



The Shape of Order at the Edge of Chaos

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review of:

Chesters, Graeme and Ian Welsh (2006) *Complexity and Social Movements – Multitude(s) on the Edge of Chaos*. New York: Routledge. (PB: pp. 195, £20.00, ISBN: 978-0-415-43974-9)

[T]he presentation of the alter-globalisation movement as anarchic disorder in effect conceals the extent to which the alter-globalisation movement embodies organizational forms and aims that *are* the future. (p. 89)

Resistance is located in the rejection of ‘habits of mind’ associated with the ‘common sense’ constructed through the disperse logics of control and the formulation through encounter of an ethics of invention and intensity... the bringing together of diverse elements in a way which allows them to escape the plane of organization. (p. 136)

At First...

The concept of organization might not be a concept that seems to fit neatly with the analysis of today’s social movements, which tends to have a heavy emphasis on ‘fuzzy’ networks and constant becoming in face of the static. This review would suggest that the way in which social movements, and in particular the multitude or alter-globalisation movement, is presented in the book *Complexity and Social Movements – Multitude(s) on the Edge of Chaos* (Chesters and Welsh, 2006) can be contrasted with the topic of organization. It is a concept which, when used to analyse social movements, tends to be problematic concerning the ambiguous relation inherent in networked social movements (or multitudes) such as what the authors call the alter-globalisation movement and the network form of such movements which does not fit nicely into an organizational framework. The authors stress how it tries to avoid a too rigid organization, but still needs a certain stability in the social, cognitive, and practice movements of the alter-globalisation movement in order to enable protest, renegotiate aims and strategies, as well as construct alternatives to neoliberal globalisation. According to the authors the alter-globalisation movement exceeds the options of *anti* and *pro* but *alter* (p. 107), and tries to present spaces of deliberation and to do so a certain stabilisation is at hand. What is interesting is how the alter-globalisation movement avoids falling into the static structures of the organization, but still enables

mobilisation and one of the rewards of this book is how it tries to formulate and describe this ambiguous situation within the alter-globalisation movement between chaos and order and what shape an entity which avoids both can take.

The book, by Graeme Chesters and Ian Welsh, uses a Deleuzian framework by which to analyse the alter-globalisation movement. Using the philosophers of multiplicity and the proclaimed enemies of the logic of the One, Deleuze and Guattari, to analyse the alter-globalisation movement seems fitting, and paired with the empirical data presented means that the authors take a different approach on the multitudes to for instance Hardt and Negri, who work on a more theoretical field. Indeed Chesters and Welsh almost deem it necessary to use Deleuze and Guattari as a conceptual frame when analyzing the alter-globalisation movement because it is a platform which is based primarily on *inclusion* and *processes* and thus “sediments a process of ‘becoming’ within the alter-globalisation movement which is one reason why the work of Deleuze and Guattari is so central here” (p. 35). Because one thing this book contains is a well-documented view of the alter-globalisation movement ranging from prior to Seattle 1999 to Genoa 2001 and beyond. We find here documents from the movements themselves, which give flesh to the concepts used, such as plateaux, and excerpts from media coverage and police reports to understand how the alter-globalisation movement becomes identified, that is, how its internal plurality is reduced to a single identifiable entity with specific characteristics, and the space in which it moves becomes stratified and thus limited. An identification far away from the plurality and becoming of the complex alter-globalisation movement.

The threat to the alter-globalisation movement is never entirely from external stigmatisation and repression from authorities and media, but also from the internal configuration of the movement itself and it is here we find the importance of the concept of organization. Indeed the alter-globalisation movement can be viewed as presenting an organization which promotes becoming-other and is inherently rhizomatic in that it affirms social, cognitive as well as practical becoming and exceedings by way of what in the book is called weak ties and reflexive framing. These concepts enable the alter-globalisation movement to move beyond the static configuration of an organization and the unidimensionality earlier social movements present when frames, aims and methods are concerned. By way of the always becoming-other inherent in the alter-globalisation movement the authors seem to subscribe to the Guattarian refusal of “an inevitable and necessary program” (Guattari, 1996: 277). There are many concepts presented in this book whose basic function is to exceed the static but maintain consistency in the face of chaos, and some of the most important ones will be presented in this review. The book can be read as presenting a way to understand organization and change.

In-between Chaos and Order...

While discussing the alter-globalisation movement or social movements in general one faces the problem of organization and stabilisation of becoming. A movement eager to become-other and provide change becomes static in its social composition as well as the

aims and theoretical frame in and by which it operates. But this is also a problem as to the nature of mobilisation – in order to be able to mobilise and include other people in the movement a certain stability is needed; topics to mobilise protest around, visions of alternatives. In *Complexity and Social Movements* the plane of organization, the concept used by Deleuze and Guattari to designate a firm and static organization of chaos, is something that the alter-globalisation movement tries to avoid whereas a certain moment of stabilisation is needed in order to proliferate social connections and render mobilisation and collective action possible. Chesters and Welsh are using the concept of ‘plateaux’ in order to understand this momentary stabilisation of forces and becomings: “it denotes a sustained plane of intensity not intended to result in any form of climatic outcome or pre-ordained conscious dénouement” (p. 20). The concept of plateaux provide an understanding of the alter-globalisation movement as, while offering a sustained plane on which to act, there is no final goal or method which subjugates or guides the act or its outcomes. The nature of the plateaux entails a never ceasing re-negotiation in order to get out of what the authors call ‘habits of mind’.

The plateaux offers only a momentarily stability, but a cognitive and social space in which to act, and hits right at the centre of the concept of any rhizomatic organization, if one were to call it such, namely the question of consistency in becoming. If one were in a reductive mood, one could claim that the plateaux is situated in the middle of rigid structures and total chaos. It avoids both the blockage of becoming which is a fact in the plane of organization, as well as the suicidal and destructive becoming which becomes subsumed in chaos, and hence the writers seem to take heed of the warning Deleuze and Guattari provide in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “mimic the strata, one does not reach the body-without-organs and its plane of consistency by wildly destratifying”, it is through a “meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003: 161). Mimicking the strata, but without getting stratified, could well be the call from rhizomatic organizations or another description of the alter-globalisation movement.

The plane on which the alter-globalisation movement operates would be a plane of consistency, a concept which has a surprisingly low level of significance in Chesters and Welsh’s book, only being mentioned on a few occasions. Instead they settle for the concept of plateaux, and while they describe it in the aforementioned manner it seems to be used exclusively to describe the protests occurring during summits, giving them name such as ‘Seattle plateaux’ or ‘Prague plateaux’. The plane of consistency in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari would be a much more fitting concept on some occasions, such as when the authors describe movements during ‘latency periods’. Plateaux is described by the authors as that which exceeds the social structures of movements and is described as such: “we use plateaux as a descriptor for the process of intensive networking in material and immaterial spaces that occurs around nodal points of contestation or deliberation, such as protest events or social fora” (p. 102). Hence they emphasise not only the plateaux as a ‘sustained plane of intensity’ but also the way in which it affirms becoming by way of multiplying social networks by way of intensive networking. This intensive networking is an important part of the inclusive part of the alter-globalisation movement, as it accelerates participation. The networking process is also described by using the concept ‘weak ties’, breaching the way in which Deleuze and Guattari describe the multiplicity of a plateaux: “we call a ‘plateau’ any multiplicity

connected to other multiplicities by way of superficial stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003: 22). However, it is unclear why the authors use the concept of plateau exclusively for “protest events or social fora” and perhaps the attention paid to ‘plane of consistency’ would include so called latency periods as well, times in between plateaux. By doing so they would include not only the intensive social networking and renegotiations of frames at protests plateaux, but also the latency periods as a whole – and in doing so regain a level of consistency as a whole for a movement that is not only alive or active during summits and social forums.

But this only concerns the more active periods of the alter-globalisation movement and the authors go to great effort to describe what they call, following sociologist Melucci, ‘latency periods’ (p. 29). These are times when frames and social networks are constructed, as well as repertoires of protest and issues are negotiated. The concept ‘frame’ is derived from sociologist Erving Goffman, and is meant to describe the understanding of the surrounding world which is inherent in a social setting. *Complexity and social movements* presents the concept of ‘Computer Mediated Communication’ (p. 9) which implies that the re-negotiating of frames involves a greater quantity of agents when being mediated by computers and communication technology. This is a characterisation of the loss of the so called ‘master frame’, or any master ideology which subsumes activity to a specific goal. Rather, the process of negotiating frames become open (p. 19). One of the first uses of Computer Mediated Communication is the case of Chico Mendes, a Brazilian trade unionist and environmentalist whose opposition to clearing of rubber bearing forest led to him being murdered in 1988. This murder was followed by an intervention by social movement Friends of the Earth, who “were amongst those distributing e-mail, phone and fax numbers of not only Embassies and Departments of State in Brazil but also specific police stations holding activists associated with Mendes and the rubber-tappers movement” (p. 27). These actions predated the internet in its current development by at least a decade, and was an important part of the use of Computer Mediated Communication. The case of Chico Mendes also proves to be paradigmatic for the alter-globalisation movement as it involves not only Computer Mediated Communication but also a plurality of issues – mixing issues on labour with environmentalist concerns, a plurality seen over and over again in the alter-globalisation movement, manifesting itself most explicitly by the slogan ‘teamsters and turtles unite’ used in Seattle 1999.

Another example of the use of Computer Mediated Communication and the reflexive frame during latency periods is the period leading up to the protests in Seattle 1999 when an active negotiation was manifested in a circulating e-mail discussing topics such as ‘motivation and objectives’, ‘lines of action’, ‘responsibilities and participation’, ‘finances’, ‘possibilities for the future’, and ‘proposal for the discussion process’. The e-mail is dated to 1996 by an anonymous writer, and circulated on e-mail lists between non-governmental organizations and social movements, as well as network actors which maximised the availability of actors. This process of increasing use of Computer Mediated Communication can be viewed as a preface to social forums such as the *Encuentero* initiated by the Zapatistas and later on the World Social Forum. The aim of the encounter in the Chiapas 1999 was to bring together a multiplicity of actors in order to view the similarities as well as differences. Chesters and Welsh conclude that “in this encounter they discovered their targets were essentially the same, the ‘hylomorphic’

architecture of globalised capitalism ... the only difference was in the form and type of resistances. Although resistance was occurring globally there was little attempt to coordinate and communicate between movements in a “cohesive or comprehensive way” (p. 111). Thus a way to speak of a common plane on which to act, but with a multiplicity of methods and strategies for resistances due to the many actors involved – thus making it impossible to succumb the actors to the guise of a transcendent organization. This encounter in the Chiapas was the main influence for the World Social Forum which “was conceived as a participatory, dialogical and pedagogical space that would be non-directed and non-representative and therefore unique as a self-organised space of encounter between civil society actors including social movements, NGOs, trade unions and engaged activists/intellectuals” (p. 121) – a sustained plane of intensity, bringing together diverse elements in order to create a multiplicity, much like the first encounter initiated by the Zapatistas which “as an attempt to offer space for connections to be made, to construct an inclusive framework and to announce a space for thinking alternatives” (p. 111). A question the book raises is how self-organization is possible and maintained, without falling into the traps of either a too rigid organization or a plunge into chaos and networks too loosely knit to enable mobilisation and action.

The bringing together of diverse elements which characterises the World Social Forum may not fit into our discussion of how the alter-globalisation movement enables us to understand the concept of organizational form in a different setting. Because the World Social Forum actually is a platform of a wide array of actors aligning in a common meeting or summit, it seems foreign to the concept of organization. There are however other examples which the authors discuss and which breach upon the in-between space of organization and chaos in a more thorough fashion than the World Social Forum. People’s Global Action is one such example. The People’s Global Action is a network of networks, or plateaux, which was founded in 1998 in Geneva. It functions by way of established hallmarks, which of course are renegotiated, which since the third international conference of People’s Global Action has a focus on taking a confrontational attitude, which stands in opposition to the function of Social Forums which primarily accumulate networks and links, and it has “an organizational attitude based on decentralisation and autonomy” (p. 113). The conference in Geneva, according to Chesters and Welsh, employed the “familiar mechanisms in constructing a collective identity”, which included discussion of aforementioned hallmarks as well as constructing a manifesto. Constructing a collective identity is of course a basic premise for any organization, the People’s Global Action however maintained and indeed encouraged “tensions between agreements” and simultaneously “maintain the space for articulation of singularities” (p. 114) and in this way obliterate the image of a collective identity to which one has to “conform” to a consensus and renders a plane of consistency which enables becoming-other. In one way the People’s Global Action put into effect the words of Félix Guattari, when he claims that “it’s something that develops precisely in the direction of diversity, of a multiplicity of perspectives ... it’s not a question of creating agreement; on the contrary, the less we agree, the more we create an area, a field of vitality ... it’s a completely different logic from the organizational, arborescent logic that we know in political or union movements” (in Stivale, 1998: 197). It is within this field that the People’s Global Action operates as a plane of consistency which enables co-ordination of events and re-negotiation of

strategies and struggles. Because the People's Global Action emphasises a certain disagreement and discussion it never makes the unidimensional claims of the party. It also exceeds the unidimensionality of the organization and its organization of the world and instead affirms the multiplicity of being. The whole point of an organization of complexity might well be to enlarge the aforementioned field of vitality in order to avoid stratification and statification – by maintaining complexity the inclusionary social aspect as well as the aspect of plural issues is kept in motion, in becoming.

The complexity of the alter-globalisation movement is the key element in order to understand the way it exceeds the structure of an organization, but never succumbs to the depth of chaos. A social complexity due to inherent inclusiveness, and a cognitive complexity because of communication which enables a broad range of perspectives and hence make sure that the frames of the alter-globalisation movement never gets too comfortable, and a use of Computer Mediated Communication which exceeds both social as well as cognitive rigidity and enables the construction of always other alternatives to the present neo-liberal globalisation, which is presented as a main enemy. Chesters and Welsh describe the complexity as a direct cause of “resisting co-option by party discipline and ideological strictures” (p. 105), a capacity which is “growing as a direct result of increasing complexity” (*ibid.*).

The complexity of the alter-globalisation movement does not only involve a complexity in its social configuration and its cognitive frames but it also involves embracing a wide repertoire of methods of protest and again the enemy seems to be unidimensionality. When writing on protests during summits Chesters and Welsh maintain that the reports by both the media and the police reduce the complexity of the alter-globalisation movement and instead try to write them off as “mindless thugs” or “anarchists”, thus discursively “collapsing complex identities to a ‘mob’” (p. 75) and that by “removing the identity of the individuals and focusing on the group as ‘anarchists’ and ‘thugs’ they become associated with the violence that the media chooses to focus upon, not the message their activism seeks to advance” (p. 81). Throughout the alter-globalisation movement a certain carnivalesque strategy was spawned, which seemed to try to accelerate the repertoire of protest in order to get away from well-known tactics of demonstrating and rioting. For instance in Prague a group called Tactical Frivolity would dress up in silver and pink and thus avoid the often chosen fashion of black hoodies and masks amongst protesters. The book offers an excerpt from an interview with one activist from Tactical Frivolity, who explains the chosen methods in the following way:

Throughout history we have like a whole human history of like people fighting each other and righteously fighting each other and going well, I'm fighting you because you're evil and you're wrong and so that means that I have to fight you, you know, and it's like somehow trying to get away from that and kind of play it differently so that we're saying well we don't like what you're doing, we don't agree with what you're doing. But that doesn't mean that I'm going to get out a bigger stick than you've got and beat you dead with it... Just by dressing up and making ourselves vulnerable, to me it was a sort of symbolic moving us out of that war like space in a way, you know, trying to get away from the total black and white, them and us. (p. 55)

This approach seemed to arouse distress amongst both the police as well as protesters who were more familiar with the common ‘black bloc’-technique of confronting the police with violence with Tactical Frivolity being stuck dancing in-between the police

and more aggressive protesters due to them insisting being in the front line. Eventually, however, the police would strip the complexity of actors within the so called pink bloc and attack the pink and silver-clad Tactical Frivolity after “male protestors produced pieces of timber and started beating the police” (p. 58). Embracing such “event novelty confounds established habits of mind leaving engaged actors confronted by the unknown associated with heightened complexity” (p. 71), thus not only confounding the police who at a ‘Global Street Party’ in Toronto in 1998 would maintain that “this is not a protest. This is some kind of artistic expression” (p. 71) but also affirming the complexity within the alter-globalisation movement itself. By widening the repertoire of protest methods and turning to the carnivalesque the desire to never be captured or come to a stand still in any area of the alter-globalisation movement is manifested.

By way of constructing spaces for encounters, building weak ties and maintaining a complexity in cognitive frames and repertoires of action, the alter-globalisation movement tries to construct an alternative to both the environmental and labour policy of neoliberal capital, as well as offering an alternative to the unidimensional organizational configurations. The authors call the space the alter-globalisation movement is aiming for a Global Civil Sphere, as the citizens of states are more and more detached from the governmental policies which are more interested in companies than in people. Consequently the need for alternative spaces is growing. What used to be the open space in which to debate policies and protest them, offer alternatives, and to link personal problems with political agendas (the *agora* of *polis*), the civil society, is “absorbed in the state... The consequence of this is an explosion of the elements that were previously coordinated and mediated in civil society”, Chesters and Welsh quote Hardt and Negri saying (p. 99). The explosion of actors is the complexity of the alter-globalisation movement, and the ability to act collectively is manifested in protest plateaux.

Finally...

Is it possible to understand an organization in becoming; to understand a complex organization without having to turn to other concepts such as plateaux or plane of consistency? Can we imagine an organization which enables becoming or is it inherently and permanently the enemy of becoming-other and change? This book would certainly disagree with the juxtaposition of organization to change and tries to formulate an organization which embraces change while still maintaining both complexity and consistency.

The greatest effort of this work is that it provides a thorough analysis of the alter-globalisation movement between the years 1999-2001, and how it applies concepts derived from Deleuze and Guattari while working close to the empirical data from the movement itself. But it also exceeds the alter-globalisation movement and implicitly urges us to investigate the field between order and chaos, organization and becoming, to a greater extent by using the alter-globalisation movement as a model. By doing so Chesters and Welsh provide a different understanding of the concept of organization which exceeds the boundaries of the subjugative and arborescent organization. Rather it

is a question of maintaining consistency, of creating different motifs by which to keep close to chaos and thereby affirm complexity and a multiplicity of perspectives but at the same time “keeping a distance to the forces of chaos knocking at the door” (Deleuze and Guattari 2003: 320). The book beautifully illustrates the multiplicity of motifs or plateaux which is the main point where the organization is exceeded yet consistency maintained.

In a world based on the network model it is important to understand how the nodes of the network communicate, mobilise, and form a plane of consistency. That is, how they form a unity without finding their singularity reduced. This is the reason why it is important to investigate the in-between space of order and chaos. It is never a question of complete order and unidimensionality opposed to chaos but rather of maintaining a certain unity which renders acting in tandem possible, a degree of multiplicity which enables becoming and rhizomatic lines of social and cognitive escape lines, and a modest becoming in order to never succumb to neither the claustrophobic static organization nor finding oneself crippled by the unbearable thickness of chaos.

The alter-globalisation movement is never a simple model of organization, but one which maintains its complexity, or rather one which due to its complexity never succumbs to the unidimensional logic of the One, whether it's one method, one frame, or one organizational structure. The book addresses the issue of how a diverse range of actors relate to each other, construct a cognitive frame and re-negotiate it, and how these actors come together and mobilise for actions despite the wide mix of actors and issues involved. The book does its work well, and in its retrospective look on the alter-globalisation movement it provides concepts which make us understand the in-between of chaos and organization, and which different methods, forms of social networks, cognitive frames and techniques are used when one exceeds the static organization and looks forward to constituting consistent spaces of complexity.

references

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