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Mobilization from the Margins

Nobody is my name.   Odyssey 9.366

Collective acts of risk taking pose a puzzle to the social sciences. One minuscule contribution to a precarious collective endeavor does not improve its prospects, but it often puts the individual perpetrator at grave risk. So why do political revolutions, economic meltdowns, mass religious conversions, linguistic shifts and collective innovation adoptions happen often, and when they do occur, why are they the most unexpected? One could argue that given the scale of these social reversals, the premonitions should be clear enough. Then why do movements encompassing absolute majorities arrive as surprises to the illuminati and the powerful, not as mere predictable, perhaps governable outcomes?[1] I provide an answer in this book based on the idea of *leading from the periphery*. I argue that marginal leaders set into motion collective cascades of risk taking that are distinct from centrally generated coordinated campaigns. Keys to "surprising" and "rapid" elements of social and political uprisings are to be sought not at the centers of social attention, but in the margins, where switching to the far fetched and dangerous is more likely and less costly.

The existing solutions to the *collective action problem* stress economizing means for creating unity among the masses: central and focal forces of ideologies, repertoires of action, carefully designated incentives rewarding individual acts, as well as centers of social life, structural or ideational,

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[1] See Kuran (1991).

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all help to generate action in concert.[2] In their emphasis on central and visible themes, the more recent solutions to the collective action problem follow the early modern writings on crowds, in their interpretation of collective action as monolithic and unified. Only that now we have a more sophisticated way of discussing crowds in unison: more reasonable and verifiable than the holistic and anthropomorphic idea of crowds as the representation of some "primitive state of human mind".[3] Nevertheless, the thrust of the argument has not shifted much, still that unity, that simplifying holistic idea of the collective action in concert is central to the existing explanations. There is also a clue to the same line of reasoning in one of the folk pillars of collective action theory, which is the division between socially *central* vanguards, and following masses. The division between the vanguard and the population, has been key to theories advancing a more heterogeneous outlook of collective action among the crowds.[4] In political communication studies, interestingly enough, the same elitist trait lives on, *opinion leaders* are the dominant gate keepers of the public opinion.[5] All these theories share one common trait: the leaders are *central*. They start at the *center* of social, political and economic life. The actions of the vanguard in those positions strengthen the unity of masses after the preordained leaders' cause. Early theorists of collective

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[2] A pioneering formulation of collective action as a problem of coordination over public goods can be found in Olson (1971). Olson (1971) and Lichbach (1995) proposed a solution based on *selective incentives*, rewards for participation that can override the risks of collective action on the individual level. Hardin (1995) outlined *ideology* as a solution to the collective action problem, an economizing means of unification. Tilly (1978) introduced *repertoires of action*, routine and practiced acts of contention, such as strikes, sit ins, demonstrations, as likely vehicles of collective acts of contention despite the inherent dangers. Along the same lines, Schelling (1978) saw *focality* as the answer to the problem of coordination among many. Focal points, a central square, a canonical time or place, similar to *repertoires*, again economize on coordination. The role of public information in coordination, normalization and establishment of the status quo is also discussed in Chwe (2001).

[3] See Le Bon [1895] (1960) for the origins of a holistic view of crowds as a special, singular social force, categorically apart from the combination of its individual components. In my characterization, crowds are not prior to individuals, but mass mobilization is a product of individual decisions, whose origins, unlike the existing formulations, can be the most remote and the least connected.

[4] Marx's early formulations of the division between *the vanguard* and the followers (Marx and Engels [1848] 1978, p. 484), gave way to many similar divisions in the following formulations, including the oft cited party-based mobilization tactics Lenin [1902] (1975).

[5] The division between the masses and the opinion leaders is deemed to be the main feature of the modern public sphere Habermas (1991), the two-stage model of political information propagation, from opinion leaders to the masses, is one of the starting points of contemporary political communication theory. See Zaller (1992).

action, Marx included, put the well positioned vanguard at the top of a hierarchical network of influence and communication. They are to incite rebellion among clueless and unsuspecting masses. To reiterate, the separation between the two categories, in theory, still persists: central opinion leaders are the source of social information. The alternative I propose in the book prioritizes leading not from the center, but from the margins. If no conclusive clue can be found where it is expected, one has to look elsewhere. I implement a pedestrian fix to the longstanding conundrum of collective action. Simply put, dynamics of mobilization originating from marginal leaders are different from those emanating from centrally established, well connected instigators.

Mass mobilization, in contrast to institutional politics, has been the realm of a stark division between the individuality of the leaders and the malleable uniformity of the marginal masses. Instead of individuals in reified bureaucracies, unpredictable crowds, their politics ambivalent and inefficient, are one part of a dichotomy that separates well studied elite coordination from the poorly understood politics of the margins. *Leading from the periphery*, is a mobilization paradigm that has been largely ignored since the beginning of the systemic study of mass mobilization. The best known schemes of collective action situate the informed, well connected and harmonious vanguard in front of the rest. Such theories see mass uprisings as surprises,[6] mass social conversions as haphazard, innovation adoptions as flukes.

Describing and decoding such surprises requires a formulation for leadership structure that accommodates peripheral vanguards, away from the gaze of the status quo, in addition to better known central schemes. I explore the very same possibility in order to detect dynamics that are different in their pace and reach from those originating from central, visible and seasoned leaders. The theoretical expositions and empirical evidence I outline in the following chapters portray processes that are characteristically outside the organizational narrative of the existing theories of collective action. As importantly, the idea of peripheral instigation is at odds with faceless theorizations in the form of mere power of numbers. In a network formulation it is possible to differentiate marginal actors, expect leaders in the margins and generate theoretical predictions that are now verifiable given the introduction of personalized media. The process clarifies the less explored logic of the transition phase between seemingly amorphous agitation and institutionalized politics.

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[6] Kuran (1989).

It detects familiar political patterns in unexpected places, among those actors who, unassumingly, play a crucial and defining, at times temporary, role toward historical transformations.

This is by no means a new question. Pondering the very same puzzle, was none other than Leon Trotsky, who residing in New York City at the time of the February 1917 revolt in Petrograd, the one preceding the October takeover, inquired about the leaders of the rebellion: "who led the [February] revolution? Who raised the workers to their feet? Who brought the soldiers into the streets?" His answer, expectedly, but hardly supported by much evidence, was "the Party".[7] That illusive division between the spontaneous outpouring of grievance in February 1917, and the organized politics of summer and fall 1917 is a showcase of a similar contrast between two modes of collective action. One is characterized with spontaneity and speed, the other with organization and ostensibly rational calculations. Institutions, ideology, information and centralization provide one resolution for the collective action problem, but do not fully answer the recurrent historical question posed above: who led the surprising waves of communal risk taking so frequent in the historical context? Rational individuals should know better.

The answer I propose is the theory and empirics of action originating from the margins. The periphery in the following chapters is not that *everything other than* the *opinion leaders*. It *is* the source of action in concert, via leadership that takes hold in small and dispersed circles of radicalism, peripheral collective action that emanates to centers of the society via a steady, at times fast strides. The key to the formulation is assuming that effective vanguardism can take hold far from the most connected, visible and "informed" areas of the social network. It is not clear if the dynamics of collective action from the margins are different from those of centralized agitations. The theory and empirics in the following chapters anticipate the effects, and are distinct from the logic of coordinated action from a central command. The contrasts between the centralized, hierarchical and well rehearsed narrative of the post-World War II social movements and the amorphous dynamics of recent uprisings all motivate similar questions. The collective memory of robust action during the Civil Rights Movement, for example, is regularly invoked in

7 See Trotsky (1937, ch. 8).

contrast to the amorphous leadership and decentralized organization of more recent global waves of unrest in 1989 and 2011.[8]

Mapping and decoding the dynamics of collective acts of the abrupt and decentralized kind also paves the way for harnessing their potential. The most adroit revolutionary leaders, knowingly or unwittingly, are experts in such methods. *Influence maximization* in social networks, using new technological means for advertising and information propagation is, in fact, a move in the same direction; however, there are few signs that those planning such programs think outside the conventional focus on the *center*. To influence voters, or buyers, they pay online *luminaries*, the most central and visible opinion leaders, to promote an innovation, be it political, social or technological.[9] The idea of actualizing a network of innovation from the periphery is not as frequently tried. For doing so, one needs a total map of the social network, a technological feat that has become feasible after advances in personalized virtual networks. If we know the map of contentious social network in Paris in 1789 or in Petrograd in 1917, or an approximation of their topology, a temporal progression of transactions could reveal the direction and trajectory of mass mobilization. In the absence of personal and immediate means of recoding, it would be a futile attempt to map the footprints of the process. The same lack of empirics encourages more emphasis on highly visible leaders instead of ephemeral processes that would immediately become difficult to discern after their meteoric occurrence.

FIVE MAJOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CENTRALIZED COLLECTIVE ACTION AND LEADING FROM THE PERIPHERY

In the next five chapters I combine a series of theoretical demonstrations and empirical evidence to examine collective action processes that involve peripheral mobilization.

I use network parameters, including proxies for the spread and diffusion of collective action in the context of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the Civil War in Damascus in 2012 and a network experiment

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[8] For the former see McAdam (1982), an account of more recent "connective action" is included in Bennett and Segerberg (2013).

[9] The theoretical foundations of influence maximization literature equate influence with centrality in the process of its formulations (Kempe et al. 2003); empirical studies of influence in virtual networks depict a more heterogeneous picture (Bakshy et al. 2011).

in collective risk taking, inter alia. The results provide evidence for the
predictions of network models I develop in conjunction with the data. The
idea of instigation from the periphery has significant implications in at
least five distinct, but interconnected domains. First, a revision of the role
of information in collective action–more communication does not always
help collective action, it can at times impede it; second, it is important
to study theoretical requirements for a sustainable concentration of
radicalism in the social periphery on par with required conditions for
generating a *critical mass*;[10] third, decentralization and contagious spread
of violence, in locally concentrated and globally dispersed cells, are as
important for the study of civil conflict as the role of selective incentives
and coordination in orchestrating collective contention, from the type
traditionally assumed in studying such phenomena; fourth, the extremes
of collective action cascades and total apathy are more frequent when
the vanguard are set at the periphery; fifth and finally, the recognition of
the existence of such network interactions leads to acknowledging action
that is at times inspired by doubt instead of conviction, driven by lack of
information instead of abundance of it and benefits from decentralization,
not hierarchy.

To see the intuition behind the five aforementioned items note the
following.

1. When the line of command is from the most connected to the rest,
   lack of communication disassembles the schemes of mobilization,
   but when severing lines of information generate circles of lead-
   ership in the periphery, empowering local leaders, then at times
   reducing the levels of information transactions can help to sustain
   growing clusters of contention. For example, adding indiscriminate
   communication links in a heterogeneous network, on average, only
   helps to reinforce the conservatism of the majority.
2. Sudden disruptions of communication media provide a testing
   ground for the effects of such communication links on the levels
   of the *dispersion* of contention. In particular, if after controlling
   for confounding and contributing parameters, one finds that the
   absence of communication caused escalation of a conflict, not
   the opposite, then there should exist processes other than pure

[10] The idea of *critical mass* is for formulating a fully encompassing movement, in contrast,
    the focus of a decentralized analysis is on minimal conditions for sustenance of risk
    taking in small cliques in the network periphery.

coordination that abet a contentious escalation. According to the traditional collective action theory, lack of communication should suppress coordinated contention, not the opposite. In the following chapters, I have employed two stark examples of blanket communication blackout in two Middle Eastern capitals for testing the *Dispersion Hypothesis*, that disruption of media connections decentralizes coordinated conflict on the collective level, and that this decentralization exacerbates revolutionary action, not the opposite.

3. Furthermore, if the peripheral clusters of contention are capable of initiating global cascades of collective action, then the conditions under which they endure and sustain themselves become a pressing theoretical question. I formulate and examine this mathematical question, finding the minimal requirement for sustenance of collective action in dispersed decentralized cells in some basic configurations, and pose the general mathematical puzzle to be explored.

4. Next, to detect *contagion*, and to formulate its relation to lack of communication, I parse the urban conflict in Damascus in space and time. Speaking about dynamics necessitates an analysis that takes both space and time into account. In particular, I will demonstrate contrasts between the dynamics of *contagion* and *coordination* in the context of an urban conflict. The results hint at the importance of decentralized, but highly concentrated islands of contention in the urban environment, a characteristic of *small world networks*.

5. Finally using controlled experiments, I demonstrate a first step into learning about the dynamics of leading contention from the periphery of the social network. The results of the behavioral experiments show that the extremes of total action and apathy are more frequent when the vanguard are positioned in the periphery of experimental networks. In contrast, the central risk-takers are more likely to be influenced by the risk aversion of the majority.

The mere possibility of such processes hints at organization from the type that, in its emphasis on early marginal adopters and its reliance, at times, on lack of information instead of abundance of it, is distinct from formulations built on coordination and global unity. It can provide explanations for phenomena which are difficult to account for with hierarchy and coordination.

Clearly, the processes I propose do not rule out the possibility of collective cascades through strong and hierarchical binds, but my emphasis in this book is on establishing the existence of alternative modes introduced above, an introduction of *network collective action*.

In contrast, the existing theories of collective action start from the economy of coordination, they emphasize central, public, accurate and focal elements versus decentrality, local, inaccurate and peripheral. In social revolutions, innovation adoptions and financial meltdowns, the individual choice is between a safe status quo and a precarious yet appealing option that becomes increasingly agreeable on the individual level when more of the others take the same risky leap of faith.[11] The dynamics of such collective processes were known to the early modern writers, including Montesquieu and Locke.[12] Despite allusions to its political importance, a careful study of collective behavior, particularly in the context of crowd behavior and crowd psychology, faced empirical difficulties in the absence of a network-based theory which could dissect the crowd into its moving parts.

Despite the increasing capacity for recording and sifting through decentralized data, the modern treatment of collective action is preoccupied with its traditional emphasis on the *center*, *central leaders*, *focal points*, well known *repertoires of action* and mass *coordination* based on centralized communication or mutually held *identities*.[13] In contrast, *spontaneity*, *local* action and *surprise*[14] are given a secondary position. To see how recasting revolutions and bank runs in the regulated and familiar imagery of centralized power of numbers could be counterproductive, in the following, I review a number of existing explanations for risky collective behavior; mainly to show that what they have in common is an emphasis on the *central*, *public*, *focal* social and structural elements, while the effects of decentralization, local action and *inaccurate* information[15] in the context of collective action are left unexplored. The move can be described as economizing both in theory and empirics. Focal point explanations simplify the theory, and provide explicit empirical evidence.

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[11] In Schelling's (1978) formulation this means there are *positive externalities*.

[12] See Locke [1689] (1980, ch. 19) and Montesquieu [1721] (2008) for examples.

[13] Each of these represent one of the existing explanation, for the emergence of collective action from inaction.

[14] See Tilly (1978) for a pioneering introduction of *time* into the study of collective contentious behavior.

[15] Inaccurate according to the centralized narrative. This is what Foucault calls *misinformation*, see Afary and Anderson (2005).

Before tending to the peripheral theory and empirics, a summary of existing theories is apropos.

FOCAL POINT EXPLANATIONS: CENTRAL COMMAND, REPERTOIRES OF ACTION, COMMON IDENTITIES, PUBLIC INFORMATION

The existing explanations for acting in concert take centralization and coordination to exist prior to the escalation of collective action. However, collective action can emerge and surge without them. Centralization, before escalation, is procedural, spatiotemporal, conventional and ideational. Coordinating on a plan of action, alignment of actors in space and time and mainstream rituals are essential to collective action's taking hold; sharing a common identity brings about acting in concert.

Collective action via coordination is the first formulation. Mancur Olson introduced an explanations for collective action based on coordinating *selective incentives*: if the benefits from joining exceed its costs, then individuals can overcome their individual risk aversion and shift from the status quo to acting for the collective cause, which is risky by nature, but provides benefits if it is successful.[16] If group action is possible at all, it should happen through providing incentives to the individuals involved, and administering such provisions becomes increasingly difficult as the size of the group grows; on the other hand, the costs of acting in small groups are too high to induce action, because the costs are divided among too few, so the conclusion is that mid-sized groups are the most likely to sustain collective action based on selective incentives. The issue of coordination is key, because in Olson's framework, given the actions of all the others each individual is better off free-riding. In a group of thousands the absence of one would not count. If the others are incurring the cost, and the attainment of the collective benefit does not rely on one's own action, then why should the individual pay the costs? Coordinating actions and policing benefits ensure that cascades of free-riding do not occur, simply because there will be no action once every individual decides to free-ride.[17] Nevertheless, group behavior and action in concert are recurring phenomena, even in the absence of visible coordination.

[16] See Olson (1971).
[17] The situation is similar to an n-person Prisoners' Dilemma.

During catastrophic episodes of communal violence, of the type seen during civil conflicts fought in close quarters, *contagion* of action in social networks operates more effectively than *coordination*. Later in the book, using a geolocated daily record of conflict locations in Damascus, I argue that progression of conflict in the city shows significant signs of spatiotemporal *contagion*, a process which operates differently from *coordination*. Given the consequences of coordinated contention in Damascus and the inherent risks of being found out, the possibility of spillovers of behavior in space and time effectively operated in parallel with better known processes of coordination.

The puzzle of action en masse in the face of individual free-riding has induced a variety of scholarly solutions, a majority of which rely on the importance of unified goals, centralized information sharing and focal actors and places already known to the actors. Thomas Schelling's notion of *focal points* is one representative solution: two individuals have to meet in New York City and have forgotten to coordinate over the location and time of their meeting on a given day. They are the most likely to converge on Grand Central Terminal at noon. *Grand Central Terminal at noon* is the focal spatiotemporal point of convergence.[18] In the absence of any other information collective action shapes around the most likely hub. However, in the course of the book I argue that if the New York social network is of a specific type, talking to one's neighbors about the rendezvous can at times be as effective. The alternative solution would be to produce a meeting place and time, pass it on to a number of one's social ties (perhaps on one's social networking platform) and ask them to pass it on. Contingent on the topology of the social network, the missing friend should be contacted in a reasonable number of steps. Note the different logic: one of network-based propagation of ideas and action as opposed to the one that assumes focal points.

According to the logic of centrality and visibility, central squares become major theaters of contention in the city. This is an important point.[19] Later, using a live account of events in Cairo recorded in emails and online announcements, I discuss the protests' gradual convergence on Tahrir Square in the afternoon of the first day of the protests. What I show is that planned protest locations did *not* include Tahrir at all

[18] See Schelling (1960).
[19] I will discuss the 2011 Egyptian Revolution in Cairo, during which Tahrir, the main square in downtown Cairo, became a focal point for contention toward the end of an 18-day standoff between protesters and Hosni Mubarak's security apparatus.