

**The Empire of Mind: Digital Piracy and the Anti-Capitalist Movement.** By Michael Strangelove. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. 337 pp. ISBN 0802038980.

Michael Strangelove's *The Empire of Mind* stages contemporary culture as a war between rival symbolic economies and their respective media of expression. On the dominant side is capitalism's eponymous empire, maintained by the symbolic economy of the mass media. Against it, Strangelove pits the insurgent symbolic economy of the Internet. *The Empire of Mind* is a book of passionate argumentation; in the interest of driving home his point, Strangelove risks a polemical approach. (How polarized? "Herein I model capitalism as a form of holocaust," states the Introduction, (p. 7). While this lends the writing an impressive degree of rhetorical force, its reductive nature compromises the book's ability to address the positions of Strangelove's opponents. The decision to focus on the Internet's symbolic economy without also addressing its material underpinnings also creates problems.

*The Empire of Mind* consists of seven chapters. The critical apparatus resides in chapters 1, 3, and 7. The other chapters present detailed case studies that document various practices of online subversion and resistance: digital piracy, culture jamming (chapters 4 and 5), and grassroots online journalism (chapter 6). These chapters contain some of the strongest writing in the book, and would make excellent reading for senior classes dealing with online culture. Given the book's subtitle, there's a surprisingly small amount of material about digital piracy itself, which is a shame. A discussion of the current enormous popularity of the BitTorrent peer-to-peer client would only strengthen Strangelove's case.

The book's argument develops from a notion of symbolic economy that Strangelove locates in the writings of John Kenneth Galbraith, Mary Douglas, and Herbert I. Schiller. From this beginning emerges Strangelove's *Empire of Mind*: capitalism "modelled as a violent and controlling system" (p. 10) that "tends toward totalization, embracing all before it within its homogenizing logic of social organization" (p. 12). Though this empire is maintained by the economy, the state and the military (p. 13), Strangelove's concern is with the economy as "the dominant site of symbolic production" (p. 17), because it is here that he sees the possibility of resistance and revolution. If capitalism has embedded its property relations into the symbolic economy to the extent that they are now "wholly dependent upon that economy" (p. 96), perhaps a forum that allows the freedom to challenge symbolic equivalencies and relations inside that economy "could facilitate the arrival of a post-capitalist society" (p. 218).

Strangelove's major contention is that the Internet is a field of "unconstrained expression"—not free of pre-existing ideological perspectives, but free of the institutional constraints of corporate and state control (p. 22). Drawing on Elizabeth Eisenstein and Harold Innis, Strangelove argues that "when cultural products move from one medium of expression to another, meanings change, sometimes subtly, sometimes subversively" (p. 43). That corporate icons such as Barbie and Ronald McDonald are endlessly parodied online signifies for Strangelove that the Internet is "intrinsically subversive, given the surrounding context of capitalism and its media system" (p. 22). Likewise, if "Commercial news is best understood as a product that enables the corporate sector to communicate with consumers" (p. 164), then "non-corporate news" produced and disseminated within the Internet "does not occur within the confines of the commercial news sector and, therefore, produces unconstrained content" (p. 165).

Strangelove maintains that such symbolic subversions have significant implications for the social order. "Unconstrained expression and uncensored selves are creating a new type of public space," he writes, and "With a new type of public space comes a new type of public"—one that is learning to "evade and resist control" (p. 199). The Internet, in

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other words, is a rejuvenated public sphere, allowing a greater range of expressive possibilities than mass media, and a greater range of potential speakers.

The polemical quality of *The Empire of Mind* emerges fully in chapter 3, “The Abnormalization of the Internet.” Here, Strangelove characterizes the scholarly opposition to his claims as the “radical skeptics”—those who “interpret the Internet as inherently or predominantly dystopic because it embeds within the social order further mechanisms of electronic monitoring and social control” (p. 97). While Strangelove freely concedes that such digital control mechanisms are snugly imbricated in the social order, he insists that existing scholarship rarely presents a “balanced model” of the Internet’s dystopic and utopic possibilities (p. 97).

The central targets of Strangelove’s critique are Lawrence Lessig, Robert McChesney, and Darin Barney, but the book denounces a long and heterogeneous list of other scholars, including Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Cass Sunstein. Strangelove treats their arguments with varying degrees of respect and makes a number of concessions, but ultimately sees all of them as proponents of the “normalization thesis,” a phrase he borrows from Michael Margolis and David Resnick. From this perspective, the Internet is quickly becoming “a straightforward mirror of content in the surrounding commercial media system.” The current unruly online audience will eventually become docile commodity consumers, because, in fact, they want to return to this state of affairs (pp. 80-81). The popularity of the normalization thesis, claims Strangelove, means that “liberal academic discourse has succumbed to the marketplace myth that says resistance is futile” (p. 81). In other words, those scholars who oppose Strangelove’s thesis about the inherently subversive quality of the Internet do so because they too are under the thrall of *The Empire of Mind*.

Such a stance makes it difficult to interrogate Strangelove’s argument without being dismissed before beginning, but I do have some questions about *The Empire of Mind*’s pre-suppositions. Strangelove stakes the validity of his arguments on “a delicate balance of theory and anthropological investigation,” (p. 97). To the author’s credit, the book does draw heavily on Strangelove’s extensive research into actual online behaviour. What *The Empire of Mind* lacks, though, is reference to the material and institutional infrastructure that produces the Internet’s symbolic economy. Without such reference, the control structures that actually bring into being the relative user autonomy that Strangelove values remain invisible.

Milton L. Mueller’s *Ruling the Root* uses institutional economics to analyze the functions of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the regime that governs Internet namespace absolutely. ICANN is, in Mueller’s words, “a conservative, corporatist regime founded on artificial scarcity and regulatory control” (p. 267). Though Mueller does not rule out the possibility of a reinvigoration of the pre-ICANN character of the Internet, he makes a convincing case for the difficulty of doing so. ICANN is not mentioned in *The Empire of Mind*. Whether this is an oversight or a deliberate omission, it remains highly problematic.

Alexander Galloway’s *Protocol* provides a second missing piece to the picture. In Galloway’s formulation, protocol is precisely how control exists after decentralization. He posits a dialectical tension between the rigid hierarchy of the Domain Name System (DNS) and the radically distributive Transfer Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) that together make the Internet possible. “Standardization,” writes Galloway, “is the politically reactionary tactic that enables radical openness” (p. 143). Introducing these sorts of considerations into *The Empire of Mind* would have made Strangelove’s task as a critic more difficult, but ultimately would have made his assertions more convincing.

There is also an inconsistency between Strangelove's criteria for a useful model of the Internet and that for his model of capitalism. "Within critical theory," writes Strangelove, "philosophical and economic enquiry tends to recreate the Internet in the image of the twentieth century" (p. 98). Fair enough, but why does Strangelove rely on a model of capitalism that is every bit as dated? In *A Yuppie Reading Deleuze*, Slavoj Žižek asks questions of Naomi Klein that might well be asked of Strangelove. Is a description of capitalism's symbolic economy as centralized, consolidating and homogenizing, waging ruthless war against diversity, already an anachronism? In the face of a late capitalism supple enough to commodify even the most eccentric forms of productivity (see *Robot Chicken*), is it not time to call the revolutionary efficacy of activities like culture jamming into question? (In *Pabst Unsold*, journalist Rob Walker quotes Neal Stewart, the 27-year-old marketing manager for Pabst Blue Ribbon who successfully transformed PBR from the market loser into the preferred brand of the current generation of hipsters, as enthusing that *No Logo* contains "many good marketing ideas.")

It is worth wondering whether the critique of an oppressive ideology (such as that which drives the *Empire of Mind*) does not turn too easily into a perception of control and limitation itself as something that should be vanquished by resort to a paradigm of multiplicity. For Žižek, this is a categorical mistake, as "the obstacle to our fulfillment. . . is a positive condition of (a limited) fulfillment: if we take away the obstacle to fulfillment, we lose fulfillment itself" (p. 187). This is not theoretical sophistry; in the context of Galloway's diagram of the dialectical tension between the rigid hierarchy of DNS and the promiscuity of TCP/IP, it is an accurate description of the necessary concessions to control that make online freedom possible.

These problems have nothing to do with the futility of resistance. Rather, they set the stage for the next round in the ongoing discussion of what constitutes effective resistance in a networked society. By emphasizing that the jury on the subversive quality of the Internet is not out yet, *The Empire of Mind* makes a valuable contribution to that discussion. Nevertheless, its arguments need to be tempered by a thorough account of the Internet's externalities.

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