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Toward an Insurrection of the Published? Ten Thoughts on Ticks & Comrades

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AND Publishing "Working in The Edges" book launch at The Showroom, London 20 Jan 2014; Photo Eva Weinmayr

1. “One publishes to find comrades!” (1997: 52) This declaration by Andre Breton is a fitting place as any to begin discussing what an insurrection of the published means, or could mean. For what Breton says here is not a facile declaration, but really something that is worth reflecting on to consider changes in the current and shifting relationship between publishing, politics, and cultural labor more generally. For what Breton says here is *not* that one publishes to propagate and spread an already conceived, an absolute: this is not a publishing of revelation or of bringing consciousness to an already imagined fixed audience. Rather Breton is describing something that might be called a publishing of resonance. That is, not a publishing practice that is necessarily intent on trying to convince anyone of anything, but rather is working towards establishing conditions for the co-production of meaning. Thus, publishing is not something that occurs at the end of a process of thought, a bringing forth of artistic and intellectual labor, but rather establishes a social process where this may further develop and unfold.

2. In this sense, the organization of the productive process of publishing could itself be thought to be as important as what is produced. How is that? It follows logically from the idea that one publishes in order to animate new forms of social relationships, which are made possible through the extension and development of publishing, through the social relationships animated by it. Publishing calls forth into itself, and through itself, certain skills of social cooperation that are valuable and worthy, even if what is produced as an end product perhaps is not an exalted outcome. Perhaps that is not so important at all. In short, publishing is the initiation of a process where embodied processes of knowing and understanding are produced and reproduced, rather than the

creation of fixed objects where complete understanding is fixed and contained. The production of the community of shared meaning and collaboration, the production of a public, contains within it a wealth that is often greater than a single text. The production of the text can only be valuable because of the social relationships it is embedded with and produces meaning through.

3. It is for this reason that historically there has been a close relationship between forms of social movements and changes in media production. This can be seen clearly in Sean Stewart's excellent book *On the Ground*, which explores the connection between the development of the underground and counterculture scene and the emergence of alternative publishing in the 1960s (2011). There is a similar relationship that has been often explored in the development of radical politics in the 1970s, particularly around punk, and the rise of 'zine production, and the use of photocopiers (2008). Likewise, Jodi Dean has suggested that there was a great importance played in the formation of the Bolshevik party by the necessities imposed by the running of a daily newspaper, with the intense commitments and forms of organization necessary to sustain that (2012). This is not to fall into a McLuhan-esque technological determinism where shifts in media form map directly on to and determine changes in social composition. Rather it is to acknowledge that media production and social movement cultures are closely intertwined, such as that shifts between them are complicated and multilayered.

4. One could likely come up with a great number of further examples to think about the relationship between shifts in print and politics, conducting a comparative analysis of them, and what differences these shifts have meant for those involved in them. And that would be useful, perhaps leading to developing a more refined grammar of political subjectivation in relationship with the

changing nature of print-politics.[1] And this could be followed by the explosion of enthusiasm that came with the various waves and changes in the rise of net technology, which managed to return after repeated bursting of various tech bubbles, to rise again with each new and successive form of technological interaction, from blogging to social media (Henwood 2003). But as important as these lessons would be, to discuss an insurrection of the published would mean to return to these previous moments, to learn from them to addressing the dynamics of the present. What are the current conditions of print-politics as affects by changing regimes of labor, culture, and media?

5. One might be tempted to think about the current dynamics of print-publishing starting from David Batterham's clever throw away line that most booksellers are quite odd, which he suggests is not all that surprising "since we have all managed to escape or avoid more regular forms of work" (2011: 7). The problem with that observation is that while once it may have been possible to escape from 'more regular forms of work,' through certain forms of literary and publishing pursuits, today it much more seems that it is work which escaped from us, in the sense of the number of decent paying jobs left within publishing and media industries more generally. The other day I was discussing with a friend working for a fairly large independent press who described that he was nearing forty years old, was working in something close to what he would imagine as his dream job, but still needed to share a house with three other people and subsist on an income more fitting of a student existence than someone who has worked in a professional job for over ten years. One might be tempted to describe this, much as Jaron Lanier does (2013), as part of the generalized gutting of middle class jobs, particularly in forms of

cultural work and media production, brought about by the effects of network technologies and labor.

6. Are we then experiencing a death of print? Alessandro Ludovico has recently written an excellent book tracing out the history of this suggestion from its first recorded instance in 1894 to the present (2012). Perhaps not surprisingly, given that it is now possible to trace out more than a century of the idea, print's proclaimed impending death seems a bit overstated, repeatedly. But that print seems unlikely to die does not mean that it is not changing, being drastically affected by constant shifts in technology and the dynamics of the digital world. Print publishing finds itself transformed by conflicting demands and roles, embedded into shifting expectations about the roles of various media, and familiarity with engaging with multiple media platforms. Ludovico suggests that these mutations in politics and publishing could paradoxically lead to a revitalization of print. Personally, I would very much welcome this development, as despite the explosion of materials available, created by digital media, there is a certain hapticality that gets lost along the way. This revitalization of print would more than likely not be as the same mass medium that it was before. It is perhaps parallel to the way that the rise of digital media in music has been accompanied by the return of vinyl as a medium celebrated for its aesthetic qualities.

7. It is in this conjunction of social and technological dynamics that I would situate a project like Minor Compositions, which is the imprint series that I have been editing and running for Autonomedia since 2009. Its overall approach and orientation is closely aligned with the history of Autonomedia itself, which has been printing works of anarchist and autonomist political theory, culture, and history since the early 1980s. Minor Compositions started as a subproject of Autonomedia, in the sense that it was

(and is) part of it, but operating with a high degree of editorial independence. And while Autonomedia has always been quite skeptical around claims of intellectual property and the enclosures of knowledge by copyright, this has usually meant that we were comfortable with other people taking up and distributing freely work that we had done. And in a number of cases this is precisely what happened, leading to much wider and developed forms of distribution than would have otherwise occurred, such as the widespread dissemination of Hakim Bey / Peter Lamborn Wilson's writing. For the most part, it did not mean the free posting of finished book files on the net. This is a step that Minor Compositions took further, posting the finished PDF of every title produced for free download. This has been the case for each and every one of the nineteen titles that have been produced thus far. Although it cannot be said that there has been a purely positive relationship between the free sharing of information and the ability of the project to reproduce itself – it is a much more complex one where this open sharing has incurred significant costs, as well as produced benefits in terms of circulating and developing ideas.

8. The question still remains, where does this leave the politics of open source publishing? Can we say that there still is a politics to open publishing at a point where it has become, even if a somewhat distorted and watered down form, the stated policy of numerous governments? I would argue that yes, there still are political potentialities found within open publishing, within and for an insurrection of the published, but they are both murkier and more complicated than there were previously. Where several years ago it might have seemed reasonable to think that the very act of publishing openly could provide the basis of a politics, that this provided a counter to the argument of conservatives like Mark Helprin who levied accusations of those involved in open source

cultural production as being the harbingers of a new digital barbarism (2009), this today is no longer the case. The act and process of open source publishing is not in itself sufficient as the basis of a politics. Rather it is a question, going back to Breton, of what is made possible through the process of open publishing. And this is the argument made by Gary Hall, one of the founders of Open Humanities Press, who argued that "the ethics and politics of open-access publishing and archiving do not simply come prepackaged, but have to be creatively produced and invented by their users in the process of actually using them" (2008: 27).

9. What this means is that the constant recourse to or invocation of the notion of openness might indeed be a precondition of the insurrection of the published, but it is not its only characteristic. Rather we end up with questions how, what, and for whom is this openness constituted? Or perhaps more fundamentally, what is the open in open publishing? What kinds of social relationships does it support? What kinds does it work to prevent? How can it serve to further the sociality in publishing argued for by someone like Breton? One interesting way to think through these kinds of questions, even if a bit strange, would be to return to Agamben's commentary on Jakob Johann von Uexküll's research about ticks (2004). As Uexküll describes, the tick is completely open the world. But in saying that, its openness is constituted in a rather limited fashion: namely sensing the movement of warm-blooded mammals below it so that it can drop itself on to them, suck out its necessary nourishment, and then die. In this version of the open, it is not an unlimited capacity for becoming and transformation, but rather the organism's capacity to interact with its particular world. Thus, it is not true to say the tick is not open to the world; it is as open as can be, and sustains itself through that relationship to the world.

10. The insurrection of the published must start from these questions: what is the openness to the world produced through the social relationships of publishing we currently find ourselves in? This is not a question that can be answered by looking at the politics of media production just by themselves, or the labor involved in the production of media, no matter how directly political or not they might appear to be. Rather it is a question of media ecologies, where print politics are embedded within larger ecologies of media production, circulation, distribution, and consumption – and at a time when the differences between these previously distinct actions have tended increasingly to blur into one another. It is not just a question of the best way to organize autonomous print and media production, although that is an important ask, but also the best ways to organize the publics and undercommons that are articulated through autonomous media production, and which feedback through and support continuing development and lifeworlds of autonomous media production. Like Breton would still say today, one publishes in order to find comrades, but not merely to find comrades as the consumers of information or media, but rather as co-conspirators and accomplices.

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1 There is an immense amount of scholarship across multiple fields that has explored precisely these questions, from the work of Habermas on the rise of the public sphere, through Negt and Kluge's notion of the proletarian public sphere (1988), to Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser's updating and expanding of public sphere theory.