

# Constructing Assemblies for Alienation

By Patricia Reed

“What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?”<sup>1</sup>—Henri Lefebvre

Ideology has long been linked to the idea of a blind or ignorant relationship between social reality and our representation of it. Such an idea has been neatly captured by Karl Marx’s infamous dictum *They do not know it, but they are doing it*, opening up an important space for knowledge, since the correlate to his statement suggests that if they only knew it, they might do it otherwise. Within this definition, our blindness to presuppositions of social reality could be overcome if only we knew better, becoming enlightened subjects and dissolving our ignorant grip on reality through critical-cognitive tools. Fast-forwarding to the Frankfurt School thinkers and their more nuanced assessment of ideology vis-à-vis enlightenment, they demonstrated that we could never categorically escape the grips of ideology, but that nonetheless we could deploy critical tools to better understand how the veil of ideology buttresses our collective enactment of social reality and its reproducibility. In the Frankfurt School sense, although we cannot rid ourselves of ideology, we could possibly reshape the ways in which ideology forms and moulds our relations. Forging ahead to the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, an arguably more pervasive form of ideology was asserted. In Peter Sloterdijk’s formulation, ideology is no longer founded on general ignorance (of not knowing of ideological distortions), but on cynical reason where one knows very well there is a foggy veil deforming our representation of reality, but where we abnegate behavioural or ideational change nonetheless.<sup>2</sup> In this formulation, knowledgeable subjects disavow the plasticity of the ideological scrim they know to be in place and can critically identify, thereby updating

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991, 44.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 2008 (original 1989), 25.

Marx's original dictum to *They know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.*<sup>3</sup>

How does this wholly depressing diagnosis resonate with us in the wake of the global unrest since the 2008 financial crisis? Is this cynical disavowal of ideology still alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? What the postmodern dictum on ideology suggests can be interpreted in three ways. In the first, simplistic and utterly fatalistic mode, we would now have an absolute divorce between knowledge and action, so we could basically give up on any new epistemic endeavours that could reshape the tools and spaces of our constructed, relational environment. In this instance there is a positing of the current ideological situation as an impenetrable, petrified, insurmountable object, so one can, at best, only hope to retreat to highly localized, immediate conditions as a coping mechanism *in parallel* with the world at large that remains undisturbed. Such an attitude is evidenced by the cult of individualized self-improvement; tactics of self-enclosed micro-communities; and those who sabotage the material incarnations of ideology, ever-so briefly throwing a wrench into the machinery, only for that same machinery to return to smooth functioning once again. The second reading would suggest that what is lacking is the will or commitment to the behavioural follow-through of the knowledge/action continuum, so there is simply no motivation to act upon what we know. From this second angle, some may suggest that, while outwardly acknowledging the perversity of our current ideology driving rampant inequality and climactic devastation, unconsciously we are quite content with this constellation, perhaps some of us thrive within it, so there is no implicit incentive to risk changing anything. Furthermore, this interpretation would fall into the 'least of all possible evils'<sup>4</sup> camp, where we might again acknowledge that, ideologically, things are not even near ideal, but it's the least bad option we have at our disposal. The third, and more optimistic account is that we fundamentally recognize we *ought* to act upon what we know to exist as a violent distortion, but we do not yet possess

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Eyal Weizman, '665: The Least of All Possible Evils' in *e-flux Journal* #38, October, 2012. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-least-of-all-possible-evils/> (accessed September 2014).

the prognostic concepts, tools, capacities and spaces that could scaffold any sort of significant, long-term remoulding of the ideological condition.

### **Affirming Negativity**

It is from this third register that I will proceed – not based on blind optimism, but reflective of the public unrest that has swept through the world in recent years leaving millions (if not more) inspired with the sense of alternate ideological and structural possibilities. Although many such courageous cultures of assembly succeeded in dismantling dictatorships, protecting the existence of public space, or infusing popular media with ideas that were once never discussed (class consciousness, particularly in North America with the *We are the 99%* from *Occupy*), none of them were able to push forward a tenable strategy for the long-haul of future orientation. Indeed the most fragile of days, the ‘day after’ revolution or social disturbance, revealed itself in full-frontal cognitive or physical brutality, where, in the best scenario, something was maintained as it was, the status quo resumed when the debris of occupation had been washed away, military rule was instantiated, or ferocious civil war materialized. Ultimately, what emerged was a series of manifestations of what we *don't* want, but to the lack of the positive formulation of precisely what we *do* want (within this scenario several have falsely celebrated the absence of demands as radically progressive in and of itself). What we saw was a series of *tactics* to articulate tenacious negation, but no *strategy* to affirm that negation into a sustainable, systemic (infra)-structure with an attendant ideological reconfiguration. What materialized was the embodiment of a legitimately angry and wilfully *affective* local *drive*, without the *effective desire* towards the restructuring of, now, global norms of ideological operation.<sup>5</sup> These cultures of assembly attest to the fact of the existence of a public will to act upon what is known or passionately felt to be wrong, but are lacking operative procedures and apparatuses that can conceptualize what is desired as a shared future, coupled with the spatial formalization of that very desire.

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<sup>5</sup> Jodi Dean describes the difference between drive and desire in Lacanian terms, where on the one hand *drive* is that which never achieves its goal; drive orbits its target, but gains pleasure in forever missing its mark. Desire, on the other hand, can be fulfilled by obtaining the object of its lack (that which we want). Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, 34.

## Complexity Fatigue

“...tasked with creating a new ideology, economic and social models, and a vision of the good to replace and surpass the emaciated ideals that rule our world today. This is an infrastructure in the sense of requiring the construction not just of ideas, but institutions and material paths to inculcate, embody and spread them.”<sup>6</sup> – Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams

Although spaces and acts of assembly have been multiplying over the last years, one does not have a clear sense of their potential direction or durability beyond the moment of their eruption. This plight is, in some ways, wholly understandable as we live in a Promethean world of confounding complexity, a world massively larger than our current sensory and cognitive scope. Alain Badiou has identified our time as one of *organized disorientation*,<sup>7</sup> for although sprawling networks of transport, communication, transactions, capital flows and movement are indeed organized (under a particular ideological constellation) all of their subsequent and compounded interactions cannot be mapped, leaving us in a state of cerebral resignation and without an intelligible foothold to begin scaling or reorienting us within this informational behemoth. This ungraspable *hyperobject*<sup>8</sup> produces what could be called *complexity fatigue*, a state of being cognitively overwhelmed, where we are ill-equipped to enter an arena of reasons at all (and it is this incapacity that also fosters a conflation of ‘personal’ opinion as a freedom in and of itself, without any public requirement to substantiate statements or make them explicit). It is under these conditions where affect takes hold of our motivations, to the abjuration of constitutive effects. To be clear, this is not a denunciation of affect, but a concern for its role in the production of disorientation in the wake of complexity fatigue. Cultures of assembly are necessarily passionate spheres of gathering for a purpose (even when quiet and deliberative), so the cognition-heavy statements should not be taken some instance of distant, unimaginative rationality devoid of emotion. Yet there is the

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, “The Accelerationist Manifesto” in *#ACCELERATE The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. R. Mackay and A. Avanesian, Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014: 347-362.

<sup>7</sup> Alain Badiou qtd. in Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, 150.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecological Thought*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010.

qualification of the nature of those passions, and in what sequence they emerge, where enthusiasm “...may be elicited by linking moral and political principles to examples that ‘enliven’ the will...”<sup>9</sup> and where “affect must remain an effect, and not a cause.”<sup>10</sup> In this project of striving for reorientation as a purpose of assembly, affect cannot be the sole means of assembly, but must be deployed as a by-product to recursively nourish the will and sheer endurance activities that reorientation necessarily requires.

### **Navigating the Inexistent**

Within the context of cultures of assembly seeking strategies for ideological and structural change, the navigational imperative caught up in the notion of “dis-reorientation” cannot be understated. This is the navigation of what *could be* in the face of what *is*, where *what is* denotes a zone of epistemic and ideological normativity that demarcates a particular social world to the neglect of alternative possibilities. Navigating the *could be* requires the conceptual, spatial and infrastructural construction of the inexistent (the creation of a map *and* a territory). Navigating what *could be* is both the definition of purposes of assembly along with the articulation of a new spatial condition for a logic unbound to the actual imperatives of the current landscape. What *could be* is not something to be unveiled, but a project of vast collaborative construction, engineering an alternative future emancipated from certain impasses that (in particular) define our time: a future captured by debt, rampant inequality and cataclysmic climate change. We need a new cartography for this speculative, inexistent territory if we are to attain a sense of orientation, and affirm other ideological horizons to incline us in logical and pragmatic cultures of assembly. This horizon, whether figured spatially or with regards to knowledge, must be intelligible and shareable; it is part spatial, affective, relational and metric, gaining value through imitation and repetition of use. Ultimately, what this notion of a horizon points to, is the basic definition of a model.

One only needs to look at one of the most spectacularly effective revolutions of all, the long-winding (and ongoing) neoliberal one, to understand the power of models and their

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<sup>9</sup> Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea*, London: Verso, 2010, 130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

real consequences. Expanding from the initial Mont Pelerin Society meeting of 39 economists and intellectuals in 1947, to the first academic journal of finance economics in 1974 (authorizing the ‘validity’ of neoliberal doctrines),<sup>11</sup> the neoliberal revolution was, and continues to be, an entire ecosystem, steadfastly permeating social relations on a global scale. Through the proliferation of international think tanks, policy influence, media up-take, and above all models and equations to ‘legitimize’ once illegal market behaviour. Models possess hyperstitional qualities, where simulative fictions or representations of reality become actualized, embedded, and drivers of the living social fabric. Nick Srnicek has pointed out the distributive potential of models that is of key importance here when speaking of cultures of assembly that could strategically aspire to scale up beyond the bounds of their initial, localized situation: “... models condense a set of inferential and material rules into a medium that also alters the persuasiveness of the reasoning [...] transforming indifferent matter and social complexity into something that is cognitively tractable.”<sup>12</sup> The fact that models are always reductive, simplifications of reality, is not, to my mind, a valid enough reason to disregard their yields and what they *can* do – they are crucial tools *of* and *for* representation, opening up cognitive gateways and tangible experimentation with variation. The point is not to denounce complexity in favour of the exclusively immediate or concrete scale of things we can readily perceive. The point is to articulate models that allow us to navigate this complexity otherwise; models that afford the construction and proliferation of alternative concepts, acting as a compass for structural and ideological territory under fabrication.

### **Freedom for Alienation**

The capacity to create such models of social reality outside the neoliberal bind is equal to the expression of positive freedom, that is, the freedom *to do* something, and not only freedom *from* something.<sup>13</sup> Positive freedom is the power to define and construct purposes that orient cultures of assembly as an abstract compass for an inexistent

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<sup>11</sup> Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not A Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Nick Srnicek, “The Eyes of the State”. Paper presented at the *Interdisciplinary Speaker Series*, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, April 9, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Wolfendale, “Freedom and Reason”. Seminar at the *Emancipation as Navigation Summer School*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany, July 2, 2014.

territory. It is only through this positive definition that we can begin to affirm what *ought* to be done (what we do want), while collectively developing capacities to conceptualize and construct that very world. Positive freedom is not a ‘right’ held up in any charter, like the freedom of speech (in many constitutions), positive freedom is, rather, a speculative, laborious task of constructing commitments to new norms and models of social reality. These norms are purely synthetic, in the sense that they are not naturally given, but a composite between what we venture to be true in thought (belief) and its making-true through acting (agency).<sup>14</sup> Norms are not steadfast, ossified objects indifferent to difference, but are coordinates of orientation in navigating the world (especially the one we ought to create). In such a labor of normativity, it should be mentioned, the fallibility of knowledge is not a glitch or dead-end, but is a motor of potentiality for ‘updating’ the synthesis between concepts and agency or behaviour. When we examine the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis for example, a crisis brought on by specific economic/financial/social structures, the responses have demonstrated a repudiation of any sort of normative reconstruction – in fact the responses have been to amplify those very causes as a kind of perverse, homeo-pathological remedy. This is, quite simply, exemplary of the unreasoned and unreasonable landscape we are currently bound to. If cultures of assembly are to attempt an escape from this bind of unreason (a logic underpinning issues of inequality and injustice) the arduous labor becomes one of positively defining and performatively instantiating both material and ideological strategies responsive to coordinates mapped by reasoned norms. Although the ‘construction of norms’ or footholds of orientation may sound like a bland, dispassionate task of assembly today, it is wholly dependent on imagination. As the primary faculty through which we can exceed ‘what *is*’ directly before us, imagination marks a moment of fertile alienation – the wilful construction of alienation that separates us from what *is*, towards the foreignness of what *could be*. The feeling of being in assembly, of bodies in proximity, may very well be one of generative closeness, connection and necessary communication, yet if cultures of assembly are to effect and instigate enduring, systemic change (and not blips of negation), strategies for alienation must be developed

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<sup>14</sup> Reza Negarestani, “The Labor of the Inhuman” in *e-flux Journal* #52, February, 2014 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-labor-of-the-inhuman-part-i-human/> (accessed September 2014).

conceptually, materially and ideologically. Since 2008 we seem to have an increasing sense that things can't go on as usual; there have been countless eruptions of protest across the globe acting as a chorus for an even greater dissatisfied public. The challenges of assembly today seem to be less about urging bodies into collective space, but more about the construction of purposeful conditions to affirm new cartographies of what we do want as a navigational rupture from what exists. In the face of daunting complexity, assembly today is tasked with the development of cultures *of* and *for* constructive alienation, a peculiar form of alienation that separates (from what *is*) as much as it enjoins (orients collective activity towards what *could be*). If the reproduction of social reality (ideology) is always constituted by a recursive interplay between space and its 'vocabulary' of uses, it's our pressing labor to construct a foreign tongue to articulate desired estrangement.