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THE CEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Foundations for a more genuine understanding of online collective action

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The crossroads between networks and collective action studies has never been as crowded as it is these days. Over the last few years, an increasing number of researchers from different disciplines and fields have moved towards this junction – inspired by renewed attention to collective participation, following cross-disciplinary ties or, more often, intrigued by the opportunities and challenges raised by the ubiquitous diffusion of digital media. Major mobilizations such as the Arab Springs, the spread of Occupy movements, the diffusion of Indignados and Podemos groups have created great hope for political change, even in regions where civil society seemed to have only scant margins of maneuver to revise and reverse consolidated governance logics. Looking at these and at other less “popular” experiments of social change, several observers (myself included) have argued that the new and possibly unlimited public space created by digital media provides a completely new terrain to energize, reconstruct and restructure democratic political participation. Though few of us will be keen to re-use (if we ever did) memes such as “the Twitter revolutions” five years down the line, we are still strongly engaged in attempting to understand the implications of digital media and online communications for collective action dynamics.

It is in the context of this exciting and sometimes daunting effort that I read and interpreted “The Cement of Civil Society”. As Diani acknowledges more than once, the book is very far from current discussions on the value of online networks and also, in spite of its focus on processes of “boundary definition”, from broader and longer-term reflections on the importance of communicative, symbolic and discursive processes for the organization and maintenance of collective efforts. However, it is precisely this distance that makes this book a valuable resource for researchers committed to proving, not simply claiming, that online communication networks are more than a spur for our hyper-connected and hyper-technological zeitgeist and a true asset for a genuine, radical democracy.

Few would doubt that we live in a time in which the diffusion of digital communications and the progressive hybridization between online and offline spaces of action are conveying an unprecedented prominence to the communicative dimension of political processes. Yet, when engaging in the effort of understanding the substance and implications of this prominence, collective action studies have often been constrained by three “disciplinary habits”. First, as Mosca (2014) notes, the study of media and communication processes has long been subordinated to that of organizational structures, frame formations and action repertoires. This, in turn, has prevented us from achieving a systematic conceptualization of communication as a true component of collective efforts’ organizational processes (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Second, and very similarly to one of the main arguments in Diani’s book, the traditional collective action agenda tends to consider social networks as part of the overall environment with which movements interact. Only seldom have networks been considered as *loci of movements*, spaces in which collective dynamics are shaped, deployed and constrained. Finally, as I have argued elsewhere (see Pavan 2014), even when networks have been employed to represent relational structures underpinning collective systems, nodes have often represented social agents (i.e., individuals and organizations) but only rarely the platforms and devices social actors lean on to construct collaborations and conflictual ties. Consequently, we have so far worked under a false dichotomy between offline and online spaces, the first dominated by social actors’ preferences and choices and the latter by technologies’ features and functioning mechanisms.

Nevertheless, collective action studies have proved rather successful in wearing the “habitus of the new” (Papacharissi and Easton 2013) that digital media invite us to don. We have achieved increasing evidence on the transformative effects of digital media for individual recruitment (e.g., Oser, Hooghe and Marien 2013); the hybridization of action repertoires (e.g., Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010); the personalization of collective efforts (e.g., Bennett and Segerberg 2013,); the redefinition of collective identity construction

processes (e.g., Milan 2015). Thus, we have inevitably become more welcoming to the idea of *networks as true spaces of collective action*. Indeed, by virtue of their materiality (i.e., their inherent networked, communicative and participated nature), digital media do not simply foster but, rather, *impose* a relational logic on the deployment and organization of social relations. In this sense, networks are not only a privileged entry point to unveil and tackle the inherent diversity, dynamics and complexity of social interactions that sustain collective projects. More importantly, *online communication networks become an actual component of organized collective efforts*, one where the collective construction of discourses summarizes the essence of both political activity and social conflict (Pavan 2012). To some extent, we have also proven capable of admitting and including technological agency side-by-side with social agency by employing multidimensional network models to render the co-existence of directed and mediated ties within hybrid collective action systems (Pavan 2014).

In spite of these achievements, we have not been successful in preventing the emergence of new “scripts”, to borrow from Goffman, that characterize and, often, constrain our work. On the one side, we have committed so much to unveiling the implications of the “ultra-saturated media environment” (Cammaerts 2012:118) around us that we have somehow ended up narrowing down all the “action” within collective action dynamics to the “act of communicating”. On the other side, because the step between digital media and networks is such a short one, we ended up taking it too easily and, sometimes, heedlessly. In these respects, “The Cement of Civil Society” does a very good job in reminding us that collective action results from a multiplicity of tightly entwined and non-self-exhaustive processes; and that networks, flexible and ubiquitous as they may be, require careful handling.

More generally, the thorough examination of Bristol and Glasgow civic networks teaches us a set of lessons that, building on Diani’s metaphor of the “cement” of civil society, I like to think of as the “foundations” of a genuine and systematic approach to improve our understanding of digital collective action. The raw material of these foundations makes up the starting point of the book: when we look at systems of action based on networked digital media in particular, (potential for) social change lies largely in the type and patterns of connections that actors build among themselves. As the author argues in the first pages of the book, it makes “a great deal of difference” if citizens simply converge on online platforms to express themselves as part of an anonymous crowd or if, instead, they strategically exploit the connective potential of digital media to “collaborate, mutually support their respective initiatives, and blend them in broader agendas” (Diani 2015: 3). We will not appreciate, let alone fully understand, the actual benefits of instances of contemporary “civic narcissism” (Papacharissi 2009: 236-39) by only looking

at who is online, what platform is chosen amongst the many available, how often personal inputs are delivered, or how sustained engagement with an issue is over time.

I agree with Diani that we should not dismiss this property-based approach altogether. To be fair, the application of this approach is what allowed us to understand some peculiarities of online activism, such as the resized importance of traditional mobilization predictors (e.g., individuals' socio-economic status and biographical availability) and of formal social movement organizations as the main brokers within collective dynamics. However, in line with the author's argument, I am deeply convinced that in online activism, where networks are not so much the outcome but, really, the *precondition* of political participation, it is mandatory to proceed toward a disambiguation of different relational structures that emerge from the appropriation of digital media.

To this end, the approach proposed by Diani is a precious one, although we cannot limit ourselves to simply "translate" it cross-dimensionally. In the online space, a clear-cut focus on organizational fields as "recognized areas of institutional life (...) comprising all voluntary organizations engaged in the promotion of collective action and the production of collective goods" (p.12-13) becomes even more constraining than it is offline. Part of the problem is of course that organizational fields defined in this way do not match the inherent heterogeneity of online networks, where we are equally like to find meaningful contributions from individuals as from organizations, or indeed digital resources (databases, online documents, service platforms, search engines, bots and the like). In some cases, such as hyperlink networks among organizational websites, the distance from Diani's approach is reduced. However, starting from such a vision of actor homogeneity would prevent us from grasping an important feature of online activism, that is, its capacity to connect portions of belief systems within networked and flexible collective identities beyond traditional political organizations such as parties (Baldassarri and Goldberg 2014) or voluntary associations (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Thus, the assumption about homogeneity *across organizational fields*, so crucial to Di Maggio and Powell's approach, is even more problematic. In fact, online networks of activism are characterized by their unique capacity to turn a rather limited set of codified modes of interactions (e.g., building a link, sharing a tweet, posting a picture etc.) into a variety of practices that, although shared to a certain extent, are fairly resilient to homogenization processes. In turn, this heterogeneity of practices has not prevented these collectivities from gaining overall "recognition", if not as social movements per se, at least as legitimate political actors.

This said, the overall lack of homogeneity that characterizes the online world is not tantamount to an overall lack of *regularities*. Online dynamics have their own patterns of deployment precisely because, in spite of the active intervention of technologies, the

online is a space for *humans* to strive for change. There is no need to think that, just because it happens online, collective action would change its very nature. Those “shared interests and programs” that lay at the core of Tilly and Tarrow’s definition of collective action dynamics (2007:5) *are and do remain* social, in spite of the extensive mediation exerted by communication technologies. Hence, what has emerged over time as a thorough approach to investigate the networked processes of definition of such programs and that we find well illustrated within “The Cement of Civil Society” is a roadmap worth heeding when we begin exploring the online terrain of political participation.

Without wanting to over-simplify the complexity of Diani’s book, I will try to summarize in the remainder of this contribution what I perceive to be the “foundations” for a more genuine understanding of online collective action. As I mentioned above, the effort here is not to “translate” the book’s approach *tout court* under the assumption that, because it worked so well in the offline space, then it should be “stretched out” to cover other domains. Rather, I think that “The Cement of Civil Society” shows a solid application of network concepts and techniques to investigate citizens’ political participation. For this reason, it provides to anyone concerned with this very matter a set of crucial points to be borne in mind, whether the focus is online space, offline or at the intersection between these spheres.

The first element is certainly the importance of *looking at networks in all their complexity and from a truly relational perspective*. Although Diani’s “modes of coordination” are based on patterns amongst organizations and are therefore difficult to trace online in the same way as done in the book, the idea that we can disambiguate among different modes of pursuing collective efforts holds. In fact, I would argue, such a task becomes of primary importance when it comes to the online space. Too often, we have equated the collectivities that emerge from a distributed use of digital media with the existence of collective actors and of social movements in particular. In the same way in which Diani argues that social movements are not the sole way of organizing collectively and that different modes of coordination correspond to different agencies, I would argue that not all online collective expressions of concern correspond to rational, strategic and purposed collective efforts, let alone to social movements. In other words, albeit online we do always *have networks*, not all of them are necessarily aimed at “allocating resources, taking decisions, elaborating collective representations and forging feelings of solidarity and mutual obligation” (Diani 2015: 13-14), which is, in the final instance, what grounds collective participation.

Certainly, because in the online space we *start from networks, turning convergence into collective action* is somehow less challenging, as the costs of building ties is much reduced. However, this transition is not automatic and, in fact, still requires a great deal

of effort as the “volatility” of online relations does not serve the need for the sustained bonds that underlie long term projects of social change well. I am aware that, at this point, some readers may think I am echoing early criticisms to online activism such as those of Malcom Gladwell or Evgenij Morozov, who blamed the ephemeral nature and low commitment of online activities. Quite the opposite, because I am well aware of the ease with which these criticisms can be raised, I am simply calling for caution. Whenever we equate networks that *necessarily emerge* from the use of digital media with a “social movement” not only we are guilty of naiveté but, more importantly, we are not adopting a relational perspective. In fact, all we are doing is treating networks through an aggregative approach and we may end up in a Shakespearian “much ado about nothing”.

A wise way out of such an impasse, as Diani shows us, is to *employ networks beyond the metaphor*. Moving beyond the metaphor entails taking two facts seriously: first, that the *content* of ties determines the type of relational structure actors engage in; and, second, that actors do not engage in all relations in the same way. Once again, the different “modes of coordination” provide a useful entry point. On the one hand, Diani foresees a more “instrumental” form of ties (what he calls “resource allocation”), which tends to the realization of joint activities and initiatives. On the other, he identifies a “deeper” level of connection (i.e., boundary definition ties), which tends to the formation of a “we” as a collectivity as opposed to “them”, the rest of the world and our opponents within it. Normative readings of these two categories should be avoided: neither is “better than the other” – they are simply two faces of the same coin. Thus, depending on how and how much actors engage in each type of interaction, different types of political agency will emerge.

Distinguishing between different modes based on the investigation of actual relational patterns is more than a network exercise. It is a prerequisite to attach different expectations to different courses of action. A social movement is structurally different, and hence politically different, from a campaign as much as it is from a subculture or from a collective effort handled within the boundaries of one organization. Because they are grounded in different relational patterns, movements, campaigns, subcultures and organizational modes of action will last differently over time, are expected to engage with certain challenges rather than with others and, also, to be more or less keen on the adoption of different action repertoires. The key element here is not so much in “labeling” a course of action in a suitable way but, rather, to understand the potentialities and constraints to action that come with a specific relational pattern.

As I mentioned before, this element is even more crucial when it comes to the online space. Not only is an online network not necessarily an instance of collective action but, when it is, we should address its potentialities and constraints starting from its structure

– not from some aprioristic assumptions based on its size or its levels of activity. In order to do so, we should begin by acknowledging that different digital communication tools allow different types of networks. Some platforms, such as microblogs à-la-Twitter or social networking sites like Facebook, explicitly foster social ties among users; whereas others, such as content-sharing platforms like YouTube or collective projects as Wikipedia, privilege content and thus foster indirect connections based on shared preferences. Moreover, users can interact in different ways on the same platform. For example, on Twitter, users can interact directly with each other through mentions and replies or can re-broadcast someone else's content through a retweet. Much like Diani's types of relation, none of these mechanisms for tie building should be read from a normative point of view: mentioning is not "better than" retweeting, it simply serves a different purpose. Thus, we can distinguish platforms and the ties that they enable by borrowing directly from Diani's categories. In this sense, ties such as mentions and replies, which subtend to a direct exchange between users, can be thought of as consistent with boundary definition ties, whereas retweets can be thought as a more "instrumental" type of connection, one that subordinates the relation between two actors to the circulation of the content they produce.

When we depart from a metaphorical use of networks and acknowledge that online systems of interaction are not monolithic we open the door for a fuller investigation of many of the mechanisms that Diani outlines. In the first place, we can *unveil the logics* that lie underneath the construction of different communities and different ties within them. We can detect how *instrumental and cognitive-oriented ties intersect*, if at all, and thus characterize the networks we observe in terms of their capabilities, constraints and, ultimately, in terms of their political agency. We can engage in the effort of *unveiling indirect connections* amongst participants, and not only when users interact upon those platforms that are more germane. For example, using the same hashtags in tweets reveals an underlying cognitive proximity in framing issues. In the same way, tagging YouTube videos with similar sets of keywords suggests an overall commonality in the meanings attached to a piece of experience.

Furthermore, we can (and should) *address the relevance of the broader socio-political context* even if, at first sight, time and space seem to have lost their constraining effect in the online space. Digital collective action generates in the virtuous interplay between the materiality of technology and human expectations and projects. Collective action studies have extensively shown that the overall socio-political context plays a crucial role in shaping the expectations and the strategies through which committed individuals and organizations try to pursue social change, also by exploiting the connective potential of digital media. However, we still do not know enough about how far digitally enabled

collective action is sensitive to contextual changes and, in particular, to greater or scarcer possibilities to impact decisional processes.

Finally, our exploration of online network patterns should include a serious scrutiny of *central and peripheral positions*. In the online space, the long-established misconception that networks are horizontal structures finds a fertile terrain to grow deeper roots. The overall invisibility of online ties, together with the overwhelming daily rhetoric on the participatory potential of digital media, have contributed to this “myth of horizontality”. In fact, a closer look to digital networks reveals that most of these large-scale systems present typical structural features, *in primis* highly skewed degree distributions which are largely independent from the domain under observation. Hence, collective participation, whether online or offline, is played out within structurally unbalanced power structures which, nonetheless, do not jeopardize the possibility of pursuing efforts in an inclusive and participatory way. Of course, because of the specific content of online ties, the *roles* associated with central and peripheral positions change and we should proceed toward a more precise understanding of power within online networks (see Padovani and Pavan *forthcoming* 2015). This notwithstanding, within online networks just as in Bristol and Glasgow, “power” is inherently relational and, therefore, leadership is not a permanent condition. Network rewiring processes yield to a redefinition of power settings within collective systems and thus affect their capacity of impacting the status quo.

Perhaps the most important lesson one can learn from the book is that, although networks can tell us a lot, they do not tell the whole story. Throughout the book, excerpts from interviews with activists are fundamental to understand the implications of analytical insights produced through network measures and, ultimately, to validate them. When it comes to the online space, interviewing or surveying the myriad of individuals and organizations that fluidly step in and out of action networks may become an overwhelming (not to say pointless) task. However, the difficulties of applying traditional social science methods do not dismiss the need to anchor networks in the broader context to which they belong. Hence, not only should we engage in a theoretically sound and empirically grounded network analysis along the lines I have sketched. In parallel, we have to engage in the definition and application of a set of consistent digital methods that reflect the “ontological distinctiveness” of the online space (Rogers 2010) and, therefore, allow us to contextualize the construction of online ties as part of the broader and ever evolving landscape of socio-technical practices.

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