
Images of resistance thread their way throughout Genosko’s book, be they examples of human activism and a refusal to conform, or allusions to electrical resistors embedded within the devices that facilitate our modern, mobile, collective communication. Genosko thereby raises important questions about “the limits of autonomy as innovation traverses the divide between resistor and conductor” (p. 116), or hacker and conformist. His subtitle, Innovation from Below and the Struggle for Autonomy, is a fair description of his book, those two overarching themes growing clearer as the reader progresses through the chapters.

In this day of hyper attention to innovation as the saviour of post-industrial Western economies, Genosko offers a counter view to the pervasive discourse of “innovation” often invoked by political candidates and university presidents. He argues that one need not have a laboratory, or government funding, or even a post-secondary education to be an innovator. Additionally, twenty-first century innovation need not develop from the standard models of entrepreneurship, patents, start-up companies, or seed funding from angel investors who have made their fortunes off the backs of the working class. Hacking, hacker culture and hacktivism offer alternate routes for innovative and creative explorers, and may be more attractive to the lone computer geek than the models provided by the status quo.

Working outside of traditional technocratic/capitalist systems, individuals can explore networks of authority, question corporate ownership, fight for personal and political independence through multimedia, and enact change. One can circumvent the monopolistic control of electricity and telephone companies through low-tech mechanical interceptions to exercise one’s right of exploration, or liberate for personal use what was once seen as a public good. Real world hacks (as opposed to computer hacking) can occur during times of freedom from authority (such as during blackouts or riots) and can be undertaken by all, even members of often marginalized groups. Autonomy can be wrested free through acts of phone phreaking, physical exploration, or even counter-culture zine publishing.

Genosko explores these two themes of innovation and autonomy between covers depicting the Guy Fawkes mask appropriated by both the hacker group Anonymous and the Occupy movement. He directs his curiosity towards modern disruptions and explorations of technocratic corporatism by those living in connecting countercultures. Through the use of unapologetically Canadian examples that are “far from perfect and exemplary, [though] this is what makes them worthy of critical study” (p. 9–10), Genosko is careful not to endorse acts of vandalism or theft, but acknowledges the value of those striving towards autonomy within a system that is designed to minimize or monetize the individual experience. As he says at the end of his first chapter, he is identifying instances “under the tabletop” as sites of exploration and, “with a certain delight [he valorizes] its unofficial ways and entanglements” (p. 38). Genosko thereby
resists “the economic misappropriation of innovation linked to tax exemptions and other stimuli for public-private partnerships in education and industry” for the sake of the neglected innovators operating from below (p. 39).

His examples include University of Toronto professor-cyborg and sous-veil lance advocate Steve Mann who looks to wearable computing as one path towards greater freedom; American-Canadian science fiction writer and cyberspace prophet William Gibson and his descriptions of collecting “old tech” both in his life and writing; Jeff Chapman (aka Ninjalicious) and his embodiment of the original phreaker/hacker ethics of intellectual curiosity, probing networks, and “freedom to look around” while exploring off-limits spaces in Toronto; Michael Calce (aka MafiaBoy), a 15-year old Montreal hacker whose denial-of-service attacks disabled the websites of Yahoo!, Amazon, eBay and others in February 2000; the western Canadian historical sites of pioneering telephone phreakers in British Columbia and Manitoba in the 1960s; and addiction to the BlackBerry, the quintessential Canadian technocultural device, and how BlackBerry abuse is “a happy addiction that mobilizes dependency as conformity and makes itself indispensable to personal and corporate success” (p. 146).

These “home grown” examples illustrate the fight for individual autonomy and uncompromised freedom in Canada, a nation that has a history of struggle against cultural, economic and technological independence from the United States and corporate superpowers. As Genosko says, he is providing “examples of how to phreak the maple leaf … a toolbox of sorts for rethinking resistance and innovation in Canada” (p. 178).

Overall, he clearly has a passion for “the study of subcultural expression, including style and practice” (p. 59). This is shown through his choice of examples and most especially in his two strongest chapters, “Home-Grown Hacker” (discussing MafiaBoy), and “WikiLeaks and the Vicissitudes of Disparity” (discussing Julian Assange and the hacker group Anonymous). However, one does not have to have read William Gibson or be familiar with Ninjalicious’ Infiltration to gain from Genosko’s perspective.

Well-written and edited, the text frequently references Felix Guattari, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Antonio Negri, Georges Bataille and Marshall McLuhan to contextualize Canadian examples within the greater body of media and cultural theory. The author describes those who oppose the current technocratic regime as operating from a place of weakness, which is a clear motivation for the actors (for example, a Grand Master deliberately losing a chess game played against a computer). Failure is also discussed as an under appreciated realm of creative innovation and is framed as a way of resisting exploitation. The discussion of intelligent computers in the seventh chapter is particularly relevant in the light of the claim by the creators of the Eugene Goostman chatterbot of its having passed the Turing Test, implying technology’s final usurpation of mankind. Genosko anticipates the irrelevance of the Goostman chatterbot or any argument that computers could supplant people by pointing to the human liberation and value that comes from the ability to fail, be creative, and take back autonomy within (or outside of) the bounds of modern technoculture.

Mark Sedore, University of Toronto