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# From mobilization to improvisation: the lessons from Taiwan's 2014 sunflower movement

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## ABSTRACT

The recent global eruption of large protests calls for a rethinking of the question of movement participation. The conventional model of movement as organized mobilization led by pre-existing organizations and top-down leadership clearly fails as an adequate portrait. As an alternative, horizontality with its emphasis on direct democracy, decentralized decision-making, and prefigurative politics (the rejection of instrumental view of participation) emerges in the global justice movement. This article explores an intermediate pattern of movement participation between these two extremes. Analyzing the protest occupation of Taiwan's national legislature in 2014, the so-called Sunflower Movement, I theorize the mechanism of improvisation, defined as 'strategic responses without prior planning,' as a vital process that facilitates coordination in a large-scale protest. Improvisation involves decentralized decision-making, but it proceeds as a means to a clearly defined and consensual movement goal. The creative collaboration by dispersed, but experienced activists plays a critical yet often neglected role during contentious confrontations against the government. Improvisation is capable of orchestrating large-scale protests because movement leadership is oft constrained by the lack of real-time information and their command is more effective when it provides room for improvisation from below.

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## Introduction

The opening decades of the twenty-first century witnessed a global surge in massive protests against economic inequality and political authoritarianism. In Kiev's Maidan Square, Seoul's anti-U.S. beef protest, Athen's Syntagma Square, Cairo's Tahrir Square, Madrid's *Indignados*, and the Occupy Wall Street Movement, the photogenic spectacle of youthful demonstrators, who mostly did not belong to pre-existing political parties or movements, had captured the attention of mainstream media. Particularly in the eventful 2011, when the gust of discontent flowing from the Arabic world swept through the austerity-stricken Europe and finally descended on New York, commentators spoke of an '1848 redux' (Mason, 2012, p. 171), as if a world-wide revolution was brewing.

Some common features have been identified in the surge of global protests, including the participation of young precariat, the savvy use of social media, and experiments with participatory democracy (Tejerina, Perugorria, Benski, & Langman, 2013). The absence of a pre-existing strong organizational basis was a noticeable characteristic of the contemporary activism. In the Korean protest against

American beef, high school students, rather than the more resourceful and experienced NGOs, pioneered the campaign (Kim, 2014). Although the Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood had a branch in every neighborhood, it was the young people who knew how to use Facebook who toppled Hosni Mubarak's regime (Way, 2011, p. 21). The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong erupted when police repression stirred the widespread participation of citizens who were previously uninvolved (Cheng & Chan, 2017).

Absence of a coherent ideological orientation was another trait. The global justice movement was a potpourri of environmentalists, unionists, and anarchists (Nowhere, 2003). The Arab Spring protestors were successful 'by dint of what they did not have – a clear program, a hierarchical organization with figureheads and followers – and by what they did not want – a specific ruler, his party, his family, his policies that enriched his elites and impoverished the people' (Noueihed & Warren, 2012, p. 6). Even in the pro-democracy movement in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004, Beissinger (2013) found its participants more diversified in terms of political values than its opponents or neutrals. Clearly, the lack of a shared vision for an alternative society in no way mitigated the movement impact.

Why do a great number of citizens take to the streets when they do not share organizational membership or ideological consensus? How can we explain the sudden outpouring of mass enthusiasm? Snow and Moss (2014) maintain that protest actions that are not 'planned, intended, prearranged, or organized in advance of their occurrence' have been an oft-neglected phenomenon. These acts of 'spontaneity' are more likely to take place in some conducive situations including nonhierarchical organizations, uncertain and ambiguous moments, the existence of prior emotional priming, and so on. Apparently, these conditions are more or less present in the above-mentioned global occupy protests, which explain why numerous, unsolicited, and anonymous contribution of citizens generate such a huge political impact.

Based on this insight, this article examines a specific form of mass protest that is not led by pre-existing organizations by conceptualizing 'improvisation,' defined as 'strategic response without prior planning,' as a vital mechanism that makes possible the orchestration of these large protests. Acts of improvisation emerge when an acute grievance surfaces as a focal national event and it also presupposes a sufficient number of seasoned and well-connected activists who are able to make strategic decisions autonomously from the top leadership. That these conditions are not always present explains the rarity of these history-making events. This article understands improvisation a subset of what Snow and Moss (2014) identify as 'spontaneity' since both acts involve unplanned and decentralized responses from the protestors. Nevertheless, improvisation is conceptually narrower because it has to do with strategic decisions in an unusual confrontation with the authorities.

I will develop the concept improvisation as an alternative ideal type to 'organized mobilization' and 'horizontalness' as a mode of movement participation. Organized mobilization happens when people respond to the call of pre-existing organizations by joining a collective action in order to realize a definite goal. Movement participation is clearly an instrumental action following the top-down decision of leadership. Horizontalness, by contrast, is a particular form of movement participation that rejects the hierarchical distinction between leaders and followers. Participants are encouraged and entitled to define the purpose of their collective action so that their movement goals are multiple or fluid. Prefigurative politics often accompanies such movements of horizontalness because participants do not see their action merely as an instrument to a future goal, but an instant realization of the desired status of the affairs. Improvisation appears an intermediate form of movement participation between these two ideal types. It takes place when there is no or weak prior organization, but it still aims at a clearly defined goal. Decision-making is to certain extent delegated to non-leaders, who nevertheless see their contribution as a means to the same objective. Improvisation deserves a closer theoretical look precisely because it occupies a midway place between the elitism of organized mobilization and the populism of horizontalness.

## Case selection and data sources

Taiwan joined the international trend of occupy protest with its Sunflower Movement of 2014, which started when two hundred students stormed the national legislature (Legislative Yuan) in the evening of 18 March to protest the ruling party's railroading of a free-trade agreement with China. Unexpectedly, the radical act of congress seizure evolved into a political confrontation that lasted for twenty-four days. During that period, the Sunflower activists were able to enjoy broad public support and launched a rally of half a million participants on 30 March. The Sunflower Movement ended peacefully; though the government stood firm in its defense for the free-trade agreement, the protestors at least succeeded in preventing its immediate ratification (Ho, 2015).

The research data come from many sources. I conducted field observation during the protest. After its conclusion, I carried out in-depth interviews with fifty-eight persons, including forty-one students, seven NGO workers or volunteers, and six politicians or political staff, and four other participants, in order to collect first-hand information from different subgroups and factions among Sunflower participants. Since the incident represents Taiwan's hitherto largest social movement in terms of scale, there has subsequently been a wealth of published work, discussion forums and speeches by both participants and observers, which also provide vital information.

## Movements as organized mobilization

Since the ascendancy of resource mobilization theory in the 1970s, students of social movements have focused on the episode of mobilization as the basic unit of analysis. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicated the dual origins of 'mobilization' as 'the action or process of bringing into circulation or realizing assets, capital, etc' and 'the action or process of preparing or organizing an army, fleet, etc.' The founding theorists' choice for such a term with its financial and military etymologies aimed to highlight the disciplined and purposeful aspect of movement participation, which was often obscured by the stereotypical image of 'a madding crowd' (McPhail, 1991) in the earlier collective behavior theory, which tended to view the emergence of protests as a bottom-up result of accumulated grievances.

Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow define mobilization as the process whereby a political actor gains control over resources that are vital for political contention (Tilly & Tarrow, 2006, p. 217). Earlier theorists did not provide a precise definition of 'resource,' but rather used the term to loosely refer to anything that was useful for the movement. As such, mobilization covers a number of related but distinct activities, such as cultivating awareness, recruiting participants, fund-raising, building organizations, establishing personal relations, and so on. In spite of its broadness, mobilization always presupposes the existence of a prior group, whose various degrees of coherence and coverage have a direct bearing upon the scale of movement participation. Hence, Tilly (1978, p. 84) proposes the hypothetical formula 'mobilization =  $f(\text{organization})$ ,' with the expectation that stronger organization brings about powerful protests. McCarthy and Zald (1987, pp. 15–42) emphasize the entrepreneurial role of 'social movement organizations' that are capable of defining grievances and motivating participants. Seeing social movements as an organization-led activity comes with the necessary distinction between leaders and followers as well as the tendency to formalize their relationship (Staggenborg, 1989). Social protests become less a spur-of-the-moment happening, but a premeditated event involving rationalistic calculation. In this perspective, social movements are not extra-institutional in the sense that they deviate from other mainstream political activities such as lobbying by interest groups because they also involve with a bargaining process with the authorities (Burstein, 1998).

With the gradual institutionalization of social movements in democratic polities (Goldstone, 2004), it becomes a reasonable expectation the majority of social movements take place in the pre-planned manner. There emerges a standard mobilization model of social movements: a core group of social movement leaders manage formalized organizations, frame public grievances, seize political opportunity, and mobilize their constituencies via organizational or interpersonal networks in the attempt to bargain with the incumbents for the desired concessions (see the synthesis by McAdam, McCarthy, and

Zald (1996) and Tarrow (1994)). The organization-based mobilization model becomes the dominant view, capable of explaining those social protests that are launched with an identifiable leadership and objectives and are expected to end more or less predictably and peacefully, which has grown into the modular understanding of social movements of our times.

## Movements of Horizontality

The belief that movement power originates from its organizational strength, to be sure, was never free of criticism. Since the nineteenth century, the debate over centralized leadership and mass spontaneity has been a perennial issue of contention between Marxism and anarchism (see Graeber, 2009, pp. 210–222; Hobsbawm, 1973, pp. 58–89). The New Left of the 1960s was animated by a powerful ethos of participatory democracy that viewed bureaucratic organizations as rigid, inauthentic, and oppressive. In its wake, there emerged many social movements that consciously rejected professionalization and organizational development. The American feminists of the 1970s experimented with a number of small and local groups to encourage grassroots participation (Freeman, 1975). Similarly the European autonomous movements of the 1980s pioneered with disruptive direct actions in an effort to transcend the institutional Left, which was trapped by its ossified machines of political parties and labor unions (Katsiaficas, 1997). More recently, the term horizontality emerged as a more inclusive concept for these movements that attempted to preserve participant diversity and to decentralize decision-making as much as possible (Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Maeckelbergh, 2013).

Horizontality is a noticeable feature in the global justice movement, which are best exemplified in the summit protests at the regular meetings of some international organizations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the G8. Protests on these occasions are often characterized as ‘a movement of movements’ because of the rich diversity of participants and their demands (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005). McDonald (2002) contends that participants are not forging a ‘collective identity’ in the sense of consolidating their solidarity, but rather aiming at ‘public experience of self,’ or an expressive action for their personalized commitments. Tominaga (2012) discovers that summit protest participants are also motivated by a number of personal motives and some do not even share a critical outlook on neoliberal globalization. Taken to its extreme form, some street occupations are said to have become ‘a kind of performance art’ for itself (Kraev, 2014, p. 20). Clearly, there are multiple or open goals in a movement of horizontality (Maeckelbergh, 2012).

Horizontality comes with the rejection of instrumental logic that reduces movement participation to a means for a distant goal. Prefigurative politics, or the effort to realize the movement ideal through protest action here and now, envisions liberation of human possibilities per se as a desirable goal, not just a resource for movement mobilization (Graeber, 2002, p. 72). Its supporters maintain that prefigurative politics is not merely about expressive playfulness, but also comes with strategic significances. In his participant observation of Occupy Wall Street Movement, Graeber (2013) documents many incidences of tactical innovation, such as choosing Zuccotti Park as the protest site, as a result of bottom–up and collaborative decisions. In similar vein, Maeckelbergh (2011) contends prefiguration plays a strategic role in movement of horizontality precisely because the movement goals and courses remain an on-going issue of negotiation among participants.

In short, horizontality amounts to a mirror image of organized mobilization because it starts with weak or no pre-existing organizations, pursues multiple goals, and delegates decision-making to grassroots participants. While horizontality draws its power from the initiatives among the rank-and-file, organized mobilization relies more on the judgment of movement leadership. Beyond these two modes of movement activism, there exist other possibilities of a creative mixture of these opposing tendencies. The following section will theorize improvisation as an alternative.

## Movements by improvisation

Improvisation, the ability to generate creative responses to new situations, constitutes the very core of human agency. People do not improvise when they fail to take proactive action or when they closely follow the given script. Analyzing face-to-face interaction, Erving Goffman highlights self-command under fluid and ever-changing circumstances should not be taken for granted, but a social skill to be mastered. In this sense, the actor ‘must give himself up to certain rapid resolution of an uncertain outcome. And he must give himself to fate in this way when he could avoid it at reasonable cost’ (Goffman, 1967, p. 261). Just as an impromptu instrumental performance is a hallmark of accomplished musicians, the ability to improvise for interaction, even in a less familiar milieu, is a necessary social skill for human agents.

This article defines improvisation during the movement as ‘strategic responses without prior planning.’ It might on the surface look like prefigurative politics because it also invites free and flexible contribution from non-leaders. However, improvisation takes place on the occasion when there is a clear consensus on the movement goal, particularly when the protest involves an acute and risky confrontation with the authorities. Under these situations, sustaining the protest in order to minimize the danger of police crackdown becomes as the most important task. Therefore, improvisation functions more or less as a complement to the movement leadership, rather than a substitute to it.

While movements of horizontality celebrate the participant diversity without the attempt to reconcile their differences for the unity’s sake, movements by improvisation highlight the fact participants are differently endowed. The ability to make and execute impromptu tactical decisions during protests is not a universal attribute, but a capacity cultivated by experience. As Jasper (2004, p. 5) argues, movement activists possess certain resources and skills that are not necessarily transferable across different arenas. As such, the capacity to improvise varies from person to person and it would be dogmatic to insist every participant can contribute equal share to the movement.

Focusing on the role of improvisation helps us to overcome the limits of the standard model that views movements as organized mobilization. The issue here is not that the mainstream hierarchical and centralized social movement organizations are not effective, but that they do not exhaust all the possible ways of making protest. Since improvisation is inherently a subjective capacity, we have to look more closely at the agency of movement activists. Jasper (1997, pp. 54–58) emphasizes the biographical aspect of movement agency and sees individuals as carriers of a distinctive selection of cultural meanings. In this perspective, whether a social movement can mobilize a ‘resource’ or capture an ‘opportunity’ depends on the idiosyncratic traits of the movement participants whose cultural understanding defines what a resource or an opportunity is.

The emphasis on experienced activists helps us to avoid the trap of unduly glorifying the resourcefulness of ordinary citizens as if everyone is equally capable of ‘making history.’ As suggested by Jasper (2014, p. 185), paying attention to the agency issue in social movement entails a balanced recognition that humans ‘are capable of heroic actions, but also disappointing and mistaken actions.’ In many contemporary protests, what appears as a natural overflow of the crowd might actually be a trained response and coordination by movement activists, who are experienced enough to provide necessary on-the-spot management, yet not so well-known to be mentioned in the mainstream media. For example, the Egypt’s Revolution originated from ‘protests had been meticulously planned by a small number of activists’ whose collaboration evolved over more than one decade (Gunning & Baron, 2014, pp. 165–166). Analyzing the Spanish *Indignados* Movement, Fominaya (2015) challenged the ‘myth of spontaneity by ordinary citizens’ by pointing out the role played by the activists of the preceding movement. Zamponi and Joseba (2017) indicated the prior student mobilization contributed to the anti-austerity protests in southern Europe by popularizing the criticisms against neo-liberalism.

In short, an alternative conceptual scheme is needed to understand those rare, but consequential moments when social movements deviate from the business-as-usual route. More specifically, there emerges a particular variant of largely peaceful movement activism with the following characteristics: (1) large-scale participation in a relatively short episode of intensive confrontation, (2) weak or no

pre-existing organizations, and (3) decentralized, ad hoc, or even ineffective leadership, which are conducive to the emergence of improvisation.

### Occupying congress in Taiwan

The Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA), signed on 21 June 2013, was a controversial attempt to liberalize the bilateral flow of capital and manpower between Taiwan and China. Partly in response to the growing public concern, the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) party and the opposition parties, chiefly the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), reached an agreement to review the CSSTA on an article-by-article basis. The KMT leadership was apparently dissatisfied with the slow progress in the legislative review. On 17 March 2014, the KMT lawmakers launched a surprise offensive by announcing the CSSTA had cleared the procedure of substantive review and was ready for the final reading. The whole incident took place in 30 s, leaving many lawmakers and journalists in bewilderment.

Previously, there were already two social movement organizations targeting the CSSTA. The Democratic Front Against Cross-Strait Trade in Services Agreement (DF) was a coalition of Taiwan's NGOs in labor, gender, human rights, and environmental protection, formed in July 2013. Two months later, activist students formed the Black Island Nation Youth Front (BIY). Both organizations were small (less than twenty core members), as the CSSTA did not initially receive spotlight attention in the media.

The 'incident of 30 seconds' prompted the DF and BIY activists to launch an unusual protest. The detailed plan was finalized in the afternoon of 18 March. That evening, a rally with music concert was staged on Jinan Road (#2, see Figure 1). At 9 pm, protestors on Jinan Road and Zhongshan South Road (#1) suddenly engaged in a scuffle with policemen as a diversion. Around 50 activists broke into the complex from Qingdao East Road (#3) and entered the plenary conference chamber. Protestors immediately built makeshift barricades out of chairs and tables to prevent a forceful eviction. News of the successful occupation attracted more and more supporters to come and join in. Around 200 people entered the occupied chamber before midnight and thousands more gathered at locations #2 and #3. The police made several attempts to pull out the protestors in the early morning of 19 March, but the outside crowd swiftly grew, effectively frustrating the police maneuver.

The Sunflower Movement, the name given by the media after a florist's gift to the students, demanded the withdrawal of the CSSTA, more oversight on Taiwan–China negotiation, and the convening of a citizens' constitutional conference. While the government equivocated on the last two demands, it persisted in the defense of the free-trade agreement. As the movement dragged on into the third week,

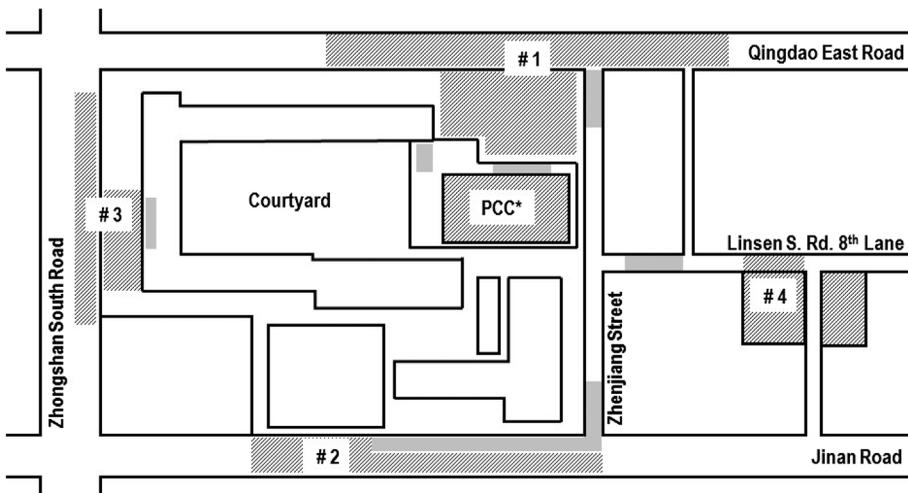


Figure 1. Legislative Yuan occupied (March 18–April 10).

fatigue and frustration set in and there were indications that the authorities were ready to forcibly evict the occupiers. On 6 April, the Legislative Yuan Speaker intervened by promising to prioritize the supervision issue. There was a ceremonious farewell rally on the evening of 10 April, concluding the standoff that had grappled national attention for more than three weeks.

### **The construction of movement leadership**

From the very beginning, the roughly 200 protestors in the plenary conference chamber symbolized the resistance. Camping out in the occupied building was challenging, especially in the first few days because the authorities shut down the air-conditioning and even forbade the use of the restrooms. Although there was a medical team working in shifts, occupiers suffered from sleep deprivation, fever and other health problems. During the twenty-four days, the atmosphere among the protestors inside was sometimes tense and fearful, as the constant rumors of an imminent police onslaught prompted them into defensive formation, but at other times festive with film screenings, music performances, poetry readings, and speeches. There was daily fluctuation in the number of protestors inside and not all of them stayed there throughout the period of occupation; however, for the reasons explained below, strategic decision-making emanated mostly from the small nucleus of activists that remained within the legislative building.

While the protestors seized the national legislature as a bargaining chip with the government, they appeared vulnerable to police action. Thus, occupiers were besieged by police and their safety relied on the outside crowd amassed on Jinan Road and Qingdao East Road (see Figure 1). Evidently, the more supporters there were outside, the less likely the occupiers were to be removed, since the authorities would have to take potential casualties into consideration. It was imperative for the Sunflower leadership to maintain a sufficient crowd of outside supporters to sustain their bargaining with the government. Yet their greatest difficulty was that they had to exert their leadership in isolation from the supporting crowds.

Initially there was an intense debate about whether such spatial segregation between the insider occupiers and the outside supporters was tenable, which was a precarious stalemate since the early morning of 19 March. Some moderate leaders pointed out the benefits of 'an isolated island of occupiers' claiming it created the imagery of heroism that aroused public sympathy. On the other hand, there was an attempt for a full occupation by encouraging the outside crowd to storm the legislative complex so that leaders and the rank-and-file were no longer separated. The radicals launched a more audacious offensive on 23 March. In the evening, protestors began to occupy the executive branch of the government located one block away and a massive peaceful sit-in was staged there. At around midnight on 24 March, the policemen started the crackdown, which resulted in more than five hundred injuries and sixty-one arrests.

The so-called Executive Yuan incident on the night of 23–24 March was the most violent incident throughout the protest. The subsequent police manhunt drove radical activists into hiding, thus consolidating the supremacy of moderate leaders inside the legislative building unexpectedly. Since then, 'an isolated island of occupiers' became the only possible course to preserve movement momentum. There were many practical problems associated with a partial occupation of the national legislature. First, relatively free access to the plenary conference chamber was only possible in the first few chaotic hours on 18–19 March. Subsequently, except for media journalists with permits, people who wanted to enter the secured hall needed assistance from opposition lawmakers who could negotiate with the policemen. Although reentry was possible for the inside protestors who were there in the very beginning, it was difficult for those who had failed to show up in the first two days to enter the occupied hall. As the political stalemate dragged on, it meant a protracted war of attrition for the inside protestors with little possibility of replacement or reinforcement.

Secondly, there was intensive contention over movement leadership from the onset up until the Executive Yuan incident; a subsequent reorganization of the command structure centralized the movement leadership. Starting on 25 March, the primary decision-making body comprised of twenty

students and ten NGO representatives and this structure continued until the end. The reorganization aimed to concentrate decision-making within the core activists in the besieged hall to avoid another round of out-of-control protests. Exclusion from the decision-making core, however, gave latitude to other experienced activists who were able to experiment with unconventional ways of protesting.

Centralization in the context of spatial segregation created coordination problems. Separated by the policemen, the inside leaders had only indirect and oftentimes delayed knowledge of their comrades on the street. From the second day, the site management of Jinan Road (#2) and Qingdao East Road (#3) was delegated to a number of NGOs which took shifts to stage activities for the crowds. Such an arrangement was an expediency that came with the cost of confusion and frustration. Nevertheless, it left plenty of room for experimental activities and events to emerge. There were teach-ins, deliberative democracy forums, cram schooling, lessons in handcraft and yoga, psychiatry counseling, makeshift kitchens, and a service station for recharging mobile phones. Social workers, medical workers, professionals in advertising and publishing, and the indigenous people began organizing in the outside open space. All these innovative activities were made possible by local initiatives without guidance from the leadership in the occupied legislature.

The incomplete occupation of the Legislative Yuan brought about an enduring tension between the centralized leadership in the plenary conference chamber and decentralized initiatives on the streets. To tighten their grip over the movement direction, the nucleus of activists implemented a centripetal command structure; nonetheless, the physical separation from the crowds meant that their control was always limited and indirect. In the end, the major strategic decisions, such as to stage a mass rally on 30 March and to evacuate on 10 April were made by the few inner-circle participants. The task of maintaining the pressure on the government was effectively devolved to a number of activists whose improvisation was oft neglected in the mainstream media.

### **Improvisation as decentralized collaboration**

Throughout the Sunflower Movement, the nominal leaders were not always conscious of the limit of their power. It turned out that their leadership was more effective when it allowed the free play of improvisation; their directives failed when there was no room for decentralized collaboration. As defined above, improvisation meant self-directed problem-solving without following pre-existing procedures or directives from above, which consisted in the strategic responses of those activists who were not incorporated into the decision-making core.

In hindsight, the core leadership made a number of tactical decisions which actually backfired. The decision to enlist the opposition party's followers was a clear example. On the second day of the occupation, Sunflower leaders were worried that if they were not able to fill the streets with people they could be evicted at any time. They requested the DPP to send in its supporters. On that the fourth day, the DPP claimed to bring 10,000 people to back up the student occupiers, which unexpectedly turned out to be a publicity disaster. Since there had been thousands of protestors on the street then and the police had ceased pulling out occupiers, there were complaints that the DPP had 'stolen the thunder' from students. Mass mobilization by the opposition party turned out to be of little help even though it was first proposed by the movement leaders. The conventional organizational mobilization failed precisely because of the need of prior planning that minimized the possibility of quick readjustments.

Another example consisted in the call for students to 'boycott class' and a 'general strike' on 23 March, with the intention to increase pressure on the government. Due to the education officials' intervention, only a few university departments suspended regular teaching. Students who skipped class to attend the movement risked their academic performance and a collective wave of class stoppage did not materialize. The call for a political strike was almost left unanswered. Hence, improvisation was only possible when there existed a sufficient number of activists or supporters to respond to the request.

The last case consisted in the call for people to take shifts to protect the occupiers after the highlight of the 30 March rally. At that time the Sunflower leaders were concerned that the third week might see a sharp decline in participation. At the end of the rally, the student leadership urged the audience

to form seven-person groups to rotate attendance to maintain protest participation. That attempt failed completely as the morning of the next day witnessed only a few hundred on the streets. Student leaders embarrassingly acknowledged that supporters did not respond eagerly to this plea. The effort to rationalize protest participation floundered in part because it bypassed the meso-level organizers by appealing to the rank-and-file directly. The plan of rotating for a week's protest by mutual strangers was too rigid to be improvised upon.

After the 30 March rally, there was visible fatigue in the movement. The protracted stagnation had diminished street supporters and core leaders seemed to have exhausted their strategic capacity, while there were alarming signs that the police was prepared to take back the legislature. The relative inaction among the inner-circle leaders, however, allowed more freedom for decentralized initiatives.

Early April witnessed a flourishing of new organizations and campaigns. Democracy Kuroshio started a series of street demonstrations at the local offices of KMT lawmakers. An organization called Appendectomy Project aimed at collecting signatures to recall KMT lawmakers. Beez was an organization with more than a hundred cells (the so-called 'beehives') all over Taiwan. Beez participants staged street speech and singing actions and distributed leaflets. These activities helped the movement to tide over the treacherous ebb by opening up new battlefronts.

All these initiatives came from veteran activists who were somehow unable to join the decision-making core. Democracy Kuroshio, for example, was organized by student activists in the central and southern regions, who were largely excluded from the decision-making nucleus because of their late arrival. There remained untapped strategy-making resources even after the movement institutionalized its decision-making structure. These initiatives showed the risk and the limitations of centralized leadership. Carried to its extreme, top-down directives and comprehensive planning would have eliminated the space for flexible and local adaptation.

### **A typology of improvisation**

There were many instances of improvisation during the twenty-four days of congress occupation. These numerous acts of decentralized collaboration did not usually involve dramatic performances by publicly known leaders; yet they contributed to the movement in different ways. In terms of degree of deviation from the routine activities, there are three categories of improvisation.

#### (1) Improvisation by replication

Applying previously used solutions to meet a new situation was the simplest form of improvisation since the past experience provided a reliable guide when facing oncoming uncertainty. Hours after the successful occupation on 18 March, there emerged many unsolicited efforts to support the protest among those who were not present on the scene. Student activists outside Taipei immediately rallied their friends and chartered buses to join the protest in the early hours of the morning. Internet activists also quickly responded to set up an online broadcasting service to cover the incident before the TV camera crew arrived. These efforts were unplanned and uncoordinated, but not unprecedented. Soliciting financial support to transport students to Taipei had been put into practice in previous protests. So was the instant establishment of online broadcasting. These activists reenacted what they had been doing before, but the real contribution consisted in their timely and autonomous reaction.

#### (2) Improvisation by adaptation

Replicating a used tactic was effective when it aimed at satisfying an analogous task, for example, to encourage more participation. There were times, however, when the same task required a novel method since the change in circumstances had rendered the previous ones inadequate or inapplicable. A relevant case was how the activists reacted to the apparent failure of a nationwide 'class boycott.' In a number of universities, students negotiated with the school administration for a temporary suspension of classes to no avail. Then students decided to stage a series of 'democracy classrooms' within the campus, in which the issues of civil disobedience and free trade were discussed. In other words, students adapted to the campus conservatism with these on-site teach-ins so as to create an impression of inter-campus solidarity.

Another instance was the formation of the so-called ‘Independent Company of Lane Eight.’ That military appellation referred to an ad hoc group, which took turns to guard an intersection area in Linsen South Road Lane Eight (see Figure 1, #4), where police reinforcements could easily be deployed without encountering the crowd on Qingdao East Road and Jinan Road. The Sunflower leaders apparently overlooked this area because they were primarily concerned with drawing supporters to locations #1 and #2, which were closer to the occupied hall. Outside activists discovered the strategic location and managed to stage events and activities on their own because they shared the same goal of preventing a police assault. ‘An independent company’ meant that they did not receive orders from the headquarters, yet they remained an integral part of the network of combatants. That military metaphor summed up the gist of improvisation rather nicely.

### (3) Improvisation by innovation

The most inventive improvisation moved a step further by actively finding new needs and then devising means to satisfy them. It represented a bolder departure because these new needs were discovered independently, often unknown or ignored by movement leaders. A relevant case here is how a so-called ‘team of 3621’ experimented with online crowdfunding that led to a full-page advertisement in *New York Times* on 29 March.

This independent project was initiated by a group of Internet activists who wanted to help beyond just joining the outside crowd. At first, they were busy reworking the complex details of the CSSTA into easily readable infographics. Later they discovered a ‘generational digital divide’ since senior citizens were not used to receiving online information, so they decided to try fundraising via the Internet to place advertisements in the major newspapers. The crowdfunding campaign began at the stroke of midnight on 24 March, which happened to coincide with the police suppression of the sit-in at the Executive Yuan. Within three hours, they had collected contributions of 633 million NT Dollars (21.1 million USD) from 3,621 donors, more than four times their goal. With this money, they were able to fund three waves of local newspaper advertisements plus an additional pamphlet, and with the help of overseas compatriots, they were able to reach the international audience.

## Discussion: the source of improvisation

How do we explain these creative and uncoordinated responses? Both DF and BYI had only a few participants prior to the occupation. That the inside occupiers were quarantined from their supporters provided ample room for improvisation. But it would be a mistake to locate the source of creative initiatives among the newcomer participants. Published witness accounts showed that although first-timers were often involved with some voluntary work, such as sorting and recycling the waste and provisioning the food, they seldom engaged in decision-making (One More Story Citizens’ Voice Team, 2014). My interviews with experienced activists revealed that they were constantly adjusting their strategic responses independently as the situation unfolded. For example, students in the central Taiwan suspended their busing mobilization on the fifth day because there was already enough of a crowd, and hence they re-directed attention to other activities. Sometimes these anonymous leaders might misleadingly have claimed themselves to be ‘amateurs’ or ‘netizens’; however, they were actually more experienced than regular participants. A key leader in the ‘team of 3,621,’ for example, insisted he was a ‘novice’ because his prior involvement in social movements had been for less than six months. Nevertheless, he had been administering a number of online forums for more than a decade, which accounted for some eight hundred thousand Internet users. As indicated by Bosi and Davis (2017), the intervention of movement participants with different tendencies contributed to the making of transformative events.

Depending on one’s past experience, skill, and personal network, how one might contribute to the movement varied greatly. The Sunflower Movement was able to sustain a political standoff for over three weeks in part because of these numerous yet anonymous activists, whose spatial dispersion made possible flexible and swift responses. The resurgence of Taiwan’s social movements after the conservative KMT regained power in 2008 had greatly expanded the ranks of movement participants (Fell,

**Table 1.** Organized mobilization, horizontality, and improvisation compared.

|                            | Organized mobilization | Horizontality          | Improvisation               |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Pre-existing organizations | Presence               | Weak or absence        | Weak or absence             |
| Movement goals             | Singular and clear     | Multiple and open      | Singular and clear          |
| Decision-making            | Top-down               | Bottom-up              | Both top-down and bottom-up |
| Nature of protest action   | Instrumental           | Prefigurative politics | Instrumental                |
| Participant involvement    | Weak                   | Strong                 | Of varying degrees          |

2017). Particularly among college students, the years leading up to the occupation had witnessed a visible surge in student clubs devoted to movement activism. In major cities, they developed regional connections to facilitate coordination between the clubs. In short, a denser civil society populated by more experienced activists facilitated the invention of improvisation.

There were attempts to consolidate the network among student activists. Two months before the sudden occupation of congress, there was a workshop for youth activists, attracting more than 150 participants in the four-day course. The acceleration of movement activism had led to an effort to popularize the corresponding know-hows. Right before the congress occupation, a group of activists had finished the manuscript for a movement manual. The existence of these seasoned and well-connected activists led a close observer to characterize them as ‘small but persistent guerrilla-type protest groups’ (Cole, 2014) that made the movement succeed. Hence, although the BIY had less than twenty student activists initially, it was firmly embedded in a nationwide movement network. The fact that these activists were not incorporated into the formal leadership structure unexpectedly sowed the seeds for decentralized strategic responses.

In established democracies, social protests are mostly concluded in an expected manner, as both movement leaders and the police largely share a consensus on the scope for tolerated protests. However, for a large protest that engenders a sustained standoff with the authorities, the habitual ways of undertaking a movement appear inadequate, thus calling forth novel and creative types of participation.

Top-down command works only as long as there is room for flexible adjustment at the grassroots level. Leaders in the hierarchical decision-making structure often possess insufficient or incorrect real-time information, which made appropriate on-the-spot responses difficult in a swiftly changing situation. It is more advisable to devolve and decentralize some latitude in strategic decision-making when a movement exceeds a certain size. Improvisation is not synonymous with the impromptu performance by laypersons. Large protests typically involve participation among those who were previously unconcerned or unmotivated, but the first-timers are seldom capable of handling strategic decisions effectively whereas skilled activists can always rely on their past experience and personal network to devise novel solutions.

The Sunflower Movement was emphatically not a ‘leadless movement’ empowered alone by the mass participants who followed the principle of horizontality. During the legislature occupation, it remained imperative to maintain the participant morale, to keep pressuring the incumbents, and to open up more battlefronts by new offensives except that these tasks were effectively delegated to activists not in the leadership core. The Sunflower Movement appeared more decentralized than the conventional pattern of organized mobilization; nevertheless, the widespread strategic responses did not attempt to replace the movement leadership, but more as an auxiliary to the latter because there existed an overarching consensus to prioritize the opposition the free-trade agreement with China.

Table 1 summarizes the differences among these three modes of movement participation as discussed above.

## Conclusion

For decades, theorizing social movements has been an attempt to elucidate what movement activists actually do to promote their agenda. Mobilization-centered research emerged in response to the trend of professionalization of social movements in advanced democracies. A standardized image

prevails: a social movement happens when organization leaders utilize their mobilizing network, grasp political opportunity, frame collective grievances, and deploy protest repertoires. In those countries where protest has been so routinized and institutionalized as to merit the characterization of a 'social movement society' (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998), this stereotypical model does explain the majority of contentious politics on the streets.

The recent eruption of large protests all over the world has triggered a new wave of conceptualization to understand these unusual yet consequential forms of activism. Large protests emerged without strong pre-existing organizations, a coherent ideology, and effective leadership. The global justice movement was featured with a dominant mode of participation with extensive decentralization of decision-making, plural ideologies, and open goals. Participants refuse to see their presence merely as a means that can be separated from the eventual goal, but an integral part of changing the world. Two key conceptual terms have emerged from the recent theorization: horizontality, understood as an emphasis on direct participation (Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Maeckelbergh, 2011), and prefiguration, or a principled rejection of instrumental view on movement participation (Graeber, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2012).

This article sought to theorize a third alternative model beyond the mainstream organization-led movements and the movements by horizontality and prefiguration by a close look at Taiwan's Sunflower Movement. My findings showed that a large protest can be weakly led or organized, yet still capable of delivering a powerful challenge to the government, which clearly departs from the conventional model of organized mobilization. On the other hand, the Sunflower Movement does not follow the principle of horizontality because decentralized decision-making complements rather than replaces the movement leadership as both share an unambiguous movement goal. Moreover, participants themselves are not homogeneous and equal in their contribution. Previous studies have indicated the importance of pre-existing activists whose presence is conducive to the emergence of large-scale protests (Fominaya, 2015; Zamponi & Joseba, 2017). Here, I extended this discussion by focusing on what they actually did when the nominal leadership had only ineffective control over the evolving situation. Seasoned activists are more capable of making strategic responses based on their previous experience and personal networks. In the Sunflower Movement, the activists' improvisation, by replication, adaptation, or innovation, makes up for the weakness of the nominal movement leaders. These decentralized strategic responses are a functional equivalent to organization-based mobilization in other regular protests for they help to solve the problem of coordination. The social preconditions for these strategic responses without prior planning are that (1) the protest issue has to be sufficiently riveting to motivate participation on a large scale and (2) there is ample supply of seasoned activists who enjoy some degree of independence. The Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, also a student-led anti-government protest partly inspired by the preceding Sunflower Movement in the same year of 2014 (Cai, 2017; Lee & Chan, 2016; Yuen & Cheng, 2017), arguably follows the similar logic of improvisation. It remains to be investigated how this pattern of collaborative activism diffuses in this globally contentious era.

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