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Jeffrey P. Cain

Sacred Heart University, cainj@sacredheart.edu

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Review Essay

After Utopia: Three Post-Personal Subjects Consider the Possibilities

Jeffrey Cain Sacred Heart University

William E. Connolly (2008) *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Alexander García Düttmann (2007) *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, trans. James Phillips, London: Continuum.

Adrian Parr (2008) *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory, and the Politics of Trauma*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Not the least of the many challenges involved in engaging with Deleuzian thought is the problem of writing about it without re-inscribing the same positivistic model that Deleuze so inimitably subverts. If difference itself grounds a virtual actuality that is also characterised by multiplicity, univocity and pure immanence, then a merely narrative account of our epistemological situation begins to seem like folly, a reductive process that drags Deleuze to a standstill in order to take a snapshot of whatever concept is most relevant to the moment. Surely there must be a better way. But even the most sophisticated approaches can be imprisoned by the linear nature of language or the symbolic order; perhaps this is part of what informed Deleuze's well-known remark to Claire Parnet, that in philosophy 'the aim is not to answer questions, it's to get out, to get out of it' (Deleuze and Parnet 2002: 1). The task then becomes, as Claire Colebrook and others have pointed out, to think transitively: how might it be possible to think actuality, think immanence, think univocity, think desire, think language itself?

These questions imply metaphysical hunger of a sort with which theoretical discourse has been manifestly uncomfortable for several decades. Considered another way, however, they promise new

conceptual schema based on the positive (rather than positivistic) notion of creative and desiring production. The task for those exploring the relationship of Deleuze to cultural issues is not to extend his thought in a straight line, but to swerve or veer into thinking a productive approach to the cultural events that actualise themselves in our time. The process is then less about iconoclasm than it is about permeability: how to theorise a way into a richly layered middle ground that comprises interstices of desire, immanence, virtuality and difference? And how might one do so without simply listing and exploiting some concepts 'given' us by Deleuze? While much has been written on the fairly explicit Deleuzian construction of the pre-personal subject, the implicitly post-personal subject who is actually developing concepts on a page seems to be hypostatized inside the critical text. Nonetheless, three recent books that work brilliantly with or from Deleuzian concepts also illustrate the importance of writing from a flexible, deeply thought, yet actualised subject position.

In *Deleuze and Memorial Culture*, Adrian Parr thinks several sites—architectural and conceptual—that are based on the collective experience of social trauma, including the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 9/11 news coverage, US military abuses at Abu Ghraib, the Amish shootings, and ground zero. The Holocaust serves aptly as a reference point throughout her text, and she devotes a chapter to its powerful presence in the fractured urban space named Berlin. It is not, of course, that there are only a few narrative choices to make, that all cultural wounds are the same, or even that one is really 'worse' than another. Rather, Parr provides an intimate and agile series of readings that are sustained by the positive desire to think memorials in their unique contexts. A great strength of her work is that she clearly sees the body politic as gendered, organic and ethnic. Memorials are, she remarks, 'utopian memories thinking', and they work to signify the affective disruption that writers of utopian tales usually fail to mention. As such, Parr observes that memorials embody '[a] combination of cultural production and collective traumatic memory that can help us peel back the skin and tissue of repression so as to uncover the utopian demand that memory stirs forth' (3). Thus Parr sets the topography and architecture of memorial sites into motion, but the movement is not linear. She is at pains to point out that, as Bergson and Deleuze suggest, the present is not an *effect* of the past. Rather, the past and present co-exist and alter even as they are actualised into becoming.

Parr's chapter on the Vietnam War Memorial intriguingly deploys the Deleuzian concepts of affect, sensation and percept as well as the

distinction between minoritarian and majoritarian statement (54–75). Perhaps there is no other more powerful example of art overcoming or, more accurately, permeating the superficial emotions of the people to whom it is meant to speak. Parr details the numerous insults hurled by Vietnam veterans and others at the designer, Maya Lin Ying, when they saw the design for the memorial. The diatribe, however, was wholly derived from majoritarian narratives about wars, heroes, world communism and reflected glory. Remarkably, it is not political or social pressure that has changed the outlook of most veterans towards the memorial, it is Lin's dynamic re-reading of the area as an architectural and topographical machine for generating blocks of sensation and affect. Parr's illuminating and sure-footed analysis of this situation maps the majoritarian discourse onto Lin's gendered, ethnic and political body. Being young (still a student at Yale), a non-veteran, a woman and an Asian ultimately enabled Lin to find a line of flight from the vertical and static textuality that normally constitutes war memorials, thus leading to a deterritorialisation of the veterans' formerly monolithic position and the creation of a 'minor memorial' (69). This deterritorialisation did not emerge in order to deny or undermine the soldiers' collective memory of trauma in Vietnam, but to release it (68–72). One might add that no better testimony to the potency of Lin's work exists than the veterans' re-naming of the Vietnam War Memorial as 'The Wall', a productively reterritorialised marker for a war memorial that has, against all odds, become a multiplicity.

The attempt to theorise a middle ground takes on extra intricacy when large abstract categories are involved. In particular, Deleuzian thought highlights the limits and prevarications inherent in the molar structures that impose themselves on everyday life. Nonetheless, in *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, William E. Connolly essays the task of synthesising certain internal forces in such disparate institutions as democracy, capitalism, Christianity, secularism and the news media. Connolly carefully but creatively transforms the Deleuzian concept of the resonance machine in order to mobilise nuanced tensions and influences, and he writes with a refreshing intellectual integrity. Thus he points out that his description of a capitalist-evangelical resonance machine does not issue from some imaginary pose of neutrality. Connolly remarks that descriptive comments, including his own, already contain the seeds of an agenda. For Deleuze and Guattari this was surely true, because the resonance machine they explicate in *A Thousand Plateaus* is an instrument of fascism. Connolly therefore envisions a new resonance machine tuned to twenty-first-century progressive politics.

Whether such an assemblage can disassociate itself from the black holes of micro-fascisms that have been elided by post-Nazi discourse is a real question. However, Connolly does not seem to duck this problem; he simply appropriates the part of the theory that he needs without specifically contradicting the rest.

Pausing briefly to point out that the word 'resonance' is no more metaphorical than any other term used for political critique, Connolly lists some of the components that align themselves in order to resonate within the right-wing of North American politics. These include, but are not limited to, Fox News, most segments of the financial markets, the Republican Party, evangelical/fundamentalist Christianity, the Book of Revelation, and the Bush Whitehouse. While he condemns the *ressentiment* infused by the right-wing hermeneutic of the Book of Revelation, Connolly makes distinctions with a fine deliberation: he notes that Jimmy Carter is an evangelical Christian for whom 'the vengeful sensibility is alien' (52). If anything, one almost feels sorry for hyper-conservative televangelist Pat Robertson, whom Connolly puts to rout by arraying against him Spinoza, Weber and Nietzsche. The evangelicals are not the only ones capable of conjuring voices from a whirlwind.

For students interested in Deleuzian identity formation, the most interesting part of the book will perhaps be Connolly's deeply felt essay on the possibilities of Meliorism and tragic vision. Here he orchestrates a triple polyphony of Deleuze, William James and Nietzsche. Only James, he notes, draws back from sounding a tragic chord when it comes to the concept of progress, and James' brand of Meliorism depends on a personal struggle to square faith with a philosophy of transcendence. Connolly observes that both James and Deleuze formulate a limited god, but that Deleuze's signal contribution is belief in radical immanence. 'Deleuze', writes Connolly, 'experiments in those fugitive junctures during which tradition encounters the real uncertainty of twists and turns in the making' (131). To Deleuzian immanence Connolly ascribes an incomplete or disrupted mysticism, and it is this reading that allows Connolly to characterise his personal position on Christianity as 'Jamesleuzian' (133).

Alexander García Düttmann's *Philosophy of Exaggeration* begins with a textual experiment that situates the post-personal subject of the author (or possibly a persona) in counterpoint with his more traditional philosophical writing. Thus, even as the book's main text states that 'deconstruction recognises in its object, justice for example, an intrinsic exaggeration that does not even permit one to speak of a recognisable

object', a text box at the top of the same page asks, 'is my incensed exaggeration a weakness of temperament, an affliction, or is it precisely that which protects me from decrepitude and annihilation' (3)? The immediate temptation is to regard the line of thought in the text boxes as more personal, or perhaps more elemental, than the rest of the words on the page, but quite possibly the inverse obtains. After all, the first-person narrative is about what the 'I' or Ego can know or wonder, while the putatively more objective third-person academic discourse is engaged primarily, in this case, with making fine distinctions about imbricated exaggeration and *aporia*. I would aver that the voice in the text box knows far less about the 'internal' workings of exaggeration, as a mode of doing philosophy, than does the voice on the main page. And there are other moments in which percepts shift, most notably in a brief confessional about the narrator's visit to a sex club (26–7). This latter passage serves to complicate the book's production of corporeal affect, which soon reappears in the chapter entitled 'Odd Moves', itself a sophisticated and ironic recital of the difficulties inherent in being a professor right after 9/11. Düttmann's method here is to reframe the remarks of a literary critic to her college class in Manhattan a week after 9/11, one of her students having taken notes and later put them on the web. What follows is a devastatingly accurate satire on postmodernism as a sort of séance, with the anonymous professor playing the role of Madame Blavatsky or the Cumaean Sybil, or both. The class begins with the professor ringing a small bell, which Düttmann tells us is like an invocation of the spirits. The professor then informs the class that language itself is inadequate except to perform meaning or understanding when everything is shattered and disconnected. She gives the class aphorisms, such as 'understanding understands only itself' (42–3). The professorial mystic communicates by telephone with disembodied spirits (Derrida, Hélène Cixous and Jean-Luc Nancy) and reports to the class that 'A lot of energy is coming here. A lot of language failure' (43). This role of poststructuralist as servant of a secret fire will perhaps be not unfamiliar to those who have tried giving a paper on Deleuze as part of their local faculty lecture series, although there it is usually a perception of the audience, not honest Deleuzian affect.

Düttmann's writing displays his easy familiarity with every corner of twenty-first-century philosophical discourse. Beginning with his axiom that justifying an exaggeration thereby causes it to lose its exaggerated status, he follows the twisting and turnings of exaggeration, its implications and inclinations, its limits and liminalities. Drawing attention to his complicity with Deleuze early on, Düttmann sketches

the Deleuzian project of exaggeration as a method of pitting crowned anarchy against the familiar ‘image of thought’. Doing so requires excision from the totalising requirement of ‘clarity’ that characterises everyday opinion as well as some academic discourse. *Difference and Repetition*, for example, shows that comprehensive explication is radically counterproductive. For Deleuze, writes Düttmann, ‘explanation without remainder and exhaustive interpretation integrate difference in a determinate and articulated system only at the price of its annulment’ (6). This thought sorts agreeably with something that is well-known to students of Deleuze and Guattari: even in a philosophy of pure immanence and radical difference, a small amount of molecular order and subjectification is necessary in order to avoid collapse into an infinite regression of difference. Therefore, the idea is to follow becomings, de-subjectifications, lines of flight, and deterritorialisations without immediately abandoning the subject to the *end* of becoming, which would be solidification into a fact.

It is in this context, then, that Düttmann adduces the importance that Deleuze and Guattari place on utopian narrative. The concept of utopia is deeply implicated in revolutionary politics, and revolution is immanent, as opposed to being an occasional disruption. Utopian discourse takes place ‘in a field of forces constituted by exaggerations... in which there is no solidification that would not harbour a becoming, and no becoming that would not harbour solidification’ (72). The idea of utopia is thus trapped between two poles, although there remain various ways ‘to get out, to get out of it’. One way is via the utopian memory and affect explored by Parr, and another would be to proceed according to Connolly’s opportunistic Meliorism. Yet a third way consists in Düttmann’s method of using exaggeration and irony to break utopian critique on the wheel of its own institutional and traditional status. The virtue of these three books, then, is that they do not simply go back to the same old questions; all of them represent departures in the best sense of the word.

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