

Ontological anarchy and punk-inspired zine culture

Jason Rodgers' rich discourse and presentation

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a review of

Invisible Generation: Rants, Polemics, and Critical Theory Against the Planetary Work Machine by Jason Rodgers. Autonomedia, 2021

For many years, Jason Rodgers has been a motivating presence in a startlingly large number of anarchist zine projects and communities, including frequently in this magazine. Her work has been published in a great many collective contexts, but always singly and hard to find. In *Invisible Generation*, her diverse body of critical writing has finally been brought together.

What Rodgers presents us with is a pile of heterogeneous ideas and provocations without a controlling framework, ideology, or voice to guide us easily through the book. Aptly, the book's title offers multiple interpretations, all pertinent.

On one level, these essays are one representation of an "invisible generation" of anarchists who came into their own on the cusp of the internet's ascendancy, within the intersection of ontological anarchy and punk-inspired zine culture. The book exhales this atmosphere.

Generation can also speak to new creation, beginnings, birthings. These essays call for the generation of continual insurrection from materials invisible to the technological panopticon: underground communities, intransigent individualists, and discourses that have been discarded or marginalized.

The more traditionally-presented tracts are alternated with starkly photocopied collage-essays, which will be instantly familiar to anybody involved in punk or zine communities. It took me back to my own introduction to anarchy through the hardcore punk scene, that took the form of a slew of one-off or fourth-degree distro copies of short pamphlets, zines, lyric sheets, and flyers by unknown and anonymous authors, distributed for free or at cost.

It was experienced as a mass of partial and contradictory ideas, desires, mantras, and expressions whose very irreducibility is what gave them power. Not only did all of the works collected here arise from this context, but the arrangement and complex relations between them evokes that rich anarchy of discourse and presentation. Given Rodgers' intense involvement in this network of publication and dissemination, it would be nice to have included dates and publication histories for the pieces, even if the latter could only be partially reconstructed.

For these reasons, readers looking for a comprehensive system of anarchist thought in *Invisible Generation* will feel thwarted. But if there are more critiques than solutions, this is not accidental. It is the expression of Rodgers' mistrust in all over-arching systems as forms of social planning, insisting that "rather than create a social program, resistance could come in the form of becoming a glitch in the cybernetic system." She offers us a collection of provisional gestures toward new ways to frame resistance and generate new forms of anarchist praxis, as well as direct provocations that operate on the reader almost physiologically through artistic and poetic means.

Certain themes rise repeatedly to the surface and permeate the book, subtly brought out by the ordering of the texts. The "planetary work machine" of the subtitle designates the most consistent concern. A relentless critique of digitized culture, drawing heavily on anarcho-primitivist theory, but avoiding prescriptive or dogmatic positions,

instead focused on teasing out the effects of the contemporary system on the psychological, social, and ecological planes. In multiple shards of text, Rodgers reveals the ways in which computer-logics of control and surveillance are extending beyond machines themselves to inhabit our social structures, personal interactions, and individual processes of thought and self-formation.

The mistrust of social planning which informs Rodgers' anti-tech position also affects her insistence on a post-Left (though unambiguously anti-fascist) conception of anarchy, founded in the egoist tradition, but with a firm insistence on the social and collaborative capacity of egoism as conceived by 19th century philosopher Max Stirner and others.

Ontological anarchy is called upon to generate radically subjective psycho-social forms of resistance against the dominance of the objective machine-consciousness, as Rodgers delves into mystical, magical, Discordian and an-tritonal strains of anarchy. She emphasizes insurrection on the micro-cosmic, nearly-invisible scale of personal praxis, on unique relationships of elective affinity, and on the revitalization of off-line culture: "The totality invades every facet of life. Struggle must thus occur in every facet of life. Alternative practices of nomadism and invisibility become necessities in the asymmetrical conflict."

The variety of texts is the result of their genesis in the zine network. The book's subtitle distinguishes between "Rants, Polemics, and Critical Theory," so each category uses a different voice to respond to a different function in anarchist textual culture. Many of the rants are densely-collaged posters or handbills combining image and text made for easy distribution in the mail or in public spaces, deploying poetic and artistic techniques in the tradition of Dada, Situationism, and Punk.

The voice is urgent, tending paranoid, almost despairing, often evoking the claustrophobic manner of conspiracy theory without being such. They aim not at logically convincing, so much as activating and radicalizing the unconscious anxiety produced by the surveillance society, instigating and stimulating the reader's perception of the workings of the Machine around and within them.

The "polemics," on the other hand, are equally urgent, but the voice is committed, angry, yet controlled rhetorical calls to action and empowerment. They participate in a long tradition of street-level anarchist propaganda. The language is compressed and concise, emphatic in tone, the arguments kept simple and intuitive for accessibility, though drawing upon a great deal of discourse and thought. These include handbills and posters as well as more traditional essays initially published in zines.

The "critical theory," finally, reveals the subtlety of Rodgers' thought. Most of these essays address similar themes to the other pieces, in a more discursive and subtle manner and more measured tone, drawing more explicitly on a wide body of critical writing. A few are direct responses to specific situations, events, or current debates within anarchist and zine subculture. These are handled in an even-handed and nuanced manner, avoiding defensiveness, exaggeration and ad hominem insinuations. There is no trace of the paranoia invoked in the rants.

In gathering all of these little fragments of rebellion together, Autonomedia has done us a great service and rendered the deeper unities and complexities of Rodgers' theoretical process to come across in a condensed form, illuminated by its own context rather than the scattered gleams available before.

Reading them one after another, rather than singly in their native habitats in numerous zines and mailings, can be anxiety-producing. The disjunctions and competing vectors of argument that the fragments present can overwhelm in their very success, especially thanks to the effect of the rants, whose unsettling tone un-deadens our responses to the oppressive conditions that surround us.

A steady diet of these rants, polemics, and essays is a sure prescription to guard against the self-satisfying spectacle of comfort offered to us on a hundred screens every day. Rodgers reminds us that the planetary work machine continues to extend its control in ever more deep-seated and insidious ways.

And, more importantly, that our resistance to it can be just as intimate and invisible.

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