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The Social Network, the alter-globalization movement, and counter-forums

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Abstract

Scopo dell'articolo è quello di mostrare come soprattutto attraverso i *social network* e i *controvertici* il movimento alterglobal concretizzi le sue istanze antagoniste e come sia in grado da un lato di mobilitare soggetti eterogenei esercitando sovente rilevanti pressioni sulle scelte dei decisori politici e dall'altro lato sia in grado di attuare vaste e ampie campagne di disinformazione.

Parole chiave: Disinformazione, Guerra Psicologica, No Global.

Abstract

The purpose of the article is that to underline as through *social networks* and *counter-forums* and the extent to which it is capable of mobilizing non-homogeneous groups, often by exerting substantial influence on the choices made by political decision-makers on one hand, and capable of implementing vast and widespread disinformation campaigns on the other.

Keywords: Disinformation, Psychological Warfare, Social Movements.

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Recebido para publicação em 10/04/2012. Aprovado para publicação em 31/07/2012.

Introduction

An attentive analysis of the ways in which the alter-globalization galaxy enacts its antagonism to the system, especially in regard to national and transnational political, economic and military institutions, reveals both how the alter-globalization movement implements its antagonistic demands above all through *social networks* and *counter-forums* and the extent to which it is capable of mobilizing non-homogeneous groups, often by exerting substantial influence on the choices made by political decision-makers on one hand, and capable of implementing vast and widespread disinformation campaigns on the other. Like all technological instruments, also social networks can cut both ways: like two-faced Janus, they can incite terrorist violence or contribute to the consolidation of antagonist ideologies by catalyzing discontent or just as equally consolidate consensus around national and super-national political and/or military institutions.

Attempts at censure in today's democracy would be destined to fail because the web offers such a wide variety of technological solutions that any type of shutdown imposed could be bypassed. Even if the manipulation of information is not only possible but desirable in a context of information warfare between institutions and movements or between national institutions themselves, in fact, the web offers the possibly to provide counter-information also through film footage and photos taken by cell phones and transmitted via Youtube. As regards the role played by information in the contexts of both sociology and social psychology, the domination of a particular piece of information and the ability to spread it can have such profound effect on civil society that Gen. Sullivan, ex-

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Chief of General Staff of the US Army, once claimed that information is the equivalent of a victory on the battlefield.

On the other hand, as aptly noted by Luther Blisset, theoretician of anti-establishment media warfare, it is necessary to act within the mass media communication system and fight the power structure using its own arms. In light of these considerations, the definition of war as “...*a struggle of opposing wills between organizations that use any violent or coercive means (armed conflict, cold war, evident and occult coercion) available to impose their own best interests or point of view*” provided by Gen. Fabio Mini appears more appropriate than ever. The relevance of this definition depends on the absence of the adjective “*military*” and the presence of the expression “*any struggle*” between organizations.

This means that the previous limit on the participants in traditional war – opposing nations – disappears and gives way to an opposition between nations and economic or social groups and/or political and other types of organization. In this light, also the definition provided of *netwar* by Arquilla and Ronfeldt is extremely interesting because it amounts to the aggregate of activities conducted for the purpose of disturbing, damaging or modifying what a determined population knows or thinks it knows about itself and its surroundings. In other words, what the antagonists have promoted and continue to promote through the social network may be considered warfare strategy in the Minian sense of the term, and more exactly, in information warfare, and therefore in propaganda and deception or altered, deceitful and/or misleading information.

As correctly observed by Capt. Alfonso Montagnose, the *Social Media* are instruments of mass communication and relation whose utilization takes place in *cyberspace* using *hardware* (Internet, cell phones, pc, etc.) and *software*

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(Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.). Compared to traditional media channels, social media users can interact and overcome geographic limits in real-time. Yet when social networks are used in an asymmetric context of conflict (with a governmental institution or a national or multinational industry one on side with a group of alter-globalization activists on the other, for example), the opposition takes form alternately in psychological warfare (through disinformation and propaganda) and antagonistic mobilization with the expenditure of reduced resources. The political and cultural subjects that have enacted asymmetric-type oppositions can largely be grouped as national subversive groups (Marxist-Leninist groups, anarchical-insurrectionist groups); antagonist movements/extra-parliamentary powers (anti-global, environmental protection, anti-nuclear power groups, xenophobe groups, organized sports hooligans, right-wing extremist groups); non-profit associations/foundations; religious groups, and trade union/political party groups.

Appropriately, Capt. Montagnese mentions the comments of Gen. Francesco Lombardi, Ce.Mi.S.S. Military Sociology Department vice-Director and Head, who emphasizes how the protest movements of the future will still manifest themselves through physical conflict, the illegal occupation of public space, demonstrations, and rioting, and as in the past will still have antagonistic ends, but will differ from those of the past in the interaction between the demonstrators themselves, between the demonstrators and the power against them, and between the demonstrators and the world at large.

Strategic *warning* must certainly be included among the counter-measures to be enacted, and *horizon scanning* is extremely important because as noted by Montagnese it permits threat trends to be monitored in the mid- and long-term, the orientation of opponent force to be identified, and their evolution to be

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predicted. Specifically, national security institutes must draft a *Social Media Strategy* capable of alternating offensive activity through influence, *deception*, and propaganda with defensive activities like counter-propaganda, counter-interference, and the *early warning* conducted through the direct or indirect use of *Social Media*.

The Social Network and alter-globalization

In the context of the antagonism of the alter-globalization movements, the independent networks developed by civil society in the wake of Seattle (such as Indymedia, for example) have proven to be fundamentally important in globalizing the antagonism and making it more widespread and efficacious; these activists have made use of independent networks to convey clearly defined ideological content: ecologist, pacifist, anti-militarist, anti-capitalistic. In such regard, the promoters of these networks, whether consciously or unconsciously, have adopted as reference at the levels of both topic and mobilization technique the protest movements of the '60s, '70s and '80s in their implementation of both virtual and operative activism.

The structure of these networks is naturally horizontal and this affords a greater degree of freedom in the flow of information while precluding every form of hierarchy similar to those of traditional political organizations. At the base of these networks lies the conviction of the existence of a universal right to knowledge and networking and that this right is an essential component in the exercise of the rights of citizenship in the context of participative democracy. It is enough to consider in this regard the networks of *hacker movements* that trace

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their roots to the social movements of '70s, the cyberpunk/artistic avant-garde, internationalism, and the self-managed social centers in general.

Specifically, during an encounter in Naples in March 2001 against the Global forum, the Italian *hacker movement* implemented a technique known as *netstrike* designed to jam institutional internet sites. Again in 2001, but this time in Genoa, the independent networks were able to create a media center capable of efficacious counter-information for the purpose of de-legitimizing the work of the law enforcement system. In Italy, the *Isola nella rete* – the most significant entity inside the independent network is undoubtedly important. Founded as an association in the mid-'90s with the purpose of placing communication and mobilization tools at the disposal of social movements, through an extensive network of links, the association has constructed an authentic virtual community of the antagonists. It is enough to consider that a dossier entitled "Under Accusation" that documents the violations of individual rights during the Genoa demonstration has been created in the *Isole nella rete* and that the new media sociologists use the expression *controversial* political communication to define this new communication vehicle, intending the combination of techniques or repertory of communication actions adopted to de-legitimize national, transnational and/or determined representatives of the same as an expansion of democracy.

This new approach in communication has opened representative democracy to alternating direct and indirect criticism of increasingly wider scope. Another expression employed by mass-media sociologists is "*counter-democracy*", which is used to emphasize the increasingly important role played by alter-globalization movements in monitoring and criticizing the institutions that hold political and

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economy power in blogs, forums, on-line campaigns, and mailing lists as tools that coordinate the activities of different groups.

In this sense, *Facebook* becomes a fundamentally important instrument of counter-information because when it is used in an antagonist context, it can transform the consumption of news articles into a participative and antagonist process at both virtual and physical level. In this regard, the experience of the *Popolo viola* bears much significance. Using Facebook, it has proven capable of organizing at national level a campaign such as the one entitled *No Berlusconi day* with great visibility. Another example of political aggregation with antagonist ends in mind is provided by *Beppe Grillo's blog*, which has now become a new place of meeting, encounter, and political interaction among citizens. This blog succeeds in attracting fairly constantly a considerable participation of around 200,000 visits a day and over 1000 comments on every single posted entry; beyond that, the blog has led to the birth of around 400 local groups in over 200 cities under the name *Amici di Beppe Grillo* (Friends of Beppe Grillo).

The blog's operative efficacy is demonstrated by the fact that between 2007 and 2008 it proved capable of collecting from a minimum of 350,000 to a maximum of 1,350,000 signatures for a law proposal made at popular demand. At international level, another successful example of popular mobilization is certainly the American movement known as *MoveOn.org*, which even if it cannot be considered unequivocally a part of the alter-globalization movement has, in any case, dealt with similar questions and adopts similar operating methods. In the context of new media sociology, this organization is known as a *meta organization*, meaning that it is radically decentralized and possesses a number of specific characteristics, including that of consisting of an organizational core of limited dimensions that serves as both facilitator and producer of organizational

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processes. First of all, it has smaller size than traditional organizations because its nucleus oscillates between 20-30 people; secondly this organization does not have a physical office and therefore has no administration costs. In other words, in legal terms, MoveOn.org resembles a cross-linked non-profit organization.

This organization has a mailing list of 5 million members and is currently the most authoritative pressure group on the US political scene at network level. Its significance is demonstrated by its role in a promotional campaign for Obama that raised 88 million dollars in 2008 and provided the future president with 933,000 volunteers. Back on the Italian scene, much of the alter-globalization movement has used freeware software to create its own websites on the basis of precise assumptions: a common struggle against multinationals and their influence, and the establishment of an alternative society to the current one based on the freedom of information and spontaneous self-organization.

Above and beyond the purely idealistic motivation, it is evident that the use of freeware gives anti-global movements an undeniable economic advantage. It is no coincidence that during the 2005 World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazilian President Lula committed his nation to both freeware and open-source software. One of the most important characteristics of the anti-global organizations that use the telematic network is certainly the promotion of alternative information that lets the public participate firsthand in the management of certain aspects of communication, provides additional documentation to sympathizers of determined movements like the peace movement or the antagonistic left. Another extremely important aspect is the need to integrate information with widespread work in the territory by creating, for example, local branches that collect all the most pertinent information on the issues under consideration. Another alternative communication tool is certainly

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TeleStreet, or in other words, “street television” that is closely linked to the local dimension. In purely technical terms, street television is born in a neighborhood or some other small center of inhabitation. Historically speaking, street tv was born with the 1977 movement and more precisely in the free radio movement. One particularly important event regarding street tv occurred in 2003, the year when numerous Italian tv activists promoted the widespread flying of rainbow-colored peace flags in their towns.

The public addressed by Italian anti-global movements – prevalently the people who use Internet through websites and mailing lists – is a global and therefore heterogeneous one. The websites *Indymedia*, *ControllArmi* and *Peacelink* are undoubtedly particularly significant in the context of alter-globalization movements. *ControllArmi*, for example, is nothing but a website that runs by the *Rete Italiana per il Disarmo* (Italian Disarmament Network) set up in March 2004. This network has proven capable of mobilizing its resources to report the amendments made to Law No. 185 regulating arms exports; in particular, *ControllArmi* was born precisely to defend Law No. 185 and obtained an impressive and significant success after applying pressure to certain influential representatives of parliamentary institutions. The establishment of *ControllArmi* arose from the need to exert short-term control over arms sales on one hand and general disarmament in the long-term on the other. The presence of a number of important alter-global movements such as *Rete Lilluput*, *Attac*, *Arci*, *Acli*, *Fiom-Cgil*, *Fiom-Cisl*, *Pax Christi*, *Un ponte per...*, and *Emergency* in the organization is significant.

The study of arms and the general disarmament desired in the future can be seen in the organization’s detailed analysis of every aspect of the world of arms,

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starting from small arms and covering international arms brokers, nuclear arms, depleted uranium, and the economic and political problems linked to the legal and otherwise exportation of arms. Also extremely interesting are the organization's bonds with *Iansa* – the global small arms control movement founded in England – and with *Safer World* set up to monitor and study armaments; equally significant is the pressure exerted on the European Parliament – together with Safer World – in the defense of Law No. 185.

Counter-forums and the alter-globalization movement

According to the alter-globalization movements, only diplomats or government representatives who were never publicly elected usually take part in the world's decision-making summits, but this, on the contrary, reflects a balance of power between nations. In other words, the alter-globalization movements lay claim to a logic of direct democracy that would enable civil society movements to become key players on the international scene. The counter-forums are characterized as unofficial meetings that deal with the same problems as traditional forums but with a deeply critical stance in regard to the choices made by governments and even those of neo-liberal companies on one hand, and on the other, the counter-forums utilize operative methods far different from those used by traditional ones (including counter-information, civil disobedience, etc.).

From the historical point of view, counter-forums first came into existence in the '60s with the Tribunal against war crimes in Vietnam created in 1967 and then in the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal founded in Algiers in 1976 and instituted in definitive form in 1979. Naturally enough the composition of these tribunals – far from being impartial and unbiased – reflects world views with a strong

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ideological slant: in favor of the under-developed world, anti-capitalist and anti-militarist. Another historical root of the counter-forums that Mario Pianta identifies lies in the Peace movements that developed during the '80s.

Experts on alter-global movements explicitly acknowledge the extent to which experiences in the leftist and ecologist movements of the '70s and '80s were fundamentally important because a large part of the activists on these fronts continued their activities in alter-globalization movements. As regards the risk posed to national and transnational military institutes, it must be remembered that some of these counter-forums have questioned the need for the existence of NATO and demanded the democratization of the UN, intending by such term the widespread presence of alter-globalization organizations in UN decision-making processes. From the historical point of view, the first counter-forum undoubtedly took place in Seattle (1999) and was organized alternately by structured and unstructured groups and an articulated organization that succeeded in bringing 60,000 people to the city.

The media impact created by the counter-forum was such to raise hopes of a grass-roots globalization to be achieved precisely through such counter-forums. The Davos counter-forum of 2000, the counter-forum held in April in Washington, the one held in May, 2000 in New York called the Millennium Forum with 1200 participants must also be remembered in this sense. The apogee of such counter-forums was certainly the one held in Porto Alegre in January 2000, the fruit of an alliance between the Brazilian Workers' Party, the trade unions, and the Sem Terra and Attac movements. This event with worldwide media coverage featured the participation of 20,000 activists from every continent and was the launching pad for the counter-forum to the G8 meeting in Genoa held in July, 2001.

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Naturally enough, one of the reasons for which these counter-forums developed is to pose a challenge to the nation-state system and the neo-Liberalist economy on the political and economic levels. The strategy pursued by the exponents of these counter-forums was – to use Mario Pianta’s expression – alternately reformist (this approach centers its attention on procedural change and specific political choices and is a strategy developed by the NGOs for the purpose of implementing integration with inter-governmental organizations wherever possible), radical alternative (an approach that places existing concentrations of power in serious doubt and indicates new models of collective actions such as new democratic structures as alternatives to neo-Liberalist structures), and lastly the strategy of resistance, which has been particularly developed in the undeveloped world for the purpose of implementing coordinated antagonistic action at national and international level.

The strategy pursued so far by institutions – above and beyond the legitimate repression of manifestations of violence – has consisted in enacting surface level modifications in their political plans on one hand and in integration through co-opting whenever possible, on the other. The UN has chosen to accept some of the demands made by civil society and to acknowledge the validity of certain anti-Liberalist choices made by numerous NGOs, permitting these latter in this way to increase the gap between transnational institutions and intensify — for example — the contrast between decisions made by NATO and those made by the UN. At any rate, it is clear that the long-term strategy pursued by the counter-forums is to implement real and therefore structural change in the system.

In this sense, it is well worth analyzing certain aspects of the document issued by the Assembly of Young People’s UN in Perugia, Italy, in September 1995. Firstly, it is clear that the alter-global movement wishes to convey all transnational

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institutions into the United Nations system, and that member nations must abandon thinking in terms of national security as the first step towards real disarmament (and the conversion of national military institutions in an international police force under the authority or command of the United Nations). It also emerges that nations must create an unarmed, non-violent force in replacement of today's military, and lastly, that education in peace and human rights must be initiated in public schools and training institutes.

The considerations made in the *Tavola della pace* (The Peace Table) in the *Documents of the Assembly of the People's UN* drafted in Perugia between 1995 and 1999 are particularly interesting. First of all, the authors of this document express the need to bring institutions like the World Monetary Fund and the World Bank under the control of the United Nations; they also expound the concept that member nations must abandon thinking in terms of national security once and for all; thirdly – and consequently – the pacifism theorized in the document implies disarmament, the cessation of the international arms trade, the conversion of national military institutions in an international police force under the authority or command of the United Nations, and above all the creation of an unarmed, non-violent force in gradual replacement of today's military. In light of these proposals, the refusal of the document's authors to legitimize rightful warfare or interference on humanitarian grounds is clearly evident; on the other hand, the authors express the need to internationalize penal law through international courts, to condemn neo-Liberalism, and above all, emphasize the determinant role that must be played by organizations coming from civil society if a positive change is to be made, organizations that play – and can play – a determinant role in the establishment of world peace, a fair economy enhanced by solidarity, the promotion of human rights and democracy.

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Equally significant is the idea of education that emerges clearly from the document: the authors of the Tavola della pace also emphasize the need to promote education in the principles of world peace, human rights, and non-violence in the curricula of public schools. These proposals formulated at the Tavola della pace are democratic in nature but a more careful reading – especially one capable of identifying the operative implications of these proposals – clearly reveals their substantially antagonistic nature, and therefore one of radical rupture with the existing order.

The proposals that the Tavola della Pace intends to achieve are as follows: first of all the dismantling of international trade organizations and the gaining of access to the nerve centers of transnational power by first gaining credit at the institutional level at UN level, the substitution of existing institutions for the purpose of planning an international policy and economics completely opposed to the one in existence. Secondly, the Tavola della pace aims at the elimination of the existing national and transnational military institutions and their substitution with non-violent armed force.

The unswerving and radical rejection of neo-Liberalism – the third aspect – induces the document's authors to identify in fair trade and solidarity organizations – such as alternative banks such as the ethical or sustainable banks – the only feasible alternatives capable of dismantling the current commercial organizations founded on the principle of mere capitalistic profit. Lastly, the fourth aspect, the emphasis posed on educating young people in the principles of peace at school and university level, really aims at systematic psychological warfare through widespread disinformation to induce them to reject the legitimacy of military institutions, which are portrayed only as illegitimate and immoral institutions. In short, the program formulated by the Tavola della pace is

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to every effect a political program – and one wide in scope, to be sure – that aims at taking power – even with the use of non-violent instruments (and therefore rejecting the traditional techniques or military overthrow, terrorism or guerilla warfare) and replacing the existing military and economic institutions with others controlled by delegates from lay and religious organizations of pacifist and alter-globalization origin.

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