The Net*worker's* Querist.
Some questions and tentative answers on networks and social transformation

by

Massimo De Angelis
(University of East London)
m.deangelis@uel.ac.uk
http://homepages.uel.ac.uk/M.DeAngelis

Introduction

In this short paper, I raise some basic questions and I attempt some answers. The overall gist of my argument is that oppositional networking (or meshworking) is not only instrumental (which presupposes a goal), but goal and value forming, thus constituting new social relations; that societies have always been made of overlapping networks and therefore the political issue is what is the difference between "us" and "them", meaning what is the difference between the networks we are developing as oppositional movements and the networks we are forced into when working within capitalist production. Finally, since in networks societies organisational means are *forms of*

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production and not simply instruments to achieve goals, the question of the role of (inter)national unions is the same as the question of access to the means of existence and social production. Labour unions must promote networking on the basis of aspirational demands, and pose the question of work and pay condition *together* with the question of the nature of work and its role within networks of social production.

1.   Information Computer Networks: "advocacy" (instrumental) or constitutive networks?

I think a discussion of international labour and (other) movement networks must address this question as a fundamental starting point. This because the political rationale of our discussion on networks depends on what model (or combination of models) we believe networks that are transformative of social relations do follows. In short, the answer to this question raises another strategic question: what are we (networking people) for?

Both forms of networks are oppositional in nature and both are, in reality, intertwined. However, the *forma mentis* we use to read ICN networks changes drastically in the two cases. In *instrumental networks*, communication among the nodes is instrumental to the "realisation" of the objectives of a campaign. This objectives are generally pre-given by some small group who take the initiative of the campaign. The general character of these objectives often makes it possible to organise instrumental networks in ways that combine centralising and decentralising tendencies. Here centralisation retains co-ordination of the operation and control of the formulation of the objective, while decentralised federative structure allows for great independence of operation by local branches. Examples of these are ATTAC, greenpeace and, to a certain extent, even traditional trade unions.

Constitutive networks are those social networks that emerge from the interstices of dominant social practices, and give rise to new forms of social co-operation, new needs and aspirations. Here the network is not only an organisational means to a pre-given end, but a social practice that give raise to new goals and new visions. What I have in mind here is the interplay of given identities, perhaps brought together through advocacy or support networks, which then come together to reshape aspirations, identities and goals through the recognition of needs aspirations of the "other". For example, the alliances between labour activists and environmentalists not only bring about the possibility to reach critical oppositional mass instrumental for the achievement of a particular campaign's goal. Also, and more importantly, these alliances help produce a green identity within the labor movement and a "labour" identity within the green movement. The "muesling" of the two issues, push forward visions, criteria, demands, values.

I think that to regard international labour networks simply as instrumental is the easiest option, but also the politically most dangerous. In this model goals are pre-given, and their interrelation embeds a vision of society which is compatible with those goals. The "goals" of better wages, higher employment, less inequality are formulated within a vision that does not question the nature of the wage form, the disciplinary role of

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unemployment, and the competitive rat race brought about by the same social system that gives us inequality, environmental destruction and international wage hierarchy? How can labour fight for higher wages and at the same time question consumerism? How can labour defend the means of existence provided by employment and at the same time oppose unethical production and environmental destruction? Labour unions need to be creative. So, le me start from the beginning, and try to present a case for labour unions as constitutive networks.

2.   Is the network-form a constant of all *societies?*

Yes. Contrarily to the unitary understanding of societies, the latter are made by overlapping networks of power and social practices (Mann 1984). In this sense, all societies are and have been "network societies". Social cooperation of labour has always assumed a network form. The problem is how social networks are articulated with power and what forms they take, how ultimately these networks are organised, what forms of social production their organisation gives rise to, what are their limitations and contradictions, and what subaltern networks emerge out the interstices of hegemonic one that can replace the latter.

3.   What is then the difference between network societies?

The key distinction between today and previous network societies is not the network-form, but the *form* of networks, that is the redefinition of the operational field of a variety of social networks (hegemonic and subaltern), both in terms of space and practices of power (and counter-power). If this is the case, then Castell (2000) "the rise of the network society" should be retitleld "the rise of a particular *form* of network society". This distinction is important for theoretical and political reasons as we will see.

4.   Is there a central feature in today networks of capitalist production?

Yes. For networks that constitute capitalist production (production, trade, finance), neoliberal strategies of deregulation and market liberalisation, accompanied with the development of information and communication technologies, created a context which enormously increased *competition* among nodes, and therefore increased degree of spatial substitutability among network nodes. In this context, the relation between individual nodes and the rest of the network is increasingly, paraphrasing Foucault (1977), a disciplinary one. So, the central feature of today networks of capitalist production is the pervasiveness of disciplinary mechanism over the social field *and* over the globe made possible by the extension of the process of increased competition *among* nodes together

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with the increased number of commodified relations among nodes through enclosures. These last two "means" also constitute the parametric center of capitalist networks.

5.   Does the current "network society" have a center?

Contrarily to what Castell argues, yes, if by network society we mean the set of social networks constituting capitalist production. The center here must be understood as "parametric center". A parameter is a (system of) value(s) that shapes behaviour and actions. A center is a source of discipline (like in Bentham's panopticon). A parametric center therefore combines the production of value(s) through discipline with social production according to those values. In current global capitalist society, this is obtained through a) authoritative and b) systemic means. Authoritative means are neoliberal strategies of enclosures, expanding the realm of the market and competition, and fencing off alternative means of people's access to social wealth. While authoritative means aim at setting the conditions of productive social interaction, systemic means reproduce the system of values and norms of social interaction through the disciplinary process embedded in market competition. Micro- and macro conflict emerging within the realm of capitalist production is therefore the object of discipline of systemic means (see role of intra-product trade, deep integration and internationalization of trade, De Angelis (2001)).

6.   Do oppositional networks have a center?

Certainly not in the sense of parametric center of capitalist networks of production. Subaltern, oppositional networks are also referred to as meshworks, and they are generally distinguished from dominant networks because they are non-hierarchical and self-organizing (Harcourt: 2001: 7). These organisational features of meshworks must be considered in conjunction with the dynamics of cross-issue alliances emerging in the practices of these oppositional networks (Waterman 1998; De Angelis 2000). In fact, the term "alliance" may not be appropriate to describe the process of cross-fertilisation of needs and aspiration resulting from these co-ordination of oppositional practices. Maybe we should talk about a "mueslification" of subjectivities.

As we have seen in the more general discussion of "constitutive networks" in the introduction, this mueslification is what creates new values, dynamises and problematises old rigid identities, and open up spaces for new aspirations. Let us compare dominant networks and oppositional meshworks. In the case of networks of capitalist production the imposition of parameters of social interaction (through enclosures and market liberalisation) is the presupposition of social action, out of which in turn emerges the disciplinary mechanism (competition) that reproduces the *given* parameters. In the case of oppositional networks the parameters of social coordination — what defines the rules of co-ordination — is the creative result of mutual recognition. So, while in the case of

networks of capitalist production the individual nodes organise their interaction within a given and self-reproducing "value" system (the value of competitive interaction), in oppositional networks the interaction among individual nodes help them to "discover" values out of the process of interaction. While in the former case every node is formerly *equal* in front of the need to engage in competitive struggle with the "other", in the latter case every node is distinctive depositary of needs and aspiration whose "equality" — i.e. commonality — emerges only out of a process of mutual recognition and decoding through alliance and struggle.

7.   . . . and what about meshworked dignities . . . ?

It seams to me that today, every struggle for whatever "goal" is forced to redefine itself in relation to the rest of society (other social networks), and this opens great opportunities for social transformation (rather than simply union struggle). Its demands in other words must be presented not only as legitimate or ethical (based on pre-given set of values), but as socially aspirational, and the ability to pull support around the struggle depends very much on how the aspirations of struggling subjects echoes somehow the aspirations of other networks. To make a rough example, if we work in an electric torture baton factory exporting to China and we say we want to set up a fight to work less hours and get higher wages, moral and solidarity support can be obtained only by appealing on abstractly defined "common" interests (higher wages are "good" for the economy, less working hours are "good" for family cohesion which in turn is "good" for the economy). This justification of the struggle implies *abstracting* from the concrete aspect of our roles within society and our connection to other social networks. This of course ultimately boils down to the fact that we are producing torture batons. I think that most of unions attitude towards struggles is of this kind, even when workers are producing less problematic items. At most, they appeal to solidarity based on support based on pre-given values of "class identity", "social justice", and whatever.

Let us make another example. If we work as nurses (as in Paris in the mid 1990s), we could make a different appeal: we want higher wages and work less because we are dignified subjects, our position within the social networks is valuable, you want better care and show respect for our work. The connection is immediate, it echoes the position of nurses vis a vis other social networks, and it creates *both* instrumental and constitutive networks. Instrumental because of greater support for our demands, and constitutive because at least it opens up a debate on the nature and state of nursing and health care, debate which is a premise, at best, to transform it in desirable direction.

Aspirational demands do certainly pre-suppose a certain baggage of values, but they leave open the mode of cooperation and engagement with the other. The great mobilising success of recent struggles — the anti-sweatshop in US; anti-GMO in France, etc — I think are based on the ability of the campaigners to voice aspirational demands.

Ultimately, the issues raised by aspirational demands are a question of dignity, and dignity is a relation of respect between a productive node within society and the rest of

the networks. In my opinion, the question of dignity is basically an organisational issue, meaning that it defines the nature of social production. Recently it has been posed openly by the Zapatistas (De Angelis 2000) and by the French farmers of the confederation Paysienne (Bove' Duford 2001). Organisationally, it means that "the fundamental jump comes when the union does not stop at the defense of working conditions, of wages, of employment, but interrogate itself on the social and economic end of work and human activity." (Bove' Dofour 2001: 127). The point is to turn this interrogation from contemplation of ones own role, into active tool of relating with the world, of positing oneself in relation to other social networks.

8.   So, what can unions do?

A. Labour unions can promote their own increasing insignificance by continuing regarding themselves only as *instrumental* networks and appeal to the outside world in terms of economic "common interests" or abstract common values. In the first case, their efforts are self-defeating, since in an increasingly competitive world, economic "common interests" are being continuously reformulated. The second case, presuppose the formulation of evangelic attitude to politics with given values. This attitude is increasingly at odds with a world of cross-fertilization of movements which creates new values and give new meaning to old ones.

B. Labour unions can promote reflection on (and action on the basis of) aspirational demands, and pose the question of work and pay condition *together* with the question of the nature of work and its role within global networks of social production. In this way, alliance with other movements is not only facilitated, but also *constitutive* of new social relations. But this means that unions as we know them are destined to be washed away by the flood of democratizing forces brought about whenever in presence of cross-issue fertilisation and mutual recognition. Also, current unions must be prepared to abandon abstract and meaningless rhetoric on what is "good" for the economy, and see themselves as part of the transformative process defining the "values" of the economy (What do we produce? How do we produce? How much do we produce? How do we relate to other producers — competition or cooperation?). Finally, if union begins to redefine goals away from those constrained by market priorities, they also will be forced to pose the question of non-market access to the means of existence (social commons).

Appendix: Some notes and reflections on the state of the current movement.

These reflections are the result of both theoretical work as a radical political economist, and several years of active participation in a variety of oppositional networks, including the Zapatista and anti-globalisation networks. My reflections on oppositional networks

arise out of a profound sense of transformation of the political horizon that I have witnessed emerging since early 1990s, and especially since 1994/95. Seattle to me was the end of a phase, rather than the beginning. What was ending was the long journey of hope through the desert of the 1980s after the greatest capitalist restructuring in world history, a process that Marcos called the third world war. In this period up to Seattle in 1999, a process of recomposition of radical subjectivities took place, which started a process of mutual recognition of the different souls of the movement. The diverse aspirations of a wide spectrum of social actors started to come together, melt into one another, being recognised, validated in their dignity and legitimacy, being organisationally coordinated in a non-hierarchical way. In short, as a scholar of Marx and enthusiastic supporter of the themes of his early writing, I could not avoid to see that that political process was not just instrumental to the success of some campaigns, but was an end in itself, in the sense that it *created* new subjectivities that transcended the alienation of the market and new organisational means which sustains forms of communal networks of social production.

After Seattle, things took a new dimension thanks to the sheer dimension of the movement. In the first place, the movement became visible: the media across the globe were forced to point their camera onto us. With visibility comes publicity, and publicity can be adverse if it is the result of images edited and juxtaposed in such a fashion to reveal how "bad" and "violent" the movement is. In this way, it is not much that divisions within the movements are created (there were already "divisions" due to different background). What is being created is a climate that turns these divisions from an opportunity of mutual engagement, recognition and constitution between *different* sections of the movement, into scission, separation, and classification between "good" and "bad" protesters. In other words, between a process that searches for values into one that already takes up values for granted (and of course smashing Macdonald is "bad").

There is another effect of the visibility of the movement after Seattle. A buzz question kept being insistently asked by journalists or was interlocked in the subtext of dismissive comments of politicians (like Claire Short): What do they want? What is their program? Where is some coherence in their demands? This question of demands is of paramount importance when talking about oppositional networks. Also, the step between the classification between "good" and "bad" protesters and between "good" (admissible) and "bad" (non-admissible) demands is a very short one. Under the rubric of admissible demands goes all that is negotiable with governments. Under the rubric of non-admissible demand goes everything that is not. Right, but what are we *really* for?

Now, there is a difference if "they" ask this question to us or if "we" ask this question to ourselves. If they ask this question to us, we generally tend to respond: we want this and that from you. Next comes the reply: but if we give you this and that we end up creating more problems (higher wages = more unemployment, more social services = more inflation and in general, greater access to social resources = bad competitive position). Thus follows the endless list of manifestos and programmes (the localists and the developmentalists, the fair traders and the latter-days keynesians) that aims at convincing some enlightened parts of the establishment that if we were to adopt the rights

combination of policies, we could have it all, competition and high wages, efficiency and social justice, private property and environmental protection. When we go down this road we have been already co-opted. Co-optation here has nothing to do with talking to them, or engaging in dialogue with them, to shake hands and be civil or even demanding things. Co-optation here has to do with taking on board *their* problems with our availability to subscribe to a coherent set of policies that closes the horizon of constitutive networks, pre-empting the rise of new forms of social co-operation, of possible networks of social production. In other words, this sets of programs are not utopian — in the sense of unrealizable — but, from a point of view of human freedom and "*common*ism" — largely dystopian. For example, in the dystopian future of the UK green party manifesto at the last general election, there is the active engineering of what is "local", by confining it "back" to "place" through making long distance air travels more expensive. Of course air travel is polluting, but this is not justification for their indiscriminate curtailing that through the definition of what is local, reduces the range of possible constitutive networks across the globe. On the contrary, curtailing of the forces that feeds into the "growth for growth sake" culture together with more democratic and widespread access to the possibility to travel across the globe, extends human communication on the planet and therefore the realm of social cooperation of labor which both make possible to satisfaction of needs and the creation of new "environmentally friendly" needs.

When they ask the question to us then, we have to be careful to answer in monosyllables. Martin Glaberman recalls that the contracts being signed in the 1930s in the period of unionisation of mass workers in the US, were one page long: wages will go up so much, working hours will go down so much. This shortness has a great advantage: keep mobilization alive and with it the direct empowerment of the grassroots. When contracts in the 1950s started to become volumes long, workers lost their ability to make decisions on the ground, to practice democracy: every controversial issue was instead dealt by union bureacrats with proper procedures who diffused conflict and helped delay resolution of the problems. All this in the name of efficiency and increased productivity. Direct democracy and efficiency as god do not go well together.

On the contrary, the greatest articulation of discussion should be put when we discuss the issue of what we want among ourselves. But here, is not a question of programs, but of aspirations and needs. In this case we can easily be utopians, meaning we wants things that are utterly unconceivable under the current states of affairs. Precisely because we are *not* responsible for the co-ordination of the needs of transnational corporations with those of the environment, or the needs of pervasive competitiveness with that of social justice, in our imagery the formulation of our aspirations can easily drop the first poles of these dichotomies. Transnational corporations and pervasive competitiveness are not written in stone as part of the reality: they are only part of the *permitted* reality. What is permitted is there only as a result of relations of power. If we constrain the formulation of our aspirations to meet the need of what is permitted, we will never escape the present, and we will never connect with the imagery and aspirations of millions more and we will never develop constitutive networks beyond the interstices of the current society.

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