

## *The Physiognomy of Dispersed Power*

by Jon Marshall

### **Abstract**

The web of post-modern power appears nomadic, elusive and always elsewhere. Like our online presences, it has no obvious boundaries and appears as spirit-like, a magic life haunting the net and the world. Government becomes liminal: 'Liminal identities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom and ceremonial' to quote Victor Turner. This liminality has changed the balance of power between the corporate and non-corporate sectors, however this does not mean that power is straightforward. When everything is interlinked through information technology then exercises of power may even increase confusion and undermine the bases or legitimacy of that power. Modes of ordering can produce perceived disorder. Knowledge of the system becomes divination and trapped in magic. It is suggested that an awareness of this, and focusing on contradiction, or oscillation is more useful than focusing on simplicity.

### **Introduction**

This is the second in a series of papers developing the consequences of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's idea that, nowadays, power forms a complex dispersed and dynamic network encompassing the world, which they call "Empire" [1] and which for reasons discussed later I prefer to call "distributed governance".

The first of these papers [2] argued that distributed governance (in particular as manifested on the Internet, including the 'free software or open source movement'), does not necessarily produce inherently democratic, co-operative, egalitarian, non-hierarchical or unauthoritarian movements as Negri and Hardt's imply in their analysis of the internet or through their counterpositional term 'Multitude'.

This paper continues the exploration by showing how distributed governance increases already existing paradoxes and problems around making order and dominance. It argues that although this kind of governance appears to extend the power of dominant groups while at the same time making it easy to delete their responsibility, it is also the case that, within this system, modes of ordering are not straightforward and often create the disorders they seek to stem. Dominant groups do not have own way in any simple sense. There is always a danger that events will escape control. With power dispersed in complex systemic ratios and arrangements, then the world itself becomes liminal and ambiguous to the categories of analysis, and thus our understanding resembles divination and produces further ambiguities and uncertainties. Those who do not realize this may be undermined by magical conventions of their divination, while attempts to resolve these uncertainties in simplicity can be disastrous. Taking these uncertainties seriously would seem to be more fruitful than foreclosing them. Thus after briefly summarizing some points of Hardt and Negri's argument, the paper goes on to explore the paradoxes and disordering effects of attempts at ordering, or producing dominance,

and then looks at the nature of our knowledge of the 'system'.

### **Negri, Hardt and Distributed Governance**

Negri defines Empire as "the transfer of sovereignty of nation-states to a higher entity", but not to a World Nation, or to an existent nation like the United States [3]. It is decentered, distributed and deterritorialized [4], "a network power" [5], even though one country may have temporary dominance. Empire is produced by the networks of corporations and NGOs, which are linked together by information technology and which transcend any particular country. Thus, Empire is an artefact of an 'information society'. "Empire takes form when language and communication, or really when immaterial labor and cooperation become the dominant force" [6].

Sadly the term 'Empire' leads to pointless arguments, which is why I prefer to use the phrase 'distributed governance'. 'Empire' implies an Emperor and a dominant State, contradicting the author's assertion that there is no such Emperor or State. Secondly, its singularity implies a level of deliberate co-ordination, rather than levels of confusion and conflict. Thirdly, it is easy and common to object that under its current Administration the US \*is\* attempting to gain a more traditional empire. As Robert Steel writes: 'Suddenly everyone has discovered, and accepts as a commonplace, that the United States possesses an empire' [7]. Even so, Hardt and Negri's analysis holds, as maintaining this conventional empire has not proved easy in an age of distributed governance. The US may already be overextended economically and possibly militarily, as modern technology (which cannot be confined in one place and vastly extends the destructive power of small groups) makes it much easier to attack than to hold conquered territory. Making dominance explicit in a world of distributed governance might make it more vulnerable, and we should not confuse dominance with domination. Besides, there is no real reason to assume that the order favored by important nodes in the network such as Microsoft, Coca Cola or Haliburton is always completely the same.

The term Negri and Hardt oppose in polarity to Empire is Multitude, which is defined as all those who labor and produce under capital, and it is asserted that the differences which divide labor no longer exist [8]. The Multitude is the 'class of productive singularities, the class of the operators of immaterial labor' [9]. This is also an unfortunate definition as it excludes 'unproductive' singularities and people who engage in 'material labor', although it does conform with dominant ideas about the 'creative class' and the 'information economy' [10]. The formulation also reduces the diversity of the multitude and does not take dispersion, confusion, chaos and conflict within it seriously. Indeed commenting on his books Negri emphasizes the "transformation of \*organized\* subversive behavior" keeping the necessity for organization at the heart of rebellion [11]. The consequences of disorder on conceptions of the Multitude will be discussed later.

### **Ordering and Disorder: Problems of Control**

It is probable that modes of ordering the world via culture and categories, generate the sense of ambivalent things, of excluded things or of things out of place, which are then thought of as unsettling, or as 'waste' or 'pollution'. Dirt and pollution make the system of ordering visible or stable. Categorization itself may produce perceptions of disorder [12]. Similarly, production may depend upon destruction, or on the separation out, or the manufacture, of waste [13]. I have shown elsewhere that the strategies employed by members of an internet mailing list to produce a functioning community also undermine that community [14]. In this paper the argument is extended and applied to dispersed power generally. What people attempt to control can become productive of

disorder, which can in turn impact upon the ordering system, and undermine those who attempt the ordering.

As a simple analogy; if an existing order of objects is tidied by a person who cannot perceive this order, then the original people may no longer be able to find things. Tidy, schematic orders imposed from above may contradict existing orders which have risen spontaneously and are unknown by the 'superiors'. Then again the tidying may cost much more than it is worth and distract from other, more essential, tasks [15]. New entities which arise during change are also hard to categorize and create messes in conceptual and organizational systems, especially when an old system is applied/enforced [16].

William Burroughs succinctly discusses the generalized paradoxes of control [17]. His first paradox is perhaps more conceptual than actual; control, he claims, requires acquiescence, opposition or delay otherwise it is not \*control\*. If control systems succeeded completely "then there would be nothing left to control" and control loses its psycho-social meaning and rewards [18]. His second paradox is that the "more hermetic and seemingly successful a control system is, the more vulnerable it becomes". Burroughs points out that Mayan priests were so successful using the calendar as control they did not need an army and so could not defend themselves against invaders. Similarly, once force is used it usually has to be maintained because of the fear of revolt, even if it is against the interests of the users of force and, further, the 'controllers' of that force need protection from their protectors [19].

Deleuze refers to Burroughs when discussing the shift from "disciplinary societies" to "control societies" and the hypothesized move from disciplinary confinement to continuous control, but sadly he seems to lose Burroughs cultivation of paradox and ambiguities, despite saying that control societies have overlapping and competing methods of control [20]. Developing this, we could assume that in a so called 'disciplinary society' institutions tend to be arranged in an exclusive hierarchical classification scheme with all entities ideally classified under the discipline or control of one set of institutions, say medical, judicial, military etc. This produces a relatively ordered and stable classificatory schema. However, in a society of control, a person faces overlapping, and possibly competing, jurisdictions and classifications and, as Abrahamson suggests, this is more likely to produce mess – especially if the organizers still maintain hierarchical classificatory schemas. [21]

As implied, these kinds paradoxes are not just problems of 'societies of control'. For example, David Graeber suggests that being able to force people to do things through violence creates a power/stupidity nexus, as the user of violence no longer has to think or gain information [22]. This can lead to their eventual downfall or to them acting in complete ignorance. There are also the well known, if humorously presented, principles of disorder which mainly affect those in authority, such as Parkinson's Laws ("work expands to fill the time available", "officials multiply subordinates", "Expenditure rises to meet income") [23], the Peter Principle ("in a hierarchy every member tends to rise to their level of incompetence") [24], Celine's Law ("Accurate communication is possible only between equals") [25], and the implications of the fact that manager's constantly produce disruption by re-organizing workplaces, possibly to show they exist and are worth the money spent on them, thus preventing workers from doing anything useful [26]. The chances of rulers being effectively informed is further lessened by the huge amount of data they can collect, the unanalyzed theories embedded in the programs which collect the data, the growing tendency of politicians to use paid and deliberately biased staffers part of who's job is to keep them deniably uninformed, and the quest for quick results and maximal short-term profit as their own incomes depend upon what can be earned while they have the position.

It may, however, be the case that a total network of distributed governance increases the effect, as was implied by Paul Valéry, in the 1930s. In his view, the greatest change in the world of his time was that it had become finite and interconnected. Previously, he argues, it was possible to foresee and calculate the localized results of actions, but now every action has repercussions on a host of unexpected interests all over the world and gives rise to multiple instantaneous events. As a result, events do not have simple causes or consequences, and there is no recognizable pattern of continuity or causality in this world of multiplied relationships, so "the expectations of any calculator are always disappointed" [27]. Even, inequalities of power can be unstable, not only through the profitable distribution of destructive technology, but through discrepancies of population [28]. He goes on to suggest that there is a conflict between traditional ways of relating and the new interdependence [29]. This interdependence is increased by the use of Information Technology, which is itself unstable.

### **Information Technology and Failure**

Evidence of the ongoing failure of order in the information/network society is provided by the common failure of those software implementations which make us an information or network society. Saran reports a survey in which 73% of 450 IT directors across the UK, Germany and France said they had suffered from major faults in their IT systems [30]. The Standish Group, a technology consultancy company, estimated that that 30% of all software projects were cancelled, nine out of ten came in late, almost half ran over budget, and 60% were considered failures by the organizations that initiated them [31]. Indeed, some research has indicated that ICT is often implemented almost by faith, without review of its effectiveness or cost [32].

However, the financial cost of such failure is obvious (although figures are more freely available for public systems). For example, the UK National Health System's, National Program for Information Technology had by late 2006 at least doubled in cost to £12 billion, with massive delays, pull out by programming companies, allegations that the software systems did not work and loss of confidence in eventual success among users. Similarly the UK Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee declared a £100m UK Customs Service was a failure because the new system was more complicated than the previous paper-based version [33]. The American Internal Revenue Service wrote off a \$4 billion multi-year overhaul of its computer system when it failed completely in 1997. The American National Institute of Standards estimated that straightforward computer bugs "cost the U.S. economy... \$59.5 billion annually" [34]. The amount of work hours lost through these failures would significantly add to these figures.

However, even when successful, IT often produces disruption, or restricts actions [35]. Previously simple procedures can become complicated and local flexibility can become constrained. Users have to contend with programmed categories rather than their reality, and have to learn how to 'fudge' the system in order to function. Kallinikos suggests that if IT systems add complexity and connection, then they almost inevitably sabotage standard modes of organizing which depend upon simplification and boundaries [36]. On the other hand Henman talks of 'targeting', or the ways that people are forced into categories in order to comply with the requirements of the data processing system [37]. While such categorization assigns worth, risk and treatment to people, and dictates business behavior towards them, it may not reflect the more complex reality. Such systems inevitably try to limit the possibilities of behavior, which in turn reduces flexibility. People, who resemble offenders in a constructed category, may end up as much the focus of government effort or surveillance in time and

money as those who do offend, and their behavior may alter in unexpected ways as a result. The State therefore, could create disruption to itself by its attempts to increase control.

IT can also cause loss of local knowledge (if data is not in the system it does not appear to exist), and it fosters the rapid and humanly uncheckable accumulation of unforeseen consequences which may result in chaotic breakdown. Members of an organization may employ these hidden models, or the diffuseness of responsibility, to implement their own projects, leaving those lower in the hierarchy feeling confused and helpless; thus increasing resentments and disruptions in the workplace, or among those subject to the administration.

IT directly enters into the question of corporate power with those global business systems (such as derivatives and forex markets), which only exist due to IT and which are intended to produce order, but which may actually increase unpredictability through adding complexity, or by undermining conventionally necessary distinctions [38]. Estimated turnover on the Forex markets is 1.9 trillion US dollars a day (of which 95% is speculative), and on derivatives is 1.2 trillion US dollars per day; dwarfing conventional trade and making the 'regular' ordered economy parasitic on dispersed and chaotic speculation [39]. This produces what the General Manager of the Bank for International Settlements calls "an unusual, perhaps unprecedented, combination of financial imbalances". Palan argues that the deliberately chaotic nature of the 'offshore world', defined by its exemption from taxation and regulation, is an important part of modern business [40]. This offshore, semi-underground scheme of transactions also enables the distribution of organized crime and terrorism, which might aim at undermining corporate domination [41].

It is improbable that this waste and expenditure is a deliberate control strategy, but it does arise as a consequence of using IT for control. IT can extend and add failure to an existing system as well as add precision.

Before proceeding to suggest that these kinds of events imply that the contemporary world escapes orderly theorizing and must change the way we approach it, I want to further look at the ways that dominance of power has shifted, yet attempts at control remain only partially successful.

### **The Growth and Decline of the Modern Nation State**

The 'Modern Period' can be characterized in terms of the growing inclusion of the State [42]. This view primarily sees the State as not just a site for rule, but as a site where factions compete and compromise to varying degrees [43]. The more democratic the State, the more open it is to roughly equal participation and internal competition. The late sixties to early seventies may well have marked the peak of this process of inclusion in the West, with increased participation of minorities, ethnic groups, gays, those defined as criminal, and possibly the citizens of other countries through NGOs and International bodies. War in Vietnam had been shut down partially by incompetence, partially by a dedicated enemy, and partially by protest and international action. Resources and wealth were not just distributed to a 'ruling class,' and predictions were made of a future of general leisure. Samuel Huntingdon wrote:

The 1960s witnessed a dramatic renewal of the democratic spirit in America. The predominant trends of that decade involved the challenging of the authority of established political, social, and economic institutions, increased popular participation in and control over those institutions, a reaction against the concentration of power in the executive branch of the federal government and in favor of the

reassertion of the power of Congress and of state and local government, renewed commitment to the idea of equality on the part of intellectuals and other elites, the emergence of the 'public interest' lobbying groups, increased concern for the rights of and provisions of opportunities for minorities and women to participate in the polity and economy, and a pervasive criticism of those who possessed or were even thought to possess excessive power or wealth [44].

Previously passive or unorganized groups in the population now embarked on concerted efforts to establish their claims to opportunities, positions, rewards, and privileges, which they had not considered themselves entitled to before [45].

This increase in participation and the resultant complexity was seen as threatening by those who had previously thought they were in control and who resented the resulting untidiness. Thus, Huntington argues that these events, which he calls "the democratic distemper" or an "excess of democracy", were problematic for good government, for governmental authority (on behalf of elites), and for American military hegemony [46]. Huntington divined that power no longer lurked in quite the right places and that the change threatened boundaries and control. Hierarchical classification and ordering systems were under attack. He argued that this potential violation needed to be overcome by a focus on economic issues and by encouraging voter apathy [47].

This strategy seems to have been pursued. The 70s and onwards saw the, largely corporate, foundation of Right Wing, pro-capitalist "think-tanks" in both Britain and the US, whose mission was to restore the appeal of 'free-market' economics [48]. This was achieved by associating the distrust of government, which arose during the Sixties and the Nixon years, with a free market agenda of 'looking after oneself', and cutting back on State 'intrusion' into social security. The left may have helped this agenda by often arguing that social security was a form of state discipline, although it is doubtful they appreciated the results.

Whether intentionally or not, as the 20th Century came to a close, access to the State was rolled-back, participation of the less powerful was diminished, income was no longer redistributed to the poorer sections of the nation, education was no longer free, and the tax burden shifted from the corporate sector to wage earners [49]. Faced with only paying 17% income tax, without taking any avoidance measures, investor Warren Buffet is reported to have said that "There's class warfare, all right... but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning" [50].

This family of events would imply that the corporate sector has become the dominant sector of Western English Speaking Countries and that hierarchy was effectively reintroduced.

Yet this change has not clearly resulted in the \*appearance\* of a definite ruling class with recognizable members, and institutionalized complete \*control\*. Garten's interviews with top CEOs seem to show that they do not feel in control and Lapham's account of a Davos conference also displays our leaders' confusion [51]. Was it planned that executive income would sharply decline after 2000 in the US [52]? Can we simply assume that the Bush Administration knowingly downplayed the difficulties of maintaining control in Iraq to the extent of having no plans for the occupation, or did they find themselves without control they had expected? Did in fact their attempts to impose order, produce a disorder which threatens the basis of their power in fear of military might? Was it intended that the distrust of government and voter apathy that Huntington recommended encouraging should mean that people become quite so disconnected from identifying with the State, or with seeing the State as corrupt or conspiratorial? Is it not conceivable that the focus on economic

issues means more people are aware of ongoing economic crisis of capitalism and the risk to their livelihoods? The web of post-modern power not only appears dispersed, but nomadic, elusive and always elsewhere. Because of this appearance, responsibility, and location of power is never clear, even to those who use it.

### **Patterns of Distributed Power**

Castells argues that capital is now, thanks to information technology, nomadic and flexible, able to strike where it will, and not easily locatable – whereas the majority of people are comparatively fixed and subject to these raids and movements. Capital lives in the "space of flows", and people in the "space of places" [53]. The powerful seem mobile, able to be transferred elsewhere with ease, again largely through information technology.

In this system of distributed governance power has no fixed base and responsibility is hard to allocate. As a result it is often hard to hold corporations responsible, as with the escape of the Union Carbide company management from any consequences over the ongoing Bhopal disaster. Union Carbide was bought out by Dow Chemicals who deny any responsibility or obligation [54]. Governments in Australia, and I imagine elsewhere, use privacy agreements and commercial confidentiality to prevent people from discovering the precise nature of their agreements with the corporate sector and the precise degree of tax payer money involved, or even if cheaper contracts were available. It also seems hard to hold any particular person in charge of a corporation responsible for the actions of that corporation.

Thus it is hard to act upon the system of power. Traditional modes of protest, such as occupying the streets or a building, are no longer effective, and neither is the Internet. As Valéry suggested in the 1930s the modern state, by taking power into some buildings and the hands of a few people, made revolution possible -- now the power is dispersed revolution may not be possible in the same way, if at all [55]. Critical Art Ensemble further point out it is the elite who can make use of cyberspace to make:

a diffuse power field without location, and a fixed sight machine appearing as spectacle... hostility from the oppressed is rechanneled into the bureaucracy which misdirects antagonism away from the nomadic power field. The retreat into invisibility of non location prevents [definition]... of a site of resistance... No longer needing to take a defensive posture is the nomad's greatest strength [56].

Sometimes, as part of this syndrome, politicians seem successfully able to blame events elsewhere for results in their own State, and thus support the official powers-that-be. Thus ordinary wages decline due to foreign competition and the ease of exporting jobs elsewhere through IT, while executive salaries increase due to the same international competition, also facilitated by IT, for the 'best people'. In these cases responsibility can be put upon the impersonal market, as if the market was not influenced by human decisions, and as if the market was not a political, but a natural, force. But although the market seems to demand policies which favor particular distributions of wealth, perhaps deferring to it also expresses the sense that even those at the top of the corporate sector have of not being in total control.

Another economic tool for avoiding responsibility is through share holding, in that decisions are supposedly the responsibility of the shareholders, most of whom have little idea as to what is going on. It often seems to be alleged that 'the people' own the corporations through their pension funds,

but not only do 'the people' have no control over these corporations, they have little control over how their money is invested in the first place. It would not be surprising if this supposed ownership was used to further diffuse corporate responsibility and to argue that we cannot have control over environmental issues, or whatever, because it may affect 'your' investments, and leave you penniless in your old age, and this would be 'your' fault.

Responsibility is distributed while the impact of power is focused on whomever it is affecting or confining. It seems common for power to be seemingly emptied out of a place so that the power of the emptying body can increase. In Guantanamo Bay people are kept under U.S. restriction while outside the presence of that country's laws, or outside international laws. The result is that although there is a war against terror those detained in this war are not prisoners of war. This may be disputed in courts, but it is a technique which seems to sit easy with the dynamics of distributed power. A related example in Australia occurred when then immigration minister, Amanda Vanstone, argued that people should not protest against the prolonged imprisonment of refugees, as it raised the hopes of refugees and would cause unnecessary pain. Shortly afterwards the then attorney general Philip Ruddock (with his Amnesty International badge prominently displayed) argued that lawyers, who attempted to represent those refugees able to get to court, would be held responsible for the failure of their cases, because they were clogging up the courts. This was despite the fact that most appeals to a court were successful, and if they took longer it was because the Department of Immigration kept challenging them. Yet again responsibility was deferred. It is not us who lock people up without trial that are cruel but the people who protest against it, or attempt to end it [57]. After claiming it was being emotionally blackmailed by refugees, the Australian Government, then proceeded to excise parts of Australia from immigration law, in order to be able to imprison refugees, and confine them in foreign countries so they would not have access to Australian courts or refugee advocates. In these cases power is increased by officially being deleted, but the fact that governments have to do this also shows how they fear things will pass out of their control.

In this condition it is not really the refugees, or prisoners, who become liminal (they are confined to a very specific place, under specific regulations, and very much outside); it is the government which becomes liminal. "Liminal identities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom and ceremonial" [58]. It, however, seems that this liminality is not being used to build any \*communitas\* in Victor Turner's communitarian sense, but it does attempt to deal with the disappearance, or increased vagueness, of marked hierarchy, clear rules, precise locations of power and responsibility. Unlike the liminal states described by Turner it is not "giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond" [59] but trying to overcome that recognition, or to break bonds which may be recognized but which are too threatening. It is truly a rite of anti-structure, a fight against, or a flight from, a briefly recognized complicity. If it does create community then it usually does so \*against\* some other, rather than through risking participation, because participation may even further destabilize the legitimation, of the power and increase the sense of resistance or dispersion. In this case there is another which has to be suppressed to bring the about promised world. In some ways it is like the workers' paradise that justified Stalinist oppression. Except that the liminal image is not \*that\* clear.

This lack of responsibility does not always work, as seems to be being shown by the increased number of executives facing trial for fraud, although sometimes the responsibility seems strained, as in the recent James Hardie case in Australia. In this case a corporation profited through knowingly poisoning their workers with asbestos. When this was discovered they transferred ownership of most of their assets overseas, while leaving some money with a foundation in Australia to deal with people



suffering asbestosis and mesothelioma. This foundation did not have anywhere near the money needed to deal with the cases which were going to arise. The company came to court and the Managing Director who set up the process was dismissed, after a huge payout to him. Nevertheless the company was not able to escape completely, information kept escaping and the workers with asbestosis became close to national heroes.

We can also see the confusion produced in the current US Administration by the refusal of evidence to portray things as it thinks they are. Thus, anyone, who read independent newspapers could have been better informed about the extent of Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction (largely due to leaks from intelligence agencies not wanting to be blamed for false results) than it seems the British, American and Australian governments were through their intelligence agencies. Wearing combat fatigues and claiming that major combat operations were over did not mean that the death rate among US troops did not increase and resistance grow harder to deal with. Photographs 'escaped' from Abu Graib, even if the prisoners could not. Attempting to suppress news of the increase in terrorist attacks in a report draws attention to the figures. If Suskind is correct, then it was the Vice President Dick Cheney's attempt to reduce the probability of attacks on America to less than one percent that produced the challenge to US power in Iraq [60]. Attempting to remove the fear of disorder creates disorder.

Those outside the process tend to think that there is some vast conspiracy going on, because they assume that people in power \*can\* control things (that dominance equals control), and thus are engaged in dark unspoken plots. As Valéry writes "power always seems greater and more sure, the further one is removed from it" [61]. We might think that right wing media commentators who fill the media with denunciations of its left wing nature, are either suffering from delusions (precisely who do they think owns and controls the media, and who are they being paid by?), or they are incipient totalitarians who want to engineer a condition in which they only read stories which agree with their opinions. However, it is possible that they too are expressing the feeling that somehow, they don't have power either, that somehow it escapes them and resides in another place.

As stated previously, corporations are motile when compared to States, even when the States are necessary to impose the laws that make corporations and business possible, and to suppress worker dissent. The ability of corporations to engage in 'transfer pricing' whereby they take their profits outside of national domains, though incur costs within national domains, means that traditional ways of raising tax from corporations do not work [62]. Similarly corporations can get States to compete for the lowest tax rates on their activities, or even to pay subsidies. The tax burden is shifted on to those smaller companies or wage earners who cannot shift their incomes off-shore. As a result the revenues of Nation States may decline, and proposed regulation of corporations (such as the suggestion of curbs to pollution), or tightening of taxation can be greeted with threats of corporate flight [63]. This sets up a paradox in which the motility of corporations threatens the financing of the State mechanisms they need to survive and may weaken the nationalism which has been a standard tool of the right. In this way, in distributed governance with complex interconnectedness and dispersion, reality not only escapes but may seem to strike back against the aims of ordering.

This dispersed power, carried through wires, command and control systems and virtually present force, is like our online presences. It is not only neither firmly present or absent, or even present and contested, but has no obvious boundaries and appears as spirit-like; a magic life haunting the internet and the world, intangible other than when it strikes or is resisted. This power takes on a vague, undefinable life of its own – as Haraway states in a different context it is "disturbingly lively, and we

ourselves frighteningly inert" [64]. It seems probable that when humans find it hard to manipulate things then 'magical' styles of thought and categorization become both prominent and convincing, in order for us to act. This unclarity makes our reactions an uncertain divination, rather than straightforward perception. Perhaps the only way to move is to take a leap. As a result, we live in an 'info-mantic' society: the main part of the economy is based upon guesses about the future of chaotic or random currency shifts, much information industry demands predictions of major and beneficial transformations, each piece of new technology will be 'thrown' to discover its effects on the world's future, and the news is saturated with prediction and tales of the latest breakthrough.

### **Physiognomy, Magic and Presence**

If contemporary power has no obvious boundaries and appears as spirit-like; a magic life haunting the internet and the world, intangible but buried in symbols and partial glimpses, then it cannot be assumed to be only present or absent. It is what I have called 'asent' [65] and difficult to act upon or to conceive. We search a collection of noticed events, otherwise random, which are used to tell us something about what seems \*hidden\*, or allows us to simplify the pattern. This is what anyone in the global system must do. It may be precise where power impacts them, but hard to tell where it comes from, where other power is, or even to tell what the power involves (as its use may be being denied). The system is too complex and dispersed for us to portray, and a fragmentary pattern gets taken for a whole. And our ordering may further destabilize appearance.

As a result of this ambiguity of presence, power can only be divined from landmarks, from general layout, from the surfaces perceptible, or imaginable, to us. In that sense, dealing with power and situations generally becomes a physiognomy or a divination from appearance. Physiognomy is based on the idea that the soul shapes the face, that the appearance reveals the inner and hidden, or that the world can speak to us if we are knowledgeable of its 'natural' signs. To get this inner nature, we search for a already known essence and try to distil it into a simple formula.

Divination can be defined as "modes of communication developed to bridge realms that are intimately related yet distinguishable – the realm of ordinary or 'visible' experience and the realm of unseen powers" [66]. The unseen powers become the forces of the world. That is not to say that a divination cannot be an incipient science. Physiognomy is related to weather forecasting and medical diagnosis [67]. Paracelsian Oswald Croll writes: "For every disease... and its medicine, are of one physiognomy, chiromancy and anatomy" [68]. It can be anticipatory of some kind of systematic knowledge.

As von Franz suggests "if one looks at a chaotic pattern one gets befuddled" and this draws forth the unconscious as it is active all the time; dreaming and waiting for events to be projected upon [69]. This is its charge and its danger – it can break down the known order to forge new vision or can leave one trapped in local fear. Ideally the diviner should be detached from the field they are divining, and not care about the results. Then we can get a degree of insight, or pattern detection, which we could not gain from the limited routine knowledge of the ego. This may produce transformation in the enquirer, a new framework for questions, the uncovering and resolution of buried conflicts, or something as precise as social reorganization after the death of a socially important person and so on [70].

Even here, the divination, at best, expresses some partial truth, usually reflecting the personality or position of the diviner. It is not separate from its space of divining, or the culture of divination.

However, without caution and experience then we become truly captive of our habitual frameworks and the processes which appear numinous beyond question. The result is a possession. Through unconscious projection, ordinary events accrue meaning; they become symbols laden with multifaceted and contradictory imports and values which have their own dynamism within our psyches. This can in turn become similar to paranoia, especially given that dispersion may lead to the fragmentation of elements of perception. At best the information becomes what is already known with other things to be ignored; unless, perhaps, one has experience dealing with the unconscious. Traditionally the Christian West has defended against this possibility of possession by divining from natural signs, rather than from hearing voices [71].

When the divination fails completely it will be because the diviner has some obsession, or is divining outside their personal unconscious experience. In small-scale communities this is not such an issue as everyone's problems are to some extent shared, collective or known to each other; thus the diviner is more likely to be accurate, or at least satisfying to most people [72]. However, we need to remember that obsessions, or obsession fantasies are frequently group and socially based, and increase the more groups are separated from each other; then divining makes the other group a scapegoat.

In that case divination systems can function as ways of detecting the source of evil, or of evaluating others and the roles they play in society. For example speaking of Ndembu Divination Turner writes that "Divination seeks to uncover the private malignity that is infecting the public body" [73]. Again, divination is not free of pre-existent politics or hostilities, or of attempts to negotiate a way of life amid multiple possibilities and potential catastrophes, and can be led by this. Even if we do not refuse to see our own culpability and thus have to assign it anywhere else, we still attempt to live within the probabilities of power, and perhaps attempt to divine what has prevented our control of the situation, and thus become evil. So, divining power can be a part of the social process that leads to further social separation and political polarization, as we attempt to eliminate the truth expressed by the other. In other terms, in the West at least, we tend to want the results of an oracle to be good or bad, rather than complex, and thus tend to force the information into simple patterns [74].

Another problem, which particularly arises in the West, is that divination, rather than being used to find patterns or the nature of the current situation, often turns into prognostication – which may be why so many analyses of the current world turn into stories about the future, and these then use the monotheistic mythic background model of future apocalypse; the imagery seems basic to our sense of self.

The problems of divination increase when the inferences are less connected to actions, or the results of actions get buried in complexity. When actions do not work according to magical or divinatory theory, then a force of ubiquitous magnitude is often created to explain this failure. This can inflate the actual known opposition into a major force as may have happened with al-Qaeda; originally a small fairly closed group, but now become the name given to any enemies of the US who strike effectively, thus spreading its ideology and repute, and gaining it the allegiance, or good will, of those religiously opposed to the US. This creates more chaos and disorder in the power field.

With divination, it is not just that finding rules becomes difficult, but that reading can disintegrate in the face of too much meaning. Texts may appear to have clues which reinforce what we have already conceived, giving sense to our sense lack of control or understanding. It seems to become impossible to interpret people according to their intention (and intention may have little to do with consequences

anyway), and I'm not implying that this essay is immune to that – if it was then the situation would be different and subject to resolution. However, if divination and chance are not recognized, or we try to eliminate chance, then the possibility increases that everything will seem determined by unconscious projections, by a vast conspiracy, by the location of evil in outgroups, and through the reduction of complexity to 'good' or 'bad' situations. The effects of our own disordering order is discounted.

It could be argued that people can use a rational knowledge of history to navigate the present, or that "history provides the future with the means of being thought about" [75]. Valéry, however, points out that when it is impossible to be aware of all relevant events (either in the present or in the past) then our conception of history remains rudimentary and our politics futile [76]. History teaches nothing for it give examples of everything [77]. Thus the Bush Administration argued as if Saddam Hussein was Hitler, and negotiation and weapons inspection equaled appeasement. They already 'knew' that Iraq must have weapons of mass destruction and must be collaborating with al-Qaeda. They predicted what would happen in Iraq based on events in Germany and Japan after the Second World War, others predicted what would happen in Iraq based on Vietnam; but Iraq is not Germany, Japan or Vietnam This comparison of dissimilars makes history a kind of closed divination in which random events are fitted into expected patterns of the past, based upon what people hope or fear.

A group's understanding of history also depends upon them casting aside the rubbish and chaos present in 'real' history and accepting only what is amenable to their existent habit and thought, and this discarded rubbish may bite back, as when people are ignorant of another group's suffering. In this sense, using history to divine the future becomes a matter of rhetoric and magic, especially when the only things we can guarantee are that the future will be different, and that power is dispersed and ambiguous. History becomes a myth, and the history we know is what we are condemned to repeat as failure. Divinatory history is useless when faced with new events, or new 'facts'.

After all President Bush's main reason for invading Afghanistan and Iraq was that God told him to [78]. Unlike the Reagan Whitehouse, which introduced another semi-independent consciousness into their divinations with an astrologer, he reverted back to the voices and possession.

Valéry argued some time ago that our theories have not caught up with our levels of interconnectedness and uncertainty and the Romans could find "more just and consistent ideas in a fowls entrails than all our political sciences can muster between them" [79]. Despite the years it is doubtful if anything has changed. Tetlock's study of 284 people who were recognized experts in predicting political events showed they were generally less successful than a random choice, and the more the experts had a single grand theory, the less likely they were to be accurate [80]; so perhaps deliberate divination would not be that foolish – what may be foolish is to be run by the conventions of Western divination without being aware of them and to ignore the forces of what we might call imagination.

## **The Multitude**

Dispersion of power into chaos, undermines Negri and Hardt's arguments about the Multitude and democracy. They claim the Multitude is supposedly composed of singularities, but is not a mob, crowd or mass, as these easily collapse into an "indifferent whole". The Multitude acts "not on identity or unity... but on what it has in common" [81], it is singularities which act in common [82] and as stated earlier it is asserted that the differences which divide labor no longer exist [83].

This reduces the organizing principle of the analytic categories to similarities and harmonies (within the big polarity), rather than accepting that members of categories can be linked by different commonalities. However, the prime problem with this method of categorization is that it ignores the ways that members of the multitude could differ or come into conflict, or the ways that they organize could disrupt that organization. The term imposes uniformities on the World which do not exist, and obliterates differing and incommunicable cultures. We can see this apparent incommunicability and hostility within the Multitude of our own Western societies, which may even have been increased by IT, without having to assume that conflictual differences will not exist within the complexity of the World.

There is, for example, little evidence that the differences which divided labor no longer exist. Some labor movements seem to have been co-opted by the corporate classes in the US [84] – again showing the problems with divination – and in the 2004 election in Australia timber workers supported the rightist government against forest conservation. Active snobberies might divide the multitude – such as the "aspirational" classes the then leader of the Australian Labour Party Mark Latham separated from the worthless poor, not to mention race and gender divisions. Finally, if the Multitude is linked in information technologies, ignoring the vast parts of the world which are not, then they may well be divided by work based knowledges which are not widely distributed, and which do not allow much in the way of intercommunication.

Groups can also interact to polarize or separate, and this is also communication and can result from networks. Such interaction may also continue to produce what they have in common, such as mutual hatred etc. Communication and connection is not an unrelieved good always bringing harmony, or construction.

Networked communication can be paradoxical communication, with order producing disorder. Incessant 'communication' can be a way that alternate paths are suppressed [85]. Communication can become change from exchange to display as in many blogs. Jodi Dean suggests that this communication no longer forms a way of building connection but acts as an economic form – yet another way of alienation [86]. With networked links the Multitude can as easily feel separated as from each other by the modes of communication. There is no necessary connection between distribution or dispersion and harmony

Furthermore, messages become subsumed as isolate propaganda, the appropriateness of which is still determined by reference to items in the mainstream media which provide the context for semantic resolution. The mainstream can also bring forth responses which it largely ignores. As Dean points out "the more opinions or comments that are out there, the less of an impact any given one might make" [87]. Within, this domain of saturated non-messages it is always possible to divine a conspiracy, and some of them may even be real.

## **Conclusion**

There is no need for a triumphant or cautionary conclusion. What can be presented is only a divination, and a very incomplete one at that. A sketch has been made of how the West has moved from a trend towards participatory governance to a trend towards distributed governance. Despite claims to the contrary, dispersing power has not been inherently democratic or unauthoritarian. It has changed the balance of power strongly in favor of the corporate sector by allowing the forces of capital to be motile, by giving the powerful new ways of acting while making their responsibility

unclear, such as allowing the excavation of official power in order to increase power. However, despite this trend, the modes of ordering employed can undermine this attempted order. Therefore the system is not stable or subject to total control. The situation may never be controllable, and we should not necessarily be upset about this; as Valéry observes it is enough to consider that collective life needs to be organized according to an intelligible pattern for the idea of dictatorship to be conceived [88].

We can take Negri and Hardt's idea of distributed governance seriously without engaging in fantasies that the Multitude are a unity of any type, or are independent of the system of which they are a part, or that they can be extracted from it, or that they can take over its control. However, let us take dispersion, and the unpredictable complexity of the system seriously, being aware that the system may be beyond our control, or behave unexpectedly, without assuming that orders which emerge by themselves are necessarily beneficial. We cannot be sure that any point or place is not significant for action, but on the other hand we cannot assume that action at any point will reach the centre, or will not rebound.

Given the complexity of the world and the possible self underminings of action, then attempts to analyze this world become a kind of divination, which have the potential to be trapped in Western conventions of divination (such as being short term, future oriented, reduced to good [triumph] or bad [disaster], and claiming certainty too soon). This further undermines both the ability of the powerful to control everything and the ability of the multitude to challenge it. More conscious awareness of this feature of contemporary life might lead to a more skeptical and inquiring type of prognostication and divination. One that allows a recognition of any divination as partial, incomplete and possibly warped by our own psyche and hopes.

Recognizing the limits and precariousness of knowledge, of politics or sociology as divination, may be useful. When prediction, or our understanding of the world, is seen as divination rather than knowledge then it can possibly provide another framework with which to perceive events and allow unconscious knowledge to become visible. It may even make us more modest in our claims about what will happen. However, this is not simple. Divination needs to be tested by logic and trial, and changed as new information arises.

What this calls for is the recognition of the irreducible nature of complexity. We cannot always reduce the complex to the simple. We are not looking for the "deep simplicity" which underlines chaos [89], so chaos theory is of little use. We also need to recognize that different people may define chaos and disorder differently and that what we perceive as disorder may be another person's order, and that imposing our order will simply increase complexity and the probability of unforeseen consequences. Precision might only ever be possible locally, and there may be no such thing as standard events or responses. We recall the concepts hidden within the term \*cybernetics\*: of 'steering', of adjustment, uncertainty and alteration of course by feedback.

However, the system may not be under the control of the elites who pretend that it is theirs. One of the characteristics of distributed governance is that the opposition seems everywhere, or mystically powerful, when the resistances may be systemic and simply escape control. The pretence of elites is also an act of magi; a magic which works to some extent by evacuating power to increase it, but magic subverts itself. Evacuation of power could possibly become real, and distract elites from the real networks of power in which they participate. It may be possible to find gaps within this power, places in which the system is not so well set up. At these places of interstitial power, it may be

possible to act and set up a tipping point which brings it all down. But there is no guarantee of improvement. If the system falls, so might the world.

Politics requires caution, when the ripples of a stone in a pond might create a tidal wave.

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[71] I know of no good general history of Divination in the West. However it seems that most writing in the middle ages and renaissance followed the division between divination by frenzy (getting direct inspiration and hearing voices) and divination from natural signs (such as formations of the liver in a sacrificial victim or the flight of birds). The idea of divination by the act of generating a random pattern was not often discussed until much later, despite the use of sortes and some geomancy. Christian writers although generally suspicious of divination until quite later were always inclined to assume that divination by voices was possibly demonic. Therese Charmasson "Divinatory Arts" in Walter J Hanegraaff ed \*Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism\*, Brill, Leiden, pp. 313-19.

[72] \*On Divination\*: 41-44.

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[87] \*Networked Empire\*: p. 273.

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[89] The Title of John Gribben's book on chaos/complexity theory, \*Deep Simplicity\*.