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Deleuze, Guattari and Marxism

Opening

The Marxist who opens *Anti-Oedipus* and reads the celebrated first lines finds himself in a strange universe, one that is entirely foreign to him.\(^1\) To be sure, ‘it [*ça*]’ works, but ‘it’ also eats, shits and fucks. Such activities are not unknown to the Marxist, but neither are they activities that his pet theories usually account for. However, if he goes beyond the first feeling of surprise, and reads on, familiar features will soon emerge: this ‘it’ that shits and fucks is also engaged in production. Indeed ‘it’ is a machine, an assemblage of machines. And, before he reaches the opening lines, our Marxist has crossed two thresholds: the title of the first section, ‘Desiring Production’, and the title of the whole opus, of which *Anti-Oedipus* is the first volume: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. This is where the Marxist who attempts to read Deleuze and Guattari has a problem: he is threatened with a form of schizophrenia, inscribed in the ‘and’ of that title. Those are indeed machines (a term Marxists are rather fond of), but they are also *desiring* machines; an analysis of capitalism is duly promised, but in relation to schizophrenia. And, after a few chapters,

\(^1\) A shorter version of this essay was published in Lecercle 2003.
the Marxist will be interested to note that this is a coherent practice: whatever the concept, however graphic its name (nomadism, assemblage, war-machine), however great the distance from concepts that are familiar to him, the general impression is that Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts are always constructed in relation to Marxism. Thus, the famous analysis of nomadism and its war-machine (as opposed to the state apparatus), with its smooth or striated space, has a relation, albeit a distant one, with the Marxist concept of the Asiatic mode of production. The question is, of course: how relevant is this relationship, and what is the extent of the displacement? Marxist concepts are indeed present in Deleuze and Guattari (obviously, not all of them), but the bearded prophet would find it difficult to acknowledge them as his own.

**Proximity**

There are historical and biographical explanations for such propinquity. However, they are contingent. All those who became philosophers in France in the immediate aftermath of World War II had some relation to Marxism, sometimes critical, more often enthusiastic. We remember that Foucault burst into tears when he was told that Stalin had died. This did not prevent him from claiming, at a later stage, that Marxism was nothing but a storm in a teacup. And, if Bourdieu always strenuously maintained that he was not a Marxist, this might denote a proximity too great for comfort. The spectre of Marx haunts French philosophers, even the greatest of them.

We know that Guattari was, or at least had been, a Marxist. A one-time member of the French Communist Party (PCF), he was long associated with left-oppositional groups, and never denied his origins. Deleuze, on the other hand, was never a committed Marxist, although he sometimes hinted that he might be. In his youth, he says, he was too busy doing philosophy to join the Party and waste his time in political meetings. Later in life, he became what he himself called a ‘run-of-the-mill leftist’: he was an active member of the GIP (Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons – the Prisons Information Group, an inmates support platform), and supported the attempt made by Coluche, the comedian, to run as candidate in a presidential election. It is in the course of those campaigns, as is well known, that he met Foucault and became his friend. All this is highly interesting, but not to us: we are interested in the proximity of concepts, not in their thinkers’ political views.

In order to assess that proximity, or distance, I need some kind of standard, or a set of criteria. I must say what a Marxist in search of a kindred spirit...