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Micro-politics: Anti-Oedipus and the wall of ultra-liberalism

Micro-politiques : anti-Œdipe et le mur de l'ultra-libéralisme

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A B S T R A C T

Context. – Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus series has shaped several generations of radical left political thought, promoting an accelerationist understanding of revolutionizing capitalism. Despite the lasting influence of the concepts developed in this work, the changing dynamics of capitalist social life, particularly increasing social and institutional fragmentation, have called the core itinerary of these concepts and their application to political struggle into serious question.

Objective. – This paper critically examines the theoretical presuppositions that drove the Anti-Oedipus series, with particular focus on the first volume, and asks whether the repertoire of concepts developed in this work remain relevant to the contemporary left.

Method. – After an investigation that focuses on the movement away from a Marxist-centered praxis and understanding of capitalism in Anti-Oedipus, an analysis of the conception of the “Oedipal form” is presented and critiqued with reference to a wide range of post-Lacanian political thinkers.

Results. – Anti-Oedipus has made a tremendous influence on the theoretical understanding of today’s anti-capitalist left. Its concepts have been adopted in two main ways on the contemporary left: a radical abolitionist politics of opacity and a new form of left-accelerationist utopian socialism.

Interpretations. – These two tendencies of political thought are critically analyzed and diagnosed as inadequate to facing the political and social challenges of our time, but they remain nonetheless important intellectual tendencies for understanding the ideological makeup of today’s left.

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RÉSUMÉ

Contexte. – La série Anti-Œdipe de Deleuze et Guattari a façonné plusieurs générations de pensée politique de gauche radicale, promouvant une compréhension accélératrice de la révolution du capitalisme. Malgré l’influence durable des concepts développés dans cette œuvre, les dynamiques changeantes de la vie sociale capitaliste, en particulier la fragmentation sociale et institutionnelle croissante, remettent sérieusement en question l’itinéraire central de ces concepts et leur application à la lutte politique.

Objectif. – Cet article examine de manière critique les présuppositions théoriques qui ont motivé la série Anti-Œdipe, en mettant particulièrement l’accent sur le premier volume, et se demande si le répertoire de concepts développé dans cette œuvre reste pertinent pour la gauche contemporaine.

Méthode. – Après une enquête qui se concentre sur l’éloignement d’une praxis centrée sur le marxisme et la compréhension du capitalisme dans Anti-Œdipe, une analyse de la conception de la “forme oedipienne” est présentée et critiquée en référence à un large éventail de penseurs politiques post-lacaniens.

Résultats. – Anti-Œdipe a eu une influence considérable sur la compréhension thèorique de la gauche anticapitaliste d’aujourd’hui. Ses concepts ont été adoptés de deux manières principales dans la gauche contemporaine: une politique abolitioniste radicale de l’opacité et une nouvelle forme de socialisme utopique d’accélération de gauche.

Interprétations Ces deux tendances de la pensée politique sont analysées de manière critique et diagnostiquées comme insuffisantes pour faire face aux défis politiques et sociaux de notre époque, mais elles demeurent néanmoins des tendances intellectuelles importantes pour comprendre la composition idéologique de la gauche actuelle.

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“How does one get through this wall, for it is useless to hit it hard, it has to be undermined and penetrated with a file, slowly and with patience, as I see it.”

Vincent van Gogh, (Van Gogh, 1888)

The Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia series formally ended with the text What Is Philosophy? (1991) and this nearly twenty-year long project has left an indelible mark on the anti-capitalist left ever since. Anti-Oedipus was first released in 1973 just as the global economy went off the gold standard, an event which marks the concomitant rise of early financial-dominated capitalism. Written in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the May 1968 rebellion, the text responds to a sense of collective defeat and pessimism over the very prospect of collective liberation. It proposes a bold re-fashioning of Freudian-Marxism, a tradition that had first blossomed with Wilhelm Reich, the sole Marxist in Freud’s inner circle. Anti-Oedipus ushers in a new guide to ascetic living and has proven influential for multiple generations of leftists.

As the protégé of Michel Foucault, sociologist Jacques Donzelot says of the book: “In order to read this book, and even more so to like it, we must, it is true, share with the authors a certain boredom with the age, of suspecting it of being nothing more than an exorcism of life” (Donzelot, 1972, p. 3). It is this libertine ascetic appeal to life in the face of political defeat combined with a new conception of fascism, and indeed of resistance to capital, what Michel Foucault called “a guide to non-fascist living”, that defines the novelty of the wider series.

We will explore how Deleuze and Guattari redefine the distinction between capital and capitalism and incorporate a critique of psychoanalysis and the figure of the psychoanalyst as a representative of a patriarchal and authoritarian “oedipal form” of desire that forms the core metaphysics of capitalism. With intense theoretical rigor, the authors reinvent nearly all the core concepts of psychoanalysis, from desire, drive, the unconscious, to Oedipus. In the background of this effort is a grand philosophical fusion of Nietzsche with Marx, and importantly, the emphasis is placed squarely Nietzsche over Marx. Nietzsche the “nomadic rebel” emerges as the source of this new libertine philosophy and political praxis. In Deleuze’s view, Nietzsche is considered the superior philosopher to Marx because he “decodes” the repressive coding procedures of a stultified and bureaucratic capitalism which was present in both the west and in the USSR at the time Anti-Oedipus was written.

Nietzsche had already replaced Marx as the primary philosopher of the left in Deleuze’s earlier “Nomad Thought” essay (1964) and his Nietzsche and Philosophy (1962) published about 10 years prior to Anti-Oedipus. In these works, the great French philosopher associates Marxism with Stalinist bureaucracy and Nietzscheanism with a new counterculture-centered concept of leftist revolt. The dawn of a new era, a Nietzschean-Marxism was to be refined in Deleuze’s thought and this new orientation found its most practical expression in the Anti-Oedipus series with Guattari. In this way, it must be stressed that the Anti-Oedipus series portends a significant theoretical assault on Marxism and the worker’s movement. The authors re-define class and the proletarian away from class-based conflict, and yet they situate their project in line with and in close dialogue with the Marxist historical materialist tradition, (the third chapter of Anti-Oedipus is a study of revolutionary conceptions of history).

This is a deep skepticism expressed towards socialist parties and in lieu of a conception of classes a radically libertine conception of groups is put at the center of this work. Marx’s proletariat is completely recast from an understanding of alienation in relation to the mode of production and labor power no longer serves the basis for the organization of revolutionary action. In this regard, the authors take insights directly from Sartre’s Marxist period: “Sartre is correct when he notes that there is not class solidarity there is rather group spontaneity” (p. 256). Implicit in their understanding of capitalism is the idea that capitalism seizes on revolutionary desire and re-shapes it. Capitalism is posed as a total vour, usurping even the Leninist and the Marxist idea that in communism “even a cook can run the state” as Lenin famously put it. Deleuze and Guattari argue that capitalism in its own elaborate bureaucratic mechanisms can deliver on such communist fantasies.

The centrality of class conflict as bound up with productive and labor-based social forces is thus completely discarded, and revolutionary politics now becomes a question of independent revolutionary groups. Psychoanalysis and its analysis of desire, once it is overhauled from its repressive foundation aids this idea of group and the problem now revolves around locating a given militant groups desire. Militant groups are in a symbiotic relationship with the decoded flows of capital, and it is capital that poses the revolutionary situation, i.e., capital and its desiring process opens the site for liberation. The analysis of Anti-Oedipus can be understood as a manual for identifying and reading the micro-flows of desire that elude the repressive system of capitalism and its Oedipal desire systems that over-code processes of its own organization. Thus, politics is no longer “about the Marxist wager that class struggle is built around a primary schism between bourgeois and proletarian classes. We are presented with a new, Nietzschean-Marxist praxis, wherein there is no primary schism between two classes, and politics is theorized as a confrontation of desiring machines in a society of depersonalized forces and flows of capital.

The decoded flows that enter into a class axiomatic on the full body of capital, and on the other hand, the decoded flows that free themselves from this axiomatic just as they free themselves from the despotic signifier, that break through the wall, this wall of a wall, and begin flowing on the full body without organs (p. 255).

Since desire is inherently multifarious and is tied directly to production and not tethered to lack (as the psychoanalysts insist through the Oedipal form of desire) it cannot be limited by the stable nature of a human subject. This means that capital itself resembles desire and any revolutionary subject must be understood as bound up with the anarchic acceleration of capital and its flows. The name for this subject is the “schizo”, a figure that plunges deeper and deeper into the realm of capital in its de-territorialization. The shizo revolutionary plunges “into the limit of capitalism, since he is the inherent tendency brought to fulfillment, its surplus product, its proletariat, and its exterminating angel” (p. 55).

The motif of the wall is important to understanding this conception of the revolutionary, as the metaphor of the wall is a reference to the schizophrenic’s room in the mental ward. But the wall also refers to the political defeat post 1968, and metaphorically the schizo is the ideal form of political praxis, as they detach bricks from the wall. Indeed, this metaphor of the schizo is so essential that it formulates the entire idea of a politics of breaking walls. It formulates the typology of “desiring machines” who break apart social forms in three ways: a surplus break that forms a “disjunctive synthesis,” a break as a detachment that forms a “conjunctive synthesis,” and a residual break that forms a “conjunctive synthesis” (pp. 39–42). Importantly, these breaks are not castrations; they are syntheses that produce distinct break flows. It is this model of thinking breaks and syntheses that comes to replace a commitment to dialectical materialism and a new, allegedly “materialist” Nietzscheanism is put in its place.

The Anti-Oedipus series would usher in a new era of micro-politics on the left. This profound revision of Marxism also portended a new understanding of the proletariat, construed as a
multitude of “minor” – not exactly minority struggles but rather non-bureaucratic and non-institutional – struggles that are thought de-coupled from class-based forces entirely. These minor-based struggles are linked directly to a new conception of erogenous and pleasure-based liberation that works closely with Freud’s revolutionary insights into “polymorphous perversion.”

The polymorphous perverse idea of the subject is one of a decentered subject composed by erogenous partial and autonomous pleasure zones. This conception of a polymorphous perversity is fundamental to Deleuze and Guattari’s important idea of the “body without organs”, a concept built around Wilhelm Reich’s analysis of psychotic and schizophrenic patients. Reich argued that “what belongs to the schizophrenic patient is that he experiences the vital biology of the body” (p. 80). To understand this elusive concept, we have to grasp how Deleuze and Guattari draw out a distinction between “social” and “desiring” production; they understand social production as that which produces the molar “despot, earth, capital.” Desiring production produces the more liberatory body without organs, which is understood as an empty center associated with capital itself (p. 13). The “schiz”, or the revolutionary subject, coincides with this very same liberatory flow of capital and desire.

This framework leads them to draw a further, and arguably even more crucial distinction between capital and capitalism. They write that “capitalism is constructed on the ruins of the territorial and the despotic, the lyric and the tragic representations, but it re-establishes them in its own service and in another form, as images of capital” (p. 303). It is capitalism and the “capitalist machine” that organizes the Oedipal representational system, whereas capital like the “schiz” is organized as “matter without space” and an anxious body without organs (p. 19). This distinction between capital as an anarchic and radical desiring system and capitalism as a bureaucratic and stifling machine is at the core of the accelerationist wager that grows out of this work, namely that the impersonal flows of capital must be harnessed as a priority of radical leftist praxis. This distinction still shapes the left today, especially elements of the abolitionist left, to which we turn in the final section.

A good example of how this praxis is built out of this distinction between capital and capitalism is found in their treatment of the concept of “lines of flight”, which they discover in the American black radical George Jackson’s prison writings (Koerner, 2011). The concept line of flight is invented by Jackson when he describes the way he could always evade a police officer when his life was on the line (p. 277). As a metaphor, Jackson’s line of flight from the police firing at him on the run is made homologous to the schizophrenic tearing down the wall of his holding cell in a mental ward. Both figures reveal a form of revolutionary desire that matches capital in its pure form, as both images are pure lines that can be extended across oedipal desiring system. The line of flight is what tears down build-ups of repressive territories instantiated in the institutions of the family, the police, the school etc.

It is worth noting at this point that in the history of Freudian-Marxist interventions, the Anti-Oedipus series represents a totally novel direction. Compared to Herbert Marcuse in Eros and Civilization (Marcuse, 1955), a text that was also highly influential to the leftist counterculture of the 60s and 70s, revolutionary upheaval is meant to overthrow the reality principal. We find a similar total assault on the institutions of capitalism in Marcuse’s account as we find in Deleuze and Guattari. For Marcuse, the revolutionary subject wages a total rejection of the institutions of capitalism and the surplus repression that capitalism engenders is meant to be transcended in the act of revolt and rebellion. But unlike Marcuse, for whom psychoanalysis remains a liberatory practice and method, Deleuze and Guattari argue that psychoanalysis – as a theoretical construct and as an institution in capitalism – only fuels a sense of fatalism. They propose a new nomadic asceticism combined with a ludic, Nietzschean inspired idea of revolution that aims to overcome the Oedipal coding system. What is most unique in this regard is the way that they analyze psychoanalysis as a major impediment to liberation.

Capitalism is encircled at all ends by territorialization, and the nomadic rebel aims to evade this capture. But there is an entire ethics involved with militant activity given that the schizo also risks getting ensnared in fascist capture if they settle down and submit to Oedipal desire. Fascism builds off territory and oedipal desire; it affirms the metaphysics of Oedipus in all its “molar” or centralized and bureaucratic institutional form. The nomadic rebel or the “schizo” breaks off the signifier and splits it apart before it becomes encrusted in a molar tendency. The Oedipal process of reinscribing the desire structure of “mommy-daddy-me” is directly associated with a fascist tendency inherent in capitalism.

We can already see that such a definition of fascism risks an all too libertarian cooptation thesis as it implies that any capitulation to capitalism risks being fascist.

Perhaps the best example of how nebulous the theory of fascism is in Deleuze and Guattari can be found in their discussion of the American muse of Beat counterculture, Jack Kerouac (p. 132). They argue that when Kerouac moved away from his subversive nomadic lifestyle on the road after falling into a depression and alcoholic stupor with his mother, he became captured by Oedipal territorialization, abandoning the nomadic radicalism of his earlier work. They celebrate Kerouac’s spontaneous prose method as fragmenting and decoding the despotic signifier of postwar American repressive social norms. Thus Kerouac, although a reactionary like Balzac, could still hold to reactionary politics but write in such a way to reveal the despotic signifier of the American postwar dread just as Balzac reveals the repression of mid-19th century bourgeois European society. It is not the personal fascism of either reactionary author, it is the ‘oedipal form’ that their writing takes which reinforces neurosis, the superego, commodification. “It is not a question here of the personal oedipalization of the author and his readers, but of the Oedipal form to which one attempts to enslave the work itself, to make of it this minor expressive activity that secretes ideology according to the dominant codes” (p. 133). In politics and in art the “schiz” lacks Oedipus and thus emerges as the ideal form of revolutionary subjectivity. But what exactly is the “oedipal form” and how is Oedipus conceived in this work?

The Oedipal form: excess, patience, working-through

If this conception of fascism appears so total as to be practically nonsensical, if not hyperbolic, what about the core assault on the Oedipal desiring system itself? Do Deleuze and Guattari’s very idea of a “territorialized” Oedipus, and the strategy of a “line of flight” from Oedipus’ capture offer a plausible model for subjective liberation? As we have mentioned, Deleuze and Guattari aim for nothing less than a total critique and assault on the Oedipal desiring system, which they claim is the primary “metaphysics” of capitalism. They develop a “transcendental” alternative to the “metaphysics” of Oedipal capitalism by shifting the very meaning of desire. For them, “desire makes its entry with the general collapse of the question what does it mean in favor of how does it work?” The unconscious is thus thought as founded on a
transcendental instead of a metaphysical basis and it is nonfigura-
tive rather than imaginary, which is to say that the unconscious is
directly bound up directly with social production, it is immediately
tied into the earth, or the first “socius” (p. 109).

They develop the notion that “desire is productive” from a
reading of the unconscious as a construct that is totally unaware of
persons as such but driven primarily by “partial objects.” As we
noted above, Freud’s notion of “polymorphous perversity” or the
pre-social period of a child’s life in which they experience pleasure
that is fulfilling to organs and not caught within social taboos and
norms is elevated as the main liberatory concept. This more
elemental state of the subject is where Deleuze and Guattari derive
the “body without organs” as a mode of subjective return to this
condition in which different erogenous zones and what they call
“desiring machines” govern (pp. 86–87).

The text builds on the American cybernetician Gregory
 Bateson’s idea of the “double bind,” which they locate as the
central dynamic at play in the Oedipus complex. Deleuze and
Guattari argue, rightly, that the fundamental double bind of
capitalist life is Oedipal desire, and the contradictory way Oedipal
desire operates on the symbolic law of the father. The double bind
of Oedipus sets its own trap, in the law of the father: “do as I say, not
as I do” (p. 79). The idea of the double bind comes out of
anthropological work done by Bronislaw Malinowski who discov-
ered a social order in the Trobriand Islands, in Melanesia where the
father is not the authority figure, but the maternal uncle is. In such
an arrangement of authority within the family there was an
absence of nervousness because the father doesn’t function as a
contradiction but serves over only sublimation, not both sublima-
tion and repression. The double bind of western civilization finds its
historical legacy in the Abrahamic paternal authority structures
which position the father as a figure of authority over the symbolic
law and over sublimation. It was these anthropological and
ethnographic insights into non-Oedipal desire structures that
would lead Lacan to fundamentally de-mythify Oedipus and
Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus should be read in a similar way.

This understanding of Oedipal power and authority affects the
ways that Deleuze and Guattari theorize the family in the
contemporary capitalist society. The Oedipal desiring system is
thought as bound up with the state long before being delegated to
the family, which is an insight that tracks very closely with what
the Marxist and socialist-feminist tradition maintains (p. xx).
Wilhelm Reich’s *Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) also located the
rise of fascism in Germany with the repressed desire emanating
from the bourgeois family. Reich’s analysis of the family was
understood in a class analysis in which the bourgeois family was
thought as the primary bulwark to revolutionary potential and the
main site where acquiescence to repressive social codes occurs
(Reich, 1980).

Apropos the family, Deleuze and Guattari are in general
agreement with Engels’s argument in *Origins of the Bourgeois
Family* that kinship relations in pre-modern and pre-capitalist
societies were a form of praxis, i.e., the family is a social
arrangement, not a filial arrangement. This insight is taken to
mean that the family can take different forms and have more
liberatory expressions, although there is little to no discussion of
what the family-form would be in a more liberated social order.
They argue that historically, when the modern bourgeois family
emerges, the parental figures are indutors, not organizers of desire.
The family is thus a structural re-routing of desiring production, and
the parental imagoes are not the real inductors, they are rendered
transcendent (p. 92). Oedipal desire, in the modern bourgeois social
order is thus not invented by the unconscious but is a discursive
invention of the state and of other forms of social power.

The assault on psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysts-as-an
institution in capitalist society is at the core of Anti-Oedipus. The
most striking fact of this assault on psychoanalysis is the oversized
degree of power the analyst is assumed to possess in social life. It is
not clear whether the psychoanalyst is taken to be a metaphoric
source of repressive desire or the primary agent, the “new priest”
in Nietzschean terms for the perpetual legitimation and spread of the
Oedipal system itself. They speak of the psychoanalyst as if he/she
is a sovereign legislator imposing an artificial unconscious
coding system:

It is only little by little that he makes the familial romance, on
the contrary, into a mere dependence on Oedipus, and that he
neurotizes everything in the unconscious at the same time as he
oedipalizes, and closes the familial triangle over the entire
unconscious (pp. 54–55).

Deleuze and Guattari take aim at the conservative potential
inherent in Freud’s work by locating how Freud assigns an
autonomous value to psychic repression as a condition of culture
acting against the incestuous drives. And they are right to point out
that psychoanalysis cannot see beyond the repression it posits as
necessary and then comes to see its solutions as the only viable
ones to the problem it has established.

But at the same time, any critical treatment of Anti-Oedipus
today must face up to the fact that psychoanalysis no longer has the
institutional power it once had in the 1960s and 1970s due to the
ripping apart of the welfare state social service protections under
a neofar-right rule. As they write, “instead of participating in an
undertaking that will bring about genuine liberation, psychoanaly-
sis is taking part in the work of bourgeois repression at its most far-
reaching level, that is to say, keeping European humanity harnessed
to the yoke of daddy-mommy and making no effort to do away with
this problem once and for all” (p. 50). But this reading of the
liberatory potential of psychoanalysis is uncharitable and hyper-
bolic. The idea that the yoke of “daddy-mommy” should be totally
extinguished reveals an excessive libertinism that is hardwired into
the theoretical edifice of the wider project. The best example of this
excessiveness is found in Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that “incest
is impossible” because to truly consider the problem of incest is to
understand the prior problematic that gives rise to it, namely the
invention of the “person” as such.

For Deleuze and Guattari, one cannot enjoy the person and the
name the person is given at the same time, i.e., a person is an
oppressive social invention that cannot be situated as separate from
“intensive flows” (p. 46). What is repressed prior to any act of incest
is the intensity of the “germinal influx,” and it is the germinal influx
that “conditions all representation” and as such it is the representative of desire. Oedipal desire represses and blocks this
better, more liberatory access to the germinal intensity of the earth.

Incest is only the retroactive effect of the repressing representa-
tion on the repressed representative: the representation disfigures
or displaces this representative against which it is directed; it
projects onto the representative, categories, rendered discernible,
that it has established; it applies to the representative terms that
did not exist before the alliance organized the positive and the
negative into a system in extension – the representation reduces the
representative to what is blocked in this system (p. 165).

This dense passage presents us with a seemingly out of touch
philosophy and praxis which is furthering a transcendental
alternative to a system of Oedipal desire which is so total that
to escape or to perform a “line of flight” from it, one faces a massive
castration. If incest is only the “retroactive effect of the repressing
representation” of Oedipus this calls for a total overthrow of
Oedipus. This excessive libertinism is also detected by René Girard
in his critique of Anti-Oedipus when he points out that in aiming to
circumvent the problem of castration, they only intensify it. Girard
suggests that “the omnipotence of desiring production is
absolutely indistinguishable, in practice, from a radical castration”
(Girard, 1978, p. 95).
What we find here is a critique of Oedipus that is highly dated. Psychoanalysis as an institutional force no longer imposes Oedipal discipline and capture throughout the wider culture. This is due to the conditions of social fragmentation brought on under neoliberal capitalism. The theories of liberation upon which Anti-Oedipus are built must face the fact that, as understood at a subjective level, there exists a radical left Lacanian view on Oedipus which understands oedipal desire as a de-normative and de-stabilizing form of subjectivity. There is a conception of Oedipal desire that does not necessarily signify a dependence upon the father as an authoritarian figure within Lacanian thought itself. At issue is a debate regarding how to overcome Oedipus, which can be defined generally (since Freud) as a subjective theory of movement out of paternal dependencies. This process extends from the family to the wider institutions of capitalist social life. As Étienne Balibar argues:

The family structure is not based on Oedipus, but Oedipus, to the contrary, inscribes the conflict and the variability of subjective positions into its core and thus hinders any possibility for the family to impose the roles which it prescribes as simple functions for individuals to fulfill норма " (Balibar, 1997, p. 337).

In the Lacanian account, Oedipus is what de-roots the family and prevents its normal functioning. It is a psychic process that points to a treatment which does not necessitate an excessive negation or libertine line of flight. As Mladen Dolar argues; in Oedipus, every subject is placed into an impasse, and no subject can simply occupy his or her place (Dolar, 2008, p. 23). The Slovene School argue that Oedipus must be understood as a theory of subjective de-normalization, i.e., it is a drama about the working-through of reliance on Oedipal power.

The excessive libertinism that is implicit in Anti-Oedipus faces a more practical question today tied directly to the fact that de-territorialization and fragmentation is already now succeeding without the help or direction of any minor-politics groups that might be capable of leveraging these forces.

The wall of ultra-liberalism: left politics and the spectre of Anti-Oedipus

In his later years, following his collaboration with Guattari, Deleuze began to question the political efficacy of the anti-Oedipal project as he began to see the concepts of liberation and revolution that he and Guattari had developed begin to hit the wall of ultra-liberalism. In other words, the core method and praxis of Anti-Oedipus and the accelerationist politics that underpin these concepts began to face a paradox wherein deterritorialization and “lines of flight,” or strategies for exit that pose a strong break with Oedipus, miss a more embedded Oedipal logic at play within the social arrangement of power. Bernard Stiegler writes:

He (Deleuze) becomes critical of what he and Guattari and opened in Anti-Oedipus, A Thousand Plateaus, and many other texts. I think he begins to take a little step back. He has aged, and he perhaps finds a little limited this kind of yes to the capitalist “desiring machine”, which had become more and more an attitude and less and less a thought (Stiegler, 2015, p. 7).

Ultra-liberalism appears in politics in a different way than the ultra-leftism that Lenin combated in the worker's movement and socialism in his time. For Lenin, ultra-leftism was defined by a failure, typically in the name of abstract “left” principles, to establish any connection to the masses. From a Maoist position, Alain Badiou would reject Deleuze and Guattari in the early 1970s with accusations that the “Professors of Desire” had misconceived their critique by missing the masses entirely. Badiou accused them of a form of ultra-leftism and implicit in his critique is a comment on the intellectual and petit-bourgeois basis of their praxis, i.e., they aimed to “assign the revolt.” For Badiou (2004); the understanding of capitalism as “rhizomatic” constituted a total abandonment of class antagonisms and he predicted that their politics would fall apart, “under the cover of the cult of the Self, before the real political powers, before the separate unity of the State.” The entire praxis of Deleuze and Guattari fails to account for the seizure by the state that Badiou saw as fundamental. This meant that Deleuze and Guattari were pre-fascist ideologies without knowing it (p. 78).

For Bernard Stiegler, ultra-liberalism marks a reactionary turn in liberalism that affects the entire political spectrum. Ultra-liberalism emerges in a post-Soviet context in which capitalism now operates on a “drive-based” and irrational footing. Ultra-liberalism is defined, paradoxically, as the abandonment of bourgeois values that might stabilize the radical, deleterious and brutal dominance of the market. Ultra-liberalism is also defined by an extreme rightward drift in liberal politics which has enveloped the wider political scene in the 21st century. This shift is marked by the absence of socialist alternatives within mainstream parliamentary politics. In such a context of ultra-liberalism, any critique of the “molar” forms of socialist party politics, a position which is fundamental to Deleuze and Guattari (2009), will forever risk being implicitly captured by liberal civil society institutions who have themselves mastered a similar “micro-politics” sort of activism.

As Joshua Clover’s (2016) work on riots and rebellions since 2008 has shown, the American liberal civil society organizations have developed a sophisticated NGO-swarm network that works in-tandem with the Democratic Party and corporate media in the United States (MSNBC, NPR, etc.) as well as the wider liberal campus radicals, to introduce normalizing communicative protocols on popular rebellions that kick off in exurban regions such as Ferguson, Missouri where Black Lives Matter first started. This liberal establishment network is at face value also against molar party politics, it has seized a minority-directed and identity politics infused conception of social power and they have a close interaction with the most abolitionist and radical elements of ultra-left politics.

Within contemporary politics, we can identify two persistent and lasting tendencies of anti-Oedipal politics on the left. The first is what we will call a politics of abolition and opacity made popular by Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee and more recently in works such as Andrew Culp’s Dark Deleuze. The second is what we will call utopian socialist accelerationism which is made popular in works such as Fully Automated Luxury Communism (2018) by Aaron Bastani. To the first tendency, Andrew Culp’s short manifesto Dark Deleuze is exemplary in its call for a return to the subversive militancy of Deleuze and Guattari. Culp takes aim at the more cartoonish and apotitical version of Deleuze we get in some Silicon Valley glosses on “accelerationism” that deploy Deleuze as a thinker of rhizomatic creativity and joyful affirmation. Thus, unlike Stiegler, who emphasizes Deleuze’s insistence on building a love for the world, Culp reads Deleuze as granting a permission to cultivate a sense of cruelty and he aims to “unlink our thought from ourselves” to “tap into intensity” (Culp, 2016, p. 33).

For Culp, the task of militant action is to restore the radicality of Deleuze’s project, which must be discovered in a new form of politics as conspiracy, i.e., a clandestine praxis that aims to cultivate a new sense of the intolerable basis of this world and all its unreformable injustice and violence. Culp’s politics of indecipherability is a radicalized Nietzschean politics that goes beyond merely denouncing representational logics of states, nations or races but moves to a politics of opacity, a radically dark and subversive militant politics. Culp reads Deleuze as a philosopher without an ontology and instead of the leftist accelerationism of Hardt and Negri who theorize an “immanent resistance” to capitalism, Culp’s aim is to force a choice, to accelerate a total break from capitalism entirely (p. 32) which, as we saw above, is true to Deleuze and Guattari’s original vision.
But instead of posing Deleuze’s politics between either a false affirmationist Silicon Valley-style Deleuze and a conspiratorial politics of opacity Deleuze, there is a third model of emancipatory politics that is present in Deleuze’s work. This is found in the way that Deleuze himself hints at the problem of ultra-liberalism and the way that this affects the efficacy of the anti-oedipal praxis starting in the early 1990s (Deleuze, 1990). Deleuze offers some hints towards a different conception of politics in “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (a work written in 1992 after the conclusion of the Anti-Oedipus series). In this important text, Deleuze argues that our society has become a “control society”, in distinction to a “disciplinary society”, a distinction he derives from Foucault. Power is not to be thought of as “uni-causal” or only tethered to one causal agent such as the proletariat, or the class struggle, etc. Rather, in control societies, which he sees arising in rudimentary form in the late 19th century, power moves away from disciplinary or juridical power to the idea that there are many forms of power, and that society is an “archipelago” of different powers.

Deleuze importantly notes that the idea of power we find in control societies is in concert with Marx’s idea of various “meshes of power” and Marx’s writings on post-industrial society discuss different forms of power (Foucault, 2012, pp. 3–4). What is important to note here is that the transition from a disciplinary society to a control society is fundamentally bound up with changes in the division of labor. One of the most important insights Deleuze homes in on in this text is the idea that in the control societies, “institutions come before the state,” i.e., institutions possess internal mechanisms of power that are no longer reliant on centralized states. Here we find the suggestion of a different notion of market dominance and control than Anti-Oedipus, now the mechanism of power is horizontally distributed across institutions.

In general, Deleuze’s work on the control societies points to a critique of the anti-oedipal political praxis as it suggests that the interior mechanism of psychic and regulative control mechanisms has become so interiorized to subjective life and so tied up with institutions and social reproduction that they re-produce “meta-stable” institutions that are flexible, even impervious to destruction as we find in the guiding ethos of Silicon Valley. The control societies are immune to exaggerated lines of flight; they render the very project of “escape” as superfluous, and this should be clear in any assessment of accelerationism, a movement which sought to avoid the work of building political organizations from the ground up, and which abandoned class politics. Deleuze’s theory of the control societies poses a serious challenge to the earlier anti-oedipal praxis such that to maintain fidelity to the “schiz” revolutionary subject will forever risk reproducing a politics of ultra-purity and even moralism in its insistence on a total break and a politics of the outside. In an age of ultra-liberalism, the outside seems only realizable via a politics that would insist on violence, conspiracy and subjective invisibility.

Left accelerationism: a new utopian socialism?

The fact that Deleuze questions the political efficacy of the anti-oedipal praxis is not something that has been thoroughly processed or even acknowledged by the contemporary left. The Anti-Oedipus series remains a rite of passage for young leftists and its ideas still shape leftist theoretical discourse especially in the wake of the 2008 global recession. But Deleuze and Guattari’s “guide to nonfascist living” has also given birth to new monsters. The Nietzschean-centered leftist of Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus has given rise to “accelerationism”, a theoretical orientation that has both cold and warm stream tendencies. On the cold stream, the anti-oedipal critique has been co-opted by fascist and reactionary currents of thought that pervert the ideas of capitalist deterritorialization towards supporting extreme libertarian capit.

The cold, or rightwing accelerationist tendency is exemplified by the philosopher Nick Land who accepts Deleuze and Guattari’s premise that capital is a nonhuman desiring process, but draws out a deeply reactionary, neo-social Darwinist philosophy from these insights. Land advocates a new race war that will give way to “white exit”, colonies on Mars and much of his thought is grounded on cybernetic and pro-Crypto online philosophies (Fluss and Frim, 2017, pp. 4–5). Land’s cyber-confederate philosophy is a far cry from the more center-liberal accelerationism of Elon Musk, which envisions capitalism as impervious to speed and acceleration. In a general sense you could say that Silicon Valley itself, in its celebration of “creative destruction” and libertarian market fundamentalism, is center accelerationist. As the philosophers Landon Frim and Harrison Fluss have pointed out, Nick Land’s accelerationist discourse has now entered a new stage, what is sometimes called “unconditional accelerationism”, a position that is bordering on neo-fascist. Land’s aim is now set on accelerating dynamics of social fragmentation to the point of “terminal institutional paralysis.” (p. 7).

Standing apart from the center and the cold stream is the warm stream of accelerationism, which we will call a variant of “utopian socialism” as Kohei Saito recently referred to it (Saito, 2022, p. 136 - 170). This tendency popped on the political scene after the steady disappearance of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the waning of the global Movement of the Squares in the 2010s. From this defeat emerged a revitalized socialist movement in the United Kingdom with Jeremy Corbyn and in the United States with Bernie Sanders. Left accelerationism is composed of a group of intellec-
tuals and political activists who look to introduce radical organizational strategic thinking on the left with a focus on cybernetic theory and parliamentary reforms. These socialist utopians were influenced by the poststructuralist “discourse turn” and many of them studied French Theory in graduate school and the post-Soviet era radical democracy socialism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The use of slogans in politics are thought to “hegemonize” a popular bloc and shore up the resolve for new political movements.

Although sometimes referred to as left populist, this new orientation on the left has most notably coined the phrase “Fully Automated Luxury Communism” as a popular slogan. The slogan is not an empty signifier but points to an ambitious, albeit naïve political horizon. A new generation that had been let down by the conservative turn of the neoliberal promises inherent in Barack Obama and the failures of the more militant alter-globalization protests gave birth to a radical reformism deeply informed by an anti-oedipal understanding of capitalism. The class composition of left-accelerationists tends to be professional Millenial-aged left activists (in some cases former militants) many of whom are represented by the UK-based media collective Novara Media, co-founded by Aaron Bastani, author of the manifesto Fully Automated Luxury Communism (2018). Nick Srinicek and Alex Williams’s Inventing the Future (2015) was a notable contribution to this more radical reformist movement on the left. These works tend to combine the insights of Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of accelerationist ideas of revolution to capitalism but without paying any mind to Deleuze and Guattari’s more radical rejection of “molar” politics. A generation of post-nomadic rebels have taken their activism to the NGO and nonprofit board rooms and media startups. They are bringing radical ideas to bear on the politics of a generation strapped by debt peonage in a capitalist system that only seems to produce crisis, imperialism, and new depressions. These utopian socialists are drawn to full automation as a policy objective. This position makes them oddly resemble the neoliberal
and libertarian preferences for Universal Basic Income (UBI), and as Saito says in his discussion of the utopian strain of left accelerationists, their thought is set on the speculative question of envisioning a “postcapitalist world without work” (Saito, 2022, p. 136). Saito identifies three tendencies of the utopian left-accelerationists: a world without work thanks to automation, the reduction of necessary labor as much as possible and the introduction of large-scale Universal Basic Income wealth transfers (pp. 137–138). These three tendencies possess a fidelity to the lasting influence of Deleuze and Guattari’s skepticism towards class-based politics. Smiek and Williams tend to refuse class-based politics in what they pejoratively name “folk politics”. We thus find the utopian socialists inherit from Deleuze and Guattari a similar refusal of a conception of politics set on building working-class consciousness, a refusal that we can link back to Nietzsche’s influence, as we mentioned at the outset.

Our age is witnessing the ramblings of working-class agitation in ways that call for left-oriented politics to meet these new antagonisms, from the large-scale worker protests in France in protest over Macron’s pension reform laws, to public sector unionization in the United States. These movements challenge many of the presuppositions of the Anti-Oedipal praxis, which place such a profound suspicion on working-class politics and socialist party building. The anti-oedipal praxis moves away from a theory of alienation based on class relations and this runs the risk of either falling into a professional politics sheltered off from the working-class, or into an ultra-leftist radicalism which risks forever finding implicit solidarity with the diffuse private NGO network in their radicalism. Deleuze and Guattari’s suspicion of ‘molar’ institutions is already a suspicion that neoliberal capitalist institutions integrate into their design of institutions. Neoliberal capitalism is already de-territorial, the mantras of “creative destruction” in Silicon Valley do not leave any institutions in which a repressive Oedipal desiring system can take over.

Both of these tendencies can be understood as formulating demands for liberation that stem from a petit-bourgeois class position. The standpoint of the petit-bourgeois intellectual and the distinct class experience that is contradictory, situated as it is between worker and bourgeois. This contradictory class position splits the class affiliation of the intellectual and tends to dislocate the conception of class interest in their formulation of demands for liberation. The petit-bourgeois has an important link to the libertine tradition and some scholars argue libertinism first really emerged in the Second International period (1890s–1920s) specifically amongst petit-bourgeois intellectuals, artists, and writers. The historian Eli Zaretsky has argued the pre-WWI American petit-bourgeois intellectuals – bohemian artists, writers, feminists and the “Greenwich Village intellectual” scene – centered the category of “personal experience” as the locus of proletarian struggle. For these petit-bourgeois thinkers, it was their own personal experience discovered through exemption from wage labor and the free time that afforded which led them to the view that socialist liberation involves the freedom for workers to enhance their personal experience. What we see emerge amongst these intellectuals is the modern discovery of libertine leftist, and the development of a socialist politics in which “personal life could be transformed without a transformation of the mode of production.” (Zaretsky, 1982, p. 119). The problem with this form of libertinism is in the way it formulates demands for revolution as detethered from collective goals of class emancipation. Deleuze and Guattari’s libertinism must be situated in this same libertine historical genealogy as Zaretsky develops, specifically in the way they abandon an understanding of the proletariat as bound up with exploitation in relation to productive labor. Given that accelerationism is an ideological movement, not a spontaneous movement amongst workers, it is best analyzed through an analysis of the intellectuals who adhere to both variants of accelerationism that we have critiqued. Both the utopian socialist and the ultra-left politics of opacity tendencies would be well served to examine the way that revolutionary libertinism is formed in relation to the class-based habits of their own position in capitalist society. Should any fidelity to the Marxist tradition mix with accelerationism, this is the least one can ask.

As we have aimed to demonstrate, Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizo” praxis faces a different wall today than the one faced in the 1970s. At that time, the wall of capitalism was fortified around the repressive vestiges of institutions molded in a postwar welfare state; institutions in which even socialist and communist parties had succumbed to the coding regimes of normative bourgeois mores and repression. The walls of our ultra-liberal age are far more porous as the social order undergoes profound social fragmentation brought on by the anarchic flows of capital. The social order has absorbed the ideology of accelerationism, leaving the institutional matrix of a repressive capitalism – which Deleuze and Guattari set their critique on dismantling – in a state of fundamental crisis. Put another way, the conditions of capitalist social life, from the family to the school, to the workplace are in an entirely different subjective crisis than the one that was diagnosed by Deleuze and Guattari in the 1970s. Deleuze realized this shift by the time of the early 1990s. Today’s capitalism foments a hyper-paternalism wherein the “trap of Oedipus” requires that we cultivate different strategies of working-through paternal and institutional dependencies. The left must take its cue from the later Deleuze and begin to think up strategies that call for patient solidarity, collective solidarity, and a newfound focus on class-based exploitation as the horizon of emancipation instead of hyper-libertine lines of flight.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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