aesthetical component of the actions, be it on one's body or on the city, as in Istanbul. One other aspect should be fully understood: none of these crowds was, nor is, "revolutionary" in the twentieth-century meaning of the word, with a general program, a party, its military section, or organized leaders. On the contrary, they were seeking efficiency without party or leaders, giving the new communication technologies all its inventive deployment. Dealing with such crowds is extremely difficult for governments. The media are themselves trying to create representatives whereas, facing them, individuals refuse to stand as such. One can also reflect about the renewal of democracy. Why should there not exist a twofold democracy: one side being Weberian, with leaders, and the other side being the vast and moving gathering of all movements stating democracy with their presence in the street, with their occupation of squares, and so on? This comparison in space and time lets appear a profound renewal of politics with new forms of expression for cultural or social groups defining themselves in the action.

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## Notes

[1.](#) I missed June 2013 and its most important movements in Brazil, but I took share in others from August to October, and I systematically met activists in various countries.[2.](#) Thanks to Marcia Consolim, who indicated this text.

[3.](#) There were also quilombolas, people from former quilombos, which were territories occupied by fleeing slaves.

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