“Anarchism has an ambivalent relationship to the academy. This is, when one takes a second to reflect, not so surprising. How can one maintain any sense of ethical commitment to non-hierarchical, non-exploitative relationships in a space that operates against many of these political ideals? And how to do so without creating a space or knowledge that can be turned against these political goals themselves?”

Infra-politics and the Nomadic Educational Machine

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Shukaitis, 2009
ANARCHISM HAS AN AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP TO THE ACADEMY. This is, when one takes a second to reflect, not so surprising. How can one maintain any sense of ethical commitment to non-hierarchical, non-exploitative relationships in a space that operates against many of these political ideals? And how to do so without creating a space or knowledge that can be turned against these political goals themselves? As Marc Bousquet and Tiziana Terranova remind us, the institutional setting of the university is not a location outside the workings of the economy (i.e., it is not a bubble nor an ivory tower), but is very much a part of it, existing within the social factory and producing multifarious forms of value creation and the socialization of labor (the development of human capital and the ability to brandish forth credentials to obtain employment, practices of knowledge, information, and organization that are used throughout the entire social field). This is the case, broadly speaking, both for the classical university, which played an important role in the process of state building and the creation of national culture, and for the neoliberal university, which is more geared to the development of new forms innovation and creativity. That is to say, of course, innovation and creativity understood primarily as those forms that can be translated into new intellectual property rights, patents, and commodifiable forms of knowledge and skills. Thus, there is no ‘golden age’ of the university that one can refer to or attempt to go back to; it is not a ‘university in ruins’ that can be rebuilt to return to its former glory precisely because it is a space that has always played a role in creating and maintaining questionable forms of power.

Anarchism, except for perhaps a few strains of individualist orientations, cannot find a home in such a space without betraying itself. But the realization that anarchism can never really be of the university does not preclude finding ways to be in the university and to utilize its space, resources, skills, and knowledge as part of articulating and elaborating a larger political project. As Noam Chomsky argues, “It would be criminal to overlook the serious flaws and inadequacies in our institutions, or to fail to utilize the substantial degree of freedom that most of us enjoy, within the framework of these flawed institutions, to modify or even replace them by a better social order.” While the extent of this “substantial degree of freedom” might very be debatable within the current political climate of the university and more generally, the point nevertheless remains: that one can find ways to use the institutional space without being of the institution, without taking on the institution’s goals as one’s own. It is this dynamic of being within but not of an institutional space, to not institute itself as the hegemonic or representative form, that characterizes the workings of the nomadic educational machine.

Ervin, Ashanti Alston, Mohamed Jean Veneuse, Richard Day, Sandra Jeppesen, the Leeds May Day Group, El Kilombo Intergalactico, Peter Lamborn Wilson, Alan Aniliff, Daniel Colson, Saul Newman, Marta Kollarova, and Arif Dirlik as well as publications such as Siyahi and Aflamas.

23. Ibid., 63.


6. There is a good deal of resonance between the concept of being in but not of a space and the framing within Open Marxism of the position of being both within and against capital or the state. The moment of suspension created between existing within but not of is precisely an exteriority, which is not external, a fold of the interior that creates the outside within.

7. See www.edu-factory.org

8. The Institute for Social Ecology's campus in Vermont, which operated as a haven for radical thought and played a very important role in the radical left in the US, is perhaps the most striking of recent examples. The New College in San Francisco seems to be suffering a similar fate, albeit for a larger set of reasons and dynamics.


14. This need not always be the case. For examples who have not fallen into this trap see work of Peter Marshall, Jason Adams, Harold Barclay, and others who have not fallen prey to such a tendency. Even Kropotkin did not base his history of anarchist thought around the use of the word, but rather on what he identified as the ‘libertarian tendency’, which he traced all the way back to Lao Tzu.


16. In particular see the work of people such as Jamie Heckert, Lorenzo Kom’boa This essay argues against the creation of a distinct area of anarchist studies within the academy in favor of an approach to education based on creating undercommons and enclaves within multiple disciplines and spaces. In other words, to disavow anarchism as object of anarchist studies in favor of a politics of knowledge constantly elaborated within a terrain of struggle. The impossibility of anarchism qua ‘Anarchist Studies’ proper, far from closing the question of the politics of knowledge from an anarchist perspective, opens the matter precisely from the perspective that more often than not this occurs in the infra-political space of what James Scott and Robin J.G. Kelley call the ‘hidden transcript of resistance’, the space of minor knowledges and experiences that do not seek to become a major or representative form, instead forming tools from discarded refuse and remains.

If there is one thing that can be gleaned from the history of autonomist political thought, it is that the social energies of insurgency and resistance to capitalism, when turned against themselves and re-incorporated into the workings of state and capital, determine the course of capitalist development. That is to say that capitalism develops not according to its own internal structural logic, but according to how it manages to deal with and utilize the social energies of its attempted negation. Similarly, if one heedsthe recent analysis that many people, drawing from this tradition, have made of the university (the edu-factory project being perhaps the best example of this [?]), one can see how the university has come to play an increasingly important role in the social field as a space for economic production and struggle.

This is why it would be absurd to assert a space in the university for the continued development of anarchist thought in an institutionalized way, for instance as a department of anarchist studies or similar form. What at first might seem as if it could be quite a victory for subversion could just as easily be turned into another profit-making mechanism for the university, creating the image of subversion while raking in tuition fees. There are numerous programs as well as institutions (to remain nameless for the moment) who constantly turn their ‘radical image’ into an improved bottom line while all the while operating on a solidly neoliberal basis, strangely enough without this seeming to sully the luster of their radical credentials. Meanwhile, institutions that have attempted to run their operations in line with their stated politics have endured a whole host of other pressures and dynamics leading to many difficulties including programs closing down. [?]

This makes the position of the subversive intellectual in the academy quite odd, precisely because the funding of space might be the very act of delivering capital its future. But in other sense, given capital's dehumanizing tendencies, no one is ever in a comfortable relationship to it. As argued by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, the role of the subversive intellectual in (but not of) the university, is like a thief who steals what she can from it, using the space to form a "collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project." [?] This would be to utilize
the space provided by the university, not as a goal in itself, nor to assert one’s right to such a space, but to accomplish something within this space. In other words the fact that one has managed to create a space to discuss anarchist politics does not mean that one has accomplished anything just by that in terms of creating a more ‘radical’ university. It is what one does with this space that is the core politics within the university more so necessarily than the specific content. In this way at times an engaged but tepid liberal politics can very well yield material effects and outcomes that are more radical in their effect than a radical politics without means of its own realization. It is a politics based more on process and ethics of transformation rather than the claiming of territory. However, radical knowledge production does not form itself as a fixed object and space, but one that constantly moves and morphs across disciplines, frontiers, ideas, and spaces. It is a form of knowledge production that comes not from a perspective of separation but rather constant self-institution and questioning of the foundations that support it.

Rather than necessarily assert and affirm an identity or space, these forms of knowledge production develop in exodus, in the marooned and hidden alcoves of the university, in the constantly moving spaces that James Scott and Robin D.G. Kelley call the hidden transcript. This hidden social transcript encompasses not just speech but also an array of practices bound to the particular location— which is both mediated and created by those practices—and so is marked between such and the public transcript often through ongoing struggle and contestation. Between the hidden and public transcripts exists a third realm of politics, “a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actor.” Arguably, the overlooking of this space might in many ways suit the needs of the social actors who articulate their freedom dreams by constantly reinventing and reinterpreting their cultural practices as a part of this third realm of politics, of the infrapolitics of resistance that creates a space for dreams of transcendence and autonomy to exist in a seen (yet unseen) manner. Radical academics, when they find a space in the academy, can use their position to create room and possibilities for organizers to use it for their ends, to orient their work towards the needs and desires of organizing, rather than fixing them as objects of study.

This is to think about the autonomous institution of the nomadic educational machine as a process of subjectivation, on constant becoming, which avoids fixed institutionalization: as the constant movement of constituent power through the undercommons, as one more instance of creating a transformation machine for the development of radical subjectivity exterior to capital's appropriation without needing necessary to find a physical exteriority to capital. The undercommons exist as the forms of self-organization developed by the despised and discounted who no longer seek to develop a form through which their marginalization be can countered by a recognized form of being in public. In other words the undercommons are the spaces in which forms of self-organization exist that no longer

of-going failure of well intentioned, largely white progressive political forces to appreciated forms of resistance and subversion that occur within displaced communities in an on going manner. As traditionally sociologists have seen stymied by non-state forms of social analysis, the left in general often fails to appreciate politics aside from marches, rallies, and other visible manifestations. But the result is similar: the failure to understand a large segment of social reality because it does not jive with existing conceptual and analytical frames of reference. And if there is anywhere that an actual anarchist educational project can find a home, it is here within these spaces and enclaves, rather than in the brightly lit halls of academia or in the company of polite conversation.

It is this task of the constant renewal of the grounds of politics, of finding a way to create a space for subversion, sabotage, and learning within social movement, that is the task of the nomadic educational machine. It is also the same process engaged in by people drawing from the history of militant inquiry and research within autonomist politics. This is a constantly renewing process, not a onetime thing but rather an orientation towards tracing out the development of the grounds on which struggles occur and constantly rethinking on those shifting grounds. It becomes the task of continuing in the tradition of nomadic thought, of embodying and working with philosophy as described by Deleuze and Guattari, which is to say in the creation of concepts through processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Calling forth “not the one who claims to be pure but rather an oppressed, bastard, lower, anarchical, nomadic, and irremediably minor race; it is this double becoming that constitutes the people to come and the new earth.”

Notes

The author would like to thank the many friends and comrades with whom years of discussion provided the basis for this essay. Special thanks to those who provided comments on this piece including David Harvey, Stefano Harney, Dave Oshun, Scott Cheshire, and the excellent editors of this volume.

1. For the purposes of this essay I’m limiting my comments to the relation between the nomadic educational machine and the university, or higher education more generally. Arguably there are different dynamics to consider within other educational spaces.


3. For some thoughtful consideration of value production and struggles within the classroom, see Harvie, D (2006) Value-production and struggle in the classroom, Capital and Class 88: 1-32, and
with western rationality and the dynamics of the state political process (and thus to exist in full view), the politics of transfiguration has a profoundly different character that makes such unlikely. The politics of transfiguration focuses on the sublime and the creation of new forms of social relations and realities. Thus while the politics of fulfillment can show its designs in full view (for the most part), the politics of transfiguration have a more subversive character, that which expresses itself in the partial concealment of ‘double coded articulations and the infrapolitics of the partially hidden public sphere.

It is in this space that the arts figure so prominently. The formation of the space itself, as a site for interaction, can itself be considered a form of social sculpture or aesthetic activity. And in so far as it also creates channels for the development and articulation of knowledge through social interaction, also a form of education. From folk songs to tap dancing, theater, tales, and more recently movies, are all involved in creating what Gilroy describes as “a new topography of loyalty and identity in which the structures and presuppositions of the nation-state have been left behind because they are seen to be outmoded.” [3] This is the space, as much as it isn’t a space at all, where the freedom dreams that Kelley explores come to be and are retold, reinterpreted, and re-dreamt in a million new combinations. Although Kelley laments that in a world where getting paid and living ostentatiously seem to be held as the ends of the black freedom movement, this is the space where to build radically democratic public cultures, to acknowledge and foster the social force of creativity and imagination. [4] In its transmutable, transversal form created and maintained by these articulations that enable there to be discussion about creating a radically democratic public culture even if the existing political context or situation prevents such conversations from happening openly.

The diasporic aesthetic, which characterizes the form of appearance of the nomadic educational machine (as well as its partial non-appearance), is the social function and creativity displayed by the articulations of those who through displacement and marginalization must partially hide or conceal sections of their expression, often times in plain view, so that they may continue to exist under marginalizing or oppressive conditions. It is the voice, to borrow from the ideas of the Zapatistas, which must hide itself in order to be seen. It is the expression of those who bow before the master during the day in order to pilfer the grain warehouse at night. It is the space created by, containing, and sustained by the articulations and dreams of those who dream out loud in semi-opaque manners. It is not the will be misunderstood, but rather a question of who wants to be understood by, and who wants to remain an incomprehensible glyph towards. As Nietzsche once observed, the only thing worse than being misunderstood is being totally understood, for that is indeed truly the end.

There is an odd parallel between social scientists that have difficulty understanding and theorizing liminal and recombinant spaces as those in diasporas and the seek the approval or recognition of their existence but more often than not get along much better without it. [5] This is not an institution in any sort of Habermian sense with clearly defined speech acts and reasonable debate. The nomadic educational machine rather is a transformation machine; [6] it is a process for structuring an exteriority of knowledge production to the dynamics of capitalist valorization through educational labor and production, an exteriority that is not necessarily physical but often temporal, intensive, and affective in its nature.

This is the problem (or one of them) that confronts ‘anarchist studies.’ What might seem at first a relatively straightforward phrase quickly becomes more complicated. What does anarchist studies mean and who will benefit from establishing this field of study? All too easily, anarchist studies become nothing more than the study of anarchism and anarchists by anarchists, weaving a strange web of self-referentiality and endless rehashing of the deeds and ideas of bearded 19th century European males. This is perhaps a bit too harsh, but is in general an accurate observation. That of course is not to deny or disregard the importance and value of movement histories and studies, as they often provide a wealth of insight and information. The problem is when seemingly all other forms of knowledge production that could be encompassed within the framework of anarchist studies become forgotten within the endless repetition of the same histories and ideas. By too easily slipping ‘anarchist studies’ into the ‘study of anarchism,’ the of has constructed anarchism as a pre-given object that one stands outside as object of knowledge that can be examined, probed, and prodded, rather than as a common space of political elaboration and the development of new ideas and knowledge as a part of this politics. In other words what is lost is the sense of anarchist studies as the elaboration of ideas and knowledges useful to further developing anarchist politics, such as studying the workings of healthcare to financial markets, from the movement of emboli to the movement of the social, approached from a way that is deeply connected to questions posed by social movement and struggles.

In either case it is an approach to knowledge production geared toward the twin imperatives of creating blockages in circuits of oppressive forms of power as well as prefiguring liberatory forms of sociability. There is also a tendency in this dynamic to reduce anarchism to its linguistic instantiation that then further reduces it to only a specific kind of politics. [6] In other words, we cannot reduce anarchism to the mere use of the word ‘anarchism,’ but rather might highlight and propose social relations based on cooperation, self-determination, and negating hierarchical roles. From this perspective, one can find a much richer and more global tradition of social and political thought and organization that while not raising a black flag in the air is very useful for expanding the scope of human possibilities in a liberatory direction. The conjunction of anarchism and anthropology has been quite useful in this regard. [5] There is also much to learn from postcolonial thought, queer studies, black and Chicano studies, cultural studies, and feminism.
Some of the most interesting anarchist thought to emerge within recent years has explored these conjunctions and connections with great success. [5]

The workings of the nomadic educational machine are closer to the operations of a diffuse cultural politics than what would be commonly recognized as an educational project. David Weir makes the intriguing argument that anarchism’s great success as a form of cultural politics (particularly within the spheres of art, music, and in creative fields generally) is because of the inability to realize anarchism’s political goals in other ways. [7] But there is more to it than an inability to realize political goals, particularly when the realization of these goals is almost always understood to be the creation of a hegemonic space or situation, such as replacing a particular territorial nation-state with a newly created anarchist non-state. Rather than seeing the success of anarchist cultural politics as connected to a failure to create hegemonic forms, one can see it rather as based on a continued refusal of institutionalizing forms that contradict the nature of anarchist politics. It is seeing the educational dynamics that exist within the hidden configurations of knowledge production circulating in the undercommons, a process that is just as much about the articulation of ideas through the arts and culture. The nomadic educational machine is a fish that swims in the secret drift of history that connects medieval heresy to punk rock, from Surrealism to Tom Waits, and it is this submerged history from which insurgent movements draw theoretical and imaginal substance and inspiration from, to forge tools and weapons for resistance. [13]

The nomadic educational machine exists as a diasporic process of knowledge creation within the undercommons. But more than existing within a diasporic configuration, the workings of the nomadic educational machine are necessary for the articulation of this space itself. That is to say that there are forms of knowledge and interaction that constitute a particular space and an approach to education such that it is not clear or perhaps even possible within such to clearly delineate where education and life are different. Paul Gilroy, in his description of the black Atlantic as a transnational, transversal space created by the movement of blacks across the Atlantic, suggests the idea of a partially hidden public sphere. [9] The black Atlantic, constituted by the movement of black people both as objects of slavery, colonialism, and oppressive forces as well as in motion seeking autonomy and freedom through real and imaginary border crossing, can be considered part of this space. While the space described is certainly visible in the physical sense, it is nonetheless a space of history, politics, and social interaction that has often been overlooked as a site of cultural production and analysis.

There are a variety of reasons for the overlooking of spaces such as the black Atlantic as a site of cultural analysis and production. In addition to longstanding racism and conceptions of displaced people as having no history or culture (or at least not one that deserves the same level of analysis of other forms of culture or history) that preclude a serious consideration of such a space, are factors created by the relative inability of the social sciences (sociology in particular) to analyze social forms outside the nation-state. The social sciences, having evolved concomitantly with the rise of the modern rationalized nation-state, tacitly assume that social and cultural phenomena correspond to national and state boundaries, and are often read as if it were the case even when it is not so. The continued existence of ethnic absolutism and cultural nationalism also creates difficulties in analyzing forms of cultural production that violate these clearly defined political, racial, and cultural boundaries which are assumed to constitute natural pre-existing fixed and immutable categories.

The creativity of what the nomadic educational machine is the articulation, preservation, and reinterpretation of cultural and social forms as part of this partially hidden public sphere, as a part of the hidden transcript. The public transcript, or the self-representation of power, more often than not totally excludes and often denies the existence of the social forms developed in this partially hidden public sphere. But this exclusion from the gaze of power, in the blackness of the undercommons, is not necessarily something to be decried or banished, but could very well provide the basis upon which to build a radical cultural politics not instantly subsumed within the optic of the spectacle and the mechanisms of governance. Indeed, there is often a great effort put forth in what Roger Farr (building on Alice Becker-Ho’s work on gypsy slang) describes as a strategy of concealment, one which builds affective and intense bonds and politics around the refuge of the opaque space, the indecipherable gesture. [23] Jack Halberstam has also done very interesting work on the panics that secrecy, or even just the appearance of secrecy, has caused within the left and more broadly. While some concern is valid around closed circles (perhaps to avoid the emergence of informal hierarchies, as Jo Freeman has famously argued), one cannot forget how much of the history of revolts and insurrections are founded upon conspiracies both open and not, with the ability to cloak such plans oftentimes quite important to their success or even mere survival. [21]

It would be arguable that in a sense the overlooking of this space in many ways suits the needs of the social actors who articulate their freedom dreams. Constantly reinventing and reinterpreting their cultural practices as a part of this third realm of politics, the infra-politics of resistance creates a space for dreams of transcendence and autonomy to exist in a seen yet unseen manner. This corresponds well with the two notions of politics that Gilroy poses: the politics of fulfillment (“the notion that a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished. It creates a medium in which demands for goals like non-racialized justice and rational organization of the productive processes can be expressed”) and the politics of transfiguration (which “emphasizes the emergence of new desires, social relations, and modes of association.” and “resistance between that group and its erstwhile oppressors”). [22] While he describes the politics of fulfillment as much more willing to play along