

‘An Original Protest, at Least.’ Mediality and Participation

Introduction

‘An original protest, at least’ ... said the Spanish public television newsreader, after a report about a *zombie parade* – organised by an artists association – gather a crowd of young people dressed as zombies to denounce consumerism. An original protest, at least... ‘Though not very effective’, she lacked to say. Thus originality and efficacy are not always found together.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have largely contributed to widening the gap between two ways of understanding social mobilisation. One focuses on its efficacy, understood in terms of influence on the political system. The other approach does not grasp mobilisation in reference to the *a posteriori* effects, but as what is happening here and now. Our question here is whether media can be considered as merely tactical factors for collective actions or whether their presence modifies the means/ends relationship of political participation and social mobilisation. What happens if, in the heat of the mobilisation, activists are unable to differentiate, in experiential terms, between mediation and the mobilisation goals? Marshall McLuhan’s infamous slogan ‘media is the message’ could be read as mediality prevailing over any other consideration, such as political mobilisation goals, following Scott Lash’s thesis (Lash, 2002) about contemporary societies.

Before describing the way in which ICTs are taking part in contemporary social movements and analysing some of the empirical and theoretical consequences of such participation, some aspects of the complex relation between media and social participation – in the context of political collective action – will be discussed.

ICTs and social participation

It is already a cliché to note that in order to attract public attention, social movements need to renew their collective action repertoires and their discourses (Tarrow, 1998). ICTs have become an essential element of social movements’ dynamics. However, some observers point out that new media have undermined social participation because they have created certain self-referentiality and a nihilistic approach regarding conventional political aims, as mobilisations and

forms of participation are often centred on strictly medial issues – examples include *copyleft*, the open source movement, and the bandwidth campaigns (Lovink, 2007).

Present debates on Net activism raise the following questions: It is possible to build a social movement by technical means or through pure mediation only? Does the shift from public space to virtuality entail renouncing social action in favour of pure mediation? Can meaningful politics exist in a medial frame? Can something merely operational or symbolic belong to the realm of political participation? According to Net critics, such as Geert Lovink and David García,

For many, the urgency of some of the questions we are facing generate an angry scepticism around any practice that raises art or media questions. For real actionists the equation is simple, discourse = spectacle. They insist on a distinction between real action and the merely symbolic (Garcia & Lovink, 1999, html).

Media activists are accused of just talking without doing anything. They are blamed for creating empty signs¹, because ‘after all the expansion of the media realm it has not automatically resulted in an equivalent growth in emancipatory movements and critical practice. It has merely resulted in an accumulation of self-referential topics’ (ibid.). New mediated forms of participation would fragment instead of unify. They would de-mobilise instead of encouraging social participation. Paradoxically this would be the result of the extraordinary capacity of these new media to elaborate on differences and to question the status quo. Lovink sees this paradox embodied in the ‘nihilist impulse’ given to the Net by the blogs (Lovink, 2007).

For Lovink and García, the trick to the survival or success of social movements is to emphasise topics that lie outside of the media realm whilst, at the same time, retaining sophisticated media tactics. Thus, media are mere tools and their contribution to the mobilisation does not alter the ways of experiencing and understanding political participation. These are old principles in a new format because, as simple tools, technologies would fit into the means/ends hierarchy of traditional political protest. These practices and the aesthetics based in using ICTs as implements to organise and mobilise are called *tactical media*.

Both Net criticism and tactical media approaches would find problematic the relation between mobilisation and originality, or between the form and the content of social participation, because they are attached to the means/ends architecture of traditional politics. Net critics’ analyses often try to promote social participation. Therefore, they acknowledge that, in order to increase the efficiency of social mobilisation, the renovation of action repertoires and publicity tactics is required. Tactical questions ask for imagination and fantasy, in one word: *originality*. Protest and resistance rituals are obsolete. They do not attract the public

1 It is interesting to note that for other authors, such as Laclau, Butler or Žižek, empty signifiers are the only ones that can be operative in politics (Butler, et al., 2000)

anymore. They are inefficient in a society of spectacle. Fantasy, imagination, and originality are necessary requirements to any movement aspiring to success.

However, Lovink and García's statements about ICTs and mobilisation reveal a double bind relation between the efficacy and the originality of social movements' dynamics. The (over-) use of these new tactics and new forms of mediation can be to the detriment of the efficiency of social movements, because of the risk to forget their authentic goals. Of course the latter are considered to be different from the means employed. Mobilisations under the influence of new media would tend either to self-referentiality or to alienation, being reduced to mere sociability, to the cult of friendship and the affinities networks. Lovink asks provocatively whether creating social relationships is *social*. He uses the term 'social' in a political sense, as in Marx's 'social question'. He concludes that making social relationships for their own sake lacks political dimension. It's mere entertainment. Technical mediations used with this goal would present the same political deficit, too. In this paper we advocate another sense of 'social', as an association or assembly of things (Latour, 2005). Social is the association formed by human and non-human actors. Thus, society would be a socio-technical network, not a network of people using the technology, but an assembly of human and non-human dispositions. By splitting the *form* and *content* of social participation, Net critics radically separate means and ends, attributing to technologies a mere intermediary role. It ensues that social movement has to be built first, and then we can start thinking about technology, because, by the mere use of media and networks alone, we cannot change the world. According to Lovink (2002), the opposite belief would be a trap. That is, the categorical separation of means and ends rules out the possibility that the means would be, precisely, the goal of the political contention. This belief excludes the politicisation of the means, the definition of the contention in and by the means and the media, which can embody political contention in them. Therefore, by considering media as mere tools, Net critics de-politicise them or rather politicise them wrongly. Hacktivism has for a long time suffered the reprobation of such critics, who consider that claims about mere media politics are alienating.

Tactical Uses of Media and their Limits: From Smart-Mobs to tactical Frivolity

Tactical media approaches define ICTs as mere intermediaries and not as a constitutive element of the mobilisation. First, the movement is created and only then the issue of a smart use of media is raised. An example of this view is the concept of *smart mobs*.² 'Smart Mob' is the term coined by Rheingold (2003) to name collective actions organised through the use of mobile phones and the web. Individuals, groups, mobile devices and computers connected through the

2 Cf. <http://www.smartmobs.com>.

web transmit information not found in traditional mass media. Mobiles, email, blogs, email lists, Instant Messaging, Social Network Sites ([SNS] like *Facebook*, *MySpace*, *Tuenti*, *Flickr*, *YouTube* and *Twitter*) where people usually express and exchange opinions, gossip and personal experiences, by text, sound or images, become means of broadcasting and calling to participate in collective actions. They become virtual public places as well as means to organise political actions. These networked devices take part in practices of citizen journalism³ (Gillmor, 2004) and *sousveillance* (Mann, 2004) as well, where those who tell the action are not external cameras and observers but the participants themselves. Some of these applications – such as blogs, photoblogs, videoblogs, wikis – or those which allow the sharing and diffusion of pictures and videos, are called *participatory media* because they support collective participation in the production of culture, social bonds, power and wealth (Rheingold, 2008). The presence of mobile communication devices with cameras affords people's organisation following swarming tactics. These increase the efficiency of small collectives, by facilitating their mobility and autonomy, as well as the coordination and synchronisation of their activities. Such devices provide security to the participants too, as they allow them to react quickly, to ask for help and to record in order to sustain possible legal claims. Main uses and presence of these technologies in the organisation of collective actions and in the practices of social movements can be summarised in the following six points, which are a kind of tactical repertoire:

A. Mobilisation calls. to vote, to demonstrate, to raise funds or to act violently against certain groups. This last decade is marked by diverse examples of political mobilisations organised through the massive sending of SMS (Short Messaging System) and emails throughout the globe, parallel to the increasing adoption of both mobile phones and Internet. In recent times, SNS such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* have been used towards this aim too; most of these actions have been demonstrations and protests. The organisation of collective actions with the help of ICTs however not only concerns civic actions, as it was seen in Nigeria in both 2002 and in January 2010. In 2002, violent protests against the celebration of Miss World contest resulted in dozens of deaths. SMS helped to disseminate the press article, deemed as blasphemous by many Muslims, which triggered the violence, as well as to spread the lynching calls. In the recent confrontation between Christians and Muslims, which resulted in hundreds of people killed, inflammatory text messages contributed to fuel the violence.

B. Communication required to the tactical organisation of a particular action. The best-known example is probably the 1999 anti-globalisation protest in Seattle, where thanks to mobile communications the activists could

3 Also called participative journalism or journalism 3.0. It refers to the work of citizens who, without being professional journalists, make and publicise in the web visual and textual chronicles, reports, and comments about political, social and cultural events in which they participate.

evade the centralised radio systems used by the riot police. These tactics are now part of the action repertory of the so-called 'anti-summit model' (Iglesias, 2004) by the prominence they acquired during the mobilisation cycle on the occasion of diverse international organisations summits (WTO, OECD, World Bank) after the Seattle events (Washington, Bologna, Prague in 2000, Gothenburg, Barcelona and Genoa in 2001).

C. The dissemination of news, rumours, election campaign slogans.

Different web sites, such as the South-Korean *OhMyNews.com*, the US *MoveOn.org*, the international *Indymedia* or the Spanish *Nodo50* and *Sindominio*, are examples of an emergent citizen journalism or journalism 3.0 (Gillmor, 2004). These webs try to inform as well as to promote political activism and social transformation. They provide news and alerts, which are continuously updated by a combination of reporter-citizens and professionals. They are also forums for the debate and the organisation of campaigns and other form of collective actions. The possibilities of the convergence between mobiles and computers have facilitated and diversified the content creation in such web sites. Nowadays social media such as SNS, microblogging and video and image sharing sites are accomplishing this function as well.

D. Citizen surveillance, or sousveillance. For instance, related to the suspicion of electoral fraud in countries such as Kenia in 2003, Sierra Leone in 2007, or in the U.S. 2004 Presidential Election, where a similar citizen surveillance system was organised called 'People For the American Way Election Protection'. Volunteers had access to a legal assistance phone line through their mobiles, in order to help to identify and solve problems that could come up during the elections.

E. The appropriation and politicisation of technologies. This consists in making explicit the logics of use, design and commercialisation of ICTs. It entails a reflection about technology role related to social change, as well as their adaptation to the activist collectives by the design of new applications and devices. Such practices are called technoactivism or hacktivism. Barcelona collective *Riereta*, which organise technological workshops addressed to the participants in different social movements and associations of the city, is an example of this articulation between technology and activism (Callén, et al., 2008).

F. The account of the actions through stories and images made, consulted and shared in the web. Media uses reveal the importance of the shared visibility and narratives in the constitution of personal experiences and collective actions. They are a main element of the creation of an international media public space (McAdam, 1996). Besides the case of the Global or Anti-Globalisation Movement described by Kevin McDonald, such practices can be found in other kinds of contemporary mobilisation, as in the recent Spanish case of young people's protest claiming the housing right. The platform *V de Vivienda*

had its own web site⁴ and a *Flickr*⁵ account where pictures of all its mobilisations can be found. The Barcelona delegation of this collective created a *YouTube* account with videos of the protests, as well as of the participation of its members in traditional media.⁶ Elsewhere in *YouTube* there are video clips filmed and uploaded by the participants to their personal accounts where they join other clips recorded during rock concerts or nights out with friends.⁷

The concept of *tactical media* emerged with the 90's mobilisations whereby groups of activists started to combine old collective action repertoires, performing arts and ICTs. Uses are tactical because they make possible quick changes of form and platforms, as well as the simultaneous use of a big variety of media according to the circumstances. In this case media are mere intermediaries between the most politically active and activist sector of civil society (social movements) and the political and institutional system. As intermediaries, ICTs play a secondary role. They are simple bridges that facilitate or simplify the relationship between two systems without changing them, social movements, civil society or public opinion in one side and institutional politics in the other. The contribution of ICTs is measured in tactical terms, as tactical efficacy regarding the renewal of action repertoires. But, what happens in those cases when tactics are not endowed with an efficacy label, when, as in the example of Net critics quoted above, they are deemed to be irrelevant, vacuous or, at worst, counterproductive to the attainment of political objectives? What happens when the bursting originality of the action repertoire employed, which makes mobilisations cryptic or impossible to codify in political terms, collides with their efficacy? Are we facing then a process whereby the originality and the surprise of certain mobilisations force us to overcome an all too easy antagonism between originality and efficacy? The following example helps us to consider how these tensions are revealed. *Tactical frivolity* is one example of these particular practices, which arose with force in very recent social movements, such as in the case of the British collective *Reclaim the Streets*. Tactical frivolity seeks to,

[u]ndo classical anarchists vs. police, one-to-one confrontational tactics, by multiplying frontlines and making an extremely ironic use of femininity and kitschy representations of the body in direct action. Music and dance provided this radical redefinition of street protest not only with a powerful tool to practically dissolve or *détour* police violence, but also with the strongest possible image (and soundtrack) to realise how street demonstrations can become the unleashing of body's desires in the moment of protest itself (*Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 2007)

Rhythms of Resistance, a samba orchestra that used to take part in *Reclaim the Streets* mobilisations, are a clear example of tactical frivolity:

4 <http://vdevivienda.net/>

5 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/vdemadrid/>

6 <http://youtube.com/profile?user=vdeviviendabcn>

7 <http://youtube.com/profile?user=ultlulble>

Whilst people often refer to us as a 'Samba Band' we actually have more affinity with the Afro Bloc paradigm drum bands that emerged in the mid 70s in Salvador de Bahia in Brazil. Bands such as Ile Aye and Olodum formed as a political expression of black awareness, resisting economic exclusion. Coming out of some of the poorest urban communities, Afro blocs became a mobilising focus on picket lines and marches. As they put it, they played as 'a force of resistance and source of self-confidence'. The growth of Schools of Samba both in Brazil and all over the world since the 80's, is largely a result of the commercialisation of this culture of resistance. (*Rhythms of Resistance*, 2009)

Rhythms of Resistance are part of an international of percussion, and '*international of percussive resistance in front of the advance of capitalism*' (ibid.), as they say. Carnival is akin to their tactics. For them protesting entails living and enjoying, using one's imagination, weaving interconnected networks, designing tools and clothes, composing and playing music, questioning the world through unexpected role reversion, disrupting the media representation of the activists (encapsulated by the image of the 'anarchist throwing stones at McDonalds') and the police categorisations. Nuria Vila and Marcelo Expósito are the authors of an interesting documentary about *Rhythms of Resistance*. The documentary tells the epiphany of tactical frivolity in a quite epic way. In a *Reclaim the Streets* activist's words:

The police were drawing lines around people. They call it 'putting people into a kettle'. And Rosie was there wearing this ridiculous costume with this tiny pink bikini and this headdress and this pink tail and the feather duster and she was tickling the police officers and we were like: 'What is she doing? This is really strange!' But in the papers the next day there were pictures of anarchist throwing rocks and pictures of McDonald's being destroyed and then pictures of Rosie with the feather duster. It looks so incongruous. But every newspaper editor thought: 'Oh! We've got to have the scantily clad woman there!' and they put this picture in. It was a brilliant image because it makes you wonder: What is all that about? What are they about? It made much more difficult to categorize us as those bad protesters who just want to destroy things. They just go like: 'Why is she doing that?' (*Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 2007)

We know that a pink bikini, a headdress, a tail and a duster are not ICTs. However, tactical frivolity is interesting for our topic because it points out the limits of the means/ends divide regarding social participation; these limits become even more evident when using new media. Tactical frivolity reveals the difficulty of keeping this separation, as means used by social movements – better called mediations – are not means in a strictly tactical sense, but constitutive elements of the mobilisation itself. Mediations and goals become undistinguished. Moreover, the way of conceiving means and end changes. On the one hand, means used are political in themselves. On the other hand, once the dialectic means/ends is overcome, the question of what is political becomes more complex, symbolically and operationally as well. It becomes difficult then to go back to unilateral visions of the all too cold Weberian logic of instrumental rationality or the all too hot Durkheimian logic of collective effervescence. Media become mediators, not mere intermediaries. Unlike intermediation relationships, in mediation relation-

ships the worlds (here, Political Opportunity Structure, cf. McAdam et al., 1996, on the one hand, and Social Movement on the other) are not constituted before the mediation occurs. They are constituted because of the mediation. This constitutive character of mediations makes *Rhythms of Resistance* activists' experience go beyond the goals marked by their political activism. This is the account of a young female member of the samba band featured in the documentary quoted:

The rhythms that we play originate from candomblé. So they are actually used to call down deities of nature and when these deities of nature materialized on earth they possess people, so they would come into the bodies of humans and dance. So breaks in rhythm are supposed to be the moments when the deities are called down and if you go to a demonstration and you hear the sound of the band playing and you hear the moment when they break up, the crowd goes mad and I think there is something very powerful about those moment and those changes in rhythm that go a little bit further than just being about music. (*Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 2007)

People involved in collective actions, such as demonstrations or other kind of protest gatherings, form what Elias Canetti in his book *Crowd and Power* calls 'rhythmic crowds' (Canetti, 1962). In this type of crowds the cohesion is mainly assured by the imitation and repetition of the same gestures and movements, and by the empathy and affective transmission facilitated by this kind of common body created by these physical movements. These are ephemeral crowds, decentralised and non-hierarchical, by opposition to the crowds organised and subordinated to an institution or a particular leader. The participants share the same ambience, the same atmosphere that they contribute to create. This is due to a reciprocal and accumulative resonance between the participants. In the *Rhythms of Resistance* case, this is helped by the use of percussions and Brazilian rhythms. These resonance and synchronisation facilitate a feeling of togetherness, the creation of a common present and the participation and rooting in a group. Rhythmic behaviours are produced when the repetition of rhythmic groups (music, gestures, etc.) is linked to physical movement. Movement ability to be the source of satisfaction and excitement increases with the harmony between movement and rhythmic perception. Rhythmic behaviours as these are part of what Alfred Schütz calls 'mutual tuning in relationships' (Schütz, 1964), such as dancing together, walking together, music playing and love making, which are ways of experiencing the self and the other as a groups, as a 'we'. Rhythmic behaviours and practices are based on form, uses, living experience – not on ideas or ideologies. For rhythmic transmission of the message, the content is secondary. They are not intentional either. In this they differ from meaning, which is linked to intentionality, will and practical need. Rhythm is immanent, without representative content. In this, rhythmic behaviours and practices are similar to sociability as reciprocal actions with an end in themselves. All these aspects, this is, sociability, mutual tuning in relationships and living experiences, which allow people to leave their usual and individual self, seem to be crucial to understand the participation in contemporary collective actions. They are also

becoming more and more mediated and facilitated by the use of ICTs. Acting inside a crowd augments and extends the body abilities of the participants. Technologies are also ways of augmenting and extending, not only the abilities and bodies of the individuals but of the rhythmic crowds as well, beyond the here and now of the face to face gathering. Mediation is compared with possession in the quotation above. Following the rhythm of the drums and being resonant to them, as well as to the movements of the people around, provide the possibility of getting out of one's ordinary consciousness. Without being exactly a trance experience, protest collective actions can also entail modified states of consciousness. Both are discontinuities with the ordinary, highlighted by the rhythms and movements that break with the everyday patterns of movement and feelings. Possession rituals are rites of passage. Once the subjects have been separated from the material and social reality, they enter another consciousness, another physical and mental balance. Something new emerges, 'something more than simply music'. It could be added that it is something more than a simple protest, too. The activists who go through these moments of social excitement live a tension that cannot be accounted for using the Weberian dichotomy between means and ends. It also exceeds the functional meaning of Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence, which refers to a moment of transitory dedifferentiation required to the establishment and continuity of a process of social structuring. Expressions such as 'certain convulsionaries serving as catalyst for various bodily agitations, autosuggestibility', as one of the activists explains in the documentary quoted (*Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 2007) clearly point to the tension between reason and feelings, charisma and rationality, instrumentality and expressivity, mind and body, mobilisation and performance and other irreconcilable oppositions that, until recently, have shaped modern aesthetics of social and political participation. Our claim would be that not only media used to mobilise are mediations, but that the mobilisation itself becomes a new mediation, a flow whose parts cannot be differentiated. It is something different to the entities interconnected (activists, technologies, political system, public opinion, media). Kevin McDonald gets close to this view of social movements as mediations (Bruno Latour would speak of 'collectives') when he analyses social movements as music. One of the most striking dimensions of these movements is the centrality of embodied experience and communication that simply cannot be conceptualised within a Habermasian discursive/rational or cognitive understanding of communicative action.

We could say that groups such as *Rhythms of Resistance* do not only use music for their mobilisations as another supplementary resource, but they adopt such forms that can be conceptualised as music. In music, as in all performing arts, it is impossible to split between means and ends. This approach is very far from the separation between means and goals, which orientate traditional views on social participation, even for the supposedly heterodox concept of 'smart mobs'.

However, in respect of its strong reflexive charge, we do not believe that tactical frivolity and music or other performing arts can be put at the same formal level. Instead of performing arts, it would be closer to the logic of conceptual art, as one of its main goals is to evidence the limits of the political mobilisation and the conditions that make such mobilisation possible. There is something comparable to the shift from the objectual art to the conceptual art. In other words, with *tactical frivolity* we shift from objectual politics (centred in the legitimate object[ive]s of politics) to conceptual politics. This is, politics that questions its own object. If the art commentary was made a work of art by conceptual art, conceptual politics turns political commentary into true politics. This hypothesis helps us to understand the categorically reflexive character of the statements of the members of *Rhythms of Resistance* quoted above: ‘tactical frivolity undo classical anarchists vs. police, one-to-one confrontational tactics, by multiplying frontlines and making an extremely ironic use of femininity and kitschy representations of the body in direct action’ (*Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 2007). Can one be ironic when one says to be ironic? This purposeful logic resituates tactical frivolity in the usual parameters of the conventional analysis of social movements. The showiness, brightness and colour of this kind of mobilisation should not hide the operational similarities with more classical or conventional movements. The divide means/ends is still valid. Therefore we can consider tactical frivolity as a more uninhibited, aesthetic and hyper-reflexive subtype of smart mob.

One Step Beyond. Flash-Mobs as a Challenge to the Sociology of Social Movements

Besides smart-mobs, there is other kind of mobilisation mediated by technology uses, though much more disconcerting. They are confusing for analysts because they are not that easy in terms of differentiating between means and goals. We are talking here of *flash-mobs*. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, which has included this term recently, a flash-mob is ‘a public gathering of complete strangers, organised via the Internet or mobile phones that perform a pointless act and then disperse again.’ (Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English, 2009) They are virtual collectives that are actualised, embodied, sporadically to do something eccentric, from a conventional social perspective. They are situated under the minimal threshold of meaning. They are collective actions lacking of political meaning, unlike smart mobs. By their repeated occurrence in different cities, some of them have acquired certain degree of institutionalisation, becoming a sort of contemporary urban rituals of global cities. Pillow fights organised every year in European cities such as Madrid, London or Paris, and U.S. cities – such as New York, Los Angeles, San Diego or San Francisco – are an example of this. Image accounts of these gatherings are easily found in *Flickr* and other SNS. Some of them are organised on Valentine’s Day (San Francisco, San Diego,

Madrid). Others are part of the so-called World Pillow Fight Day, on the 3rd of April.⁸

At first, the comparison between smart and flash-mobs reveals more similarities than differences regarding the following aspects:

- The modes of calling the potential participants,
- Their intermittent aspect, as well as the intermittent character of people's participation,
- The claims about the use of urban public space and the practices regarding such space,
- The importance of the presence in the public space as a motivation element to participate,
- The stress on the here and now,
- Unexpectedness and serendipity,
- The organisers' lack of certitude regarding the number of people who will attend the event and about how the event will take place,
- The playfulness and the aesthetic,
- The affective communication between the participants and the stress on sociability,
- The importance of personal experience and body actions,
- The importance of the technologically mediated shared reflexivity, this is, the importance of recording, filming and uploading the stories about the gathering, in text, images and sounds, that will be discussed and debated in forums and blogs.

The only difference between smart-mobs and flash-mobs would be the presence in the smart-mobs calls of political slogans or topics deemed as political. The use of the adjective *smart* reveals the intention to differentiate these gatherings with an explicitly political goal from the other supposedly more playful. This being the only difference, analysts tend to emphasise it, overlooking all the structural similarities. The presence or absence of explicit political goals becomes the more differentiating feature. While smart-mobs are *smart*, flash-mobs would be, obviously and by opposition, *idiot*⁹. They would be just tautological actions, self-referential, purely immanent. This is, nothing more than a form of crowd narcissism, an expression of a formal rituality without content, that would only be understood by a sociology of the absurd. Whereas smart mobs are granted at least the possibility of being a kind of pilot experiment for political participation, flash-mobs present a codification problem for the collective action theories. Bill Wasik, a *Harper's Bazaar* editor, is, supposedly, the intellectual author of the first successful flash-mob. This flash-mob gathered a hundred people who turned up

8 <http://www.pillowfightday.com/about.php>.

9 'The flash-mob is the idiot-child of our instant-communication age' (*The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English*, 2009, entry 'flashmob').

at a big department store in New York to buy, all together, a 'love carpet'. Telling about his reasons to call the gathering, he argues that the interest of these protests is, precisely, that they are devoid of politics. It's like being in a protest, but without politics.

It wasn't for some weird revolutionary purpose or political purpose. It was just like 'hey, we're all going to get together and see what happens.' People looked at it and said: 'Yeah, I want to see what happens too. So I'm going to forward this thing on.' (The Chuckler, 2006)

In a recent interview, one of the members of the group 'Madrid Mobs', which has been launching these initiatives from the Web for five years,¹⁰ answers to the question of politics and flash-mobs by saying that:

Politics in the sense of 'make polis', maybe, that is in our intentions: make streets alive, try to do something different in them, something collective... The political side of flash-mobs is not evident. That's the interest of it. It's not about discourse, but something playful, more subtle. We are interested in the shock, the crash, the dissonance. Going out of reality. The action creates a kind of second reality, a parallel reality on the top of the everyday one during a couple of minutes. For me flash mobs are little interferences in the reality program in which we take part every minute of our life. (Interview with Correvedile, Revista Ladinamo, forthcoming)

If we have to elaborate a typology, we would say that social movements, smart-mobs and flash-mobs are three types of social mobilisation that differ in form and content. Regarding form, they differ by the regularity or sporadic character of their public space presence, and by the conventionality or unconventionality of their collective action repertory. Regarding content, they differ by the weight of political meaning. The following table summarises these combinations:

	Conventional Action Repertoire	Political Meaning
Social Movement	Yes	Yes
Smart-mob	No	Yes
Flash-mob	No	No

However, how can we account for flash-mobs if they lack of political substance and contentious claims? Are they mere artistic *performances*? Are they only a dramaturgic proposal or rather a kind of social parody? Our view is that, instead of being absurd mobilisations, flash-mobs represent a challenge to the sociology of social movements, because they make evident one of its assumptions: the instrumental and subsidiary character of its concept of movement.

Social connectivity sense mobilised by flash-mobs is only grasped when they have got some goal. In spite of their commonalities, the differences between smart and flash-mobs are highlighted in reference to the traditional political calculation between means and ends. They would be meaningful when and be-

¹⁰ <http://www.madridmobs.net/>

cause they seek some goal, when they are something more than a pure event. When they transcend. It ensues that flash-mobs are meaningful only as a political promise. This is, when, in spite of their apparent political disaffection, they guarantee the actualisation of the power of the multitude (Hardt & Negri, 2000):

Both smartmobs and flashmobs envisage the potential to turn into a vehicle for the realisation of concrete political projects. This is where their real political promise hinges upon: to become something far bigger than a fancy art project; to become a political project in itself by appropriating the spatial dimensions of reality upon which the institution of the imaginary is so persistently welded on, and without which, it is reckoned, it cannot operationalise its logic (Dafermos quoted in Guerra, 2005, p. 51).

Thus, flash mobs are deemed either political movements in seed, or multitudes to come. We believe that such attributions defuse flash mobs' empirical and analytical potentialities. They discipline the crowd closing the meaning of what it does. The instrumental and finalist approach of mobilisation practised by the sociology of social movements operate a political and interpretive control. This interpretation is supported by what McDonald (2004) calls the strong continuity thesis. He argues that the form of the relationship between political actors and the State – which gave rise historically to social movements – is still considered the main logic in mobilisations; although in the new global frame the State is losing its political influence and interpretive power. The strong continuity thesis is based on a double asymmetry: first, the conceptual cooptation of social and identity by a certain way of understanding political mobilisation; second, the priority of the action compared to communication. Most collective action analyses present an instrumental and finalist approach, as they focus either in the social movement incidence on the institutional political system, or in the consolidation of certain collective identities in pursuit of permanence (Cohen, 1985). In general, the main conceptions of collective action and collective identity in social movements studies come from the consideration of social movements as agents of politics of contention (McAdam, et al., 2001). The principal element of a social movement is its open challenge to the authorities and the campaigns of actions constituted in the interaction with the authorities. Mobilisation of collective identities in relation to the political system is at the centre of contemporary analyses of conflict and power. This asymmetry is largely due to the complexity of the topic. Social movements are a kind of theoretical crossroads between the social and the political, not easily solved. They are an intersection following a double bind logic (Bateson, 1978), that is, a situation raising a pragmatic dilemma impossible to solve: how to make compatible social effervescence and political institutionalisation. If they opt for the excitement characteristic of the founding moments, which are the most creative, and do not undertake the necessary rationalisation of their internal organisation, their claims and strategies, they vanish and remain a useless constituent act. If, on the contrary, they opt for political and organisational consolidation, they vanish by routine. They die of

success being co-opted by the political representation system. Sociology of social movements tried to overcome this double bind by choosing institutionalisation. Thus, in the movement, sociability and identity are only relevant as long as they have political value, translated into the political system code. Sociability and identity lack relevance by themselves. They are baggage for a trip whose aim is to influence the political system. In this sense, collective identity becomes a supplementary organisation resource. This is an instrumental conception of identity. Individual becomes an agent for the movement. This is a particular civil conception of identity not able to grasp any other consideration about the complex nature of subjective experience inside contemporary social movements (McDonald, 2004). The role attributed to the technological mediations used in the mobilisation is instrumental too. These mediations are considered mere resources to reach pre-established political goals. This consideration prevents new media to be constitutive elements of the mobilisation. Technologies are not recognised as full political agents. But as Bruno Latour warns:

The apparently reasonable division between material and social becomes just what is obfuscating any enquiry on how a collective action is possible. Provided of course that by collective we don't mean an action carried over by homogeneous social forces, but, on the contrary, an action that collects different types of forces woven together because they are different (Latour, 2005, p. 74 f).

Given this instrumental logic regarding the sense of the mobilisation, collective identity and the role of new media as well, it is not surprising that flash mobs are defined in negative terms, or by the lack of the characteristics required for a real collective action. They are deemed 'communicative flashes' that could crystallise identities or resources to mobilise in proper episodes of political activity (Alcalde & Sádaba, 2008). This distinction between 'communicative flashes' and 'episodes of political activity' is the content of the second asymmetry we defined above: the prevalence of action over communication. The separation between communication and action as moments of the mobilisation is the preceding step to consider the former as a means to the later. Communication would be always communication *for* the action. Without elaborating here on the theoretical consequences of such a distinction, we can point out that it thwarts the promise of concepts such as performativity (Butler, 1997) or communicative action (Habermas, 1984). According to these undoubtedly theoretically relevant concepts, communication and action are mutually shaped. Flash mobs challenge the relationship between communication (tell/talk), identity (be) and action (do).¹¹ They challenge a certain bipolar interpretation of this triad which places on one

11 There is the opposite case too: the innocuous 'doing' of the old political militancy, which seems to be stranded in discourse. In this sense Milan Kundera remembers these situations, during his political socialisation under the communist regime, when someone claimed as a war cry 'let's act now!' to close a political argument and kept arguing about how to do it in an endless loop.

side communication, meaning and identity in a world of life lacking political substance, and on the other side action and mobilisation in a political system or political opportunities structure (Kriesi, 1992). The action forms found in flash mobs do not follow exclusively an instrumental or purely rational/cognitive logic, neither an expressive or performative one. The importance of the form of the action itself is also highlighted as one of the motivations to participate in such actions, as it is found in the interview of the Madrid flash-mobster quoted above:

It's hard to explain, but suddenly something happens, together, coordinated, a kind of form in a particular and very brief time, and then it breaks up with the same elegance. That seems to me as an sculpture of a new order... Many people just have fun, they want to participate in something unconventional, to act foolish. All that is evident in the pillow fights. It's perfect. To get into the action, on stage, though there is not stage, going to the other side of the mirror. (Interview with Correvedile, Revista Ladinamo, forthcoming)

Conclusion

The sociology of social movements is still excessively dependent on a modern paradigm anchored in what Habermas (1989) calls the principle of publicity or public notoriety: the 'visibility' of social movements in the public sphere whose aim is to influence the political system more efficiently, based on contentious politics. Thus, we think that the main issue about new forms of mobilisation is not the need to adapt the Habermasian schema from the written press to new media, as Rheingold suggests,¹² but to address deep changes in what is political. Probably we are witnessing a paradigm change in collective mobilisation. As McDonald points out, this would be the passage from *solidarity* to *fluidarity* (McDonald, 2002); from *collective mobilisation* to the mobilisation of a collective of people and technologies (Latour, 2005), a hybrid crowd (Lasen & Martínez de Albeniz, 2008). This paradigm change entails the shift from humanist politics, grounded on theories of the social contract and on the ideal of emancipation, to a fluid one where actions, communications, technological and media flows are articulated in new and complex forms. When analysing social movements, one has to avoid the myopia of the visible (Melucci, 1994), this is, to notice only the process, mediations and visibility mechanisms set off by the social movements themselves. Mediated crowds ask for a paradigm beyond the humanist principle of publicity or public sphere (Habermas, 1989) to account for a more subtle and complex form of visibility. New concepts and mechanisms of visualisation are required, as well as a new political sensibility. Politicised hybrid masses threaten the political foundations. They advocate for minor politics, politics of flows, politics of small things. In this sense, French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004)

12 <http://www.smartmobs.com/2007/11/05/habermas-blows-off-question-about-the-internet-and-the-public-sphere/>

writes about the need to redefine what is political as a 'distribution of the sensible'. This is the way in which roles and modes of participation in a common social world are determined by establishing possible modes of perception. The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed... it defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of what is visible and what is invisible, of speech and noise, which simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.

The distribution of the sensible, of what can be apprehended by the senses, reveals who can participate in politics and how, which are the times and spaces of political deployment where politics become visible. This is an aesthetic that defines the form of political experience. It establishes the modes of participation, as well as the ways of making participation visible or invisible. The distribution of the sensible is the aesthetic police of politics. In this sense, flash mobs are a challenge to the conventional political aesthetics, which deems them noise or nonsense. Flash mobs reveal that the means/ends divide is not operative anymore in this distribution of political sensibility. Hybrid masses are politics in process. For them, *what* and *how* are the same. Medium is the message. The question is not what do they mean, but how do they work. Mediated crowds are communicative flows. Their aim, borrowing Jean-Luc Godard's adage, it is not to communicate something but to communicate with someone. Participation for flash mobs lies in the communicative fact itself, as it happens when playing. Communication is not communication *for* the political action or mobilisation. It is political action/mobilisation in itself. *Particip-action*.

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