Crowds, Affect, and the Mediation of Emergent Collectivities: A Student Strike in Papua New Guinea as an Order Making Project

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Abstract: From the institutional perspective of a university, student strikes mark a time of heightened disorder. In this contribution, I turn this perspective around and analyse a student strike at the University of Goroka in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) highlands as an order making project instead. The observed student strike established an alternative regime among students, which was reinforced through a sense of having achieved a superior sophistication of order through the effective, and affective, alignment of minds and bodies into a single entity. Placing the achievement of collective unity in relation to what appears as Melanesian notions of order on one hand, and recent re-evaluations of the psychology of crowds within anthropology and sociology on the other hand, I explore conceptual connections in the work of ‘mediation’ between order making in Melanesia and contemporary (critiques of) affect theory.

Keywords: Order; Mediation; Crowds; Affect; Papua New Guinea
Introduction

Recently, the sociology of Gabriel Tarde attracted renewed attention (see for example Candea 2010). In this article, I suggest that Marilyn Strathern’s analytical lens on order (1985), contains productive seeds towards reassessing certain Tardean foundations of social theory (for example Tarde 1890). I draw on William Mazzarella’s (2010a) and Christian Borch’s (2012) reading of Tarde, to make a claim about its relevance for understanding processes of order making in Melanesia today. I do so by focusing on an ethnographic case that resembles the subject matter that dominated the intellectual milieu of Tarde’s theorising: the emergent dynamics of crowds, or less derogatively put, collectivities.

At the University of Goroka in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) highlands, prolonged student strikes are a recurrent phenomenon. For observers, what stands out in them is the internal cohesion among students and their uncompromising stance. Student strikes successfully transcend internal differences of a diverse student body and unite students as an interest group in antagonism to others. This sharply contrasts with regular campus life, which demonstrates little cohesion among the general student body, and rarely gives the impression of students standing united behind student leaders or a political agenda. A student strike thus creates a certain order among students, which provides the basis for efficacy in collective action. The order created in a student strike provides students with the impression of a higher state of order, suffusing the student body with the excitement of pursuing a higher cause. The order of the student strike then also quickly diffuses conflicts among students, such as preventing ongoing conflicts following violence against students whose actions were perceived as not in accordance with the strike. In this article, I draw on Strathern’s analysis of collectivities in the PNG highlands, and recent re-assessments of crowd theory, to contribute to an understanding of the emergent dynamics of human collectivities and how they are brought about.

A central focus in this exercise is the analytical category of 'mediation', as employed by Marilyn Strathern (1985, cf. 1988), and as it appears in more recent reconsiderations of the literature on the 'psychology of crowds' (Mazzarella 2010a, 2010b; Borch 2012). Most basically, for Strathern, ‘mediation’ is a characteristic necessity in gift exchange and warfare in Melanesia, which enables to harness shared states of feeling that correspond to inherently political and ‘collective’ relations. Mazzarella refers to ‘mediation’ as a broader category, but similarly addresses the necessity for mediation in the constitution of social entities, criticising the idea that there would be such thing as social life or the expression of some vital human potential, say, affect, that is not already mediated in one way or another (cf. Hardt & Negri 2014). Through the ethnographic analysis of a student strike at the University of Goroka in PNG, I juxtapose Strathern’s and Mazzarella’s interventions on the 'mediation' of emergent collectivities in relation to Melanesian notions of order, as well as social theory more broadly.

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I place emphasis on the processes of mobilisation for a student strike, and how the student body of the university emerges as a single collective entity, energised with enthusiasm through its achievement. I conclude by suggesting that while Strathern’s analysis points to unique ideologies of order in Melanesia, Mazzarella’s contribution to affect theory (2010a, 2010b) allows us to appreciate elements of contemporary projects of order making in PNG that are relevant beyond Melanesian forms of sociality and order.

From ‘Discovering Social Control’ to Affect Theory

Questions of social order have pervaded anthropology since its beginnings and hark back to much older concerns in political philosophy, and then sociology. Order may be regarded as a key concept in British social anthropology, manifest for example in Radcliffe-Brown’s definition of social anthropology as the study of ‘the forms of association to be found amongst human beings’ (1952:189). In other words, how do people, if they do so at all, order their lives (Golub, this volume)? Radcliffe-Brown’s concern with societal structures, for example, may be squarely seen within a longer trajectory of concerns around social order that range from Hobbes’ social contract (compare Golub 2014) to Durkheim’s sociology of societal institutions.

Such a broad reading of order as key theme in anthropology, and social theory at large, may provide an equally wide angle to look at the trajectory of debates in Melanesian anthropology. Anthropologists have been concerned that social order in the PNG highlands cannot be understood using the template of African models drawn from Radcliffe-Brown or Evans-Pritchard’s work on the Nuer (Barnes 1962). The critique did not stop there, however, and anthropologists further unravelled the conceptual repertoire of social order. Roy Wagner in 1974 more fundamentally questioned the category of ‘social groups’. This intervention went beyond Barnes’ critique of too rigidly conceived models of how discernible group structures are constituted based on research conducted elsewhere. Wagner (1974, 119) instead contended that the focus on social groups or societies itself was more a convenient shorthand of anthropological analysis than something that either corresponds to the facts on the ground or to the way people themselves conceptualise their sociality (compare Wagner 1967).

Marilyn Strathern formulated an explicit conceptual critique of the category of ‘order’ as either a structure/system or a normative order in relation to Hagen in the PNG highlands. In her article Discovering Social Control, Strathern (1985) deconstructs the notion that mechanisms of ‘social control’ are what maintains ‘order’ in societies not effectively governed by a state or formal law. Strathern alleges that a specific view of human nature underlies this perspective, in that human behaviour tends to be disorderly and thus requires regulation. The eruption of conflict, such as in interpersonal violence or warfare, is then regarded as a breakdown of order. From such a perspective, social order is analytically separable from human beings, on whom a certain order is variously imposed or provided as an aid to prevent disorderly disruption (compare Hobbes 1651). According to Strathern, this is how we may conceive of ‘society’ in the West, but that does not resonate with cycles of warfare, dispute settlement, and wealth exchange in Hagen in the early 1980’s, for example.
Peaceful order and wealth exchange do not constitute an antonym to disorderly conflict or warfare in this context, and dispute settlement is not a regulative mechanism between disorder and order in such a sense. Instead, processes of warfare, dispute settlement, and wealth exchange, are all processes that harness collective energies and make collectivities emerge vis-à-vis other collectivities. Such collectivities, however, cannot be taken for granted, but are achievements of uncertain duration in time. Suffice to point out, without rehearsing the ethnographic details of Strathern’s argument here, that seeking to explore notions of ‘order’ in the PNG highlands may require taking a step back from common Western conceptions of order based on norms and rules or some regulatory process of an otherwise disorderly realm of human individuals. The important element in the creation of collective subjects, she suggests, is mediation. Collectivities must be established through mediation for warfare and exchange to take place. Mediation, according to Strathern, ‘is necessary because collectivities do not, in the Hagen view, have “minds”; there has to be an instrument which will set the individual minds of its members on a common course’ (1985, 126).

Golub (2014, 196–97), writing about the Ipili further West in the PNG highlands, draws on Levi-Strauss, and Latour, to suggest that Melanesian societies are ‘hot’, in actively embracing change and constantly re-negotiating the external world, predisposed to challenge and contest regularising processes of institutionalisation and their ‘cold’ Weberian bureaucratic objectivity of hierarchy and standard procedures. This resonates with Strathern’s critique to notions of ‘order’ and ‘social control’ in the PNG highlands, while equally bringing into analytical focus contemporary processes of social change. Today, people in the PNG highlands are thoroughly accustomed to dealing with an intentionally regularising and regulating state bureaucracy and other institutionalised structures such as mining operations, the education system, and institutionalised Christianity. The best way to study the differences between bureaucratic institutions and local forms of sociality, then, would be to examine places where they come into contact and conflict.

Golub (2014, 195) also notes that many ethnographies illustrate that ‘Papua New Guineans are keenly aware that the creation of collective subjects is a fragile achievement’, a point I appropriate here and illustrate further using the work of Strathern. The important element in the creation of collective subjects, she suggests, is mediation. Strathern qualifies the mediation that underlies the mobilisation of collective entities as playing on emotion, harnessing feelings and desires to ‘become inflated as attributes of whole groups’, blowing up ‘[s]tates of feeling’ into ‘collective proportions’ (1985, 125). While little reference has been made to this in Melanesian anthropology to date, the processes and phenomena here described also appear to resonate with the subject matter of ‘affect’ (Mazzarella 2010a, 2010b; White 2017; but see Harrison 1985), and the genealogy of the literature on the ‘psychology of crowds’ (Tarde 1890; Le Bon 1895; McDougall 1920; Freud 1921; Canetti 1960; Moscovici 1985; Tambiah 1996; Mazzarella 2010a; Borch 2012; compare Durkheim 1912; Turner 1969). This literature sets out to examine questions related to mediated orders of collective mobilisation. In brief, the psychology of crowds sought to address phenomena in which human collectivities, or crowds, appeared to assume a distinct set of qualities. Or, framed differently, how does such a ‘collectivity’ emerge in the first place? What sustains it?
I can only speculate as to why this literature appears to have been bypassed by scholars of Melanesia to date when seeking answers to these questions (but see Candea 2010). The most compelling reason for this may be the kinds of arguments that writers associated with the psychology of crowds advanced. Le Bon (1895), for example, often credited with popularising the analytical category of the crowd, wrote about the French Revolution from a reactionary perspective that sought to discredit its uprisings as driven by savage mobs instigated by emotional processes that eclipsed faculties of reasoning and otherwise present inhibitions of performing violent acts. Effectively, Le Bon argued that mass uprisings were a terrifying manifestation of human capabilities from a time thought bygone of no reason but fervent emotion (Candea 2010, Borch 2012). Le Bon and other writers of his time appeared to operate on a similar conception of seeing the constitution of crowds as remnants of bygone times that needed to be kept in check, drawing parallels between the mentality of crowds and a pre-anthropological broad category of primitive others outside the bourgeois fortresses supposedly governed by reason. As Mazzarella observes: ‘Classic crowd theory tends to assume that crowd energy is inimical to social order’ (2010a, 720). No wonder then, that this body of literature did not seem to fit the material in question, neither by its political orientation nor its theoretical assumptions.

Lately, however, anthropologists have taken up these threads again while carefully purging some of its baggage, incorporating some of the older foci into a recent anthropological attention to ‘affect’ (Mazzarella 2010a, 2010b; compare Tambiah 1996). Against much of the psychology of crowds literature that saw the crowd as the expression of a primordial human nature that needs to be kept in check, and more recent formulations of concepts such as the ‘multitude’ as a supposedly purely non-mediated emergence in contrast to mediated crowds (Hardt & Negri 2004), Mazzarella pursues ‘the question of how one might actually find a way to talk about the emergent potentials of group energy that is at the same time a theory of social mediation – in other words, a theory that would not pit “order against desire” but would rather be able to track their dialectical coconstitution’ (2010a, 715–716). This brings us close to Strathern’s discussion of the successful mediation of group energies, harnessing feelings and desires into emergent collectivities. Can we, following Strathern’s conceptual critique of notions of order as structure/system or normative order in relation to the PNG highlands, articulate a conceptualisation of order that does justice to forms of sociality and the mediation of collectivities in Melanesia, while at the same time advancing a broader reassessment of the theoretical foundations of notions of order via questions of social mediation and ‘affect’?

Mazzarella’s and Borch’s re-readings of Gabriel Tarde’s Laws of Imitation (1890) suggest that it contains the seeds for understanding the emergent dynamics of crowds, or collectivities, as source of social order per se. Tarde postulates a semi-conscious process of suggestion and imitation as the basis of a dialectical process of the constitution of individuals and society. We become social individuals only by imitating others, whereas the variable in this process is the gap between the stimulus of suggestion and the response of our imitation. The dynamics of an emergent collectivity, in this sense, becomes the purest form of sociality, in which suggestion-imitation happens most immediately without friction, a phenomenon also referred to as ‘mimesis’ (cf. Canetti 1960). Far from being an isolated phenomenon
pertaining to crowds, the basic principle of suggestion-imitation underlies Tarde’s sociology and understanding of society in general, be that in family relations, where the process of suggestion-imitation is fundamental in socialisation and kin relations, or the urban space, in which suggestion-imitation is the basis for both crowds and society in general (Borch 2012). This perspective does not require conceptual oppositions as between, for example, immanence and mediation, reason and emotion, or order and desire. Here, order is not an external feature imposed or followed by individuals but is constantly in flux and in the making through social process. The emergence of collectivities through mediated affect is then part of broader processes of establishing social and political orders.

Such an interpretation of Tarde’s work seemed to have been drowned, however, in the conservative outlook of Tarde, Le Bon, and others, who seemed most concerned with the potential of crowds to disrupt and challenge political orders of the time. On the other hand, Durkheim’s rising prominence over his contemporary, Tarde, left us with the former’s social-theoretical perspective, in which we have individuals that are moulded through external forces of society and societal institutions. It is this view on human nature that Strathern also criticised. Is there further potential then in the juxtaposition of the work of mediation in Strathern’s Melanesian ethnography and Neo-Tardean imports of social theory? Does such an exercise allow us to articulate an understanding of order and social mediation that can both account for the specific Melanesian ideologies of order that go into a student strike, and at the same time let a student strike in PNG speak to social theory more broadly? In this article, I illustrate this question affirmatively, drawing on Tarde’s notion of the ‘magnetizer’ in the mediation of crowds, and Copeman & Street’s (2014) discussion of the affective power of ‘images’ drawing on Strathern’s ‘persuasiveness of form’ (1991, 10).

The Space

The University of Goroka is located on the northern edge of the town of Goroka, the provincial capital of PNG’s Eastern Highlands Province. It is centred on the hilltop plateau of Humilaveka, which were traditional lands of Asariufa and Okiufa communities. Humilaveka, translating as ‘red soil’ in the Alekano language (also known as Gahuku-Gama, compare Read 1965), was the original Australian government station in Goroka, and the plateau served as an airfield for light aircraft. A larger airfield was built down in the valley during WWII, now the centre of Goroka town, to where the government station was relocated, and the airfield on Humilaveka was closed after the war (Howlett 1962). Humilaveka was made into a training facility for local police and, in 1965, into the Goroka Teacher’s College. The Teacher’s College later became a campus and the Faculty of Education of the University of Papua New Guinea and received university status on its own in 1997.

Most of the university’s facilities are located on the spatially-confined stretch of the Humilaveka plateau corresponding to the old airfield. From West to East, the plateau holds the Steven Eka Library building, which also houses the university management, the Mark Solon Auditorium complex, the Vice-Chancellor’s residence and some staff housing, the student mess and the main quadrangles of academic offices and lecture halls, student dormitories, a sports field, and another small section of academic facilities towards Okiufa
village to its East (see Figure 1). The edges of the plateau are partly lined with staff housing, and larger staff housing compounds extend on and below the slopes of the plateau to its West and South-East. The limitations of space have recently led to multi-storey construction, such as seven-storey student dormitory buildings. The limitations of space for expansion, and the increasing number of students (more than 2000 at the time of research), provide for the experience of a densely populated and frequented space. The physical proximity of student dormitories to each other within a relatively small area also influences the possibility of maintaining a certain level of control over student dormitory areas, and potentially eases student mobilisation.

Figure 1. Bird’s eye view of the University of Goroka campus (Google Maps/Earth; image approximately 2011)

Students from all parts of the country attend the University of Goroka, as well as a number of students from the Solomon Islands (for both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees), and occasionally students from Vanuatu (especially for postgraduate degrees), Nauru, and further afield. Although there are students from all PNG provinces attending the university, they are represented in different relative numbers. As a university located in the highlands, students from highlands provinces exceed students from other parts of PNG. The university is nevertheless a national institution, which is mirrored in its overall composition of staff and students. Many staff and students from the highlands, as well as surrounding landowners, however, proudly identify with the institution as the only university in the region, and thus also take a more explicit interest in all kinds of matters at the university, of which they perceive themselves as more legitimate guardians in comparison to other Papua New Guineans.

**Student Strikes in PNG**

Student strikes have a distinct history at PNG universities (Ballard 1977; Howie-Willis 1980; Meek 1982). Some of my observations have precursors as far back as the first major student strike at the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby in 1974. Students initially went on strike following the government’s dismissal of their request for an upward
adjustment of student allowances and dissatisfaction about the quality of food served at the university, but then broadened the strike to include political demands such as an increase of the minimum wage and a freeze on high officials’ salaries, among other issues (Ballard 1977). Robertson, in an undated working paper, examines the strike in 1974 as a collective expression of students, focusing on group dynamics. Robertson characterised the strike as ‘a popular movement which expressed the opposition of students to all those formal structures which make decisions on their behalf; a challenge to authority’ (Robertson, n.d., 8). Drawing on Turner’s (1969) notion of communitas, Robertson suggests that ‘[t]he strike strengthened the students as an interest group, increasing the sense of boundary between them and the community and eliminating all sources of internal conflict’ (n.d., 18). Robertson refers to a level of excitement in student assemblies that ‘produced a sense of danger’ (n.d., 7), and characterises ‘violence and confusion of the strike’ as ‘a secular form of the frenzied trance states which mark millennial movements’ (n.d., 16; presumably leaning on Turner 1969). As Robertson himself remarks, however, this analysis was only a work in progress, and seemed to stop there. While thus being more suggestive than ethnographically illustrative, Robertson raises questions about students’ group dynamics and affective collective expression.

Student strikes have since been a recurrent feature at PNG universities. As in the strike in 1974 mentioned above, students go on strike about student welfare issues and other internal institutional matters, national politics, or a combination thereof. A well-remembered example is the escalation of events in 2001, when three protestors were killed in confrontations with police when University of Papua New Guinea students went on strike against the privatisation of state assets and the mobilisation of customary land. The mobilisation of customary land meant to pave the way for land rights to serve as loan collateral as part of a World Bank structural adjustment program. A sense of déjà vu ensued at a strike in 2016 when police shot at University of Papua New Guinea students who went on strike to demand for the Prime Minster to resign amid allegations of corruption. While archival sources and personal reports indicate numerous past student strikes at PNG’s public universities, there is little documentation about their internal dynamics since Robertson’s working paper. This may have to do with the difficulties of observing these dynamics from among students and student dormitories, a perspective that can hardly be deduced from a strike’s public manifestation alone.

My own observations of student strikes in PNG start with a prolonged strike of about six weeks at the University of Goroka in 2010, while I was a student there and residing in student dormitories. This strike sought to oust the university management based on allegations of mismanagement and corruption and demanded for the government to re-establish a full university council, which was disbanded after unrest at the university several years before, towards the substantial appointment of a new management. The student strike discussed in detail in this article occurred within a period of 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted at the University of Goroka in 2013–14, throughout which I stayed in the student dormitories again. It again demanded for the same university management to be dismissed, after it was again re-appointed by a re-established full university council, following an investigation that cleared it from the allegations made by students in the strike in 2010. I believe it is possible to make some generalisations about these two strikes, as well as others,
using my own experiences, as well as media and personal accounts of other strikes. It needs to be emphasised, however, that some of the features in the strike I discuss here are unique, and are at the extreme end of the spectrum in terms of certain internal dynamics discussed below, such as the violent intimidation of students to adhere to the strike and the hardly concealed resolve of the strike leader to use it as a platform to enter PNG national politics.

Following PNG’s Independence from Australia in 1975, students have been regarded as the main voice of civil society in holding the government to account and scrutinising its policies. The political activism of students in tertiary education was pivotal and unrivalled in shaping politics in PNG, and many student leaders became members of the National Parliament (and the House of Assembly before Independence). The universities’ Student Representative Councils and the National Union of Students increasingly became antagonistic adversaries to the government, and university students were an important – if not the most important – force in public debate about government politics and policies, from the national to the provincial and village levels (Ballard 1977, Howie-Willis 1980). Furthermore, university students were, and still often are, seen as constituting the country’s future elite, trained to become leaders. Opportunities for quick trajectories into important political or public service roles existed for initial generations of university students in PNG much more than today, but the rhetoric about students as the future elite of the country continues to be echoed at universities by students and staff alike. In recent times, the mobilisation for student strikes by student leaders in PNG display varying degrees of commitment between advancing political or student causes on one hand, and personal ambitions to enter the national political arena on the other. While these may often be intertwined, the strike I describe in more detail below seemed, to my perception, much more aimed at the deliberate creation of a platform for preparing to contest national elections than to actually address students’ issues or alleged institutional corruption, as it claimed. The strike leader then also did contest the following national elections held in 2017, albeit unsuccessfully.

A point of clarification is in order here, to situate the widespread rhetoric and framing of political action against ‘corruption’ in PNG today. Without doubt, corruption is an important issue in PNG, and it is equally important to understand how political activism co-evolves in response to corruption as local and global phenomenon (see for example Walton 2016). Allegations of ‘corruption’ in institutional politics in PNG do not always necessarily refer to cases of corruption in the legal sense of it but may equally derive from experiencing a perceived lack of appropriate recognition as agents in institutional hierarchies and general dissatisfactions with leadership styles of CEOs or Vice-Chancellors, for example. Alice Street (2014, 184–191) illustrates this through her analysis of a nurses’ strike in a hospital in PNG that was directed at its CEO, a strike that appears remarkably resemblant of the student strikes I observed, both in framing and practical approach to antagonistic strike action. Street suggests that the nurses’ ‘goal was less about forcing hospital managers to conform to norms of international management than to provoke a response by which the nurses knew they had been recognised by those managers as persons of equivalent value’ (2014, 188). In a different context, Keir Martin’s (2013) observations on the deployment of accusations of ‘corruption’ or theft levelled by Papua New Guineans at their extended kin of more wealthy ‘Big Shots’ also illustrates popular rhetoric around corruption in PNG today. Martin specifies that he
‘soon came to recognise these accusations as often being more about the moral legitimacy of how Big Shots transacted with their relatives, than as being descriptions of actual legal crimes’ (2013, 141). My sense about the allegations of corruption levelled against the university management in the strike described below was similar. Rather than raising substantiated suspicions about corruption in its stricter sense of illegal misconduct, the real issue in the background that facilitated mobilisation for the strike similarly seemed to be that students did not feel appropriately recognised and treated as equivalent agents at the university through the style of leadership by the Vice-Chancellor.

Another general point of clarification is that student politics and strikes are male-dominated affairs. Ballard (1977, 125) noted ‘strong anti-feminist attitudes’ in student politics in the 1970’s, and these appear to prevail. The only time that I observed a female student speak in front of assembled students in the strike described below, she was quickly booed and shouted down by male students, unable to finish articulating her support of the strike. Female students are expected to attend strike activities to the same extent as male students but are discouraged from taking leading roles or to speak in student assemblies. Among elected student representative executives is the role of a female vice-president, but there are hardly other female students taking elected positions in student representation. This holds for Student Representative Councils and leading positions in other student organisations, such as provincial associations and student church fellowship groups.

The 2013 Strike: Initial Mobilisation

In contrast to other strikes at PNG universities that were initiated by elected student representatives for specific issues relating to national politics or university affairs, the strike at the University of Goroka in 2013 emerged out of a more peculiar chain of events two months into the academic year. There were problems with the university’s backup generator that supplies student dormitories and university infrastructure with electricity in case of a blackout. Events leading to the strike unfolded in the evening of the 16th of April, following days of repeated blackouts. When the lights went out once again on that evening, students left their dormitories and assembled outside. In what appeared as a spontaneous expression of frustration, students then forcefully made their entry into the gated administrative heart of the university, chanting for the Vice-Chancellor to resign and venting their anger on university vehicles.

The next morning students assembled to assess what happened, and to discuss what, if at all, should happen further. It was at this stage that a vocal male student took the lead, transforming the rampage of the previous night into a student strike with the principal demand for the Vice-Chancellor to resign or to be removed from office. The student taking the lead was not one of the elected student representatives – who opposed the idea of a strike – but assembled students, or those who made themselves heard, supported him. Most students I spoke to, however, expressed confusion about what was happening around them following the initial rampage. The focal point for getting to know about the events unfolding were the assemblies that students were called to attend once or twice daily. These took place at the
lukaut, a grass-covered space with a few benches, partially shaded by tall-grown trees, and view towards Goroka town, from which it derives its name (‘lookout’).

Students initially attended assemblies driven by a sense of curiosity, excitement, or simply for finding out what would happen next. In addition, attendance at assemblies in the first days was reinforced through what students dubbed the ‘pressure group’. Clusters of young male students armed with sticks patrolled dormitory areas to ensure that students left their dormitories to attend assemblies, knocking on dormitory room doors so no-one would miss them. They also prevented students from leaving while assemblies unfolded over the day, controlling the movement of people in and out of campus by barricading the gate. While strike leaders were predominantly final-year male students from different parts of the country, the pressure group comprised younger male students from local areas and the Highlands region. In being from the local region, this loose group operated based on a notion of constituting ‘asples’ or ‘papa graun’ (local ‘landowners’) and were thereby legitimately able to intervene in the university’s affairs. Strike leaders claimed not to have control over this ‘pressure group’, which served to divert themselves from the acts it committed. It also served to increase the level of threat it posed for non-complying students by suggesting that strike leaders have no means to save them from retribution. Strike leaders regularly warned students in assemblies not to go against the general student body’s ‘democratic’ wish to strike. Warnings included, for example, that no one knows the background of every student on campus, and that there might be former ‘murderers’ and ‘rapists’ among them who may react unpredictably to fellow students that are provoking their anger.

The regime of threat established in the initial days of the strike stood out to me. This may not hold for all students, however. Mature students, such as teachers attending the university for in-service programs, mostly felt alienated through this approach to collective mobilisation, but stopped voicing opposition following violent confrontations. Many students were curious and excited about forming part of a politically heroic movement against alleged corruption and mismanagement. The regime of threat was predominantly noticeable for those students that moved against the current taking hold, but for those that were moving with it, it appeared relatively benign and subtle. It served to create a boundary to mark off the ‘student body’ as a distinct and internally united entity, to which one is either part of or not.

In student assemblies, the pressure group was not visible as distinct entity, but contributed vocal support to strike leaders’ announcements. Leading the responses to strike leaders’ rhetorically framed questions about further steps in the strike, they made clear that no alternative answer was accepted. This in turn became regarded as the ‘democratic’ legitimation of the strike: there was always only one answer to be heard, in perfect unison, for going ahead with the suggested next step. This served as a public manifestation of the collective unity of students pursuing their ‘democratic rights’ in protesting against alleged ‘corruption’. These assemblies were public events, and they become spaces of representation towards external actors. University staff and other members of the public witness them from the periphery to find out what can be expected to happen next. However, observers are not supposed to be watching too closely either, as one could become perceived as a threat by ‘spying’ on students, attributing actions to specific persons that could later be used in
disciplinary reprehensions. In this context, there was no indication for outside observers that there is such entity as a ‘pressure group’. For onlookers, the unison of vocal affirmation by several hundred voices left a strong impression of students’ collective determination.

The Emergence of a Collectivity

To this point, the political mediation of the strike appears to have little to do with affect-based harnessing of emergent group energies into a collective unity. It is only from this context of initial mobilisation that distinct dynamics of an emergent collectivity started to become visible. Two days after the initial rampage, students came to constitute a more clearly bounded entity, mobilised in antagonism to the university management around shared experiences of disappointment, and physically brought together into assemblies where they shouted in unison. These are all important aspects to allow for an affective mediation of emergent group dynamics in student assemblies, through which collective unity and order becomes more distinctively fostered.

At the heart of student assemblies were elaborate performances of different styles of speech. These performances not only fostered a common narrative about the strike, they effectively, and affectively, aligned students into a collective unity. Distinct styles of speech by strike leaders resonated with sensibilities of students of different backgrounds and dispositions: From a ‘cool’ aggressive and authoritative voice denouncing corruption and the heroic act of exposing it for the good of the nation, to the ‘emotional’ re-enactment of the hard work of parents in remote highland locations carrying coffee bags over mountain ranges to pay for a relative’s university fees while being denied value-for-money education by allegedly corrupt university managers. These performances, variably delivered with angry fervour or the shedding of tears, left a deep impression on its audience and were fundamental in fomenting a sense of shared purpose in the conduct of the strike.

It is through the assemblies that sentiments were brought onto a common course. This is the primary work of affective mediation, to transform a dense congregation of several hundred students encircling strike leaders into an affectively aligned single collective entity. Common feelings were harnessed in these assemblies, where the performance of strike leaders elicited the response of a performed collective unity of students. The experience of these impressive aesthetics of students forming a single united entity standing together and shouting in unison, as if of a single body and voice, created a sense of achieved collectivity, and made manifest a higher state of order among students. There was an overwhelming sense of energy, enthusiasm, and determination among students during and after assemblies, and additional work was done by strike leaders in male student dormitory areas at night to keep students ‘psyching up’ each other. I illustrate these emergent dynamics through my interaction with two close acquaintances among students, Matthew and Jason, with whom I interacted as events unfolded. Matthew is a mature in-service student, a teacher by profession, from the New Guinea Islands region. Jason studied the pre-service education program and is from the Highlands region.
In conversations among students following student assemblies in the first days after the initial rampage, Matthew actively participated in debates about the events unfolding in quick succession. Matthew did not argue for a specific framing of the happenings and issues at hand, but carefully and critically evaluated the situation and the announcement of the strike. Among the questions that Matthew brought into conversations were the evidence for mismanagement and corruption at the hand of university managers, whether a strike was the best way to address student grievances in general, and whether the strike should then be framed around the principal demand for a change to the university management. Over two days, these were recurrent themes that Matthew discussed with other students, in evolving yet open and inconclusive ways. In the second day following the initial rampage, however, a noticeable shift took place. Questions and doubts that Matthew still articulated in the morning, seemed to have vanished by the afternoon. By then, Matthew advanced a compelling narrative why the strike was necessary, and why it was the only way to address the situation.

I did not see Jason as often as Matthew in the initial days of the strike. When I met Jason several days into the strike, he brimmed with enthusiasm for the strike. Skipping any of the usual interactional patterns of meeting in other circumstances, Jason immediately gave me a lengthy and passionate reasoning of the necessity for the strike that he fully stood behind. The narrative Jason advanced was like the one Matthew articulated, and both were remarkably congruent to the framing of the issues and the approach fostered by leaders in assemblies. In fact, the enthusiastic and forceful reproduction of this narrative began to constitute most of the interaction among students two days into the strike. The strike and its reasoning were noticeably foregrounded in everyone’s mind. Clusters of students formed outside dormitories, reproducing and expanding on elements of the narrative that had become a strong element of common identification and shared commitment. It became rare for students to walk around campus alone at this point. When I walked alone, it invited being approached and drawn into conversations revolving around this narrative, and the need to go ahead with the strike. Debate and open-ended conversations all but ceased, replaced by the enthusiastic embrace of what became a routinised narrative among students, as if they spoke with a single voice. I paraphrase this narrative, which was mostly conveyed to me in Tok Pisin, in English below, attempting to retain its rhetoric as it was reproduced in many similar versions:

The university management, and especially the Vice-Chancellor, is corrupt. This is the root cause for students’ grievances in their university education. The only solution is for the Vice-Chancellor to go, and his administration to be investigated. As students are the future educated elite of the country, it is students' moral duty to fight corruption. Students can only be successful in fighting corruption if they are determined to continue the strike, without any compromise, until the Vice-Chancellor leaves. Students must do something now. This is the only way to free the university from corruption, and to bring about a better PNG. 'Power hungry' and 'greedy' people that are holding on to and misusing their positions for illegitimate personal gain should not be allowed to get away with it, because it contributes to the demise of the nation. Enough is enough. In a country marred by corruption like this, what does a university degree count for – a university degree that is compromised in quality through mismanagement, with which
to look for employment amid corruption and nepotism? No. Students could just as well go home. And students will go home if the Vice-Chancellor does not go. This will be the ultimate way to force the government to intervene. Rather than pretending to not see what is wrong, students need to be strong and hold together to win this fight, to bring about change. Accepting any hasty move to address students’ grievances cannot be accepted at any cost, as it would not attack the root of the problem. Things would revert to their status quo, 'corruption' would continue as usual to have its grip over the university, but now is the time for change. This needs to be addressed by the parliament and the national government, students will not listen to anything from the university management. The time for talking is gone, this went on for too long already.

**Mediation and Magnetisers**

What had happened? How did it occur that students, who were rallied together in a quick pace of events initially characterised by confusion and uncertainty, exhibited such overwhelming unity and forcefully pressed for a shared agenda after two days? In Strathern’s words, students’ minds had been successfully brought onto a common course. States of feeling had been inflated into collective proportions. Students became united as an interest group in opposition to the university management, and they now seemed unstoppable in their shared commitment. As is clear from the account above, students’ collective determination around a common agenda did not arise spontaneously on its own terms. The constitution of a collective of students in the strike was a mediated process, which set free dynamics that perplexed me as an observer. These dynamics both resonate with Strathern’s understanding of the mediation of collectivities in the PNG highlands, and with the genealogy of scholarship on crowds, and more recently, affect.

Copeman & Street (2014) explicitly draw on Strathern to understand the phenomenon of ‘affect’. Affect, as Copeman & Street employ it, refers to pre-discursive and “non-representational ways in which images might implicitly shape a person’s emotions, attitudes and motivations and compel them to act in particular ways” (2014, 190). Images here refer to an aesthetics more broadly, and affective power derives from ‘persuasiveness of form’ (Strathern 1991, 10, quoted by Copeman & Street 2014, 189). For the student strike, this puts a spotlight on the aesthetic form of student assemblies as a compelling force that aligned students’ minds, rather than the content of the narrative of the strike. My interaction with Jason seemed to confirm such an interpretation. When I kept querying him about aspects of the reasoning that he presented to me through the above narrative, his ultimate answer was that the magnitude of the strike by itself provides evidence that something was wrong at the university, which needed to be urgently addressed. What compelled action was the impressive display of student assemblies, bringing hundreds of students together and constituting them as a collective subject through emotionally charged performances that students could identify with. Student assemblies work through creating a shared focus of attention to performances that resonate with spectators, which turns spectators into active agents as a collective subject.

While Copeman & Street (2014) draw attention to images and the persuasiveness of aesthetic form in the mediation of affect, Mazzarella (2010a) turns to Tarde’s (1890) notion of the
‘magnetizer’ and its mediating role in the constitution of crowds. A magnetiser may refer to an image, as is the focus of discussion for Copeman & Street, or the acts of a crowd leader, which similarly work through a persuasiveness of form. Thinking of a strike leader, it is not simply the content of speech that has magnetising effect, but the kind of images conjured or even mere gestures that trigger a response from the audience. The magnetiser’s success depends on the audience recognising itself in his acts or the images he conjures up. Spectators identify with his act, which triggers the actualisation of potentials that seemed just waiting to be released. This is achieved through the varied performances in student assemblies that resonate with students, stirring anger about widespread corruption in PNG, or sadness and frustration about the hard work of sponsors’ marketing of horticultural produce for university fees that allegedly become misappropriated. It is in this context that suggestion and imitation work in the most frictionless manner. Anger and frustration become shared among spectators, who also share enthusiasm for acting on these emotions.

What are the inherent potentials that become realised? Here the juxtaposition between critiques and conceptualisations of order in Melanesia by Strathern and others, on one hand, and the scholarship on crowds, affect, and social theory of Tarde, on the other hand, becomes productive. As several scholars have demonstrated, the efficacy associated with collective unity is a widespread value in different parts of PNG. Scholarly descriptions include, for example, Strathern’s discussion of mediated collective exchange in Hagen, Bashkow’s (2006) depiction of Orokaiva as longing for a level of social harmony that appears elusive because of the perceived inability to align people’s inner selves (compare Robbins 2004 in relation to Urapmin), the accounts of nostalgia for bygone times characterised by people’s memories of superior states of collective efficacy and order among Guhu-Samane speakers in Morobe Province (Handman 2016), and the Asaro valley in the Eastern Highlands (Strong 2007), or the collective projects that were infelicitously referred to as ‘cargo cults’ on the northern coast of PNG and the New Guinea Islands (Jebens 2004). In a way, collective unity and efficacy appears as an ideological ideal and value of ‘order’ that constitutes a reflexive concern for people across many parts of PNG. In many of these accounts, the collective unity or efficacy that is remembered from past times and aspired to today remains elusive. It is impressive to witness, then, the energy generated when collective unity is actually realised: actualised in the here and now with minds brought to a common cause. Its achievement becomes activated especially through a differentiation of one collective entity in antagonism to another (Strathern 1985, 1988), such as the oppositional framework between students and the university management around which the rhetoric of corruption revolves. It is in this way that the emergence of a collectivity in a student strike, for participants, also becomes the achievement of a superior kind of order.

There is a further implication of this that brings us back from Melanesian notions of order to social theory at large. The affect harnessed through assemblies in the student strike is not only sensuously contagious, it is also reflexive. While the underlying dynamics of an emergent collectivity described here are not unique to Melanesia, their actualisation nevertheless relies on the specific resonances with ideologies, values, and the experiences of the individuals that constitute the emergent collectivity. These are not only the widespread longings for collective efficacy present in different parts of PNG today, which contributes to
making the embrace of its realisation so energetic. Equally important are the resonances of the narrative fostered by strike leaders that decry widespread corruption in PNG and that relate to the grievances and dissatisfactions that students experience in an underfunded university system. The strike leader as magnetiser manages to bring these elements together in a way that elicits a collective response of minds aligned to a common focus, taking on a dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is emergent as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collective subject. While the emergence of the collectivity is dynamic on its own as a collectivity for his own ends. It served to establish him as efficacious political leader to contest the PNG national elections in 2017, rather than to facilitate a collective subject to address issues at the university or their perception of widespread corruption in PNG. The strike failed to oust the university management, lacking grounds on which this would be warranted, and ended with the strike leader terminated from studies. The only tangible result for students was the interruption to their studies, which characteristically resulted in a disproportionately high number of students failing courses once the academic activities resumed with assessments and exams.

Strike leaders ably instrumentalised a moment of dissatisfaction and confusion among students. They used it to foment collective dynamics for their own ends. This should not be read as dismissing student strikes in PNG in general, nor as dismissing the dynamics of an emergent collective subject. To the contrary, and as Mazzarella observes (2010a, 726), these are dynamics that are inherent to social process in general, and it depends on their context whether we recognise them as progressive, revolutionary, or reactionary. Another student strike at the PNG University of Technology in Lae in 2014, for example, was successful in pressuring the government to stop interfering in the university’s affairs, and to reissue a visa for the university’s foreign Vice-Chancellor that had been revoked for unknown reasons over Christmas vacations. The strike was heralded as a notable and rare success for students and anti-corruption activism in PNG, successfully petitioning the government to act. Its internal dynamics, although different in initial mobilisation, followed similar patterns. The important point here is to recognise how these dynamics are mediated both by harnessing affect and collective states of feeling, and by how accompanying narratives or reasoning allow

**Order and Social Process in Melanesia and Elsewhere**

In this article, I have analysed the emergence of a collectivity in a student strike in PNG by juxtaposing the theoretical perspectives of Marilyn Strathern on Melanesia, and William Mazzarella’s reading of Tarde’s *Laws of Imitation*. What these perspectives allow us to appreciate, I suggest, is the making of order through mediated social process rather than by equating order with an external institutional realm that is separable from social relations. In the student strike discussed here, its leader successfully mediated the emergent dynamics of a collectivity for his own ends. It served to establish him as efficacious political leader to contest the PNG national elections in 2017, rather than to facilitate a collective subject to address issues at the university or their perception of widespread corruption in PNG. The strike failed to oust the university management, lacking grounds on which this would be warranted, and ended with the strike leader terminated from studies. The only tangible result for students was the interruption to their studies, which characteristically resulted in a disproportionately high number of students failing courses once the academic activities resumed with assessments and exams.

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participants to identify themselves with them. Whether we highlight a reasoning that we agree with, approvingly, or an alleged appeal to emotion more than anything else, dismissively, is usually our retrospective decision in judging the emergence and efficacy of collective subjects.

References


