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# CULTURAL POLITICS

## AIMS AND SCOPE

*Cultural Politics* is an international, refereed journal that explores the global character and effects of contemporary culture and politics. *Cultural Politics* explores precisely what is *cultural* about politics and what is *political* about culture. Publishing across the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, the journal welcomes articles from different political positions, cultural approaches and geographical locations.

*Cultural Politics* publishes work that analyses how cultural identities, agencies and actors, political issues and conflicts, and global media are linked, characterized, examined and resolved. In so doing, the journal supports the innovative study of established, embryonic, marginalised or unexplored regions of cultural politics.

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# ORGANIZED AUTONOMOUS NETWORKS

**CARLO MILANI**

CARLO MILANI IS A TRANSLATOR AND A MEMBER OF THE MILAN BASED PUBLISHING HOUSES ELEUTHERA AND ALEKOS.NET, WHICH SPECIALIZE IN APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGIES. A HETERONYMOUS AUTHOR, HIS BOOKS CAN BE DOWNLOADED FROM [HTTP://IPPOLITA.NET/](http://ippolita.net/)

**ABSTRACT** Drawing on the work of Gilbert Simondon, this article explores the creative, subversive potential of organized autonomous networks through an examination of the possibilities and pitfalls of a collective, Net-based practice of writing.

**KEYWORDS:** Internet, organized networks, cooperation, creativity, writing, authorship, Simondon, individuation, identity, knowledge

## THE WEB AND US



In the age of profit and extreme individualism, collaboration and free cooperation between persons holding each other in mutual esteem may seem an untimely notion. Not to speak of conviviality:<sup>1</sup> who has the time and inclination to sit and chat, make plans, create or, quite simply, spend time with like-minded people? The “convivial” implies the existence of a stable “we,” or at least a “we” capable of telling its own story, representing itself,

## THE MARVELS OF TECHNOLOGY: WE ARE NOT ALONE, EVERYTHING IS OUT THERE

The risk of collective online authorship being carried out in a welter of very superficial interactions is dramatically real. Time, as Michel de Certeau has clearly explained, is the only resource available for the invention of daily life from below, for creating one's own imaginary (de Certeau 1984). But even the most refined tactics of subversion in the use of tools seldom succeed in giving rise to autonomous zones of sustainable experimentation. Time is almost always reabsorbed by the digital spaces and redirected towards the service of profit 2.0. According to Richard Foreman, "we've been pounded into instantly-available pancakes, becoming the unpredictable but statistically critical synapses in the whole Gödel-to-Google net." Speed is certainly a double-edged sword, since the illusion of obtaining immediate results in response to one's own "research intentions" deals a mortal blow to the infinite richness of the book-based culture:

We give up the illusion of our power as deriving from some notion of individuals collecting data, and find out that having access to data through our network-enabled communities gives us an entirely more living flow of information that is appropriate to the ever changing circumstances surrounding us. Instead of growing high, we grow wide. We become *pancake people*. (Foreman 2005)

The evacuation of individual inwardness, which is completely discharged into digital exteriority, is a product of this tension with the external world and the ceaseless search for responses. The responses of the digital networks, provided by mechanical signifying machines, belong to the domain and discourse of science. As Feyerabend pointed out, science betrays a religious character in its desire to impose a single truth (see Feyerabend 1975, esp. chapter 18). The digital technologies seek to offer a personalized, immediate truth (at a single click) for every research desire. "Google and the others" (as John Battelle calls them) – the little divinities of the economy of research 2.0 and the Web – are, then, something like a minor hypostasis of this scientific religion, on which we bestow the power to officiate in the contemporary rite of technology. We wait impatiently for the search algorithms to unearth what we need from the chaos of the Net. We are passive, vacuous, adoring onlookers in our encounter with the oracle. In this way, the philosophy of excellence of Google, which is now so mysterious as to be analogous to magic, shows us its esoteric – and also its militaristic – side (see Ippolita 2008).

Though far less codified than the major religions, the totality of superstitious beliefs that goes with the daily use of digital tools is the seasoning that accompanies countless insipid online meals. Meanwhile, the monitoring that is done, we are told, "for our own safety," is militarizing the whole of external space, to the point of checking on every online movement, every transition/transaction, every

there will inevitably be simplifications and misrepresentations of original knowledge, which would otherwise have remained the secret prerogative of an ever more restricted caste of experts. There are enormous layers of hidden knowledge to be made available for the invention of daily life.<sup>13</sup> It is not just academic knowledge that can be popularized and used as tools for participation, but the tactics of everyday life can also become so many tools for conviviality.

Digital technologies bring many people an opportunity to take charge of their own skills and translate them into knowledge that can be consumed by others. Underlying convivial writing is the conviction that individuals disinclined to use their own knowledge as an instrument of mere social promotion, control, and domination will not be particularly disposed to obey, and will, as a consequence, seek to spread liberatory practices. It all depends on our capacity to trust in ourselves and our own desire to *waste time* in the creation of personal pathways and to seek to communicate these to others by *constructing spaces* we can move around in. Together. Organized autonomous networks.

*Translated by Chris Turner*

## NOTES

1. This concept of “conviviality” was largely developed by Ivan Illich in the late 1960s and early 1970s in a series of texts that included *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) [eds].
2. In “real life,” for example, it very often happens that meetings or gatherings suddenly go off the agenda to concern themselves with the problems or personal demands of the group members, and this in fact lowers efficiency. Group consciousness may be a useful method for bringing out shared problems; it may also be a trap leading to the immobility of mutual aid with no concrete outcome.
3. The impossibility of reconstructing and identifying responsibilities is the real reason for the spread of the networked organizational model with virtual interfaces. “Customer Satisfaction Call Centers” are the clearest example of this: when there is a problem on the network, responsibility always lies elsewhere. In this way, networked organizations present themselves to the users as though they had no bosses and hence as truly amorphous structures (particularly during financial collapses), whereas to the institutions that finance them they present themselves as solid, trustworthy, and well-structured.
4. The idea that inner space is the only space that really remains to be explored – and hence the only alien space – goes back at least to Ballard (1962).
5. Graph theory can be used to show how, in a graph (the Internet network), a genuinely new connection completely reconfigures the network itself and is, therefore, an act of radical creation. For an introductory overview of this argument, see Barabási (2002).
6. A human being is more autonomous thanks to fire, language, and writing, which are so many techniques made available by convivial

9. It is the insuperable contradiction identified by Bruno Latour in the episode of the invention of the air-pump that marks the contemporaneous birth of modern science and the modern state. Latour takes this argument from Shapin and Schaffer (1985; see especially chapter 2). To sum up the chapter in brief, around 1670 the philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the scientist Robert Boyle go to see the king of England. Hobbes announces: "Your Majesty, you are the Leviathan, that is to say, the guarantor that the 'war of each against all' will be averted. Human subjects will draw up a contract (the social contract) and will, so to speak, recognize themselves totally in you. Your will shall be their will. What you will recognize as true will be true for them." Transcendent nature will, as it were, be subject to the immanent power of the Leviathan, the representative of society. Meanwhile, Boyle is messing around with his air-pump: it is, admittedly, an invention that is not yet perfected, but he shows it to the king who is compelled to acknowledge the facts. The pump creates a vacuum quite independently of his will. There are, then, incontrovertible facts, scientific artifacts outside the power of the as yet barely established Leviathan. Despite the fact that he is the absolute power, the total subjectivity (for Hobbes, he is the *sum* of the subjectivities of his subjects), his power is directly limited by the discovery of scientific objectivity. Transcendent nature can be mobilized by technical power and hence suddenly becomes contested ground for the political authorities. In this sense, the machine created by scientific knowledge and subjugated to political power should be the object of convivial humanistic revolt.
10. The reference is to "hackers" not as understood in the popular press, but in the sense used by Pekka Himanen et al. See Himanen (2001). [Trans.]
11. Not by chance has art (*ars*), the expression of an absolute technical knowledge, always been a target for normalization on the part of the institution – and yet it always escapes it.
12. In the sense intended by Ivan Illich in his *Tools for Conviviality* (1973).
13. Contrary to what one might imagine, public knowledge represents merely a fraction of existing knowledge. A large part of scientific knowledge falls within the sphere of – state or industrial – secrecy; this is knowledge kept from the public domain and used to subjugate, alienate, and dominate us. See the study by the physicist Peter Galison on classified materials (in particular, Galison 2004). See also Robb Moss's incredible documentary *Secrecy* ([www.secrecyfilm.com](http://www.secrecyfilm.com)).

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