

Some “Misunderstandings” on Desire

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Abstract

In this paper, the author identifies a persistent return to Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis in contemporary thought, more specifically in Bernard Stiegler’s work, which tends to naturalize desire. In order to deploy its revolutionary potentialities, the author puts forward a conception of desire defined as an immanent force that recuses all mediation and that deploys itself through a radical constructivism, inherited from “1968 thought” and in particular from Deleuze and Guattari, but also from Foucault. From there, the author examines three characteristics of this concept. First, the libido is not the source of desire, since desire is the creation of new possibles. Second, this concept of desexualized desire opens a conception of subjectivity beyond the division between an (undifferentiated) drive-based chaos and the (differentiated) symbolic order. Third, in this new framework, drives are a social construction, a “finished output”, and by no means a natural fact.

For the last few years, we have witnessed a polemical retrospection on what is called, perhaps too simplistically “1968 thought” [*la pensée 68*] and in particular the radical critique that philosophers like Deleuze and Guattari but also Foucault developed towards psychoanalysis. In Italy, Lacanian psychoanalysts enjoy a real success in the media, by lamenting the society without fathers, the dissolution of the ‘good old’ patriarchy caused by the vaporising of the father. There is a “desire” for the renewal of the family-form or “familiarization” (Foucault), which is argued by the French Right without the rhetorical subtleties of the Italian Lacanianism – which is more based on the Left. The mobilization against gay marriage in France demonstrates to us in a shocking, and “amusing”, way the nostalgia for the “Freudian” family. What do they ask for but the Oedipal triangle of “mummy- daddy-children” – a prototype of the family that is taken *prima facie* from the neurotic Bourgeoisie of the 19th century? The danger is coming! Because its death certificate was established by *Anti- Oedipus*, 40 years ago, which has now made its way, and what a long way it has been! As for me, far from confusing all the critics, I only use this conscious or unconscious return to Freud or Lacan as a symptom of contemporary thought and action.

Why had Deleuze and Guattari, as much as Foucault, so violently attacked what the latter called “the psy-function”? A mountain of misunderstandings has accumulated since the 1960s on Deleuze, Guattari’s and Foucault’s position towards psychoanalysis.

Bernard Stiegler does not escape this, since he reproaches Deleuze and Guattari for the absence of distinction between drives and desire, while for them to operate this distinction would have meant to make the mistake of modern Western thought. This mistake would be to oppose nature and culture, and it would also need to pass from the one to the other via a transcendent “mediation”. Desire does not need any mediation claim Deleuze and Guattari, but “this does not mean that desire is a force that, by itself, will build a whole universe”.

The working model of mediation built on the nature/culture opposition was first formulated, in a manner that is still impossible to overcome, by Hobbes’ political philosophy. The state of nature is characterized as the war of all against all, a mediation is needed, a sovereign, a state that makes possible the passage from nature to culture, from war to peace, from savageness to civilization. The social sciences have been repeating this political model of mediation indefinitely, in all domains, even in psychoanalysis.

The dominant conception of social order implies a definition of desire (of collective formations of desire) that is fairly disastrous: as a flow that has to be disciplined, so that a law can be created to establish control over it. (Guattari 2008: 319)

Desire seems to be something fuzzy, rather nebulous and disorganized, a kind of raw force that needs to pass through the meshes of the symbolic and of castration according to psychoanalysis (Guattari 2008: 316).

It does not matter whether drives are directly referred to as instincts or whether they are defined as being much more elaborate. “In any of these cases, we always return to the same idea: necessarily setting this raw world of desire against a universe of social order, a universe of reason, judgment, ego, and so on” (Guattari 2008: 316). This model has been largely adopted, even by revolutionaries. In the same way that a supposedly undifferentiated economy of desire necessitates law, castration, and language to structure itself, revolution would need a political party and its “democratic centralism” to organize and discipline the ‘anarchic’ spontaneity of subjectivities.

In which case, this opposition—on the one hand, desire-drive, desire-disorder, desire-death, desire-aggression, and, on the other, symbolic interaction, power centralized in state functions—seems to me an utterly reactionary reference (Guattari 2008: 320).

This model works perfectly for Stiegler, since it relates well to his conception of “public power”, as an antidote to the *pharmakon* that capitalism has injected in society. While for me, in adapting Braudel’s words, the state is inseparable from capital, it is constitutive of capital: “capitalism can only triumph when it identifies itself from the state, when it is the state” (Braudel 1985: 68). From a definition of desire as an

immanent force that recuses all mediation and that deploys itself through a radical constructivism, we will tackle a few characteristics of this concept that seems, even today, to contain more possibilities to be developed than critiques. First, the libido is not the source of desire, since desire is the creation of new possibles. Second, this concept of desexualized desire opens a conception of subjectivity beyond the division between a (undifferentiated) drive-based chaos and the (differentiated) symbolic order. Third, in this new framework, drive is a social construction, a “finished output” as Guattari would put it, and by no means a natural fact [*une donnée naturelle*].

Desire is the creation of new possibles

Stiegler still needs sublimation since he considers desire to be the expression of the libido, while D&G do away with the libido as much as sublimation. When Deleuze and Guattari affirm that desire flows immediately, without mediation, in the *socius*, they mean that it does not need any sublimation to come into play: desire is not the expression of the libido, but first and foremost the “creation of new possibles”.

The capitalist deterritorialization functions on desire in ways that are not strictly speaking human but mechanic and machinic, since the assemblage of human and non-human flows lead to the emergence of a multiplicity of social and technical machines. Deterritorialized desire has nothing to do with “drives” or even the “*conatus*”. Rather, it is assimilable to the possible. “Desire as a point of proliferation of possibles at the heart of a constituted system”, as Guattari would say (2014: 216). That desire = possible implies a revolutionary definition of desire. There is only an advent [*surgissement*] of desire when, with the rupture of previous equilibriums, there appear relations that were previously impossible. Desire can always be detected by the impossible that it opens, and by the new possibles that it creates. It is desire that allows a process that secretes other systems of reference.

Desire should not be mistaken for phantasms, dreams or representations, but it is linked to production. Desire is always a mode of production of whatever, but not according to the Marxist logic of work, since “production” concerns first and foremost the possibles. In claiming that desire is the creation of new possibles, Deleuze and Guattari practice desire’s de-sexualization. Sexuality does not have the role of an infrastructure in the assemblage of desire and where the subject would be the superstructure, since sexuality is thought of as a flow amongst others and not as the source of desire in itself. Love and sexuality, instead of forming the “the foundation of the drives” [*base pulsionnelle*] onto which a substructural subjectivity takes place, “are only the means to the semiotization of the mutations of desire”.

To put it differently, desire does not have a biological origin, it does not find its origin in drives, it is not by nature, but always already “artificial”. It is never individual but

always collective, always in and for an assemblage. And in an assemblage, not only one cannot distinguish between nature and culture, but neither can one between nature and artifice. Desire is not centered around individuals and does not result from the simple interaction of drives or individual “*conatuses*” (intersubjectivity). Desire does not come from the inside of the subject. It is always born from the outside, from an encounter, a coupling or an assemblage. The classical conception of desire is abstract, since it is extracted from the assemblage of a desiring subject and a supposedly desired object, while we never desire a single someone or something, but always a person or a thing in an ensemble constituted of a multiplicity of objects, relations, machines, humans and signs. It is the assemblage and not the individuated subject that make someone or something desirable. We never desire a someone alone or something alone but worlds and possibles.

Desire as possible does not need any mediation, any law that organizes it, any “superego” that mimes the logic of the state, since there is no drive-based chaos but emergences, beginnings, starting ups. It contains virtualities, but their actualization requires a constructivist work that is political, social and clinical. Desire does not need mediations, but an immanent process of construction.

Subjectivity is beyond the division between a drive-based chaos and the symbolic order

Amongst the two Freudian topographies, Stiegler seems to privilege the second one, while Deleuze and Guattari appreciate the first one, but they also see in the second one a shrinkage of Freud’s thought.

In the primary process of the first topography: “the unconscious is still a teeming universe, a producer of new meanings and fantasmatic scripts that can be found in religion, art, childhood, ancient societies” while in the second topography, “the logic of the unconscious is dragged toward a kind of undifferentiated matter, something that at the end of Freud’s life was related purely and simply to chaos, a drive disorder, reified in the form of a death drive” (Guattari 2008: 303). The primary process of the first topography is that it ‘has a logic that is neither poorer nor richer than that of the secondary process, but simply different’ (p. 302). It is from this heterogeneous logic of processes that the production of subjectivity happens. Instead of having a subjectivity torn between a drive-based chaos and a symbolic order, we have a process of subjectivation that produces itself in-between these two realms. Instead of having a fractured subjectivity in a semiotic chaos and the linguistic order, we have a multiplicity of semiotics that converge in the same way towards subjectivation.

Guattari, in the last years of his life, often refers to Daniel Stern’s *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, that in undoing the unity of the Ego in a multiplicity of “selves”,

semiotics, relations, affects, and particularly, pre-verbal affects, it draws up a mode of subjectivation very far from Freudianism. Before the acquisition of language, infants construct actively the modalities of perception, communication, experience of the self and the world, and through a non-verbal semiotization, that is extremely rich and extremely differentiated, that does not depend on any symbolic order, but possesses its own autonomy and own logic. It is impossible to think subjectivation as a passage from the undifferentiated to differentiation, from the drives' disorder to the order of the superego, from the semiotic chaos to the linguistic order.

Stern distinguishes three “senses of self” (the sense of an emergent self, the sense of a core self, the sense of an intersubjective self) which precedes the “sense of a verbal self”. Sense of self does not mean “concept of” or “knowledge of” or “awareness of” (Stern 1985: 71) since these experiences do not pass through language, consciousness and representation. Between birth and the first two months of her life, the infant experiences the “genesis” of “an emergent interpersonal link” and what Stern calls the “sense of an emergent self”. There are three main ways through which the infant makes this experience: amodal experience, categorial affects and affects of vitality. The infant possesses a great aptitude to extract and organize the global and abstract characters of what is happening to her. The intensities, the temporal figures, the rhythms, the movements, are common elements to every sensory modality and the infant can easily identify them and after that transpose them from one sense to the other, from the sight to the sense of touch, for example, or from the sense of touch to the sense of hearing.

The abstract and amodal characters of what is happening are apprehended with the action of two different affects. The categorial affects that express anger, astonishment, joy, sadness, etc. and affects of vitality, that express changing states, thresholds of intensity in the way of feeling [*la façon de sentir*]. Dance, music, but also the duration of video and cinematographic images are, according to Stern, realities that manifest best these intensities and “ways of feeling”. This subjective and global world, where there are no subject/object divisions yet, where the Ego and the others are indiscernible, where communication is done through contagion, this world “is and remains”, according to Stern and Guattari, the fundamental domain of human subjectivity. It acts outside consciousness and it constitutes the “matrix” (Stern), the “existential seat” (Guattari) of experiences from which “thoughts and perceived forms and identifiable acts and verbalized feelings will later arise” (Stern 1985: 67). Finally, what we call “chaos” is “the ultimate reservoir that can be dipped into for all creative [and artistic] experience” (Stern 1985: 67).

The sense of a “core self” (the self opposed to the other, and the self with the other) constitutes the experience of the self and the other as “entities”:

There is now an integrated sense of themselves as distinct and coherent bodies, with control over their own actions, ownership of their own affectivity, a sense of continuity, and a sense of other people as distinct and separate interactants (Stern 1985: 69).

This is not always a cognitive construction (it functions outside of consciousness), but an integration founded on experience and a “memory without words” (Stern 1985: 91), which will be the basis of all the more complex senses of the self. The sense of the “subjective self” appears when the infant discovers that she has a ‘mind’ [*esprit*] and that others also do, and that experiences, contents, affects, emotions are shareable (and non-shareable) and that we can communicate them, without the use of words since language has not yet arrived. The self and the other are not only ‘core’ or ‘integrated’ entities with a physical presence, actions, an affectivity and a continuity, but entities with ‘internal and subjective states’.

How can we enter into a relation with the subject experience of others, share their affects without the use of words? Through a “transitivist and transindividual” subjectivity, to use Guattari’s and Simondon’s words (but also Spinoza’s). The fourth sense of self, the sense of a “verbal self” interrogates the disjunction and the junction, the space between [*écart*] and the complementarity of the verbal part and the non-verbal part of subjectivity, since the appearance of language is at the origin of the cleavage between experience as it is “lived” and as it is “represented”. While, on the one hand, linguistic significations make our experiences with others more shareable, on the other hand, they can also lead us to make certain parts of these same experiences inaccessible to others, but also inaccessible to ourselves. The non-verbal and global part of experience can co-exist with the part which has been converted into words, the verbal part is enriched and developed in harmony with “lived” (affective) experience. But the latter can also be divided and be poorly rendered by language, which will force it to become subterranean (repression). Language is one of the modalities of expression and not what differentiates the undifferentiated. On the contrary, often in capitalism, language reduces, simplifies, operates a “rough” reduction of our experiences and their affective/rhetorical wealth.

According to Guattari, the different senses of self that precede the sense of linguistic self are not in any way stages, in the Freudian sense, which should be overcome for the realization of the Ego/Superego that order them. But they are “levels of subjectivation”, non-verbal seats and vectors of subjectivation extremely rich and differentiated, and that manifest themselves in parallel to speech and consciousness throughout life. Stiegler has got an irenic image of the linguistic “mediation”, while the institution of a dominant language (and a system of dominant significations) is indispensable to the formation of apparatuses or dispositifs of power. It is first and foremost a political operation before being a linguistic and semantic operation. The constitution of the linguistic exchange and the constitution of distinct and individuated speakers are co-extensive: first, from the constitution of an economic exchange and a juridical contract and its contracting parties; second, the psychic instances of the “Ego” (Id – Superego) and the “other”. The three processes – linguistic exchange, economic exchange,

intersubjective exchange – are closely linked.

A certain type of language and certain individuated modes of semiotization and subjectivation are necessary to stabilize the social field that is shattered by the capitalist deterritorialization which undoes old subjectivity, its forms of life and modalities of expression. This stabilization implies taking control of a national language, conveying the laws and operating modes of capitalism that were born with dialects or special languages, and “pathological”, artistic and children’s modes of expression. The national language pushes them to the margins by translating them from the “tribunal of dominating syntaxes, semantics and pragmatics”. The “symbolic” is worked on, instituted by capitalism exactly like the economy.

Drive is a social construction and by no means a natural fact

Foucault has shown us, in relation to Hobbes, how the mediation of the state invents the narrative of the state of nature to erase the conquest, the invasion, the civil war that are the establishing forces of power. The “contract” should be repressed by this non-avowable origin of power. The fiction of psychoanalysis operates in the same way. Its categories erase the origin and the political functions that enact “drive”, desire, the Ego, the Superego. They naturalize the mediation and action, while the law, the castration, and drive are only the products of disciplinary dispositifs and sovereignty that couple the production of a subjectivity required for capitalistic production. Desire is “machined”, desire is always already “machined”, say Deleuze and Guattari, that is, it is constructed, it is produced, it never comes spontaneously. Desire is not natural but artificial. Desire is always caught and expressed in an assemblage, that is by a multiplicity beyond and before the subject and the object and their interrelation (intersubjectivity). But in what sense can we say that desire is artifice, or construction, and is produced by a social machinism? Some brilliant pages by Foucault explain this to us.

All Freudian categories crown and problematize the work of nearly two centuries of construction of the restrained family – father/mother/children. Psychoanalysis arrives at the end of this long process and it naturalizes what has been constructed by power-knowledge dispositifs and gives them the legitimacy of a “new science”. The main instrument of this long work of establishing the restrained family was the campaign against masturbation. It first began in England around 1710, with the publication of *Onania* and then later in Germany, and from 1760 in France. Foucault described the constitution of the “Freudian” family, of the spread of its sexualization and incestuous desires, according to different modalities, whether it be a Bourgeois family or a Proletarian one.

By hunting down masturbation, bodies of the Bourgeois family (parents and children)

will be constructed by responding to new productive and subjective functions, required by the newly-born capitalism. The campaign against onanism favored the elimination of all other intermediaries, the removal – if possible – of the servants, and the transformation of familial space into one of continuous surveillance. The body of the child needs to be the object of permanent attention by parents. “The crusade, with all its practical instructions, was a means of compressing family relationships and closing up the central parent-child rectangle into a substantial, close-knit, and emotionally saturated unit” (Foucault 2003: 264-5). The transformation of the large family into a restrained, nuclear, cell and conjugal family, as we know it today, was born with this process. Inside this newly delimited family, the bodies of the parents are to be folded onto those of the children:

Apply your bodies to the bodies of your children; observe your children; get close to your children; possibly get in bed with your children; slide between their sheets; observe, spy on, and surprise all the signs of your children's desire; come stealthily to their bed at night, lift up their sheets, see what they are doing, and put your hand there, at least to stop them. And now, after having been told this for one hundred years, they are told: This formidable desire you have uncovered – in the material sense of the word – is directed toward you. The most formidable thing about this desire is precisely that it concerns you (Foucault 2003: 266).

This incestuous desire goes from the children to the parents, so that the latter feel in control, feeling themselves to be the masters not only of the body, but also of the desire of the child. In reality, this re-appropriation of the child's sexuality by the parents parallels the submission of the infantile body to the disciplinary dressage outside the family, increasingly intensifying in the 19th century, which allowed Capital and the state to become the owners of tamed bodies (factory and war).

The anti-masturbation crusade concerns almost exclusively the Bourgeois family, since the proletarians are a different problem: a “floating population” with irregular behaviors, which practices free unions, and that in the precarious conditions of existence, developed “a kind of extramatrimonial sexuality” (Foucault 2006: 269).

At the moment of the transformation of the European proletariat (in the 19th century) in productive force, conditions of work and housing, movements of the labor force, and the use of child labor, all made family relationships increasingly fragile and disabled the family structure (Foucault 2006: 83).

The multiple behaviors of proletarians raise many problems for disciplinary power-knowledge dispositifs, their work needs to lead to the same results: for the restrained family as well as the affective relations that go with it. The campaign of “refamiliarisation”, which will take over the proletariat is then a campaign for

“marriage”: “Get married. Do not have children first only to abandon them later. The whole campaign is directed against free unions, against concubinage, and against extra- or parafamilial fluidity” (Foucault 2003: 269). From 1820-1825 onwards, bosses, philanthropists, and public powers made a considerable effort to reconstitute the family.

Inside this solid, continuous space established by housing politics but also the promotion of saving schemes and provident saving schemes [*clairvoyance*], which fix the flowing mobility of the proletarian beast/creature [*bête*], we find the development of yet another campaign. When we set to fold the Bourgeois bodies onto those of their children, the injunction for the proletarians was not to mix bodies, to have the least possible contact with the bodies of children:

There is a campaign against shared bedrooms, against parents and children, and children "of a different sex" sharing the same bed. Ultimately, the ideal is one bed per person. The ideal in the workers' cities being planned at this time is the well-known small house with three rooms: a living room for all, a room for the parents and a room for the children, or even a room for the parents and a room for boys and a room for girls. (Foucault 2003: 270).

It is this famous three bedroomed house that employers had started to build around 1830-1835. Incest is always a result and an instrument of these politics of family, but for the proletarians, incest implies a different injunction: to save the children from promiscuity, to defend the children from their parents. This long work of training [*dressage*] of bodies and spaces will lead to an “inter- classist” family model that put the child at the center, that is the incestuous desire; even though this is carried out in two different ways.

There have been two types of constitution of the cellular family, two types of definition of incest, two descriptions of the fear of incest, and two clusters of institutions around this fear. I am not saying that there are two sexualities, one bourgeois and the other proletarian (or working class), but I would say that there have been two modes of the sexualization of the family or two modes of the familialization of sexuality, two family spaces of sexuality and sexual prohibition. (Foucault 2003: 273).

Every formation of power needs a knowledge. Thus, in parallel to the power that is exerted onto the family, the family constitutes itself a “medical-psychiatric knowledge” that does not depend solely on the family itself but will not have any efficiency without it.

Psychiatry owes this interlocking with judicial power to the problematic of the irresistible drive and the appearance of the sphere of instinctive mechanisms as a privileged domain of objects. It owes its symmetrical interlocking with familial power, which takes place

along a different genealogical line, to the different problematic of sexuality and its irregularities. (Foucault 2003: 275).

These categories are those that Freudian psychoanalysis will recover at the end of the 19th century and that, in a certain way, will bring them to their finality [*accomplissement*]. Psychoanalysis “appears as the technique for dealing with infantile incest and all its disturbing effects in the family space” (Foucault 2003: 272) while opening it on another continent of subjectivity, which was entirely unexplored until then.

Guattari presents similar arguments when he affirms that drive, desire and Ego, etc. are constructions of capitalism. The conception of desire is as a flow that should be disciplined: “I think that this conception of desire corresponds very well to a certain reality: it is desire as it is constructed and produced by Integrated World Capitalism [IWC]. It is IWC in its deterritorialization that produces this brutish figure of desire” (Guattari 2008: 319). Psychoanalysis, on the one hand naturalizes what is in reality a political construction, but also, it constitutes one of the knowledges that compose the “psy-function” (Foucault 2006: 85-86). The “psy-function” is a knowledge that functions as power:

If psychologists turn up in the school, the factory, in prisons, in the army, and elsewhere, it is because they entered precisely at the point when each of these institutions was obliged to make reality function as power, or again, when they had to assert the power exercised within them as reality (Foucault 2006: 189).

And this power of knowledge establishes itself as the reality in which the individual constitutes itself. To finish with a quotation from Freud that inscribes him in the history of transformations of psychiatric knowledges, which paralleled the disciplinary power and the pastoral power. And psychoanalysis is undoubtedly its last incarnation.

Without trying to reduce the work of Freud to these citations taken from *The Future of an Illusion*, and by recognizing that his work has opened onto the discovery of “new subjective worlds”, one should nonetheless recognize that his conception of society and culture rests, in a very disciplinary way, “on the compulsion to work and a renunciation of instinct” (Freud 1961: 19). “Men are not spontaneously fond of work and that arguments are of no avail against their passions” (Freud 1961: 8). Civilization needs to impose a mediation that resembles again and again the Leviathan as an image that frightens as much as the Leviathan did in its time, for ‘the enormous amount of coercion that will inevitably be required (Freud 1961: 8).

It is just as impossible to do without control of the mass by a minority as it is to dispense with coercion in the work of civilization. For masses are lazy and unintelligent... and the individuals composing them support one another in giving free rein to their indiscipline. It is only through the influence of individuals who can set an example and whom masses recognize as their leaders that they can be induced to perform the work and undergo the renunciations on which the existence of civilization/culture depends (Freud 1961: 7-8).

I think that instead of returning to Freud, we need to think and produce contemporary processes of subjectivation and to start again from this distancing that “1968 thought” has produced.

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