On the uses of fairy dust: contagion, sorcery and the crafting of other worlds[1]

Abstract

We look to mythic resources to help us narrativise and conceptualise instances of "affective contagion" within social movements. We first review "Crowd Theory", from Gustave Le Bon to Freud, and then the mimetics of Richard Dawkins and his followers. We find both theories lacking when it comes to accounting for collective agency. Next we turn to the work of Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, conception of capitalist sorcery and their suggestion of crafting techniques to protect oneself against capitalism's spells, to "denaturalise" capitalism and thus to repotentialise the world. While Pignarre and Stengers draw inspiration from neo-pagan witches, we instead look the annals of pop history, where we discover 1960s band The Troggs struggling to grasp what turns any particular song into a hit record. We take their "sprinkling of fairy dust" notion and apply it to anti-capitalist struggles.

Keywords: Social movements, Myth, Virality, Crowds, Memes, Sorcery.

The 2011 cycle of protests saw oppositional movements emerging and spreading with awesome speed. Starting with the Arab Spring counter-systemic activities jumped the Mediterranean, inspiring the Spanish "15M", the Greek "Indignants" and many more before morphing into the Occupy movement; in England the summer ended with a contagion of riots that swept across London and other towns and cities. Seeking

---

[1] This article has its origins in a short chapter, AUTHOR A; the argument here has been substantially expanded.

explanations for "why it's kicking off everywhere", Paul Mason (2012, 65-85) identified two new "sociological types" at "the centre of all the protest movements": alongside "the graduate with no future" was the "Jacobin with a laptop"; the result was "networked revolution". While social networking tools like Twitter and Facebook clearly played a role in expanding those movements, this in itself is not enough to explain the power of these events. Struggles have *always* circulated one way or another – in the 1790s the Black Jacobins in Haiti and Parisian revolutionaries couldn't rely on tweets, but news went back and forth on the ships that crossed the Atlantic. So while the affordances of social media have brought the "viral" nature of this circulation to the fore they are not enough to explain why some events and practices, rather than others, are taken up, re-interpreted and re-played elsewhere.

In this paper we draw on folk and mythic resources to help us address the problem of collective agency in social movements that become gripped by moments of "affective contagion".[2] Our era has been dominated by two episodes of affective contagion. The first instance was the economic crisis, which despite its deep structural causes, became manifest through a spreading wave of panicked affect. Secondly, and in response to the first, we have witnessed several connected waves of popular uprising and explosive social movements including the turbulent 2011 mentioned above, but also the Brazilian and Turkish events of 2013. We believe that both the crisis and the movements that followed them have been shaped and shrouded by myths that need dispelling.

---

[2] Although we don't have room to fully engage with the literature of the affective turn in this paper we use the term 'affective contagion' in order to emphasise the "involuntary precognitive nature" of what flows between humans, and other bodies, in episodes of contagion. (Thrift 2008, 239).

Perhaps the most pertinent example of myth surrounding the former is found in the "magical thinking" that Clark and Newman (2012) identify within the underlying logic of "expansionary austerity", still the dominant policy response to the crisis in the UK and Europe. Krugman (2010) explains this logic:

Don't worry: spending cuts may hurt, but the confidence fairy will take away the pain. "The idea that austerity measures could trigger stagnation is incorrect," declared Jean-Claude Trichet, the president of the European Central Bank, in a recent interview. Why? Because "confidence-inspiring policies will foster and not hamper economic recovery."

We can trace Krugman's "confidence fairy" back to Keynes's discussion, in *The General Theory* (1936), of the psychological factors – what he called "animal spirits" – that guide individuals' economic actions. These psychological factors are, he explained, the amalgam of an individual's beliefs concerning other individuals' and institutions' future actions, which cannot be rationally predicted. Keynes argued that in the context of subdued "animal spirits", governments should *spend* money to restore confidence; Trichet (and other austerity-implementing policy-makers) are channeling the "Treasury view" that Keynes railed against, which has as its more modern incarnations monetarism and "rational expectations" theory. In this pro-austerity view, any government spending tends to "crowd out" private sector economic activity, which may well prolong the downturn as private economic actors will lose confidence in their government's ability to pursue sound policies.

This figure of the "confidence fairy" shows the central role that considerations of collective affect play in contemporary mainstream economics. Indeed, prefiguring the direction of our argument we can even see policy makers attempting to exorcise the affective contagions of panic and despondency through policy incantations that will

summon up the affect of confidence.

Our focus, however, is dispelling the myths through which anti-austerity movements must move, in particular, the twins myths that either 'leaders' are necessary or that leader*ship* is unnecessary, and the myth that a politics based solely on rationality and rational thinking is sufficient. We begin by discussing alternative approaches to understanding "the crowd" and the relationship between the crowd and leaders(hip). Here we move from Le Bon to Freud before considering recent insights from "critical leadership studies" and other scholars sympathetic to the notions of "leaderlessness" and "distributed leadership". We then turn our attention to the question of "virality" and "contagion". Examining Richard Dawkins's (1976) concept of the "meme", we argue that this metaphor tends to naturalise what already exists: human agency is removed by placing the meme centre-stage, and casting its accompanying algorithm of imitation and mutation as the actor, the "blind watchmaker" (Dawkins 1988). More generally, we argue that memetics is a poor concept for grasping the cascading effect of sharing on social media, in part because of its inability to account for collective agency but also because its association with the kind of Socio-Darwinism that acts as a principle mythic supplement for neoliberal subjectivity.

In opposition to the thrust of Dawkins's self-declared war on religion, we wish to move beyond the limiting concepts of both Crowd Theory and mimetics by delving into the mythical and indeed "supernatural" realms. In these sections we first review the argument of Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers (2011) that capitalism is a system of sorcery, albeit one without any sorcerers. In such a world, we need techniques that grant us some protection against "capitalist sorcery", that "disenchant". While Pignarre and Stengers look to the neo-pagan witches of the alter-

globalisation movement for their counter-rituals, we turn to the invocation of "fairy dust" by a desperate member of 1960s pop band The Troggs. We use this resort to the mythic to help us interpret some recent social movements, which appear to have spread horizontally without recourse to pre-established links or established leaders. In this way we hope to unearth the contemporary incantations of a politics of lateral affective contagion.

Here then we understand myths as narratives that help us make sense of the world. In particular we are concerned with myths/narratives that inform our understanding of the role of individual human agency in socio-economic change (vis-à-vis both 'lower' units such as the gene or 'meme' and 'higher' such as the collective). We understand these narratives as mythical for two reasons: first, because they are partial, not universal as frequently claimed; and second, because they operate at least partially at the level of affect or emotion. For this reason, myths cannot be opposed simply with 'rational' ideas; counter-myths are also required.

Ocholophobia

The idea that explosive, contentious politics spreads contagiously has a long pedigree. The reactionary Prince Metternich reached for a viral metaphor when he declared, in response to the 1848 cycle of European revolutions: "when Paris sneezes Europe catches a cold." The more sustained reactionary genre of Crowd Theory developed in the shadow of the 1871 Paris Commune, which, coming after a century of collective action, had forced the crowd to the centre of the political stage. These experiences produced real analytical difficulties for the emergent liberal ontological narrative of the rational, autonomous liberal individual. In response, a series of French and Italian

writers brought the newly emerging "sciences" of sociology and psychology to bear on the problem, discovering that far from being a force for progress, the crowd events of recent history were atavistic eruptions of primitive, irrational behaviour. For Crowd Theory the paradigmatic problem was the juridical one of assigning individual responsibility within collective acts. The theory sets up an individual of good character who is "swept up" by a crowd, commiting acts they would otherwise not consider. Crowd Theory is thus an attempt to account for affective contagion within an individualist ontology that denies collective agency. The Crowd Theorists found the means of doing so through the figure of the crowd leader. Though they differed on the mechanisms involved, there was general agreement that crowds formed in relation to leaders and that at least part of the collective subjectivity of the crowd was in fact a reflection of the individual subjectivity of the leader (King 1990). We can see such a schema at work in Gustave Le Bon's bestselling book *The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind*.

Le Bon (2001, 2) begins by setting out the distinction between the individual mind and the crowd mind:

Under certain given circumstances, and only under those circumstances, an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it. The sentiments and ideas of all the persons in the gathering take one and the same direction, and their conscious personality vanishes. A collective mind is formed; doubtless transitory, but presenting very clearly defined characteristics… It forms a single being, and is subjected to the *law of the mental unity of crowds*.

The mechanics of this mental unity are threefold. Firstly, "the individual forming part of a group acquires, solely from numerical considerations, a sentiment of invincible power" which in turn leads to a loss of inhibitions. Secondly, the crowd causes an affect of contagion where "every sentiment is contagious, and contagious to such a

degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest" (2001, 6-7). Lastly, and most importantly, membership of a crowd *mentality* lowers the participant's intelligence and leads to a heightened suggestibility. This leaves the crowd open to hypnotism by crowd leaders with any suggestion immediately reinforced by the mechanism of contagion. Although the crowd can come together without leaders, which means its hypnosis can be self-induced, Le Bon makes clear that crowds "are so bent on obedience that they instinctively submit to whoever declares himself their master" (2001, 75). In other words, the crowd's suggestibility needs a leader and so crowds automatically seek one out.

Le Bon's schema was designed to play on the predominant bourgeois fears of his time. As the leading crowd agitators of the late nineteenth century were of a socialist, communist or anarchist bent, then the danger, seemingly embodied by the Paris Commune, was that the suggestible masses of the newly teeming cities would be led to embrace a primitive, atavistic communism. In response Le Bon offered his book as a guide to the counter-manipulation of crowds by established elites.

When Freud (2001) comes to consider group psychology he takes Le Bon as his starting point, fully accepting his description of crowd phenomena. His sole point of criticism is that hypnotism is an inadequate explanation of the mental unity of the crowd. For Freud formation of the ego takes place, in part, through identification with external objects that act as ego ideals. This identification, as one of the earliest libidinal ties, is usually with the father. However in certain situations another object can take the place of the father as the ego ideal. So for Freud (2001, 116) a crowd consists of a "number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their

ego." This common object is the leader. Each individual in the crowd has a libidinal investment in the leader. However the leader, as a single person, cannot reciprocate all the libidinal energy that has been invested in him. There is a surplus that becomes invested in the other participants of the crowd, who can identify with one another as common egos since they share the same ego ideal.

Despite its long-lasting popularity Le Bon's description of the crowd is unable to account for a significant amount of crowd behaviour. Not all crowds act stupidly or irrationally, for example. Freud's conception has the advantage of identifying the crowd with the circulation of sublimated libidinal bonds. This allows him to account for crowds without diagnosing a necessary reduction in intelligence. There is though much crowd behaviour that still seems to escape Freud's description. His account seems limited to crowds in their most paranoiac form; indeed the image brought to mind is of a Nuremburg rally gripped by the oratory of Hitler.[3] We can suppose that Freud would advocate the adoption of a better father figure, but the anti-democratic political message of his theory is clear. Just as there can be no family without a father, so there can be no society without leaders. Indeed Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 102) describe Freud's schema as:

the disgrace of psychoanalysis in history and politics. The procedure is well known: two figures are made to appear, the Great man and the Crowd. One then claims to make history with these two entities, these two puppets, the Great Crustacean and the Great Invertebrate.

There are many other potential group formations but these are obscured by the presuppositions of Freud's theory of the unconscious. As Deleuze and Guattari (1988,

---

[3] Indeed this may not be a coincidence. Gonen (2003) provides a detailed tracing of the influence of Le Bon's theory on both Hitler and Mussolini.

29-30) put it:

Freud tried to approach crowd phenomena from the point of view of the unconscious, but he did not see clearly, he did not see that the unconscious itself was fundamentally a crowd. He was myopic and hard of hearing; he mistook crowds for a single person. Schizos, on the other hand, have sharp eyes and ears. They don't mistake the buzz and shove of the crowd for daddy's voice.

Crowd theory understands the crowd as inherently irrational whereas for Freud this is not necessarily so. Brennan (2004, 62), however, rejects the "view that the meaningful division is between the mad crowd and the sane crowd… on the contrary it is between the collective and the individual explanations of group and crowd phenomenum." Within Brennnan's division both Crowd Theory and Freud's group psychology provide an individual explanation of the group. They both fit into a mode of thought that can only conceptualise collectivity "as a sort of meta-individual, united by and bound to a single purpose and characterised by an ontological homogeneity" (Gilbert 2014, 51). Gilbert defines this mode of thinking as Leviathanic logic, named after "Hobbes's claim that what binds together the members of society is nothing but the fact of their individual submission to the sovereign authority: there are no lateral bonds of fellowship or common purpose, only a collection of parallel, but never intersecting 'vertical' bonds linking each individual to a central or superior locus" (2014, 50).

Brighenti (2010, 294) seeks to escape this logic through a critique of both individualist approaches to the study of crowds, such as Freud's or Weber's, and the methodological holism, advanced by Durkheim, for example. Brighenti suggests that "the individual is something that exists only within a given *anthropological* range", and that "the region 'beyond' the individual does not correspond at all to an aggregated level: what lies beyond the threshold of the individual is not a group of

9

individuals; rather, we should understand it precisely as a crowd or a pack. …

Consequently we have… a horizontal view, which [… rejects] the idea of any

irreducible building block" (297-98; emphasis in original).

Clearly, once we endorse such a "horizontal" view of crowds, the question of

leadership becomes extremely "complex". Brighenti notes, for example, a

"circularity" in the thought of Le Bon: "the leader leads in so far as s/he is led" (2010,

302). But before developing our discussion of leadership, we pause to point out that

what Gilbert called the Leviathanic logic of crowds is not confined to political theory.

It also structures everyday understandings of the potential for collective action. It is

significant that the two principle intuitions of Le Bon's Crowd Theory became visible

in the response to the August 2011 riots by the press, politicians and the juridical

establishment, as well as in some public attitudes. The first of these cast the riots, in

more or less overtly racist terms, as eruptions of atavistic, even animalistic passions,

normally kept at bay behind a veneer of "civilisation".[4] The second could be seen in

the attribution of the contagious spread of the riots' cascade to the myth of the hidden

leadership. This myth has had to change shape to match the times: following

contagious inner-city riots in 1981 the press blamed motorcycle-riding, outsider-

agitators; in 2011 it was gang leaders organising by Blackberry.[5]

Perhaps the rhetoric of leaderlessness found within the 2011 cycle of protests, along

---

[4] For an example of the mental gymnastics need to account for the riots in racial terms see
David Starkey's attribution of the riots to "whites becoming black" (BBC News 2011).

[5] The *Daily Mail* carried a story on July 7th 1981 citing eyewitness accounts of 'masked
figures on motor cycles issuing instructions to groups of rioters', which they claim were co-
ordinating riots around the country. Cited in Murdoch (1984: 84)

with talk of the Arab Spring as "Twitter revolutions", should put these myths into doubt. Certainly, Sutherland et al. (2014), in their study of four social movement organisations over the preceding decade, document not only a strong rhetorical rejection of leaders but also various practices adopted by such organisations to keep leaders "at bay". However, they also discover a more nuanced reality concerning leader*ship*: "although individual leaders were not present, there was still evidence of leadership occurring". This leadership was performed in a "diversity of different ways… by a range of leadership actors" (2014, 774), while the groups studied made conscious efforts to ensure opportunities for "leadership and meaning-making [were] distributed in order to give others the opportunity to take on leading roles in the future" and to prevent leadership actors becoming more permanent leaders (2014, 774-75).

Sutherland et al.'s research is informed by several other relevant themes from 'critical leadership studies'. First, an important aspect of leadership concerns "meaning-making", "meaning-management" and the "reality definition": leadership is "a shared activity that creates social meanings" (p. 764). Second, thinking in terms of *leadership actors*, where leadership roles can include "designated leaders, emergent leaders or followers" (Fairhurst 2010, quoted by Sutherland et al. 2014, 764). Thus, "[t]he potential for leadership is not aggregated in a few leaders, but dispersed amongst a range of leadership actors" (p. 764).

Although he does not employ the language of critical leadership studies, these themes run through David Graeber's (2013) study of the various Occupy movements of 2011. There we find numerous instances of leadership being exercised by a shifting variety of different collectives and individuals; we see that the role of "second-mover" can be

as important as that of the original instigator of any event or action, showing how "followers" are also "leadership actors"; and we are reminded of the importance to political movements of shaping the parameters of what questions can be posed, a key moment in "meaning-making".

Besides being an account of Occupy, Graeber's book is "about the possibility of democracy in America" (2013, xv), not a democracy of elected politicians, but a participatory, direct democracy, it's a book about the efficacy and desirability of "horizontal" political practices, of "horizontalism". In fact, we believe, the dynamics involved are a little more complicated than the terms "horizontalism" or "horizontality" might imply. Rodrigo Nunes (2014, 12) uses the network theory of Barbasi and Albert to analyse the movements of 2011 and shows "once and for all that networks are not and cannot be flat". By implication these networked movements also were not and cannot be "leaderless". In short, "*absolute* horizontality – a completely level playing field, a strictly leaderless situation – is impossible" (Nunes (2015); emphasis in original). What Nunes does set out to prove, however, is that the leadership found within networked movements is quite different to that presumed by Crowd Theory's Leviathanic logic. Like Sutherland et al. and other critical leadership scholars, Nunes employs the term "distributed leadership" for this novel form of leadership, also calling it "diffuse vanguardism"; this he defines as "the possibility, even for previously 'uncharted' individuals and groups, to temporarily take on the role of moving things forward by virtue of coming up with courses of action that could provide temporary focal points for activity" (Nunes 2012).

Nunes ((2015)) adopts Deleuze and Guattari's non-exclusive distinction between two

different logics of group formation, the "crowd" and the "pack".[6] If the crowd follows a Leviathanic logic then Nunes associates the "pack" with the concept of a "vanguard function", which carries within it the act of *following* as much as it does that of *leading*. "[T]he pack's 'spontaneous' movement results from its following an individual that comes to temporarily occupy a vanguard-function [which] is progressively propagated across the whole, so that 'vanguard' can be said of an action's originator, but also of the first to follow it, those who join in subsequently, and so on" (Nunes (2015), xx). It is important to note that this vanguard function "scales": an individual might temporarily perform it in their small group or pack; this pack might then perform it, perpetuating or propagating the action or the "meaning" vis-à-vis a larger grouping, the "crowd", say.

We do not have space here to discuss fully these recent contributions to theories of distributed leadership. But it is useful to summarise some of the principal resonances and important differences between Nunes's argument and that of Sutherland et al. Nunes's "vanguard function" is clearly similar to "leadership acts" performed by the "leadership actors" of critical leadership studies. This function is "distributed" or "diffused" across individuals and groups ("packs"); specific individuals/groups may perform different leadership functions or acts at different times – "leader", "follower", etc. – and their performance of their functions, their occupation of role of "leader, is always temporary or contingent. Note that this appears to be an important difference between the practices described by Nunes and those studied by Sutherland et al. While Sutherland et al. report conscious attempts by their grassroots groups to *rotate* leadership roles, Nunes has a conception of leadership more open to the

---

[6] The distinction is non-exclusionary because "these are oppositions in thought that in reality only ever occur in a mixed state.

unpredictability of affective contagion. He instead argues that militant groups should seek "to prompt or prime the environment so as to produce responses that go in a devised but not predetermined direction" (Nunes (2015), xx). The question that follows is how we might prime the environment so episodes of affective contagion lead to group formations following the logic of a pack rather than that of a crowd.

We return to this problem in our concluding section but before that we must turn our attention to the predominant conceptualization of the "viral" property of distributed network structures. If recent movements have been made visible by moments of corporeal co-presence, such as camps and assemblies, then their explosive growth and spread have been propagated through the affordances of a socially mediated world.

Going Viral

If it seems strange that a biological rather than a technical metaphor has been the primary resource for the conceptualisation of the "viral" properties of technologically mediated networks then it may seem stranger still that the key concept is derived from the field of genetics rather than epidemiology. The dominant metaphorical resources in discussing the viral nature of contemporary communication, and indeed in related fields such as "viral marketing", arise from a genetic analogy for the circulation and development of culture first suggested by Richard Dawkins (1976, 201-215) in a short, speculative section of his book *The Selfish Gene*. It was here that Dawkins first coined the neologism "meme" as the proposed cultural analogue of the gene. As the base unit of culture a meme might be "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashion, ways of making pots or of building arches" (Dawkins 1976, 206). To this list, of course, we could add myth and folklore (Lynch 1996, 33–34).

The evolutionary analogy for culture begins with its mechanism of transmission. If

culture is spread through imitation then perhaps, Dawkins (1976, 192) suggests, it is

the individual unit of culture, the meme, which is the replicator and the human mind

or brain is a mere host or vehicle within which meme self-replication takes place.[7] It

is apparent that much of the attraction of the meme concept lays precisely in this

decentring of human agency. It is this decentring that allows the viral metaphor to

take hold.[8]

In addition to self-replication and transmission the gene analogy also requires the

introduction of variation. This has proven problematic for meme theory, not due to a

lack of variation but the potential for too much. As memes pass from one host to

another, the chance of alteration becomes large; just think of the popular children's

game Chinese Whispers. This problem of "copy-fidelity" is conceded by Dawkins

(1976, 209), who admits that cultural imitation "looks quite unlike the particulate, all-

or-nothing quality of gene transmission. It looks as though meme transmission is

subject to continuous mutation, and also blending." This huge potential for variation

through imperfect imitation should produce a much more chaotic and unstable culture

than we find in the actual world. So the core problem for meme theory is to account

---

[7] This, of course, is an exact analogy of Dawkins's "gene-centred" view of evolution, in
which the fundamental unit of analysis – the level at which evolution by natural selection
occurs – is the gene, and individuals in any particular species are merely vehicles for the
propagation of their constituent genes. This approach has been dubbed Darwinian
"fundamentalism" or "ultra-Darwinism by critics such as Steven Rose (see, e.g., Lewontin,
Rose and Kamin 1984; Rose and Rose 2000);).

[8] Dawkins (1976, 192) makes this clear when he introduces the idea "[w]hen you plant a
fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the
meme's propagation in just the same way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism
of the host cell."

for the stability and regularity of culture and provide mechanisms that limit the variation caused by fallible transmission and environmental interaction. This is accomplished by suggesting that meme self-reproduction must take place in a context of evolutionary competition for survival with other memes. For Dawkins (1976, 211) the scarce resource that necessitates this competition is "the attention of a human brain".[9] The successful meme is the one that "goes viral", by surviving and propagating widely. This element of competition is what allows Dawkins to invoke the operation of the "blind watchmaker" — that allows structure and regularity to emerge in culture from below.[10]

This theory, later developed by a number of theorists under the title of memetics, has come under sustained criticism on a number of fronts. The most fundamental is a problem internal to its own logic: "the meme is missing" (Sampson 2012, 70). Culture understood in its full thickness does not easily lend itself to the identification of an individual meme as discrete unit of culture. Where does one meme end and another begin?[11]

---

[9] This raises a serious problem for meme theory and one that we will come back to later. Surely the competitive pressure that comes from this attention economy must be altered by the distinct properties of the different socio-technical devices that mediate cultural transmission?

[10] Although intended as a counterpoint to William Paley's "intelligent watchmaker", Dawkins's analogy also invokes Adam Smith's "invisible hand".

[11] We have to agree with the judgment of Bruce Jennings when, writing in the now defunct *Journal of Memetics* in 2005, he declared:

The central core, the meme-gene analogy, has not been a wellspring of models and studies which have provided "explanatory leverage" upon observed phenomena.

Given this weakness what can account for the resurrection of the term "meme" within internet culture? We can start to address this through the differences between Dawkins's theory and the now principal use of the word meme to describe a dynamic in internet sharing. Shifman (2014, 8) analyses the commonalities of examples of what are popularly known as memes in internet culture to derive the following distinction:

Instead of depicting the meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated successfully, I suggest defining an internet meme as (a) *a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated* and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users"* [italics in original].[12]

On top of this we can add a related definition of virality as:

 [A] word-of-mouth-like cascade diffusion process wherein a message is actively forwarded form one person to other, within and between multiple weakly linked personal networks, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of people who are exposed to the message" (Helmsley and Mason 2013, cited in Shifman 2014, 55).

These both seem useful, yet the injunction that internet memes be created with awareness of one other seems to fit uncomfortably with the purported "blindness" of the evolutionary mechanism that the displacement of agency on to the meme seeks to achieve. And while the definition of virality accurately identifies the cascading

Rather, it has been a short-lived fad whose effect has been to obscure more than it has been to enlighten. I am afraid that memetics, as a identifiable discipline, will not be widely missed. (Cited in Sampson 2012, 70).

[12] Shifman (2014: 41) explains that he turns "Dawkins's definition on its head by looking at memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagate well, but as *groups* of content items."

properties of diffusion as the key novelty of the social media world once again Dawkinsian memetics seems to add little to explanation.

This brings us to the key problem with the shift to meme theory to discuss technologically mediated virality: its focus on the meme pays little regard to the effects that different media have on the form of the memes that circulate. To make this point obvious we can compare books and tweets. While books facilitate the development and transmission of complex sets of ideas, tweets are significantly more ephemeral. And it is not just the technical properties of media that alter such tweets, but also the culture the media is embedded in. A primary originator of internet memes has been the internet forum 4chan,[13] which has its own culture and ethic that spreads memes simply for the "lulz". As the the Deterritorial Support Group (2011, 33) explain, "lulz are essentially the raison d'être of the internet meme – an attempt to derive humour, usually through a joke of prank. But more than this – humour for its own sake, humour devoid of a moral framework".[14]

Meme theory's failure to account for the way that memes are changed by the media they circulate in is evidenced by Dawkins's own inability to grasp the operation of internet memes. On 9 February 2013 Richard Dawkins tweeted the following: "I get daily messages, apparently from different people but all using identically illiterate spelling: 'Your a dick'. Coordinated campaign?"[15] The "Your a Dick" tweet is

---

[13] http://www.4chan.org/

[14] Although the Deterritorial Support Group (2011, 32–8) go onto examine the development of enough sincerity within this culture to enable political action to emerge out of it, most notably through the group Anonymous.

[15] https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/300264541743374337.

actually a perfectly crafted internet meme that circulates virally with no need for central coordination. It perpetuates not only because of the puerile double-entendre contained in the shortened version of Richard, but also because each time it is tweeted a host of Dawkins's followers are provoked into correcting its spelling. The meme is a troll that contains a self-fulfilling critique of a perceived tendency amongst both Dawkins and his fans to mistake pedantry for intelligence.

Yet meme theory, in its failures, can still help us get a better grip on this problem. Let us return to the question of why the term meme has been taken up so widely in the discussion of internet virality. We have established that the cascade function that defines virality relies on broad and overlapping networks of weak ties. Granovetter (1973, 1361) provides the canonical definition of the strength of a tie as "a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie." From this we can identify a weaker tie as one in which there is a smaller amount of cultural interchange. Indeed social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc., all rely on the standardisation that comes with protocol and all are, to a greater or lesser, extent technologies predicated on sharing relatively limited packets of data to accord with technical limits on data processing and transmission. This limited and standardised cultural exchange allows much easier identification of discrete units of culture. The stronger the ties, the fuller the cultural interaction and the more difficult it becomes to pick out a distinct unit of culture. It is precisely the thinness or the weakness of cultural exchange on social media platforms that makes the idea of the meme more plausible. This also of course limits its usefulness in situations characterised by stronger ties.

This distinction helps illuminate the two moments found in contemporary movements: embodied co-presence and distributed virality. There has after all been a movement back and forth from the strong ties of the protest camp or assembly, say, to the weak ties of the hashtag. It is for this reason we have explored theories of the crowd, which represents contagion in situations of corporeal co-presence, and the meme, which is primarily used to discuss online virality. Yet despite this (limited) utility, we fear meme theory has another attraction for our present age that is much more problematic. Meme theory resonates with the popular fields of evolutionary psychology and socio-biology. These fields have been criticised for genetic reductionism and the pursuit of "just so" arguments that begin from the existing state of things, taken at face value, and work back to propose evolutionary mechanisms that might explain this outcome. When done in a reductionist fashion such an approach works to naturalise what already exists and so hinder social change (Rose and Rose 2000, 1–13).

Social Darwinism is perhaps the central mythic supplement to both the outlook of everyday neoliberalism and the imaginary of neoliberal economics. Roscoe (2014) shows how mainstream economics has continually returned to the myth of the market as an evolutionary mechanism, which through a Panglossian misreading that removes chance from evolutionary theory, must inevitably produce "the best of all possible worlds". Such an appeal to the scientific authority of evolution is used to naturalise existing society and more specifically neoliberal rationality by grounding it outside of the socio-economic and political forces from which it emerges.

To find a way beyond meme theory's propensity to naturalise what exists – and also the limitations of Le Bon's and Freud's crowd theories – we turn to the work of

Philipe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers. In their book *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, Pignarre and Stengers (2011) are specifically interested in how we might not only summon affective forces that exceed us but also act to ward off other forces within which we have become trapped. We first examine their characterisation of capitalism as a "system of sorcery" before turning to the creation, or better, *crafting* of collective affect out of rituals rooted in myth and the supernatural — that is, to the uses of fairy dust.

Do you believe in magic?

For Pignarre and Stengers, capitalism is "spellbinding", it "mesmerises" (2011, 4 & 30). Capitalism transforms the economy — and, we might add, society more generally — "into *a politics that kills politics*, that gives itself the authority of a rationality that demands unanimity" (2011, 15; emphasis in the original). It is a system that ceaselessly produces "infernal alternatives", which they define as a "set of situations that seem to leave no other choice than resignation or a slightly hollow sounding denunciation." (2011, 24) Further, "capitalism works continuously to reduce the intelligence of its agents, to replace it by automatic behaviour that can in turn become the matter of infernal alternatives" (2011, 28).

This operation is brought about by "minions" who perform "patient processes of fabrication", "not limit[ing] themselves to applying or following rules, but tak[ing] pains to apply the rules with loyalty, that is to say, with a certain inventiveness", minions who scorn "all those who haven't yet understood, who are still 'dreaming'," minions who are are "dumbstruck by a prohibition on thinking what they are working

for",[16] we are all of us "captured". And, according to Pignarre and Stengers, in our "modernised" world, there is no name adequate to describe this "hold" on us that capitalism produces. Instead, "we must turn towards knowledges that we have disqualified":

There has, for a long time, been a name for something that manages to produce a coincidence between enslavement, the putting into service, and subjection, the production of those who do freely what they are meant to do. It is something whose frightening power and the need to cultivate appropriate means of protection against is known by the most diverse of peoples, except us moderns. Its name is sorcery. (2011, 35)

But if capitalism is a system of sorcery, it is a "system of sorcery without sorcerers" (2011, 135), a point captured by Marx and Engels when they channeled Faust in the *Communist Manifesto*: "Modern bourgeois society … is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells" (1973, 72). Politicians and capital's strategists — minions all — are not the freely choosing agents presupposed by liberal ideology. They are caught up in this logic of killing politics: even if they wanted to escape it they simply wouldn't know how. Of course, the problem of avoiding capture extends to all who live in capitalist society.

Of particular concern to us here is Pignarre and Stengers's argument that the politics of capital, and in particular of neoliberalism, contains a logic of "killing politics… It is a logic that aims to "naturalise" – and hence automate and de-politicise – political decisions" (2011, xi). It is this "natural" logic that has been used to justify austerity. The political possibilities opened up by the crisis have disappeared behind a veil of

---

[16] For a case study of the "prohibition on thought" in the aftermath of the English riots of 2011 see AUTHOR C.

apparent necessity, a set of "infernal alternatives".

In such an apparently hopeless situation, Pignarre and Stengers explore ways by which we might "protect" ourselves against capital's spells, ways by which we might "get a hold" of capitalism, in order to de-naturalise it and to craft spaces for politics, for thinking, for empowerment. Certainly they remind us that "Marx's categories "disenchant"" (2011, 54). More provocatively — and seemingly as uncomfortably for them the writers as us the readers — they take seriously the rituals and myths — the "technique" — of neo-pagan witches in the alter-globalisation movement.

What we think Pignarre and Stengers are arguing here is that mythical and supernatural resources – a "counter-magic", if you like – can help us both denaturalise the prevailing economistic ontology that sees only rational, autonomous utility maximising individuals, and craft collectivity and affective contagion. We agree. Anti-capitalist politics must be about breaking with the apparently naturalness of capitalism, of overcoming its limitations; it must be about repotentialising the world. The problem, of course, is that we are also caught up, to a greater or lesser extent, within the current sense of things, within our "everyday" lives of "we have tos" and "infernal alternatives".

While Pignarre and Stengers have learned from the neo-pagan witches, we instead turn to the history of pop music.

A sprinkling of fairy dust

One of our favourite anecdotes from the annals of pop history involves a famous bootleg tape of 1960s band The Troggs having a hilariously sweary argument at a recording session. The sound engineer, who let the tape player run, captured a group

of musicians trying desperately to grasp what turns any particular song into a hit record. The conclusion they reached is now legendary: "You got to put a little bit of fucking fairy dust over the bastard."

What did Reg Presley, the Troggs' singer and main song-writer, mean when he talked about sprinkling a "bit of fucking fairy dust on the bastard"? For us, the notion is attractive for at least two reasons.

First, creating a hit record in pop music involves triggering an episode of affective contagion, the very phenomenon (albeit in different circumstances and for different ends) we are interested in theorising. Indeed Blackmore (1999, 56) cites the pop song as a prime example of the viral phenomena that the concept of the meme is trying to capture, "any catchy tunes that gets you to rehearse it in your head will get passed on, and so we will all come across such tunes and be in danger of 'catching' them."

Presley's "fairy dust" notion suggests a situated and collective crafting of affective resonance. It suggests that there are certain incantations or invocations that might help us break with the "naturalness" of neoliberal capitalism and thus repotentialise the world. When the "naturalness" of the current state of things begins to lose its grip – as it does when events and crises put the continuation of our everyday lives into doubt – then space opens up for "supernatural" solutions.

Secondly, the notion of fairy dust suggests that anti-capitalist militants must also be sorcerers. For they are trying to conjure up something beyond themselves, something they can't wholly know, something beyond the existing "natural" limits of society; something "supernatural". In such conditions concepts like fairy dust begin to make sense. Fairy dust invokes the need for a gamble, a roll of the dice, an experiment. But invoking the element of chance doesn't mean just trusting to luck. We can think of the

process of putting "a little bit of fucking fairy dust over the bastard" as a kind of incantation that draws on past experience in order to exceed it. Thus our invocation of "fairy dust" also involves an attempt "to prompt or prime" the episodes of affective contagion being summoned forth "so as to produce responses that go in a devised but not predetermined direction", to repeat Nunes's point, quoted above. Even the Troggs knew that the path to fairy dust lies between knowledge and cliché. As the tape goes on to say: "I know that it needs strings, that I do know."

At this point we can clarify the differences between a meme and an incantation. The former seeks to account for viral effects by displacing agency from the individual down to the meme. Just as the gene is the primary agent in Dawkinsian evolution so the meme in memetics parasitizes the individual human mind into a vehicle for its reproduction and adaptation. The linked perception that competition between memes for scarce human attention is a form of natural selection tends to naturalise the outcome and place it beyond human reflection. In the crasser iterations of memetics any outcome is seen as self evidently the best of possible outcome, in which case the indeterminacy of chance is effectively eliminated from history. But even in its most sophisticated memetics leads us away from the problem of how the infrastructures and presuppositions of existing (capitalist) society prime the operation of chance and steer its outcomes. Our concept of an incantation, on the other hand, seeks to displace individual agency in the opposite direction, into collective agency, using affective contagion as the mechanism to do so. As affect operates pre-consciously then affective contagion can only be brought back within the realm of reason, and in this case collective analysis, post-facto. It is at this point that hidden presuppositions can be further revealed and their elimination incorporated into future incantations.

A good example of a political incantation sprinkled with fairy dust can be found in the group UK Uncut, which explains its origins thus:

On October 27th 2010, just one week after George Osborne announced the deepest cuts to public services since the 1920s, around 70 people ran along Oxford Street, entered Vodafone's flagship store and sat down. We had shut down tax-dodging Vodafone's flagship store. At that point, UK Uncut only existed as #ukuncut, a hashtag someone had dreamed up the night before the protest. As we sat in the doorway, chanting and handing leaflets to passers by, the hashtag began to trend around the UK and people began to talk about replicating our action. The idea was going viral. The seething anger about the cuts had found an outlet. Just three days later and close to thirty Vodafone stores had been closed around the country. (UK Uncut n.d.)

Who could have predicted that occupations of Vodafone shops would resonate so widely and spread so virally? Was it the result of fortuitous circumstances? Or did the specifics of its incantations facilitate its spread?

There was indeed a degree of chance involved. Their first action was intended to be an occupation of Vodafone's headquarters, but at the last minute the target had to changed when someone spotted that this had moved out of town. The flagship store was chosen as a back up, a fortuitous accident that made their action an example that could be replicated elsewhere. UK Uncut also shows us some of the other elements needed for a contemporary invocation of politics. Firstly it manages to capture the deeply felt need for participatory politics to counter the parliamentary-democratic system's killing of politics. Yet UK Uncut's actions also spread because they are easily replicable. They have a low entry level. Taking part isn't too difficult. It doesn't require too much preparation or specialist knowledge. The risks involved are not too high.

Secondly, although the actions contain a "supernatural" element, they also make

immediate sense. The argument is instantly grasped: austerity is a political decision and not the result of a "law of nature". It is a political decision not to tax corporations and the rich as rigorously as the rest of us. It is a political decision to impose the costs of the crisis onto the poorest of society and those who did least to cause it. The UK Uncut actions, and the police response they provoked, reveal some of the dynamics of capital that neoliberalism seeks to deny. They reveal, for example, that capital contains different and antagonistic interests, and that politicians, the police and contemporary power structures align themselves with certain interests and against others. It is a political decision to do so.

Yet there is a danger here. Because actions must be instantly understandable, they can only push so far into the boundaries of what it is currently possible to say. They must by necessity still contain many of our society's hidden presuppositions of thought. Yet if the actions don't contain a dynamic that pushes further and generalises wider, then the movement risks collapsing back into the sense of the old world. We are all too familiar with this. "Of course we'd love to tax the bankers", says the government, "but if we did they'd simply move to Geneva." The parliamentary-democratic system seeks to kill every revelation of a political decision with a new "naturalisation". Isn't this what's obscured by the Panglossian associations of meme theory? The meme that goes viral is conditioned by the presuppositions of the existing social and economic arrangements. A weak tie can only carry a simple story and a leader's ability to make meaning is constrained by what currently "makes sense". It is this that primes the operation of chance. We may not live in "the best of all possible worlds" because the presuppositions of this world may obscure the potential for different worlds.

Yet identifying and overcoming these presuppositions are difficult. They are formed

as much through habit as persuasion. Post-Foucauldian analyses, such as Dardot and Laval (2013), reveal neoliberalism as a form of political rationality based on a limited conception of human possibility. Neoliberal institutions are structured around these ontological presuppositions and interaction with them, participation in higher education's pseudo-competitive metrics for instance, prompts responses that naturalise this view of the human. But while we partially operate in line with this "folk ontology" we simultaneously carry other resources from myth, pop songs and so on, that speak to experiences neoliberal ontology can't account for. When people get caught up in large collective experiences, which exceed neoliberal categories, they can draw on such "folk counter-ontologies" to explain them. If our counter-rituals summon forth the memories of these resources then they have a much better chance of succeeding.[17]

It is this that brings us back to the concept of affective contagion and the relation between the preconscious dimension of collective affect and the conscious use of reason. Crowd Theory treats these as opposed: collective affect must be kept at bay or the eruption of atavistic forces will diminish reason. By contrast Prigogine and Stengers see the power of capitalist sorcery as its ability to limit thought through the control of its preconditions. To counter this they seek to spark episodes of collectivity that can exceed and denaturalise capital's presuppositions. Counter-sorcery seeks to spark and prime bouts of "affective contagion" to widen the scope of thought.

Here we return to the question of myth. Central myths of capital – myths maintained

---

[17] Of course we are suggesting that Reg Presley's invocation of "fairy dust" accessed a certain folk understanding of collective creativity. For a discussion of certain conceptions of love as a folk counter-ontology see AUTHOR B.

through capitalist sorcery – are that we are rational, maximising, calculating individuals – *Homo economicus* – and that, while we are solely responsible for our own happiness and wellbeing, our pursuit of this wellbeing must take place within the "rules of the game", which are natural, unchanging and unchangeable. These ideas are myths both because they are partial and because – paradoxically, given the rationality assumption – they operate principally at an affective level. Thus our need for a counter-sorcery, for counter-myths, which can challenge capital's myths on the affective level.

This brings us to the third necessary element of anti-capitalist incantations. We must try to prime episodes of affective contagion so they'll produce mechanisms of post facto collective analysis. We also need the movement back and forth between the weak ties that allow virality and the strong ties needed for real discussion and analysis. It is only by maintaining this rhythm that we can push further through the dynamics of capital that limit our lives. In such conditions movements can change and adapt in order to generalise. For a movement to move, it must exceed the conditions of its own emergence. While a small group – a "pack" – might stumble across a workable incantation, they must conjure up forces that make themselves redundant. Thus, we require leadership that shifts and emerges, a "diffuse", temporary leadership, not leadership that solidifies its own position; we require leadership that increases the potential for others to emerge as leaders, to become "leadership actors", leadership that cultivates leadership. The aim must be to make the mass its own analyst, to spread the potential for leadership across the whole of the collective body. After all if a genie gives you three wishes, then your last request should always be for another three wishes.

Bibliography:

Blackmore, Susan. 1999. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brennan, Teresa. 2004. *The Transmission of Affect.* New York: Cornell University Press.

* BBC News. 2011. *England riots: David Starkey defends Newsnight remarks*. at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14601813. Last accessed 25.01.15.

Brighenti, Andrea Mubi. 2010. "Tarde, Canetti, and Deleuze on crowds and packs." *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 10(4): 291-314.

Castells, Manuel. 2012. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Clarke, John, and Janet Newman. 2012. "The Alchemy of Austerity." *Critical Social Policy* 32 (3): 299–319.

Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval. 2013. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*. London: Verso.

Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The Selfish Gene.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dawkins, Richard. 1988. *The Blind Watchmaker*. London: Penguin.

Dawkins, Richard. 1998. *Unweaving the Rainbow.* London: Penguin.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1984. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press.

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press.

Deterritorial Support Group. 2011. "All the Memes of Production." In *Occupy Everything: Reflections on Why it's Kicking Off Everywhere*, edited by Seth Wheeler and Alessio Lunghi, 32–38. New York: Minor Compositions.

Freud, Sigmund. 2001. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*. London: Vintage.

Fuller, Matthew, and Andrew Goffey. 2007. "Towards an Evil Media Studies." http://www.spc.org/fuller/texts/towardsevil/

Gonen, Jay. 2003. *The Roots of Nazi Psychology: Hitler's Utopian Barbarism*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Graeber, David. 2013. *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*. London: Penguin Allen Lane.

Granovetter, M. S. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties". *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6): 1360–1380.

Helmsley and Mason 2013 NEED THIS REF

Keynes, J.M. 1936. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. London: Macmillan.

King, Erika G. 1990. *Crowd Theory as a Psychology of Leader and Led*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen.

Krugman P. 2011 "Myths of Austerity." *New York Times*, July 1. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/02/opinion/02krugman.html

Le Bon, Gustave. 2001. *The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover.

Lewontin, R.C., Steven Rose, and Leon Kamin. 1984. *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology and Human Nature*. London: Pantheon.

Lynch, Aaron. 1996. *Thought Contagion: How Belief Spreads Through Society*. New York: Basic Books.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1973. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In K. Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848*, Political Writings Volume 1, edited and introduced by David Fernbach, 62–98. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Mason, Paul. 2012. *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*. London: Verso.

Nunes, Rodrigo. 2012. "The Lessons of 2011: Three Theses on Organisation." http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/lessons-2011-three-theses-organisation

Nunes, Rodrgio. 2014. *Organisation of the Organisationless: The Question of Organisation After Networks*. London: Mute.

Nunes, Rodrigo. (2015) "Pack of leaders: thinking organisation and spontaneity with Deleuze and Guattari." In *Occupy: A People Yet to Come*, edited by Andrew Conio. PLACE: Open Humanities Press.

Murdoch, Graham. 1984. "Reporting the Riots: Images and Impact." In *Scarman and After: Essays Reflecting on Lord Scarman's Report, the Riots and Their Aftermath*, edited by John Benyon, 73–95. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Pignarre, Philippe, and Isabelle Stengers. 2011. *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*. Translated by Andrew Goffey. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Roscoe, Philip. 2014. "Dr Pangloss and the Best of All Possible Markets: Evolutionary Fantasies and Justifications in Contemporary Economic Discourse." In *Myth and the Market: Conference Proceedings*, edited by Norah Campbell, John Desmond, James Fitchett, Donncha Kavanagh, Pierre McDonald, Aidan O'Driscoll and Andrea Prothero, 96–110. Dublin: UCD Business School.

Rose, Hilary, and Steven Rose, eds. 2000. *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments against Evolutionary Psychology*. New York: Harmony Books.

Sampson, Tony D. 2012. *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Shifman, Limor. 2014. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Sutherland, Neil, Christopher Land and Steffen Böhm. 2014. "Anti-leaders(hip) in Social Movement Organisations: The case of autonomous grassroots groups." *Organization*, 21(6): 759-781.

Thrift, Nigel. 2008. Nonrepresentational Theory: Space/Politics/Affect. London: Routledge.

UK Uncut. n.d.. "About." http://www.ukuncut.org.uk/about/. Accessed 1 October 2014.