Essays II

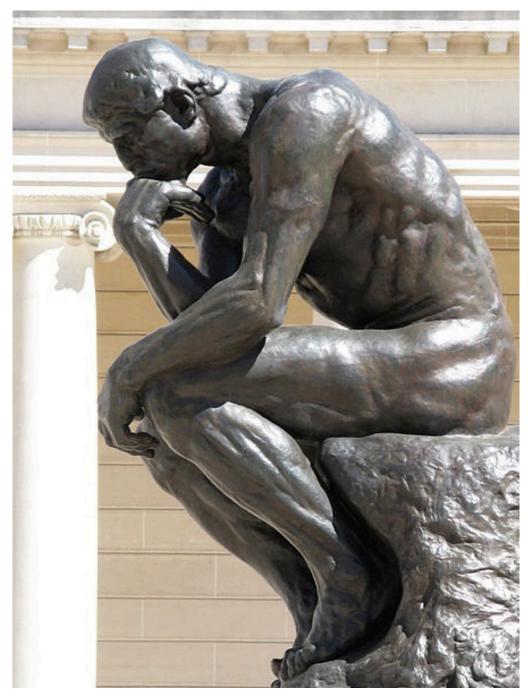# Stillness as a Form of Imaginative Labour

by Theodoros Kyriakides

Fig.1 Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), copy of "Le Penseur" at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. © Yair Haklai / Wikimedia Commons.

Stillness as a Form of Imaginative Labour

by Theodoros Kyriakides

This essay connects the practice of stillness to David Graeber's concepts of imaginative labour and immanent imagination. It makes the proposition that stillness should not be evaluated as lack of activity or movement, but rather attended to in its pragmatic and productive dimensions. The essay thus explores stillness as a potential mode of production of imagination and means of political transformation: in order for it to be meaningful, we need to reconfigure our relationship to stillness as one of imagination, resistance, thinking, and writing.

This essay was triggered – imagined as it was – from a roundtable organised by *HAU* on the theme of imagination at the ASA14 decennial conference, at The University of Edinburgh. I was particularly drawn to David Graeber's treatment of imagination as a "mode of production" (Marx 1971, Graber 2006), and the potential such proposition carries for political deployment. As expected, Graeber's political involvement and philosophical foundations infused the notion of imagination with a conceptual ferment of radical dimensions. Such imaginative radicalism is not to be thought of according to some sort of extremist political ideology, but according to the radical change it can have in the world. Taking Graeber's work on imagination as a starting point, this essay explores the relation between stillness, imagination, and political action. More specifically, I write of stillness as a way to produce and politicise imagination through acts of fighting and resisting, thinking and writing.

Stillness bears a particular relation to imagination, which often goes unattended. Being a scholar of anthropology, and also an avid martial artist, I was always fascinated by two statues Rodin's *Le Penseur* and Magnier's *The Wrestlers*. Through time I found out that the two statuettes, as different as they appear, have more things in common than one might think. The stillness of the thinker, his frowned demeanour and posture, are not that far apart from the agonistic qualities of the two wrestlers engaged in combat. As anyone who has engaged in prolonged and thoughtful stillness will tell you, thinking is not an effortless endeavour but requires labour, as many sore necks and broken backs attest. And as anyone who has engaged in combat will tell you, its most terrifying aspects are the rare moments of stillness, which impose on both combatants an uncertainty and hesitancy as to what might further occur. The winner of a bout is most certainly the one who seizes such moments of stillness in his or her favour; will the underdog in Magnier's sculpture escape his perilous position, or will he have his arm be snapped in half?

To put it another way, to appreciate the relationship between stillness and imagination we need to do away with two obstacles. Initially, we must do away with the notion of activity, utility, and vitality as bounded to perceptible spatial and bodily movement. In addition, we need to do way with the notion of stillness as sterile and opposed to production; we need to attend to stillness in-itself and the effects it produces. Rather than binding it to promise or lack of movement or production, I instead propose that we examine stillness in its pragmatic efficacy, and its relevance for a political project of imagination.

Graeber provides an extensive treatment on the productive dimensions of imagination in his book *Revolutions in Reverse* (Graeber 2011a). The title of the book hints at the way by which Graeber handles revolution, and also imagination. For him, revolution is not a grand narrative culminating in an all-encompassing telos: Rather, revolution, as an ethos and mannerism of orientating one's self in the world, is constantly re-enacted in everyday acts according to pertinent political dilemmas and collective desires. Such a concept of revolution is in-line with Graeber's treatment of communism, not as a radical political ideology or ultimate actualisation of a certain mode of governance, but as a foundation and basis for everyday sociality – a concept Graeber calls "baseline communism" (Graeber 2011b: 98). Likewise, for Graeber, acts of imagination are not driven by an ever-slipping horizon of a grand utopia, but constantly re-emerge in relation to concrete political and social objectives.

In such a way, Graeber does away with all notions of Cartesian imagination as contemplative and out-of-this-world. Imagination is not an ideal quality removed from the material realm but is, rather, *of-the-world*; imagination is, to quote the term he uses, "immanent" (Graeber 2011a: 52). Imagination, as related to desire for change, is the result of socio-material arrangements, and also carries potency of acting on and changing such arrangements. Thus, as Graeber writes, imagination "is in no sense static and free-floating but entirely caught up in projects of action that aim to have real effects on the material world, and as such, always changing and adapting" (Graeber 2011a: 53).

Accordingly, *materialism*, as a modality of exploring and understanding the world, does not only consist of tangible, material objects, but also of *fictions*. Anthropologists and ethnographers have long delved with cosmological, religious and social entities – gods, nations, utopias, organisations, dreams, myths – which, albeit intangible, have the capacity to produce the world because of the beliefs, desires and values people attribute to them. Diverging from schools of scientistic materialism[1], which claim that the only things which really exist are hard physical objects and their denominations into atoms, particles, neutrons and so on, *social* materialism insists that entities, tangible or not, real or fictitious, similarly exist and carry political relevance insofar that they bear the capacity to produce material *effects* in the world. Even in the case of Marx, whose philosophy is considered the materialist par-excellence, what distinguishes humans from other animals is the capacity to imagine and bring into being potential entities and events – to "raise structures in imagination before erecting them in reality" (Marx 1978: 174). In other words, the practice of imagining has concrete, material effects in the world insofar that it effectuates practices aimed at actualising such imaginative entities and futures.

Through Graeber's treatment, imagination is transformed from an individual quality to a collective and political one. In addition, imagination is transformed from an ideal, contemplative act, into a pragmatic and productive practice. Conceptualised as collective and pragmatic – as a mode of production – imagination must not remain in the mind of one but overflow in the minds of many. As he points out, imagination needs constant maintenance, through what he calls "imaginative labour" (Graeber 2011a: 53-55). Imaginative labour denotes practices and communities which serve in producing as well as maintaining imagination on a collective, political level. Thus, in addition to the productive effects imagination has, of equal importance are the ways in which people can produce imagination for themselves and for their peers. Indeed, Graeber's political treatment of imagination entails that one does not only imagine but also *incite imagination in the minds of others.*

While some engagement with stillness has taken place in the fields of mobility and geography (Cocker 2009, Bissell and Fuller 2010, Martin 2010, Cresswell 2011), the notion of stillness as a creative and productive imaginative force, capable of political transformation, has received little attention in anthropological scholarship. I suggest that this is a rich ground for anthropologists to step in. Initially, an anthropological appreciation of stillness entails critically examining certain dominant perceptions amongst capitalist societies (as well as ethnographically and theoretically exalting the occasions where a connection between stillness and imagination is indeed achieved). In a recent article published by The Guardian reminiscent of the famous Stanley Milgram experiments, people proved to prefer to be zapped by an electrical current, rather than to sit still in a chair and think for the duration of ten minutes (Sample 2014). Stillness widely came to assume a lack of something, whether this pertains to lack of movement, life, purpose or imagining.

Yet, if one can take something away from Rodin's sculpture, it is that the potency of imagination largely unfolds and is predicated on the practice of being still. It is exactly through prolonged stillness that one is able to engage in thoughtful meditation on the present, the imagination of otherwise futures, and ways to achieve these. Yet, a further leap has to be made in order for stillness to acquire political character. The relationship between stillness and imagination achieves political continuity in two ways.

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1. The term scientistic denotes the assumption that the methods and knowledge of physical sciences are valid and applicable in all contexts.

Fig. 2 Philippe Magnier (1647-1715), copy of the "Uffizi wrestlers", stored in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florance, Italy. © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.

On the one hand, stillness harnesses and channels imagination in the construction of concepts and the production of texts which, through their distribution and circulation in a social field, have the capacity to ignite imagination on a collective level. On the other hand, stillness achieves a doubling of imagination through its very practice in the public sphere. When one visits the sites of Rodin's sculpture, he would probably see it surrounded by likewise still observers, similarly drawn into thought. In this second guise, the public practice of stillness achieves political relevance because it doubles stillness, and also imagination, in the body and mind of those witnessing stillness. The potency of stillness as a political technology oscillates between these two modalities: stillness as a precursor to imagining and writing, and stillness as an infective practice of imagination – stillness as production and action.

In order to deploy these two positive imaginative modalities we must first reconfigure our relation to stillness itself. Amid growing working hours, capitalism dissolves the imaginative potency of stillness into a progressively complex arrangement of monetary abstraction and accumulation. Like the repetitive work of the assembly line, the rise of informatics mechanized and confined the human body to a monotonous template of movement and thought. In such insipid conditions, the two aforementioned modalities of stillness become contaminated by capitalist imperatives. In the workspace, like Rodin's statuette, one is seated, yet production and action are detached from the practice of imagining, thinking, and writing, and are instead diverted to the accumulation of surplus value. Seated production as "inactive activity" yields no intentionality other than the capitalist teleology according to which it is recursively enabled by.[2] Here, translated into capitalist terms, a perversion and inversion of stillness in its definition and practice occurs: identified negatively, stillness is treated as that which mediates periods of (in)activity, rather than that which *gives way* to activity. Otherwise said, stillness is defined as a 'pause in' and 'lack of', rather than a form of production and action in its own right. Stillness, as a sterile period mediating capitalist production, is enacted in relation to the capitalist system itself. It is treated negatively because, removed from the desk, it is not the body which remains still, but the production of surplus value. According to such terms, bodily movement as activity acquires positive dimensions, while stillness as stasis is relegated to stagnation. Incorporated into capitalist logic, stillness is extracted from the human body and projected onto the capitalist nexus as a bodily quality to be avoided.

Stillness or, rather, the reclaiming of stillness in its positive, political qualities, proved to be one of the most effective weapons against current capitalist-imperialist predicaments. The productive dimensions of stillness acquired political dimensions of collective proportions with the proliferation of occupation practices. These culminated with the recent standing protests in Taksim Square, in Istanbul, where what started as an act of one became one of many. During these protests, and inspired by the initial eight-hour effort of one Erdem Gündüz, several hundred demonstrators stood still around various parts of Istanbul for prolonged periods of time, as an act of outcry against police brutality ordered by the Erdogan government during previous protests. Collective displays of stillness such as the ones which took place in Istanbul, acquire political relevance because they double and intensify imagination: they produce these, not only in the mind of the one standing still, but also in the mind of those witnessing stillness. In events like the standing man protests, an event which many wrongly deemed as "passive" in character, stillness becomes a form of political action that produces an imaginative vitality capable of sculpting political visions. In such cases, stillness does not signify lack of production and action, but rather *is* production and action itself.

Stillness as a form of political activism diverges from rioting. One would not be mistaken to contrast the calm demeanour of the standing protesters to the turmoil and noise of rioters, or the chaos and destruction caused by terrorist bombing attacks to the awe brought upon us by the powerful stillness of self-immolating Tibetan monks. Rioting, as a form of protest, is dependent and maintained by the

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2. Workplace conditions can give way to human relations of community, friendship and love, which cannot be contained by their original capitalist context. Nevertheless, I also maintain that one must be careful in treating such relations as distinct, rather than as part of the capitalist arrangement from which they emerge. Extra-capitalist creation by way of capitalist suspension is ultimately the criterion by which such relations are deemed positive.

very evil it opposes. Enacted in retaliation to a problematic present, which it violently affirms, rioting ultimately fails to incite and deploy imagination in its political key. Preceded by hoax media reports of violence caused by the protesters, the impetus for the standing protests in Taksim was exactly to sever this unfruitful relationship of protesting and opposition. At the same time, these public displays of stillness unfolded a spectrum of positive possibility regarding the future of Turkish politics. Unlike rioting, stillness does not legitimise itself through destruction and opposition, but through the labour of its self-actualisation, and the poetics of potentiality such labour produces.

Stillness is contagious, it tickles and irritates. Possibility, rather than space, is the terrain stillness playfully traverses; in the case of occupation practices, stillness is not enacted in relation to space but, first and foremost, to imagined trajectories of otherwise futures. Deployed as such, stillness acquires an infective capacity of triggering collective processes of socio-political transformation. Like the case of the standing protests in Taksim Square, it gives way to what Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pignarre call, drawing from Felix Guattari, an "existential catalysis" (Guattari 1995: 19): an event of transmissive character, "able to generate repercussions in the mode of the 'yes, it's possible', able to arouse the appetite that will make another possibility exist elsewhere" (Pignarre and Stengers 2011: 123). Acting as a form of "dissensus", (Rancière 2010) acts of stillness disrupt rigid organisational, bureaucratic and disciplinary routines, create a slit on, and explode into the public sphere as a vector of imagination and survey of possibility.

To return to the juxtaposition between Rodin and Magnier's statues, next to the stillness of the occupier and of the monk, another form of stillness takes place – that of the thinker. The stillness of the thinker takes place in intimate, private settings, and is no less political as long as it is channelled in the labour of thinking and writing. Often, the labour of the thinker is not celebrated as much as that of the fighter: I direct such comment to both, thinkers and fighters, albeit more so to the latter. In a conversation between Foucault and Deleuze, Foucault recounts what a Maoist activist had once told him: "'I can easily understand Sartre's purpose in siding with us…I can partially understand your position…but Deleuze is an enigma'" (Deleuze 2004: 205). The Maoist's hesitancy to include him in his cohort resulted from Deleuze's lack of political militancy. Compared to Guattari's intense militant involvement, Deleuze preferred the intimacy of his desk, the stillness of thinking and writing. Elsewhere Deleuze speaks of the relationship between Guattari and himself: "He has extraordinary speeds…I am more like a hill, I don't move much, I like to write alone." Deleuze went on to acknowledge the combative dimensions of stillness: "Together we would have made a good Sumo wrestler" (Deleuze 2006: 237).

For Deleuze, both forms of Marxism – militancy and writing – were equally important and inseparable. For him "[t]here is only action, the action of theory, the action of praxis" (Deleuze 2004: 207). The library as opposed to the street, the sword as opposed to the pen: these are unproductive and unnecessary dichotomies. Thinker and fighter diverge in their practices, but find a common home in their co-produced zone of imagination. In such an endeavour, that the labour of the thinker is equally acknowledged and deployed as that of the fighter is of utmost importance to both. Thinking and fighting need not be mutually exclusive (see for example Graeber 2011c). At the same time, the two must be recognized and treated as distinct but complementary modalities of political and imaginative engagement. Such distinction does not entail a separation between thinking and fighting, but a challenge to keep finding ways to rearticulate the relation between the two in powerful combinations. A thinker can take the street prior to writing, as much as a fighter can adopt the chair and write a text or distribute a concept amongst friends.

Fighters and thinkers touch, not because of some sort of overlapping similarity between them, but because both are symbiotically implicated in a common political project of producing and maintaining imagination through their labour. Here, no opposition or even dialectic, but rather "ecology" (Stengers 2005a) of thinking and fighting takes place. Stillness must be recognized as an essential ingredient in such a project. As a collective embroiled in a common task of imaginative action and production, we must reconfigure and reclaim our relationship to stillness and the places where it is enacted

– the city square, the street, the desk, the chair – as one of affirmation to the human condition. Amid constant movement and activity necessitated by hyper-capitalist lifestyles, stillness instead invites us to "slow down" (Stengers 2005b: 994), to use one of Isabelle Stengers' terms, to think things through and imagine them otherwise. We must once again learn to stand still in order to provoke and resist, but also to think, imagine, write, and also heal, rest and sleep. Stillness in no way is indicative of political passivity or lack of purpose and direction. To embrace stillness in all its positive qualities, to stand, persist and persevere *still* could very well be an imaginative and hence political weapon par-excellence.

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