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❖ **From social media to social energy (ενέργεια): the idea of the 'social' in "social media"**

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**Abstract**

My interest in this paper is to explore how the current extensive use of 'social' in its adjectival qualification of media, and transformation into a compound noun, has replaced a complex term and its preferred meanings. Within the current usages of "social media" such as with the popular platform Facebook, the 'social' collapses into a term of mediation and stands for the range of connecting instances in which media perform linkages across platforms and virtual places. In more recent journalistic contexts, the use of social media has been tied to the activation of political and grassroots movements: in the case of the so-called Arab Spring and the 2011 London Riots. Despite the clear differences in political motivation and organisational tactics, it is the use of social media that binds these events in the mainstream media account of them. I would argue then, that while the ease of formulation of messages within these platforms and applications constructs a wholly different and distorted idea of the social, the use of social media as a communalising tool is continuous with the intellectual traditions that made the 'social' a powerful concept for theorising and thinking about civilisational change.

Using Laclau's work on the logic of populism, I link the examples of the Arab Spring, the London Riots and the use of social media to ambiguities of populism identified by Laclau. I adopt the term "social energy" to suggest a way of mobilising a broader complex of public emotions associated with populist expression.

**From social media to social energy (ενέργεια): the idea of the 'social' in social media**

'my Riots past, my wilde Societies'  
William Shakespeare, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, III, iv

**Introduction**

The sense of the 'social' when used in the phrase "social media" (for example, in reference to Facebook), has been given a very different slant to the term by new media practitioners. The term, 'social' has been understood and used as part of the language of social and cultural theory and also earlier in varied literary contexts as ably identified in Raymond Williams' (1976) *Keywords*. In this paper I explore how the current extensive use of 'social' in its adjectival qualification of media, and its transformation into a compound noun, has replaced a complex term and its preferred meanings. Within the current usages of "social media" such as with the popular platform Facebook, the 'social' collapses into a term of mediation and stands for the range of connecting instances in which media performs linkages across platforms and virtual places. These linkages<sup>1</sup> frequently take the form of conversations between persons, both structured and unstructured, with some taking on 'to whom it may concern' modes of address that tend to serve the advertising and marketing industries. There are many exemplars of how social media is used, but my interest is to ground the idea of the 'social' as a way of re-framing some of the claims made on behalf of social media.

In more recent journalistic contexts, the use of social media has been tied to the activation of political and grassroots movements in the case of the so-called Arab Spring and the so-called 2011 London Riots. Despite their clear differences in political motivation and organisational tactics, it is the use of social media that binds these events in the mainstream media. I argue then, that while the ease of formulation of messages within these platforms and applications constructs a wholly different and distorted idea of the social, the use of social media as a communalising tool is continuous with the intellectual traditions that made the 'social' a powerful concept for theorising and thinking about civilisational change. With reference to recent political events, I will pose and address a number of questions: Can the 'social' in social media be redeemed beyond corporate marketing to impact on both mass Arab Spring and micro (London Riots) political events? What are the intellectual antecedents that link the social to the expression of political action? Do those using social media for political change understand the nuances of the technologies they appropriate? Does the awareness of the impact of technologies on

communicational strategies make a difference to those strategies?

The argument in this paper begins with a review of the concept of rhetoric through the work of Kenneth Burke, who grounds the idea of rhetoric in a number of related concepts: dramatism, human agency and consubstantiation. That is, Burke acknowledges the tendency for cross-identification in human interaction for the mobilisation of political motifs. The purpose of this interest in rhetoric links with Laclau's performatively defined social action model – one that relies on a particular and critical understanding of rhetoric. The source of Burke's idea of rhetoric in the Greek philosophical tradition is linked in the final section of this paper to another concept in that same tradition: Social Energy or *ἐνέργεια*. The paper presents an etymological account of the term 'social' that Raymond Williams reveals has sustained over time an unresolved ambiguity between notions of association/political mobilisation and ideas of distinction and individualism. Turning to Laclau's work on the *On Populist Reason* (2005), the paper takes up Laclau's theory of the social that finds in his model of populism para-social phenomena in which the ambiguity of the social is resolved in favour of a dynamic concept of human association, and the social and political actions attributable to it. The paper concludes by introducing the concept of 'social energy' – a more abstract and generalising idea that allows for a more complicated relationship between those that are constitutive of the 'social' and the contemporary media chosen for the expression of public emotion.<sup>2</sup>

### Meaningful social action: rhetoric or grammar of motives?

When Kenneth Burke offers a definition of rhetoric as "... a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols ..." (1963/1964: 492), he ascribes to human beings an innate condition in which, for better or worse, they will use symbolic forms and be used by them. Burke's central metaphor was the 'drama' through which he attempts to circumscribe meaning through human action – their motives for acting in particular ways. His dramatic pentad – act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose – formed a template against which the analysis of motives could take place (Burke, 1978). The idea of dramatism finds consonance between thought, language and action such that it could be structured as a 'grammar' (hence the title of his book, *Grammar of Motives*) and thus causality could be imputed to the agents/actors of the action. The social or sociological motif enters Burke's model as a fundamental feature of literary and other textual systems as sources of the self and others, and for behaviour across the spectrum of human social and political activity.

The twin ideas of *rhetoric* and *consubstantiality* provide a dialectic for Burke that suits a sense of social communication. Burke's use of the term 'rhetoric' is a means of mobilising Aristotle's concerns in his work on rhetoric in which persuasion and speech form a "dialectical dialogue" that consists centrally of either a "call to action" or a 'warning' – directed to an 'audience' or other collective. Burke defines rhetoric as:

... the manipulation of men's beliefs for political ends....the basic function of rhetoric [is] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents (Burke, 1950:173).

And further that:

Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and continually born anew: the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols (Burke, 1950: 173).

Whereas consubstantiality occurs when:

We form selves or identities through various properties or substances, including physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs and values. [It] occurs when two entities are united in substance through common ideas, attitudes, possessions or properties (Burke, 1950:174).

It is my intention in this paper to argue that social media constitute a form that combines rhetoric and consubstantiation. In doing so, it is not a "new techné" associated with new communication technologies or a new 'tool' to enact revolutionary action (the so-called Arab Spring) or the 2011 disturbances on the streets of London (the so-called London Riots). While the ideas expressed in Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives* suggest broadly the connections between persuasive speech and human action, it is his *Grammar of Motives* that shows how the communicative instances in which appeals to group action (of demonstrating, rioting) are based on processes of identification and de-identification between self and others.<sup>3</sup> Neither treatment of *motives* crosses into the meaning of actions as they might be interpreted across the political and cultural spectrum within the social spheres in which they have occurred.<sup>4</sup> These analyses have to be developed, and Burke is one who thinks that these examples are important. For instance, writing in 1939, his close examination of *Mein Kampf* (Burke, 1974) presents a textual analysis of an imbrication of meaningful action, rhetoric as persuasion, and a call to arms within the specific ideologically-driven motives of Hitler and the 3rd Reich.

As noted, I am interested here in engaging with the treatment of the *social* as developed by Raymond Williams in order to lay the groundwork for re-thinking the use of the 'social' in "social media." The contemporary concerns raised by the Arab Spring and London Riots form problem exemplars<sup>5</sup> in the way that social media is mobilised as a term in conjunction with populist action. With the aid of Laclau's *Logic of Populism*, I argue for a more nuanced view of populism and, by extension, for the place of social media in these social movements. Finally, I offer a revised term, "social energy" to grasp better the political mobilisations of large groups of people *encoded* by social media in their contemporary confrontation with authority and dictatorship.

### Ideas of the 'social' in Williams' Keywords

In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams's etymological glossary of key critical terms in the cultural studies canon, the concept of the

*social* appears in two entries: one under the entry for 'Socialism' and the other under the entry for 'Society'. Williams locates the term, 'social' as part of the term 'socialism' as a means of lending support to his argument about the differing political sides to the term *social* as follows:

Social in sense (i) was the merely descriptive term for society in its now predominant sense of the system of common life; a social reformer wished to reform this system (ii) was an emphatic and distinguishing term, explicitly contrasted with individual and especially individualist theories of society... (Williams, 1976: 238-9).

Williams develops these different-yet-connected versions of the *social* to set up a discussion of the term *socialist* so that the varied splits in the socialist movement are grounded in these two senses. In the first sense of the social, Williams identifies the centrality of liberal values in terms of the movements that identify the social as the location where liberal reform of society emerges: for example, the promotion of social justice and the attack on inequality and embedded privilege. The second sense aligns more with the radical break from liberalism identified with the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment and collective forms of the social that opposed individualism and the private ownership of the means of production.<sup>6</sup>

The salient point to take from this treatment of the origins of socialism in the 19th century is that it is founded on differing ideas of political transformation. These ideas hinge on an idea of a collective that finds its way into knowledge regimes associated with the study of the social as a "thing-in-the-making" through sociology (Durkheim) and social anthropology (Radcliffe-Brown). In these hands, the term *social* migrates to *society* as a term that characterises:

... a body of institutions and relationships within which a relatively large group of people live; and as our most abstract term for the condition in which such institutions and relationships are formed (Williams, 1976: 243).

Here Williams is quite keen to separate the form from the formation – and formation here can be historically tracked from the way in which people have grouped together as companions or fellow travellers to one in which they gravitate towards association to effect a common goal.

As a term, *society* is much older (14th century) than *socialist*, which has French roots and usages (a peasant's revolt in 1381) and later, as quoted by Williams,

"... they have neede one of anothers helpe, and thereby love and societie...growe among all men the more (1581)" (1976: 244). This sense of fellowship and collective action is tempered later towards a simple sense of companionship as in "your society" meaning "your company". Williams take us further and perhaps closer to the recent London Riots<sup>7</sup> through an allusion to Shakespeare's (1602) *Merry Wives Windsor*, "my Riots past, my wilde Societies".

In relation to Macbeth (1603-1607) and "our Selfe mingle with Society", Williams' indication of the interest in common goals arrives only much later in the 15th century when the "societe of saynt George" offers distinction of the group from everyone else (who is not a member of the said society). Williams goes on to track society to the point when it becomes a "fuller abstraction" encompassing laws and institutions, and then moving through a complex transition in relation to the formation of the *state* – a term which itself grows out of ideas and practices of rank and hierarchy eventually to pose itself in a form of differentiation from *society*. So *society* is an assemblage of 'free' persons against a *state* that exerts power and authority, although Williams ultimately sees the state as a potential sponsor of society through socialism.

#### **Followers and friends: meaningful text(ing) as action**

The above issue outline sets up a contemporary discussion about a key distinction in the meaning of 'social' to which social media can be linked. The contemporary uses of society have expanded the earlier opposition, including the ideas suggested by the term *civil society* and the ubiquitous *community*. These terms take that associative idea of society and move away from the hierarchical interests suggested by the emergence of the state. When the interests of social reform marry with those of association, a direct link to social media may be traced to these root terms and practices. For Williams, by the 19th Century, the term *society* has become commonly configured (as with social life and/or social evenings as well a direct reference to class (upper echelons of society)), and also been retained as an abstraction against which problems of belonging, relationship and other issues of connectedness between individuals and society ensue.

With certain forms of social media come designated roles for those associated with this foundation. Twitter invokes following or *followers* and, in this sense, harks back to the earlier 14th century ideas of companionship and, further, to association in order to achieve common goals. Facebook, of course, has *friends* as the chief term of alignment that has been re-created as a verb to 'friend' (as in to be-friend). Although these forms have been ridiculed of late (can you really have 40 thousand friends?), the aggregating power of these platforms has worked in ways to suggest that they are themselves powerful agents of mobilisation. The logical consequence of the split suggested by the history of the term social, would place social media in the position of leaning towards the communalising end of the 'society' spectrum, and in opposition to the state's deployment of power. The uprisings in the Middle East and the riots in London suggest that social media may simply be extending an objective bias to the ways in which society has split for many centuries between power/authority on the one hand, and the communities that are to be policed on the other. Between these momentary outbursts of popular contestation, the tension between the two sides of the social is a symptom of all manner of things. It is not my intention here to resolve or assess the claims as to why the demonstrations are taking place. The concerns of both groups reflect social and economic injustice concerning problems of access and equity as well as living standards, employment and equal opportunity. With social media, the contention is that these tensions can be more easily exacerbated by communicative events in which the mobilisation to gather and protest enhanced by social media is swift, fluid, adaptive and highly effective.

With Williams' *Keywords* we have a key book of the late 20th Century that differs in many respects from texts in critical and

cultural studies. Because it is a glossary and etymology, and not a themed interrogation of concepts or problems, Williams chose the text to be a *tool* for understanding the language of critical discourse, and its grammar and connectedness over time. Similarly, a distinction can be made between those who program database software or other computer facilities, and those who use the computer for particular ends. Those mobilising flash mobs on the London streets do not need to know how Twitter is programmed, but only how it is used to create the ends that are desired. All this knowledge about the program is embedded in the software itself. The degree to which programs and platforms like Twitter and Facebook are used is proportional to the *lack* of interest in the technology by the vast majority of those who use these programs and platforms (see Ron Burnett's Blog <http://rburnett.ecuad.ca/> accessed August 20, 2011). By this I mean that the majority of people who *use* Twitter are not interested in how it works.

One of the consequences suggested by Jaron Lanier in a recent conversation with Jennifer Kahn in the *New Yorker*, is that:

...Wikipedia (which he called a triumph of 'intellectual mob rule') and social-networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, [which] he has described as dehumanizing and designed to encourage shallow interactions. Teenagers, he writes, may vigilantly maintain their online reputations, but they do so 'driven more by fear than by love.' In our conversation about Facebook's face-recognition software, he added, "It'll just create a more paranoid society with a fakey-fakey social life—much like what happened in Communist countries, where people had a fake social life that the Stasi could see, and then this underground life (Kahn, 2011: 56).

What this critique suggests is a kind of user-proliferation that embeds communicative competence without communicative awareness, which leads to a sociality of association that skates over the underlying logic of the social – that it would, in some way, think about the nature of reform and the formation of a larger – albeit abstract – notion that embraced institutional life. Instead, social media and specifically Facebook may have reverted to a 19th century idea of a social privilege in which:

Society is now one polish'd horde

Formed of two mighty tribes, the Bores and the Bored. (Byron, Don Juan XIII, 95 in Williams 1976: 247) <sup>8</sup>

To move the argument forward, it will be useful to examine a contemporary critique of populism in the work of Ernesto Laclau. The popular movements of the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the London Riots suggest two very different kinds of popular expression – a key feature of the way in which populism has been characterised and theorised over many years.

#### **Traditions of populism: social movements, uprisings and the street.**

Laclau's work on the logic of populism takes up a theory of the social that finds in his model of populism para-social phenomena in which the ambiguity of the social is resolved in favour of a dynamic concept of human association and the social and political actions attributable to it. In his book, *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau (2005) invokes the 'group' within a conceptual frame that attributes a set of demands to it. These demands, he suggests, are far from unifying or monolithic, and are instead notoriously unstable and multi-faceted, recalling the nature of populism itself as an analytical tool for politics. Populism has been identified with views across the political spectrum (in the Left-Right binary) as well as with a deeply ambiguous pedigree with regards to the political goals of those who hold the views and set out to achieve them (from agrarian revolt to disenfranchised rioters). There is a sense, however, that the deeply social nature of a populist revolt or articulation of causes is such that we ascribe importance to the function of these phenomena even within the ambiguities apparent in the profiles of those involved. Laclau is keen to underline the need to understand the politically charged aspect of populism *within* the ambiguities of the definition and not outside them. This position suggests that it is part of the character of populism to be inconsistently applicable to differing political situations and contexts. For Laclau, it does not limit the logic of populism but rather suggests to him that it transcends the multiple contingencies within which it is invoked.

One of the sources for Laclau's critical intervention is the work of Kenneth Minogue (1969), whose separation of rhetoric and ideology places rhetoric in a subordinate relationship to ideology. He argues this point so as to juxtapose the "surface expression of populist feeling" with the deeper feelings grounded in the ideological roots that should underpin it. In the context of the so-called Arab Spring, it is ironic that Minogue's account of "third world" ideologies degrades them as beliefs that are like "umbrellas hoisted to the exigencies of the moment, but disposable without regret as circumstances change ..." (Minogue, cited in Laclau, 2005: 11.) This judgement may be news for those still occupying Tahrir Square in Egypt.

Laclau's use of Minogue allows him to argue that the cultural context is a key manner of re-articulating populism towards a performatively defined social action model that re-calibrates the ideas of the movement as political conditions shift:

... the distinction between a movement and its ideology is not only hopeless but irrelevant – what matters is the determination of the discursive sequences through which a social force or movement carries out its overall political performance (Laclau, 2005: 23).

Populism in these terms ceases to be a dimension of empty political and ideological nomenclatures but rather a kind of political culture (see Peter Worsley, 1969).

Populism is, therefore, best thought through not as an epiphenomenon of some pre-existing condition but as the *sine qua non* of social life. It has built-in contingencies tied to every situation in which a form of political expression is both necessary but insufficient for the law of the total situation. It is in this sense that populist movements are progressive – not ideologically, but rather in the sense that they move in stages in tandem with the unfolding of political developments (for example, the deposing of a dictator, the defeat of an army). Laclau's view is that it may be more profitable to invert the general analyses of populism by looking for dimensions of populist movements that cut across the social differences that tend to be at their social base. The

denigration of populism is for him a slippery slope that would exclude populism from a rational politics and include it instead in the irrational mass psychological behaviour accorded to some of the historically celebrated riots, such those associated with the French Revolution (and potentially the recent London Riots) and the pathologies accorded to them.

Turning to the problem exemplars at hand, the Arab Spring and the London Riots appear on the surface to be populisms without common social ground; developing versus developed worlds, longstanding dictatorships against parliamentary democracy, and social theocracies and ethnic homogeneity against a primarily secular diverse society. A dimension that cuts across both popular actions and which has been highlighted by media reporting is the use of social media to facilitate the action of the movements. The diagnosis of the strategies and influences that mobilise crowds originating in 19th century mass psychology have a concomitant reflection in the considerations of social media. It is with "image, word and formula ..." (Le Bon, 1995: 143) and the "power of suggestion" that lead to the mass crowd behaviour of the revolutionary kind. The use by Laclau of Le Bon, the 19th century author of *The Crowd*, buttresses to some extent the contemporary view that populism is riven with distorted communication – that given the chance, a 'crowd' prefers false facts that support their cause rather than accurate ones that do not.<sup>9</sup> For Le Bon, the contagion that affects communicative interaction in a crowd is a pathology and remains unexplained as a so-called "power of suggestion". Curiously, it was this kind of explanation (rioters as diseased) that characterised the description of the London rioters as provided by UK Prime Minister David Cameron. In contrast to this view of the London Rioters, Cameron and other politicians from the West have described the groups who took control of public squares in Cairo, Tunis and Libya as revolutionaries, democratic activists and populists. I will conclude this paper with a further look at Laclau's views on the logic of populism, as a means of analysing the ongoing developments of the Arab Spring.

### **Streets and squares: case studies from Tunis (Habib Bourguib Avenue) to London (Tottenham) via Cairo (Tahrir Square)**

In his blog on social media, Ron Burnett (2011) offers a definition of Twitter as "tremulous excitement". By this definition he intends to focus on the reverberating but momentary engagements instigated by the "twittering classes". There are also ties to gossip and voyeurism – countervailing forces that suggest distributed communication on the one hand (gossip) and static engagement from a distance (voyeurism) on the other. Another contradiction is cited in relation to identification in which, as Lanier suggests, social media come with a risk of a loss of identity (c.f. McLuhan's view of the link between violence and the search for identity mentioned earlier in this essay). Burnett raises questions about the relationships between a technology and its use. Although with the Arab Spring we have a good example of a technology being used with great effect, its users would likely have had little understanding of its language of operation – its programs. The mainstream media view of the Arab Spring is that it is about the formation of a collective identity that mobilised itself towards revolutionary action and the overthrow of dictatorships. The issue as to whether Twitter and Facebook should be open source is clearly less important to the Arab Spring than the human resources that were mobilised in collective action with the assistance of social media. There are now underway a number of studies seeking to understand this latest burst of collective action – if not collective motivation – around the Arab Spring. The interest stems from two main concerns: first, the focus is on how, from a seemingly stable and long-term political situation, a whole region erupted to contest the *status quo*. The second concerns the role of social media. The media interest in this event was first hinted at in the last Iranian election. It found in the Iranian opposition to the official result an unprecedented defiance of the regime. But the stories were almost always inflected with a link to social media or to viral video produced on mobile phones and mediated on the internet primarily through Youtube.<sup>10</sup>

The problem exemplars of the streets and squares of the Arab Spring will no doubt find their pattern in a pent-up demand for political and economic justice, a spontaneous act of public defiance and the collective mobilisation that followed with the aid of a Facebook page, Twitter, a viral mediated video on Youtube, and the circulation of information on all these platforms combining rumour, innuendo and rhetorical flourish. There is a danger in this kind of analysis in the idealisation of social media where the emphasis is more on the media part of the equation than the social part. Given the mainstream media's interest in itself, it is not surprising that it finds, more often than not, that the story is about mediatisation and less about the political complexity of the total situation. This is not to support social media sceptics, including Malcolm Gladwell (2012) and Evgeny Morozov (2011), in their sense that these technologies will be both insufficient and too easily absorbed and neutralised by the authorities, so allowing them to enhance their hegemony. It is rather to re-contextualise the celebratory nature of the social media 'moment' as one that is of its time, and that continues within a history of communications technology from Gutenberg to the internet. It is to suggest that social communication is what remains constant while the means of communication and their cosmologies change with technological invention. There have been many such Arab Springs in different parts of the world at different times – each within its own communications cosmology finding the tools for its own particular revolution.

The London Riots are now also undergoing substantial scrutiny and they do bear comparison with the Arab Spring actions as a way of drawing out the question or issue of motive. It is also the case that a key intervention in the analysis of the London Riots is being undertaken by making a key reference to the 1967 riots in Detroit, USA. The lessons from the study of the 1967 riot are sobering:

For example, contrary to public belief, there was no correlation between economic status or educational levels and propensity to riot...The main grievances were police brutality, overcrowded living conditions, poor housing and lack of jobs (Younge, 2011: 27).

A current study, dubbed "Reading the Riots" (2011), will emulate the famous *Detroit Riots* study in both approach and design: a partnership between a news organisation (*The Guardian*) and an academic social research institute (the London School of Economics) will drive the research. The sense of a 'fearless' research process is a welcome development in contrast with the British government's minimalist approach to the riots. The outcome to the Detroit study was that the riots were caused by the rioters' greed and lawlessness stemming from economic and social deprivation. With this current research project, the

researchers will also be given access to a Twitter database of 2.5 million messages sent with hashtags related to the riots. Without having to say so explicitly, it would seem that, as with the Arab Spring, agency will be sheeted in part to social media.

#### **From social media to social energy: ἐνέργεια as a rhetorical basis for agency.**

One of the key conclusions offered by Laclau to the puzzle of populist logic is to re-punctuate the relationship between a homogenous concept such as "the people" and the causality of their appearance as a social entity. Laclau instead suggests that social demand and expectation should be the driver of popular action (like that of the Arab Spring or the London Riots) and the emergence of the 'people'. In a book on the social and cultural contexts of understanding and appreciating the plays of Shakespeare, Stephen Greenblatt (1990: 5-6) enlisted the term 'energy' or ἐνέργεια from the Greek rhetorical tradition to ground the idea of a "poetics of culture" that could circulate and establish modes of "aesthetic empowerment" from the renaissance to the present. Despite our contemporary link of energy with physics and physical processes, Greenblatt tracks this term to a Greek rhetorical tradition, which connects to my earlier allusions to Kenneth Burke's interest in this same rhetorical tradition. For Greenblatt this version of 'energy' is "social and historical" and, in this context, history is a structured process of negotiation and exchange. *Social energy* is less amenable to being measured or reduced to formulaic impacts. Rather, *energia* is:

... identified only indirectly, by its effects: it is manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape, and organise collective physical and mental experiences ... [and yet, social energy] ... must have a minimal predictability – enough to make simple repetitions possible – and a minimal range: enough to reach out beyond a single creator or consumer to some community, however constricted ... (Greenblatt, 1990: 6).

In borrowing this term from Greenblatt and applying it to this question of populism, the idea of a "social energy" may be a more appropriate manner of describing the 'force' at work in the context of both revolutionary uprisings of the Arab Spring and the London Riots than "social media".

The more abstract and generalising idea of "social energy" demands a more complicated relationship between those that are constitutive of the 'social' and the means by which this is achieved. In the terms of social media, the emphasis tends to be on how to find commonality within the framing offered by the media. The idea of social energy as conceived by Greenblatt allows for a lesser or greater effect where:

... men and women of different social classes and divergent beliefs will be induced to explode with laughter or weep or experience a complex blend of anxiety and exaltation ... (1990: 6).

It therefore can conceive of commonality as stemming from difference. As Laclau puts it, "the constitutive role that we have attributed to social heterogeneity" (2005: 223). The concept in Laclau's sense is not a simple one – he insists that heterogeneity implies a deficient or failed unity, and that in the context of mis-conceived populisms, this failed unity is nominally absent but articulated as an absent presence. The central precept of this position is that the 'people' are not essentialised as a *group* but rather arise out of a socio-political *demand* (Laclau, 2005: 224). This re-punctuation moves away from the model of commonality or sociality that looks for the manner of inclusion/exclusion on the basis of agreement or disagreement. Rather, it sees the group as driven by social and political demand whose logic is one that forms simultaneously both against and with a more general population.

Another preference for the term social energy over social media stems from the implicit teleological form that social media offer up to the practitioners that would invest in their power. Social energy suggests no such teleology. In contrast to the tendency within social movements and the populist logic described by Laclau, there is no final end-point where total revolution meets the horizon of history. As Laclau states, "History is ... a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations that cannot be ordered by a script transcending their contingent historicity" (2005: 226). It may be apparent now that we are in a universe of contingency where social demands may be autonomous – that is, specific to their own politics, spawning their own collectives and articulating their own logic of association and action. It may be that these positions raise more questions than they answer, for example, what role does "class struggle" play in a globalised capitalism? The interest it would seem would be to see how the new horizons of politics and populism weigh heavily on the limitations of an older political language.

If, as John Berger once wrote, "never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (1972: 129), a similar attribution may be given to social media in their multiplying effect on the idea of an information-rich society. However, the condition that leads human communication and exchange to thrive in times of "social and political demand" also drives the demand for mediation. These negotiated relationships *encode* social energy and make the use of social media necessary and, in some cases, useful and effective in amplifying the need for social change.

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- 1 This point suggests that social forms of mediation in the broad sense become supplanted by 'mediation by mediation' (Paul Jones, Personal Communication).
- 2 I would like to acknowledge one of the referees of this paper who proposed the term *public emotion*.
- 3 Marshall McLuhan, an adherent of Burke's, when asked about "youth violence", answered "... violence was always part of a quest for identity ..." This comment reflects McLuhan's and Burke's intellectual formation founded on the literary canon of the classics and English literary traditions from the renaissance onwards. See Interview with Marshall McLuhan (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Monday Conference, June 27, 1977).
- 4 This point underscores the view that Burke was not arguing for a logic of political action based on rhetoric alone. In this regard, social movement theory argues for many phases of social action leading to demonstrations (see Tarrow & Tilly, 2006).
- 5 I adopt the term, "problem exemplar" from Thomas Kuhn in his celebrated work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). This term is preferred to as a "case study" in that the examples to which it refers are used as a heuristic tool and as a guide to conceptual analysis.
- 6 According to Paul Jones, Williams wavers on this binary and further developed it in the work on utopianism. Elsewhere he employs a coalition between them – especially in *The Long Revolution's* (1961) chapter on educational reform (Jones, Personal Communication).
- 7 Here I am not alluding to the period (a peasant's revolt in the 1300s) but rather to a potential for an event named as a contemporary 'riot' to be linked to populist revolts.
- 8 The sense of society in Williams' *Keywords* suggests that the idea of the 'social' carried within it a residual meaning of 'good'

or privileged company. The markers of fashion and class came with this use of 'society'.

9 The current populist revolt against the Carbon Tax in Australia bears this out to a degree if science is considered to be a trusted source of accurate analysis of climate change data.

10 The most significant example is the YouTube video that went viral of a young woman who died on the streets of Tehran found at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDywWhWvIXo&feature=related>.

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