

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Matt Ratto and Megan Boler (eds), *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780262026819 (cloth); ISBN: 9780262525527 (paper); ISBN: 9780262321204 (ebook)

In radical geography scholarship and associated fields of activism and action, there seem to be two emergent stances toward constituted power, both of which can be exemplified by the Occupy movement. The first is a celebration of symbolic disruption. Whereas movements like Earth First! have long celebrated literal disruptions through tree-sitting or tampering with construction equipment, Occupy can perhaps be better understood less as the literal, material disruption of a set of practices than as a disruption of what Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible”(2010: 36) or the social fields through which sense and meaning are made. The second is a turn toward prefigurative practice, or forms of practice that attempt to call desired social worlds into being through relating-as-though they already exist, illustrated by the insistence in Occupy camps for horizontal, leaderless forms of practice. Here again, Rancière’s interest in presuming the radical equality of all as a starting point for politics is resonant. “DIY” or “do-it-yourself” as a political posture can be understood as a response to these stances. My point isn’t to suggest that this political posture emerged solely or entirely from Occupy, is only attributable to Rancière, or is in any sense new—clearly, autonomism and anarchism have their own long traditions in political philosophy, praxis and radical geography. Rather my goal is to propose some context for the zeitgeist of DIY as an emergent political posture and highlight the question that this set of political responses begs: what theory of change informs symbolic disruption and prefigurative action?

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Matt Ratto and Megan Boler's edited volume *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media* is a timely response to the question of what to make of DIY as a political posture. In particular, their invocation of DIY "citizenship" is provocative to the degree that symbolic disruption and prefigurative politics could be said to ignore or evacuate the state as a meaningful target for transformative political action, whereas the concept of citizenship suggests the possibility of revisiting or reworking the collective form that constituent power might take. Yet for radical and critical geographers accustomed to working with the concept of citizenship, the way that Ratto and Boler mobilize it may seem unfamiliar. They draw heavily, as do many of the authors in the volume, on the work of the cultural theorist John Hartley, who proposes a DIY citizen as one who creates their own identity by choosing between different semiotic materials on offer through various forms of media (p.11). In the geographical literature, this formulation is more recognizable as a "subjectivity" rather than an enactment of "citizenship".

Yet while this engagement with the concept of citizenship might feel esoteric and thin to geographers, even taken on its own terms, the notion could stand to be better articulated in the book. Part of this shortcoming owes to the structure of the book, which includes 28 very brief chapters that came out of a fairly interdisciplinary conference (see <http://diycitizenship.com/>). The result is a book that does little to advance our conceptual understanding of any of the words in the title; neither DIY nor citizenship are adequately defined, nor is the role of critical making or social media. In fact, social media tends to get completely overlooked, and many questions remain unexplored. For example, readers get little sense about what is particularly new about the social, cultural, economic and political context in which these forms of citizenship emerge. Relatedly, the book

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

offers little guidance in terms of what, precisely, is being contested by these alternative forms of citizenship that are being described. It is possible that this is by design, and that the book is intended to be more accessible than theoretical. Yet the academic publisher (a university press), the framing of the book using fairly traditional academic terms in the introduction, and the fact that the majority of contributors are themselves academics who are studying these efforts (albeit often from an engaged, scholar-activist or participant observation standpoint) suggests that the book is meant to make an academic contribution.

What we *do* get is a series of vignettes outlining various social practices, mostly concentrated in North America, that seem to exemplify symbolic disruption and prefigurative action. Because the chapters are so short and the practices considered so diverse, they tend more toward description than theoretical contextualization or conceptual elucidation. Practices described include designing overlays on ID cards to limit the amount of information communicated when they are required; “hacktivism”; documentary filmmaking and other alternative media practices; and “fan blogging”. Yet even in the case of a chapter on reorganizing school curricula, the focus tends to be more on DIY as “doing things differently” than on the concept of citizenship or subjectivities in any meaningful way.

Moreover, neither the chapters nor the introduction substantially address whether and how social change will emerge from these new forms of practice. A few exceptions include Cristina Dunbar-Hester’s chapter on efforts to “erode boundaries between experts and lay people” to go beyond merely producing artifacts and to engender egalitarian social relations through working with communities that have had limited access to technological infrastructure. Her observation that ambitious and privileged tech activists

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

and under-served people of color in low-income neighborhoods had different ideas about how to confront the technological divide isn't new, of course, but it highlights one of the most fundamental problems in celebrating DIY approaches to citizenship. Ian Reilly's discussion of the Yes Men's efforts to train people in the practice of creative "actions" as a way to draw attention to social justice issues is also a notable exception. The two chapters on feminist 'zines and alternative media production by Red Chidgey and Rosa Reitsamer and Elke Zobl also stand out for their direct engagement with the governing practices and political economic context in which these efforts are taking place. Clearly not all discussions of politics must engage directly with governance and political economy, but the discussions of citizenship practices as insurgent or radical would seem to invite at least a consideration. Given the vastly uneven landscape of access to material resources, and the pervasive ways in which the geographies of wealth and power have been produced through recourse to and reification of sedimented social difference, DIY politics must necessarily have a redistributive dimension if it is to be "radical" or meaningfully transformative.

One particular framing that needs to be much more carefully substantiated is the idea that DIY citizenship is, as the editors claim in the introduction, emblematic of Rancière's notion of "part-taking" by the part of those that have no part. Many reading this journal will no doubt be familiar with the broad contours of Rancière's argument by now: politics as such is located in disruptions of the political and social order that are so profound as to necessitate its reworking. In his various articulations of how this might work, he suggests that rupture can happen through a practice which, as the editors point out in the introduction, "makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise" (Rancière 1999: 30, quoted on

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

p.15). And while the various chapters do describe attempts at such practices, inviting dialogue about how things could be otherwise, or providing a glimpse of creative practices is a far cry from massively disrupting the social order. This is not to say that critiquing the present, inviting dialogue and offering glimpses of possibilities are not valuable objectives; rather, it is to point out that the mobilization of Rancière's work, and his associated theory of change, is ill-suited to the project of the book.

Ultimately, the book falls short of advancing our understanding of the political possibilities and limitations of a DIY approach to citizenship, despite the fact that the various chapters flag important issues. Perhaps the book works best as something like a reference guide to the myriad practices of DIY activism as capaciously conceived as possible, rather than a coherent volume that conceptually advances a particular understanding of whether and how such practices work.

References

Rancière J (1999) *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (trans J Rose). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Rancière J (2010) *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (trans S Corcoran). London: Continuum

Kate Derickson
Department of Geography, Environment and Society
University of Minnesota

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

kdericks@umn.edu

November 2014