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Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions

by Ned Rossiter

NAi, Rotterdam, 2006

In association with the Institute of Network Cultures, Hogeschool van Amsterdam

250 pp., illus. 2x b/w. paper, £23.50

ISBN: 90-5662-526-8.

Reviewed by Geoff Cox
University of Plymouth

gcox@plymouth.ac.uk

Organized Networks asserts there is urgent need for new institutional forms that reflect 'relational' processes to challenge existing systems of governance and outmoded representational structures. Emergent forms are radically dissimilar to the ways in which social relations are organized under the "moribund technics" of modern institutions (such as the university or the state). These older forms, referred to as "networked organizations", are hierarchical and centralized despite their pretensions towards fair representation. In contrast, emergent "organized networks" are horizontal, collaborative and distributed in character offering a distinct social dynamic and transformational potential. The key difference is how institutions have responded to developments in networked communications technology and the issue of intellectual property rights: on the one hand, networked organizations using this as a regulatory mechanism to enforce or extend existing power structures, and on the other, organized networks advocating open source culture. If all this sounds rather too straightforward, Rossiter elaborates on the complexities, uncertainties, and contradictions associated with sociality, labour, and life in general.

The book is split into three main sections, each with two chapters: the first, addressing the limits of democracy and organized networks; the second, tackling the creative industries, precarious labour and intellectual property; and the third, the virtuosity of general intellect and "processual democracy". Previous versions of many of the chapters have been already published, but together they make a powerful interlacing argument for network criticism demonstrating a depth of research to highlight the key issues for political intervention

(a companion volume might be Tiziana Terranova's *Network Culture*, Pluto 2004). Acknowledging the peer intellectual support of the *Nettime* and *Fiberculture* mailing lists, it is perhaps not surprising that Rossiter demonstrates an impressive but familiar range of sources to subscribers (including immanent critique and negative dialectics of the Frankfurt School, the concepts of general intellect and immaterial labour in Autonomous Marxism, and the constitutive role of the outside and immanence in Deleuze's philosophy, amongst others); taking a transdisciplinary approach that he likens to the collective ethos and protocols of the network itself.

A sense of project is clear, passionate and full of hope: "It is about conditions of possibility, the immanent relation between theory and practice... and a resolute belief... in the concrete potential of transdisciplinary institutional forms that enlist the absolute force of labour and life" (p.17).

The potential to transform social relations is somewhat demonstrated in the socio-technical dynamics of mailing lists, blogs, wikis, content management systems, and so on. But it is the institutional nature of this, as a description of the organization of social relations, that makes it thoroughly political. An example is the section on the creative industries where the instrumental ways in which creativity has been exploited in the realm of policy are mapped against "a concept of communications media that acknowledges the constitutive role of the outside" (p.103). For the argument of the book, the creative industries indicate two aspects: antagonism in the form of the exploitation of creative labour power underpinned by the increasing regulation of intellectual property as a consequence of the drive to commodify collective and communicative knowledge (the appropriation of general intellect, in other words); and also, the affirmation of creative labour that holds potential for self-organisation through its networked capacity (where organized networks emerge). By focussing on the exploitation of immaterial labour-power, or what Rossiter refers to as "disorganised labour-power", the underlying conditions are exposed but so too are new forms of agency. Organized networks represent relative institutional autonomy but do so not in isolation; they are also required to operate tactically, engaging horizontal and vertical modes of interaction: "The tendency to describe networks in terms of horizontality results in the occlusion of the 'political', which consists of antagonisms that underpin sociality. It is technically and socially incorrect to assume that hierarchical and centralizing architectures and practices are absent from network cultures" (p.36).

Networks are clearly not limitless or without borders, but are far more complex, for "while networks in many ways are regulated indirectly by the sovereign interests of the state, they are also not reducible to institutional apparatuses of the state. And this is what makes possible the creation of new institutional forms as expressions of non-representational democracy" (p.39).

This is one of the interventions of the book: Far from arguing against institutions, the limits of democracy and the discourse of neo-liberalism in general is taken as the available means to rethink politics within network cultures - and this is what is referred to as "non-representational democracy" to describe democracy decoupled from sovereign power (citing Virno's *The Grammar of the Multitude*, New York: Semiotext(e) 2004). For Rossiter, organized networks offer such an opportunity to develop strategies and techniques of better

organization. Indeed, "transformation is conditioned by a capacity to become organized" (p.215).

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Updated 1st June 2007

Contact LDR: ldr@leonardo.org

Contact Leonardo: isast@sfsu.edu

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