

Unjamming the Insurrectionary Imagination: Rescuing Détournement from the Liberal Complacencies of Culture Jamming

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This essay challenges genealogies that trace culture jamming to its coinage in the 1980s and 1990s, and argues for expanding beyond its narrow conceptualization as a tactic of media savvy activists. As media activism or pranking, culture jamming risks becoming a liberal fantasy that gives good news to capitalism: “Is this all the Left has left?” We must rescue the insurrectionary logic of culture jamming from its liberal complacencies. The insurrectionary logic of culture jamming was articulated in 1956 in Guy Debord’s theory of détournement. Détournement is political plagiarism, distortion, hijacking, or otherwise rerouting something against itself. For Debord, détournement was a revolutionary project “undertaken within the present conditions of oppression, in order to destroy those conditions.” He insisted that “[a]n avant-garde cultural movement, even one with revolutionary sympathies, cannot accomplish this.” Sporadic “subvertising” cannot jam a culture of constant accumulation. Thus, I provide a détournement of culture jamming itself, retrieving the old insurrectionary idea for the current context of capitalist crises. I critique prominent notions of culture jamming and argue for unjamming the insurrectionary imagination through collective acts of revolt, i.e., the Zapatistas, Arab Spring, and occupations movement. This essay explores sustained modes of collective culture jamming as the radical and transformative counterpart to a highly individualized constellation of subvertising. . [Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2013 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

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