

# **Introduction to *Constituent Imagination***

Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber

2007

# Contents

The Peculiar Drama of the Imperial Academy . . . . .	5
Or is there something wrong with universities in general? . . . . .	6
Demanding the Impossible (Why France?) . . . . .	8
We Want Everything, or the Italian Laboratory . . . . .	14
Global Circuits, Local Struggles . . . . .	17

Thoughts. Provocations. Explorations. Forms of investigation and social research that expand possibilities for political action, proliferating tactics of resistance through the constituent power of the imagination. Walking, we ask questions, not from the perspective of the theorist removed and separate from organizing, but rather from within and as part of the multiple and overlapping cycles and circuits of struggle. For the removed theorist, movements themselves are mere abstractions, pieces of data to be categorized, analyzed, and fixed. The work of militant investigation is multiple, collectively extending forms of antagonism to new levels of understanding, composing flesh-made words from immanent processes of resistance. Far from vanguardist notions of intellectual practice that translate organizing strategies and concepts for populations who are believed to be too stupid or unable to move beyond trade union consciousness, it is a process of collective wondering and wandering that is not afraid to admit that the question of how to move forward is always uncertain, difficult, and never resolved in easy answers that are eternally correct. As an open process, militant investigation discovers new possibilities within the present, turning bottlenecks and seeming dead ends into new opportunities for joyful insurgency.

A beautiful example of this is John Holloway's book, *Change the World Without Taking Power*. Holloway, a soft-spoken Scottish political philosopher, was associated with the "Open Marxism" school developed at the University of Edinburgh where he taught in the 1970s and '80s. In 1991, he moved to Mexico where he took a position with the Instituto de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales in the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. After the Zapatista rebellion broke out in 1994, he quickly became one of its chief intellectual supporters. In 1998, he helped compile a book of essays on the Zapatistas called *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*; this was his attempt to think through the implications of this new revolutionary paradigm, one which rejected classic Marxist ideas of vanguardism and the very project of trying to seize state power for one of building autonomous communities rooted in new forms of direct democracy, using the categories of Marxist theory. The result was an extremely dense book. At certain points, it reads like a mixture of Marxist jargon and lyric poetry:

In the beginning is the scream. We scream.

When we write or when we read, it is easy to forget that the beginning is not the word, but the scream. Faced with the mutilation of human lives by capitalism, a scream of sadness, a scream of horror, a scream of anger, a scream of refusal: NO.

The starting point of theoretical reflection is opposition, negativity, struggle. It is from rage that thought is born, not from the pose of reason, not from the reasoned-sitting-back-and-reflecting-on-the-mysteries-of-existence that is the conventional image of the thinker.

We start from negation, from dissonance. The dissonance can take many shapes. An inarticulate mumble of discontent, tears of frustration, a scream of rage, a confident roar. An unease, a confusion, a longing, a critical vibration.<sup>1</sup>

More than anything else, it's a book about knowledge. Holloway argues that reality is a matter of humans doing and making things together: what we perceive as fixed self-identical objects are really processes. The only reason we insist on treating objects as anything else is because, if we

---

<sup>1</sup> John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

saw them as they really are, as mutual projects, it would be impossible for anyone to claim ownership of them. All liberatory struggle therefore is ultimately the struggle against identity. Forms of knowledge that simply arrange and classify reality from a distance—what Holloway refers to as “knowledge-about”—may be appropriate for a vanguard party that wants to claim the right to seize power and impose itself on the basis of some privileged “scientific” understanding, but ultimately it can only work to reinforce structures of domination. True revolutionary knowledge would have to be different. It would have to be a pragmatic form of knowledge that lays bare all such pretensions; a form of knowledge deeply embedded in the logic of transformational practice.

Furious debates ensued. Leninists and Trotskyites lambasted the book as utopian for adopting what they considered a naïve anarchist position—one that was completely ignorant of political realities. Anarchists were alternately inspired and annoyed, often noting that Holloway seemed to echo anarchist ideas without ever mentioning them, instead writing as if his positions emerged naturally from a correct reading of classic Marxist texts. Others objected to the way he read the texts. Supporters of Toni Negri’s Spinozist version of Marxism denounced the book as so much Hegelian claptrap; others suggested that Holloway’s argument that any belief in self-identical objects was a reflection of capitalist logic seemed to imply that capitalism had been around since the invention of language, which ultimately made it very difficult to imagine an alternative.

In Latin America, where the battle was particularly intense, a lot of the arguments turned around very particular questions of revolutionary strategy. Who has the better model: the Zapatistas of Chiapas or Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela? Were the Argentine radicals who overthrew four successive regimes in December of 2001 right to refuse seizing power, to reject the entire domain of formal politics and try to create their own autonomous institutions? Or had they allowed an opportunity for genuine revolutionary change to slip through their grasp? For many in the global justice movement in Europe and North America, the book provided the perfect counterpoint to Michael Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, then being hailed in the media as the bible of the movement. Where Hardt and Negri were drawing on an Italian autonomist tradition that saw capital not as imposing itself on labor but as constantly having to adjust itself to the power of workers’ struggle, Holloway was arguing that this approach did not go nearly far enough. In fact, capital was labor and capitalism the system that makes it impossible for us to see this. Capitalism is something we make every day and the moment we stop making it, it will cease to exist. There were endless Internet debates. Seminars and reading groups were held comparing the two arguments in probably a dozen different languages.

What we want to draw attention to is that this debate was carried out almost completely amongst activists. Holloway himself was a bit surprised on discovering teenage anarchists were taking his book with them while hopping trains or attending mass mobilizations. “It’s a very difficult book,” he admitted to a journalist who interviewed him in 2002, adding he was “surprised and gratified” that so many young people had taken an interest in it.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in the academy, it was as if all this had never happened. Holloway’s book was not widely assigned in courses or read in graduate seminars. In fact, most Marxist scholars seemed unaware that John Holloway even existed. Mention his name and one would almost invariably be greeted by blank stares. It was as if the debate was happening in another universe. In some ways, perhaps it was.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Ross and John Holloway, “A Visit with John Holloway: Change the World Without Taking Power,” *Counterpunch*, April 2nd, 2005. Available at <http://www.counterpunch.org/ross04022005.html>

It's important to note this was not because this book is mainly concerned with practical advice to activists. Actually, it contains almost none. It's a work of philosophy; a theory of knowledge that concedes the author has no idea how one would actually go about putting its theories into practice. On the other hand, as a theory of knowledge it is daring, sophisticated, and quite brilliant. So why was it ignored in the academy? The obvious response is slightly scandalous. What makes Holloway unusual is not that he is writing theory but that he is writing theory that explicitly argues that writing theory is not enough. In the academy, theories of action are acceptable. Theories that argue that writing itself is a form of political action are acceptable (in fact they are greatly appreciated). Theories that are in effect calls to political action beyond the academy pass by as if they never were.

## The Peculiar Drama of the Imperial Academy

Granted what we are saying is particularly true of the American academy, one increasingly cut off from the rest of the world. For that reason it is perhaps fitting that a great many of the materials in this volume come from the US (as well as Canada and the UK). Hopefully, they will start conversations and motions in new directions in engaged research, which in general have been occurring elsewhere (particularly in Italy, Spain, and South America) for much longer. Empire always produces a certain blindness. In the case of the United States, one form this takes is a strange obliviousness to the fact that our university system, though the largest in the world, is not only no longer producing social theory the rest of the world is particularly interested in, it's hardly even importing any. Ask a social scientist in France to name an American social theorist, the only ones likely to come readily to mind are turn of the century Pragmatists and '50s sociologists like Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, and possibly Judith Butler.

True, during the Cold War, there was a determined effort, led by sociologists like Talcott Parsons, to create some kind of hegemonic US-centered social science largely based on developing Max Weber as a theoretical alternative to Marx. That dissolved after the worldwide student rebellions of the late '60s. In the US, this was followed by a huge inrush of French theory, a kind of French invasion. For over a decade there was a flood of new theoretical heroes one after the other: Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard, Kristeva, Derrida, Cixous, De Certeau, and so on. Then somehow the spigot dried up. It's not that France was no longer producing theorists, it was just that (with few exceptions) American scholars were not interested in them. Instead, for the last fifteen or twenty years, the American academy—or the part that fancies itself to be the radical, critical, subversive branch of it—have for some reason preferred to endlessly recycle the same body of French theory: roughly, reading and rereading a set of texts written between 1968 and 1983. There are all sorts of ironies here. Aside from the obvious one, that a group of people so obsessed with intellectual fashion do not seem to notice they are recycling ideas from thirty years ago—rather like music fans who feel they are the quintessence of cool even though they listen exclusively to classic rock—there's the very fact that those American academics who see themselves as the most subversive of all structures of received authority have been spending most of their time establishing and preserving an authoritative canon.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, any number of major intellectual trends in Europe (for instance Critical Realism in the UK, the MAUSS

---

<sup>3</sup> Granted, in recent years there have been a few new names. At times it seems as if there's a continual debate over who will be the newest hip French theorist: Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, etc. Not surprisingly, in these con-

group in France, Luhman's Systems Theory in Germany) that are widely discussed in Brazil, for instance, in America seem to pass by almost completely unnoticed. True, this is only a part of the picture. The American academy, as Jack Bratich points out later in this volume, has always been divided between the administrative and critical functions.

The former has been running great guns (sometimes all too literally) and has generated a great deal of theory—various strains of economics, rational choice theories and the like—that are directly involved in maintaining neoliberal institutions, justifying and providing technologies for various administrative bureaucracies, staffing everything from NGOs to advertising agencies. Here ideas really are flowing out of America again and have had an enormous influence over the rest of the world—even if for the most part they have been rammed down the throats of administrative bureaucracies by the threat of coups, bribery, intimidation, the manipulation of international debt (and, recently, outright military conquest).<sup>4</sup> The scions of the critical left meanwhile often seem uninterested in the phenomenon, engaging in heated debates about epistemic violence without having very much to say about the more literal violence often being planned and justified on the other side of the quad.

Perhaps this is exactly what one should expect from a dying empire. Or perhaps from any empire, dying or not. Great empires are not known for promoting intellectual creativity. They tend to be more interested in questions of law and administration. American universities are at this point primarily concerned with training the staff for various global bureaucracies (government, NGOs, corporations) and, secondarily, providing for the reproduction of what right-wing populists like to call the “liberal elite,” an increasingly endogamous and inward-looking caste who dominate what passes for American culture. If they have found an intellectual formula that successfully justifies and facilitates that, why would there be need to change it?

## **Or is there something wrong with universities in general?**

On the other hand one could just as well ask: why is it we assume that creative and relevant ideas should be coming out of universities in the first place? The modern university system has existed only a few hundred years and during most of that time, universities were not places that much fostered innovation or the questioning of received knowledge. They were largely places for compiling and redacting received knowledge and teaching students to respect authority. The old-fashioned stereotype of the professor as a greybeard pedant fussing over some obscure interpretation of a Latin epode, unaware of or disdainful of the world around him, was not really that far from the truth. For the most part, universities were dominated by figures who were scholars but in no sense intellectuals.

This has not changed as much as we'd like to think. Graduate school is not on the whole meant to foster creativity or encourage students to produce new ideas. For the most part, it's designed to break students down, to foster insecurity and fear as a way of life, and ultimately to crush that sense of joy in learning and playing with ideas that moved most students to dedicate

---

versations a prolific and brilliant author and activist like Michael Onfray, who set up a free university in northern France, is not even mentioned (nor for that matter have *any* of his many books been translated into English).

<sup>4</sup> One cannot attribute the prestige of neoliberal theory exclusively to force. It has been adopted quite enthusiastically along with American business models in some circles in Europe. But to some degree we would argue that this is the reflected prestige of empire. If the U.S. did not have the institutional dominance that it does, it's hard to imagine this would still be happening.

their lives to the academy to begin with. For this it substitutes an imperative for obsequiousness, competitiveness, and slick self-presentation that is referred to as “professionalization.”<sup>5</sup> Graduate school is designed to produce academic functionaries who when they finally do have tenure, and can say whatever they want, are almost certain not to have anything too dramatic or relevant to say. Of course there are always those who refuse to be crushed. The majority are kicked out or marginalized; a select minority promoted to superstar status and treated as charismatic heroes so obviously exceptional that their very existence serves to remind mere mortals of their limitations. And the casualization of academic labor, of course, has made all this even worse.

From this perspective, what we saw in the '60s was something rather unusual: a brief moment when the model changed. Universities were supposed to encompass intellectual life, intellectual life was to be creative and politically radical. By now the pretense is wearing thin. In US universities, the only folks coming up with really innovative ideas in the social or cultural field are involved with postcolonial studies—expats and intellectuals with roots in the global south, a group that will most likely increasingly abandon imperial universities as American power itself begins to fade. The realignment is already starting to happen. The largest departments for American studies, for example, are currently in universities in India and China. For present purposes, this matter is something of an aside. The critical thing is that universities were never meant to be places for intellectual creativity. If it happens, it's not because it is especially conducive to them, but only because if you pay enough people to sit around thinking, some new ideas are bound to get through. This raises an interesting question: Where do new ideas actually come from? In particular, where do new ideas about the nature of social life originate?

We're anarchists, so of course our immediate impulse is to say: “But of course, they emerge from social movements, or from the unleashing of popular creativity that follows moments of revolutionary upheaval.” Or as Robin D.G. Kelley puts it, “Revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement: collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly there is some truth in this. Consider the outpouring of creativity that followed the Russian revolution—not only in the arts, but especially in social theory: whether the psychological theories of Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria, the dialogism of the Bakhtin circle, or even the folklorism of Vladimir Propp or structural linguistics of the Prague School.<sup>7</sup> It's all the more impressive when one considers how brief was the window for creativity, before the innovators began to be murdered, sent to camps, starved or killed in world wars, or simply shut down by Stalinist orthodoxy. Still it seems that things are a bit more complicated. Especially if one is speaking of social theory, new ideas are even more likely to emerge from the frustration of revolutionary hopes than from their fulfillment.<sup>8</sup>

As Robert Nisbet pointed out half a century ago, sociology rose from the wreckage of the French revolution. Almost all of its early themes—community, authority, status, the sacred—were first singled out by reactionary critics of the revolution like Louis-Gabriel Bonald, Edmund Burke, or Joseph de Maistre, who argued these were precisely the social realities that Enlightenment

---

<sup>5</sup> See in particular *Social Text* 79, Vol 22, no. 2, *Turning Pro: Professional Qualifications and the Global University*, eds. Stefano Harney and Randy Martin (Summer 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* ( Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> And this in a country that before the revolution had produced no social theory at all, though it did produce a number of great novels.

<sup>8</sup> They also seem to emerge especially from the margins of the academy, or moments when professional thinkers were in dialogue with someone else: artists, workers, militants, etc.

thinkers had treated as so many bad ideas that could simply be brushed away. As a result, they argued, when revolutionaries inspired by Enlightenment teachings tried to put their ideas into practice, the result was inevitably catastrophic. These themes were then picked up by authors like St. Simon and Comte and eventually fashioned into a discipline. Similarly, Marx wrote *Capital* in the wake of the failure of the revolutions of 1848 largely in order to understand what it was about capitalism that made it so resilient. The entire history of Western Marxism, from Lukács through Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, has been a series of attempts to explain why the proletariat in the most advanced industrial nations did not rise up in arms. Whatever you might think of this tradition, none but the most hardened Stalinist would deny that it was extraordinarily creative.

There's a peculiar pattern of inversions here. Universities were founded as places for the celebration of art and culture; they still like to represent themselves that way in brochures and promotional literature. Over the last two hundred years, however, they have become ever more focused on economics and administration. In the case of revolutionary movements, things have developed very much the other way around. What began as workers' organizations grappling with immediate economic issues have, as workers consistently appeared willing to act against their own economic interests, been forced to grapple more explicitly with the nature of symbols and meanings—even as their theorists continue to insist they are ultimately materialists. One can already see this in Marx's *Capital*, a book that begins not with an analysis of material infrastructure but with a long and utterly brilliant symbolic analysis of monetary value. Western Marxism quickly became a tradition of cultural analysis. State socialist regimes were obsessed with cultural issues as well but they exhibited remarkably bad faith in this regard. In their ideological statements, they invariably proclaimed themselves ardent economic determinists and insisted that the domain of ideas is just a reflection of material forces. Then they proceeded to lock up anyone who disagreed with them on this point, or for that matter anyone who composed art or poetry that didn't meet their approval. As many have pointed out, there's a bit of a contradiction here. If they really believed art and ideas were epiphenomena, this sort of behavior would be completely pointless. By mobilizing such enormous material resources to suppress even the whisper of dissent, they acted as if they attributed an enormous power to ideas. So one could say that by the mid-twentieth century most branches of Marxism, for better or worse, not only believed that there was a domain of ideas separate from practice (already a pretty dubious proposition in our opinion), but that ideas had extraordinary political power. Capitalists, even while they espoused some variety of philosophical idealism, acted as one would if they really believed in material determinism. They didn't lose a lot of sleep worrying about art and philosophy but saved their energies for maintaining control over the means of production, on the assumption that if they did so, the rest would more or less take care of itself.

All this helps explain why so much of the radical theory of today—including the vast majority of concepts drawn on in this book—trace back to France and Italy. These countries were, especially in mid-century, trapped inside an extraordinary situation of suspense, where a permanently stalled revolution produced an apparently endless outpouring of theoretical innovation.

## **Demanding the Impossible (Why France?)**

It's commonplace nowadays to say that at the Yalta conference on the division of Europe after World War II, Churchill and Roosevelt “sold out” Eastern Europe by allowing Stalin to keep



everything occupied by the Red Army within the Communist orbit. This happened of course, but what's usually left out is that in exchange, the Soviets told Communist resistance forces poised to seize power in Italy and France to hold off and refused to give meaningful support to Communist partisans who did try to seize power in Greece, even after the Western powers rushed in aid to the fascist colonels who eventually crushed them. Had the fate of Europe been left to purely internal forces the postwar division might have looked completely different. It presumably would have been not an East-West split but a North-South split. Those countries bordering on the Mediterranean (with the exception of Spain and Portugal already lost to fascist regimes) would be socialist, and those of the north from England and Germany to Poland and Lithuania would be allied with the capitalist powers (with the probable exception of Scandinavia). What those southern European regimes would have ended up looking like—something along the lines of Yugoslavia or some kind of parliamentary socialism, for example?—we will never know. The important thing here is the fact that it *didn't* happen.

In France, the moment of opportunity quickly faded. The United States government rushed in money and support for a right-wing nationalist regime that quickly began implementing most of the major planks of the left-wing program, nationalizing banks and instituting universal health care. There followed two decades of great prosperity. The university system expanded rapidly. The Communist Party (PCF) soon found itself with a lock on the votes of the industrial workers and control over the union bureaucracy, but no broader electoral support. Over time, Communist functionaries came to a de facto acceptance of their status within the overall structure of power. At the same time, their official ideology was straight Soviet-line. Intellectuals who supported the party were obliged to at least pay lip service to an extremely orthodox, hidebound version of Marxism. The only alternatives were to join the world of squabbling Trotskyite sects, detach oneself from any meaningful tie to mass-based social movements, or give up on politics entirely. Even Foucault joined the PCF. Most remained on the Left and tried to reach some sort of compromise. The temptation to remain politically engaged was strong since this was an environment where (much as in Eastern Europe) ideas actually were taken seriously but where (unlike in Eastern Europe) the state provided intellectuals with generous grants and never shot them. Intellectuals were left with a situation where they were free to say whatever they liked, where broad sections of the public were actually interested in their opinions, but where the main thing they had to talk about was the lack of revolutionary transformation.

What followed is a story that's been told many times before and there's no reason to rehearse it in any detail. We don't really need to map out the succession of intellectual trends (Existentialism, Structuralism, Poststructuralism...), intellectual heroes (Sartre, Levi-Strauss, Foucault...) or even to go into a detailed account of the events of May '68, when a campus insurrection led to a series of wildcat sympathy strikes in factories around France that paralyzed the country and briefly seemed to herald a genuine social revolution. That promise was, as we all know, not to be. It was betrayed most dramatically by the PCF itself whose unions joined with the government to do everything in their power to bring employees back to work and the population back under the control of the administrative apparatus. In doing so, they managed to destroy any remaining illusion that the party might ever be a revolutionary force and therefore any legitimacy it might still have had among the intellectual classes. In the wake of the failed revolt there followed an even greater surge of innovative theoretical writings, one that lasted for more than a decade. This is the body of texts that has now become the canon of American social and cultural theory.

Here we can add something to the conventional account. What is referred to in France as “*la pensée soixante-huit*” or “68 thought,” and in America as “French theory,” consists—as authors like Peter Starr have pointed out—largely of attempts to explain why the insurrectionaries failed and why revolution in the traditional sense of the term was no longer possible. Or, alternately, why it never was possible. Or, why the insurrectionaries had not failed, because really they were avatars not of communism but of consumerism, or individualism, or the sexual revolution, or maybe something else. There was a dazzling array of arguments. Again, there would be no point in trying to rehearse them all. What many fail to notice is that few of these arguments were entirely new. For the most part they drew on the same themes and theoretical concepts that had been put forward in the streets during the insurrection: the rejection of bureaucratic organization, the liberation of desire and the imagination, and the imperative to unveil the hidden structures of domination that lay beneath every aspect of everyday life. Even though the insurrectionaries took them in much less pessimistic or individualistic directions. In this sense, calling it “68 thought” is not entirely deceptive. Daniel Cohn-Bendit later claimed that he and the other rebel spokesmen hadn’t really invented anything: they were just repeating slogans and arguments they’d read in the works of the Situationist International, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and the anarchist journal *Rouge et Noir*. However, this is precisely where ’68 marks a great intellectual rupture. If one goes to an anarchist bookstore or infoshop in almost any part of the world, this is what one is still likely to find: There will be works by and about the Situationists (particularly Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem), and the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* authors (certainly Cornelius Castoriadis, occasionally even Claude Lefort), alongside others continuing in the same tradition, and anarchist journals of every sort. Usually equally striking in their absence will be the work of the most famous poststructuralist authors like Michel Foucault, or Deleuze and Guattari.

The absence of the latter can be partly attributed to the fact that they are so easily available elsewhere. University bookstores are crammed full of the stuff and rarely carry anything by the authors likely to be found in infoshops. It is very hard to avoid the conclusion that the readership for French theory has effectively split in two. Activists continue to read the works immediately preceding May ’68: works that anticipated revolution. They also continue to develop them. Academics continue to read and develop the works from immediately afterwards. The result is two different streams of literature. Activists do draw from the academic stream to a certain degree, but the academics almost never read the other one.

Let us provide a small illustration. One of the first French Marxist scholars to concern himself with the liberation of ordinary life from structures of alienation (commuting, consumerism, dead time) was Henri Lefebvre, a sociologist whose book, *Critique of Everyday Life*, came out as early as 1947. He was eventually expelled from the Communist Party. In 1957, his teaching assistant Jean Baudrillard convinced Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem (known at the time as sometime-artists, sometime-essayists and political agitators) to attend a course of lectures Lefebvre was offering on the subject of daily life at Nanterre. The ideas set out in those lectures had an enormous influence on the manifestos of the Situationist International that began to appear in the early ’60s, during which time all four men became great friends. There were eventually falling outs (there always were with the Situationists), but one can observe the same themes in Baudrillard’s dissertation work *The System of Objects* (1968), as in Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Vaneigem’s *Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967)—the latter two were also considered the two most important texts for the rebellion. Debord and Vaneigem focused on what they called “the spectacle,” seeing the passivity of consumer audiences before the TV screen as the most concrete and explicit form

of the relation created by the entire commodity system that renders us all obliging audiences to our own lives. The spectacle breaks down and destroys any sense of life as art, adventure, or community (all living “totalities” in their language), and then hooks us into the system by selling us dead spectral images of everything we have lost. Where Baudrillard used semiotic theory to describe how the consumer system operated by a total, all-embracing logic, Debord tried to map out the mechanics of “spectacular capitalism” and the ways to strike back against it through artistic subversion and creation of systems of insurrectionary self-management. Vaneigem wrote books directly addressed to young people, describing the immediate textures of daily life under capitalism in a style that mixed high theory, catchy slogans, and bitter satire as well as imagining insurrectionary alternatives.

After '68, Baudrillard abandoned Marxism, having decided that its logic was merely a mirror of capitalism. He's now considered one of the first great avatars of postmodernism—though a rather unusual one, since he never abandoned the idea that capitalism was a giant totalizing system that renders consumers passive and helpless before it, only the idea that there was any meaningful way to strike back. Resistance, he argued, is impossible. The best we can hope for is a certain “ironic detachment.” Debord allowed the SI to collapse and tried to drink himself to death, eventually committing suicide. Vaneigem never stopped writing (he spent a good deal of his later life researching Medieval heresies) and continues to put out radical tracts to this day.

The striking thing here is the reception these three theorists had in the academy. What follows is a little experiment using the online academic search engine Jstor ([jstor.org](http://jstor.org)), which compiles major academic journals in the English language. We took the simple expedient of searching by discipline for the number of academic articles that mentioned each of the three authors by name. The results were striking:

	Baudrillard	Debord	Vaneigem
Language & Literature	348	80	3
Art & Art History	75	34	7
Sociology	51	5	0
History	45	10	1
Anthropology	22	3	0
Philosophy	21	3	0
Political Science	20	1	0
Economics/Business	11	0	0

The figures more or less speak for themselves.<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard is considered canonical and is regularly cited in all disciplines, even if many authors often only cite him in order to disagree with him. Debord is seen as a minor figure in art or literary studies, and is almost unknown outside them. Raoul Vaneigem might as well never have been born.

This is interesting for any number of reasons. If you ask a scholar in, say, a cultural studies department what they think of the Situationists, you are likely to witness some kind of intellectual brush of the hand. The usual response is a dismissal of them as silly '50s or '60s Marxists, along the lines of the Frankfurt School who believed that capitalism was an all-powerful system of production and consumers were hapless dupes being fed manufactured fantasies. Eventually, you will then be told, students of popular culture came to realize this position was elitist and puritanical. After all, if one examines how real working people actually live, one will discover that they construct the meaning of their lives largely out of consumer goods but that they do it in their own creative, subversive fashion and not as passive dupes of marketing executives. In other words, real proletarians don't need some French bohemian pamphleteer to call on them to subvert the system, they're already doing it on their own. Hence, this sort of literature is an insult to those in whose name it claims to speak. It doesn't deserve to be taken seriously.

This is one reason we think the case of Baudrillard is so telling. After all, if Debord and Vaneigem are being elitist, Baudrillard is obviously a thousand times more so. Debord and Vaneigem at least thought it was possible to strike back against the spectacle. Baudrillard no longer does. For him, we are nothing but helpless dupes and there's nothing we can do about it; except, perhaps, to step back and admire our own cleverness for at least (unlike the pathetic fools still insisting they can change things) having figured that out. Yet Baudrillard remains an academic superstar. One has to ask: if the cultural studies folks are right to dismiss the Situationists as elitists with contempt for the real lives of non-academics, why is it that non-academics continue to buy their books? Why is it that non-academics are pretty much the *only* people who continue to buy their books? Because it's not just infoshops. Since the late '70s, Situationist ideas, slogans and forms of analysis have become so thoroughly inscribed in the sensibilities of punk rock that it's almost impossible to listen for very long to certain strains of countercultural music without hearing some catchy phrase taken directly from the works of Raoul Vaneigem. The Situationists have managed to become *part* of popular culture while cultural studies has remained completely trapped in the academy. It is these practices of do-it-yourself cultural production that Ben Holtzman, Craig Hughes, and Kevin Van Meter describe in this volume as forms for developing post-capitalist social relations in the present.

The obvious conclusion is that it's precisely Baudrillard's elitism that makes him palatable for academics, because it's the kind of elitism that tells its readers not to do anything. It's okay to argue that it's not necessary to change the world through political action. It's okay to argue it's

---

<sup>9</sup> In each discipline, the pattern is remarkably consistent: Baudrillard is always the most frequently cited, Debord is cited far less, and Vaneigem is not cited at all. True, Vaneigem gets a bit of a bump in Art and Art History, for example, but it turns out all seven articles were published in a single special issue of the journal *October* dedicated to Situationism. Similarly, Debord gets a small bump in History—but this is because it's hard to talk about the events of May '68 in France without mentioning the Situationist influence on the student insurrectionaries, not because historians are using his ideas. Even here, Baudrillard, who played no significant role in such events, is cited three times more than both of them put together, and Vaneigem, whose book was if anything more important, is still effectively ignored. Aside from the historical references, the Situationists are viewed as artistic and literary figures, not social thinkers. Outside art and literature, Debord is cited only a very small number of times and Vaneigem is never cited once.

not possible. What's not okay—or anyway, what's considered tiresome and uninteresting—is to write works that cannot be read as anything but a call to action. Debord *can* be read simply as a theorist, though it requires a good deal of willful blindness. In the case of Vaneigem it's nearly impossible. Hence, in the eyes of the academy: Debord is a minor figure and Vaneigem does not exist.

We are not writing to say either of these two traditions is superior, let alone that one should efface the other. Just about every contributor to this volume draws on both. We do want to insist on two things. The first is that both traditions are equally intellectually legitimate. The university does not have any kind of monopoly over insight or theoretical sophistication. The second is that these ideas can only be understood within their social context. The Situationists developed perhaps the single most unsparing critique of the alienation of capitalist life. As members of an artistic collective that turned increasingly toward political action, they became prophetic voices for that intuition that has always existed in the revolutionary Left—that the experience of unalienated production in art can somehow be fused to the tradition of direct action to point to a way out. It is this tradition that Gavin Grindon traces through from the Surrealists and the College of Sociology to the actions against the G8 that occurred in 2005 in the fields of Scotland. Castoriadis, in turn, is the great philosopher of the revolutionary imagination; from him we get the power to create something out of nothing that seems to crop up at moments of crisis and upheaval, which developed into a theory of revolutionary “autonomy”—in the literal sense, the power of communities to make their own rules.

The post-'68 reaction challenged a series of the key terms—the subject, totalities, dialectics, alienation, even (in its traditional sense) power—and effectively removed them from the mix. This was part of a general purging of Marxist categories. The disillusionment with Marx is not in itself entirely surprising considering the previous dominance of the French Communist Party and the almost universal revulsion against its role in the events of May '68. But here too, this can be seen as radicalizing certain trends that had already existed within Marxist thought well before '68. It was primarily a rejection of Hegel and the Hegelian notion of the subject. If the emphasis on structures of domination within everyday life traced back to activist circles, the desire to scrub away everything that smacked of dialectics traced to Louis Althusser, the philosopher who in the '50s became the chief academic stalwart of the PCF. Althusser is famous for arguing that there was an epistemic break in *Capital* where one could detect the exact moment where Marx abandoned his early dialectical concerns with alienation and developed instead a scientific understanding of society. He often argued for a Marxism that would be founded not on Hegel but Spinoza and was also the first to insist that the very notion that we think of ourselves as subjects, as beings with free choice and free will, is an illusion created by larger structures of domination. Incidentally, he was also the mentor of a certain Michel Foucault. One might say that poststructuralism is largely Althusser without the Marx.

True, in their first book, *Anti-Oedipus* (1968), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari were still writing in the classic mode of trying to save Marx from his latter-day interpreters. Before long though, Marx apparently vanished. Similarly Michel Foucault, who used to boast he had been out of the country during the events of May '68, quickly abandoned claims of affinity with Maoism to build a career around a series of strategic rejections of traditional Marxist interests and assumptions. All sorts of previously orthodox figures tried to outdo one another in their rejection of some aspect of their previous orthodoxy. The most dramatic case, perhaps, was Françoise Lyotard, who was previously best known for leading the breakaway faction that had split from the *Socialisme*

*ou Barbarie* group in protest when they abandoned the principle that only the industrial proletariat could lead the revolution. (His new group was called *Communisme ou Barbarie*.) By 1979, Lyotard announced that we had begun the transition to a new age, which he dubbed “postmodernism,” marked by an attitude of suspicion towards all metanarratives (aside from, presumably, the one he was now proposing). Marxism, and also nationalism, for example, were increasingly becoming relics of an antiquated age—a claim that one would think would be considered more of an historical irony considering it was announced in a “report on knowledge” offered up to the government of Québec.

What one sees here is how the emphasis shifted from the factory and capital to the questions about how subjects are created through an endless variety of discourses on forms of power or production outside those domains we normally think of as the economy: in the family, clinics, asylums, bodies, prisons, literary texts. These domains were not seen as refractions of, or subordinate to, the logic of capital, but rather as part of the shifting ground made up of fractured fields of power, without a center or coordinative bond. Sometimes this was seen as the simple truth of power, other times it was seen as marking the truth of a new stage of history that itself emerged in the wake of '68. Either way, this eliminated any space for a politics of alienation because there never was a natural state from which to feel estranged, or anyway, there isn't any more. Either way, we are merely the product of an endless series of discourses.

Poststructuralism has added an enormously rich vocabulary to the human sciences: disciplinary systems, discourses and truth-effects, subject formation, rhizomatic structures, war machines, desiring machines, panopticism, territorializations and deterritorializations, flows, biopolitics, nomadology, simulacra, governmentality, etc. While all this has come to dominate critical theory in the American academy and to various degrees elsewhere as well, and in many cases there used to justify political withdrawal, it's not as if activists have found it entirely useless. As we've said, activists seem much more likely to draw from the academic stream than the other way around.

## **We Want Everything, or the Italian Laboratory**

While French theory from the '60s and '70s has been the staple of the global academy for years, interest in Italian radical theory from this period is more recent. Historically, the situation in Italy was in many ways similar to France. Here too the Communist Party played a principal role in the resistance during World War II, and was poised to seize power afterwards, when it seemed the only major political force untainted by association with fascism. The Italian Communist Party was also ordered to stand down by Stalin, and ended up playing the loyal opposition within a social democratic regime dominated by parties of the Right. Italy was unique in at least two crucial ways. First, the Italian party was that of Antonio Gramsci. After the war it threw itself into a classic Gramscian war of position, building strategic alliances and cultural hegemony based upon the idea of the autonomy of the political. Perhaps as a result, the Italian Communist Party remained far larger than the French Communist Party even in its heyday. It was often very close to the majority party, even if the US-supported Christian democrats always managed to control the government. As in France, the result was that the party dominated the labor bureaucracy, but it also increasingly drifted away from the immediate bread-and-butter concerns of factory workers, continually sacrificing them for broader political imperatives. This leads to the second

key difference: the structure of the Italian academy meant that '68 had a very different impact. Rather than creating a moment of exaltation followed by collapse, the alliance between students and workers was in a sense institutionalized. At the very least, activists, researchers, and factory workers continued to talk to one another. The result was a series of intense overlapping cycles of struggles lasting over ten years. Some of the organizational structures that emerged during this period—most famously, the squats and occupied social centers—endure to this day.

It's often said that in Italy, 1968 happened twice: first in '68 and then in '77. It would probably be more accurate to say it never completely ended: even if the fierce government repression after the occupations and uprisings of '77 had the effect of destroying much of the organizational infrastructure and landed thousands of activists and hundreds of intellectuals in jail, or sent them fleeing to foreign exile.<sup>10</sup> Here it might be helpful to recall an argument of Immanuel Wallerstein that genuine revolutionary moments, even if they seem to take place in one country, are always worldwide in scope. The French revolution in 1789 or Russian revolution in 1917 might well have had just as powerful long-term effects on Denmark or Mexico. The revolutions of 1848 and 1968 did not succeed in taking over the state apparatus anywhere but they caused convulsions across the world that marked genuine breaks in history. Afterwards things were not the same. In the case of the revolutions of '68, this was, according to Wallerstein, a rejection of states and state bureaucracies as instruments of the public will. So it's appropriate, perhaps, that in Italy, where '68 took such institutional legs, what started as "workerism" ultimately came to be known as "autonomism."

The body of theory generated by this particular frustrated—but not completely frustrated—transformation was also different from France. Where one saw a gradual movement away from Marxism in France, in Italy it was marked by a "return to Marx," a rejection of Gramscian theories of cultural hegemony<sup>11</sup> and an attempt to reexamine Marx's original texts—*Capital* and the *Grundrisse*—in the light of contemporary conditions. The range of concepts that emerged from all this—class composition, the social factory, revolutionary exodus, immaterial labor, the general intellect, constituent power, the state form, real subsumption, the circulation of struggles, and so on—have permanently enriched the revolutionary tradition. It is a language and a conceptual apparatus that is just as complex and challenging as poststructuralism. It would be vain to try and summarize it, but we thought it important to stress two areas where, in our opinion, the autonomist tradition has made extraordinarily important contributions.

One of the greatest achievements of autonomist theory has been to remove class struggle from the back burner of social theory. Generations of political Marxists have tended to give lip service to the notion that it should be important, and then go on to write history as if the real driving force in almost anything—imperialism, the factory system, the rise of feminism—was the working out of contradictions within capital itself. Capital was always the prime actor in the historical drama; workers' organizations were left to scramble to adjust to its latest depredations. Against this, Mario Tronti, one of the first theorists of Italian workerism, proposed what he termed a "Copernican shift." Let us, he said, re-imagine history from the assumption that resistance is primary and it's capital that must always readjust. The results were surprisingly compelling. Rather than seeing the neoliberal offensive that began in the late '70s and peaked

---

<sup>10</sup> This history of struggles and ideas is well-documented and described by Steve Wright in *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Books, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

in the early '90s as an unstoppable capitalist offensive against the social gains embodied in the welfare state, and then imagining working class organizations as its defenders, it became possible to see welfare state capitalism had itself been destroyed and delegitimized by popular revolts in the '60s. What was '68, after all, if not a rebellion against the stifling conformity and engines of bureaucratic control, against the factory system and work in general, in the name of individual freedoms and the liberation of desire? Capital first stumbled and then was forced to turn the rebels' weapons against them saying, in effect, "You want freedom? We'll show you freedom! You want flexibility? We'll show you flexibility!" Class struggle consists of dynamic moments of composition—in which the working class creates new structures, alliances, forms of communication, cooperation—and decomposition, through which capital is forced to turn some of these tools back on it, so as to introduce hierarchies and divisions that destroy working class solidarity. In Italy, this made it much easier to understand the paradoxical role of the Italian Communist Party that ultimately became an agent of capitalism, and the main force in imposing the Italian version of neoliberalism.

Another major contribution was the argument that the growth of what came to be referred to as "new social movements" and "identity politics" starting in the late '60s—whether the women's movement, ethnic or racially based movements, gay rights, or lifestyle-based groups like punks and hippies, movements no longer centered on the factory or capitalist workplace—did not mean that the logic of capitalism was no longer important. Rather, the logic of the factory (exploitation, discipline, the extraction of surplus value) had come to subsume everything. But so did labor power: the extension of capitalist controls into every aspect of human life paradoxically meant that capital no longer had any space in which it was completely dominant. This line of argument culminated in Toni Negri's famous claim that in effect we are already living under communism because capitalism has been increasingly forced to make its profits parasitically, leeching off of forms of cooperation (like language or the Internet) that were developed almost entirely outside of it. Whatever one may think of the particulars, this sort of argument is once again groundbreaking in its insistence on putting capitalism in its place.

It is not that '68 was a failure. Capitalism is a global system; it would never have been possible to liberate a bounded territory like France or Italy anyway. Rather, capitalism has been forced to claim credit for our victories, and even sell them back to us. The fact that feminism, to take an obvious example, has been co-opted and corporatized does not mean that the Women's Movement was a failure or a capitalist plot. Under the current domain of real subsumption, everything is co-opted. This in turn means that capitalism is increasingly administering social forms that are not in their essence capitalist at all.

One need hardly remark how different all this is from the reaction to '68 in France, with its retreat from Marx—although the social transformations being considered were quite similar: the introduction of post-Fordist industrial systems, emphasis on individualistic consumerism, and so on. In the academy—as in the corporate media (which interestingly tends to let the academy be the judge of what counts as a radical idea)—none of this left a trace. Or: not until very recently. During the '70s, '80s and '90s, in the English-speaking world "Italian theory" still referred almost exclusively to Gramsci. As others have noted, Gramsci was a critical figure for cultural studies at the time, as his work provided the bridge for a discipline founded by Marxists (it originally emerged from worker's education programs) to move away from its Marxist legacy and towards



a kind of broad “postmodern” populism and institutionalization in the university.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile in Italy, things were moving in almost exactly the opposite direction. There are other reasons the academy found it hard to deal with all this. The academy tends to seek out heroic individuals. French theory is always presented to us, much like classic Marxism, as the invention of specific heroic thinkers. It’s not very difficult to do. One of the remarkable things about autonomist theory is that it is extremely difficult to represent it that way. It’s so obviously a collective creation, taking shape through endless formal and informal conversations between activists, researchers, and working people.

When a new wave of Italian theory finally did start to appear on the radar, it always took the form of ideas attributed to heroic individuals. First Giorgio Agamben (one of the few radical Italian philosophers who was not involved in social movements and did not base himself in Marx). After Seattle, it was the turn of Toni Negri—admittedly the single most prolific and influential theorist to emerge from Autonomia—whose book *Empire*, co-written with Michael Hardt, came out in English in 2000 (and in Italian, curiously, somewhat later). Negri was the perfect bridge, since he was as much an avatar of French ’68 thought as of Italian workerism. While his ideas had originally taken shape within autonomous circles in Italy in the ’50s and ’60s, he spent years in Paris in the ’70s as a disciple of Althusser, and made something of a life’s work of giving theoretical flesh to Althusser’s project of removing the Hegelian element from Marx and reinventing Marx as a follower of Spinoza. During the years of repression in Italy immediately following ’77, Negri was arrested and eventually convicted, quite ridiculously, with the full support of the PCI, of being the intellectual force behind the Red Brigades. He fled to Paris in 1983 and did not return to Italy until 1997—just as the alterglobalization movement was coming into gear. There he quickly established himself as the rather controversial intellectual voice for direct action groups like Ya Basta! and the Disobedienti. In the course of all this, Negri had adopted a great deal of the poststructural conceptual apparatus: postmodernity, biopower, deterritorialization, and so on. Hence, *Empire* was the perfect book to make autonomist ideas palatable in a university setting. In accord with the logic of the academy, all of these ideas were attributed personally to Negri.

At the same time, a few other Italian autonomist thinkers (Paolo Virno, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Maurizio Lazzarato) have at least appeared dimly on the academic horizon, though their work is more likely to be known from webpages created by aficionados than in seminars and official reviews. Nevertheless it is critical that these webpages exist. While the standard line that the organization of the globalization movement is modeled on the Internet has always been wildly overstated (and in many ways the opposite is the case), the Internet certainly has provided unparalleled opportunities for the circulation of ideas. As intellectual labor increasingly moves away from the academy, new forms of circulation can only become increasingly important.

## Global Circuits, Local Struggles

Since the 1970s it has become increasingly difficult to treat these different ideas as national traditions, precisely because their development has occurred through increasingly large networks and patterns of circulation. Perhaps this is related to the emergence of what Tiziana Terranova, drawing from the traditions of autonomist thought, calls a “network culture,” or a global culture that is characterized by an abundance of informational output that “unfolds across a multiplicity

---

<sup>12</sup> Nick Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2003).

of communication channels but within a single informational milieu.”<sup>13</sup> Fittingly enough, during this period the emerging electronic architecture of what would become the Internet switched from a method of packet switching and data transmission based on closed circuits to forms of protocol based on a model of an open network. During the early '70s, the gains of social struggles from the '60s were met with capitalist counteroffensives by all means possible—from the tactical usage of inflation, to food shortages, to rapid increases in currency speculation (especially after the decoupling of the dollar from the gold standard). While radical social movements have always exhibited a strong degree of internationalism, during this period it became more possible than ever before for practical ongoing collaboration, mutual campaigns, and the development of new ideas to emerge collectively in widely dispersed geographic areas.

One striking example of this can be seen with the Wages for Housework campaigns that began in the early '70s. In 1972, Mariarosa Dalla Costa (who was involved in Potere Operaio and help to found Lotta Continua) and Selma James (who was involved with the struggles for independence in the West Indies and feminist organizing in the UK) published a book called *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*. Their arguments, drawing from their experiences of struggles and debates emerging within the feminist movement, provided a crucial turning point for reorienting organizing strategies. Through its understanding of the work of housewives as a key component of class struggle, it developed a method for understanding the organizing of a whole host of struggles not usually considered within the confined notion of the industrial proletariat (housewives, the unemployed, students, agrarian workers), as interconnected and important. By focusing on a demand for recognition of housework as work, this opened the door for a renewed consideration of forms of social protagonism, and the autonomy of forms of struggle, to develop what Dalla Costa and James described as “not a higher productivity of domestic labor but a higher subversiveness in the struggle.”<sup>14</sup>

These arguments led to the founding of Wages for Housework campaigns across the world. Their writings were translated into multiple languages. This focus on the importance of considering unwaged labor in the discourse on capitalism filtered through various networks and connections. For instance, these arguments proved extremely significant for a number of individuals in New York City in this period, who would go on to form a collective (with a corresponding publication) called Zerowork. These currents mutated and crossbred with similar currents developing at the time, from the collaboration between the IWW and Surrealism emerging in Chicago in the late '60s to debates around the nature of class struggle that occurred in the UK in the '80s. Zerowork, which would over time morph into the Midnight Notes collective, came to draw from the experiences of its members in Nigeria to describe the creation of new enclosures founded upon an ongoing process of primitive accumulation that was backed by the IMF and other state agencies. These arguments, in turn, would come to be used by many in the revived global justice movement that has become more familiar through the media in recent years.

What we want to emphasize are the ways that the constant circulation of ideas, strategies, and experiences occurring across ever-increasing geographic areas have produced new connections and collaborations that are often ignored and under-appreciated by the allegedly critical and subversive academics one might logically think would take the greatest interest in their development.

---

<sup>13</sup> Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (Brighton: Falling Wall Press, 1972), 36.

It might be of historical interest to map out the many connections and routes these genealogies of resistance contain, but that is not the task at hand right now. What is most striking to us are the ways this living history and the memories of struggles have been taken up, reused, reinterpreted, and redeployed in new and creative directions. The contents of this book draw together many strands and lineages, and tease them out in different directions to create new possibilities. *Colectivo Situaciones*, for instance, draws inspiration from Italian currents of radicalism and the writing of Baruch Spinoza, not to mention the rich tradition of struggles in Argentina and Latin America. In their piece for this book, they engage in dialogue with *Precarias a la Deriva*, a Madrid-based feminist collective. Maribel Casas-Cortés and Sebastián Cobarrubias draw from the experiences and ideas of *Precarias a la Deriva* and *Bureau d'études* to map strategies of resistance as teaching assistants in North Carolina; Angela Mitropoulos uses Mario Tronti's ideas to consider the nature of autonomy and refusal in organizing around migration and border issues in Australia; Harry Halpin sits in a tree somewhere outside of Edinburgh contemplating the ambivalent nature of technological development and forms of organizing; Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma are in Hawai'i, drawing inspiration from another set of radicals, the Diggers, to use the planting of papayas to create new forms of the commons. They are all reclaiming existing traditions through new practices.

Again, what is important to us is not necessarily to draw out all the different and multiple connections that exist, as interesting as that might be. What we want to do here is draw from these histories, experiences, and moments to ask questions about methods through which social research creates new possibilities for political action. That also means we wish to explore the ways in which militant praxis and organizing are themselves modes of understanding, of interpreting the world, and expressing modes of social being.

Research draws upon the multivector motion of the social worlds we inhabit and develops methods for further movement within that space, whether it's using militant ethnography within the globalization movement in Barcelona or applying autoethnographic methods as a homeless organizer in Toronto. As Graeme Chesters and Michal Osterweil describe, it's a question of forging a space, ethic, and practice appropriate to where we find ourselves, whether in a classroom or university space, a social center, a factory, or knitting at a summit protest. There is no pure social space in which new practices and ideas will emerge from an ideal revolutionary subject that we only need to listen to. Our lives are constantly distributed across a variety of compromises with institutions and arrangements of power that are far from ideal. The question is not to bemoan that fate but rather to find methods and strategies of how to most effectively use the space we find ourselves in to find higher positions of subversiveness in struggle.

This is a process of finding methods for liberating life as lived imagination from the multiple forms of alienation that are reproduced through daily life and throughout society. Alienation in this sense is not just something that exists from a lack of control in one's workplace, or a process that divorces one from being able to control one's labor. Rather, as all of society and our social relations are creatively and mutually co-produced processes, alienation is lacking the ability to affect change within the social forms we live under and through. It is the subjective experience of living within structures of the imagination warped and fractured by structural violence. This violence occurs not only in striking forms (prisons, wars, and so forth), but also through the work of bureaucratic institutions that organize people as "publics," "workforces," populations, etc.; in other words, as aggregated segments of data whose form is imposed rather than mutually constituted and created. From census surveys and marketing research to even sometimes the

most well-intended social movement research, research finds itself used as a tool to categorize and classify; it becomes part of the process of organizing forms of knowledge that are necessary to the maintenance of alienating structures, from the most horrific to the most mundane.

Constituent power is what emerges most fully and readily when these institutional structures are shattered, peeling back bursts of time for collective reshaping of social life. It is from these moments that archipelagoes of rupture are connected through subterranean tunnels and hidden histories, from which one can draw materials, concepts, and tools that can help guide us today, wherever we might find ourselves. Trying to put a name on the directions of tomorrow's revolutionary fervor is for that reason perhaps a bit suspicious, even if well-intended, because the process of tacking a name on something is often the first step in institutionalizing it, in fixing it—it is the process that transforms the creativity of the constituent moment back upon itself into another constituted form and alienating structure.

But if we are not trying to come up with definitive versions of reality (naming the world in order to control it), what are we doing? This question of rethinking the role of thought and knowledge production as a part of organizing, of appreciating multiple perspectives rather than universal truths and plans, is exactly what the contributors for this volume are doing. It would be silly to think that in this volume such a question could be definitively answered, or that it would be possible to capture and represent the vast experiences, accumulated practices, and knowledges that have been developed by organizers and militant researchers. Just the sheer amount of excellent proposals and submissions received for this project indicated to us how much interest in the pursuit of new forms of engaged research practice has grown. They simply all couldn't fit in one book (although perhaps in an encyclopedia devoted to the subject).

The point is to use these developments to construct new possibilities, to follow the paths of our collective wanderings in ways that we could not have even dreamed of before starting this project. These hastily sketched maps and guides will orient our directions. We are stashing reserves of affective mental nourishment and conceptual weapons under our belts as we find new paths and passages. Eduardo Galeano once observed that "Utopia is on the horizon: I walk two steps, it takes two steps back. I walk ten steps and it is ten steps further away. What is utopia for? It is for this, for walking."<sup>15</sup> What then is theory for? It is a question that is best answered through walking, through a constant process of circulation and movement that we begin here, following in the footsteps of many who have come before us.

---

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in: Notes From Nowhere, *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism* (London: Verso, 2003), 499.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber  
Introduction to *Constituent Imagination*  
2007

Introduction to *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization* (edited  
by Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber), pp. 11-34

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**