

# Book Review: Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization by Rodrigo Nunes

*In Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization, Rodrigo Nunes challenges the binary that pits verticalism against horizontalism, instead proposing that we approach political organisation as a diverse ecology of different initiatives and organisational forms. This is a timely contribution to theoretical debates around organisation and the global collective memory of political struggles, offering practical tools for activists and organisers while retaining scholarly rigour, writes Birgan Gokmenoglu.*

**Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization. Rodrigo Nunes. Verso. 2021.**

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Just over ten years ago, the Tunisian Revolution of 2010-11 rippled through the Middle East and North Africa in what came to be known as the 'Arab Spring', followed by the Occupy movements in the US, southern Europe and the UK in 2011, and in Turkey, Brazil and other nations in 2013 and beyond. As the world witnessed protests, uprisings and revolutions sweep across continents, the question of organisation resurfaced for activists and scholars alike, and continues to be central while we revisit the legacies of the 2011 wave ten years on.

The question of organisation spans a range of practical and theoretical issues, often framed in binaries such as spontaneity versus strategy; communication versus antagonism; informally connected networks versus formally organised structures; self-organisation versus organisation; local versus global; process versus outcome; coordination versus centralisation. In short, horizontalism versus verticalism. Thinking through these concerns, [Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization](#) by Rodrigo Nunes is a timely contribution not only to theoretical debates around organisation, but also to a global collective memory of political struggles. It is thus a book to be read by scholars of political theory, social movements, revolutions and contentious politics, as well as for activists and organisers to think with.

Organisation has a bad name. It has become synonymous with 'the party': today commonly understood as that hierarchical, centralised, vertical and – to the extent that it is those three things – authoritarian political structure that is associated with 'old politics' or the 'old' Left. The book identifies the historical roots of this association between organisation and the party, and the ensuing aversion to the former that Nunes calls 'the trauma of organisation' (Chapter Three). This term refers to a fear of collectivity, structure, permanence, institutionalisation and any kind of vertical-sounding organising effort with which the movements of the 2011 wave, and the alterglobalisation movement before it, had to grapple. Nunes, however, reminds us that being *against* organisation means being 'so fixated on the risk of its excess and perversion as to become desensitised to the tragedy of its lack and dissipation' (39).



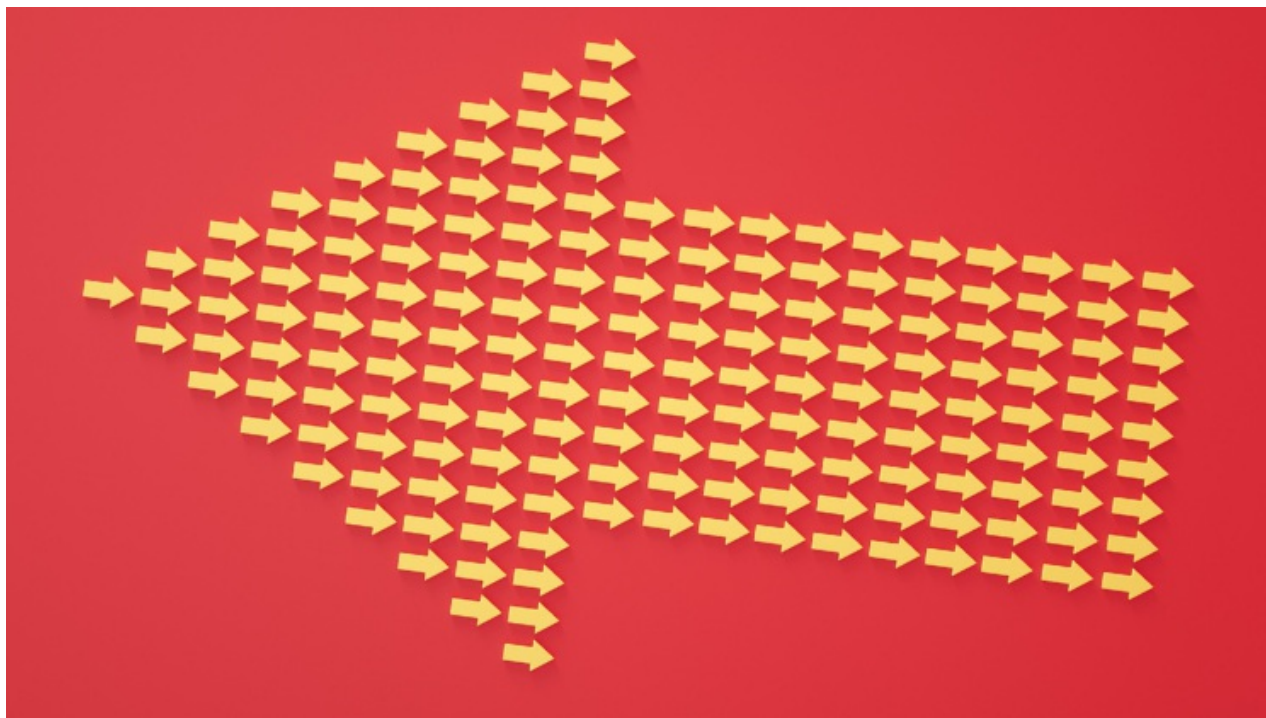


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The trauma of organisation is interlinked with what Nunes calls the ‘double melancholy’ (Chapter Two) of the defeats of both 1917 and 1968 and the ways of doing politics that are attributed to each. 1917 refers to the old politics, encompassing actually existing socialism, labour movements, trade unions and the party with its vanguard position and leadership, whereas 1968 is assigned ‘new social movements’ with their emphasis on minorities, identity politics, everyday transformation, struggles beyond the state and hippies.

Both ‘monoliths’, Nunes points out, are historically incorrect generalisations, ‘a retroactive projection constructed after its loss’ (26). His historical account dissipates the longstanding conviction in social movement studies that ‘workers’ movements’ have been replaced by ‘new social movements’. In fact, one of the major contributions of this book is its dissolution of the binaries that cause much division in both political theory and left-wing movements, such as those mentioned in the opening of this review. Instead of conceiving political action as choosing between binary opposites, Nunes suggests we think *ecologically*.

Thinking organisation ecologically is to think about the relations that bring together different forms and levels of action, various forms of organisation, different organisations collaborating with or contesting each other as well as individuals who are unaffiliated with any political organisation who support, engage or cooperate with these organisations in various ways. Nunes states that a theory of organisation should start from these relations, and that organisation ‘must refer to this phenomenon first, and only then to individual organisations’ (27). Individual organisations, in turn, can range from loose networks of individuals to political parties, from urban gardens to affinity groups.

Rather than aiming for a specific *form* of organisation that fits all purposes at all times, ecological thinking aims to deploy different *forces* of organisation, in different combinations and degrees, according to their fitness for expanding the capacity to act under specific conditions (Chapter Seven). Therefore, thinking organisation ecologically requires being sensitive to context, the configuration of power relations at a specific time and place and to the strengths and weaknesses of various tactics, alliances, demands, scales of engagement and organisational forms.

If organisational ecology is the scaffolding of Nunes’s theory, it is upheld by numerous supporting elements that help academics and activists to navigate their way through political action. The second half of the book elaborates on these constituting elements, which provide useful analytical tools and practical takeaways with which to study and engage in social movements.

‘Distributed leadership’ is one such element that lifts the weight off a particular organisation or individual with a leadership *position* and distributes it across the ecology of organisations to fulfil the *function* of leadership. This shifting of emphasis from position to function not only democratises leadership, but also redefines radicality (Chapter Seven):

To be radical is to be radical in relation to a concrete situation, by identifying the most transformative action compatible with it [...]. Outside of that, “radicality” is a purely aesthetic gesture [...] devoid of commitment to actually producing effects in the world (271).

Once action is taken out of the confines of a predetermined and fixed radicality and subjected to situated and empirical appraisal, neither a particular strategy nor a given form of organisation appears as the one-size-fits-all choice. This allows for another key element in Nunes’s theory of organisation: the ‘diversity of strategies’ to be taken up by political actors. Considering how the limited range of tactics of the alterglobalisation movement (for example, summit protests) and the 2011 wave (for instance, square occupations) obstructed these movements in the long run, Nunes’s theory provides a sound way forward for thinking about movement-building, strategy and alliances, in both the short and the long term, from within the moment of action and after.

Although Nunes builds on the lessons learned (or not learned) from the alterglobalisation movement and the 2011 wave, the parallels construed between the two obstruct as much as they reveal. The book would benefit from a more explicit discussion of how broader political ecologies, such as political regimes, shape and are shaped by the dynamics of the organisational ecologies of the movements that operate within them. This would entail acknowledging global waves while being attentive to the specificities of each case; after all, neither the alterglobalisation movement nor the 2011 wave were ‘global’ in the literal sense. That said, a case-by-case analysis would exceed the scope of this theoretical work, and the theory itself is flexible enough to provide useful concepts and practices to think with across movements.

*Neither Vertical nor Horizontal* offers a sober theory of organisation that builds on an eclectic mix of theorists and historical experience. It does not provide an ideal model to be followed but prompts the scholar/activist/organiser to ask, ‘what can we do now, in these circumstances?’ instead of the disengaged ‘what should be done?’ Indeed, the greatest strength of the book lies in Nunes’s skilfulness at offering practical tools for activists and organisers while retaining scholarly rigour, without compartmentalising theory from practice.

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