

Rebuilding the Machine

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Gerald Raunig. *A Thousand Machines: A Concise Philosophy of the Machine as a Social Movement*. Trans. Aileen Derieg. Semiotext(e), 2010.

A follow-up to his *Art and Revolution* (2007), Gerald Raunig's *A Thousand Machines* uses a combination of Marxian theory and Deleuzian philosophy to examine today's radical social movements as they negotiate the post-fordist landscape. Combining theoretical rigour with an approach that is part genealogical exploration, part activist reportage, *A Thousand Machines* theorizes artistically inclined or inflected social movements in an attempt to determine how these "art machines" resist the imperatives of transnational capital while altering the ways in which protest movements imagine themselves under twenty-first century capitalism. In the first instance, the force of *A Thousand Machines'* thesis would seem to turn on the dialectic between a Marxian-Deleuzian theoretical framework and the book's particular contents: do these artistic social movements gesture toward some real critical potential, or are they simply further symptomatic manifestations of a neoliberal hegemony in which all utopias can only be imagined as a rupture or flight from a repressive statism? However, against this somewhat limited view, I would suggest that the real critical potential of *A Thousand Machines* is manifest in the way in which the text implicitly collapses this binary itself. By way of its clear enunciation of the ideological similarities between the 1968-inspired anti-capitalist movements and the logics of global capital itself, *A Thousand Machines*, above and beyond its actual content, is ultimately a call to dialectically think the implications for resistance to capital when both oppressor and the oppressed champion the same ethos of creativity, freedom, authenticity, and production.

A Thousand Machines unfolds in a tripartite movement. The first move sets up the Marxian-Deleuzian framework through which the various social movements discussed later are examined and assessed. Following the widely-held premise that Marx's "Fragment on Machines" offers an analytic of the machine or "fixed-capital" that is very different from the more sustained discussion of technology found in *Capital*, Raunig conceptualizes machinery as the *materialization* or *objectification* of collective human intellect, knowledge, and labour, a construct Marx called the "General Intellect." For Raunig, as for Marx, objectification in this context should not be viewed

as simply the ossification of “living labour” within the cast iron of the machine, but rather as the ongoing dialectical re-organization of scientific knowledge, labour power, and social relations which, in the contemporary post-fordist era, threatens to break down the barrier between intellectual and manual labour and engender novel revolutionary conditions:

The concatenation of knowledge and technology is not exhausted in fixed capital, but also refers beyond the technical machine and the knowledge objectified in it, to forms of social co-operation and communication, not only as machinic enslavement, but also as the capacity of immaterial labor [to] destroy the conditions, under which accumulation develops (9).

Raunig furthers Marx’s epistemology of the machine by way of the singularly machinic categories found in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s double-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which posits that “man and nature are not two opposite terms confronting each other ... rather they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product” (*Anti-Oedipus* 4). For Raunig, the Deleuzian deconstruction of “man” and “nature” necessarily implies deconstruction of the “opposition of man and machine, of organ and mechanism developed over the course of centuries, on the basis of which one is explained by the other,” and thus offers a entirely different, but commensurate, platform through which to extend and expand Marx’s approach to the question of technology, machinery, and social relations (10).

Conceptually, Deleuze and Guattari’s central contribution to Raunig’s project is the notion of the war machine. In the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari’s first axiom that the “war machine is exterior to the state apparatus” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 351), Raunig offers a sweeping catalogue of artistic movements that, in the style of the war machine, verge toward the exterior of state systems in search of new lines of flight. Moving from a discussion of the *deus ex machina* in ancient Greek theatrics to the radical experimentation of post-revolutionary Soviet theatre, Raunig suggests that art and theatre might be productively viewed as an “abstract machine” that exists within, yet operates in contradiction to, the purely technical machine of the state apparatus. From this, Raunig jumps to a discussion of contemporary social movements (many of which have already been dealt with in *Art and Revolution*) that he also conceives as fitting the definition of the war machine. Raunig gives an account of the Vienna-based transnational activist troupe “PublixTheatreCaravan,” which travels across Europe transitionally linking and delinking with national and international solidarity movements that challenge international capital. He also discusses the Spanish performance group “Yomango” – which translates into English as “I steal” – and its organization of mass acts of shoplifting as a means of liberating commodities from their branded imprisonment by way of a performance that celebrates shoplifting as a subversive life-

style: “seven couples ... skilfully dance the tango ... at the same time that they pocket bottles of champagne in their specially prepared clothing, which they later consume with pleasure during a collective visit to a bank” (31). These movements, according to Raunig, fit Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the war machine not only insofar as they “turn against the concrete states that are still powerful players in the constellation of neoliberal globalization,” but also through their constant problematization of their own representational closure, or the “development of state apparatuses within themselves” that representational politics have a tendency to generate (32).

While the middle section of the book certainly proves interesting reading, the crux of *A Thousand Machines* turns on its capacity to re-incorporate this social movement “artisanal nomadism” into a neo-Marxist theory of revolution. Somewhat disappointingly, however, the previous and interesting discussions of social movements fall by the wayside in the book’s last chapters and Raunig, following the lead of other Marxist-inflected theorists inspired by Italian radicalism, fixes his attention on the ongoing transformations of “class” under post-fordist conditions. Principally, Raunig contrasts the negatively conceived geographical isolation of France’s small-holding peasants (from Marx’s *The Class Struggles in France*) with the physical dispersion of a technologically advanced post-fordist precariat:

Instead of the clearly negative connotation of dispersion as obstructing all social intercourse, the present conditions offer an ambivalent situation, which manifests both a lack of direct communication [like the small-holdings peasants] *and* the potentiality of new forms of communication in the dispersion. Thus, to the modes of existence in abstraction, in diffusivity, there also inheres the potential in itself to generate concatenations of singularities instead of identity and community forms of societization. (49).

In this passage, I want to suggest, we find *A Thousand Machines*’ most trenchant insight. Where Marx had assumed that the physical agglomeration of wage workers on the industrial shop floor would, as a matter of course, generate a historically unprecedented form of class-consciousness which would set an otherwise static sociological category – the working class – into motion, Raunig’s thesis suggests that the flaw in Marx’s theory was not that the proletariat was too weak, but rather that it proved, in a sense, to be too strong: subjective over-identification with the Union, Party, or State simply subordinated revolutionary praxis under yet another oppressive apparatus.

Today, however, conditions have become very different. Under post-fordism, Raunig suggests that Marxist praxis and poststructuralist machine theory now definitively overlap as production and language become increasingly synonymous and overdetermined: “in postfordism,” Raunig writes, “the raw material and means of production

of living labour is the capacity for thinking, learning, communicating, imagining, and inventing, which is expressed through language” (51). For Raunig, these conditions make possible a new mode of *formless* collectivity that sets itself against both the (artificial) state and the (natural) community. Presumably, this formless revolutionary machine is aware (if only structurally) of the temptation to forge a collective identity “without cracks,” and thereby embraces the constitutive fractures that invariably plague aspiring collective totalities. In other words, it is precisely because the post-fordist precariat is forced to negotiate its collective identity through networks of communication technologies, which necessarily imply a certain distance, that it is predisposed to forestall the construction of a fixed revolutionary subject: a formless form, it dissolves itself at first sign of hierarchical ossification only to re-compose in a different virtual space as a new revolutionary agent.

At the same time that *A Thousand Machines* makes this important contribution to neo-Marxist scholarship, the book also suffers from the principle shortcoming of the wider Marxian-Deleuzian genre. Namely, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether the revolutionary movements Raunig outlines represent real critical engagements with global capital or whether they are merely symptoms of a post-Keynesian neoliberal orthodoxy which perceives the “state apparatus,” in the broadest possible sense, as the root of all evil. To a certain extent, this seems to me an inevitable outcome of Raunig’s all too common appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari. Despite the fact that the third section of *Anti-Oedipus* advances an entire theory of capital built from Marx’s work, Raunig draws almost exclusively from the nomadic rhetoric found in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Invariably, the real enemy for Raunig is not capital as such but rather the hidden “state mentality” that lurks not only in the international economic and juridical order but within the global anti-capitalist movement itself. The logic of resistance that this emphasis on Deleuze and Guattari’s work embraces is thus problematically *mimetic* to that which global capital has mounted against numerous forms of collective or democratic control over the past thirty years: both are driven to flee state structures, create new lines of flight, and open new worlds outside the coded flows that state machines continually erect to restrict movement. But where Deleuze and Guattari consistently foreground capital as, at its essence, “the generalized decoding of flows, the new massive deterritorialization, the conjunction of new deterritorialized flows,” the conspicuous absence of this aspect of their work in *A Thousand Machines* only serves to mask the underlying similarity between artistic protest movements and the logic of global capital (*Anti-Oedipus* 224).

For assuming that theorists from Lukács to Adorno to Jameson were on to something when they argued that capital’s reifying code had rendered direct opposition, from an exogenous “critical” distance, unthinkable, then today’s resistance should not so much search for some absolute exterior to capital in order to get a better look at the

system, but rather attempt to alter capital's logic from within based on whatever critical vantage one is able to gain under conditions that, to paraphrase Marx, are not of our choosing. Yet it is in this regard that Deleuzian philosophy ultimately complements Marxist thought, and proves useful for Raunig's project: the moment when neoliberal utopianisms equate the unrestricted flow of capital with the superimposition of nature, or rather the natural, into a fraught history of human intervention into economic affairs, a Deleuzian approach works against this utopian naturalization and tells us that neoliberal capitalism is simply one socio-economic machine among others and of no particular ontological distinction. There is thus no imperative to exit the space of capital, as this concession already grants too much authority to an economic system that, as the recent economic crisis has surely demonstrated, is far from hermetically sealed. It is in this final sense that the political message of *A Thousand Machines* is ultimately democratic and emancipatory: Raunig insists that capitalism is not the Fukuyamian juggernaut it is often depicted as, but rather one machine operating among many, and a machine that can be built differently once its downtrodden masses actualize the desire to do so.

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