

General

Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life

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***Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life*, Minor Compositions / Autonomedia 2009, ISBN 9781570272080**

‘What does it mean to invoke the power of the imagination when it has already seized power (through media flows and the power of the spectacle)?’

Imaginal Machines is a rich source of information and inspiration for those interested in the cross section of politics and the arts. Politics and the arts here are thought together in a specific way expressed by the title *Imaginal Machines*. The imagination, Stephen Shukaitis writes, is ‘a composite of our capacities to affect and be affected by the world’. It is therefore ‘not ahistorical derived from nothing, but an ongoing relationship and material capacity constituted by social interactions between bodies’. Shukaitis is particularly interested in the development of ‘movements toward new forms of autonomous sociality and collective self-determination’. The ‘radical imaginary’ is thus not understood merely as a fantasy or an image, but along the lines proposed by the leftwing philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘as a radical self-instituting form: the very capacity to create new forms of social relations and organisations that determine the course of social and historical development’.

Imaginal Machines is a sort of intellectual travelogue that explores ‘other workers’ movements’ which exist within a ‘secret drift of history’ – secret, because they were often suppressed or renounced by the official organs of socialist movements such as parties and trade unions. Those ‘other workers’ movements are those who protested not just for fair pay but for an altogether different life, where the radical imagination unfolds at ‘the nexus between the self-management of work and work refusal’. Shukaitis finds examples in ‘the history of autonomous Marxism in Italy, the First World War, forms of council communism, the situationists and ‘hobo Surrealism’. The claim is not that all those movements and initiatives towards autonomy and self-organization are somehow identical, but that there are ‘resonant connections’ between them, which are worthwhile to investigate so that the knowledge gained can be made productive for current and future struggles.

Shukaitis, however, is aware that ‘to invoke the imagination as underlying and supporting radical politics has become a cliché’ and that at some point in history ‘the recourse to the imagination was no longer enacting new forms of creativity, but continually circulating forms that already existed and perceiving them as newly imagined.’ Those involved in ‘creative insurgency’ involuntarily find themselves repeating the slogans, postures, tactics and gestures of struggles bygone. The trouble is not only that the products of the social imaginary that once seemed truly revolutionary suddenly lost their effectiveness, they also

have the unfortunate tendency to turn against living struggles. Capitalism has shown an amazing capacity for what the situationists called 'recuperation', the adaptation of critique and its creative expressions for its own end. The current version of capitalism, whether it is described as post-Fordist or an informational economy, relies increasingly on the management of carefully cultivated images and on the mobilization of the communicative and creative capacities of the workforce or the 'prosumer' – people in their split double identity of being producers and consumers who not only find themselves exploited at work but also during their 'free' time or 'leisure' time. This is in fact also 'productive' time, not only because consumption is necessary for the valorisation of capital but because in the process consumers produce 'the cultural content of the commodity'. Shukaitis, here following the analysis of 'immaterial labour' by Maurizio Lazzarato, is careful to point out that capitalism's increasing dependencies on forms of symbolic labour is nothing new in itself, but that it has become more central in the post-Fordist 'regime'.

Added to that is another problem, which is connected but not identical to the one just mentioned: 'Social struggles do not die, but rather are left in a zombified state of indeterminacy where their only desire is to turn against themselves and eat the brains of the living labour resistance.' However, what Shukaitis calls 'Zombie politics' and the 'organisational gothic' does not lead to defeatism and the overall pessimism that often characterizes leftwing theorists and tends to grant capitalism too much agency and sees all efforts and ways of resistance and struggle as 'already' subverted and therefore without any chance. 'There is no alien spacecraft that has landed,' writes Stephen Shukaitis, 'unleashing hordes of little green men who are gnawing away at the revolutionary imagination.' There is still something 'to be done': 'The task is to explore the construction of imaginal machines, comprising the socially and historically embedded manifestations of the radical imagination.' Shukaitis does this by providing examples of how exactly 'recuperation' works but also how it, occasionally, can be defeated. He gives ample space to the 'technopranks' of artists-activists such as the Yes Men who try to invert image manipulation techniques to tease out the worst from underneath the shining surfaces of informational capitalism. From 'hobo Surrealism' to pop-cultural motifs used in urban insurrections to groups such as the Chainworkers in Milan and the Euromayday initiative, *Imaginal Machines* consists of many interesting stories told in such a way that the result is a texture rather than simply a text, a very open-ended undertaking that has, as is stated in the Introduction, neither a beginning nor an end. The author knows how to deal with heavy concepts by not addressing them frontally. It is rather more like a lengthy reconnaissance mission, weaving in and out of side streets and dodgy alleys, hacking through the underworld of zombified concepts, yet occasionally stumbling almost by accident against the wall of a fortified castle, that is, one of those big, chunky, issues that Castoriadis would have called the 'aporias of capital', or, as more traditional Marxists would say, its 'objective contradictions', which not only bring capitalism occasionally to the brink of total collapse but make it also very difficult for those who seek to change the system to find easy and convenient answers.

Weaving its revolutionary patterns of thought in constant dialogue with the concepts and works of authors such as Cornelius Castoriadis, Silvia Federici, Toni Negri, Felix Guattari, Stefano Harney, David Graeber and others, *Imaginal Machines* has been praised not only for being an instructive survey of imaginative left-wing politics but also for its 'humour and wit' (Federici). This is a rare type of praise for an otherwise very political book, which makes it all the more recommendable.

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Tags

Activism, Art Discourse, Autonomy, Labour

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