

Think Pieces 1: Improvisation and ... Think Pieces

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Prelude (introducing a new dialogue)

How can theories of improvisation re-imagine and redefine the roles of intellectuals? How can a *theory* be activated by an improvising subject and directed into tangible and meaningful action? What are the horizons of improvisation studies and why do they matter in contexts of crisis?

The **Think Pieces** project will explore the boundaries and borders of critical improvisation research as it engages with the social, political, and cultural issues that affect the lived lives of individuals around the globe. By bringing together the divergent voices of engaged writers and thinkers to ponder how improvisation provides novel insight into a deluge of problems, the *Think Pieces* project will offer a provocation to its readers: as improvisers/through improvisation, how and why do we think; how and why do we act? We intend to collect the voices and writings of scholars, activists, policymakers, creative practitioners, artists, and philosophers to debate what role improvisation plays in any number of topics – and any number of responses. Each month, a new *Think Piece* will be uploaded to [the online home](#) of the ICASP project to be shared, discussed, and debated.

A Short Rationale (in a time of need)

This is a time of need – a time to look closely at our own positioning. Precarity, marginalization, and disposability characterize increasingly large swaths of the world’s population as the economic and social demands of neoliberalism lay assault to real and imagined manifestations of community and collectivity. In universities, where humanities scholarship could hold the promise of critical inquiry and threaten a hard gaze back at the dictums of power, work is instead increasingly defined by its profit-generating potential and by pressure for academics to protect and preserve traditional fields of inquiry and their own institutionalized privilege. What emerges is a compromised language of *crisis*. A [recent op-ed](#) in the *New York Times* by David Brooks characterized the oft-cited “crisis in the humanities” by claiming that the originary misstep of humanities scholars was accounting for the outside world: “[The humanities] were less about the old notions

of truth, beauty and goodness and more about political and social categories like race, class and gender” (Brooks). For Brooks, and for others who share in the belief of a privatized response to the social issues of our era, the role of tangible social action in the work of academics is readily discarded as part of the neoliberalizing of an intellectual’s public role. The intellectual’s work is thus characterized by dominant economic imperatives – as seen in arguments that locate the salvation of the humanities through its proven and promised economic contributions – or by the self-interestedness of careerism.

Elsewhere, in communities of workers, activists, and everyday citizens, collective struggle is being re-imagined and redeployed to question and undermine the injustices of policies, programs, and ideologies that strip individuals of their right to a safe and sustainable way of life. In June 2013, the “Free Fare movement” in Brazil demanded that the social inequalities that characterized a majority’s lives across the country be acknowledged by the two leading parties, the Brazilian Social Democratic Party and the Workers Party, who had spent billions and displaced thousands of families in preparation for the 2014 World Cup. The protests in Sao Paulo – which soon spurred on solidarity marches in New York City and San Diego – demanded imminent change to the practices of government policies that trample civil liberties, scoff at social equity, and embrace class, race, and gender oppression. At the local level, the debates that ring out in the ranks of these protesters reflects real-world struggle and the uneasy dynamics of social upheaval; Miguel Borba de Sa, a lecturer at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro **explains**, “The movement is a battlefield. It highlights all the contradictions of Brazilian society” (de Sa). De Sa describes a movement not characterized by a utopian consensus – which would certainly flatten the complex and contradictory grievances of the movement’s participants – but rather by an internal struggle to breathe vitality into a messy, collective push for change at the national level.

In a recent issue of *New Left Review*, Asef Bayat **asks** the difficult question, pertinent for our discourse: “Are we then really living in revolutionary times?” (Bayat 48). While Bayat provides a careful analysis of the 2011 Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen to tentatively answer this question in the affirmative, I want to pause and determine the politics of the question’s *asking*, particularly as it carries currency for intellectuals who may or may not place it on their radar. What role can/does the intellectual play in revolutionary times? Bayat begins his article with an overview of several terminologies that have gained currency amongst left intellectuals: Alain Badiou’s “communism of movement”; Slavoj Žižek’s “magic of Tahrir”; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s “longing of the multitude for a ‘real democracy’” (47). While these new designations for revolutionary upheaval frame the recent uprisings as novel, formative, and universal, Bayat insists that this language too hastily conflates the “two key dimensions of revolution: *movement* and *change*” (48). If the current era of upheaval has flourished in terms of “movement” – if we can indeed agree with Bayat that “‘revolution as movement’ is in spectacular supply” (49) – then it is *change* that has remained much more scarcely realized. This complicates the work of intellectuals who celebrate the implied change brought about by popular movements around the globe, and it makes doubly important – and complex – the task of awakening those intellectuals who neglect the public responsibility of academic work. The question at hand is how (and

why) do we *think* revolution – *think* social change? Bayat writes, “In truth, people may or may not have an idea about ‘revolution’ for it to happen; the occurrence of mass uprisings has little to do with any theorizations of them...But having or not having ideas about revolutions does critically influence the outcome when they do occur” (58).

To ask the question, now slightly askew, “Do intellectuals live in revolutionary times?” explores a commitment to radical practice and a desire and challenge to reframe intellectual work within the larger public interest. Against the currents of careerism and corporatization in the academy, improvisation research presents hope for a reformulation of intellectual engagement and a rigorous challenge to the divide between theory and praxis. Improvisation research provides both a way to newly perceive the social connections that characterize human relations and relations to power, and it provides a mode of self-criticism that challenges the implications of intellectual engagement and intellectual positioning. Improvisation studies, as a discipline, speaks from the margins of normative disciplinary constructs, as Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz explain in *The Fierce Urgency of Now*: “the resultant failure of scholars to pay serious and sustained attention to improvisation has led to a broader failure to recognize the extent to which improvisation provides a trenchant model for flexible, dynamic, and dialogical social structures that are both ethical and respectful of identity and difference” (Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 34). For Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, the lines blur between the connotations of “intellectual” and of “creative practitioner.” A product of this collaboration, what I call the *improviser-intellectual*, undertakes work both in the traditional realm of academic study, the university, but also in and amongst the broader community as someone who employs a “project of sounding truth to power” (38), whether as a performing artist or an intellectual struggling to effect material change in her community. The improviser-intellectual is an “organic intellectual” in the Gramscian sense, working alongside or from within the ranks of a marginalized class, and also an “amateur” intellectual, as Edward Said deemed those who “[choose] the risks and uncertain results of the public sphere” (Said 87).

In his article, Bayat notes that the revolutions of 2011 “heralded a novel path to emancipation” (Bayat 47); it is only after his argument is fully articulated that “emancipation” becomes little more than a past dream discarded in favour of “the consolidation of electoral democracy” and “the emergence of multiple power centres” (59). Bayat does not consider what Robin Kelley calls “an unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change” (qtd. in Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 35). In contrast, the figure of the improviser in the work of Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz dares to practice a creative and emancipatory politics in an outward acknowledgement of the urgent struggles of the present moment. The authors write, “improvisation is at its heart a democratic, humane, and emancipatory practice, and...securing rights of all sorts requires people to hone their capacities to act in the world, capacities that flow from improvisation” (xi). One way for an intellectual to live in revolutionary times is to be an improviser, to seek radical connectivity in work that engages social issues from within a broader community.

The Think Pieces Project (and the need to think)

The tactic of learning to “hone [our] capacities to act in the world” is one that opens innumerable possibilities for the improviser-intellectual to undertake work that generates meaningful change across communities. Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz write, “Scholars studying the politics of culture and the culture of politics have become attached to conventions and categories that substitute feelings for actions, that resort to moral condemnation rather than cultural analysis that leads to social action” (xxx). In contrast, the authors argue, “Improvisation appeals to us because it is work that makes a difference in the world” (xxxi). The call to action – a call to *dream* of action and then make it happen – is a fundamental aspect of improvisation theory as it is formulated in this work. The *Think Pieces* project is the collective authoring of this dream; it is the shared storytelling of improvisation – in theory, in practice – and its imagining of more equitable public spaces and more just social relations. The project collects the experiences of improviser-intellectuals from inside and outside of the academy (and the exciting spaces in-between) to challenge our collective responses to the injustices of our era. It challenges us to think more in terms of the *public* than the *private*, and to reconsider how we can better establish modes of solidarity across borders, institutional and otherwise.

The *Think Pieces* project is a call to think. Slavoj Žižek, in his exploration of contemporary violence, rightfully sums up the importance of thinking when faced with a crisis:

“A critical analysis of the present global constellation – one which offers no clear solution, no ‘practical’ advice on what to do, and provides no light at the end of the tunnel, since one is well aware that this light might belong to a train crashing towards us – usually meets with reproach: ‘Do you mean we should do *nothing*? Just sit and wait?’ One should gather the courage to answer: ‘YES, precisely that!’ There are situations when the only ‘practical’ thing to do is resist the temptation to engage immediately and to ‘wait and see’ by means of a patient, critical analysis.” (Žižek 7)

The need to act is urgent and it is essential; the *act of acting* is precisely the tactic that counters the imperatives of careerism in a neoliberalized academy and the demands of self-obsession dictated by a consumer culture. But “cultivating the capacity for action, a capacity inculcated by improvisation” (Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz xiv) demands a critical lens formulated by the ethical and thoughtful consideration of the improviser-intellectual’s public responsibility. This project will open a “patient, critical analysis” of improvisation and its role in a growing number of sites, disciplines, and practices around the world. It will direct this analysis as a tool for the formulation of future projects and future dreams for social change and social action.

Works Cited

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