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Review / Reseña

Rabasa, Magalí. *The Book in Movement: Autonomous Politics and the Lettered City Underground*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019.

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In Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), "culture" is defined as: "a system of discriminations and evaluations… [with which] a particular class in the State [is] able to identify…; and it also means that culture is a system of exclusions legislated from above but enacted throughout its polity, by which such things as anarchy, disorder, irrationality, inferiority, bad taste, and immorality are identified, then deposited outside the culture and kept there by the power of the State and its institutions" (11). This definition proves useful insofar as it allows Said to distinguish culture and politics as two distinct fields while simultaneously demonstrating how even ostensibly "apolitical" cultural products and practices serve to enable and legitimize a political system, since they structure the system of values upholding said political system. Nonetheless, Said's interpretive framework remains largely dominated by the centrality of State politics, critically following Matthew Arnold's argument that "culture is potentially nothing less than the power of the State" (10), thereby leaving us unprepared to understand the relationship between culture and alternative insurgent political visions dedicated to autonomy from the State and capitalism that have been developing over the past decades. That is, following the politics of autonomy that have been theorized by Ana Dinerstein, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, John Holloway, Raúl Zibechi, and many others, one is

left asking: What is the relationship between culture and the politics of autonomy? What is the relationship between culture and radical politics when our discourse is not centered around the State?

This is where Magalí Rabasa's marvelous 2019 work, *The Book in Movement* comes in: her work is dedicated to exploring the possibilities for a cultural project linked to the politics of autonomy. More precisely, she examines how independent small presses throughout Latin America are currently developing cultural-organizational practices with which to promulgate and popularize a culture, political theory, and material praxis of autonomy. Although the book therefore inevitably speaks about the political commitments of the practitioners of the radical small presses, what might be more compelling is her exploration of how an attendant culture is emerging that serves to support the objectives and motives of autonomous social movements across Latin America. In an introduction, four chapters, and an epilogue, Rabasa makes a profound, insightful, and highly needed intervention in the current discussions of autonomous politics from the fields of cultural studies and book studies, one that will likely make waves in other disciplines including, but not limited to, literary studies, political theory, Latin American studies, communication studies, and sociology. It is therefore to be expected that in the near future it will become an essential point of contact for discussions on the relationship between culture and the politics of autonomy.

The Book in Movement opens with an introduction outlining the theoretical stake of Rabasa's project: the role of independent book publishing within the politics of autonomy. As Rabasa defines the politics of autonomy:

> popular movements and experiments with autonomous politics are defined by their practices, including self-organization, horizontalism, cooperativism, and mutual aid. In this way, the twenty-first century movements…are characterized by their shift away from programmatic and top-down approaches to political organizing and privilege dialogue and communication as their basic modes while working from the everyday to build prefigurative politics. (5)

For Rabasa, the politics of autonomy is dedicated to a recognition of "the limits of the revolutionary potential of a state project" (27), and the subsequent development of novel, prefigurative, and egalitarian modes of political praxis and theory outside the structures of the State and capitalism.

As Rabasa argues in the introduction, the "shifting network of small presses" she analyzes—a network dedicated to the production of "low-cost books," "an autonomous political perspective," "collective forms of organization," and "engagement in local and transnational political networks of presses, writers, and movements"—is the cultural actualization of this autonomous political framework

(16). Not only do these small presses "create and disseminate a new body of political theory" of autonomy, but they also embody this theory within their *modus operandi*. It is through this discussion that Rabasa develops her key conceptual addition, what she calls *the organic book*: "the organic book is an autonomous object that emerges not from institutional dynamics and structures (nor a singular individual author) but rather from collective practices of experimentation and becoming" (14). Through this analysis, Rabasa identifies the organic book as a novel cultural practice that legitimizes and enables Latin America's postmillennial politics of autonomy. The rest of the book explores how the organic book accomplishes such a task.

The first chapter is dedicated to the "autonomous knowledge practices" (38) that have been developed in the autonomous presses studied by Rabasa. Through a reading of Raúl Zibechi's *Dispersar el poder*, Bajo Tierra Ediciones's collected volume of *Pensar las autonomías*, and Claudia Korol's *Caleidoscopio de rebeldías*, Rabasa makes a compelling case for how the organic book's "focus on collectivity, dialogism, and horizontality reorient[s] practices of thinking and communicating as relational and active rather than authoritative and fixed" (37). As she writes, "All three books explore the question of how to engage ideas and practices that break with the colonial and capitalist dynamics of the state and its extension into everyday life. They each propose distinct concept-practices that are significant dimensions of the organic book: dispersion of power, autonomous praxis, and popular pedagogy" (39). What appears in her account of these tracts is not necessarily a unified and univocal political-cultural theory of autonomy, but rather a "kaleidoscope of knowledge practices" in which autonomous knowledge production is better understood through the "relations and practices" generating the organic book than through "referents of knowledge" (58). The determining factor of the organic book, in other words, is the prefigurative conditions of collective autonomous existence under which the book is produced, not exclusively the scientific methods, archives, bibliographies, and so on that inform the book's creation.

The second chapter examines the relations of production of the organic book through an exploration of the workshops in which said books are created. In this way, the central question of the chapter is the following: "What does a production process look like when the use-value of books…is prioritized over their potential exchange-value, or profitability?" (61) Here, Rabasa argues, the organic book of autonomous small presses does not offer "an alternative *model* of book production," but rather opens a laboratory of experiments in novel book-production practices that "disorganize, unsettle, and *desordenan* (disorder)…the social relations and economic principles that underlie commercial, profit-oriented

production" (71). Recognizing that the autonomous knowledge practices of the organic book seek to explore alternative modes of coordinating social relations, Rabasa's second chapter demonstrates how small-press cooperatives and workshops seek "to organize work, time, and life differently" (93) in a way that reflects this emerging political theory. Not arguing that these publishers reconfigure their relations of production in response to the political theory identified in chapter one, Rabasa makes a much more nuanced argument: that the political theory and the autonomous relations of production are mutually reinforcing—one is impossible without the other.

The third chapter, dedicated to an analysis of what Rabasa calls *the unbounded book*, refers to a common process among small publishers: a given book is published by a plethora of presses, each with a distinct edition, composition, and perhaps introduction or preface, rather than through the creation of an authoritative, univocal edition. As she summarizes, "this chapter analyzes the ways that books get reedited and reprinted repeatedly by different presses to consider what happens when books travel across the continent, through networks that are constantly shifting with no centralized or institutionalized coordination" (100). The singular book thereby comes to acquire a kaleidoscope of multiple meanings depending on the workshop, context, and assemblage in which the book is printed, "They become multiple through the connections they form and that form them" (99). As Rabasa concludes, organic book publishing can more properly be described as a "productive consumption" (132), in which a book comes to be made through its multiple printings across a medley of contexts.

In the fourth and final chapter, Rabasa extends the analysis of chapter three in order to explore the distribution networks and book markets that link together various small autonomous presses throughout Latin America: "This chapter is about the exchange and encounter generated by organic books as they move from producer networks to consumer networks" (134). That is, Rabasa demonstrates that not only does the organic book manifest alternative relations of production and autonomous knowledge practices, but additionally is generating continental-scale networks of circulation. She accomplishes this task by investigating the *independent book fairs* that are spaces of encounter for fostering trans-national collectivization. As she puts it, these networks are not a type of globalization, but instead embody a "trans/local practice" (135) that can be described as the rhizomatic linking of singularities of autonomous small presses across Latin America.

Rabasa's work is effective not only insofar as its argumentation carefully, elegantly, and robustly outlines the political-cultural consequences of Latin

America's autonomous small presses, but because it makes the reader *want* to actively participate in these autonomous networks. When Gayatri Spivak (2012, 38) argues that "literature might be the best complement to ideological transformation" insofar as it "buys your assent in an almost clandestine way" by making the reader learn "to identify implicitly with the value system figured forth by literature," I can only imagine that she has books like Rabasa's in mind: books that make one want to join the world described between its covers. Rabasa's work is an extremely convincing invitation to participate in the cultural worlds tied to autonomous politics that are currently emerging throughout the Western Hemisphere.

On the surface, this may also appear to be the central contradiction of the work. Although it celebrates autonomous small presses, *The Book in Movement* was first published by a prestigious university press with a well-established reputation in Latin American Studies (Pittsburgh University Press). Rabasa addresses this contradiction in the epilogue. Here, writing about Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui republishing a translation of a fragment of her *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa* with Duke University Press's *South Atlantic Quarterly*—despite the fact that Rivera explicitly critiques some faculty of Duke University and "specific members of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* editorial board" (174)—Rabasa concludes with the hope that the organic book might infiltrate and transform academic book production: "The organic book, with its reorientation of theory and politics, opens the possibility of subverting the kinds of North/South knowledge relations that have been so compellingly critiqued in postcolonial and subaltern studies" (170). Rabasa herself has attempted to carry out this imperative: the co-publication of Ezequiel Gatt's Spanish translation of *The Book in Movement* by two autonomous small publishers, Tinta Limón and Tren en movimiento, with a new prologue by Andrés Bracony and Alejandro Schmied, is precisely the idea of the "unbounded book" explored by Rabasa in the third chapter. What this translation ostensibly represents is the transformation of the academic book into an organic book. Indeed, in the introduction she talks about the hope that insurgent "knowledge practices" might "contaminate" and thereby transform dominant book production (17). In this way, Rabasa is not merely postulating a hypothesis but is working out in reality whether that hypothesis can be actualized in practice: can the academic book be transformed into an organic book by inserting it into the networks of the autonomous small press?

Nonetheless, this points to a recurring question I had while reading *The Book in Movement*: where is the discussion of hegemony? More precisely, this lack of a discussion of hegemony is curious given that Rabasa's central conceptual

development, "the organic book," is a development of Gramsci's conceptualization of the organic intellectual (12-13). For Gramsci, hegemony is constituted by the development of a civil institutional framework of only apparently private organizations, "like the Church, trade unions, or schools" (Gramsci 1979, 204) that serve to "disseminate" a given class's "conception of life" (Gramsci 1992a, 187). For Gramsci, domination is therefore not constituted exclusively by "a dictatorship or some other coercive apparatus used to control the masses in conformity with a given type of production and economy" (Gramsci 1979, 204), but rather by the combination of that "political society" with the "civil society" in a way that generates consent—conscious or otherwise—regarding the coordination of social relations. It may seem, therefore, that the small presses analyzed by Rabasa are taking the first step towards hegemony: the trans-local formation of a civil institutional framework that articulates an alternative mode of coordinating social relations. The task of this cultural project, then, would apparently be its expansion in various popular sectors to build its strength—a strength that would include the formation of other resonant civil institutions—and eventually attempt to seize State power and nationalize its socio-political vision. It is in this sense that Gramsci (1992b) argues, "The subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'State'" (52); seizing the power of the State is more precisely the successful development of a robust civil society capable of organizing social relations, one element of which would apparently be the autonomous small presses discussed by Rabasa.

Since the publication of John Holloway's *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2002), however, autonomous politics has explicitly attempted to imagine ways of arriving to a world governed by self-determination without seizing state power. As such, it is unsurprising that Rabasa's research never uncovers a demand to displace mainstream and hegemonic publishing processes, but only to offer an alternative. Indeed, many of the workshops and book fairs Rabasa discusses explicitly define themselves in contraposition to hegemonic book production processes, not in conflict with them. In this way, the subtitle of the work, "Autonomous Politics and the Lettered City Underground" is itself testimony to the limitation of the autonomous small presses: they are seemingly destined to remain in the so-called underground without ever offering a viable liberatory project, only a minor refuge to a limited audience. Rabasa herself acknowledges "the extremely marginal place of the organic book" (18).

This is a problem discussed in one of Rabasa's sources: *Pensar las autonomías*. Two authors in this work, Mabel Thwaites Rey and Ezequiel Admovsky, warn

about how envisioning autonomous politics as the formation of a "sociedad paralela" is "hoy inviable" (Thwaites Rey 2011, 189). Adamovsky's (2011) use of the example of Google is particularly compelling. As he argues, Google is successful precisely because it is so effective, because it offers a desirable service. Upon eliminating Google and empowering autonomous "search engine" practices, he writes, many would likely simply become attracted to the first organization that can accomplish what Google previously did. What we need, he writes, is to generate "una alternativa organizativa que permita realizar eficazmente las funciones que Google desempeña…poniendo cualquier concentración de flujos que fuere necesaria dentro de un marco institucional [autónomo] que garantice que esa concentración no subvierta los valores emancipatorios que la 'vida cotidiana' (biopolítica) de la red de redes [autónoma] promete" (229). In other words, Rabasa does not seem to adequately address the possibility that the academic monograph and the autonomous organic book are fundamentally in conflict, and what needs to be imagined is not a "parallel society" of underground autonomous book production—or the hybridization of the two in a manner that still leaves intact the processes of book production tied to the academic monograph—but rather an "alternative organization that permits us to effectively realize the functions that academic publishing performs," functions that, her work admits, are not currently carried out by the autonomous small presses.

More precisely, Rabasa seems to hope in the epilogue that the infiltration of the organic book into hegemonic academic publishing will substantially transform the latter. Yet it is not entirely clear how we are to distinguish this transformation from the participation (even if critical participation) in a hegemonic publishing process that serves to support a significant civil institution of the United States, namely, the university. How this transformation would not be the reconfiguration of an already existing hegemonic project, and therefore the antithesis of autonomous politics, is uncertain. She seems to suggest a response on the antepenultimate page of the book (174), acknowledging that there is a direct relationship between academic publishing and the institutional space of the university, while identifying how such publishing might catalyze "extra-institutional" organization, but only alluding to it rather than fully developing it. Perhaps what is imagined is the de-hegemonization or deconstruction of academic publishing—in chapter one Rabasa talks of the autonomous small press in terms of facilitating "the explicit or implicit deconstruction of the dominant machines as part of the process of creating autonomous machines" (39)—but this is where the challenge of the previous paragraph returns: academic publishing is dominant not

only through coercion (making academic employment contingent on using certain academic publishers; weaponizing access to scientific knowledge against universities; persecuting attempts to make scientific knowledge free; and so on), but because it offers the efficient realization of certain functions, as Adamovsky argues. By publishing with a major academic press, Rabasa forces us to address these questions and her work is absolutely invaluable in its discussion of small presses and their relationship to the politics of autonomy, but it requires further development in future research with respect to this other side of Gramsci's theorization: hegemony.

I speak of future research intentionally since it would be highly inappropriate to exclusively critique Rabasa for this limitation. Indeed, it might be said that the central tension of autonomous politics is how to adequately engage with hegemonic powers in a way that avoids institutionalization, appropriation, or becoming a new hegemonic power (McNaughton 2008). Ana Dinerstein (2015) resolves this issue by saying that autonomous politics does not seek a mode of self-determination that replaces the State (or hegemonic book publishers for that matter) but is instead "an untranslatable aspect of the autonomous praxis that constitutes both a threat to capital and a source of inspiration for the movements" (201). As such, "Disappointment," defined as the *appropriation* or *institutionalization* of an autonomous movement—e.g., the incorporation of a small press into academic publishing networks—and therefore the apparent "betrayal" of its founding principles, "is not something that has to be avoided but is a necessity of the process" (70). It might be said that Dinerstein repeats the same thesis as Rabasa: autonomous movements will always be an underground phenomenon, whose aspirations for expansion will produce continuous disappointment. We must accept disappointment, the underground, institutionalization, appropriation, and so on rather than trying to eliminate them.

Yet such a conclusion feels inadequate, and seemingly betrays the hope embedded in Holloway's theorization that there might be a way to change the world without taking power. Rabasa's epilogue tries to address this gap by putting the academic article into conversation with the organic book, and *The Book in Movement*'s recent publication in Spanish is a manifestation of this desire to subvert "North/South knowledge relations" (170). Nonetheless, Rabasa avoids a simple counter argument: the distribution networks of Taylor and Francis, Duke University Press, Elsevier, and so on outstrip any of the most ambitious visions of the small presses she covers. Indeed, although I can now find most of the titles she analyzes in her work on the internet, that does not detract from the fact that many

of them are difficult to find (e.g., *Caleidoscopio de rebeldías*), that it is easier to buy a copy of Rabasa's English monograph from the United States than the new Spanish translation, and that it is often easier to access titles from academic publishers than from autonomous publishers like Quimantú even though the latter is only an hour from my home in Chile. These dominant presses are not only dominant because of the oppressive power of capital and the institutional demands of the academic world, but because they offer certain attractive elements to both authors and readers (a wide distribution network, copy-editing, production quality, and so on). The question remains: How can the organic book accomplish these same tasks without betraying its principles, without accepting that disappointment is the inevitable end of its radical utopian activity?

Again, it would be wholly inappropriate to hold Rabasa responsible for resolving this dilemma given that it is perhaps *the* dilemma of autonomous politics. She attempts to keep it at bay by leaving the question of hegemony undiscussed and allowing the organic book to remain underground. But in so doing, she seems to ignore that the eventual goal of Gramsci's political project—and with it the *organic intellectual*, the concept inspiring the idea of the organic book—was the formation of a revolutionary, popular, and national collective will. Rabasa's theory of the organic book is convincing, but I wonder if it has abandoned Holloway's hope to change the world without taking power, leaving it open to the inevitable critique of autonomous politics as a "safety valve" for discontent but not a revolutionary project. A pertinent question for future research, and by no means a critique of Rabasa's wonderful study.

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