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'Autonomous Education, New Institutions and the Experimental Economy of Network Cultures'

Abstract

If political economy is traditionally understood in terms of the role institutions and their concomitant interests play in the structuring and regulation of economic life, then what might it mean to transpose this axiom to the culture of networks? How, in other words, might organized networks as nascent institutional forms provide new insights into the political economy of peer production? Moreover, how might the social-technical properties of organized networks situated within the urban and political context of Beijing facilitate new models for interventions in local, regional and transnational 'knowledge economies'? What might such activity tell us about the geopolitical variations of neoliberal capital? This paper outlines some preliminary models of economic sustainability for autonomous education platforms and considers the political implications for networks cultures that take seriously the problematic of political economy.

Author bio

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'Autonomous Education, New Institutions and the Experimental Economy of Network Cultures'

Ned Rossiter

1. What is an Institution?

Sociality is always immanent to institutional arrangements. This was the analysis of Althusser and later Foucault. The state, family, school, prison, hospital, madhouse. During the time of Western modernity as it is commonly understood, we can add the firm, the union, the university. Foucault's tendency was to see this institutional field as technologies of discipline. My interest in this paper is to consider technologies of invention. What institutional form might such technologies assemble? What are the conditions of their emergence? What are the technics of governance that distinguish them? How do they connect to other institutions and what is their economy? What is the relation between the construction of the common – understood as processes of translation constituted through struggles of labour – and its differential potential or multiplying affects?¹ And how might this relation constitute a new institutional form?

Over the past few years I have been developing the political concept of 'organized networks' in an effort to think the possibility of new institutional forms immanent to the culture of networks. My curiosity was, and remains, how social-political organization within networked settings might be understood in terms of the invention of new institutional forms. Along with the influence here of the work of Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno and insights gained from the history of *operaismo* more broadly, there is also a debt to medium theory, particularly the work of Canadian political economist and communications theorist Harold A. Innis. Collaborative practices within network cultures can be understood in terms of formation and form. Formation corresponds with the processual relations through which expression emerges. Form, on the other hand, furnishes the contours of expression as it subsists within the social-technical dynamics of digital media. How these relations coalesce as distinct networks situated within and against broader geopolitical forces becomes a primary challenge for networks desiring scalar transformation – a movement that also consists of trans-institutional, disciplinary, subjective and corporeal relations whose antagonisms define 'the political'.

The problem of translation across and within a network of networks becomes one of the key difficulties for transnational collaboration. Translation is inherent to the logic of the common. This is the differential potential of the common. Trans-institutional practices are practices in translation. As processes of movement, translation is comprised of transversal orientations. An organized network is one that instantiates 'the political' in the moment of transversal engagement with seemingly antithetical institutional forms: the state, the firm, the NGO, the union, the university. It is through such confrontations that the temporal rhythms and spatial coordinates of a network are made most clear. The tensions that ensue in this transversal encounter constitute new subjectivities.

¹ This definition of the common draws on Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, 'Border as Method or the Multiplication of Labor', unpublished paper, 2007.

As an assemblage whose spatial and temporal coordinates undergo constant transformation, the relation between inside and outside is subject to processes of translation. The process of invention is a practice of translation. Translation is the common from which methodological iterations emerge. We are always in translation. Taiwan based cultural theorist Jon Solomon defines translation 'as a mode of social praxis rather than a mode of epistemological mapping'.² Beyond simply a technical procedure of establishing configuration or linguistic equivalence through communication,³ the technics of translation foreground the relational encounter between entities, affective modulations, the visible and invisible, perceptions and imperceptions, communication and the non-communicable. The emphasis is not on one or the other, but rather the movement and adaptation between coordinates, agents, institutions. Variables such as these acquire their form and habitus through connections made possible by movement (*kinesis*). The certainties by which institutions, for instance, might normally be understood as stable identities become substantively more uncertain and insecure when movement is accorded a determining force. Parameters become porous.

Within the porosity of institutional borders subsists a potential for new economic interventions. The question of economic autonomy is a key issue for organized networks, and is a matter that has to be taken seriously. The social-technical endeavors in institution formation might operate as what Fabian Muniesa and Michel Callon term 'economic experiments' that shape the construction of markets.⁴ The communication of relations between emergent institutional forms and their invention of markets is underscored by the technics of mediation. Mediation, in turn, is registered in the following key ways: systems of governance, rituals and materialities of practice, discourses with uncertain borders and technologies of collaborative constitution. The arrangement of these elements produces new territories for potential exploitation by capital. The political and economic challenge is to produce interventions into markets that enable economic resources for experiments in organizing networks and living wages for participants. How, for instance, might resources created within any particular network be adapted and recombined by another? Not only are there distinct linguistic-cultural differences that delimit one network from another. To recast Virno, there is also the grammar of networks to consider: socialities of communication, formats of code, techniques of governance, materialities of investigation, etc.

Spatial distributions and temporal rhythms further complicate the capacity for networks to undergo scalar shifts. The network-institution nexus is not one that corresponds with what Mary Kaldor and Chantal Mouffe loosely term 'global civil

² Jon Solomon, 'Re: <edu-factory> A Hierarchy of Networks?, or, Geo-Culturally Differentiated Networks and the Limits of Collaboration', posting to edu-factory mailing list, 23 January, 2008, http://listcultures.org/pipermail/edufactory_listcultures.org/2008-January/000129.html.

³ See Rada Iveković, 'Transborder Translating', *eurozine* (2005), <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2005-01-14-ivekovic-en.html> and Naoki Sakai, 'Translation', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23.2-3 (2006): 71-86.

⁴ Fabian Muniesa and Michel Callon, 'Economic Experiments and the Construction of Markets', in Donald MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa and Lucia Siu (eds) *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Markets*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 163-189.

society' networks.⁵ The singular qualities of network cultures underpin my contestation with political theorists invested in reinvigorating democracy as we know it. I have serious doubts about persisting with models of democracy, especially when they are simplistically grafted on to the Internet. E-democracy? No thanks. Given that representative models of democracy frequently correspond with modern institutions of the nation-state – institutions that I argue are in crisis – I continue to wonder how appropriate the burden of democratic theory is to describe the political culture of embryonic institutional forms within networked settings. My preference is for a non-representational politics constituted through relations rather than procedures. This poses significant challenges for the governance of networks, and the way these are handled play out on a case by case basis.

The structural arrangement of the neoliberal university coupled with the experience of immaterial labour operates as a constituent force in the creation of autonomous education initiatives, which I consider vital examples of organized networks. Such initiatives have blossomed across Europe in recent years, often connected with social movements organized around the precarious experience of post-Fordist labour. Elsewhere, the massive alternative schooling movement in South Korea and the self-organization of domestic workers in Hong Kong turn around a logic of networks that address a specific field of forces. In the US Trebor Scholz's guiding work on the Institute for Distributed Creativity (iDC) comes to mind.⁶ The Sarai media lab in Delhi would be another example.⁷ At the level of concrete planning and theoretical analysis of transnational autonomous education, the Italian edu-factory initiative is one that I've been more closely associated with.⁸

The period of network cultures as new institutional forms is still very much under construction. The speed and intensity of their development is best understood, in my view, from anthropological perspectives. I tend to think that organized networks (new institutions) are more likely to emerge when relatively small numbers of participants (certainly not millions) situated about local problematics combine with the Internet's transnational capacities along with practices of adaptation (the 'remix') that define digital culture. An example of this type of emergent institutional form would be the OrgNets' mobile research laboratory I coordinated in Beijing last summer.⁹ Formulated as a counter-mapping of the creative industries in Beijing, the project was interested in the multiple idioms through which Beijing's creative industries might be understood and, indeed, made different on a micro-scale.

Departing from the 'cookie-cutter' script of mapping the creative industries according to statistics on economic productivity, as championed by the likes of Richard Florida, this experiment in collaborative urban-media research attended to variables absent from most policy rhetoric and academic research on entrepreneurial or creative cities. At the level of plan, the project was organized around the following vectors of

⁵ Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War*, Cambridge: Polity, 2003; and Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

⁶ <http://distributedcreativity.org>

⁷ <http://www.sarai.net>

⁸ <http://www.edu-factory.org>

⁹ <http://orgnets.net>

research: migrant networks and service labour; network ecologies of creative waste; informational geographies vs. creative clusters; centrality of real-estate speculation for creative economies; import cultures and export innovations in architecture and urban design; artist villages and market engineering.

Certainly these topics were investigated in a preliminary sense, but in many ways what came to pass was a tension between concept and practice. In this respect, the project embodied the way in which the sociality and communicative relations within networks frequently are underscored by instantiations of 'the political'. Such antagonisms define the borders of networks and the limits of collaboration. At one level such tensions come about through the encounter between the hierarchical or vertical dimensions of networks and the horizontal, distributive layer of communication that is frequently, and mistakenly, attributed an ontological status within new media research. And then there's the contingencies of life.

This paper outlines some preliminary models of economic sustainability for the OrgNets platform that investigates, among other projects, collaborative practices of counter-mapping the creative industries in Beijing. The paper considers the political implications for network cultures that take seriously the problematic of political economy. By way of addressing the question of political economy, I wish to focus on the social-technical aspects of an experiment in transdisciplinary urban-media research in Beijing built around the logic of networks.

2. The Neoliberal University

As government funding for higher education has diminished over the past decade (or longer, in some national cases), universities have found themselves increasingly positioned within a market economy. This structural relation alone locates education as a commodity object. Inevitably there will be barriers to access learning in such instances. An alternative – open access learning – has great merit, but there are some fundamental issues to do with cost of delivery (labour, production, infrastructure, etc.) and technological modes of communication that must be addressed. In building open access repositories of research findings, the Beijing counter-mapping project investigates the connection between peer-to-peer collaboration and new business models.

The glacial temporality of university curriculum development and subjugation of teachers by the life-depleting demands of audit cultures sets a challenge for media education programs that wish to synchronise their curricula with the speed of popular media literacies. To distinguish market and user hype from quality that makes a substantive difference is near impossible. Consensus will not be found beyond the fleeting moments of micro-adoption among A-list bloggers and their links, or whatever other community of users you care to name. Ratified standards for media education within the cultures of networks do not exist.

As the university increasingly loses its monopoly on the provision of knowledge as a result of neoliberal governance and the advent of peer-to-peer and user-producer media systems, media education is in crisis mode. Best practice is frequently found outside of university degree programs. Expertise has become distributed across a

population of practitioners and everyday users. How, then, might such knowledge feed back into university programs? Can formal accreditation for autonomous education be extended to non-university actors? Are such processes even desirable?

Crucial here are the different temporalities afforded by research platforms positioned outside of the temporal order of the market and its post-Fordist modality of just-in-time production, which underscores the habitus of the university today. In a posting to the edu-factory mailing list – an initiative by mostly young activist researchers associated with Negri's uni-nomade (an informal teaching program across a network of media and social centres in Italy) – Jon Solomon phrases the predicament of time and the university as follows:

The students have been so disempowered by the compulsory national primary and secondary education system (which favors the production of an elite) that when it comes to the university organization of their own temporal rhythms, they are completely passive in their forms of resistance (and the faculty doesn't provide any relief or alternative resources).¹⁰

How, then, to create different temporalities which enable process of counter-subjectivization? These are two of the core elements that come into play in the repositioning of research and teaching outside of the university. And these, I would add, are not without precedents: think of the mechanics institutes as sites of popular learning for the working classes in the 19th century (albeit enframed by the morally uplifting values of the middle-classes), adult education classes after the second world war, or the rise of alternative schooling movements such as Montessori in the 60s and 70s. My point is that counter-sites of learning at the current conjuncture are imbued with qualities special to the social-technical dimension of network cultures, and conditioned by the political economy of the informational university.¹¹

3. Transdisciplinary Research in Beijing

From May-July last year I coordinated a transdisciplinary research platform that produced a counter-mapping of the creative industries in Beijing.¹² In the first instance this project was financed through parasitical means, with funds from the research centre that I worked in at the time enabling participants from Europe, India, Australia and New Zealand to collaborate with local researchers and media practitioners in Beijing. Such a model of financing research is a one-off, and self-generating means of funding are required in order to sustain this platform as a partially autonomous research network.

In migrating urban-media research outside of the university, the project recomposes media education as a collaborative research process focussed on critique and analysis of urban transformations and the politics of creative and service labour. The

¹⁰ Jon Solomon, 'Knowledge Conflicts, Self-Education and Common Production', posting to edu-factory mailing list, 22 April 2007, <http://www.edu-factory.org>.

¹¹ See, for example, the recent Summit: Non-Aligned Initiatives in Education Culture, Berlin, 24-28 May, 2007, <http://summit.kein.org>.

¹² <http://orgnets.net>

project adopted the model of a mobile research laboratory as a framework for collaborative research on the creative industries, urban transformation and media practice in Beijing. As a laboratory the OrgNets project was an assemblage of experimentation and testing, one that will continue to develop throughout the next year. And as a laboratory, the OrgNets project was excised or temporarily suspended from the outside force of the real market. But the mobile and social nature of OrgNets makes its borders porous. The distinction between inside and outside is not fixed; borders are defined by the continuum of change that comes into play with the addition or departure of participants, the particularities of urban situations, the topics of investigation and the institutions of temporary connection.

It would be a mistake to think the range of contingencies – many of which may register imperceptibly on the action of networks – can ever be brought under control. But within the territory of the known, faintly perceived and vaguely intuited, it is not unreasonable to suppose an economy is possible for networks that, at this stage, are without money. Given the transdisciplinary orientation of the OrgNets project, the prevailing policy discourse of creative industries, the intense economic and social changes underway in China and the exotic allure the city as urban laboratory holds for intellectual tourists, the expanding international market of education is an obvious economy awaiting intervention by non-traditional ‘providers’. In fact, this is already the case for mainstream external providers. As an outsourced form of education provision, OrgNets offer established institutions of education and research the possibility of value-adding at a cost that is going to be cheaper than if these institutions hired staff on full benefits whose capacity to invent is rapidly dulled by the burden of bureaucracy and audit cultures.

As a pilot study, the counter-mapping project in Beijing provides initial research data for future comparative research that examines the inter-relations between geopolitics (regional trade agreements, national and multi-lateral policies on labour mobility, security and migration, etc.) and the peculiarities of intraregional, translocal and global cultural flows within the creative industries. A comparative focus on the creative industries enables new questions to be asked about the mutually constitutive tensions between these forces, practices, histories and policies.

The project establishes a prototype for new cross-cultural educational and research institutions organized about the logic of networks. As signaled in policy milestones such as the Bologna Process (1999), scholarly monographs and OECD reports, the landscape in higher education has been undergoing gradual, and in some instances rapid, transformation toward a market model. The Bologna Process is more complex than a simple transition toward a market model, but its modularization of educational processes should nonetheless be considered as a core dynamic of the contemporary second wave of globalization (services economy). This dynamic is also how educational changes intersect with the emergent economy of culture after the first wave (trade) has been nearly completed, which is why the Bologna Process in Europe holds important implications beyond the realm of education. The role of universities as exclusive providers of higher education is changing as small and medium enterprises obtain government accreditation for provision of ‘educational services’. We are yet to see organizations develop out of the field of network cultures as formal providers of high quality research and teaching.

Collaborative practices within the creative industries and network cultures are now well established as the primary mode of production and communication. The business models which sustain the combination of service labour and innovation as they are located on the margins of industry are less understood. Primarily comprising of 'informal economies' (symbolic, voluntary, word-of-mouth) and sustained economically by various forms of financial support (parental, small government funds such as the 'citizen wage' or grants, associations with universities) and wealth generation (e.g. the 'long tail'¹³), there is great scope for further development and understanding of new business models.¹⁴

4. Experimental Economics and Evidence Machines

Notwithstanding the commercialization of the Net, the hierarchical systems embedded in social-technical infrastructures and dynamics, and the impact of national and supranational government policy on network cultures, to what extent can we really speak of a political economy of peer-to-peer network practices? If political economy is traditionally understood in terms of the role institutions and their concomitant interests play in the structuring and regulation of economic life, then what might it mean to transpose this axiom to the culture of networks? How, in other words, might organized networks as nascent institutional forms provide new insights into the political economy of peer production? More specifically, how might the social-technical properties of organized networks situated within the urban and political context of Beijing facilitate new models for interventions in local, regional and transnational 'knowledge economies'? What might such activity tell us about the geopolitical variations of neoliberal capital?

It seems to me that a social economy preconditions the possibility of a political economy of network cultures. Without a social economy, or the valorization of labour, there is no political economy. Indeed, in many instances the social economy within p2p networks thoroughly marginalizes or displaces the operative force of political economy. Open publishing and bit torrents of pirate cinema, software and music are obvious examples that come to mind. However, even in these instances of ostensibly 'free culture' there lurks in the system a political economy, one that is closely connected to infrastructure and info-governance. In a recent dialogue with Paul Hartzog, Trebor Scholz frames this tension as follows: 'the means of production are available to networked publics; these tools and platforms are, however, owned by corporations'.¹⁵ Aside from the ever-present potential of unruly workers, the trouble so often faced by the owners of infrastructure is that they suffer from limited imagination. Without a few tinkerers in the shop, capital is left without the invention of difference necessary for its renewal. Thus a mutually parasitic relation exists between owners and users of the means of production. As we know, historically this relation is one of constant oscillation that constitutes the force of hegemony.

¹³ Chris Anderson, 'The Long Tail', *Wired* 12.10 (2004), <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html>

¹⁴ For a study of working conditions and experiences of new media workers in Amsterdam, see Rosalind Gill, *Technobohemians or the New Cybertariat? New Media Work in Amsterdam a Decade after the Web*, Network Notebooks no. 1, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007, http://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/17.pdf.

¹⁵ <http://www.re-public.gr/en/?p=201>

The field of experimental economics in its contemporary form emerged out of game theory from the late 1940s and early 1950s. Francesco Guala notes two distinct approaches within experimental economics – theory-testing and institution-building; the former tends toward experiments in decision-making, the latter experiments in market performativity.¹⁶ Orthodox game theory combines or traverses these two approaches, and plays the market as an institution whose problematics are ‘solved’ by rational agents within controlled laboratory settings.¹⁷ But what happens in occasions of ‘irrational exuberance’ that define bubble economies, as seen in real-estate speculation, dotcom-mania or the caffeine induced palpitations of day traders?

There is undoubtedly a logic at work in such instances, but it is not one that conforms to rational intent. The logic of irrational economics is one whose particularities are immanent to the contingencies of the event. The experimental economics of game theory attempt to overcome or at least minimize contingency by designing markets in which the desired results come to fruition. The world is their laboratory. The structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and IMF are good examples of experimental economics in operation. However, the desire to see the world in their own image is the primary catalyst of failure for such models. Certainly, this point is disputable; arguably the model of structural adjustment has succeeded insofar as the World Bank and IMF agenda for countries in Africa and South America to ‘leapfrog modernity’ in such a way that bypasses European models of state formation into a neoliberal paradigm of governmental dependency on outsourcing to private providers has proven financially beneficial to foreign investors. But such a view is limited in scope, to say the least. The production of global poverty and massive disparities in wealth can hardly be rated a success.

My proposal, then, is to see a project like OrgNets as a form of experimental economics that are open to the contingencies of the event and the social-technical and disciplinary dynamics of conflictual constitution. Contingencies necessitate factoring in the elusive dimension of experience. My interest is not to exploit economic or social vulnerabilities, but rather to enhance capacities and address trans-institutional economic realities and disciplinary foreclosure brought about by intellectual property regimes, internal competition and limits placed on research by the avalanche of administration.

The trick with a project like OrgNets is to treat it as a symbiotic device that both facilitates the generation of concepts and affects the allocation of economic resources. The latter may take the form of direct funding, commissions, participant fees for summer schools, or in-kind support by institutional partners – e.g. office space, use of equipment, personnel, etc. Of course any proposal to play the neoliberal game of outsourcing education is going to meet the wrath of some leftists and activists. But it is hypocritical to dish out critique without offering alternatives for economic subsistence.

¹⁶ See Francesco Guala, ‘How to Do Things with Experimental Economics’, in Donald MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa and Lucia Siu (eds) *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

Muniesa and Callon refer to platforms (as distinct from laboratories and *in situ* experiments): 'the platform is an intermediate configuration, more open to compromises with several kinds of actors than the laboratory' and refers to 'flexible organizational forms in [sic] where surprise is more a resource than a problem' for 'strategic innovation'. OrgNets also share these features of a platform – flexibility, most certainly, but the element of surprise is less clear. A genealogy of OrgNets would establish the connection with tactical media, renowned for its hit-and-run approach to semiotic warfare. Where OrgNets corresponds with surprise is perhaps most clear when it is brought in to relation with established institutions of education and research, namely the university, which is characterized by a transdisciplinary deficiency and has a limited capacity of invention.

As a collaborative anthropology of new institutional forms, the project investigates how the emergence of organized networks illuminate some of the material qualities and tensions of creative industries in Beijing. The project holds the precept that transdisciplinary urban-media research is an autonomous expressive capacity that subsists within a field of translocal and supranational structural forces. This is not to suggest a form of structural determination, but it is to recognise that tensions of a particular order are inherent to media education that refuses the stagnant methods and orthodox theoretical approaches that by and large characterise the state of play, be that in Chinese universities or the rest of the world.

It would be too crude to say neoliberalism generates new institutional forms. But if precarious labour and life are the norm, and not the exception,¹⁸ then it follows that the institutional spaces of precarity subsist as the common within a neoliberal or post-Fordist condition. So how do we explain the social impulse to invent new institutional forms at the current conjuncture? Why now, in other words? In many ways the type of institutions I am speaking of are internal to the logic of capital. Certainly, it would seem they cannot exist outside of neoliberalism. By way of conclusion, I wonder if the incessant peer-to-peer drive to collaborative production – exemplified most starkly by the advent of web 2.0 and social networking sites – is not symptomatic of capital's quest for new economies of scale that minimize the cost of labour. Perhaps the invention of new institutional forms needs to be accompanied by a reassertion of wage labour and modes of collectivization. Maybe that will be the spectre that comes to haunt neoliberalism and its Will to Outsourcing.

¹⁸ This argument is developed in a forthcoming article written with Brett Neilson.