SALVAGE

#9

THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH

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Contents

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The Anarchist in the Network

John Perry Barlow, the one-time Grateful Dead lyricist and founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, released 'A Declaration of Independence for Cyberspace' in early 1996. The document explicitly channeled the countercultural spirit of the 1960s in the direction of a nascent world wide web: 'Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather'.

Hakim Bey, an artist and anarchist, formulated his idea of the 'temporary autonomous zone' in the '90s in dialogue with emerging technology, which he thought could create new pathways for coming together beyond centralised control: 'the full potential of non-hierarchic information networking logically leads to the computer as the tool *par excellance*'. *Wired* praised Bey's model of social change in '96: 'Carve out a space you can call your own, but don't plant any roots. When the heat comes, skedaddle'.

In 1998, Electronic Disturbance Theater, an art group, created the paradigm for the distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack. It

was meant as a creative gesture of solidarity with the autonomist Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, which had inspired those around the world and fascinated media activists with how their horizontalist politics took advantage of the new openness of internet communications to get the word out. Styled as a 'virtual sit-in', the first action was called SWARM, i.e. Stop the War in Mexico.

Anne-Marie Schleiner, an artist, offered in the early 2000s her manifesto, 'Countdown to Collective Insurgence: Cyberfeminism and Hacker Strategies', enumerating ways to realise the promise of a broader Cyberfeminist movement. It focused on actions like creatively disrupting male-dominated art contests, claiming pop culture role models, and hacking video games to insert feminist imagery. 'If we no longer rely solely on broadcast mediums like television and film to feed us culture (after all, not every television show is as daring and brilliant as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), but instead actively refashion our own computer games and erotic entertainment, we will change the world we inhabit'.

Anonymous, the acephalous hacker collective, emerged in the late 2000s taking its symbol, the Guy Fawks mask, from *V for Vendetta*, an insurrectionist graphic-novel fable by Alan Moore turned middling 2006 movie. In the film, *V for Vendetta*'s Fawks-masked vigilante hero inspires the exploited to coalesce spontaneously into a coordinated anti-authoritarian uprising through spectacular acts of terrorism. Anonymous later helped promote Occupy Wall Street, the quintessential 'networked social movement', whose carnivalesque occupation in turn strongly echoed Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone idea.

Together, these may be considered touchstones, moments of prehistory that have helped define the potentials of 'digital activism' for press and public alike.These are disparate examples. Strikingly, though, this history leans libertarian and anarchist. Its heroes are more often artists than workers. And it's less oriented on the state or organisation building, and more focused on liberated personal expression and direct action. It's worth asking if there's something that makes this the default setting of 'digital politics'.

Social media has turbo-charged these underlying tendencies. In

a recent article about social media and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest wave, philosopher Marielle Ingram attributed its vitality to how social networks allowed for a spontaneous leaderlessness that blew past the organisational limits of previous eras: 'in the current moment, unlike in the civil rights era, social media have allowed for a decentralised movement, which means there is no specific figurehead to demonise. In the 1960s, the American government targeted Malcolm X and Dr. King and tried to squelch the civil rights movement, but today Donald Trump can only point at 'Antifa,' a non-unified movement of organisations committed to anti-fascism."

By contrast, writing in 2019 and assessing the arc of the previous wave of Black Lives Matter protests in an essay titled 'Five Years Later, Do Black Lives Matter?', Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor saw the very same 'decentralised' quality as part of the weakness of how it had unfolded. In a section titled 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness in the Age of Social Media', Taylor wrote: 'The lack of clear entry points into movement organising, and the absence of any democratically accountable organisation or structure within the movement, left very few spaces to evaluate the state of the movement, delaying its ability to pivot and postponing the generalisation of strategic lessons and tactics from one locality to the next or from one action to the next. Instead, the emphasis on autonomy, even at the cost of disconnection from the broader movement, left each locality to its own devices to learn and conjure its own strategy'.

Out of theoretical preference and personal experience, I agree with Jo Freeman's critique of 'leaderless' organising that Taylor alludes to in this passage ('The Tyranny of Structurelessness'), hard-won wisdom from her experience of in the US feminist movement. The pretense of leaderlessness sounds idealistic, but in practice it poses disabling problems. The difficulty of achieving total consensus makes united action impossible; the disavowal of hierarchy masks the hierarchies that are really there, since some people actually are doing more work and making necessary decisions; initiative tends to fall to the person with the most free time, who can just out-endure everyone else.

There is a practical value to leaders – of democratic leadership,

accountable to the people who have entrusted their interest in them. Formal organisations are indispensable to making movements effective in the long run. Everyone can't just do their own thing in an ad hoc way; there has to be coordinated division of labor and sustained commitments. That's just the reality of taking serious fights seriously.

We need to reckon with the ways that social media, by its design, makes the kind of politics I favor more difficult (which also means that many of the pitfalls of 'social media politics' are already prefigured within classic Marxist debates over the stakes of organisation). This isn't a matter of saying what goes down on YouTube or Instagram or TikTok is 'fake'. You can say, if you want to use a Marxist cliché, that it's dialectical: it may be that social media's greatest strength as a political tool also poses its greatest obstacle, and that effective politics involves passing through this contradiction.

Parties on Paper

A command of communications, in the form of propaganda to win the unconverted and agitation to mobilise action, has always been part of the project of gaining power. Let's consider how the classic media of political propaganda related to classical forms of political organisation: from the Bolsheviks to the Black Panthers, revolutionaries were associated with the revolutionary newspapers they sold. It was probably never pleasant or cool to sell a newspaper ('My God! How I hated selling the *Worker*', one former Communist Party USA member recalls in Vivian Gornick's *Romance of American Communism*), but it was at least defensible for the entire period during which this was the most efficient way to get your message out and newspapers actually formed a major part of street life.

But spreading the gospel was actually only one of the desired ends of the revolutionary newspaper in the first place. Lenin, the figure most associated with the political newspaper tradition, expounded at length on its significance in *What Is to Be Done?*, not

uncoincidentally his major text on party organisation. As usual with Lenin, it was a theoretical text pitched at the needs of a moment in time, Russia in the early 1900s. He was arguing (among other things) for an all-Russia newspaper against foes who thought that a multiplicity of local newspapers would be the better solution, and that the effort of national publication was a distraction from on-the-ground work. His point was partly that information should be shared between all localities, the better to coordinate a united national struggle against the czar.

But the ideal of the revolutionary newspaper also had an infrastructural dimension. The revolutionary newspaper, in Lenin's formulation, was the 'scaffolding' around which the political organisation would grow. The very collective labor involved in printing a newspaper in the early twentieth century – of reporting, writing, delivering copy, editing, printing, distribution, street corner sales – guaranteed coordinated activity among large numbers of comrades, creating the pathways along which sustained and coordinated action could flow.

> The organisation, which will form round this newspaper, the organisation of its collaborators (in the broad sense of the word, i.e. all those working for it), will be ready for everything, from upholding the honor, the prestige, and the continuity of the Party in periods of acute revolutionary 'depression' to preparing for, appointing the time for, and carrying out the nation-wide armed uprising.

There was thus a particular coincidence at this moment between media form and desired form of struggle. Nothing better represents how the hard labor of maintaining a newspaper might train one to understand the realities of collective working-class struggle than the fact that a few years after *What Is to Be Done?*, it would be a strike by typesetters that detonated the 1905 revolution. 'They demanded a shorter working day and a higher piecework rate per 1,000 letters set, not excluding punctuation marks', Trotsky

recalled. 'This small event set off nothing more nor less than the all-Russian political strike – the strike which started over punctuation marks and ended by felling absolutism'.

Print newspaper circulation reached its peak in 1984. Mainstream newspapers were in the 2000s sharply undercut and undermined in the new millennium as attention moved online and then onto mobile devices. In major urban centers through the first decade of the new millennium, you still could rely on picking up an alt weekly paper like the *Village Voice* or the *New York Press* or being handed a free commuter newspaper like *Metro* or *amNY*. These are all gone or dying. At a certain moment in history, having a newspaper made a political organisation seem like a respectable institution; after a certain point, it associated it with institutions that were dying.

The New New Middle Class

In surveying the history of anarchist tendencies, Hal Draper called them 'the primal scream of the petty bourgeois in a squeeze': 'In the course of its development [anarchism] reflected various class elements in a blind alley: artisanal workers fearfully confronting modern industry; recently proletarianised peasants fearfully meeting new societal pressures; lumpen-bourgeois elements fearfully facing an empty future; and alienated intelligentsia fearfully resenting the indignities of a money-obsessed society'. Quite logically, forms of radicalism rooted in individualistic property relations – whether a peasant's ownership of a small bit of land or an artist's claim to intellectual property and signature style – flowed towards forms of action and demands that would honor and defend individualism.

There is, of course, plenty to learn from the anarchist tradition, and no shortage of 'petty bourgeois' elements among today's socialists! I'm only rehashing these schematic arguments because they help put into focus the significance that shifting media structures might have for Marxism. Lenin thought that the collective

project of building a newspaper would help fuse its members into an effective unit that made them fit for the kind of coordinated and sustained action working-class struggle demanded. One of the internet's big buzzwords, by contrast, has been 'disintermediation', the removal of middle men in favor of more direct representation. In retail, you don't have to find a store to stock your wares; you can sell them direct through the web. In publishing, you don't have to find an established publishing organisation to write for; you can just publish your thoughts directly into cyberspace, and hustle for attention, outside of any institution.

As Astra Taylor comments, the boosterish rhetoric of internet culture tends to emphasise one kind of autonomy – the freedom to publish independently – and skate over the fact that larger media organisations, in some ways, provided the basis for other kinds of autonomy: legal protection, training and mentorship, investments in longer term projects. 'Many structures of the old-media system, however flawed, relieved some of the burdens now borne solely by individuals'. Even having an editor, the most basic formal relation to another person, is a rarity for new writers. With blogging in the 2000s, this empowered amateurism became a rival to mainstream publications. By the 2010s, social media made even the blogs look cumbersome and made users into content-producers by default.

To the extent that through advertising, sponsorships, or patrons, this solo operation potentially becomes a career, publishing essentially takes on the form of a classic 'middle class' self-employment, where the worker is their own boss. In response to ridicule provoked by a 2019 study that showed that 'influencer' and 'YouTuber' were the second and third most popular career choices of British youth (behind the most popular: doctor), *Talking Influence*, a site dedicated to influencer marketing, gallantly defended these aspirations as not just a frivolous career, but a grueling form of small proprietorship:

> For an influencer to be in a position where brands will actually pay them for collaborations, they will have great content creation skills, whether that's in

> photography, videography, styling or illustration. They will have also amassed an audience, steadily building a connection over the years, adding value to their followers' lives, fastidiously replying to their comments and DMs. It will have taken time, dedication, skill and often a fair amount of kit. Once those brand collaborations come, it doesn't get any easier. An influencer will wear many hats. Handling negotiations, monitoring trends, creating custom content, deciphering analytics and constantly reinventing themselves to stand out in an increasingly crowded market. Should they take their foot off the pedal, there's a queue of creators behind them, eager to take their place.

In the '80s, Marxist theorists came up with the idea of the New Middle Class to explain the vacillating middle-manager base of a certain kind of neoliberal reaction. Neil Smith wrote of the shift in 'Of Yuppies and Society':

> [U]nlike the old middle class of artisans, shopkeepers, small farmers, and self-employed professionals, the professional managerial class was not independent of the capital-labor relation but was employed by capital for the purpose of controlling, managing, and administering to the working class.

The present-day disintermediated media ecosystem creates something like a New New Middle Class, a layer that returns to a lot of the older characteristics of the unincorporated middle class in new digital forms. Indeed, the so-called 'Californian Ideology', the sunny techno-optimism of '90s-era *Wired* magazine that promised levelling of hierarchies and entrepreneurship for all, imagined the net's promise as 'a new "Jeffersonian democracy" in cyberspace'. Already in the first wave of scrutiny of 'Web 2.0' in the mid-2000s, media analyst Nicolas Carr coined the term 'digital sharecropping'

for content creators working on big digital platforms that snarfed up most of the advertising gains and data – so there is even an established conceptual analogy to the most classically volatile form of disaffected 'petit bourgeois', the small farmer.

The kinds of professional positions to which the 'online political commentator' is most proximate are the journalist and the intellectual. But while these roles still have symbolic clout and attract plenty of aspirants, as actual jobs attached to stable institutions, each has been savaged in the last decade, stimulating new forms of class struggle: newsrooms have been decimated, and recent years have seen successive waves of defensive unionisation efforts at digital media sites once seen as replacing the titans of old media such as *Buzzfeed*, *Refinery29*, and *Vice*. Academia has been in a slow-motion meltdown, with deteriorating conditions for adjuncts leading to new struggles and unionisation.

The general dynamics, then, suggest exactly the kinds of pressures that lead to political radicalisation. But self-promoting independent commentators and authors don't have a newsroom or a campus to organise within; that form of struggle is not available to them. In fact, they are in implicit competition with 'mainstream' journalists and academics for public attention, and their only comparative advantage is independence and superior visibility in the venue where they appear, the social network. This fact, in turn, creates strong pressure to emphasise the values associated with the social-media platform as the decisive ones for new social struggle: networks over organisations, immediacy over deliberation, personality over neutral voice.

Only a minority of users are committed to carving out a career or reputation as a media personality – though almost by definition, a very visible minority. Most people simply dip into online debate with the occasional desire to win an argument or publicise a cause. But just as activists distributing political newspapers on street corners didn't have to be paid for the paper to model collective discipline, the self-directed default style of online propagandising doesn't have to be commercially motivated for it to model a more individual ideal of politics overall.

Social Media / Social Revolution

Zeynep Tufeki, in *Twitter and Tear Gas*, points out that the ability to cut through layers of centralised communications and top-down media control has real effects for freedom struggles of various kinds. In authoritarian countries where official censorship has kept citizens from seeing how widely shared discontent is, access to networked communications suddenly cuts through 'pluralistic ignorance' – letting people know that if they go into the street, they have a good chance of not being alone.

But Tufeki also notes a downside in the social movements that have sprung up around the new 'scaffolding' of the smartphone and social media. In truth, it is just the obverse of the strength. Exactly because it lowers the bar for getting the word out, many more people can be mobilised in a short time period with limited ground organisation. But this also means that there are *no established structures* within these movements. Partly for this reason, she thinks, the last decade's networked social movements like Occupy Wall Street have been extremely volatile, with massive spikes of public support and equally confusing turnarounds.

Overall, such protest events are characterised by a vulnerability Tufeki called 'tactical freeze':

> The lack of decision-making structures, mechanisms for collective action and norms within the anti-authoritarian, mostly left-wing networked movements examined in this book often results in a tactical freeze in which these new movements are unable to develop and agree on new paths to take. First, by design, by choice, and by the evolution of these movements, they lack mechanisms for making decisions in the face of inevitable disagreements among participants. In addition, their mistrust of electoral and institutional options and the rise of the protest or the occupation itself as a cultural goal – a life-affirming space … –

> combine to mean that the initial tactic that brought people together is used again and again as a means of seeking the same life affirmation and returning to their only moment of true consensus: the initial moment when a slogan or demand or tactic brought them all out in the first place.

Accelerating the speed at which radical ideas propagate should, in theory, increase the potential power of a movement, just as a faster engine should make it easier to win a race. But you also need to steer the car as the track curves. If you cannot, then the faster engine just causes you to crash faster.

Under these new networked conditions, what mass mobilisations signify also cannot be measured in the same way. Tufeki uses the comparison of the March on Washington in 1963, which brought a quarter of a million people, to the Women's March of 2017, which drew nearly a half million people to DC and millions more across the country in what was reported as the largest-ever coordinated protest. But the former culminated a decade of Civil Rights organising and took many months to plan and coordinate, given the difficulty of getting the word out; the latter coalesced in a few short months following the election of Donald Trump. The smaller, earlier march therefore symbolised a degree of legitimacy among broad layers of the public and was seen as an indication of the power of a movement that had produced a seasoned cadre of leaders. The larger, later march symbolises just the beginning of that process—which may never happen. It is entirely possible for a movement to be much more visible but less effective in the face of an intransigent and hostile system.

Lenin on Cancel Culture

Faced with conservative media attacks keen to paint leftists as intolerant scolds, a reflex is to frame contemporary attacks on 'cancel culture' as a cover for a reactionary agenda (they often are),

but also to deny that there can be any problem at all with being too dogmatic, if the goal is justice for the marginalised and oppressed – despite the fact that large numbers of otherwise sympathetic people clearly consider online left discourse alienating. To address this, Loretta Todd (among others) has emphasised 'calling in' rather than 'calling out', placing more emphasis on offline or private criticism, and stressing the need to avoid public shaming as a tactic. 'Call-outs make people fearful of being targeted', Todd writes. 'People avoid meaningful conversations when hypervigilant perfectionists point out apparent mistakes, feeding the cannibalistic maw of the cancel culture'.

Toxic cultures are not new on the left – though it bears remembering that their impact is nothing to dismiss. They have contributed to left isolation and dispersal. Jo Freeman wrote of all but dropping out of the women's liberation movement after experiencing 'trashing' in the late '60s and early '70s. She defined this as a practice where political disagreement was replaced with ostracisation and personal attack: 'In effect, what is attacked is not one's actions, or one's ideas, but one's self'. Notably, Freeman sees this style of atomising interpersonal hostility, in part, as a symptom of the amorphously anarchistic style of activist politics that dominated in these circles: '[Trashing] is much more prevalent among those who call themselves radical than among those who don't; among those who stress personal changes than among those who stress institutional ones; among those who can see no victories short of revolution than among those who can be satisfied with smaller successes; and among those in groups with vague goals than those in groups with concrete ones'.

Freeman's text has recently been rediscovered as relevant to debates over the excesses of digital activist culture. There is much to write about the psychology of online shitstorms. But the emphasis has to be on how the climate of debate is shaped by a style of politics which is in turn shaped by the affordances of the platforms where it takes place. Exhortations to 'be nicer' or avoid 'uncomradely' behavior don't really address this. The unpleasantness has to be viewed as a symptom of how, by hardwiring the kind of 'leaderless'

and 'structureless' politics that Freeman criticised into the way most new activists engage in political discourse, social media leads to potentially disabling practical problems.

'It is not only Right doctrinarism that is erroneous; Left doctrinarism is erroneous too', Lenin once wrote in *Left-Wing Communism*. Revolutionaries, of course, had to fight constant pressure to sell out, compromise core principles, or be mollified by symbolic gestures. But Lenin saw another set of pitfalls as equally dangerous: getting stuck in rigid sloganeering, being unable to change the way one argued to win wider layers, and failing to form tactical alliances with others who didn't totally agree with your program. He identified this self-isolating 'ultra-left' tendency as 'petty-bourgeois, semi-anarchist (or dilettante-anarchist) revolutionism' – the radicalism of armchair pundits, professional commentators, small self-selected groups, and artists.

Key here is that Lenin saw this type of political temperament as arising in a condition where 'propaganda work' dominated over 'practical action':

> As long as it was (and inasmuch as it still is) a question of winning the proletariat's vanguard over to the side of communism, priority went and still goes to propaganda work; even propaganda circles, with all their parochial limitations, are useful under these conditions, and produce good results. But when it is a question of practical action by the masses, of the disposition, if one may so put it, of vast armies, of the alignment of all the class forces in a given society for the final and decisive battle, then propagandist methods alone, the mere repetition of the truths of 'pure' communism, are of no avail. In these circumstances, one must not count in thousands, like the propagandist belonging to a small group that has not yet given leadership to the masses; in these circumstances one must count in millions and tens of millions. In these circumstances, we must ask ourselves, not only whether we have convinced the

> vanguard of the revolutionary class, but also whether the historically effective forces of all classes – positively of all the classes in a given society, without exception – are arrayed in such a way that the decisive battle is at hand

The sequence of distinct moments Lenin lays out is important. 'As long as' one is in the phase of building a vanguard audience for radical ideas, even the 'parochial limitations' of the propaganda approach are a net positive; once in struggle, the same emphasis on '"pure" truths' that helped define this vanguard identity is an impediment to putting its program into action.

It can then be seen how the same communication tools that have the very positive effect of more widely distributing the means of 'propaganda' and making the diffusion of radical ideas easier also provide a serious obstacle when you enter the 'practical struggle' phase, where the task is not just to distinguish radical ideas from the pack, but to lead the pack, practically, towards a desired objective. In fact, Lenin describes the consequences of being stuck in the 'propaganda circle' mentality as very similar to Tufeki's 'tactical freeze':

> We have only to say … that we recognise only one road, only the direct road, and that we will not permit tacking, conciliatory maneuvers, or compromising – and it will be a mistake which may cause, and in part has already caused and is causing, very grave prejudices to communism.

A class diagnosis is also implicit in Lenin's analysis that's relevant to our analysis of social media. 'A petty bourgeois driven to frenzy by the horrors of capitalism is a social phenomenon which, like anarchism, is characteristic of all capitalist countries', he wrote. 'The instability of such revolutionism, its barrenness, and its tendency to turn rapidly into submission, apathy, phantasms, and even a frenzied infatuation with one bourgeois fad or another – all this is

common knowledge'. Substitute 'bourgeois fad' here for 'trending topic', and you have a nice description of present tendencies.

It is not just the simple fact of scaled-up communication possibilities that shapes the 'ultra-left' quality of social-media politics; it is the fact that platforms interpolate users as small communication entrepreneurs, invested in maintaining their relevance. This is, in a notable way, distinct from an analysis that says that the problem of online politics is that it is 'too dogmatic'. Mark Zuckerberg once said of Facebook's multitudinous users that they were 'building an image and identity for themselves, which in a sense is their brand', and countless posts explain how to 'build your brand online' as an indispensable skill for competing in the job market today. But any brand's value is only in how it maintains its connection to a unique product and distinguishes itself from other brands. But if you are invested in maintaining a social-media 'brand', a strong material incentive exists (both consciously and unconsciously) towards staking a claim on an intellectual position and finding fault with anyone who comes close to it. Otherwise, you lose value as your voice ceases to stand out from the pack. To repeat how the *Talking Influence* blog put it: 'Should they take their foot off the pedal, there's a queue of creators behind them, eager to take their place'.

The New New Middle Class, self-managing, entrepreneurial nature of the 'social media commentator' role therefore helps explain some of the centrifugal patterns of the political conversation, its constant drive towards splintering.

Viral Left / Organised Left

The political scientist Yasha Mounk has fretted that the experience of direct forms of participation (or pseudo-participation) in online communities is eroding 'liberal democracy': 'The Internet threatens to end the hegemony of liberal democracy not only by amplifying the voice of a small band of haters and extremists, but also by alienating a much larger number of digital natives from the

decidedly analogue institutions by which they are governed'. The crisis of contemporary politics, in this view, is something like how, in any social situation where one doesn't know other people, it is easy to migrate your attention to your phone rather than going through the awkwardness of trying to strike up a conversation with a stranger.

Clearly, frustration with an intransigent system that is captured by the rich, feeds on racism, and is shepherding us towards planetary doom is a positive development. Nevertheless, exactly because of the lethal inertia of institutions of power, building enough pressure to force durable change requires collective political organisations that operate outside hyper-individualistic and distractible norms of online self-expression.

Richard Seymour's *The Twittering Machine* approaches the political consequences of social-media atomisation without Mounk's centrist nostalgia but with a similar emphasis on the peril it holds for the political sphere:

We should take seriously the possibility that something about social media is either incipiently fascistic, or particularly conducive to incipient fascism'. Seymour sees this in how the very business model of social media 'magnifies our mobbishness, our demand for conformity, our sadism, our crankish preoccupation with being right on all subjects', logically playing into the hands of reactionary tendencies. And indeed, if social media incorporates its users as something like a New New Middle Class, a downwardly mobile middle class has always been thought to be the basis for fascism.

Even crediting the intensified power of left-wing sentiment driven by viral media, the resulting dynamics produce 'incipiently fascistic' dynamics worth considering. Clearly, social media does more than just provide a place for people to vent; it makes spikes of networked street protest possible at a scale previously undreamed of, forcing real crises for existing configurations of power. The fact that viral media can do this without building up organisation risks 'tactical freeze', but the very speed of protest also risks forcing serious confrontation with power without serious preparation. Intervening into the Marxist debates about the relative value of

'spontaneity' vs. 'organisation', Antonio Gramsci wrote:

> It is almost always the case that a 'spontaneous' movement of the subaltern classes is accompanied by a reactionary movement of the right-wing of the dominant class, for concomitant reasons. An economic crisis, for instance, engenders on the one hand discontent among the subaltern classes and spontaneous mass movements, and on the other conspiracies among the reactionary groups, who take advantage of the objective weakening of the government in order to attempt coups d'etat. Among the effective causes of the coups must be included the failure of the responsible groups to give any conscious leadership to the spontaneous revolts or to make them into a positive political factor.

Gramsci argued that modern capitalist ruling classes achieved hegemony via the combination of 'consent' and 'force', both by posing themselves as moral leaders and by wielding direct repression – the mirror images of the 'propaganda' and 'practical action' capacities within movements. It seems believable that social media activism, in the right circumstances, has the ability to challenge a ruling class's ability to win 'consent' for its worldview by giving broader layers of people direct voice. This undermines one of the pillars of rule. But by the same logic it makes confronting that other pillar, 'force', more immanent. If explosions of spontaneous/viral struggle increasingly characterise the political environment, partisans had better be able to scale up the other pole – organisation, discipline, coordination, continuity. If they do not, then they are not taking seriously the logical outcome, which is an intensification of *organised* repression.

Neither 'fascism' nor military coups might be the right images for what results. As Seymour notes, classical fascism was rooted in military clubs and street gangs – IRL institutions to enforce terror. Today, organisations on the right as well as on the left are thin. But there is no reason to think that violent reaction has to take

the same form today as it did in the days of Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler. 'The "swarm", which began as a metaphor for conscientious citizens holding power to account, might well become a metaphor for the twenty-first century version of fascist street gangs', Seymour writes. He cites the concept of 'stochastic terror': in a networked communications ecosystem, a call for violence can trigger seemingly random but predictable acts – a kind of crowdsourced flash-mob version of political terror. (Then again, it's worth saying that it is also possible that the rich and powerful simply respond to the increasing ideological prominence of calls to, for instance, abolish the police with more reliance on good old-fashioned private security and mercenaries – paid-for repressive organisational capacity.)

Strange as it may sound, something like 'stochastic solidarity' also exists, where mutual aid doesn't pass through any real coordinating organisation. Every time someone posts into the void of Facebook or Twitter a call to donate to a cause, they are modeling this form of action. It is clear, however, that there are limits to what kind of leftwing projects random and voluntaristic forms of networked action can be relevant to.

'Stochastic protest' can be a force to be reckoned with, as online outrage metastasises into street action – but it can just as easily lose fire as the news cycle moves on and dispersed calls to action no longer get the same viral lift. And the 'stochastic strike' is not really a viable option at all. Workers will be able to unite for coordinated action over a long enough period to exert the pressure needed to win their demands, or they will not win their demands. The power is all in preparation, organisation, discipline.

Unplug or Reboot?

What, as they say, is to be done? Now and into the near future , new people coming into politics will almost certainly enter through social media, since it has captured so much attention and energy. So left abstention seems impossible and probably counterproductive.

Brands and corporate reputations are built and broken in the hustle for attention online. Given this, it is now standard for capitalist institutions of all kinds to have official social media guidelines for workers and affiliates. Intel explains the need to disclose employee status when talking about the company, what language to use to distinguish a personal opinion from official policy, and even how to apologise if you have incautiously made a false claim about Intel products in a social-media setting. The US Air Force encourages sharing personal stories, directs service members to a public affairs contact for questions about whether an anecdote they are thinking of sharing contains mission-sensitive information, and offers separate recommendations under headings 'Social Media for Leaders', 'Social Media for Airmen', and 'Social Media for Families'.

For activist organisations, such bureaucratic guidelines would likely be experienced as encroaching on individual autonomy in a way that repulses newly radicalising people. But doesn't that throw the problem into relief? The notion that radicals are going to coalesce into a mass force that meaningfully challenges the most powerful, well-resourced, and deep-rooted institutions of capitalist society without some kind of basic communications discipline that makes them accountable to one another is implausible.

If you accept the need to be present online but also the need to transcend the latently anarchistic nature of online politics, it's not totally clear to me that there is a ready-to-hand solution. I can imagine experimenting with ways to use social media in a more collective way, in an attempt to jury-rig a function for it that encourages coordination and collaboration on an organised and sustained project. I can imagine making a more self-conscious attempt at building organising spaces in contrast to social media, to really focus on the non-expressive component of organised left politics as a counterweight. What I cannot imagine is saying, 'people can just do whatever they want; it doesn't really matter'. That sentiment is a representation of the intellectual disarray that is the problem in the first place.