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Using Alberto Melucci's collective identity model: the case of the Anonymous collective

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Abstract

This paper discusses the popular model of collective identity of Alberto Melucci, its shortcomings and how they can be superseded. Melucci's collective identity model is almost always referred to in academic publications dealing with collective identity in social movements. Yet, the model is never fully used. To explain this discrepancy, the present article focuses on the 'action system', the part of the model that is the least cited in the literature and possible weak point. Theoretical limitations can be imputed on this concept, which seem to have lead scholars to avoid applying Melucci's model in full. However, acknowledging its existence, its limitations and attempting to alleviate them can prove useful to the study of social movements. To highlight this I use my previous work on the hacktivist movement Anonymous. The collective identity model of Alberto Melucci encompasses three components: the feeling of the participants to be part of the collective, the interactions between these participants, and the action system, that is the different ideas participants have to define their movements and their relationships with one another. The study of Anonymous' action system permits to understand how Anonymous participants consider themselves as a collective even if they can partake in actions widely different from each other. It can also explain the main divisions within the movement. However in Anonymous—as well as in many other social movements—the action system is not the only content of its collective identity, and the sole use of Melucci's model renders the study incomplete. To alleviate this problem, it is possible to add different types of collective identity definitions that are compatible with Melucci's model. Definitions of anonymity and self-organisation are such examples in Anonymous. Eventually, to offer an augmented version of Melucci's model permits to benefit from its explanatory power while superseding its shortcomings.

Keywords: Anonymous, hacktivism, social movements, collective identity, Alberto Melucci.

Introduction

The collective identity model of Alberto Melucci, an Italian sociologist who published his most influential works in the 1980s and 1990s before his premature death in 2001, is most often, if not systematically, cited by scholars of collective identity of social movements. Recently for instance, all of the nine articles constituting the 2015 special issue of *Information, Communication and Society* on "social media and protest identity" made mention of Melucci's framework. By contrast, the model has never been applied by anyone but Melucci himself.

The present article aims at explaining this discrepancy. I claim that this lack of application is the consequence of the limitations of a substantial part of the model, called the 'action system'. The action system describes the ideal content of collective identity, the concepts participants use to define their movement. It was insufficient to make sense of empirical findings discovered by other scholars. However, Melucci's model, and notably the action system, can be a useful framework for the understanding of social movements. I attempt to show this by applying the concept of action system to the case of the Anonymous movement, that I studied for the completion of my doctoral thesis (Firer-Blaess 2016) through a three years ethnography including participant observation, online interviews, documents and discussion analysis, and participants feedback. The application of the action system on this collective permitted to explain its progressive factionalisation.

In the first section of the paper, I present the notion of collective identity and the collective identity model developed by Alberto Melucci. Then I describe the Anonymous movement, the formation of its action system, and how factionalisation appeared. Finally I propose how some additions to Melucci's model can overcome its limitations and be a useful framework for the understanding of social movements.

The notion of collective identity and the collective identity model of Alberto Melucci

The term 'collective identity' has been used in the social sciences to describe very different phenomena, to the extent that a single definition cannot encompass them all. Definitions of collective identity can roughly be sorted into three different categories whether they focus on its subjective, objective, or intersubjective aspects. Studies focusing on subjective characteristics usually consider collective identity as the individual's identification with a larger group, that is, as Polletta and Jasper (2001) state, "...an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation" (285). The work of Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) gives a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic. Studies on the objective aspect of collective identity concentrate on the ideal content of collective identity, that is, which attributes members of the collective use to define it. Such attributes can be shared traits of its members, such as ethnic background (Cerulo 1997, 386), shared grievances (Taylor and Whittier 1995, 163), or taste in the same tactics (Jasper 1997). They can also be attributes proper to the collective itself, for instance its organisation (Downey 1986). Studies on the intersubjective aspect of collective identity, finally, are concerned with networks of interaction and the construction of affects and ideas through these interactions. Gould (1995, 1998) for instance worked on the networks that formed the Whiskey rebellion and the Paris Commune, while Mische (1996) studied political youth networks in Brazil.

Alberto Melucci attempts at a synthesis of these three aspects. For Melucci, collective identity is made of three components: "emotional investment" on the subjective side, "cognitive definitions" on the objective one, and a "network of active relationships" related to intersubjectivity (Melucci 1995, 44-45). Collective identity exists first through the affective sense of belonging participants invest in the movement, which lead them "to feel like part of a common unity" (*ibid.*, 45). It is also expressed through the construction of meaning, shared ideas (also called cognitive definitions) that participants use to define the movement. Cognitions and emotions are finally framed through active relationships, which are parts of a what Melucci calls a "submerged" social network (*ibid.*, 57), defined as a social network that extends beyond the set of relationships occurring during collective action, but encompasses everyday life interactions of the participants from which activist actions arise, since participants are often embedded in countercultural networks that favour activism. Melucci often underlined the constructive, processual, communicative aspect of collective identity as a way to counterbalance the main perspective on collective identity at the time, which viewed collective identity as an always-already present essence rooted in structural (such a class) or primordial (such as race) features of a group (Snow 2001, no pagination). For Melucci, collective identity is not fixed, but is constructed and subjected to change.

Melucci's syncretism—his inclusion of the three previously described aspects of collective identity—, his social constructivist stance on the formation of collective identity, and his focus on dynamism and heterogeneity proved popular among scholars, to the extent that his Magnum opus *Challenging Code* (1996) was systematically cited in works on the collective identity of social movements. None, however, came to use Melucci's model as it was, and only Melucci himself and his students did so when studying several social movements based in Milano during the 1980s (Melucci 1984, 1989, chap. 3). I interpret this discrepancy notably by the perceived limitations of the content side of Melucci's model, namely the 'action system'. The action system is indeed its least summoned or cited part. I describe it below.

The action system encompasses the cognitive definitions participants use to define their own movement as well as their relationships with one another (Melucci 1995, 44). Participants to a social movement communicate these definitions, influence one another and negotiate so that they can reach a temporary agreement, which is needed to start collective action. The collective identity content of a social movement is rarely fixed and is most of the time subjected to renegotiations between actors during and between collective actions. In Melucci's model, collective identity cognitive definitions are always related to three aspects of collective action: 1) its goals (closing a nuclear facility, fostering public acceptance of a minority, etc.), 2) its means (demonstration, direct action, propaganda, etc.), and 3) its relationship with the environment (how the movement relates to the media, the public, the state, allies, etc.). Since resources are limited so that every idea cannot be implemented, and since some ideas can be contradictory to one another, choices need to be made.

For instance, Melucci applied his model on an Italian leftist youth centre situated in Milano in the beginning of the 1980s (Melucci 1989, 68ff). Concerning goals, the movement was torn between actions directed toward revolutionary class struggle and actions fostering the expression of alternative lifestyles. In terms of means, some participants were in favour of antagonistic methods such as direct action while others were advocating public dialogue and raising awareness. Finally in terms of relationship with the environment, some wanted a policy of introversion, limited interactions with the outside in order to concentrate on the fostering of affective bonds within the group, while others favoured intensification of interactions with the environment in order to seek external resources and forge alliances. In the case of Milano's youth centre, it became impossible for the participants to choose and come to an agreement, or to accommodate spaces to everyone's plan, so that the organisation became paralysed and unable to perform collective actions.

Melucci also studied two other collectives, namely a feminist group and an environmental group. In both Melucci found that they were faced, as well, with two competing and polarising options concerning goals, means and environment. Since agreements on collective definitions are not fixed yet bounded by these polarising options, Melucci defines the content side of collective identity as a "multipolar action system". 'Multi' because it concerns

three cognitive definitions, 'polar' because they both contain two opposing choices, 'action' because the cognitive definitions refer to characteristics of collective action, and finally 'system' because collective identity is then not a single point but a range of possibilities derived from states of compatibility and incompatibility between cognitive definitions. The multipolar action system can be represented by a diagram containing three axes, each axis representing a type of cognitive definition, their poles representing the different choices movements can make:

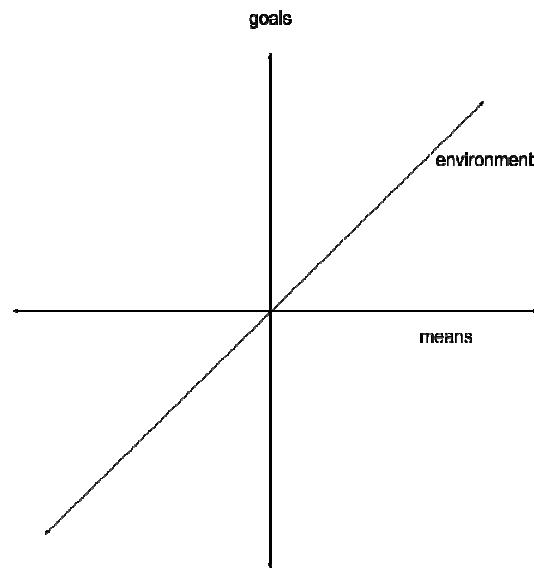


Figure 1: the multipolar action system.

The concept of action system can be criticised in different manners. First, Melucci never explains why social movements end up with two polarising choices for each type of collective definition and not more; whether this 'multipolarity' is specific to his case studies or whether it can be generalised. Melucci, notably, does not explicate what seems to be epistemological ties with systems theory and possibly Hegelian dialectics, where phenomena arise from the subsuming of tensions between two contradictory forces. Second, Melucci limits the types of cognitive definitions included in collective identity to characteristics of collective actions (goals, means and relationships with the environment), even though several academics, using similar content-focused definitions of collective identity, identified other definitions, for instance the type of organisation as cited earlier or the belief in shared moral and political values (Flesher Fominaya, 2010a,b).

My interpretation is that, as an esteemed scholar who spent significant time on the study of social movements, Melucci was probably aware that participants were defining their movement in other terms than those contained in the action system. Why, then, didn't he include them? Unfortunately, Melucci is not clear on this choice. One possible explanation is that he constructed his notion of collective identity with one particular function in mind, that is as an enabler of collective action, discarding other collective identity contents superfluous to this function. This interpretation seems in line with Melucci's general focus on the phenomenon of collective action rather than on the study of an identified collective actor, which is merely for him an illusional construct:

Movements are often described in terms similar to those used in addressing personalities or personages in tragic theatre, characters with a distinct and coherent role. Yet what in fact is in question are heterogeneous and fragmented phenomena, which internally contain a multitude of differentiated meanings, forms of action, and modes of organization [...]. The collective action of a movement is thus always related to something other than itself; properly speaking, it does not even exist. It is important to react against such theoretical liquidation of an object so salient in daily discourse and theoretical debate, and with so crucial a role in contemporary social processes. Beyond linguistic convention, only a theory of collective action can provide a meaningful basis for analysis of social movements. A discipline that sets out to study social movements can accomplish its task meaningfully only if it starts out from a theory that can account for the specificity and autonomy of social action, and can give a foundation to its collective character as something different from the sum total of aggregate individual behaviours. (Melucci 1996, 13-14)

But this possible reason could also be critiqued: there might be other collective identity cognitive definitions that play a role in the start or paralysis of collective action. The anti-nuclear Clamshell movement, for instance, paralysed itself when it refused to adopt a more delegative and vertical organisation best suited to its size, preferring to stick to its self-defining principles of grassroots organisation and consensus-based decision-making process (Downey 1986).

In any case, the circumscription of cognitive definitions to goals, means and environment limited its application by other scholars, because they were faced with empirical observations extraneous to the action system. It is, I think, the main reason why the collective identity model of Alberto Melucci was not used. This is unfortunate because the model, and notably the action system itself, can be a useful tool to understand social movements. In the

next sections I show how the application of the concept of action system permitted to understand the factionalisation of the Anonymous collective.

Anonymous and its multipolar action system

A short history of Anonymous

The Anonymous collective was born on the image board 4chan, a website created in October 2003, and on which a small, tight-knit community developed (4chan is today very popular and attracted in 28 million users per month in 2016 (4chan 2016)). An image board is a website similar to a forum or a bulletin board, used to discuss on a variety of topics and to exchange pictures. Image boards distinguish themselves from other platforms of communication by the ephemerality of their content (posts are deleted after a certain time), and by the presence of an automated ranking system where topics attracting the most answers stay the longest. 4chan also developed, after a few years, a culture of anonymous posting. Early on the 4chan community came to be known for its craft of popular 'internet memes' (especially image macros, that are pictures with an added caption (anonymous 2015, 7)), as well as for its collective actions akin to pranks, which often implied the harassment and eventually the ridicule of individuals or organisations, for the sake of laughter. Collective actions took an activist turn after the creation of the campaign 'Project Chanology', initiated in January 2008, which targeted the Church of Scientology (CoS) because it had attempted to remove material from the video-sharing site YouTube. Considered first as yet another prank from its participants, the campaign spread out in time, in terms of geographical space, in number of participants, and in number of actions in an unexpected manner. Following this success, some Anonymous participants (or 'anons' as they call themselves) gradually came to consider that the collective could act not only to have fun, but also for social justice. Part of the collective, which I call 'Chanologists', sided with this vision and autonomised itself from the 'channers' of 4chan, leaving pranks aside, centring their interactions on the web forum 'WhyWeProtest' and the IRC server 'AnonNet' to create other activist campaigns, such as 'Anonymous Iran' in June 2009 to protest the allegedly rigged elections in the country. Later on in the fall of 2010, a third branch of Anonymous emerged after some anons were evicted from Chanologist platforms because they were performing illegal actions. This branch of Anonymous, referred to here as 'Ubiquitous' because of the strong heterogeneity of its campaigns, created its own platforms, centred around the IRC server 'AnonOps', and quickly diversified its activities, supporting for instance the Occupy movement as well as the insurgents of the Arab Spring, raising a large number of diverse issues such as privacy, freedom of information, freedom of speech, human rights, and environmental issues. This summary is a crude depiction of Anonymous' main factions and a full description of the movement should include the myriads of more or less stable groups, sub-groups and alliances created outside and within these factions.

The division of Anonymous into three broad families—Channers (users of 4chan and other related platforms), Chanologists (centred on the forum WhyWeProtest and IRC server AnonNet), and Ubiquitous (centred on the IRC server AnonOps)—can be explained as failures to agree on a common positioning in the multipolar action system that the collective constructed for itself. By corollary, these families all consider themselves to be part of the Anonymous movement because, among other things, their own action system positioning is present within the boundaries of Anonymous' multipolar action system. In the next paragraph I describe the formation of this action system.

The construction of a multipolar action system.

Before the activist turn of Anonymous in 2008, the asserted goal of the collective was consensually understood as the the production of fun for the benefit of its participants. Within 4chan, anons created fun through the collaborative creation and posting of internet memes, textual and visual interactions characterised by an aesthetic and stylistic of offense, with the posting of shock value material, sexist and racist imagery and comments, and the normalisation of flaming and trolling during conversations (Firer-Blaess 2016, 110, 116). Finally, fun was and is still produced by the performing of 'pranks' toward outside actors, mischievous acts at the expense of someone else. One can cite the invasion of the virtual world Habbo hotel in 2008, the harassment of eleven-year-old Jessica Leonhardt (such as fake pizza delivery and hatred comments on her social media), the spread of the fake news that pop singer Justin Bieber was suffering from cancer and the creation of the fake campaign #baldforbieber that urged fans to shave their own heads in support, the rigging of internet polls that elected a school for the deaf as the winner of a corporate grant for musical hardware, and the election of the founder of 4chan as Time magazine Most Influential Person of the Year 2009 (ibid., 25). The Anonymous collective constructed its identity as a trickster figure, pranking people to have fun, sometimes revealing their hypocrisy, and uncaring of the damages it can create (Jung 1969, Vogler 2007, 77). It is at that time that the self-defining mottos "Anonymous is not your friend", "Anonymous can be a horrible, senseless, uncaring monster" and "Anonymous: because none of us are as cruel as all of us" were created and circulated within Anonymous social networks. This consensual vision was called into question during the series of events related to 'Project Chanology' in the beginning of 2008.

Project Chanology, the Anonymous campaign aiming to undermine the Church of Scientology (CoS), was at first a reaction against the attempted censorship of a video leaked on YouTube that showed an elated Tom Cruise

praising the CoS. It was bootstrapped by a shared emotional reaction against a perceived violation of the right to information. It was also, like any other pranks, a means to have fun. In a matter of days however, voices began to suggest that Project Chanology should not limit itself to be a fun-inducing punitive expedition, but that it could also become a long lasting campaign aiming to bring down an organisation not only guilty of the violation of free speech, but also of the violation of several human rights. These anons were proposing the addition of a new goal for Project Chanology: social change. This idea gained momentum notably because of the arrival of a new population attracted by the early media coverage that Chanology benefited from, a population that was more interested in activism than in the production of fun. This addition of activism as goal was the beginning of the development of a new persona for Anonymous as a force of good, a champion of people's rights, a dispeller of oppressive forces, a 'hero' in its etymological sense of 'protector' and 'defender'.

The addition of activism opened the door to previously uncared for issues concerning relationships with the environment and the choice of tactics. Chanology was faced with the question of the efficacy of its actions in terms of raising public awareness, the main mission participants decided to act upon. This question of efficacy was linked to the question of the public image of Anonymous, since to better vilify the CoS, the collective needed to show itself as a force of good, so that it could intensify a successful 'us=good/target=evil' narrative. Therefore, the rise of the goal of social change engendered the previously unthought-of issue of Anonymous' relationship with its environment. This issue, in its turn, generated a care for the type of means the movement could use, in terms of legality and morality: to make Anonymous 'look bad' was to take the risk to temper with the efficacy of its raising awareness campaigns. This issue was first raised by Mark Bunker, a long-term anti-Scientology activist. In a YouTube Video published a few days after the launch of Project Chanology, Mark Bunker advised Anonymous to stay within the boundaries of the law by stopping the electronic attacks performed against Scientology's server and to cancel plans of tempering with the CoS' buildings and cars. He proposed instead to lobby for revoking the CoS tax-exempt status by contacting elected representatives, to demonstrate, and to publicise the violations and abuses committed by the CoS. A consensus was rapidly formed on Chanologist platforms of communication for the acceptance of Mark Bunker's propositions, and all illegal actions were proscribed. Legal, 'grey zone areas', or misdemeanour actions were performed instead, such as black faxes, prank calls, misinformation campaigns targeting the CoS, and raising awareness campaigns on the internet with a humorous tone.

This decision of Chanologists to stick to legal methods is the landmark for the beginning of the construction of Anonymous' multipolar action system. Activist Anonymous created interdependencies between goal, means and environment. The goal of social change created a need to maintain a good public reputation in order to intensify a good vs. evil narrative. This need involved the avoidance of means that could be considered as immoral for the public, notably illegal acts. It also created the need for the continuity of the movement, involving the avoidance of illegal methods that could end in police arrests and the closing of platforms of communications.

Social change and the production of fun are not intrinsically incompatible. For the majority of Anonymous participants they are both incentives for action and can both be reached simultaneously. A part of Anonymous, however, came to consider these two goals to be incompatible, for two reasons. The first is the will, for some anons, to keep Anonymous as a pure trickster archetype. To add the goal of social justice is to add to Anonymous a moral compass, a vision of good and evil, which contradicts the original amorality of the collective. Anonymous pranks, indeed, often seek for reactions of shock, disgust, and anger from their targets. Hence, Anonymous risks to lose its trickster identity by caring about moral issues and developing a conscience. Second, close to this question of identity, is the issue that the development of morality would eventually limit the possibility to produce fun: if tactics such as harassment are prohibited in order to keep a good public image for reasons of activist efficacy, then it becomes less fun to act as Anonymous. Due to these potential contradictions, proponents of the trickster persona of Anonymous created their own interdependencies of goals, means, and environment in reaction to the creation of the hero persona: the search for fun called for the enactment of any type of means, including illegal and immoral ones, disregarding any effect it could have on the movement's public image.

This interrelation of goals, means and environment related to the trickster persona of Anonymous, present but not explicit before the construction of the hero persona, completed the creation of Anonymous' multipolar action system, with the presence of two conflicting choices between the three characteristics of collective action. The figure below represents it:

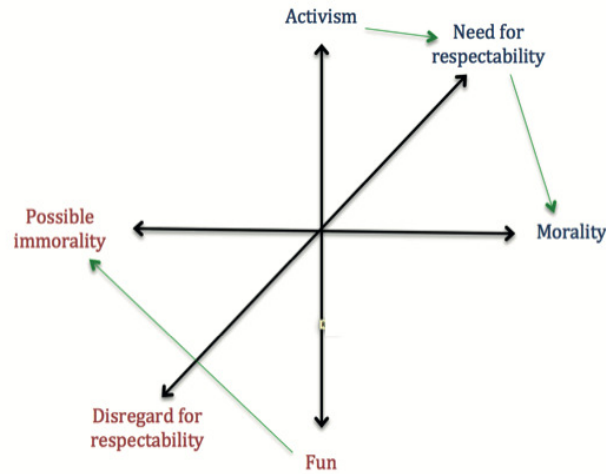


Figure 2. The trickster/hero multipolar action system of Anonymous. The vertical line concerns the goals, the horizontal line the means, and the diagonal the relationships to the environment. The blue cognitive definitions are part of the hero archetype, the red ones part of the trickster archetype. The green arrows show dependencies between definitions.

Factionalisation of Anonymous related to the multipolar action system

Tensions concerning where to position Anonymous within this multipolar action system became an important topic during Chanology, an issue that would come up regularly from there on. Within the collective, three groups appeared: the 'lulzfags'¹, championing the trickster persona, the 'moralfags', in favour of the hero persona, and the 'neutralfags', majoritarian during the Chanology campaign, who thought that both goals of fun and activism can be accommodated. Discussions failed to make everyone agree on a single logic of action. Some anons, on the 'radical' side of the lulzfags, refused the activist turn and attempted to sabotage the moralfag movement. For instance, they went to Chanology demonstrations by showing up with signs that had the contact information of some people participating in the protests, which was exposing them to harassment from the Church of Scientology. In March 2008, a group of radical lulzfags tried to damage Anonymous' public image by posting hundreds of flashing computed animations on the forum of the Epileptic Foundation of America, with the intent to induce seizures to persons suffering from epilepsy (Poulsen 2008). These actions, however, did not succeed into thwarting the development of the hero logic. Despite calls to unity, part of the lulzfags decided to secede from Chanology and to return to 4chan and other sister platforms in order to perform purely amoral pranks. With these departures, Project Chanology autonomised itself from 4chan and stabilised its own action system leaning toward a hero logic, though many participants still held the production of fun as an important goal. This middle position generated constant discussions concerning which means of action could be used, which actions could be fun inducing without causing troubles to the 'good guy' reputation of Anonymous (Firer-Blaess 2016, 135-137).

The issue of positioning on the multipolar action system continued to factionalise Anonymous twice, first creating the 'Ubiquitous' third faction, second leading to the formation of 'splinter cells'. In September 2010, different groups and individuals within the Anonymous submerged network, and mainly from 4chan, gathered and launched 'Operation Payback' to protest against the Motion Picture Association of America, which had hired a private company to perform DDoS attacksⁱⁱ against a file-sharing website. Operation Payback notably used the Chanologist IRC server AnonNet to coordinate, since it was known as the place to be to perform activist actions in the name of Anonymous. But the participants to Operation Payback decided to focus on the performing of DDoS attacks, a decision that was strongly reacted upon by the Chanologist community that had kept to its rule of prohibition of illegal means. Participants to Operation Payback were then asked to leave. They departed for other IRC servers before eventually setting up their own, that they would call 'AnonOps'. A second wave of eviction from AnonNet occurred in December 2010, when participants to the campaign 'Operation Avenge Assange' were expelled because of the use of DDoS attacks, and who joined the recently created AnonOps.

Because of its tolerant policy on different types of tactics, AnonOps rapidly grew popular, surpassing Chanology platforms in the number of operations carried out. The Ubiquitous faction arising from AnonOps attempted an original positioning on the multipolar action system: operations created for activist ends but with a strong focus on the production of fun, leading to an acceptance of immoral and illegal means and a lesser concern on the group's public image. This position, however, did not last. Pressured by the gradually perceived importance of the public reputation of Anonymous on the success of awareness raising campaigns, Ubiquitous reconfigured its action system positioning toward a position similar to Chanology's, with a care for its reputation and a rejection of immoral means. Some Ubiquitous participants, indeed, had recognised that some electronic direct actions like DDoS attacks and electronic penetrations were not well perceived by the public, notably because it had led most of the mass media to portray Anonymous as a dangerous collective threatening the stability of the internet (Klein 2015). A majority came to

agree that performing hacks, DDoS attacks and morally dubious means should be avoided. This decision led to the creation of 'splinter cells', autonomous groups with strong bonds of friendship and affection towards the Anonymous collective and the sharing of many ideological and cultural traits, but signing their deeds with their own group name instead of the Anonymous moniker. The most famous splinter cell was the 'Lulzsec' group, created by core participants of Ubiquitous mid-2011, which perpetrated a spectacular series of politically motivated and/or lulz-worthy hacks from May to June 2011. Lulzsec members, using their own signature, were able to perform actions that could otherwise have been frowned upon by a part of the community if they had done it under the name of Anonymous.

Conclusion: toward an augmented model of collective identity

To consider collective identity as a system of relationships between goals, means and relationships to the environment permitted to understand the reasons of the factionalisation of Anonymous. Shortly after the creation of Project Chanology, the consensual self-definition of Anonymous as a trickster figure was called into questions by participants who proposed to add another goal to Anonymous' actions, i.e. activism. While both activism and the production of fun can be achieved simultaneously, some proponents of activism advised to stop activities that could be dangerous for the continuity of the movement or hurting the public image of Anonymous, even though they were fun-inducing. At the same time, a fringe of the collective considered the addition of the goal of activism as an insult to the trickster persona of Anonymous, and the ban on some methods as unacceptable limitations on fun. From disagreements between these two sides of the collective, a multipolar action system was formed, with at one pole the cognitive definitions of a pure hero persona, with an activist goal and limitation of means for reasons of public relationships, and at the other pole cognitive definitions of a pure trickster persona, with the production of fun as a goal to be attained by any means necessary, oblivious to questions of public image.

Failures to agree on a common positioning on the multipolar action system caused the division of Anonymous into different factions. In the beginning of 2008, those who refused to part in collective actions with activist goal, or who wanted to perform illegal or immoral activities left Project Chanology to return to 4chan and other related platforms. These departures permitted Chanologists to find a middle ground on the multipolar action system, trying to accommodate both fun and social change when performing collective actions, but still keeping a ban on illegal means. This led Chanologists to expel, during the last quarter of 2010, several campaigns who were breaching the ban. Expelled participants left and created the IRC server AnonOps, which took a positioning that took both activism and fun in consideration and accepted immoral and illegal means. This positioning, however, did not last and Ubiquitous gave in to the need for a positive public image, as new norms discouraged the use of DDoS attacks and techniques of electronic penetration. From May 2011, participants at the core of Ubiquitous created autonomous groups in order to perform acts that were not accepted as originating from Anonymous itself.

Failures to agree on a common action system positioning did not, like in a few movements studied by Melucci, end up with its paralysis. Participants, indeed, praised heterogeneity for the most part and allocated different spaces for different positioning within the Anonymous submerged network. The issue of public image, potentially problematic because all signed deeds influence it, was solved by the fact that the moniker came to be used publicly only by those caring about Anonymous' public image, namely Chanologists and Ubiquitous. Channers indeed, to dissociate themselves from the 'moralfag' part of Anonymous, had progressively abandoned the use of the moniker, and splinter cells were created in order to act in their own name.

Considering now the collective identity of Anonymous in its entirety, studying its multipolar action system is not sufficient. Other collective identity cognitive definitions exist that are not included in Melucci's model, which I showed in my doctoral manuscript (Firer-Blaess 2016) and which I quickly summarise now. First, some anons link Anonymous to a culture of shock-value and a parrhesiastic mission to reveal and tell the truth. Second, Anonymous collective actions are defined by a grassroots organisation and the strong autonomy of users. Third, to act as anon often means to carry an ethics of self-effacement through anonymity, that is to act without the search for personal recognition or praise. Fourth and last, anons consider their collective as inclusive, everyone being welcome, and as universal and unbounded, so that it cannot be defined in a fixed manner nor can it limit itself to specific missions. The finding of these cognitive definitions does not invalidate Melucci's model. It shows that it is limited, but its overall logic still holds. Indeed, while these extraneous definitions have different working than the ones contained in the action system, they are still compatible with Melucci's general constructivist framework. They hold indeed a different logic, in the sense that they are not in potential contradiction or interrelated to one anotherⁱⁱⁱ, but they are still non-essential definitions and are constructed through interactions and negotiations between participants within the submerged network. Hence they can, with no apparent theoretical issues, be included into the content part of Melucci's model alongside the action system. Such addition permits to alleviate the limitations of Melucci's action system. Augmented, Melucci's model can be used to acquire a more holistic understanding of the collective identity of a movement and of its effects.

Theoretical frameworks can be tools to shed lights on reality, to hint us at where to concentrate our observations. With its synthesis of the subjective, objective and intersubjective approaches to collective identity, its constructivist and dynamic stance, and its functionalist understanding of collective identity as enabler of collective action, Melucci offers us a powerful model to fully describe the self-understanding of a movement, to underline the importance of feelings of belonging and interactions between participants, and to highlight the importance of collective identity in the life of social movements. However, some issues remain concerning the accuracy and utility of the model. For instance, are goals, means and relationships to the environment always essential cognitive

definitions? Do they systematically form multipolar action systems? Is Melucci's model, finally, applicable to recent forms of collective actions, for instance those related to the Occupy movement, which are characterised by "personal action frames" (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 743), derived from an individual and personalised understanding of the movement? More research is needed to answer these questions.

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Biography

Sylvain Firer-Blaess is an independent researcher. He obtained his PhD in Media and Communication at the department of Informatics and Media at Uppsala University, Sweden. His research focuses on the uses of New Media and their potential for social change. He notably studied the hacktivist movement Anonymous, the political economy and organisation of Wikipedia, and platforms of electronic democracy.

i 'Lulz' is a derivative of 'LOL', itself an acronym for 'Laughing out loud'. 'For the lulz' originally means to have fun at the expense of someone.

ii A distributed denial of a service (DDoS) attack aims at making a webpage unavailable by flooding a server with connection requests coming from multiple machines.

iii However they are sometimes in contradiction with the reality of their application. The definition of self-management, for instance, is often contradicted by the emergence of informal hierarchies and charismatic leaderships, which lead some actors to reclaim this principle by introducing debates on the issue, denouncing alleged leaders, or leaving operations to create their own, hoping to better express grassroots organisation.