

**Andy Merrifield**, *The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love*, London: Verso, 2017.  
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No longer a battle between slave-owner and slave, lord and serf, or bourgeoisie and proletarian, the present historical juncture is a battle between professional experts and amateurs, or so Andy Merrifield contends in his latest book, *The Amateur: The Pleasures of Doing What You Love*. In 2017, however, the amateur is only a class *in* itself. Merrifield gives us nine chapters that explore the professional/amateur divide to help the amateur become a class *for* itself. It's an engaging book, for Merrifield is an intriguing and clear writer who moves seamlessly across disciplinary divides, keeping the content socially relevant, abstaining from asinine and arcane academic debates, and giving us the right amount of autobiographical information and concrete context. Readers of Merrifield's previous work will be familiar with many of his thought partners along the way, with appearances by Franz Kafka and Guy Debord, Charles Baudelaire and André Gregory. But it's a terribly frustrating book, too, in that it makes some potentially politically useful observations, but in the end never actually enters the domain of politics.

### *The Cult of the Professional*

Merrifield's first cut at the battle between professionals and amateurs comes at the end of the Keynesian era, as the state collapses social policy into market logics. The bureaucrat of the 1950s, the "organizational man", evolved into a new breed: the think-tank expert. Bureaucracy is still with us and the state hasn't shrunk in any way, but the shrinkage and deregulation of the state that took place in the 1970s ushered in a whole new kind of bureaucracy, one that was dispersed across a diverse network of private and semi-private corporations and organizations. An example is when the New York City Mayor brought on the RAND Corporation to cut the fire department's budget. RAND set up metrics to determine which fire houses were the least efficient based on response time, but ended up, according to Joe Flood (2010), burning the city.

Professional knowledge amasses hard, quantitative data and is focused on measurable outcomes, which is no downsized task: “Millions are spent checking, auditing, defining and redefining, systematising and re-systematising targets and controls. Yet targets often fail in human terms, because the most important public services—health and education—aren’t amenable to narrow measurement” (p.19). Humans have a difficult time conforming to quantitative data, and are far from predictable.

This shouldn’t seem like too radical a claim, but amateurs nonetheless have their work cut out for them. Jane Jacobs is one amateur urbanist Merrifield calls on a few times throughout the book. Whereas the professionals try to make order out of the city, “Jacobs marveled at the ‘organized complexity’ of disorder, the hurly-burly that made people want to come to the city and linger” (p.67). The professional urbanists want to chop up the city and arrange it so that capital can move through it most efficiently and so that differences can easily be policed, surveilled, and if needed eliminated. They see numbers, indices, and metrics everywhere. The amateur urbanists are those who want to reclaim the city for everyday living. Like Henri Lefebvre, they see the city as the place where differences assemble in simultaneity. But it isn’t just politicians that are after the encounters that make the city urban: “The study of cities is a thriving business that boosts professional careers as well as personal bank balances” (p.72). Merrifield delineates two trends of this: triumphalism and dystopianism. The triumphalists present the city as crucial to economic success (read: excellence), and are the proponents of the “creative class”, those who want the cities to be filled with yuppie artists and tech producers. The dystopians present the city as a hell-hole in dire need of a new round of think-tank designed, private investment projects. All manner of professional urbanites spring up. The London School of Economics’ “Urban Age” program is exemplary here, having “mastered the art of talking Left while fundraising Right, saying a lot very persuasively whilst saying very little, sometimes saying nothing at all” (p.77). The program ultimately provides Left cover for the continued privatization of city spaces.

The university was once thought of as a place where received wisdom was questioned, but the professionals have infested academia, too. What matters for faculty are research output and citation metrics, neither of which give any indication whatsoever as to the quality or kind of thought generated. Merrifield's analysis is similar to Bill Readings' in *The University in Ruins* (1996). Written at the onset of what is now called the neoliberalization of higher education—as the big publishers started to get bigger by eating up the little publishers, and research assessment was ascendant in many universities—and before online platforms automatically gathered and updated citation metrics, Readings said that the university was functioning exactly like a corporation. He called it the “university of excellence”, wherein “[w]hat gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it be excellently taught or researched” (1996:13). Excellency lacks any referent. Yet whereas Readings thinks that the university of excellence is a bureaucracy that is entirely internally driven, Merrifield rightly presents it as a sausage factory turning out revenue for academic publishers and going after the last glimmers of job security out there. Excellency doesn't have its own referent, but it is clear that in today's universities excellence's referents are determined by capital. Not all academic workers are victims of this, and Merrifield usefully goes after what he calls “*doxo-intellectuals*”, those professional scholars who are “always on TV, produce newspaper columns, and do TED talks, do anything and everything to promote their works and advance their careers” (p.123).

Merrifield likens professionalism to that great interior space, the Crystal Palace. The contemporary corporation is modeled after the Palace, an enticing, expansive inside that one never has to leave (or question). In the Professional Palace, professionals “instruct us about what we must learn and what we must read, what needs to be sold” (p.xii), and what we need to buy, what we need to make us happy, and so on. We internalize this and *self-bureaucratise*:

From smartphone banking to online filing of tax returns, from paperless paying of utility bills to PayPal and Amazon accounts, from emailed Apple receipts to internet and phone

contracts, from car insurance to travel bookings, you name it. Each with an infinite array of personal passwords and passcodes, complex numbering and lettering, symbolic ordering and secure encoding—all needing to be memorised. (p.2)

The limits to capital, Merrifield contends, aren't technological (or, apparently, spatial), but subjective. Here, we get into what the amateur is positively.

*The (Non)Politics of the Amateur*

In the first chapter, reflecting on an Edward Said lecture he saw at Oxford in the early 1990s (published as Said 1994), Merrifield contends that the amateur is intellectual that speaks truth to power and has “a *sensibility* to de-professionalise reality, and a political *allegiance* to ordinary folk” (p.12). A model of this is his former teacher, David Harvey, who, he says, “was—and still is—an outsider in the establishment, an amateur who shrugs off professionalism, who back then even shrugged off his Oxbridge title, hanging out with his graduate students rather than his peers” (p.11). The amateur, then, isn't a structural position in society one occupies, but rather a kind of ethos or attitude. The faultline between amateur and professional isn't about how well you do something, but about what you do, how you do it, and why you do it. The amateur approaches life as a hobby and not a series of credentials. They can even hold down professional jobs: “How many lawyers in Britain,” Merrifield asks, “have found their true calling as bakers, competing in the popular TV series *The Great British Bake Off*?” (p.157-158). What we have to do, according to Merrifield, is overcome the subjective limits within ourselves, refuse to be interpellated as professionals.

It's at points like this when the book morphs into something like an anarchist self-help manual. It reminds me of an updated (and more academic) version of Jerry Rubin's (1970) Yippie manifesto, *Do it! Scenarios of the Revolution*, except without all the calls for violence. Stop being such a square, the reader is told, with your iPhones and social media accounts, your

concern with credentials and reputation. Forget your online passwords. Stop worrying about fashion and brand names. Turn on, tune in, drop out! The “crucial item in any amateur’s arsenal,” Merrifield says, is “to be confrontational...to guard against professional domestication and being incorporated into the corporation” (p.86). So if you insist on keeping your job and earning a living, then at least work slowly, take naps in the bathroom, and don’t let your work define you. I’m not exaggerating. In fact, Merrifield even proposes that we stop fighting structural unemployment and start embracing it. If you get fired, “imagine something else; what if the reaction was, ‘I’ve just been laid off: great!’” (p. 106). Recalling his time in Greece, Merrifield writes fondly of a group of unemployed anarchists in the Exarcheia neighborhood. Even though the women in the group were themselves “subdued, depressed at the personal and political state of affairs” (p. 180), Merrifield wasn’t. He saw that they “had other concerns than the stuff young men and women interest themselves in elsewhere, like fashion and conventional ambition, making money and owning property” (p.181). Although he says he doesn’t want to “romanticise hardship”, he in effect does just that. It turns out not having any money is great because then you don’t have to stress yourself out about what to buy with it. Being homeless is way better than being chained to a mortgage.

To be fair, at a few points in the book Merrifield insists that we have to do all of this together, collectively, and that we have to take down some structures that are standing in our way. The problem is that he doesn’t name any of these structures. Now I’m not saying that what we really need is yet another book explaining the laws of capital and insisting that we have to understand them to grasp our oppression and finally get the bosses off our backs. But it is odd for an allegedly political book written for a popular audience to make no mention of imperialism or racism. It seems that over the last 15 years or so Merrifield’s politics have gotten increasingly muddled and, well, apolitical. In his earlier works, such as *Dialectical Urbanism* (2002a) and *Metromarxism* (2002b), Merrifield made it abundantly clear that exploitation and oppression were the problem, that there was an identifiable “common enemy” (Merrifield 2002a: 171). And

he did so while paying attention to questions of being and subjectivity. But lately, the contours of the battlefield have progressively retreated into the subject and micropolitics. For example, in *The Politics of the Encounter*, Merrifield (2013: 130) brushes off the importance of ownership. But there he at least put the question of subjective transformation alongside the task of revolt. In this book, however, he announces that what “spoils everything” is “the context of...work: the organisation, the company, the boss, the demands placed upon employees, the speeds they have to beat, the tasks they have to achieve, the rapidity and intensity of work, its duration and duress” (p.158). In a phrase, “[t]his institutional drive is the problem” (p.159). It’s not capitalism, but the professionalization of capitalism. “Professionals set the terms”, and this is what must be changed. Changed to what? “Professionals must follow, must respond to amateurs—not the other way around” (p.68). There is no real antagonism here, no fundamental division; only a shifting of roles.

Thus, it’s not really a matter of the oppressed eliminating the conditions of their oppression, but of modifying those conditions and getting the upper hand in determining them. At base, then, it’s not really a matter of politics. After all, even lawyers can be amateurs. Or stock brokers, or politicians, or bankers. For that matter, I don’t see why white supremacists or neo-Nazis can’t live the amateur life. In fact, as I type these words a bigoted real estate mogul and boss—but amateur politician—sits at the head of the US government. By avoiding discussion of the structural divisions that run throughout society, Merrifield ultimately gives us no politics.

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