



# The Party's Not Over: Network politics and the 2010-11 UK Student Movement

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## Abstract

In late 2010 a mass student movement emerged in the UK in a series of spectacular demonstrations and a wave of occupations in response to the trebling of university tuition fees and the education cuts of the Tory-LibDem coalition. There followed a debate about its organisational forms in which "organising without organisations", Internet organising and a leaderless movement of autonomous groups became prominent themes.

This intervention uses examples from the movement to argue that this model cannot deal with a number of issues necessary if it is to be sustainable and effective in bringing about radical political change: forms of democracy and accountability; the determination and implementation of a political strategy; and the formation of political organisations that can attract long term commitment and go beyond individualised responses. This suggests limitations to this model as an organisational strategy for the movement.

## The movement

[...] contestation and spontaneity – the force of the streets... this power, which lies outside of state power, was and remains the most real and active power... Such power however, has difficulty in constituting and



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affirming itself as power... How can a movement based on negation become a power? How can it move from contestation to institution?

Lefevbre (1969, 82)

In late 2010 a mass student movement emerged in the UK in a series of spectacular demonstrations and a wave of occupations in response to the trebling of university tuition fees to £9,000 a year and the education cuts of the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition. On November 10<sup>th</sup> over 50,000 students marched in London in response to a call by the National Union of Students (NUS) ( Daily Mail, 2010; Guardian, 2010). A part of the march spontaneously occupied the unprotected Conservative Party HQ on Millbank, venting their anger at the prospect of curtailed access to education and in turn facing attacks on 'violent troublemakers', not merely from the media and politicians but also from NUS President Aaron Porter. The campaign continued through two further demonstrations on the 24th and 30th of November, which saw the use of the police tactic of 'kettling', the surrounding of groups of demonstrators by riot police who then refused to let them leave for hours in freezing weather. On December 9, the day the legislation was due to be voted on in Parliament, the majority of the 30,000 students marching in London ignored the NUS call for a peaceful vigil away from parliament, instead facing mounted and riot police in Parliament Square where many were attacked to the extent of one marcher being pulled from a wheelchair and another needing an operation for brain damage (Wikipedia, 2011).

The movement was characterised by the anger and creativity of large layers of previously uninvolved students, including many school students and 16-18 year olds affected by the proposed abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance. The marches were accompanied by a wave of occupations in universities, which provided centres for organising campaigning and political debate.

The movement made extensive use of social media, the new opportunities for communication opened by platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and the widespread availability of portable, 'smart' devices. They were used for spreading real time information about what was happening on the streets, both to give immediate alternative news not found in mainstream media and to tell demonstrators how to avoid being kettled; to provide a conduit for the expression of solidarity and communication between activists; and to plan activities and mobilise for them so that 'smart mobs' could appear at focal points with little notice. Tags such as #solidarity and #dayx were used on Twitter to locate information and provide an online identity and space. Occupations created their own blogs and Twitter feeds with people specifically responsible for updating them.

Fighting kettling, looking to control the streets and, not least, the occupations all gave rise to concerns with the spatial aspects of the movement (detailed in several articles in Maddox, 2010). The possibility of real time connection between

dispersed protesters gave rise to platforms such as Sukey designed to gather and distribute information about the location of police and protesters.

### **The debate on organisation**

A combined effect of the speed of mobilisation, the involvement of many new people who were largely unattached and often antagonistic to any political organisation, the ability to use the Internet to mobilise distributed networks with little or no formal structure, an apparent lack of leaders and the influence of both anarchist and autonomist ideas and forms of organisation was to convince many that traditional forms of organisation such as political groups, unions and even student campaigns such as National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC) were either unnecessary or should at least have only a loose and minimally organised structure. Questions of organisation and perspective thus quickly emerged in the movement as this view was debated (Callinicos, 2010; Penny, 2010c).

This did not prevent the movement uniting around the immediate forms taken by the student movement: militant marches, occupations and open assemblies. Rather it focused on how the movement should seek to develop and whether these forms needed to be supplemented by more long-term forms of organisation. This led to a debate between advocates of 'organising without organisations', 'open source' politics or, as theorised in Hands (2011), a fluid, minimally organised and temporary form called the "quasi-autonomous recognition network" (QARN) and those who recognized the issue raised by Lefebvre after May '68 - the transition from episodic popular protests to social movement to civil society organisation (Etling et al, 2010) - and felt that more formally structured organizational forms were needed to enable the movement to survive and pursue strategic goals.

The issues are not in themselves new, ultimately being traceable as far back as the debate between Marxists and anarchists in the First International in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Bailey, 2012). More recently, the alter-globalisation movement of the early 2000s saw a debate between 'horizontalists' and 'verticalists', particularly around the 2004 European Social Forum in London and the continuation of the Social Forum movement (Nunes, 2005). While both the underlying organisational forms and the political divergences pre-date the emergence of the Internet and the growth of "informational capitalism", these contemporary developments are seen to reinforce the particular set of organisational forms and practices that have become known as network politics. Its defining characteristics are taken to be based on horizontal networked connections among autonomous elements, non-hierarchical, open and fluid in participation and forms and based around self-managed networking (Juris, 2004). It has been associated with non- or post-representational forms of politics (Rossiter, 2006; Tormey, 2011) and, in some cases, with a reluctance to articulate political demands.

This is counterposed to more traditional representational forms of political organisation based around membership, vertical structures (which may vary greatly in their degree of democracy ranging from bureaucratism to incorporating accountability through the right to recall representatives) and the development and propagation of political strategies and demands. The most relevant types of organisation in our context are political groups or parties and unions – both often proclaimed dead by advocates of network politics.

The network politics view gained a broad airing in the British student movement through the emergence of group of activist bloggers and journalists such as Laurie Penny, Aaron Peters and others whose writing is collected in the volume 'Fight Back' (Hancox, 2010). They echoed ideas widespread in the movement.

A few quotes will give a flavour of this position:

The young people of Britain do not need leaders, and the new wave of activists has no interest in the ideological bureaucracy of the old left. Their energy and creativity is disseminated via networks rather than organisations. (Penny, 2010b)

The old organisational structures of revolution -- far-left parties, unions and splinter groups -- are increasingly irrelevant to the movement that is building across Europe... I'm not interested in whether you're a Leninist or a liberal or a Blairite or a Brownite or an anarchist or a concerned member of the public with no time for ideological flim-flammy. I want to know if you're up for a fight. (Penny, 2010c)

In the new 'crowdsourced' paradigm the distinction between producers and consumers of dissent is dissolved - there is no organising or membership structure in place, with instead all individuals being potential participants' within a movement. (Peters, 2010c)

Elsewhere actors ... have functioned in a manner that has been described previously as '**open source**' behaving in a networked and autonomous manner... For such actors there is no structural hierarchy or bureaucracy and anyone who wishes to participate and actively contribute to the group can do so. **These networks in many ways represent organising without organisations...** (Peters, 2011a. Emphasis in original)

In the case of the emergent student movement... the Internet has meant it has been able to organise horizontally and without leaders... (Hands, 2011b)

For some, the potential absence of organisation is rooted in a technological determinist view that the coming of open digital communication has removed the need for organisation. Penny (2010a) for example, suggests that "this could be the beginning of a second information age... as social media come of age, the rules of resistance are undergoing a similar shift". For others, it is based in a suspicion of

existing left organisations or a general political outlook that equates representative, hierarchical organisation with authoritarian control.

This intervention uses examples from the winter of 2010-11 to suggest that these ideas are inadequate for building a democratic, sustainable and effective movement capable of achieving strategic goals, whether those are defined - as those of the students have variously been - as reversing the cuts, forcing out the Coalition government, establishing a right to free education or overthrowing capitalism. They rather reflect the early stages of a rising wave of protest when opposition and resistance to government measures can bring into being a spontaneous, broad and heterogeneous movement. At this stage, as Lefebvre suggests, its mere force can shake the status quo and point to the future and thus appear sufficient. However moving from protest to the challenge of achieving its general goals requires a movement with a clear strategy and durable organisational forms ready for a long haul with inevitable downturns.

The purpose of this intervention is not to denigrate the tactics or techniques I have described and still less the movement as a whole, which has been an inspiration as the first serious opposition to the Coalition, mobilising new layers of supposedly apathetic youth and using imaginative methods. Rather it is to challenge some of the more wide-ranging conclusions being drawn from the course of the movement so far - in particular, on the question of organisation - that threaten its further development.

I will begin by using examples from the recent student and anti-cuts movements to demonstrate some of the problems with this approach and will then discuss the issues in more general terms.

### **The National Campaign Against Fees And Cuts**

The NCAFC has been one of the main networks behind the mobilisations and organisation of student activists in late 2010. Founded in February 2010 to fight moves to attack student conditions and the passivity of the NUS leadership in the face of them, NCAFC played a major role in events at Millbank and called the follow-up demonstration two weeks later. An open campaign, NCAFC has brought together independent activists and sections of the organised left.

The NCAFC took a decision to have no formal membership, no national organising committee and decision-making by whoever turned up to a series of regionally organised meetings. Jonathan Moses (2011) describes this form of organisation: "There is no leadership... Rather [it] channels a coalition of local groups relying on key activists and organic leaders to supplant anachronistic formulas of vanguards and steering committees." At its most extreme, this position ends up as saying "decisions regarding the direction and the objectives of the student movement... do not need to be made at all; the 'direction' of the movement is determined by the culmination of the actions taken by autonomous groups" (Mullarkey, 2011). This view was counterposed to that of NCAFC as a "strong,

democratic national coordination" (Cooper & Sutton, 2011) able to fight for a strategic direction for the student movement and call actions quickly.

Ironically the open structure was open to manipulation precisely because anyone who turned up was able to vote. Thus members of groups supporting rival organisations voted against NCAFC adopting structures at its January 2011 conference as a way of weakening the campaign. By default, decisions tended to be taken for the whole campaign by London meetings. (Cooper and Sutton, 2011; Marks, 2011)

The absence of formal decision-making powers led to NCAFC being unable to exploit the opportunities to grow at the start of 2011 by calling a conference that could serve to draw together the radical elements of the student movement while it was at its height. NCAFC finally decided to elect a 14 person steering committee at its conference in June 2011. (NCAFC, 2011)

### **UK Uncut**

Our second example comes from the campaign UK Uncut, which was intended as a minimal organisational framework within which anyone committed to the broad aims of opposing tax avoidance and cuts could organise their own activities. Developed through the Internet, UK Uncut has been seen as the epitome of the QARN (Hands, 2011c). As it began to go viral on social media at the same time as the anti-fees movement exploded, it became closely connected to the student movement which organised UK Uncut demos from their occupations.

The democratic deficit in UK Uncut became clear in January 2011 when a demonstration was called outside John Lewis' department store in London to show support for the chain as an example of mutualism and co-ownership. Many UK Uncut supporters immediately objected to presenting John Lewis as a positive example. The action was eventually cancelled as a result of the controversy (Peters, 2011a)

For reasons of space, I cannot describe the debate in detail (see Buckland, 2011 and Peters, 2011a for opposing views). It raises two points in relation to the model of organisation. Firstly, it raises the issue of who in a self-proclaimedly leaderless organisation can formulate or expand on its goals beyond the minimum for which there can be taken to be a consensus. Secondly, the decision to withdraw the action, whether right or wrong, was fundamentally undemocratic. It was dependent on the decision of one individual in response to an Internet storm that may or may not have truly reflected the views of the amorphous group of UK Uncut's supporters.

## **Four reasons why networks cannot replace formally structured collective organisations**

As we have seen, some protagonists of a network form of organisation, both in the student movement and the literature, see it not merely as something tactically useful in situations where a loose form of organisation is appropriate but as a replacement for other formally structured organisations such as membership campaigns, unions or parties. There are however reasons why a movement such as the student movement must go beyond the limitations of the network form.

### ***Democracy and accountability***

The cases of NCADC and UK Uncut both demonstrate that the absence of formal structure does not equate to the presence of democracy and accountability - the opposite is true. This is not a new lesson having been noted in the early 1970s (Freeman, 1972) and again in the early 2000s (King, 2004). What is new is that social media can give the appearance of a genuine collective and democratic decision when only a self-selecting group is involved.

The key issues in ensuring democracy are not the absence of structures and representative forms but rather ensuring their accountability to wider forums and attempting to enable as wide as possible range of input and the representation of minorities. The point is not to adopt or take a place in the existing bureaucratic structures of trade unions or the NUS, which is often presented as the only alternative to the network model. It is instead to fight for accountable rank and file structures within such organisations and to adopt them within the others we build as part of the movement.

### ***Sustainability***

All movements have ups and downs. If they are not to disappear and need refounding after each downturn, the issue of sustainability - which implies persistent organisational forms - is central. How does the looser network model rate in this respect?

If network organisation lets people take part in movements easily, it also let them leave easily. Lovink (2008,255) sees this as creating problems of sustainability: "There is no permanency here. People come and go... This, above all, is the primary problem networks must address if they are to undertake the passage to organization". Despite advocating network organisation, Lovink does not have an answer to this question.

The need for sustainability is also given by the need for a persistent historical memory. This is not the old telling the young what to do or a historical re-enactment society (Penny, 2010c), rather a way of learning from the success and failures of the past. In a discussion about the lessons of the 2010-11 student movement, Jeremy Gilbert, an older activist, noted angrily that the techniques - including networked organisation - claimed as the inventions of the movement went back as far as the early 60s (Gilbert & Aitchison, 2011). This not simply

nostalgically revisiting the past - we do not start from a historical blank slate. To believe so may mean repeating the mistakes of earlier generations some of which find their echoes today.

If the student movement is to develop beyond a one-off protest against laws now passed, it needs to find a form that can encourage and incorporate more long term commitment and be ready for the next wave. While the temporary nature of networks is seen as a positive feature by some of its advocates (Hands, 2011a), the looseness of the network form may make initial growth easier but mitigates against sustainability.

### ***Strategy and ideology***

While for some the movement does not need an overall strategy, the serious pursuit of any but the most immediate goals implies a strategy of some kind. A right to education? How to get it? Get rid of this government? How? What to replace it with? What is the role of students in a broader movement against the government?

One occupier at UCL made the point sharply under the title "Leaderless youth will not bring this Government down" (Jones, 2011):

Chaotic dissent is eminently manageable. Without aims and political direction, movements fizzle out... It may be exciting to be part of an amorphous movement bubbling with lots of radical ideas, but that offers no concrete alternative to the way things are. The fight to destroy something without having anything to replace it is nihilism. If we have no overall answer to the key issues facing society... then we will change nothing.

The absence of strategy and an anti-ideological strain both leave the movement with little beyond an immediate cause and resistance without (an) end. Strategy does not simply emerge from a sequence of fragmented actions and events, even when, as in our case, there is a shared immediate goal. The alternative is not an imposed uniformity but instead the movement gaining coherence and direction by arguing out alternative strategies and testing them in practice.

### ***Individualism or collectivity?***

An emphasis on autonomy, on being free as an individual to choose forms of activity and political tactics that may (or may not) promote a shared cause, and on loose networks as one's preferred organisational form leads to an individualistic 'doing one's own thing'. Mason (2011, 2012) has noted networked individualism as a central characteristic, enabled by the Internet, of a range of radical movements in recent years. New technology "allows activists to assemble fast and zap the enemy, without any greater commitment to each other than doing this" (Mason 2012, 139). Movements then can be reduced to a contingent collection of networked individuals. This fits well with the idea of political activism as a choice of preferred



tactics and strategy from a marketplace of ideas as shown in Peters' (2010a) call for protesters to become "dissent entrepreneurs".

The network model does not just emerge as a neutral tool from technological development but rather is a social form which reflects and reproduces the fragmentation of collective organisation by neo-liberal capitalism. Penny (2010c) makes the direct link when she writes: "Thatcher, Reagan and Blair deregulated oppression. In order to be properly effective, rebels have to deregulate resistance... the organisations that control resistance, [must become] more anarchic, more inclusive and more creative". In calling on the left to join her in the world of flat and open networks, she is echoing what Fisher (2010) calls the "technical discourse" used in the legitimisation of contemporary capitalism as a network society.

The questions raised by these four aspects of emerging networked movements suggest that for movements such as the 2010-11 student movement to be successful, they need to be supplemented by more durable and representative organisational forms such as political groups and parties and unions. While this is in itself not a guarantee of accountability or a correct strategy, it enables the overcoming of the problems associated with the loose and transient nature of networked movements.

## Conclusions

The 2010-11 student movement was the first militant opposition to the austerity policies of the British coalition government, using social media, occupations and street protests to challenge their redistribution in favour of the rich. In the wake of its initial success in mobilising young people, ideologues of the movement emerged to argue that its future lay in the creation of 'leaderless' autonomous groups, using the Internet to create horizontal organisation and the abjuring of political direction and strategy.

Yet Lefevbre's question posed in the aftermath of May '68 remains relevant: how can a negative movement of protest become an institution capable of fighting for the power to bring about radical change in society? The answer cannot be to accept as inevitable the decline of collective organisation, whether in the form of unions, political parties or left groups, and instead to look for something exciting and supposedly new in the self-willed dispersal into fragmented autonomous units of protest. It is rather to bring the energy, militancy, and creativity of the student movement into the long term task of reconstructing collective structured organisations that can play a strategic role pursuing its aims.

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