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Networking social movements through individuals multi-participation

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Inês Pereira é licenciada em Sociologia e mestre em Comunicação, Cultura e Tecnologias da Informação pelo ISCTE. Interessa-se particularmente pelo estudo de movimentos sociais, associativismo, redes sociais e identidade(s). Actualmente desenvolve uma tese de Doutoramento em Antropologia Urbana (ISCTE/Universitat Rovira i Virgili), sobre a formação de redes entre diferentes movimentos sociais globais. É uma apaixonada pela utilização da etnografia e pela combinação da perspectiva sociológica e antropológica.

Abstract

This paper is drawn upon an on-going PhD research in Urban Anthropology, focusing on social movements and particularly on the establishment of networks of relations among them.

Classical studies on social movements tend to focus on a specific type of social action, analysing its – collective and individual - actors individually. However, empirical data sustain the idea that there are complex sets of interdependency among different social movements, which tend to organize themselves in relation to other collective actors. Individual multiparticipation; convergence events as the so-called social forums; virtual and urban spaces of protest; and partnerships between organizations: all these linkages act as different types of ties between social movements, promoting complex networks of relations.

This paper particularly focus on processes of individual participation, that is, simultaneous involvement on distinct contexts of collective action linked to social movements, and its several impacts, probing, through biographical analysis, the processes of identity reconfiguration, and individual multiparticipation on social movements. The impact of this multiparticipation on the organizations where these individuals are involved is also analysed, as, sometimes, a stronger relation between different movements have been constructed this way.

The paper is organized around three different parts, each one comprehending one or more stories – snapshots of reality – collected through individual biographical interviews. As the research design and the proposed theme, the text follows, through its short stories, a somehow circular path, following the multiple social insertions of my interviewees. From the participation at Portuguese ATTAC to BE, a Portuguese left wing party. From BE to catholic institutions of charity and free software. And, finally, from free software to BE again.

Key words: Social movements, multiparticipation, networks

Resumo

Este artigo baseia-se numa pesquisa de doutoramento em Antropologia Urbana que se encontra em curso, centrando-se nos movimentos sociais e particularmente, no estabelecimento de redes de relações entre diferentes movimentos sociais.

Os estudos clássicos sobre movimentos sociais tendem a focar-se num tipo específico de acção social, analisando os seus impactos – individuais e colectivos – individualmente. Contudo, dados empíricos sugerem um complexo conjunto de relações entre os diferentes movimentos sociais, que tendem a organizar-se em relação a outros actores colectivos. Multiparticipação, eventos de convergência, como os fóruns sociais, espaços urbanos e virtuais de protesto, parcerias entre organizações, todos estes mecanismos agem como diferentes tipos de laços entre movimentos sociais, promovendo complexas redes de relações.

Este artigo foca particularmente processos de multiparticipação individual; ou seja o envolvimento simultâneo em distintos contextos de acção colectiva ligados a movimentos sociais; explorando, através de entrevistas biográficas, os processos de reconfiguração identitária que lhes estão associados. O impacto desta multiparticipação nas organizações onde estes indivíduos se inserem também será analisado, bem como as eventuais relações entre diferentes movimentos que daí poderão surgir.

O artigo organiza-se em três partes, cada uma incorporando uma ou mais histórias – *snapshots* da realidade – coligidas através das entrevistas. Tal como o desenho da pesquisa e o próprio tema, o texto segue um percurso circular, de acordo com os múltiplos envolvimento dos entrevistados. Da participação na ATTAC portuguesa ao Bloco de Esquerda. Do BE, a uma instituição católica de caridade e ao software livre. E, finalmente, do software livre ao BE de novo.

Palavras-chave: movimentos sociais, multiparticipação, redes

1. Social participation, social networks and networked social movements

David's story

David was born in the North Interior of Portugal. His family and early friends were not involved in political or social action. Still, he grew up reading Portuguese neo-realism authors, many of them associated with resistance to fascism, and when he was fourteen he started visiting annually a well-known event, called *Festa do Avante*: three days of music, political discourses and social action, promoted by a newspaper related to the communist party. That was a time of great political contestation, and David started to feel a personal interest on social and political participation, also stimulated by his communist friends and especially by a cousin who was deeply involved on politics. David's first political actions took place on high school, where he got himself involved with the students union, integrating an alternative list, usually without any chance of winning.

As many young people from his background he went to Lisbon, the capital, in order to take universitarian studies. He entered a public university to study Economics. At the time, there was, in his University, a left wing unitary project that won for several years the leadership of the students' assembly. The participation on this project helped to stimulate David's political awareness, and, together with several of his colleagues, David was one of the activists who saw the birth of Portuguese ATTAC. That was his first social action outside students' unions.

As many of his colleagues, David went abroad for a year to study on a foreign university, funded by Erasmus program. He went to Barcelona, where he got himself involved with the local students movements, and also with Catalonia's ATTAC group. Coming back to Portugal he kept working at ATTAC, being at the time deeply involved with Iraq war contestation, and with the promotion of the first Portuguese Social Forum. Within the same group of friends, he met some persons that were involved in the Portuguese edition of the French newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and he started to collaborate in a association called Friends of Le Monde, where he, later on, made part of the direction board.

He went then to France, to do his Masters, and, living in Paris, he also got involved in students movements. He came back to Portugal a year ago, and he is currently starting an association (UniPop) that intends to create a so-called popular university, promoting public understanding of science, public debates on social and Philosophical issues and fighting homogenous apprehensions of reality.

At the same time he got himself more involved in Bloco de Esquerda (BE - literally Left Block) a recent Portuguese party that resulted from the coalition of different former radical left wing parties. He is not officially a member of this party, but he collaborates on their actions quite often. Now a day he is also linked to the ecologist movements, through episodic participations on an ecologist association and he is also linked to the feminist movement through an international mailing list.

As many Portuguese activists he became deeply involved and excited by the idea of a global movement of resistance, a movement of movements and particularly with the social forums, that he considers both as an important network tool, that promoted linkages between different social movements in Portugal (for instances he mentioned how CGTP, a big union confederation linked to the communist party, became involved in the annual gay pride parade, following relations established in the Portuguese Social Forum); but also as a way of strengthening the cohesion of different Portuguese social movements, (he told me about his trip to the European social forum, where, much for his discontent, Portuguese ATTAC activists demonstrate together with others Portuguese movements, instead of going with other national ATTAC's).

Daily life in society is marked by this kind of social participations in specific groups and movements, perceived as something with a specific unity, a common project and particular social activities. Different kinds of social participation, although often very different from one another, have some common specificities: they tend to gather under a common name: the alter-globalization movement or the ecologist movements, for instance; they have one or more projects for society (from the more reactive to the more revolutionary, from cultural to social intentions), they share a common identity, related to the establishments of particular social codes and cultural productions, as jargons; and they have specific patterns of relationship to the outside world.

Social movements are a part of this reality: social actors that construct themselves around specific projects for society, defining its enemies, and organizing actions of protest (Porta e Diani, 1998; Neveu, 1996). It is difficult to define the dynamic of social movements, and even more difficult to identify precisely what is to be part of a specific social movement (as there is no formal membership to social movements but just to specific organizations that are part of the movement) but recent theories suggest that we should consider social movements as networks – particularly dense networks of both organizations and individuals, such as David, – that join efforts to change society. It is thus possible to identify a relational structure of involved individuals.

The concept of network, as a metaphor for life on contemporary societies, has conquered an increasing significant role in social science, and it is, now a day, a favoured metaphor for social scientists. Several researchers on sociology and anthropology have made use of this concept, as a particularly interesting and useful tool to explain dynamics of social structuration, interdependency and social organization (Agier, 1999; Castells, 2000; Fisher, 1982; Granovetter, 1973; Hannerz, 1980; Wasserman e Faust, 1994; Wellman, 1998). Still, although networks have acquired this almost hegemonic status in social sciences, there are deep differences among scholars on the way they use and interpret the concept of network.

In this paper, I intend to use the concept of network as a perspective, or point of view, on the way individuals and groups interact with each other (Wellman, 1998). At the same time, social networks allow us to (1) design on a fashionable graphic way social relationships, particularly social relationships that aren't easily inducted nor follow a schematic pattern and to (2) explain how these relations of interdependence and interinfluence take place. Thus, networks may simultaneously be seen as a descriptive and analytical tool.

It is important to mention that recent explorations trying to connect sociology of social movements with social network analysis tend to consider social movements as networks of (1) individuals (activists, voluntaries, etc); (2) organizations; (3) events and happenings (specific contexts of interaction and social situations of political struggle, as demonstrations, forums and other events) and (4) spaces (both physical and virtual, that constitute social places where interaction takes place).

All these nodes can act as powerful network tools (we should take into account the impact of organizational agendas as well as that of joint actions and events). Still, on this paper, although events and spaces are present, the focus will be on individual participation on organizations¹. Different types of organization can be considered as social movements actors (although one cannot reduce a social movement to one, specific, organization, as social movements are networks of both individual activists and formal organizations). Associations tend to be the most consensual kind of social movement organization, but one can also consider that frequently cooperatives, political parties, public institutions, or companies, act as agents of social movements, sharing the same beliefs and being present on the same happenings² (Diani, Mario e D. McAdams (ed.): 2003, Sommier, Isabelle: 2003).

Interviewing David allowed me to list some of these nodes, taking, for instances, social forums as a most important event; and finding some important Portuguese organizations, as ATTAC, BE and UniPop, his new project of Popular Universities.

But David's story is also a story of networks between different social movements, suggesting that, not only social movements are networks, but also that they interconnect with other social actors, constructing bridges based on partnerships and common events. As an example, we may highlight his story of how CGTP, usually considered a very traditional Union, got involved in the annual Gay Pride parade as a very interesting one, suggesting how convergence events may promote other common events.

In the last century, and particularly from the seventies till now, sociology of social movements have aroused as an autonomous disciplinary field, with its own approach, methodology and concerns. A wide range of studies have been developed focusing on different types of social movements. Sometimes in the literature, the

¹ The thesis, however, will be organized around different relational *loci*, including events, spatial contexts and organizations. Thus, multiparticipation is only one of the ways through which social movements networks will be analysed.

² Take, for instances, the role played by free software companies in the free software movement, the role of green parties in the ecologist movement or the role played by left wing parties in the social forums, the most important convergence event of the antiglobalization movement.

parallelism of different subcultures on distant countries has been aroused (Feixa, 1999) and different contact points between distinct groups have also been brought to light (Magnani, 2002; Simmel, 1955). Still, classical studies on social movements usually keep on focusing on each group *per se*, and related role models, languages and cultural performances tend to be isolated in the analysis. However, empirical data sustain that there are a complex set of interdependency among different social movements, which tend to organize themselves in relation to other collective actors. That is, social movements are not isolated and stable communities.

Furthermore, this topic has been recently intensified, both on literature and public discourse, following recent initiatives around global protest movements, as the alter-globalization movement. David is also aware of that, and he mentioned it when he discussed the alter-globalization movement as a movement of movements, with a specific – but difficult to sustain – project. This so-called movement of movements have been a recent essay to promote networks of different social projects, more or less interrelated. The alter-globalization movement is not, though, a unique or particularly innovative tool, as different historical episodes have shown how distinct spheres of protest have interconnect with each other in order to promote a more effective mobilization. Furthermore, relations between different social movements are not only based on intentional joint actions – they also aroused from non-planned multiparticipations and from the episodic coincidence of different social circuits (Magnani, 2002). They may also come out from multiparticipation of individual actors that, as David, get themselves involved with different organizations and movements.

This fact, however, pose many different and challenging questions. How are these networks build up, and how are they enlarged? What kind of mechanisms promotes bigger networks between social movements)? And how are boundaries defined and identities negotiated, when we're speaking about the promotion of linkages between different contexts of social action, each one particularly focusing on a specific social arena of protest?

On my PhD thesis I intend to focus, precisely, on this question, taking into account that empirical data often highlight individuals multiparticipation, joint actions and partnerships among different organizations (as associations). Being a PhD on Urban Anthropology, the research also results from studies on urban issues, that tend to present cities as networks of individuals, or even as a network tool that may act promoting public spaces of debate. Thus, I propose the necessity to study the – often unsuspected –

links between social movements, developing a sociology of hybrid spaces between movements.

2. Identities negotiation and metamorphosis

Coming back to David, I tried to ask him about how he connects all his social participations and if he could draw a hierarchy of belonging. Asked about these multi-participations, David explains that this is not such a personal particularity as he saw this multiparticipation as a generic tendency. He also mentioned that, quite often, he sees himself working always with the same people everywhere, with a possible exception for the Friends of the Le Monde association, where people tended to be older. Still, he has a group of friends that followed him from students unions to ATTAC and then to BE, and finally to UniPop, a new project where there are a lot of persons from ATTAC.

Confronted with the necessity to choose among his multiple social and political participations, David considers two different dimensions, on one side, he considers he should stand for the smaller initiatives, for instance, if he goes on a demonstration, he joins the smaller group, as he feels he would be more necessary in that context. On the other side, he thinks political parties are the most important agents of change (that is not however a common idea that aroused from the interviews. Many young activists are quite critical of political parties and they tend to think social movements' organizations should take their place as the most important agents for change). Thus, if confronted with a conflict of interest, he would stain for BE, although he is not a very active member in the party.

Adding another bit of David's story helps us discussing how individuals deal with the process of identity negotiation required for dealing with simultaneous involvement in several organizations, related to different social movements. The following story, about Gil, will provide us a more in-depth analysis of this issue.

Gil's story

Gil was born on a high class family, established in Lisbon; His parents were involved on a progressive-catholic movement that fought fascism, during the former regime, having being involved on some important events of struggle. Now a day, they're both members of the Socialist party and they have important positions on the current socialist government.

Gil, however, soon left his catholic education, being the first member of the family to be a convict atheist, and he also became progressively interested in radical left wing parties. As David, he become involved with BE from its beginning. Refusing to join the communist party, as many young people from the so-called new left, he thinks BE would be the most important agent promoting true socialism, and fighting what he considers an increasing liberal tendency of the socialist party.

Throughout his life, Gil also experienced several social participations. During university – he studied on a catholic university usually seen as a very conservative one – Gil joined a martial arts group, a very exclusive association that practices a particular art inspired by oriental traditions. The group promotes an oriental inspired philosophy, defending peace, friendship and self-understanding. He also became

interested in music: first heavy metal and then jazz, soon joining the more or less underground scene of Lisbon jazz.

Particularly concerned with poverty and social exclusion, he joined a group – a catholic one – called Comunidade Vida e Paz (Peace and Life Community) that helps homeless people in Lisbon, distributing food everyday. During university his days were quite fulfilled with all these activities. That was the time I first met him, and discussed with him his multi-participation on several organizations. Gil was willing to discuss this, and we particularly focused on the apparently difficult reconciliation between his involvement with the catholic organization and his atheistic convictions. He explained that issue by focusing on the importance of the work done there, and he told stories about his other colleagues in the association, some of them also atheists. All of them used to skip the religious stuff, concentrating themselves on social activities. None of them ever left the association, till they got angry to the responsible (a nun), not for religious reasons but for practical ones,

After some years working in Lisbon, Gil went abroad to study music, and his participation with different associations in Lisbon started to be episodic although he never left any of them, and he tried to keep up with his participation every time he came back for vacations. In the UK, where he lived for a couple of years, he also participate on some social and political events, namely demonstrations, including the famous demonstration against Iraq war in London, joining an incredible amount of people. On the last years he became increasingly concerned with ecological issues – sometimes complaining about BE not being enough involved in this issue. When visiting Portugal he liked to participate on demonstrations, as the one that occurs every year at the 25th of April, celebrating the revolution that instituted democracy in the country. Last time, he went to the demonstration together with a Lisbon fair trade association, where the girl who was his girlfriend at the time was a volunteer, being fair trade an issue he increasingly became interested in, also making advantage of the dissemination of this movement in the UK. His last participation with the fair trade movement happened when the Lisbon fair trade association organized a debate around free software (because some of his members already had connections with free software associations). Gil is also interested in this movement, and recently he started using some free software applications for making music.

One of the most important outcomes of social network analysis, and from the use of the network metaphor, is the idea that each individual is involved, simultaneously, on a set of – more or less inter-related – networks, including family, sociability networks, professional groups and so on. Each individual is, thus, a unique node on a complex set of networks, a node that must interact on several contexts, re-inventing himself on different roles and moving through different fields of significance. This multiplicity of senses of belonging is something quite significant on what identity construction is concerned.

Voluntary networks, as participation in social movements and associations, play a most important role on identity construction, precisely because of its voluntary nature. The choice of joining a specific association to be involved with is a reflex of one owns

reflexive identity. On the other hand, participation in a movement and daily sociability with individuals that share the same concerns act as a most important influence, reinforcing the initial convictions, and proposing new topics of discussion and concern.

As David, Gil has a biography of social participation marked by several incursions on different organizations and movements, reflecting his concerns but also his networks of sociability. Both men's lives are a good example of the idea of multi-participation as a reality lived by many young activists.

Multiparticipation on voluntary association is not an issue commonly discussed on statistical surveys, but, if we take a look only on Portuguese data referring to the participation in associations, we note that 26,2% of associations members participate in more than just one organization, and 18% participate actively on more than two (Cardoso, et. al, 2005). Note this data are only based on formal inscription on associations (and thus leave behind informal participants), and, on the other side, they include all kinds of associations, and not only the ones who are directly related to social movements. Even so, the truth is that this data gives a first look on multiparticipation figures, suggesting that it is a significant trajectory for many participants in voluntary organizations and not a particularity of David and Gil lives.

But Gil biography also poses another question, as it shows how multi-participation may occur on very different and even opposite contexts, suggesting a need for identities reconfigurations and negotiations. Instead of the common sense tendency to see the existence of 'ideological kits' organizing personal identities (considering, for instances, that if you're an atheist you don't join a catholic groups), Gil biography suggest the need to reconcile social involvement on quite contradictory contexts, from catholic charity to satanic heavy metal concerts, from left wing radical parties to the peaceful oriental philosophy on the Jet-kon-Do group.

On a most inspiring text, Gilberto Velho, Brazilian anthropologist, says: *'it makes part of normal competencies of social actors, to move themselves across different fields of significance (...) this implies what we might called the metamorphosis potential, unequally distributed across society'*. By metamorphosis, he designates the capacity of one individual to integrate and disintegrate himself completely on several social contexts. Velho's work provides a most important tool to explore and discuss how individuals negotiate their sense of belonging and how identity is constructed through a dynamic articulation of several influences.

Gil and David are, thus, forced to circulate between different social contexts with distinct languages, role models and core concerns. They must construct their identities

as a patchwork that incorporates some characteristics of the networks they're involved while discarding other ones. And, on their daily lives as activists, they must somehow prioritise specific events and political positions, through personal choices. These choices, however, are explained by a set of causes, both individual and social and simultaneously political and practical.

3. Multiparticipation as a social movement's network tool, social movement's networks and its impacts on individuals.

The free software movement story

Free software movement, an informatics movement, defending that all individuals should have access to the source code of software, being thus allowed to freely de-bug, develop and create, (creating an alternative to the common use software produced and developed by big cooperations as Microsoft, that do not disclose their source code), is a movement difficult to frame on political terms. Some of its defenders tend to sustain that it draws upon right wing principles, as liberalism and entrepreneurship, and they defend free software as it promotes individual freedom to create. Others associate free software with equalitarian principles, talking about anti-monopolist strategies, poor countries empowerment and anti-capitalism. Still, ANSOL (Associação Nacional para o Software Livre - the national association for free software) decided to search for support in the whole spectrum of Portuguese politics, and its members contacted deputies from all big parties, trying to gain support for their cause, and particularly, to propose the use of free software on the public services.

Eventually, after some time of lobbying, they were welcomed by BE, that volunteers to write a proposal about the use of free software on public administration, a proposal that was debated on the Republic Assembly plenary.

This fact made even more difficult already difficult relation of free software activists with political parties. Suddenly, all activists started to be quite anxious to defend something proposed by a radical left wing party, one that most of them did not defend. As Pedro, one of the most important activists, leader of a Portuguese free software Operative System, and supporter of a centre/right wing party, said: '*it is strange, it seems that now I'm some kind of communist or something!*'. On the other hand, for Ricardo, who was already involved with BE, this was the confirmation about his party role as the most important agent leading social protest.

Even though, all ANSOL activists, not used to have much public space to defend their ideals, join efforts to support BE's proposal. The relationship between the two organizations was later on reinforced, as BE invited ANSOL to have a stand on their fifth anniversary party, to which they invited many small social movements organizations.

The above story shows an approach between two different contexts – the free software movement and BE, and follows the way this relationship has been shaped. Different activists looked at this relation on different ways: some of them, already involved in BE, were quite happy about it, while others would have preferred a link

with other political force. Multiparticipation act as what we may call an important network tool, connecting social movements not only through a common node (an individual member that is simultaneously involved in two or more organizations), but also implying, at least frequently, other – subsequent – ties. Plus, multi-participation not only implies identities reconfigurations for individuals but also for movements, that somehow have to re-adjust themselves to these new, and more or less involuntary, links. Sometimes multi-participation may result on a stronger relation between different organizations or even different movements, with distinct concerns. Note also that the fact that this ties are contextually produced imply that approximation between different movements may occur on some countries and not on others.

To find and discuss the impact of these network tools is, precisely one of the main objectives of this PhD research, trying to understand how, on concrete cases, networks between social movements are constructed and developed, considering the importance of contextually produced relationships and the impact of pre-existent networks.

I would like to conclude by saying that this final story shows that if individual can, somehow, change their organizations and modify the face of the social movements they belong, creating new networks of relation, the opposite situation also occurs, as new directions on social movements imply alterations on their member identities. Now, focusing on the free software movement, we may see that it has been recently transformed by its participation on a BE law-project. It is important to mention that this would not happen, though, if Portuguese most representative free software organization, ANSOL, has not been willing to get involved with all kinds of potential supporters. A similar situation happened, by the way, with ANSOL's participation at the first Portuguese social forum, where many young activists heard, for the first time about free software. Free software movement, that has always been somehow marginal to Portuguese main topics of social and political struggle, was, for the first time, taken as part of Portuguese social contestation field, incorporated as an area of interest.

ANSOL' members and others free software organizations activists have, at the same time, been, for the first time, involved with other organizations promoting other social issues. That implied some capacity of readjustment (or metamorphosis) as personal political inclination had to been abandoned for a while.

4. On conclusion: beyond individual multi-participation, finding other network tools

I would like to conclude by saying that, as multiparticipation, there are others different mechanisms that may act as network tools. During the already done research, some of these other network tools have been found, as the common organization and presence on specific events; joint actions, partnerships and bilateral negotiations between social movements organizations and frequency of the same social contexts.

On the first case, it is important to mention the significance of the social forum, a unique moment of interaction between different, often difficult to reconcile, social movements. Portuguese Social forum (FSP) is an omnipresent reference among the young activists interviewed discourse, and some of them reported its impact on subsequent action. One can recall here the tie between CGTP and the gay pride parade. It is also significant that FSP act as a space of re-affirmation of social movements. FSP organization is a multi-step process that stage latent struggles between the small, not very developed field of Portuguese associations linked to new social movements, Portuguese parties (mainly the communist party) and the most established social movements as trade unions. Thus, same small organization joins regularly in order to prepare a common front on preparatory assemblies, often controlled by Communist Party and CGTP.

Other events that annually occur in Lisbon are demonstrations, namely the regular ones, as on the 25 of April and on the 1st May. Particularly on the 25 of April, all social movements like to be present on a symbolic parade that is also quite participated by non-organized individuals. Each parade also starts with an informal negotiation: who goes in the front? Which organizations should march together?

It is also important to mention the role of specific organizations that act as platforms gathering different organizations, namely the Portuguese NGOs platform, that have an important role on lobbying, advising and activism training.

All interviews also include some questions about places where activists usually join, as bars, coffee shops or event squares. Many interviewees referred some bars and public houses where they went regularly; being sure of finding there some people from the same organizations they were involved with. As many of these spaces are a social patrimony for different organization, these spaces may also act as a context to establish new ties.

Gathering together individual from different backgrounds on a common purpose – from social and political activities to leisure – all these network tools present some,

often unintentional, collateral dynamics, promoting new and convergent projects, hybrid and syncretic dispositions and identity reconfigurations.

Finally it is impossible to forget the role of Internet as a most important network tool that has stretched to its limits interactivity between different social movements. Web-based directories of organizations, mailing lists focusing on different topics and alternative media agencies are some of the most interesting internet-based network tools, but one can also include other specific tools, as websites gathering several online petitions, or other ones that promote meetings between individuals involved on the most diverse topics.

Finally, it is important to include a final remark, remembering that these different mechanisms are only analytically distinct, as events, partnerships and multi-participations tend to be deeply imbricate on each other.

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