

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari — Refrains of Freedom



Edited by
Constantin V. Boundas and Panagiotis Sotiris

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Refrains of Freedom

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Introduction: Refrains of Freedom

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'We need both creativity and a people': this is how Gilles Deleuze chose to end the interview he gave to Antonio Negri for *Futur Antérieur*. If 'creativity' refers to the immanent potentiality for collective, productive and affective practices, the notion of the people, in the 'minoritarian' sense of it that Deleuze has in mind, brings us back to collective political subjects and politics as a struggle between competing hegemonic projects. Consequently, every attempt to think, from a political point of view, the work of Deleuze and Guattari must avoid simplified oppositions—between organised intervention and nomadic action, hegemonic politics and minority assemblages, and revolutionary projects and 'lines of escape'.

We must rethink the pertinence of Deleuze and Guattari for the contemporary social and political landscape. The crisis of 'actually existing neoliberalism' that erupted in 2007–8 has not only been a crisis of finance but rather a crisis of an entire regime of accumulation and social regulation—in what Deleuze called societies of control—shaking up the belief in the self-regulatory ability of markets and the disciplinary forms of the subjectification they induced. The large waves of protest and unrest that shook the world from the 2008 December riots in Greece to the global protests of 2011, and to more recent movements have presented a series of complex and contested becomings that vindicate and at the same time test many of Deleuze and Guattari's assumptions. On the other hand, the various forms of 'left governance' that emerged, their difficulties, shortcomings and defeats, act as warnings against any facile and naive approach to these questions. The same warning applies to the reactions of European societies to the new waves of refugees and

migrants, as we are being faced with an impressive mass expression of solidarity and also with so many authoritarian or xenophobic responses; and the same goes for the ways Europe is facing the consequences of its own attempt to transform a war against its lower classes into a 'war against terror', as well as for the emergence of the Far Right. 'The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters.' This often repeated phrase of Gramsci, in a certain way captures the spirit of the time.

We believe that we need a renewed reading of Deleuze and Guattari. We believe that it is exactly now, faced with the complexity but also the potentiality of the conjuncture, that this reading must be done, in a way both creative and productive, in order to keep afloat the intensities that traverse their texts and to attempt also new forms of a dialogue between them and other theoretical traditions.

The essays included in this issue were first presented in Athens during the April 2015 international conference, 'Refrains of Freedom', Athens, a (non-)place of crisis and misery, of struggles and hope, of rage and despair, of open questions and answers yet to be found, Athens bearing the scars of the crisis but also the resources of hope, seemed the ideal place for such a dialogue. We are grateful to *Deleuze Studies* for choosing to preserve and highlight a few moments of this encounter.

It is Savas Michael-Matsas's introductory essay, 'The Utopia of Immanence', that sets the tone and builds the frame for the twin thought that made the Athens conference possible and guided our editorial choices for the assemblage of the writings that make up the present issue of the journal: our intention was to reopen the file of the impact that Marx and Marxism has had on the political choices of Deleuze and Guattari and to do it in Athens, the capital city of a hopelessly indebted state, the victim of the shameless greed of its own elites for wealth and power and of the neoliberal/neocolonial deadly experimentation of its international lenders.

'[We] did not renounce Marx, did not repudiate May '68' Matsas reminds his readers, repeating Deleuze's statement reproduced in the *Magazine littéraire* of 2002 – an expression of his and Guattari's efforts to re-actualise the revolution as an absolute deterritorialisation that would simultaneously be the revolutionary utopia of Ernst Bloch and the resistance against death of Baruch Spinoza. As for the choice of Athens to be the site of an international encounter, Matsas provides the motivation for the choice, in his appropriation of Primo Levi's shame at being human. Matsas writes:

We experience the shame of being human here and now, in the extreme situation in Greece, in a dying democracy included-and-excluded into a European Union of democratic states, in a shameful 'state of exception'. We experience shame before the unemployed, the famished, the homeless, the humiliated, the persecuted and those who committed suicide because of their degradation. We experience shame before the Nazis of Golden Dawn and those who long for the military dictatorship. We experience shame before the migrants in 'our' concentration camps, and the thousands who drown night and day in the Aegean and the Mediterranean.

It is time to remember with Matsas that, for Deleuze and Guattari, shame can be a powerful motive for becoming minor and for 'mak(ing) all the lines of escape connected on a revolutionary plane'.

Sotiris, on the other hand, in his essay, 'The Many Encounters of Deleuze and Marxism', surveys the missed encounters of the 1960s and the 1970s and the more promising ones of the 1990s and the 2000s. The possibilities for a dialogue between Althusser and Deleuze on the question of a non-deterministic and non-teleological Marxism—the possibilities, that is, for an aleatory Marxism of the encounter—were laid to rest in the denunciations of Deleuze by the early Badiou for being a pre-fascist ideologue, anarcho-desirer, enemy of traditional party politics and discipline, and traitor of the cause of the One. Nicos Poulantzas still in the 1960s and Fredric Jameson in the 1970s are also, for Sotiris, cases of missed encounters: Poulantzas sees in the work of Deleuze and Guattari a mere variant of an anti-authoritarian criticism of totalitarianism and Jameson turns his back on the affirmative encounter that could bring Marxism and libidinal deconstruction into a serious dialogue with each other. For Jameson, there cannot be a real dialogue with those who espouse a libidinal conception of politics in the name of a post-Freudian metaphysics of desire, those who mistake the decentred subject of the bourgeois decadence for the Subject writ large and those who turn their backs on all processes of interpretation. Similarly, for Poulantzas, no serious dialogue can exist with those who ignore the rooting of political power in exploitative social relations.

In the last twenty-five years, however, several writings suggesting a closer proximity between Marxism and schizoanalysis made their appearance and positioned themselves as signs on the road to more and better research. From Toni Negri's acceptance of Deleuze's work, with its emphasis on immanence, as a new materialism with revolutionary potential, to Nick Thoburn's situation of Deleuze and Guattari next to *operaismo* as a minor Marxist politics turned against Lenin's centralism

and helpful for the theorisation of a becoming without identity, all the way to Read and Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc. Read's appreciation of Deleuze and Guattari's politics of thought that shows how certain images of thought emerge from different social relations is duly noticed by Sotiris as is Read's conclusion that 'schizoanalysis is not an 'ontology' of desires ... It is a highly original dialogue with Marx's research and an attempt at a relational conception of social reality ...' Sibertin-Blanc is even more appreciative. His claim that Marxist theoretical research has a lot to gain from the confrontation with the work of Deleuze and Guattari is emphasised by Sotiris along with their careful demonstration of the role of the violence in the state which makes the need for resisting and counteracting war machines necessary. Sotiris states that becoming-minor is an 'attempt to think the complexity and difficulty of revolutionary politics today'.

But it is in his discussion of becoming-minor that the originality of Sibertin-Blanc's essay lies. Following a suggestion by Etienne Balibar, he focuses his attention on the 'antinomic' nature of becoming minor. Whether or not the Deleuze-Guattari becoming can be made into a strategy, as Sibertin-Blanc maintains, is a question that will be left for another time; but whatever the answer may be, Sibertin-Blanc correctly claims that majority and minority can only be an *antinomic relation*, or even better an *inclusive-disjunctive one*. '[W]e must identify the obstacles which, in a majoritarian strategy, require the experimentations with a minority strategy, and, conversely, detect inside a minority strategy the difficulties that necessitate new developments of a majoritarian one.' That the inclusive-disjunctive relationship between majoritarian and minoritarian strategies is, from a practical point of view, indispensable is expressed in the following way:

No minority strategy should ignore, in a conjuncture marked by the sudden hardening of the oligarchic blocs of power ..., that the majority strategy regains its most urgent necessity, and that an antagonism must be built which might federate a counter-hegemony ... Yet, it would be equally dangerous to foreclose the issue of the minor in situations where its autonomy cannot be acknowledged' in the 'us' of the sovereign people ...

In the sequence, Sibertin-Blanc finds in Judith Butler's work on mourning and melancholia what he needs in order to qualify the 'strategic perspectivism' of the inclusive disjunction as '*dissymmetrical*' and '*melancholic*'. He speaks of 'strategic perspectivism', because both strategies, majoritarian and minoritarian, are indispensable alternative responses to changing socio-political circumstances. They are not

mutually exclusive, but they are jointly sufficient. 'Dissymmetrical' and 'melancholic', because the loss of oneself, the loss of being that is implied in the becoming-minor essential to the process of minorisation, is not equally constitutive of the concept 'majoritarian'. The minoritarian confronts what he or she is ready to lose of his or her own self—where the 'self' alluded to here is not captured only by the ideas we have and the representations with which we can identify. It also includes the material conditions of existence and ways of life. The loss of being implied by the becoming-minor cannot mask the exposure to loss and vulnerability, and it is this loss and this vulnerability that the strategic melancholism of the minoritarian position refuses to forget. Sibertin-Blanc concludes his essay making clear that there are epistemic and political implications stemming from strategic melancholism: the undecidability and the impossibility of a knowledge that might tell us where, in the experience of becoming-minor, the limit between being active and being passive lies—'between what is open to experimentation and what must be left *unconstructible*'.

Boram Jeong's essay, 'The Production of Indebted Subjects: Capitalism and Melancholia', returns to Matsas's other theme—the theme of being ashamed at being human—with an interesting twist this time. It shows that we are ashamed and guilty because we are indebted subjects, and that being indebted is the inevitable condition of capitalism, which is more dramatically felt in circumstances of finance capitalism and of its crises. Jeong revisits Deleuze's theory of time, focuses on the relationship between time and capitalism, and concludes that the temporality of debt and being indebted, being guilty and being ashamed of it, presuppose a specific understanding of time and a construction of subjectivity—where the individual turns into a subject without future, it becomes the melancholic subject.

Bruce Baugh's essay, 'The Open Society and the Democracy to Come: Bergson, Deleuze and Guattari', takes us back to Bergson, and to his vision of the people to come that has inspired Deleuze. For both Deleuze and Bergson, the sad but also promising state of affairs is that, in the minoritarian counter-hegemonic strategies that must be undertaken, the new people and the new earth are missing. The social instinct and the habits it consolidates prevent the arrival of the new. The prevailing actual conditions and the opinions of the majority render reforms according to an incrementalist agenda impossible and unable to usher in the open society of creators. The hoped-for revolution/counter-actualisation requires 'the leap' and the experimentation of 'privileged individuals' (Bergson) or better of 'nomads' and 'minoritarians' (Deleuze

and Guattari). It will be their love of humanity that will replace guilt, indebtedness and shame, and their intuition of the virtual that will enable resistance and counter-actualisation to gain strength and momentum.

The next three essays raise a critique of Deleuze and Guattari (and incidentally of certain forms of Marxism) from a decolonial, post-feminist and non-Eurocentric point of view. Méndez and Karkov allege that there are limitations in the revolutionary potential of the work of Deleuze and Guattari, attributing them to the fact that their joint work, despite its 'openness to radical theory', continues to 'breed [its] concepts on a Western soil and under a Western sky'. Xhercis Méndez exposes limitations in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the refrain. He stages a group of Black and Brown youngsters disrupting the ordered and disciplined space of those who, every morning, half asleep, wait for the State Island ferry to bring them to Manhattan. He has them, with their song and dance, deconstructing the space of those whose lawfulness is 'protected by the state' and turn it into chaos. But, at the same time, Méndez remarks, these youngsters by tapping into a different world of sense are in the process of organising a new territory and a novel set of possibilities; in fact, they are in the process of creating a territory of their own. The song and the dance of the Black and Brown youth is their refrain and as such, were we to accept the function that Deleuze and Guattari attribute to refrains in *A Thousand Plateaus*, it should have put a modicum of order and sense upon a disorienting and senseless chaos. But Méndez's example tends to show something else: it shows that, whether space is ordered or reordered depends on the side from which the visual and sonoric disruption is undertaken. What Méndez chooses to highlight in his essay are refrains that are as disruptive, disorienting and disorganising as they are also capable of bringing forth a new order and a new sense. With them, [w]hat becomes visible in this encounter is *the border* between the territory where [the values] and the World we spend most of our time in 'come to meet each other. If now we call the old order by its right name, 'colonial' and the disruption/new order, 'decolonial', we may conclude, with Méndez, that a decolonial possibility that lies in the ability of the refrain to reorganise space has been missed by Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the ritornello. What their conception is missing is not a simple theoretical omission. It has political implications. It is the possibility for '[d]ecolonial decoding to [be] understood as that which makes visible the operation of the coloniality of power and [to draw] our attention to the cracks in the code, thus making it possible for us to press these cracks to our transformative advantage'.

Nikolay Karkov's essay, 'Why Pluralism = Pluralism \neq Monism: A Decolonial Feminist Critique of Deleuze and Guattari's Concept of Becoming', on the other hand, exposes the weak links in Deleuze and Guattari's chain of becomings that are supposed to lead to emancipation: becoming-woman, becoming-animal and their co-imbrication. For Deleuze, becoming is 'a process of affective recomposition constituted by different modalities arranged in a particular sequence of progressive liberation, away from the one subjective figure that does not become: Man'. The trouble with this, argues Méndez, is that the two becomings, becoming-woman and becoming-animal, are throughout Deleuze and Guattari's work, conceived from a Western point of view. As a result, the images of femininity and animality, indeed the very intersection of femininity and animality that prevailed in colonial times and spaces (and still exist in some quarters) and in contexts of racialised gender as well, have been ignored. '[T]heir effort', Karkov points out, 'to identify a progressive sequence of affective liberation leaves them oblivious to the practices and policies of settler colonialism, which mirror uncannily the basic premises of their emancipatory narrative, yet to a very different strategic outcome.' He concludes, therefore, that the use of Deleuze and Guattari's texts for decolonial theory is bound to be limited because of their 'colonial myopia' and their 'epistemology of ignorance', and, just like Méndez before him, he advises 'neither unconditional abandonment nor uncritical embrace' of their political ontology.

Finally, this issue includes an interview that Anne Querrien granted us as well as the transcription of a speech that Arnaud Villani made during the Athens Conference, in the amphitheatre of the Institut Français de Grèce. The interview with Querrien offers the point of view of a participant on the political struggles of the Left groups around Guattari and the La Borde clinic in France, between the years 1955 and 1981. Villani's lecture, on the other hand, on 'Deleuze and the Greeks: An Essay on Polemosophy', has been included in this issue because, in making the case for an affinity between Deleuze and the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, Villani praises them both for their dedication to the cause of the One/All (after all, the main theme of the Athens Conference was the Deleuzian riddle, 'monism = pluralism'). But, more importantly, Villani's lecture is chosen to complete our collection, because it reminds us that the struggle for the inclusive disjunction – the One/Multiple – at the core of Deleuzo-Guattarian political thinking, is not carried out *sub specie pacis aeternae*. We are a warlike tribe and philosophy and politics become unworthy of their call whenever they start contemplating their own demise. The fight goes on and the struggle (*polemos*) will never

cease fuelling the cycle of human affairs – the point is to know how to transform it, the way the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers did, turning it to the symbolic confrontation of the ancient *agon*. Villani, having joined us in the *Refrains of Freedom*, salutes with his own essay Athens and wishes that the wounded but still fighting city, with the 'magical cultural history', would relearn how to transform war into one of critical intelligence – a symbolic duel without dead corpses and without enslaved captives.

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