

Revisiting Anti-Oedipus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

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“It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have said *the id*. Everywhere *it* is machines - real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections.” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996, p.8)

In these famous opening lines Deleuze and Guattari signal that *Anti-Oedipus*, subtitled *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is not a book of academic philosophy or psychoanalytic theory, not only in the way they appropriate and re-assemble the thought of Freud and Marx, but also in their use of language, style and rhetoric. *Anti-Oedipus* reads like a work of experimental fiction or avant-garde literature rather than as a book of scholarly research.

Paraphrasing Lacan (with whom Guattari had a tumultuous relationship), *Anti-Oedipus* is structured like the unconscious. It is an unrepresentable and disruptive book that resists being reduced to intelligible significance. This is not a model or an updated framework for psychoanalysts; rather what is offered here is a method, but one that can be only understood in its practice. The book shows how one can grasp the psyche as a desiring machine, as a constellation of thermodynamic stoppages and flows. Therefore, the question is not what is Oedipus, but how does desire operate, how is it possible to decode the flows and products of desiring machines? *Anti-Oedipus* is a work of practical philosophy and psychiatry, a response to the uprisings of 1968, and a toolbox containing instruments useful for dismantling the master’s house.

What Deleuze and Guattari say about the unconscious can be applied in equal measure to *Anti-Oedipus* itself. ‘The unconscious poses no problem of meaning, solely problems of use. The question posed by desire is not “What does it mean?” but rather “*how does it work?*”’. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996, p.108). Their goal is not to write a book that describes desire, but to show how desire functions.

In this review I will focus on three of the playful, interconnected lines of inquiry into desire developed by Deleuze and Guattari. The first is the charge directed at Marx and Freud regarding the place they allocate to desire. The second is their assault on the superego, and the third is the way it is possible to talk about gestures not as symptoms with hidden causes, but as affect.

I. Desire in Marx and Freud

The first step points to the way both Marx and Freud mishandle desire: Marx describes economic schemas and does not notice the libidinal energies that defy containment, and Freud is too focused on the Oedipal triangle to see desire as social and political, an essential surplus value of the capitalist mode of production.

To enter *Anti-Oedipus* is to enter a delirium factory. It is just as impossible to escape

schizophrenia as it is impossible to escape capitalism. On this reading, schizophrenia is not a condition defined by the Manual of Mental Disorders, but it is also not an attempt to romanticise mental illness. The goal instead is to show the internal connections that link psychosis and capitalism. To show that capitalism is productive of psychosis, not as the affliction of an individual, but as the consequence of phantasmagorical relationship between the conditions of alienation created by the capitalist mode of production and the institutions of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and the nuclear family. By using techniques to 'fix' the patient, the psychoanalyst is promoting norms of behaviour and standards of mental fitness that are incompatible with the demands of alienation and privatisation required by capital. To escape capital, one has to escape Oedipus first. But a Marxist revolution that makes the collective ownership of the means of production its goal cannot succeed as long as desire remains individualistic and private. Rather, a revolution requires that we own the means to produce our desire. For as long as we are imprisoned in the oedipal triangle no true liberation is possible. The father will morph into the teacher, the boss, the doctor, the therapist and the priest, and there will never be any way of escaping, with the desire intact.

Like R.D.Laing, Deleuze and Guattari refuse to understand psychosis as a disorder of the individual who deviates from the standards of psychic norms, because such understanding of psychosis places the burden of responsibility on the person who needs to be 'fixed' to fit in the social mould. Instead, they propose a model of the unconscious that is historically constructed, impersonal, political and directly linked to the social organisation within which it is produced. The extreme inequalities of a capitalist society are mirrored in the extreme mood swings, paranoid breakdowns and euphoric highs of the psychotic patient. By rejecting the universality of Oedipus and the notion of individual pathology in the private sphere Deleuze and Guattari are inquiring after the social and cultural value of madness considered as a form of social critique. Schizoanalysis is a "theatre of cruelty" (Artaud) that is capable of producing new, and politically charged alliances between artists, revolutionaries, social undesirables and the insane - everyone who managed to escape the 'familial-ism that is the ordinary bed and board of psychoanalysis and psychiatry" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996, p.131).

Foucault, who wrote the preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, has already shown that madness has a history. In *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) he traced the cultural evolution of the notion of a mental illness, showing it as an ideological construct, a by-product of the age of reason and a form of ethnic cleansing of social undesirables and outsiders. Deleuze and Guattari are taking the next step by showing that the (dis)organisation of madness and the organisation of capitalism share common principles and structures. As can be seen from the quotation that opens this review, their charge against Freudian psychoanalysis is that the id is not private and individual, rather it is the very ground of the social constitution of subjects. Psychoanalysis attempts to strip the unconscious of its links with political, economic and social dimensions of existence, ignoring the way labour, commodities and exploitation configure and determine both reality and desire. In other words, psychoanalysis sees the neurotic individual as pathological, while absolving society from any responsibility in the construction of the unconscious.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, both Marxism and psychoanalysis have emerged from an "image of thought" that dominated the Western mindset for millennia. The Hegelian dialectic that lies at the basis of Marxist theory of class struggle is repeated in the Oedipal dialectic. As a counterbalance to the dialectical synthesis Deleuze and Guattari develop a critique of both capitalism and psychoanalysis that they call schizoanalysis.

II. Schizoanalysis

Freud conceived of Oedipus as the transition from autoeroticism to desiring the other, as the nadir of repression and sexual identity that is the entry ticket to civilisation, language, subjectivity and law. Freudian psychoanalysis established the family as the theatrical setup where subjectivity is being produced through the repression of desire. The Oedipal triangle takes up the dramatic tension of the dialectical theatre, the abyss between the audience and the performance on the stage, between the real and the imaginary, and discovers it in the nuclear family Mommy, Daddy, me. The abyssal divide between the audience and the actors returns as castration anxiety. The polymorphously perverse infant is learning the ways of the world by discovering the shameful truth of their own desire. In the Freudian family, the tedious drama of Oedipus is grimly repeated night after night.

According to Freud, Oedipus is a threshold and a limit, a threshold between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. It is a limit at which subjectivity is produced through the repression of desire. Yet, because of his understanding of desire as part of family dynamics, psychoanalysis turned into a “capitalist drug”(Guattari, 1977) by turning social problems into individual pathologies and by castrating desire; removing its explosive political and disruptive potential.

Deleuze and Guattari aimed to overturn the Oedipal model of psychoanalysis characterised by excessive reliance on the scientific-therapeutic model that sees the client as someone who must be fixed, with an approach that makes room for ethical and aesthetic considerations. To do that, they take the Marxist notion of false consciousness and extend it to our own body. On their account, capitalism initiates a process of privatisation that extends to all aspects of life, starting with the anus (hidden in plain sight) and up to, and including the psyche. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the invention of psychoanalysis marks the moment when the psyche becomes privatised and subjected to the fantasy of the big other, a father figure to be sure, who is holding the truth of our being.

Deleuze and Guattari mount a two-pronged assault on the Oedipal triangle. First, against the universality and totality of the Freudian Oedipal model they propose a genealogy of the Oedipal theatre showing that it is rooted in the binary between rationality and irrationality. Where Freud sees theatre, Deleuze and Guattari see “factory” continually recombining drives in order to produce new, previously unheard-of forms of desire. Second, Deleuze and Guattari identify most of western thought as paranoid. The source of this paranoid structure is the superego, the little voice that keeps telling us what we *should* be doing. This is the voice of the law, of society, of consciousness. In trying to figure out what this voice wants from us we resort to interpreting it like the biblical prophets channelling the voice of God. We keep searching for meaning, attempting to find answers in the authority figure, be it the father or the therapist.

Freudian psychoanalysis only deepens this paranoid structure establishing the superego as the law unto itself, the domineering presence that threatens with castration and demands the total subordination of the child, while also aligning it with the role of the good doctor, the blank-slate analyst who refuses neither to validate nor disprove the discourse of the patient.

Schizoanalysis is Deleuze and Guattari’s alternative to Freudian psychoanalysis; instead of looking for symptoms and their meaning schizoanalysis looks at the intensities produced by encounters between bodies. On the one hand schizoanalysis seeks to divorce madness from its pathological, medical and individual context and to consider it instead as a political and poetic force, and on the other hand it alludes to what Foucault refers as ‘the fascism in us all, in our

heads and in our everyday behaviour' (Foucault 1996).

III. The psyche is the political

The goal of *Anti-Oedipus* is to expose the history and the political investments of the signifier, in particular the way it underpins Lacanian psychoanalysis, while at the same time creating an alternative that draws on desiring machines, schizoanalysis and bodies that resist the logic of social organisation (bodies without organs).

By refusing to locate the unconscious within individuals and their motives, Deleuze and Guattari announce a political theory of intensity and desire rather than of value and ideology. The problem, in other words, is not why people make one ethical choice instead of another, but what is the process of differentiation that establishes binary choices as a transcendent principle in the first place.

Deleuze and Guattari diagnose both psychoanalysis and Marxism as dependent on primary organising images; the dialectics of class struggle in the former and the dialectics of Mommy-Daddy-me in the later. These organising images are responsible to a large extent for the way we come to understand life and the potential for divergence and change. The problem of psychoanalysis is that it conceives of desire as mediated through fear of castration, guilt and shame, subsumed into the triangle of the nuclear family.

For Deleuze and Guattari desire is not understood as pleasure - as this would bring back the ethics of individualism that they are at pain to eradicate - but as *affect*; the ability of the body to be affected by another body in a way that either increases or curtails its ability to act. In this way desire is detached from its association with the id and aligned instead with the question of power: "Power is an affectation of desire" (Deleuze, 2007). Considered as *affect*, desire is refashioned as a nexus of biological, political and economic forces, and becomes the key to understanding why "people desire that which oppresses them" (Foucault, 1996).

The talking cure was the basis of psychoanalysis since Freud. What Deleuze and Guattari suggest is that there is a different form of therapeutic intervention emerging in the therapy room that is not coming out of the theory but through asking what conditions need to be met for healing to take place.

References

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