

Making a body that questions

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Three central concepts - from ATP - that can enable a re-thinking of the body in struggle.

Strata - Assemblage - Lines of Flight

(A) Strata (smooth and striated)

This is often expressed in terms of the smooth and striated. Two elements help us understand this - the BwO and Desire.

1) The Body without Organs and the Organism

If Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze have anything to say about bodies that is specific to them, it is probably to be found in the way that they try to understand 'the body' as a site of conflict. To take their most famous formulations, which all centre around the concept of the 'body without organs', the body is a site of conflict between *the body without* and *the body with* organs (the organism). The organs aren't 'natural' in this situation but are those forces of the body without organs that have been organised into an *organism* (cf ATP:158).

"The organism is not at all the body, the BwO; rather it is a **stratum** on the BwO, in other words, a phenomenon of **accumulation, coagulation and sedimentation** that, **in order to extract useful labour from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organisations, organised transcendences**. The strata are bonds ... We are continually stratified. ... The BwO is that glacial reality where the alluvions, sedimentations, coagulations, foldings and recoilings that compose an organism - and also a signification and a subject - occur." (ATP: 159)

The BwO is that which is organised (striated), and the place where the organisation takes place.

Organised by what?

By the sociological (but also the geological, the biological, the technological, the cosmological - the *logos* itself as an organising force here - the move from AO to ATP is precisely a move which takes concepts developed in the anthropic setting and begins to extend them, test them, as *generalised conceptual tools* - ie: as 'ontological' not 'anthropological' concepts - this is a philosophical 'problematic' - is there one process that envelops the human, or is there a break/gap/split *between* the human and the non-human?).

The BwO is organised more specifically by particular codes, codes (not meanings) that *record as striations* (the flux carves out paths, along which further fluxes then flow - sedimentation, erosion and disruption).

The code (at least in the anthropic context) *striates* the Body Without Organs - which is a smoothness - in three major ways and in doing so produces

- organisms
- meanings (significance) and
- subjects.

If (to offer a crude topography) Spivak focuses on *the organisation of Subjects* and Said on *the organisation of Significances*, then Deleuze and Guattari point us towards this third strata of the organisation of the organism, the body. It is also here that we might think about the relation that we find brought forward so prominently in Fanon between violence and the body. In 'schizoanalytic' terms, Fanon might be said to have a greater focus on the organization of the body, on the way that this striation, this layer or form, is constituted within the colonised. Here it is more than a question of meaning or even of subjectivity and agency, although these are obviously inter-related and important, it is a question of *the docility or activity of the body itself*.

2) The body is a flux of desire

The crucial tension then is between an organising force and an organised something - what is it that is organised, striated, codified? The answer for D&G is 'desire'. Desire is not human, not something specific to a human being, perhaps not even specific to the organic but is, fundamentally, the process of *production through connection*. There is nothing that is 'desired' that starts the desire, absent or otherwise, not is there something *towards which* desire aims. Desire is simple flux of connection, disconnection, connection. It is a swarming, seething, blind force and it produces flows.

Imagine yourself in an underwater facility, all around you the ocean pressing in. As long as the structure holds fast you can live in the illusion of security but at night you dream of drowning and during the day the steel and glass gradually corrode as the water keeps seething all around, reacting, catalysing, seeping slowly into the tiniest, microscopic fracture in the material, microscopic fractures that will gradually put the desire of the water to work, gradually allow it to corrode the cocoon you live in until, one day, those seething, seeping connections, made day by day, minute by minute, second by second, will erupt in a catastrophic collapse and the dream of drowning will become the nightmare reality.

This is the flux of desire. This process of continual connection, production, destruction, at the microscopic pre-organised level, this process that undermines each structure, this is the body, this flux of desire that cannot stop still, that cannot rest.

The body is nothing more than a flux of desire organised in a particular form or structure through a set of codes that impose themselves on the flux, codes that themselves result from the flux and which exist because of the recordings of past flows.

It is far better to think in geological and ecological terms when attempting to think of desire than to think in human terms: think of the sociological as a geo- or ecological analogue, of the organism as a geo- or ecological feature.

(B) Assemblages and Territories

“Assemblages are ... different from strata. They are produced in the strata, but operate in zones where milieus become decoded: they begin by extracting a *territory* from the milieus. Every assemblage is basically territorial.” (ATP: 503)

‘The body’ is never singular - it is only ever *an assemblage*.

If the basic form resulting from the flux of desire is a series of smooth and striated spaces, then *within the strata we find assemblages*.

Assemblages *operate* - they have a life of their own and because of this they have a zone of operation, their *territory*.

This territory is most often encountered in the idea of *home*. There is somewhere that thing, that animal, that person, that plant, is at home - or not.

It is at the level of *the assemblage and territory* that we find the idea of meaning and action - speaking and doing, saying and behaving, gesturing and acting. The *semiotic and pragmatic* systems operate in this zone of assemblage and territory. Of course, these assemblages and territories are neither autonomous nor discrete, they form part of the wider process of the flux of desire and the organisation of flows.

(C) Bodies that question

Heidegger famously distinguished the human from the non-human in terms of questioning, more accurately, he determined a type of assemblage, *Dasein*, which ‘questions its own being’, which is characterised by its capacity to question - not, note, by the mere *asking* of questions but by the *activity* of questioning. What is ‘decisive’ for Heidegger is “*the movement of questioning that alone lets what is true come out into the open*” (ITM: 106).

Now Heidegger is not enormously interested in the *genesis* of such a being, but Deleuze and Guattari are. If the body that questions is an assemblage with a territory, *either* this is a unique and special characteristic of a *special type of body* - in which case we enter a space in which we privilege a particular kind of being *or* questioning is a process that results from the basic processes of flux and organisation that *bodies are capable of*. It is this latter route that is important for them.

If a body, an assemblage, always has a territory then what might produce a shift from an unquestioning to a questioning behaviour? Note, not a meaning, but a behaviour in relation to a structure. It is the edge or the limit that produces the question.

One response to this is to think of the territory as something that has limits.

The assemblage operates and as it does so it produces signs, the content of 'behaviour/action' expresses 'gestures/signs'. Yet at particular points these 'activities' encounter limits - thresholds, boundaries, impossibilities, necessities. At these limits, at these edges, one can submit or confront, move back or move forward, depending on the docility or activity of the assemblage.

Now assume that these limits are not fixed.

Territories do not exist in isolation but in continuous relation to other territories and they are also not static but shift, growing or slowing, increasing or decreasing, and in this situation one territory can constrict and squeeze another. As the colonists establish their territory it constricts the colonised. For a while this might simply result in a kind of passivity - as the edges shift, the assemblages move into their heartland, or reconstitute a heartland. Yet if the process continues then the colonists territory eventually encroaches on everything and once it has swarmed across the lands it continues into the hands. It moves ever further into the colonised body, first taking the borders of the lands, then taking the activity of the hands and finally pushing into the very breath of the colonised bodies, touching on the flux of desire that is expressed in this particular assemblage.

At the edge there are always questions, but when the edge lies beyond the horizon, when it is 'over there' these questions are not forced into existence. They still exist, they are still raised, each assemblage has its own territories and whilst they might overlap, no two assemblages have exactly the same borders. As the horizon begins to fill with new borders, however, the borders of the territories now become more and more common notions amongst whole swarms of assemblages, producing in turn new collective assemblages - a people, a race, a nation, a group, a creed, a denomination.

Now the crux of the matter is to be found at the moment at which *the existence of one territory cannot tolerate the existence of another* - when, we might say, a territory is overwhelmed. To be overwhelmed is to be caught in a flood, to have the territory destroyed and to be caught in the flux of desire, where processes of *de-territorialisation* now dominate. Pure de-territorialisation is terror, the terror of the overwhelming flood of water, or coloniser, or emotion. When one territory is conquering another those that are being conquered can no longer simply exist - they must be assimilated or annihilated, or they must fight. There are no other options.

It is not an accident that the slogan of 'liberty or death' arises - it expresses the content of the activity of the flows, from a particular perspective, the perspective of the territory that is being conquered. It is not a 'moral' slogan, or a choice to be made and which one is being exhorted to choose - it is an expression of the facts of the flows, of the content of actual activity.

Flows take time, however. Time is the space between passivities, it is the active force that arises at the limits of assemblages and territories, between now and then, between yesterday and tomorrow, between homefulness and homelessness.

In this space, of threshold, of transition, of movement and activity, we can encounter comrades like Fanon as expressions of the content of activity that they are surrounded by. Fanon attempts, at first, to merely develop a territory - a 'life' we might say - that operates in a collective, interested, co-operative mode. "The function of a social structure is to set up institutions to serve man's needs."¹ His clinical practice expresses this in that the mad are not objects to be conquered but people - human beings - with whom he co-exists and whom he attempts to co-construct a world with - his assemblage is such that he engages in co-constructing a territory of human activity in which all are at home². Yet this is cross-cut by the flows of constriction that arise from the action of those assemblages that would conquer and destroy. If he had been able to simply slip into a space of clinical practice that comfortably existed outside of those lines of conflict generated by those who would conquer then we might never have heard of him, he might have slipped away from history into a territory of safety. Yet this was not possible. He is caught in the overwhelming flood.

By the time Fanon resigns from the Psychiatric Hospital at Blida-Joinville in 1956, where he had worked for 3 years, he is clear about the very status of psychiatric practice within a colonised territory:

"If psychiatry is the medical technique that aims to enable man no longer to be a stranger to his environment, I owe it to myself to affirm that the Arab, permanently an alien in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization.

What is the status of Algeria? A systematized de-humanization."³

(D) Making a body that questions

The question arises at the edge of a territory, with the assemblages encounter with its limits, limits which can shift as the assemblage develops or as territories collide. These can be accidental encounters or forced ones. I might stand on the beach at the edge of the sea and never encounter the question of whether I can swim other than through an almost random action. Yet if I am being chased, by hunger or hunter, then the water becomes more than a passive limit, the beach becomes a moment of having the question posed and swimming an

¹ F.Fanon, 'Letter to the Resident Minister', in Franz Fanon, Towards the African revolution, 1967 Monthly Review Press, p53.

² This would need to be much more fully developed as an account of the assemblage that Fanon is, but one example, one clue, can be found in the second thesis of the text 'The "North African Syndrome"', "*SECOND THESIS.-That the attitude of medical personnel is very often an a priori attitude. The North African does not come with a substratum common to his race, but on a foundation built by the European. In other words) the North African, spontaneously, by the very fact of appearing on the scene, enters into a pre-existing framework*". This 'a priori' or 'pre-existing framework' is the encounter and expression of what here I am describing in terms of the imposition and conquering of one territory by another. Fanon, *ibid*, p7

³ Fanon, *ibid*, p53.

answer both forced and embraced in response to the reality of those assemblages and territories that surround me.

We always of necessity begin in the middle of things, in the midst of things. Actions and thoughts are not isolated but always part of networks of flows, connections, transformations. At the edge we encounter the territories limit and in doing so we encounter most directly those *lines of flight* that constitute the moments of *de-territorialisation*. The uncanny, the homelessness, the line of escape from *this territory*.

The lines don't begin, however, at the edge, but cross-cut the territories, constantly shifting and connecting, flowing across the organisation, deriving from the Body Without Organs as it seeps and seethes into the sedimented, coagulated territories. We might come face to face with them if forced to the edge but we can also encounter them everywhere, if we can face the fear of the overwhelming that they point towards. Fanon is forced to encounter these lines of flight from the position of being overwhelmed, as *lines of flight*, forced to try and understand the dances, magical rituals, psychological forms and expressions of one territory that is being overwhelmed by another⁴ and, faced with the options of drowning or swimming, he fights to learn to swim, finds assemblages of survival in the national liberation struggle of Algeria, where he organises - quite literally - lines of connection that enable resistance, as for example when he develops the details of how to establish supply lines for weaponry for the FLN from Mali⁵.

This *practical* action, this move to alter the nature of the assemblages, is the beginning of the process of making himself a body that questions - not just a mind, not just a *Dasein*, not just some image of an isolated individual meditating peacefully in a secure homely space. When Descartes produces his work, it is not on the frontlines of the war he has just been involved in, it is in an isolated territory he constructs, in front of a wood-burner, warm, fed and safe.

This, perhaps, is the lesson to draw from Fanon - that making oneself a body that questions involves recognising the flow of territories, the overwhelming of one territory by another and responding to it with the *attempt* to find modes of connection that *alter the flows*. It is a matter of asking 'what works', what is it that is working now and what is it that can alter this, not in an abstract sense, not 'in general' but right here, right now, today and tomorrow and next week - within this horizon, what is the next step to get to another world. For the only other option is to simply settle here, where we are now, with what we have and no more - and to die assuming no other world is possible.

⁴ See Fanon's discussions in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, 1963 - for example: the 'cathartic' (tension release) form in the discussion of dance, the circle etc p57, the description of colonialism in terms of various forces - intellectual, settler, native; nationalist party, town worker (proletariat), peasant (lumpenproletariat), the role of magic and myth as 'complicit' in so far as cathartic, (p56) but also as active in (p243-244) the 'upward springing trend' in, amongst other things, 'dancing, singing and traditional rites and ceremonies' as indicators of 'cultural rebirth/renewal' prior to liberation struggle., the trope of substitution - the last shall be first and the first shall be last, p32 'he wants to take their place', p39 cf also p44, p52, p53, p60-61

⁵ cf the section on *Technical Problems* in 'This Africa to come', Fanon, *Towards the African Revolution*, p187-190.