

In Conversation: Peggy Deamer and Keefer Dunn

PEGGY DEAMER

“Crowd” is such a provocative term: unruly or communal? Packed or popular? And it is a pivotal term that lies behind much of what the Architecture Lobby, an organization that advocates for the value of architecture in the public and in the discipline itself, must take on. What crowd do we speak for and what crowd do we speak to? Is the crowd resistant to a new message of architectural value or supportive of the Lobby’s provocation? On the one hand, there is a whole “crowd” of architectural workers who need to understand their rights and their power. On the other hand, there is the “crowd” - the population - that could benefit from a more enlightened approach to producing the built environment.

Peggy Deamer and Keefer Dunn, the Content Coordinator and Organization Coordinator, respectively, of the Lobby, enter into a dialogue here that offers them the opportunity to explore the difficult and often tension-filled approaches that drive the Lobby. We hope this gives insight to both the significance of “crowd” in the architectural context and the work of the Architectural Lobby.

Peggy Deamer: Keefer, when I think of “crowd” and the work we do, I think of Hardt and Negri’s “multitude” and how that notion - a rhizomatic aggregation of individuals which capitalism cannot control and hence has liberatory connotations - inspires what we - a group of diverse but passionate individuals - can do. But I see how your experience as an organizer who understands the need to bring order and due processes to the Lobby as a coherent whole

and not random individuals is essential to our effectiveness. I wonder how you see the unified versus varied aspects of our “crowd”?

Keefer Dunn: I think, as you may have suspected, that I have trouble with using Hardt and Negri’s conception as a frame for doing the work of mobilizing the crowd even as I find their fundamental optimism in the masses to be inspirational and correct. In some sense, it rings true with my operative understanding of Marxism - that there is a mass of exploited laborers that make everything actually work and because they make everything work, have a vast and unrealized power.

But recognizing, organizing, and operationalizing that power is for me the more pertinent task of the left - and, in our slice of the economy, The Architecture Lobby. In my experience, people are typically quick to recognize when they are on the short side of power, and save for those who think that is a temporary condition, the task of the organizer is to provide a framework for collective activity.

I think it is interesting that Hardt and Negri appear as characters at this moment because the debate about organization vs. the spontaneity of the masses is an old one in the left; the autonomist tradition falls clearly on the side of spontaneity.

In my own thoughts and actions, I try to follow Rosa Luxembour’s approach to the question. Luxembour doesn’t set organization or spontaneity against each other but sees them as inseparable parts of the same momentum. Collapsing the distinction helps her chart a clear case for how to move forward. The lesson is couched in the context of the inter-war German SPD, but is widely applicable:

The social democrats (SPD) are the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat. They cannot and dare not wait, in a fatalist fashion, with folded arms for the advent of the “revolutionary situation,” to wait for that which in every spontaneous people’s movement, falls from the clouds. On the contrary, they must now, as always, hasten the development of things and endeavor to accelerate events. This they cannot do, however, by suddenly issuing the “slogan” for a mass strike at random at any odd moment, but first and foremost, by making clear to the widest layers of the proletariat the inevitable advent of this revolutionary period, the inner social factors making for it and the political consequences of it. (Luxembourg. “The Mass Strike”)

Organization on its own can’t will forth any real power, and the radical spontaneity of the masses may not ever be realized without it. The task she outlines for the radicals, “Making [it] clear,” requires going out there, creating media apparatuses to proselytize, sharpening our own theories and analyses about the situation, winning reforms so that more and more people recognize their capacity to make change, and most importantly building democratic organizational infrastructures that allow all of this to unfold. It might be a little cheesy, but I would substitute the formal metaphor of the rhizome with the metaphor of building a trellis.

I can’t help but feel like I’m always skipping past the set of left references that are most familiar to architects, namely the Frankfurt School. It’s a school of thought that is indispensable for explaining and analyzing the mechanisms through which capitalist cultural hegemony

keeps the crowd in check, but that is also why it can be very demoralizing – especially to a group of architects and thinkers who are accustomed to fighting on the terrain of culture and discourse!

To be clear, I think making waves in those arenas is central to the work we do in the Lobby but it still feels a bit like squaring the circle. My question then is: how do you see the role of discourse and cultural shifts in relation to the crowd and the Lobby?

PD: I love your question because it goes to the heart of what we are doing right here – spending time writing this – and why. Let me get to my answer in a round-about way by further nuancing (as you did in your response to my question) the terms that we are using. I think the various ways we see these terms points to our differing MO’s, even if those differences fade away as we agree on what needs to be done.

For me, there is a big distinction between the terms “masses” and “the multitude”, not just because they have different pedigrees but because they point to different things. The “masses” points to the basic similarity between individuals, i.e., as workers, and “the multitude” points to their multiplicity, i.e., “worker” isn’t the singular signifier in subjectivity.

I know this sounds anti-Marxist, but it goes to the heart of Italian Autonomism, from which Hardt and Negri come and which you rightly reference. For them, as for the Operaismo/ Workerists before them, the position was not only a profound recognition of worker power – that Italian workers could wholly stop the economy and the country if they didn’t work – but their resistance to the idea that they were workers first and whole subjects second. They didn’t like being factory workers; it was neither the life nor the identity they subscribed to; factory work was grueling and oppressive. Worker identity was necessary but not sufficient for them. But further, the difference between the Workerists and the subsequent Automatists

was exactly the latter's rhizomatic approach to who was included in the multitude – amongst other things, domestics and women – and how they were heard – not through traditional frameworks, like political parties, with hierarchical structures. This means for me that what Hardt and Negri put forward is not merely the “spontaneous” side of Luxemburg's organization vs spontaneity balance but something qualitatively different.

The term “proletariat,” given this, should be nuanced as well, but I think parsing “revolution” might get us farther since it goes so much to the heart of how we – as crowds, as masses, as a multitude, as the Architectural Lobby, as you and me – prepare for a better future. I just don't believe in the revolution. I'm not a teleological historian and tend to think we will never get to the other side of capitalism. This is not depressing. Yes, in a Deleuzian manner, forces for undoing capitalism get co-opted and usurped by capitalism; but similarly, the forces undoing capitalism are always at work exposing its internal inconsistencies and blundering inadequacies. That process, which has many rewards for subjectivity – we are not condemned to waiting for the post-revolution to realize our full potential – is also deeply creative. Plotting to outstrip capitalist territorialization stretches our humanity and requires constant reinvention.

*To circle back to your question to me: I do think there is much to be gained by the Frankfurt School's analysis of how culture and cultural discourse aids the capitalist agenda. More than an embrace of the (mere) superstructure at the expense of the base (an assumption which I think underlies your critique of the School), the Frankfurt School illuminates the role that (capitalist) ideology plays in creating a subject that functions smoothly in capitalism. I know that the Frankfurt School does not intellectually own the critique of ideology, but, many of us recognized ourselves as operating in the capitalist system for the first time by reading *Critical Theory*. The Frankfurt School so clearly understood the complexity of being “an artist” while exploding the myth of genius and autonomy.*

I guess I see the role of discourse and cultural shifts in relation to the crowd (and the Lobby) as one that prepares a new architectural subject – one capable of recognizing shit when we are in it. From there, we can be open to change, organization and “operationalization” (love it).

So let me ask you. In what sense do you believe in the revolution?

KD: I certainly do believe in the revolution, and for me, it's not a utopian (or aggressively violent) quest at all. There is a fantastic book called “Revolutionary Rehearsals” edited by Colin Barker that outlines the rise and fall of revolutionary moments throughout the 20th century. Although frank about the shortcomings of historic revolutionary movements, the book demonstrates how rigorous historical analysis can help check the prevalent ideological assumption that a failure to win a bottom up democratic socialism is tantamount to a failure of revolutionary ideology. Instead it advances the idea that these failures are lessons that both provide corrective lessons and point to the possibility of a similar revolutionary movement succeeding.

In much Marxist thought, revolution isn't insurrectionary or violent except in the sense that revolution is an extreme break with existing social relations. To be a bit reductive, revolution is the moment when large enough masses (perhaps representing multitudes) of workers are organized well enough and possess a level of class consciousness sufficient to simply go on strike en masse and proclaim a new social order.

It is the radical and total realization that workers make the world work, so they should be the body of people in charge of that world. And since the working class is a collective body,

that control can only happen through radical democracy.

The aim of revolution is nothing more than gaining genuinely democratic control of the economy; that is a simple enough aim, but such a radical change in the core economic mechanisms of society lead to a whole new form of sociability, which is the actual goal of revolution and which Karl Kautsky termed the “Social Revolution.”

Kautsky has been written off by the left because of his role in marshaling the SPD’s support for war in 1914, which is a shame because his 1903 book *The Social Revolution and on the Morrow of the Social Revolution* is one of the more compelling works of history and theory on this subject. In the introduction, he also takes a very nuanced aim on the subject of reform or revolution by stating that in either case, the conquest of political power by the oppressed classes is the mechanism that allows the social revolution to unfold.

For me, this is also the barometer of whether fights for reforms are worth it or not. Does a reform or an activist fight help build political power for workers? Does it help them realize the strength of their economic position (i.e. nothing works without workers)? Does it help build their class consciousness? Is it making it easier for folks to believe in a better future (i.e. one with fewer forces limiting their subjectivity?)

I think the two last questions are the most pertinent and in many ways, the project of the Lobby. The reason that they are good questions is because they posit subjectivity and enlightenment as things that are won through political struggles of many kinds. In other words, the recognition that you are



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a worker first and a whole subject second is for me part of a dialectic relationship to political struggle and not its precondition. Luxemburg discusses this too in “Reform or Revolution” which I think is a must-read for anyone with an interest in left politics. You often hear the idea summarized as “reforms in the service of revolution” – meaning reforms that weaken the capitalist structure and, in so doing, can help the working class to get a sense of itself and recognize its own agency to make change.

Narrowing this down to the scope of the Lobby might help contextualize some of my positions in the debates we have internally. For instance, I think that the discussion about transforming the value of architecture so as to emphasize our role as knowledge workers and our relevance to the current economy puts us in lock-step with neoliberal attitudes and platitudes about disruption and innovation. But, counterintuitively, I think that in the case of a discipline that is becoming superfluous to the economy at-large, conversations and action to increase architecture’s economic relevance to neoliberalism might constitute a reform in the service of revolution.

There is a big caveat here, that such a push would only be positive for the Lobby and architecture workers if the impetus for change is coming from below - allowing us to help architectural workers develop a consciousness about their relationship to capital, and their power within it as workers. That would help lay the groundwork and provide a material basis for winning the more radical demands and actions in the future that I'm actually interested in. In other words, it's meeting people where they are at by having a conversation about how we save our jobs and livelihoods in the context of existential threats to architecture and the world, and eventually expanding into conversations and actions around the system that created that crises in the first place - capitalism.

We also have had a long-running debate about whether we should be focusing on cooperativizing small offices or unionizing large ones. I think we've correctly landed on the idea that it is essential to do both, given the industry trend toward the consolidation of medium-sized firms into large offices along with the proliferation of small offices of fewer than ten, and the different relationships to capital implied by these differences in scale.

But I still have strong feelings on the manner in which we conceptualize both cooperatives and unions. One of my hesitations about cooperatives is that they are limited to a small scale, but I do think that they provide an important example of how a better world could be possible. However, they only accomplish that aim if they are focused primarily on a radical reinvention of the social relations between manager and employee,

or owner and worker. If the cooperative only seeks to soothe the pains of a downwardly mobile petit-bourgeois by resource-sharing, that is insufficient, although I would grant that tactically, it may be a necessary step towards laying the groundwork for more radical forms of cooperativization.

I've been a proponent of focusing on union efforts because by definition they include a larger number of architects, and also because the power to negotiate a collective contract is an obvious step towards the development of class consciousness and power. However, this too has limits (which Luxembourg also discusses in "Reform or Revolution"), especially in the current context of business unionism, but I am optimistic about the increasing interest in rank-and-file unionism. Since in many ways we are trying to build a union of architects from scratch, I think we are well positioned to pursue a rank-and-file strategy that ensures unionizing is a "reform in the service of revolution." Interestingly, the term "whole subject" has some resonance with one of the chief proponents of a rank-and-file union strategy, Jane McAlevey, who uses the term "Whole Worker Organizing." I'll quote at length from a review of McAlevey's book "No Shortcuts":

Advocacy is the lowest form of worker participation. It "doesn't involve ordinary people in any real way; lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle." Mobilizing does bring significant numbers of people into the fight, but they are, McAlevey contends, generally the already committed activists, not the mass of the workforce and community, "because a professional staff directs,

manipulates, and controls the mobilization; they see themselves, not ordinary people, as the key agents of change.”

McAlevy insists on a third approach, organizing proper, which is differentiated by its emphasis on continually bringing new layers of people who have never been organized before into the fold and empowering them to recursively expand and continue that process. In this context, campaigns and activism matter, but primarily act as a mechanism that builds worker power by bringing in new people and keeping them involved. In McAlevy’s words it is ordinary people who “help make the power analysis, design the strategy, and achieve the outcome.”

So that is my abbreviated case for revolution, and I think we may have to agree to disagree on the subject. But I am curious whether you think that we will ever move beyond capitalism or transform it into something that is unrecognizable (and hopefully positive) from its present mode of operation? And if so, what role will architects play in that transformation?

PD: No, I actually do not believe we will ever move beyond capitalism. The freedom to which we are supposed to arrive at the end of history will always elude us. Why do I think this?

1. As long as we have money, we have abstracted relationships to value; and as long as that is the case, we will not recognize the real value of any production – either the work itself or the product. And it is hard to imagine our giving up money.

2. The distinction between labor and owner is now so screwy. The fact that we divide between labor and management as opposed to labor and owners is an indication of the problem – management workers are workers who just don’t identify as such. But in our current economy, managerialism has totally

taken over: no one “owns” or cares about the actual PRODUCT but only on how you make obedient and efficient workers to yield a profit for shareholders – the true owners who don’t give a shit about either the process or the product.

Managerialism is related to finance capitalism, meaning a) no one is asking the big question of whether we should be producing what we are producing; and b) few in this arrangement identify as “proletariat”. 3. Thus, capitalism makes itself unrecognizable in a way that Marx couldn’t have imagined. In post-productive finance capital – which has transformed, as Wendy Brown has articulated, “the character of nation-state and NGO’s, universities and corporations, start-ups and social life” – the very measure of value is transformed. As Brown also points out, exploited labor is not the engine moving finance capital. Neoliberalism has “brought new actors and powers onto the world stage” that “require a different and more complex account of capital’s sources, means of enhancement, and shape-shifting capacities than the labor theory of value can provide.”

What we can do is mitigate capitalism’s hegemony on our lives and its effects on our planet. For me, Marx’s biggest contribution is his analysis of capitalism – an analysis that will allow us to recognize it through its effects on subjectivity. While he could not have imagined finance capitalism, he understood capitalism’s inherent tendency to invent new “needs” and its destabilization of our personal relationships (be they worker to worker, child to parent, man to woman, human to nature). I follow Marx the analyzer of capitalism’s central role in alienated subjectivity, but not Marx the historiographer.

But to bring this back to the issue of “crowds” (and the Architecture Lobby as a crowd and as an organization that wants to mobilize a crowd), I actually want to talk about how your emphasis on organization and unions (the latter being, I always think, a means to an end and not an ideal in themselves) and mine on, individual agency, come together. Because I think they DO come together, perhaps in three different, not necessarily compatible, scenarios.

One I referred to earlier: that raising awareness, which happens at the level of individuality, precedes organizing the mass(es). The second is embedded in the idea of radical democracy, in which the various individual voices are invited to articulate their difference in a never-ending effort to achieve “freedom” for all. The third basically accepts that things always move dialectically between the two poles of individual empowerment and the organization that supports empowerment.

The role that the architects then play in “mitigating capitalism’s hegemony on our lives and the effects on our planet” is a really poignant question. I once thought that architects could only aim for mitigating their own internal economic, organizational, and conceptual problems; that taking control of our means of production is what we could and should hope for. But I actually have come to think that we might be an uber discipline; one that has the capacity, perhaps in the success of that modeling, to affect better forms of production in general.

The fact that we are the last discipline to come to any understanding of labor might be an indication that capitalist ideology has worked particularly hard to suppress our potential, potent value as caretakers of the constructed world. It scares me to think this because it plays into an idea of disciplinary exceptionalism which has been architecture’s excuse to look away from labor. But it could be that in understanding architectural labor more fully, our “exceptionalism” will come out the other end: our ability to deliver a more humane built environment.

KD: The idea of architecture as an uber-discipline is compelling and I think in line with the nature of our work today. At all levels of architecture workers spend so much time coordinating and managing timelines, budgets, processes, etc. Even though so much of our work has been specialized, information must still be centralized and coordinated. We exist at the nexus

of that centralization, we are the centralizers. It is one of the reasons why it’s so important we organize into a union. It would allow an extension of worker power from our peers in the construction industry into the design office - into a single place where all of the decisions about time and money have to flow through.

Kim Moody, the labor writer, has similar analysis about the potentials for workers inherent in the hub and spoke dynamic in the logistics industry. The concentration of the flow of goods through only a handful of sorting and distribution facilities means that workers in those facilities have unprecedented power to bring the economy to a halt in the name of better working conditions and a better world. I think you can apply a similar lens in many industries and workplaces because the potential for building for worker power and for winning socialism is always already latent within capitalism.

So while I think it’s true that there will be no end of history, for the above reasons, I do think there will be an end to capitalism. I think all of the things you’ve highlighted are undoubtedly real phenomena but, to me, they do not present an inevitable foreclosure of democratic control of the means of production. I think money as a means of exchange doesn’t have to be abstract and can be linked to labor-time as Marx conceptualizes it in his essay on the labor theory of value.

Likewise, I think the rise in power of the managerial class is a recent historical development that bears serious inquiry—but again, I don’t think that the fundamentals of the critique have changed. If you have to sell your labor power to survive (as the vast majority of people, including

most managers, do), then you are being exploited. Certainly, ownership has become increasingly abstracted into systems of finance capital and has become highly mystified and abstracted, but counter to Brown, I would suggest that this doesn't change the fundamental fact of exploitation. If we imagine a moment where no workers showed up to work, the economy would of course crash.

Our accounts of capitalism's functions might take on new complexities, but the fact that economies are still dependent on human labor (and they always will be: automation fears have been with us since the Luddites, but machines have invariably created new jobs in the long term) means there is always a chance for that labor to organize and win an end to exploitation.

A recent Gallup poll from August 2018 showed that more people than ever, including a majority of left-leaning people, as well as a majority of people that lean left, view socialism more favorably than capitalism. Beyond that, the rapid growth of groups like Democratic Socialists of America and the proliferation of groups like The Architecture Lobby in many corners of the economy give me great hope that we are witnessing the rebirth of a left capable of continuously expanding its horizons, perhaps even to the point of ending capitalism.

But to your more immediately relevant point, I totally agree with your outline of three ways that the individual impulse and organized power merge together but, with the proviso that they do not precede or succeed each other. The most frustrating and odd part about organizing is that everything is happening at the same time, and different people find the Lobby at different points in their political

development, and with different agencies, knowledges, and skill-sets. It's more complicated than that as well because as an organization we, too, are in motion. We have to be comfortable with things being non-sequential. Organizing implies there are no prerequisites to getting involved or taking action, we have to meet people where they are at and take them as far as they can go, in their own time.

That messiness can be frustrating and complicated, but its presence is a sign of progress and vitality - even if that progress is slow. Being in motion is critical because it means that not only are we productively bouncing between the poles of individuality and collectivity in a bid for higher enlightenment but also that we are building the capacity in workplaces of all kinds to go even further. It is the difference between someone coming around the Lobby and saying "you guys should do X thing" and someone saying "we should do X thing." In both cases the imperative stems from an individual impulse, but when the onus of action lands on the "we," it gains a new legitimacy and a new kind of audience that can help nurture the impulse for change and ultimately give it the force of a collective.

PD: Well, it is clear that we have different reference points that guide our actions and our understanding of the Lobby, but equally clear that they set us both up for hopeful change and the hard work it requires. But to bring this back to "Crowds" and to point to a conclusion, I think that, besides the individual vs masses debate, you've pointed to another crucial aspect of "crowds": commitment.

I totally admire and have learned from your belief that if we don't get people to participate - to be change agents and not merely supportive bystanders - change won't happen. At the

same time, perhaps because I teach and am surrounded by young'uns who want to connect to the next coolest thing, I strive to make the need for change (with the issue of work at its center) cool. The role of persuasion fascinates me. How do you persuade students (or architects in general) that "formal autonomy" is much less cool than sharing knowledge and participating in the world's problems? I know that getting people to think that the Lobby's issues are cool is different than getting active commitment; but maybe this dichotomy, like the fluidity between the individual and the masses, is one of oscillation and, inevitable adjustment to operating in our current social-mediated world. It's tough not to look over one's shoulder to see how an opinion is being interpreted by one's peers. Maybe that is sad, but I want to be generous to those who worry about what commitment means while we nudge them to enlightenment.

This all, I think, brings us to radical democracy and its notion of "crowd": that in the crowd, one doesn't strive for consensus, harmony, and resolution, but, rather, openness to debate and the continual refinement of the terms of debate. I think that is a cool goal and something we should commit to.

KD: It's definitely not about having a pure commitment to the struggle - that is exactly the kind of attitude that is the death knell of any kind of movement. Lionizing "the fight" above all else can be counter to the goal of actually winning the fight. After all, we need to make our ideas mainstream - not just part of the mainstream discussion but mainstream legislation, policies, and most importantly worker organization. It's maybe the reason I am skeptical of things becoming "cool" - of course, that is good and helpful to building awareness, bringing people in, and changing the tenor of the discourse - but I have my eye on the long-term goal of making the reforms

we want to see ordinary and uncool parts of everyday life!

But certainly one of the things that makes me feel really good about the Lobby is that we have a multifaceted strategy. A strategy just premised on persuasion is always going to wash up against the power of capitalism to commoditize even the most radical cultural ideas. A strategy premised only on activist organizing often marginalizes those who can't or don't forge their identity around being organizers - leading to a bitter and cult-like group. A strategy premised only on "changing things from the inside" (ie. if we all quit the Lobby and joined the AIA) will have its political horizons diminished by force of the status-quo. A strategy premised only on building the world we want in the here-and-now (ie. co-ops and alternative practices) will always be limited in its ability to spread beyond the scale of the local because of the intense commitment needed to make those types of ventures successful. I could go on and on, left-history is littered with failures that we can learn from, but the point is that while any singular strategy on its own has limits, when multiple strategies are contained within the same momentum and a single organization they can play to each other's strengths and weaknesses to create the conditions for winning and making change.

That, of course, makes it harder to measure outcomes but it is the only way I see to actually win.

What's most exciting about the Lobby is that we are doing that! We are doing it in our work around immigration in #NotOurWall, in our Infrastructure (parallel AIA) National Think-In, in our JustDesign. Us exemplary firms campaign, in our

work to set up small firm cooperatives and large firm unionization; indeed, all of the chapters and working groups that are constantly rabble rousing. The experiences, backgrounds, and expertise of our members are incredibly diverse, and our structure makes it impossible to have a single theory of change or strategy all while our commitments to democracy and changing architecture act as unifying forces. I think that the decline of the left in the decades of neoliberalism meant that groups had to find a niche in order to survive and do something - but thankfully the resurgence of the left in this country and abroad means that we are working in a different context where groups like ours can grow to the point that we don't have to pick and choose. I wouldn't go so far as to say we can do it all - we are still a resource-poor grassroots organization - but as long as we keep on the path we are on I am confident we will create a better architecture - for architects, and for the crowd!