

Comment on Abderrazak Belabes' 'What can Economists Learn from Deleuze?'

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This article is a welcomed addition to the literature. It insightfully draws the numerous connections between classical economics and the works of Deleuze. Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) was one of the most influential philosophers of his time (Badiou, 2000, p. 97). Michel Foucault once remarked that the twenty-first century may become known as Deleuzian (Buchanan, 1999, p. 1). Foucault moreover predicted that Deleuze's work would steadily grow in significance across a variety of fields, such as economics. His work is especially noted in trans- or interdisciplinary work where theoretical innovation is often regarded as an end itself (Tormey, 2005, p. 415). Deleuze (with Guattari, 1994, p. 28), when discussing his place among the great philosophers, once stated that 'is it to repeat what they said or to do what they did, that is, create concepts for problems that necessarily change?' because the field of economics is constantly changing.

Taking Foucault's lead, Belabes argues that economists can learn from the Philosopher of Difference.¹ For Deleuze, 'thinking differently, becoming different and the creation of difference' (Jeanes and De Cock, 2005, p. 3) are keys to understanding the world. This is important because a Deleuzian thought provides the tools to address unsymbolic² differences.

From a Deleuzian viewpoint the common sense, conventional and orthodox world is ultimately illusory. 'Genuine [understanding] ... occurs through signs which takes us beyond the illusion of habit and common sense to the truths of what Proust calls *essences* and Deleuze labels *differences*' (Bogue, 2004, p. 328). What escapes orthodox thought is difference, or the genuinely *new*, which can only be engaged through an *imageless thought* (Bogue, 2004c, p. 333). In order to generate new connections and conceptual transformations that move beyond existing frameworks, one has to 'want to do something with respect to new uncommon forces, which we don't quite yet grasp, who have a certain taste for the unknown' (Rajchman, 2000, p. 6). Thus, the orthodox approach can be conceptualised as the negation of *difference*. As a result, it is key to challenge the orthodox understanding (beliefs, opinion or *doxa*) of the practice of economics.

The Deleuzian concept of *difference* embraces chaos and complexity because 'difference finds its own concept in the posited contradiction: it is here that it becomes pure, intrinsic, essential, qualitative, synthetic and productive; here it no longer allows indifference to subsist' (Deleuze, 1994, p. 45). Consequently, Deleuze approached problems such as 'How to understand economics?' as something that does not have a single simple solution because a problem is something that defines a field of different drives or pressures as problematical because each solution merely transforms the problem and creates new challenges (Williams, 2003, p. 57). For Deleuze, a problem is determined because it cannot

¹ Deleuze, the author of *Difference and Repetition* (1994), was known as the 'Philosopher of Difference' because his writings produced encounters of forces that resonated by aligning the reader with new forces and trajectories.

² Unsymbolic means outside of language/words. For an explanation of unsymbolic differences see Alliez (2004, pp. 92-93).

be distinguished from a chaotic state. This is important because as Deleuze stated (as quoted by McMahon, 2005, p. 42) 'if philosophy is to have a positive and direct relations with things, it is only to the extent that it claims to grasp [an understanding of economics] ... , in its difference from all that is not it' and that the problem of difference is both 'methodological and ontological'.

Deleuze (1989, p. 280) offers a way forward by stating that 'the theory of [economics] ... does not bear on the [discipline] ..., but on the concepts of the [discipline] ...'. Economics in itself is 'a practice of images, [metaphors] and signs' (1989, p. 280) that are not limited to a concrete phenomenology of signs and images. Rather, because economic 'concepts are not given in the [discipline], ... philosophy must produce [a] theory [of economics] as conceptual practice'. Every concept has components and is defined by them, therefore it is a combination or a *multiplicity*, but Deleuze (1989) goes on to indicate that every multiplicity is not a concept.

This line of reasoning leads one to conclude that economics is a Deleuzian *multiplicity*. It can also be considered an event or a series of events and therefore a potential concept. Belabes argues that economics is a combination of many disciplines; yet to this point, it is unclear if economics can be considered a Deleuzian concept. Deleuze would have responded to the question by viewing the discipline from a neutral point (Archimedean point of reference) and systematically study the factors (symptoms) that influence and impact upon the discipline. A framework for understanding would be developed by approaching the problem as a medical doctor would when studying symptoms in order to develop a treatment for a disease. When a doctor examines a patient with a 'group of symptoms, his diagnostic task is to discover the corresponding concept' of the disease (Smith, 2005, p. 182). The process of symptomatology in medicine can similarly be applied to economics. If diagnosing a group of symptoms can be considered concept creation in a Deleuzian sense – then theorising the multiplicity of factors and activities that constitute economics might also be a Deleuzian concept because the 'symptomatology method' promotes '*lines of flight* inherent in every ... multiplicity' (Smith, 2005, pp. 190-191).

Belabes has written an excellent article that should become required reading for those interested in how economics interacts and is influenced by philosophy.

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