

# DELEUZE AND FOUCAULT

---

*Jan Rehmman*

## TOWARDS A DECONSTRUCTION OF POSTMODERNIST NEO-NIETZSCHEANISM

THE FACT THAT postmodernist theories emerged from left-wing interpretations of Nietzsche is, in itself, hardly disputed,<sup>1</sup> nor the position that Deleuze and Foucault played a crucial role in this process. Although what is lacking in the debates is the question of *how*, in the 1960s and 1970s, Deleuze and Foucault managed to make Nietzsche into a compelling reference point for leftist and alternative milieus. I will offer here some reflections on this contemporary moment. Initially, I will take a historical look at how certain kinds of “leftist Nietzscheanism” came into being and how they succeeded to “superannuate” a Marxist critique of capitalism. Taking Gilles Deleuze as a chief example, I will demonstrate that his reading of Nietzsche is itself a highly ideological construction that needs therefore to be “deconstructed” — thus turning a key postmodernist concept on postmodernism itself. Secondly, I will show with the example of Foucault’s concept of power that the neo-Nietzschean superannuation of Marxism meant a significant theoretical loss, a step back in several respects. My assumption is, in a nutshell, that postmodernist theories, in so far as they found themselves on a watered-down Nietzscheanism, have generated various kinds of hyper-radical rhetoric while diluting the analytical foundations of a serious critique of class and gender domination. Finally, I try to demonstrate postmodernism’s tendency to de-materialize social life with the examples of the body, gender relations, and the concept of “immaterial labor,” and draw some tentative conclusions for a deconstructive and reconstructive critique.

For an understanding of how Deleuze reads and transforms Nietzsche, it is necessary to return to his early book, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (1962), which has often been called the “postmodernist bible.” According to Cornel West, all the features we now associate with postmodernism and poststructuralism, from the thrashing of mediation to the valorization of difference and the decentering of the subject, “go back to Deleuze’s resurrection of

---

<sup>1</sup> Habermas treats Nietzsche as the decisive entry point into postmodernism (1987, 83ff); according to Manfred Frank, Neostucturalism overthrows Structuralism by means of a philosophical thesis “attained through a reconsideration of Nietzsche’s overcoming of metaphysics” (Frank 1989, 22). As Resch observes, “The Nietzschean Left was Postmodernism *avant la lettre*” (Resch 1989, 514). According to Waite (1996, 108), “Poststructuralism must be defined as an *overwhelmingly positive, assimilative embrace of Nietzsche. And it is as such that it persists today.*”

Nietzsche against Hegel.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, Deleuze’s book on Nietzsche is directed against any kind of dialectics. According to him, Nietzsche convincingly opposes the “principle of negation” by the “principle of affirmation,” and overcomes the concept of dialectical contradictions by the principle of difference and of pluralism.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1962, long before the *Nouveaux Philosophes* make their first appearance, we see an image of Nietzsche as a representative of plural differences raising his voice against the “totalitarianism” of dialectics. The language of this “new Nietzsche” has already the postmodernist melody of joy, lightness and dance: “Nietzsche’s ‘yes’ is opposed to the dialectical ‘no;’ affirmation to dialectical negation; difference to dialectical contradiction; joy, enjoyment to dialectical labor; and lightness, dance to dialectical responsibilities.”<sup>4</sup>

We can consider this as an early postmodernist manifesto playfully deriding critical social theory. Deleuze’s argument is flawed in several respects. First, he draws a caricature of what dialectics is or might consist, i.e. a hermeneutics which allows the conceptualization of a moving and contradictory context is reduced to a set of the most speculative principles detached from any reality. Secondly, Deleuze’s interpretation that Nietzsche’s approach was essentially anti-dialectic is, at the least, very one-sided, since Nietzsche uses “all forms of dialectical incorporation when it suits his pleasure.”<sup>5</sup>

But the most interesting part in deconstructing Deleuze’s readings is to observe how he manages to derive his concept of plural difference from Nietzsche’s writings. Deleuze enunciates it at the beginning when he talks about “the pathos of difference and distance” and subsequently quotes the passage in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* that contains the term “pathos of distance.”<sup>6</sup> It is worth to go back to the original text and to confront it with Deleuze’s interpretation. It becomes clear that Nietzsche’s “pathos of distance” has nothing to do with any plural differences, but is defined as a “pathos of nobility [...], the feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to those ‘below.’”<sup>7</sup> It is an interesting symptom that the postmodernist concept of difference, used as a battle cry against dialectical totalitarianism, is, at least in Deleuze’s

---

<sup>2</sup> West 1999, 283.

<sup>3</sup> “Nietzsche’s philosophy cannot be understood without taking his essential pluralism into account.” (Deleuze 1983/1962, 4).

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze 1983/1962, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Waite 1996, 108. A good example is the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche deals with ascetic life’s “self-contradiction” (GM III, §11, §13, §27).

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze 1983/1962, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche, GM I, §2.

account, not as democratic as one might think at first glance, but has its origin in Nietzsche's explicitly anti-democratic elitism. Nietzsche defines "noble" and "master" and also "base" and "slave" explicitly in "social terms,"<sup>8</sup> in the sense of an aristocratic classism from above — his examples are the ancient Greek aristocracy, the Roman "warrior," the conquering and master "Aryan" race, the "magnificent blond beast."<sup>9</sup> Deleuze, however, reads them as innocent terms for "active force" or "affirmative will," on the one hand; "reactive force" or "negative will," on the other.<sup>10</sup>

Obviously, this kind of neo-Nietzscheanism does not emerge from a critical, rebellious, or subversive reading of Nietzsche, as proclaimed and advertised. It rather does what the mainstream literature has been doing all the time; it applies a depoliticized allegorical interpretation, which takes the most reactionary and anti-democratic statements of Nietzsche's as mere representations of something else, of a "deeper" philosophical sense. It is not a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that is applied to Nietzsche, but a "hermeneutics of innocence"<sup>11</sup> that eliminates any social meaning and context.

Paradoxically, such a depoliticization of Nietzsche is the precondition to his being shifted to the "radical left" during and after '68. This political transformation of one of the most elitist representatives of an "aristocratic radicalism," as Nietzsche himself calls it, turned into a reference point for an anti-authoritarian left is indeed one of the most astonishing turnings in recent intellectual history. And it is not least the hyper-radical language borrowed from Nietzsche that enabled postmodernism to successfully unhinge a theoretical Marxism that was, for many reasons, in deep crisis. In 1972, Deleuze describes Nietzsche as a "nomadic rebel," who is much more radical and subversive than Marx and Freud. In this perspective, Marxism and Psychoanalysis stand for bureaucracies that recodify culture; namely, the state in the case of the Marxists, the family in the case of the Freudians. Nietzsche, however is decodifying these institutions, and by his aphorisms, helps us to create a "war-machine" that opposes the administrative machine. "We seek a kind of war machine that will not re-create a state apparatus."<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, *GM I*, §4. The German expression for "in social terms" is "im ständischen Sinne" (KSA 5/261) - "Stand/Ständisch" means "status" or "rank" and usually applies to classes in pre-modern societies.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *GM I*, §5, §11.

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze, 1983/1962, 55; cf. 57f, 61, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Losurdo 2002, pp. 653, 781, 798 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze, 1995/1973, 149.

This is indeed a very interesting figure of speech, which reveals the political ambivalence of this shift. On the one hand, speaking of a war machine in 1972 clearly alluded to the terrorist groups among the radical left, who were now invited to see in Nietzsche their companion; on the other hand, it is clear that Nietzsche's "war machine" is not meant to be a real one. It doesn't consist of street bombs, but of aphorisms, and is thus used as a metaphor that endows a highly esoteric philosophical discourse with the impetus of guerrilla warfare. It is this culturalist sublimation that allowed postmodernism to come out of its ultra-leftist corner and to gain access to the academic mainstream in the humanities and in cultural studies. In order to grasp this dynamic, Terry Eagleton has described postmodernism as "a way of keeping warm at the level of discourse a political culture which had been flushed off the streets."<sup>13</sup> I have proposed to analyze it with the Gramscian term of a "passive revolution" that emerged from the defeats and deadlocks of the radical left after '68.<sup>14</sup>

From the point of view of a critical philology, the postmodernist transvaluation of Nietzsche to a nomadic rebel is a highly imaginary construction, or to say it in a more old-fashioned way: a systematic falsification. I confine myself to one example. The basic philosophical operation that allows Deleuze to shift Nietzsche to the left, is to disguise him as Spinoza. Deleuze assumes that Nietzsche's will to power is basically the same as Spinoza's concept of power: both Spinoza and Nietzsche treat power first and foremost as a "capacity for being affected," as a matter of feeling and sensibility.<sup>15</sup> Under Deleuze's influence, this equation became a commonplace in postmodernist interpretations and beyond. One can find it in Michael Hardt's book on Deleuze, without any attempt of a philological corroboration, and one can still find it in Hardt/Negri's *Empire*, where Nietzsche's concept of power is said to be just more "expansive" than the Spinozian one.<sup>16</sup> These interpretations cast out the fact that the late Nietzsche, at the same time as he introduced his concept of a "will to power," turned more and more hostile against Spinoza, finally denouncing him as being obsessed by "Jewish hatred."<sup>17</sup> But apart from that, they overlook the fact that Spinoza's concept of power is the exact opposite of Nietzsche's. His key-concept is *potentia agendi*, best translated as "power to act" or "capacity to act." It is

---

<sup>13</sup> Eagleton 1996, 4, 17, 24f.

<sup>14</sup> Rehmann 2004, 9f.

<sup>15</sup> Deleuze, 1995/1973, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Hardt 1993, 34ff, 54f, 72; Hardt/Negri 2000, 359.

<sup>17</sup> Unpublished Fragment, fall 1884, 26 [49]; KSA 11/319.

never used in the hierarchical sense of domination (for this, Spinoza uses another term, namely *potestas*), but as a capacity to cooperate with each other in a “reasonable” way. The late Nietzsche, however, defines power as “overpowering,” “dominating,” and states, e.g. that “exploitation” is a natural consequence of the intrinsic Will to Power. When he praises in the *Antichrist* the feeling of power, he concludes: “The weak and the failures shall perish: first principle of *our* love of man. And they shall even be given every possible assistance.”<sup>18</sup>

This textual comparison should be sufficient to demonstrate that the equation of equivalence between Spinoza’s and Nietzsche’s concepts of power is not just a minor mistake, but rather cynical or foolish, and in both cases an intellectual scandal.<sup>19</sup> It comes down to equating social cooperation and a fantasized annihilation of the sick and the weak. The Nietzschean concept of an unfettered and even exterministic domination from above is something that the democratic left in the largest possible sense has the duty to denounce and to combat; power from below, in the Spinozian sense of a cooperative capacity to act, is a perspective without which no project of liberation is possible. Deleuze’s conflation of Spinoza and Nietzsche reveals a fundamental flaw of postmodernism, the analytical incapacity to differentiate between antagonistic social perspectives in power relations.

Now, it is necessary to address the question of how the postmodernist transvaluation of Nietzsche affects their own theory, most notably the claim of a subversive critique of Western power relations. The lack of differentiation between antagonistic social perspectives is a fairly general feature in postmodernist theories. Let us take the example of Michel Foucault, whose blending of “truth” and “power” has been directly shaped by Nietzsche’s derivation of a “will to truth” from the “will to power.”<sup>20</sup> In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault takes up Althusser’s early concept of ideology and dissolves it into his own categories of “knowledge” (*savoir*) and discourse, which he then later (first 1971, in *L’ordre du discours*) transforms into the concept of power. As soon as one reconstructs the formative period of Foucault’s power concept, one can see that, in spite of his rhetorics of

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. GM II, §12; BGE, §259; AC, §2.

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed account, see my analysis in Rehmann 2004, 52ff.

<sup>20</sup> In the *Zarathustra*, it is the will to power that walks “on the heels of your will to truth” (Z II, On Self-overcoming). When Nietzsche jots down several drafts of his planned book, “The Will to Power,” he projects to dedicate its first chapter to the “will to truth” (*Unpublished Fragments*, KSA 13/515f, 537, 543).

“micro-physics” and “relational power,”<sup>21</sup> that he has in fact never introduced it as a “relational” concept of power — i.e. developed from class relations, gender relations, or race relations — but has installed it as an enigmatic force *behind* actual social relations.<sup>22</sup> Nicos Poulantzas, who had actually conceptualized the notion of a “relational” power before Foucault, criticized him for re-essentializing the concept: by detaching power from actual social relations and practices, Foucault endowed it with the status of a “Master-Power” (Maître-Pouvoir); behind the rhetoric of multiformity lies the idea of a “phagocytic essence” that invades and penetrates both the mechanisms of domination and of resistance, glossing over all social contradictions and struggles.<sup>23</sup> It is not least due to his Neo-Nietzscheanism, that Foucault has never specified his power concept according to: power for whom, of what kind, to what ends, and for doing what.

This lack of social differentiation is, in my view, a clear theoretical loss compared to Marxist concepts of ideology at the time, e.g. the theory of ideology as developed by Louis Althusser. We should not forget that postmodernism has taken over large parts of the academia, most notably in the humanities, at the very moment when the Althusserian School fell apart. That Foucault has replaced the concepts of ideology and hegemony by the concepts of knowledge, discourse and power, is usually hailed as a successful overcoming of Marxist class-reductionism and state-orientation. But such praise casts out the fact that critical concepts of ideology are, at least in one respect, much more differentiated: they try to decipher the contradicting social positions inherent in knowledge, discourses, and power relations; they claim to show how organic intellectuals of different classes fight in the realm of ideological and moral values. Postmodernism has dropped this analytical task altogether.

Connected to this backdrop is another loss. In Gramsci’s and Althusser’s approaches, the ideological has been considered as a complex material arrangement, consisting of hegemonic apparatuses, specific intellectuals, ideological practices, rituals, images, and also texts, as an integral part of this whole arrangement. Postmodernism has largely emerged from a radicalization of the linguistic turn and has therefore focused in fact almost

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Foucault, 1995/1975, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. in detail, Rehmann 2004, 106ff, 119, 139f, 177f.

<sup>23</sup> Poulantzas 1978, 149, 151. The concept of “relational” power in the sense of a collective capacity to act, which depends on the relations of force between social classes, has been developed in Poulantzas 1968, 101ff.

entirely on texts, detached from the material ideological settings and practices in which they are embedded.

The consequence of this one-sidedness is that postmodernism's critical project of de-naturalization of fixed identities is always at risk to morph into an overall de-materialization of social life. A few examples may demonstrate this. It has been widely criticized that postmodernism has, on the one hand, developed a glamorous body-talk, most notably in respect to the tortured and the desiring body; but, on the other hand, de-materialized the real bodies. Foucault, for example, promises in *Discipline and Punish* to deliver a "'political economy' of the body."<sup>24</sup> But throughout the investigation he deals with bodies solely insofar as they emerge in pedagogical discourses without ever looking at the actual corporeal conditions in the prison system, nourishment, overwork, statistics of deaths and suicides. For postmodernism in general, there seems to be no laboring bodies in sweatshops, exploited bodies, malnourished bodies. Postmodernists usually don't go where Marx went in *Capital*, when he left the "noisy sphere" of circulation and went down to the "hidden abode of production" (*Capital I*, 279). David McNally has argued that the postmodernist radicalization of the linguistic turn is reproducing what Marx has analyzed as "fetishism:" the alienating rule of abstract value over use-value, of abstract average labor over concrete labor.<sup>25</sup>

A similar tendency can be observed in postmodernist gender theories, which tend to reduce the social to the symbolic, gendered subjectivities to a shifting play of signification, the body to conventions and norms. Rosemary Hennessy has criticized the shift from de-naturalization of identities to a de-materialization of social life, as shown in the example of Judith Butler's contribution to "queer theory." According to her, there is a rich and alluring evocativeness, but "there is also an eerie if familiar immateriality to this new queer subject, who moves in a milieu of virtual relations, whose desire is the unleashed mobility of disconnected images."<sup>26</sup> Under the influence of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, a new reductionism has gained acceptance that misses the material levels where gender relations are interlaced with and overdetermined by class relations.

And finally, let's look at the notion of "immaterial labor" that has become so crucial in the debates on the concept of the "multitude." Hardt/Negri

---

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, 1995/1975, 25.

<sup>25</sup> McNally, 2001, 52ff, 66ff.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hennessy 2000, 108.

recognize that the term is ambiguous, because what is “immaterial” is not the labor, but the product. But this specification does not solve the problem. It maintains the conceptual confusion of “material” and “tangible:” if we take the digital products of computerized labor, which are the most evident examples of Hardt/Negri’s argument, we can certainly say that they are not tangible, but as long as one does not stick to what Marx had already dismissed as the “old,” mechanical materialism, one cannot but consider digital virtuality (like energy or the law of gravitation) as an integral part of a philosophical concept of materiality.<sup>27</sup> This does not mean that there aren’t any new conditions of labor in High-Tech-Capitalism, but rather that they are to be reformulated in terms of the relations between manual and intellectual labor. The postmodernist notion of “immaterial labor” (and in this regard, Hardt/Negri just carry on the de-materialized tendency of postmodernism) is tightly connected to the neoliberal myth of a new weightless economy. Both are buzzwords that do not consider that the consumption of raw materials is increasing on an astronomical scale. Both obscure the new divisions in High-Tech-Capitalism between a “cybertariat” and a new “precariat,” between highly qualified ICT-employees and growing sections of the working poor and unemployed.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, I see in postmodernism, in spite of its critical impulses, two main flaws. One is that it de-materializes social relations, the other is that it doesn’t attempt to decipher the contradictions and antagonisms in these social relations. Confronted with these shortcomings, Marxist theory has a double task, a deconstructive and a reconstructive one. On the one hand, it should continue to critique the fact that the postmodernist celebrations of social fragmentations and simulacra are propelled by the illusions of fictitious capital and tightly connected to the hegemony of neoliberalism. On the other hand, it ought to re-interpret the productive insights of postmodernism in the framework of a historical materialist theory of hegemony and ideology. Against the postmodernist reduction of social life into disembodied figures of discourse, it has to re-embody “cyberspace” again and to re-insert, on the level of High-Tech Capitalism, the concrete laboring bodies into social and cultural analysis.

---

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Haug 2004, 820, 823f.

<sup>28</sup> cf. Ursula Huws 2003, 150ff; see also her critique of the “myth of the weightless economy” (ibid., 126ff).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Deleuze, Gilles, 1983 [1962]: *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, 1995 [1973]: "Nomadic Thought," in: Allison, David B. (ed.) 1995: *The New Nietzsche. Contemporary Styles of Interpretation*, Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, pp. 142-149.
- Eagleton, Terry 1996: *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Foucault, Michel, 1971: *L'ordre du discours*. Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France prononcée le 2 décembre 1970, Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault, Michel, 1972 [1968]: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel, 1995 [1975]: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Random House.
- Foucault, Michel, 1990 [1976]: *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, New York: Random House.
- Frank, Manfred 1989: *What is Neostructuralism?* Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen, 1987: *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Hardt, Michael, 1993: *Gilles Deleuze. An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, 2000: *Empire*, Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, 2004: *Multitude*, New York: Penguin Press.
- Haug, Wolfgang Fritz, 2004: Article "Immaterielle Arbeit," in: *Kritisch-Historisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus* (HKWM), Vol. 6/1, Hamburg: Argument Verlag, pp. 819-832.
- Hennessy, Rosemary, 2000: *Profit and Pleasure. Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, New York, London: Routledge.
- Huws, Ursula, 2003: *The Making of a Cybertariat. Virtual Work in a Real World*, New York, London: Monthly Review Press.
- Losurdo, Domenico 2002: 'Nietzsche, il ribelle aristocratico'. *Biografia intellettuale e bilancio critico*, Torino: Bollati Boringheri.
- McNally, David, 2001: *Bodies of Meaning. Studies on Language, Labor, and Liberation*, New York: State University of New York.

Nietzsche, Friedrich:

AC *The Antichrist*

BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*

GM *On the Genealogy of Morals*

KSA *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazino Montinari, München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999 (1980).

Z *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Poulantzas, Nicos 1968: *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales*, Tome 1, Paris: Maspero.

Poulantzas, Nicos 1978: *State, Power, Socialism*, London: NLB.

Rehmann, Jan 2004: *Postmoderner Links-Nietzscheanismus. Deleuze & Foucault. Eine Dekonstruktion*, Hamburg: Argument Verlag.

Resch, Robert Paul 1989: "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Social Theory: A Comparison of Althusser and Foucault," in: *Poetics Today* 10:3, 511-549.

Waite, Geoff 1996: *Nietzsche's Corps/e. Aesthetics, Politics, Prophecy, or, The Spectacular Technoculture of Everyday Life*, Durham, London: Duke University Press.

West, Cornel 1999: "The Political Intellectual" (1987), in: West, Cornel 1999: *The Cornel West Reader*, New York: Basic Civitas Books, pp. 278-293.