



# Autonomist leadership in leaderless movements: anarchists leading the way\*

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## abstract

Autonomist Leadership is the name given to the non-hierarchical, informal and distributed forms of leadership found in emancipatory social movements, and, in particular, in networked social movements. This paper establishes how Autonomist Leadership has emerged from anarchist theory and practice, and thrives in the digital and physical networks of contemporary social movements, utilising mobile communications and digital platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. This paper situates Autonomist Leadership in the critical leadership literature and sets out five principles that make it a distinct form of leadership: *Spontaneity, Autonomy, Mutuality, Affect* and *Networks*. Autonomist Leadership is both enacted and, at the same time, disavowed by activists, which creates dissonance and internal tensions. The paper argues that activists' affective attachments to the identity of being leaderless is a barrier to the development and agency of social movements. I conclude by arguing that by naming and acknowledging the Autonomist Leadership they have pioneered, activists can transcend the fantasy of being leaderless and develop beyond being protest movements to engage in social change with greater agency.

## Introduction

I receive and I give – such is human life. Each directs and is directed in his turn. Therefore there is no fixed and constant authority, but a continual exchange of mutual, temporary, and, above all, voluntary authority and subordination. (Bakunin, 2012/1882: 33)

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What Bakunin describes is an early articulation of anarchist-inspired leadership. This paper defines and describes a specific form of anti-hierarchical, informal and distributed leadership that is distinctive to emancipatory social movements, named as 'Autonomist Leadership' (Western, 2013: 79-84). This develops my earlier work on Autonomist Leadership by setting out the five principles that make Autonomist Leadership distinctive, i.e. Spontaneity, Autonomy, Mutuality, Affect and Networks. In recent times, anarchist-inspired leadership has re-emerged, after a period of being marginalised by the 20<sup>th</sup> century successes of communism and capitalism, and can be observed flourishing in the digital networks and physical spaces of contemporary networked social movements (NSMs). Social movements become networked when they use digital technology as a main tool to communicate, a political expression and manifestation of the today's networked society<sup>1</sup> (Castells, 2000, 2012; Quan-Haase and Wellman, 2004; Juris, 2004). NSMs have imaginatively utilised social media, mobile communication and digital platforms such as Twitter, which enables the rapid diffusion of information and increases autonomy in communication and actions. Social movements have always used the communication tools of their day, often seeing opportunities that mainstream society has not yet fully realised. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the new communication technology, in the form of the printing press which was successfully utilised by radical dissenters with great effect through pamphleteering (Hill, 1972). New technologies do not only impact on communication, but have wider effects on society. W. Lance Bennett (2012), for example, discusses how new technologies have contributed to a 'personalisation of politics', which also impacts on NSMs as I will discuss later. NSM's activity is not only restricted to the virtual realm, but, as Manuel Castells argues, 'from the safety of cyberspace, people from all ages and conditions moved towards occupying urban space, on a blind date with each other and with the destiny they wanted to forge, as they claimed their right to make history' (2012: 2).

Contemporary activists aim to develop radical participatory social movements utilising new network capabilities, but they have a problem to overcome. They must fill the gap which remains when hierarchy and traditional leadership are removed. This problem has been addressed in three ways. Firstly, NSMs organise by maximising participative democracy, drawing on experience from previous social movements and anarchist theory and practice. Secondly, they have innovated a new form of Autonomist Leadership that thrives by embracing

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1 Network Society-Castells refers to how society has changed whereby social structures and activities are organised around digital and virtual information networks. Social networks process and manage information using micro-electronic and mobile based technologies.

participatory democracy, enabling individual autonomist leadership and mobilising a collective leadership agency without contradicting their ethos. Thirdly, the gap is filled with a utopian fantasy whereby activists claim that their movements are 'leaderless', disavowing all forms of leadership, which creates further problems that are addressed later in this paper. Drawing on Lacanian theory, the term leaderless operates as an 'objet petit a', an object that temporarily fills a gap, but which is also a symptom of the lack, rather than a sustainable replacement for the lost object. Lack is a cause of desire and the symptom 'leaderless' points to the desire for leadership. Discarding traditional leadership creates a lack and leaves a gap. Utilising the signifying term leaderless to celebrate the absence of leadership does not fill this gap, but temporarily covers it over. For a short time the anxiety and desire created by the lack is displaced by the temporary enjoyment gained through the identification of being 'free protestors'. However, this enjoyment is short lived, for to fill the gap will take new and innovative forms of leadership, not the celebration of its absence.

This paper discusses this emergence of Autonomist Leadership, setting it firstly in the context of anarchist theory and practice, and then within critical leadership literature, before addressing the challenges created by the paradox of Autonomist Leadership being enacted in so called leaderless movements. Autonomist Leadership has delivered powerful results within protest movements, as seen in the Arab Spring revolutions and the Occupy and Indignados movements, yet these large movements have struggled to move beyond the phase of protest. A key reason for this is the disavowal of all leadership (including autonomous forms) that occurs within these movements. When activists associate all forms of leadership with hierarchy and authoritarianism, the Autonomist Leadership they enact takes place in the context of a paradox that creates a cognitive and emotional dissonance. This leads to internal tensions and conflicts (often in passive aggressive forms) limiting and displacing the movements' agency and constraining them from developing the form of non-hierarchical leadership they have pioneered. As shown later in this paper, this dissonance problem could be overcome by adopting a critical leadership theory approach which reveals how leadership can be distributed, informally and non-hierarchically (therefore removing the contradictions). Yet in spite of this, the disavowal of leadership continues, and this paper claims that this is due to the strong affective investments activists have to being leaderless. Affective attachments override cognitive-rational considerations, particularly when the affects are associated with what Jacques Lacan calls *jouissance* (a particular type of enjoyment). Yannis Stavrakakis (2007) shows, for example, how consumer society and nationalism draw on the affective attachments of enjoyment (*jouissance*) to fuel their cause; my observations and research show how activists attach powerful affects of enjoyment to their identification as leaderless protesters. When this occurs, the

affective attachments are very difficult to displace, hence the problem activists have in recognising the autonomous forms of leadership they have pioneered.

I conclude that the paradox of leadership being enacted in leaderless movements needs a disruptive intervention, which can be achieved by naming and defining their specific forms of non-hierarchical leadership as Autonomist. The prefix Autonomist undoes the affective attachments to being leaderless, as it breaks the emotionally binding ties that link leadership with hierarchy, elitism, authoritarianism and coercion.

Autonomist Leadership names and describes a specific form of leadership existing within emancipatory movements, which can then be scrutinised and developed. By naming and owning Autonomist Leadership, the inner conflicts associated with denial are removed and activists can re-attach their affective investments to the object they really care about and which initially engaged them in these movements, i.e. their emancipatory aims. When Autonomist Leadership is transparently acknowledged, tensions and conflicts do not disappear, but become developmental rather than regressive. This means working through difficult challenges such as addressing power dynamics and struggling for meaning and ideas, which contrasts with the regressive dynamic of imposing constraints on themselves in regard to taking up leadership in order to maintain the fantasy of being 'leaderless'.

The paper will now situate leadership in the context of anarchism, before defining Autonomist Leadership that has emerged from this tradition and is found in Networked Social Movements.

## **Anarchism and leadership**

Anarchists have always had an ambivalent, often negative, relationship towards leadership, highlighted by the anarchist slogan 'No Gods, No Masters!' Yet, radically democratic forms of leadership have always been present (if not named) within anarchist circles, both in terms of famous leaders, e.g. Bakunin, Kropotkin and Proudhon, but also in terms of their understanding that individuals and groups take temporary leadership autonomously and on behalf of the wider collective, without assuming a formal position of power or authority over others (Bakunin 2012 [1882]; Joll, 1979; Woodcock, 2004). Bakunin captures the anarchist's view of leadership:

At the moment of action, in the midst of the struggle, there is a natural division of roles according to the aptitude of each, assessed and judged by the collective whole: some direct and command, others execute orders. Hierarchical order and

promotion do not exist, so the commander of yesterday can become a subordinate tomorrow. No one rises above others, or if he does rise, it is only to fall back a moment later, like the waves of the sea forever returning to the salutary level of equality. (Bakunin, cited in Joll, 1979: 92)

Anarchists developed innovative forms of leadership without naming it as leadership for two reasons. Firstly, the capacity to lead was historically seen as a rarity and only for specific domains, e.g. the military and governing emperors or kings (Wilson, 2013). The contemporary usage of the term leadership has become widespread and now is found in business, sport, politics and social arenas; therefore, anarchists wouldn't have used the term leadership as it is used today. Secondly, the terms 'leader' and 'leadership' have become synonymous in mainstream thinking with the Messiah leadership discourse (Western, 2008; 2013), where charismatic, elitist and powerful individuals have influence over others, which doesn't fit with anarchist understandings of leadership based on egalitarian principles.

Past forms of anarchist leadership have not delivered huge success, in contrast with more traditional and hierarchical forms of leadership displayed within certain socialist, communist and capitalist systems. However, anarchist critiques of hierarchical forms of leadership have been proven right over and over again. Anarchists point to Stalin, Mao, Mussolini, Hitler and also to contemporary 'democratic' political leadership in the west that reproduces the power-elites that dominate within neo-liberal capitalism. From an anarchist's perspective, the problem is not just bad leaders, but leadership itself, which creates a 'power-over' (Ricoeur, 1990) dynamic that inevitably reproduces coercive relationships and diminishes the autonomy of 'followers'. Engels wrote that the Paris Commune of 1871 effectively ended serious anarchist ideology because their '[...] ideological forms were inappropriate for making decisions of state [...] making way for a single "Marxism"' (Engels, cited in Badiou, 2006: 263). Yet, today's networked society reveals a turn towards horizontal rather than vertical forms of organisation. Marxist and capitalist traditions of hierarchical elite leadership are increasingly challenged by participatory forms of leadership, underpinned by anarchist theory and practice (Newman, 2001).

Whilst many anarchists denounce leadership, those with theoretical insights distinguish between being anti-authoritarian and anti-leadership. Ehrlich states 'Anarchy is not without leadership, it is without followership' (1979: 108), yet this lesson seems to be forgotten in today's NSMs, where leadership is conflated with being governed by another. Proudhon, the French anarchist famed for his slogan: 'Property is Theft', establishes the anti-authoritarian position of anarchists and expresses their antipathy to being governed:

To be governed is to be watched over, inspected, spied upon, directed, legislated at, regulated, docketed, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, assessed, weighed, censored, ordered about, by men who have neither the right nor the knowledge nor the virtue [...] That's government, that's its justice, that's its morality! (Proudhon, cited in Joll, 1979: 55).

Anarchism comes in a variety of forms, and it is mutualism and syndicalism that offer the clearest examples of anarchist leadership in practice. Kropotkin, in his famous text *Mutual aid* (2012 [1902]) presented an evolutionary perspective of mutualism, challenging social Darwinism: 'There is an immense amount of warfare and extermination going on amidst various species; there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more of, mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defense [...] Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle' (Kropotkin, 2012 [1902]). Contemporary anarchist Kevin Carson (2014) explains mutuality as follows: 'All relationships and transactions are non-coercive, and based on voluntary cooperation, free exchange, or mutual aid [...]'. Mutualism offers a balance to excessive individualism that can be found in anarchist circles. The principles of mutualism are central to the anarchists' approach to leadership, whereby leaders do not hold power over others and any formalisation of a leadership position is temporary, open to recall and dissolvable at any time. Leaders and followers/participants mutually co-produce leadership, and positions are exchangeable: a leader can be a follower and vice versa at any appropriate moment. Leadership in anarchist environments has been tried and tested with various successes and many failures in small communes, co-operatives, anarcho-syndicalist collectives and in war zones such as the Spanish Civil War (Thomas, 2001).

Tracing the ambivalent anarchist relationship to leadership, we see that two strands of thinking and practice occur. Firstly, following an acknowledgement by Bakunin and later anarchists that leadership always exists, the questions they pose are what kind of leadership do we want and how can leaders be empowered without disempowering others. Secondly, the term leadership has accumulated negative connotations by anarchists and is conflated with hierarchical governance and authoritarianism and, therefore, any form of leadership is discarded as not being compatible with anarchism. This second point reflects a purity in anarchist thinking that idealises a natural social harmony that could be achieved if the state or powerful elites are removed. Saul Newman writes: 'Anarchism is based around this notion of the purity of the revolutionary identity. Human essence and natural human society is anarchism's uncontaminated point of departure, the pure place of resistance that will overcome power' (Newman, 2001: 48). It is this tradition of purist thinking that is re-enacted through the idealism of being 'leaderless' in today's NSMs.

The 1960s counterculture saw a re-emergence of libertarian and egalitarian idealism and anarchist-influenced movements appearing in society. Social movements emerged and organised around collective identity politics, e.g. the feminist, peace and environmental movements, whilst at the same time a more generic ‘hippy’ movement championed individualism, anti-establishment and anti-institutional sentiments. Radical feminists and peace activists denounced leadership as a form of patriarchy and a central tool of capitalist control. Many of these movements drew heavily on the anarchist stance of privileging individual autonomy over party discipline. Leaderless movements became popular within the counter-cultures of the 1960s and later, which have in turn informed today’s NSMs. Yet the lessons learnt from these movements seem to have been lost. Contemporary anarchist, Chaz Bufe, reflects that leadership is inevitable in social groups:

In the 60s and 70s many leftist, anarchist and feminist groups agonised over how to eliminate leadership, equating all leadership [including temporary, task-based leadership] with authoritarian leadership. Their fruitless efforts confirm what the more astute anarchists have been saying for over a century – that it’s a mistake to think that any kind of group or organization can exist without leadership; the question is, what kind of leadership is it going to be? (Bufe, 1988: 21)

As Bufe makes clear, being ‘leaderless’ is a myth, propagated to support an ideological position to which activists become affectively attached: for leadership always occurs but it is not always transparent (Barker et al., 2001; Gerbaudo, 2012). Jo Freeman, in her polemic ‘The Tyranny of Structurelessness’, articulated her observations of leaderless groups in the feminist movement, finding that removing leaders and clear structures simply masked power and created very negative dynamics:

[S]tructurelessness becomes a way of masking power and within the women’s movement was most strongly advocated by the most powerful. Awareness of power is curtailed by those who know the rules, as long as the structure of the group is informal. The most insidious elites are usually run by people not known to the larger public at all. Intelligent elitists are usually smart enough not to allow themselves to become well known [...] Friendship and informal power networks dominate and exclude ‘out-groups’ within such movements and organizations (Freeman, 1972: 156–157).

Activists from various egalitarian traditions became wedded to the idea of being leaderless, and contemporary NSMs have followed this stance. Yet, as Freeman shows, the impact of a wholesale rejection of leadership is detrimental because leadership and power relations don’t disappear to create pure social harmony, they simply get driven underground and become enacted in hidden ways by ‘insidious elites’.

NSMs draw on anarchist and egalitarian social movements' traditions and are against hierarchical forms of leadership and organising structures. The rejection of power being concentrated in elite leadership positions has led to innovations in how NSMs organise, including how leadership is enacted. New forms of anarchist-inspired leadership have re-emerged and flourish in these networked movements. However, the problem remains that these novel forms of leadership remain hidden because of the continued disavowal of all leadership. Before addressing this challenge, the paper will now define and describe Autonomist Leadership.

## Autonomist Leadership

Autonomist Leadership is an important innovation in leadership, found in contemporary, emancipatory protest movements and, in particular, NSMs. The impact of 'leaderless' protest movements has caught the imagination of the wider media, as evidenced by Time Magazine making 'The Protester' person of the year in 2011, following Tahrir Square, Indignados and Occupy Wall Street protests. These Networked Social Movements are contagious, inspiring one another, sharing experience and creating a networked solidarity through new technologies that enable a new found global connectedness. However, mainstream commentators and many scholars have failed to recognise the leadership that takes place, preferring to propagate the romantic myth that these movements are leaderless (Gerbaudo, 2012). Autonomist Leadership currently plays a vital part in these protest movements and can be increasingly important in wider contexts beyond protest movements considering what many perceive to be a cultural shift towards horizontalism emerging in society. To fully account for how these movements organise, it is vital to name, define and describe this new form of leadership, which enables researchers to scrutinise it and activists to develop it. Five principles define the parameters of Autonomist Leadership<sup>2</sup>: Spontaneity, Autonomy, Mutualism, Networks and Affect. Together, they differentiate Autonomist Leadership from other forms of leadership. I will address each principle in turn.

### *Spontaneity*

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2 These principles are arrived at through participative observation in anarchist and other 'leaderless' groups over many years, combined with reviews of contemporary literature, texts and activist websites as well as through informal interviews with activists participating in NSMs, such as the Occupy movement. I am not claiming these principles offer a fixed definition of Autonomist Leadership, but they offer a heuristic device and I encourage dialogue and further research. This definition has been developed and expanded from an earlier version (Western, 2013: 80) with the addition of two principles: Affect and Networks.



Leadership arises spontaneously, is temporary, without fixed roles and does not stabilise in any key actors or form of governance. It emerges and falls away as contexts arise, and actors take up leadership in diverse ways (both as individuals and collectively). A strength of this spontaneity is that it perpetuates unstable networks of individualised-collective action, thereby keeping movements agile and potentially able to utilise the leadership talents of all activists, rather than be limited to the talent of small elites.

### *Autonomy*

The principle of autonomy applies to leaders, followers and all participating actors. Anybody and everybody can take up leadership, there is no ranking or hierarchy and there is a heightened awareness and commitment to the autonomy of all, guarding against coercion and the manipulation of power. The principle of autonomy reflects many anarchists' belief in individual freedom as a cornerstone of social justice, in contrast to socialist/communist privileging of collective allegiances over individual autonomy. Leaders or followers are interchangeable and both participate autonomously to co-create the enactment of leadership.

### *Mutualism*

Leadership is enacted with mutual consent, mutual responsibility and for the mutual benefit of the movement/group. When functioning well, Autonomist Leaders are upheld and supported to act in the best interests of the movement. Mutualism is the counter-balance to over-zealous individual autonomy (found in some anarchist groups that can become narcissistic, and end up promoting self-interest). Any enactment of Autonomist Leadership always works between the two tensions and forces of mutualism and collaboration, on the one hand, and competing individual and group interests, on the other.

### *Networks*

Autonomist Leadership is embedded within networks as an active leadership dynamic that is fluid, changing and dispersed throughout the network. This differs from traditional leaders who may engage with and utilise networks; for example, when political leaders engage with and mobilise networks to gain support or fundraise. This is not Autonomist Leadership. Autonomist Leadership is a multiplicity and is rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987); it pops up, disappears, reappears, is beyond any single individual or elite group and is potentially within all individuals. Networked Autonomist Leadership can make these movements appear 'leaderless' to those looking for orthodox leadership structures. Whilst social movements have always used social networks to organize, the digital age has created new virtual platforms enabling a

mobilisation of Autonomous Leadership in ways which were inconceivable before. The connectivity between virtual and physical networks has been one of the key innovations of NSMs and is transforming how social movements organise.

### *Affect*

The importance of affect is amplified in NSMs in contrast to mainstream organisations. This is due to the strong personal affective investments that draw individuals to these emancipatory movements. Activists have personalised self-narratives and emotional attachments that draw them to ideals such as freedom and to fight against oppression and abuse of power. Reciprocally, these movements generate powerful collective affects: feelings such as hope, solidarity and love that arise from the idealism, camaraderie and unity expressed within them. An individual's personal affective attachments are reinforced and shaped through the networked conversations and exchanges that take place. Within NSMs, sub-groups are formed that appeal to diverse individual needs, desires and passions. Autonomist leaders act upon their personal affective investments and are mobilised by others into taking courageous or utilitarian acts of leadership. NSMs are charged with libidinal energy that arises from these affective investments and when attached to the emancipatory object, this produces and sustains pluralist and fluid forms of Autonomist leadership. However, when affective attachments become disinvested from the emancipatory object and become attached to fantasy objects such as being leaderless, the movements are weakened as activists' energies become displaced and Autonomist Leadership is curtailed.

There are two clear reasons for the recent emergence and success of Autonomist Leadership in contemporary NSMs. The first is due to the new zeitgeist that has emerged within the networked society, giving these movements opportunities for new forms of connectivity and activity in the digital realm that are later enacted in public spaces. Newman captures this zeitgeist:

The situation is changing, and the new forms of autonomous politics that are currently emerging demand the use of another term: anarchism. Shipwrecked on the craggy shores of state power, anarchism is now moving to the forefront of our political imagination. There has been a certain paradigm shift in politics away from the state and formal representative institutions, which still exist but increasingly as empty vessels without life, and toward movements. (Newman, 2011)

The second reason is due to the 'personalisation of politics' (Bennett, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). Bennett claims that the demise of social loyalties and institutional ties (Putnam, 2000), alongside the impact of the

personalisation of society expressed via consumerism and social media activity, have also impacted on political engagement. Today, networked individuals (Castells, 2007) discover a new autonomy on the internet which they enact in the wider world, and which activists apply to the political sphere. Bennett writes:

Among the most interesting aspects of this era of personalisation has been the rise of large-scale, rapidly forming political participation aimed at a variety of targets [...] The more diverse the mobilisation, the more personalised the expressions often become, typically involving communication technologies that allow individuals to activate their loosely tied social networks. (Bennett, 2012: 21)

This personalisation of society becomes a personalisation of these movements, which have less rigid identifiable causes, political programmes or collective identities than previous social movements. This facilitates wider participation so that individual activists can personalise their political commitment. The Occupy movement epitomised this. Its 'We are the 99%' slogan embraced everybody (except the evil 1 per cent). This enables individuals to personalise the movement to their own ends. Individuals form intimate networks and sub-groupings, they create personalised blogs, tweets and Facebook identities and attract like-minded individuals (Gerbaudo, 2012). Autonomist Leadership often begins in cyberspace and transitions to the public squares which then offers new opportunities and new demands for Autonomist Leadership<sup>3</sup>. The experience from previous anarchist-led movements is present in the discourses that shape the practices in these gatherings, the General Assembly at the Occupy movement being a good example. Autonomist Leadership fits with these movements' ethos 'to practice in the present, the future changes they seek' (Melucci, 1989: 5-6), i.e. it enacts non-oppressive and participatory forms of leadership; sadly, they have not yet fully embraced their own success. Autonomist Leadership is always aspirational, never a pure form, and the five principles act as a description of the parameters, not a rulebook. Working within these parameters is an ongoing contestation that is at the heart of any radical democratic process (Gobetti, 2000). Having defined and discussed Autonomist Leadership, I will now situate it within the critical leadership literature which provides explanatory theories that accommodate and will help research and shape this new form of leadership.

### **Situating Autonomist Leadership within Critical Leadership Studies**

Autonomist Leadership can only be recognised, developed and scrutinised if situated within a Critical Leadership Studies (CLS) expanded view of leadership

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3 See Castells (2012) for a full account of this movement, from network to public square.

that challenges the mainstream leader-centric view (Jackson and Parry, 2011). The mainstream organisational literature and popular view of leadership can summarised as: Leadership = Person + Position + Authority (Western, 2013: 80). Firstly, leadership is situated within a person, i.e. individuals are attributed innate transformational or inspirational qualities (Bolden and Gosling, 2006; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Burns, 1978). Secondly, leaders hold formal positions in hierarchical structures, e.g. CEOs, priests or political leaders who influence followers both through their personality and from their position. Thirdly, leadership relates to exercising authority over others, either using soft-power (Nye, 1990) or overtly using coercive forms of authority that range from economic levers (pay and promotion) to despotic leaders wielding authoritarian control. CLS scholars argue that leadership is not only defined by what individual leaders do (Hosking, 1988) but that many actors in a network interact to produce the agency of leadership (Gronn, 2002; Bolden, 2011; Latour, 2005; Law, 1993). CLS scholars emphasise leadership as a process, which corrects the mainstream imbalance towards the individual. The leadership definition below is formulated from the CLS literature, and it is through this lens that Autonomist Leadership is made visible. The following definition, drawing on CLS, can be offered: *Leadership is a psychosocial influencing dynamic.* (Western, 2013: 36)

To clarify:

- **Psycho:** refers to the psychodynamics of leadership, referencing that leadership occurs both within and between people. Leadership and followership stimulates unconscious and emotional responses within us, and relational dynamics between us.
- **Social:** refers to the social construction and social dynamics of leadership. Leadership goes beyond relational dynamics; it also references social power and authority that operate through discourses shaped by powerful elites. The social field, and how it influences and controls material and symbolic resources, must be accounted for in our understanding of leadership.
- **Influencing:** leadership signifies the specific agency of influencing others. Influencing is a wide-ranging term, and leadership draws on a vast array of resources, from personality to coercive power to influence others.
- **Dynamic:** refers to the dynamic movement within leadership. Leadership cannot be fixed to a single person, group or formal position, or reduced to a set of behaviours, skills or competencies. Leadership moves between

people (and things) as a dynamic social process, and can often emerge where least expected.

Autonomist Leadership, when viewed through the mainstream leadership lens, is rendered invisible, as no individual or group holds position, power or authority over others. Whilst CLS provides the explanatory theory that accommodates Autonomist Leadership, very little is written about leadership in NSMs in the critical literature<sup>4</sup> (Einwohner, 2007: 1307; Reger, 2007). For example, the Sage handbook of leadership (Bryman et al., 2011), a comprehensive publication with contributions from sixty-four leading scholars in the field, with chapters on 'Leadership and cults', 'Spirituality and leadership', and 'Transformational leadership', does not mention leadership in social movements, nor is there mention of social movements in the index. Because social movements, and NSMs in particular, are a growing force as political-social actors, this gap in the literature should be of great future interest to CLS scholars. Two exceptions to this omission in the CLS literature are Neil Sutherland, Chris Land and Steffen Böhm's (2013) paper on 'Anti-leaders(hip) in Social Movement Organizations', and Paolo Gerbaudo's (2012) book *Tweets and the streets*. Sutherland et al.'s research affirms the ambivalence towards leadership in anarchist groups and their paper upholds, I would argue, the commonly held belief that leadership is a bad thing in anarchist circles. It also confirms that activists discuss leadership from within the mainstream Messiah discourse (Western, 2013), i.e. as a power-over form of elitism that leads them to an 'ideological rejection' of leadership (Sutherland et al., 2013: 10).

They position leadership as being discursive and a process, and claim that 'just because an organisation is leaderless, it does not necessarily mean that it is also leadershipless', (*ibid.*: 1) concluding that 'although individual leaders were not present, there was still evidence of leadership occurring' (*ibid.*: 16). This clearly supports the position that these movements are not leaderless; however, this stance of having leadership without leaders is problematic. They argue the CLS line that leadership is not confined to stabilised positions or individual actors, but is a process. When addressing individual leaders, however, they revert to the mainstream view that constrains individual leaders to being in stable, power-over positions. For example, they seek to understand how the meaning-making work of leadership 'is done in the absence of permanent and stable leaders', (*ibid.*, 2013: 8) yet do not ask how leadership is done with individual leaders acting within the participatory ethos of the anarchists groups, i.e. via Autonomist

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4 Social movement studies include discussions of leadership in social movements, but do little to address an Autonomist Leadership perspective. This paper will be limited to discussing leadership in CLS.

Leadership. Their paper argues for leadership but without leaders, and in order to achieve this, leadership is limited to being a discursive function of meaning-making and individual leaders are substituted by ‘leadership actors’ (Fairhurst, 2008). This presents two challenges. Firstly, leadership occurs in many diverse forms and cannot be limited to a meaning-making discursive function (Drath, 2001). Secondly, individual leaders can have agency without being reduced to being stable individuals with position power. The term ‘leadership actors’ is not specific enough to identify the particular form of leadership taken by individuals because it is a generic term that can denote anybody taking an informal leadership role (which may be progressive, reactionary, coercive or manipulative). It is, therefore, important to recognise the specific form of emancipatory leadership enacted by individuals in NSMs that contributes to the wider embedded process of Autonomist Leadership in these movements.<sup>5</sup>

By eliminating individual leaders, a kind of decaffeinated leadership is described, where leadership is desired, but it is not the real thing,<sup>6</sup> and the theoretical nuances of having ‘leadership without leaders’ are difficult conceptually to enact in practice. This affirms one of the criticisms of critical theory in general, i.e. that it is too remote from practice (Cooke, 2008). Sutherland et al.’s research affirms that in spite of the attempts to make leadership disappear, stealth leadership often takes place as a ‘return of the repressed’ and this happens in dysfunctional ways. To quote an anarchist from their research:

It got to the stage where whatever they said [...] was what we did. They’d already chatted about most of the agenda points, so just reiterated that without giving anybody else time or space to air their thoughts. It wasn’t aggressive, and most of us didn’t realise it for ages [...] but they became so powerful. (Sutherland et al., 2013: 15)

A similar example of stealth leadership is reported in the Zuccotti Park Occupy camp by a New York activist:

I’m hesitant to say that it’s non-hierarchical, that there’s no leadership, because I do really think that there’s a core of people – the media and press team – who are doing a lot of the organising and shaping the public image [...] I think it’s denying the real power dynamics that are at play now. (Sacks, cited in Strauss, 2011)

Gerbaudo (2012) also challenges the notion of leaderless movements. He writes: ‘I argue that far from inaugurating a situation of absolute “leaderlessness”, social

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5 Further to this discussion, CLS author Fairhurst (2001) critiques the splitting leadership and leaders, the individual and the collective, while Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012) argue that leadership must be looked at through a number of prisms to see it clearly.

6 To play with Žižek’s insights (2002).

media have, in fact, facilitated the rise of complex and “liquid” (Bauman, 2013) forms of leadership which exploit the interactive and participatory character of the new communication technologies’ (Gerbaudo, 2012: 13). Gerbaudo says that leaders within NSMs subscribe to the ideology of horizontalism and are ‘reluctant leaders’ or ‘anti-leaders’: ‘they do not want to be seen as leaders in the first place but whose scene-setting and scripting work has been decisive in bringing a degree of coherence to people’s spontaneous and creative participation in the protest movements’ (*ibid.*: 13). This affirms the claim in this paper that leadership is enacted whilst being disavowed. Gerbaudo claims these reluctant leaders ‘become ‘soft leaders’ or choreographers, involved in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold’ (*ibid.*: 5). I agree with Gerbaudo’s assertion that the leaderless myth is compounded because ‘social media are turned into a ‘fetish’ of collective action [...] endowed with mystical qualities that only obscure the work of the groups and organisers using them’ (*ibid.*: 8). However, his metaphor of leaders as choreographers can be interpreted (and he warns against this danger) of another form of ‘stealth leadership’ happening behind the scenes. Clearly, stealth leadership occurs when leadership is denied and hidden, while some form of organised leadership undeniably takes place. For example, the editors of *Adbusters* called for the Occupation of Wall Street<sup>7</sup>. Using their media savvy, they called for ‘a Tahrir Moment’, bringing the energy and inspiration of the Egyptian experience to mobilise activists in the USA. Yet this was not stealth leadership, it was overt. They did not choreograph the actions; rather, they emotionally engaged the protesters and took a transparent Autonomist Leadership role (amongst many other actors) drawing on their particular talents and resources (Yardley, 2011). The term choreographer does not describe the diverse, plural and fluid forms of Autonomist Leadership that occur within these movements. Autonomist Leadership operates as an emergent process, not as scripted or choreographed from behind the scenes like a planned piece of theatre. A strength of these movements is the embedded Autonomist Leadership that responds adaptively to fast changing contexts, precisely because there is not a hierarchy or group of choreographers co-ordinating the action. On the other hand, collective and individual Autonomist Leaders may plan, strategize and organise, sometimes within consensual participatory structures, sometimes in a cell-like rhizomatic way, outside of traditional organisational structures and sometimes with complete spontaneity, e.g. the first anarchist in the crowd to throw the rock!

Both Sutherland and Gerbaudo’s work support the notion that anarchist organisations and NSMs are not leaderless, and both offer different accounts of

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7 <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>

what leadership means in these movements. This paper adds to this literature claiming that emancipatory movements are filled with Autonomist Leaders who aspire to act within the specific parameters set out in the five principles.

Autonomist Leadership has proved to be a key strength in NSMs through mobilising distributed and informal leadership which enables autonomist actions and fast adaptive responses. The lack of traditional individual leaders and power elites make Autonomist-led movements exceptionally difficult for their opponents to contain or control. A weakness within these movements is the disavowal of leadership caused by the affective attachments to being leaderless. This creates tensions through the dissonance of experiencing leadership happen (and engaging as a leader/follower), whilst at the same time having to repress awareness of it. Prohibitions of the self occur to avoid being seen as a leader and subtle or coercive prohibitions of others occur by self-appointed activists who 'police' the 'leaderless' space. The prohibitions involve power games and envious attacks and sabotage that undermine morale and the emancipatory cause. In this scenario, acts of Autonomist Leadership are encouraged, welcomed and celebrated (under another name), and are also condemned and constrained. Heroic activist actions are narrated and shared on the internet and in camps, while successful mobilisations and victories are stories often retold, yet discussing leadership openly remains a taboo subject.

Autonomist Leadership clearly sits within, and draws upon, CLS literature, whilst also opening new areas for further research. Three examples of research stand out: firstly, how leadership influence operates where conventional power-over relations and hierarchical structures of governance are actively discouraged; secondly, how individual leadership is enacted and its relation to distributed leadership processes that are emergent within these networks; thirdly, how leadership moves between digital networks and physical spaces, e.g. do the same leadership actors operate in both domains? Are there different codes of normative practice and behaviours for leaders and followers, or are they the same in both domains?

Having defined Autonomist Leadership and situated it in the critical literature, the paper will now discuss the impact that the disavowal of leadership has on the enactment of Autonomist Leadership and on the agency of these movements.



## The disavowal of leadership: Autonomist leadership in leaderless movements

Autonomist Leadership clearly exists within these movements, yet the disavowal<sup>8</sup> of all forms of leadership persists in order to support the activists' ideal of 'leaderless' movements. This paradox creates a dissonance that leads to tensions and a displacement of energy that undermines a movement's agency and prevents them from developing beyond their protest mode. Two main reasons account for this disavowal. Firstly, all leadership is seen as hierarchal and authoritarian, ignoring other contemporary forms of non-hierarchical and informal leadership as identified within critical leadership studies. Secondly, leadership is disavowed due to activists' strong affective investments in the term 'leaderless'. The first reason is easily addressed, because the knowledge of new forms of non-hierarchical leadership that overcome the traditional symbiosis between leadership and hierarchy are readily available and known to many activists. However, it is the affective attachments to being leaderless that override the conscious knowing that non-hierarchical leadership exists, and this knowing becomes disavowed. Affective investments fuel individual and collective libidinal drives that create the solidarity and commitment to act in political and social movements (Ahmed, 2013; Stavrakakis, 2007). These affective attachments are often stronger in NSMs than in other social movements or political organisations due to the blurring of collective political demands and the network capability that enables a greater personalisation of engagement (Bennett, 2012; Castells, 2007).

It is, therefore, the libidinal economy, i.e. the conscious and unconscious emotional dynamics and drives that shape and energise these movements that must be addressed if new forms of Autonomist Leadership can fully develop. The strong affective attachments to being leaderless becomes the enactment of an ideological ideal, a purifying pact that binds these movements together. The term 'leaderless' has become a master signifier that signifies activists' ideals of creating a world free of oppression, hierarchy, elitism and power itself. 'Leaderless' is perhaps the only term that universally defines these movements, in the absence of a manifesto, a political party, a collective identity or a programme of demands. 'Leaderless' appeals as it signifies a disruption of the cultural norm, it challenges the hegemony of the past and present order, whether capitalist or socialist. To be leaderless is to evoke the possibility of a new world order. To be leaderless is to seek the pure anarchist ideal of a natural harmonious

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8 I use the term disavowal to indicate the psychoanalytic meaning, where we have knowledge of something yet it is not consciously available to us.

society without unnatural interference from external governance (Newman, 2011).

Drawing on the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan, the disavowal of leadership represents a desire for a world that is freed from authoritarianism and power-relations. The affective investment in being 'leaderless' is to unconsciously seek pure *jouissance* (Lacan, 2007), which means to unconsciously identify with the fantasy of obtaining excessive enjoyment, a utopian fantasy that is unobtainable. The idea of being leaderless acts as the *objet petit a*, the object that temporarily offers relief by filling the gap, and at the same time symptomatically points to the lack of, and the repressed desire for, leadership.

The gap created by the discarding of traditional leadership can be developmental when it leads to innovative participatory forms of organising (such as the emergence of Autonomist Leadership). When the striving for a utopian ideal acts as a motivation, rather than an end in itself, and is translated into innovative practices and actions, this is developmental. However, the disavowal of leadership is regressive because it represses conscious knowing that leadership is taking place, in order to pursue the fantasy of attaining pure *jouissance*. When this happens, affective investments become displaced from their emancipatory ideals and become attached to seeking the excessive enjoyment of being a protestor. They act out a 'celebrated self', which is paradoxically dependent on identifying with their 'wounded self' (Western 2013: 3-12), i.e. their freedom as protestors, is dependent on being oppressed. Activists try to enjoy too much, and aim for an imaginary capturing of *plus-de-jouir* (the excess of enjoyment found in relation to the lack of leadership). This requires staying in utopian mindsets and enjoying the protest carnival, rather than tackling the more difficult developmental task of addressing what is lost or lacking. Slavoj Žižek observed this at the Occupy camp in Zuccoti Park and warned activists 'to go beyond enjoyment and carnival, not to fall in love with themselves' (Žižek, 2013). When protesters fall in love with themselves, they take 'pleasure in their displeasure' enjoying being protesters too much, enjoying their oppression and in doing so maintaining the binary status quo of the oppressed and the oppressor, rather than working on creating a better society.

When leadership is disavowed, two potential outcomes occur. Firstly, stealth leadership occurs whereby elite in-groups or powerful individuals take leadership without it being named, and without consent (Freeman, 1972-1973). Stealth leadership often occurs under a different name, for example, a co-ordinator or communication role may emerge, but the role may also be a cover for leadership. Secondly, Autonomist Leadership occurs alongside, and in spite of, stealth

leadership, yet it is not acknowledged openly, therefore undermining the movement's potential.

In these movements, when leadership is disavowed, a displacement of energy takes place, and activists engage in endless debates about power, equality and consensus politics, which can produce paralysing politically correct groups, bureaucratic slow decision-making and the sabotaging of talent and agency. As one Occupy activist I interviewed said: 'we planned some really exciting actions but these were sabotaged, particularly by the anarchists, who always blocked things, saying that any ideas that were put forward were being forced on others [...] it got ridiculous, and many left the group'.

Scholars and media commentators also share the contagious enjoyment of the ideal of being leaderless. For example, Castells (2012) reveals the confusion and dissonance in these NSMs which he identifies as being leaderless. In the Occupy movement, he boldly states: 'there were no leaders in the movement, not locally, not nationally, not globally' (Castells, 2012: 179), and he describes their General Assembly as a 'horizontal, leaderless, consensus-based open meeting'; he continues with fervour in his disavowal of leadership: 'there was no traditional leadership, no rational leadership and no charismatic leadership. And certainly no personalised leadership'. (*ibid.*: 180) In the Indignados movement, Castells reports: 'Commissioning of all sorts sprung up spontaneously. Some took care of logistical problems [...] sanitation, water, food [...] others deployed Wi-Fi networks [...] No leaders were recognised: everybody represented just him/herself' (*ibid.*: 113). Yet, what Castells is describing is Autonomist Leadership, individuals acting autonomously and spontaneously, collaborating with others for the mutual benefit of all, without hierarchy or fixed positions. Turning to the Egyptian revolution, the activist Noha Atef explained how he uses the internet to communicate with others 'to increase their anger, this is my favourite way of on-line activism [...] when you ask people to go and to demonstrate against the police they were ready because you had already provided them with materials, which made them angry' (in Aouragh and Alexander, 2011: 1348, cited in Castells, 2012: 58). Activists like Noha lead autonomously and spontaneously, connecting through digital networks, encouraging others to demonstrate by providing resources to produce the necessary emotional engagement required influencing others to act. This is a precise example of Autonomist Leadership, achieved without a formal position, being enacted by an individual alongside many other leadership actors engaging in their own personalised forms of activism, online or on the streets. Castells continues with his confusion over leadership when discussing the Tunisian 'leaderless' revolution, saying, 'The protesters generated spontaneously their own ad hoc leadership in specific times and places. Most of these self-appointed leaders were in their twenties or thirties'. (Castells, 2012: 26,

emphasis my own). Castells then cites three key ingredients of the Tunisian revolution: a strong cyber-activism culture, a relatively high diffusion of internet use and 'the existence of an active group of unemployed college graduates who led the revolt, bypassing any formal, traditional leadership' (*ibid.*: 26, emphasis my own) Autonomist Leadership seems to be a much-needed term to describe the informal forms of distributed leadership that Castells describes yet at the same time disavows.

## Conclusion

### *Acknowledging Autonomist Leadership to overcome the disavowal of leadership*

In this paradox where Autonomist leadership exists within 'leaderless' movements, something has to give. The disavowal of leadership creates a dissonance and internal tensions that are unsustainable and undermine the capabilities of these movements as social change actors. As being leaderless is a fantasy position, the only positive way forward is to acknowledge the Autonomist Leadership that is practiced. By using Autonomist as a prefix to leadership, the relationship between leadership and authoritarianism and hierarchy is broken. By describing the five principles that describe the parameters and reflect how Autonomist Leadership is practiced, a space is opened whereby activists can determine how Autonomist Leadership is being enacted in their specific contexts and how it can be developed. Addressing Occupy activists, Slavoj Žižek said:

Don't be afraid of words like work, discipline, community and so on. We should take all this from the right-wingers. Don't allow the enemy to take from you to determine the terrain of the struggle. (Žižek, 2011)

I would argue that the same applies to leadership.

Thus far, Autonomist Leadership appears to have been very successfully utilised as a resource to help mobilise protest movements to become vital actors in the embryonic stages of social change. Yet these NSMs seem to lack the ability to get beyond protest groups and to go further, hence the failure to sustain gains made in the Arab world as the spaces they created were quickly filled by political actors with traditional organisation and leadership. The Occupy and Indignados movements also petered out without making substantial gains (Žižek, 2012; Castells, 2012). This paper claims that a key reason for these movements' inability to develop beyond protest is because their agency is diluted and constrained by the continued disavowal of leadership.

Engaged scholars seem to agree that NSMs and anarchist/egalitarian-inspired social movements are not leaderless as claimed, but have different forms of leadership happening within them (Sutherland et al., 2013; Gerbaudo, 2012; Bufe, 1988). Even Castells, who claims NSMs are leaderless, references many leadership acts and offers contradictory statements pointing to movements that are led by activists. What has not been agreed in the literature is how Autonomist Leadership is enacted by individual leaders, and how this manifests in the emergent forms of collective leadership and distributed leadership processes that occur across fluid networks of actors in these NSMs. Part of this problem is that the literature lacks a term and description for the specific form of leadership found in NSMs. Thus, by naming Autonomist Leadership, and acknowledging the role taken by individual Autonomist leaders, this paper aims to move this dialogue forward.

This paper contributes to the field in five ways. (1) There is a gap in the literature, which the term Autonomist Leadership fills, naming and describing the specific form of leadership enacted in NSMs and other emancipatory movements. This enables leadership to be made visible where previously hidden and, therefore, opens new possibilities for research and critical dialogue. (2) Autonomist Leadership offers anarchists and social movements a leadership term which they can adopt and utilise as their own, diminishing the impulse to disavow all leadership and helping to move them beyond the limitations of remaining as protest movements. (3) Autonomist Leadership is a form of individualised collective leadership, i.e. it is embedded in networks and enacted by autonomous individuals and groups. This paper offers an example of leadership that bridges the polarised split between the individual leader and collective leadership or leadership as a process. (4) The paper highlights the role of affect in Autonomist Leadership as one of its five core principles. Affect is much under-researched in the leadership and social movement literature and this paper points to more research on affect and the libidinal economies of NSMs and, particularly through a Lacanian lens, developing theories of the politics of enjoyment (Western, 2014; Stavrakakis, 2007). (5) The social-political zeitgeist is moving from vertical to horizontal relations, from rigid structures to networks, resulting in new organisational forms and new forms of leadership. Whilst Autonomist Leadership is specific to egalitarian-inspired NSMs, it also resonates with other developments, such as informal and distributed leadership in organisations and networked grass roots leadership in political campaigns. Advances in our understanding of Autonomist Leadership can also be applicable and transferable to other areas.

## Transcending the fantasy

Žižek asked Occupy protesters to address the truly difficult questions, ‘not about what we do not want, but about what we DO want. What social organisation can replace the existing capitalism? What type of new leaders we need?’ (Žižek, 2012). This paper claims that the answer to the leadership question is already clear: activists need to develop the Autonomist Leadership that already exists in their movements, but first they must acknowledge it. Reclaiming leadership on their own terms is to transcend the fantasy of being leaderless, to go beyond utopian desire and to re-focus on their emancipatory aims. Once Autonomist Leadership has been acknowledged, the other questions posed by Žižek, ‘what do we want?’ and ‘what social organisation can replace capitalism?’ can be addressed, utilising Autonomist Leadership as a resource to help engage in these developmental questions.

The radical emancipatory task is to live openly with the knowledge that authoritarianism and other misuses of power are potentially within us all, a social symptom in all social relations. The challenge is to contain the excess and to work towards the desired emancipatory society, whilst acknowledging that it is never to be founded in its purest form. Stavrakakis (2007) claims that only when the negative (the lack) is faced, the work of building radical democratic and participatory structures and alliances can take place. For networked social movements to realise their full potential, they must first acknowledge and then develop their unique forms of Autonomist Leadership.

I leave the last words with an anarchist Autonomist Leadership collective, The Invisible Committee, who wrote *The Coming Insurrection*:<sup>9</sup>

The pioneers of the workers movement were able to find each other in the workshop, then in the factory. They had the strike to show their numbers and unmask the scabs [...] We have the whole social space in which to find each other. We have everyday insubordination for showing our numbers and unmasking the cowards. We have our hostility to this civilisation for drawing lines of solidarity and of battle on a global scale. (The Invisible Committee, 2009: 99)

They urge activists to ‘Get going[...] Find each other [...] Get organised [...] Form communes’ (*ibid.*: 95-103) and argue for autonomous actions that are self-organised claiming, ‘Proliferating horizontal communication is also the best form of coordination ..the best way to put an end to hegemony’ (*ibid.*: 124). Finally, they make the point that it is affect, not rational or democratic decision-making that is the crucial factor in social change:

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9 Mason (2013: 189) calls this booklet ‘the modern equivalent of the Communist manifesto’.

“The democratic character of decision making” is only a problem for the fanatics of process. It’s not a matter of critiquing assemblies or abandoning them, but of liberating the speech, gestures, and interplay of beings that take place within them. We just have to see that each person comes to an assembly not only with a point of view or a motion, but with desires, attachments, capacities, forces, sadnesses and a certain disposition towards others, an openness. (*ibid.*: 2009: 123)

The Invisible Committee are calling for Autonomist Leadership on a global scale, utilising digital connectivity as a new space to act.

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