

Molecular revolution - on the question of organisation

[Matt Lee](#)

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Guattari makes the claim that the failure of revolutionary desire, in particular its 'collapse into organizational microfascism' arises from "a more powerful investment that comes to replace revolutionary desire"¹. His 'provisional' explanation, offered in 1975, is that power operates not only in the economic and political fields but also through "semiotic subjugation". He describes this in terms of the process of learning:

"Children begin learning about capitalism in the cradle, before they have access to speech. They learn to perceive capitalist objects and relations on television, through the family, in the nursery. If they somehow manage to escape semiotic subjugation, then specialized institutions are there to take care of them: psychology, psychoanalysis, to name but two."²

Now the difficulty here is in this deployment of semiotics to understand this process of learning to obey that is described as 'semiotic subjugation'. The tension within his attempt to use semiotics in this way can perhaps best be seen in his attempt to develop concepts of the machinic which reach their apparently paradoxical height in the concept of an a-signifying semiotics. Semiotics in some form is, however, central to the Guattarian strategy of 'exiting language', of leaving interpretation behind and moving to an engineering of and experimentation with desire, in particular the engineering of a revolutionary desire.

I would suggest that two things need to be noted when trying to think about Guattari's use of semiotics. The first is that signs do not necessarily need interpreters, the second that signs are not reducible to or best understood as social conventions. These two pillars of semiotics - interpretation and social conventionalism - seem, at best, irrelevant to Guattari's semiotics and, at worst, actively confusing if applied to his theoretical experimentation.

To quote Guattari again:

"What I call semiotization is what happens with perception, with movement in space, with singing, dancing, mimicry, caressing, contact, everything that concerns the body."³

He goes on to claim that the process of learning that underlies these concerns of the body is nothing less than learning a 'behavioural model'⁴. If 'semiotic subjugation' is, as it appears

¹ Felix Guattari, 'Molecular revolutions', in Soft Subversions, Semiotext 1996, p10

² ibid

³ ibid, p11. In another text that follows Guattari uses the phrase 'impose a semiotic modelling on the body' and the context suggests that both 'behavioural modelling' and 'semiotic modelling' are naming the same thing, see the discussion in 'Desire is power, power is desire', ibid, p22.

⁴ ibid

here, more to do with the body and processes of learning behaviours than why retain this 'semiotic' aspect, why not reject this concept in favour of a more behavioural model? On the surface it seems that there is a tension between the machinic, behavioural, body aspect of Guattari's thoughts and the semiotic, sign-oriented aspect. Body or mind? Which is it to be?

To pose the problem so crudely is to almost immediately encounter responses that would deny the dualism implicit in the options of 'body or mind'. For Freud, instinct is produced at the borderline between the psychic and the somatic⁵. Guattari learns from Freud that it is not possible to separate out the idea from the body because the idea is always invested by the body in the forms of desire, but he breaks from Freud precisely, I think, by inverting the place of desire in relation to the body⁶. If we were to say something like 'Freud understands the body as the ground of desire' then in contrast we might easily understand Guattari as proposing that 'desire is the ground of the body', statements which might be a little less wrong if we understand 'ground' not in terms of foundations but in terms of the earth, space, place - in terms of something like the 'grounds of the estate'. For example, imagine that capitalism operates like the landscape gardener, producing the fields, valleys and vistas within which we wander, with the only difference being that it operates at a global scale, leaving nothing apparent beyond the hedgerows it lays. Inside these grounds we might feel as though movement is free, but only in the same way the meat from the organic farm once thought itself free. More fundamentally, the desire that forms the landscape constitute the grounds within which the body is formed.

Again, quoting Guattari, from the poetic manifesto found in the text entitled 'In order to end the massacre of the body':

"This antiquated world, which stinks everywhere of dead flesh, horrifies us and convinces us of the necessity of carrying the revolutionary struggle against capitalist oppression into that territory where the oppression is most deeply rooted: the living body.

It is the body and all the desires it produces that we wish to liberate from 'foreign' domination. It is 'on that ground' that we wish to 'work' for the liberation of society. There is no boundary between the two elements. I oppress myself inasmuch as that I am the product of a system of oppression that extends to all aspects of living.

The 'revolutionary consciousness' is a mystification if it is not situated with a 'revolutionary body', that is to say, within a body that produces its own liberation."⁷

Yet we have a problem here, one that depends on the understanding of what a body is. The easy, lazy response to the idea that 'desire grounds the body' might be to question this

⁵ See the discussion in the 'Editors Note', PFL 11:107-109

⁶ We might describe Lacan as fundamentally shifting the relation of the idea to desire and thus the difference between Guattari and Lacan comes down to the reconfiguration of elements within the set {ideas,body,desire}, each producing their own 'well-formed formula' from the elements.

⁷ Guattari, 'In order to end the massacre of the body', *in op.cit.*, p30. This text was 'published anonymously in the special issue of *Recherches* on "Three Billion Perverts", March 1973', *ibid.*, p29.

seemingly free-floating desire that somehow 'comes before' the body. The thought might be something like 'the body must be a ground for desire because otherwise desire is ungrounded and we have made of it an ideal essence'. This is a lazy response because it assumes too much with regard the critical problem of *instantiation*. To the question 'where is desire to be found in the real, actual world rather than in our mere conceptual constructions?' the answer is no doubt 'in the body' but the 'body' is itself assumed too quickly to be the organic body, delimited by the individual member of a species, instead of being, for example, a vector, in that technical sense of a constituted magnitude and direction. Desire is not limited to instantiation in an individual body any more than a body is instantiated in an organism, a specific member of a species. Desire is instead always instantiated in a body as an assemblage or multiplicity, in swarms not singletons, and such swarms are defined not by their edges or surfaces but by vectors of formation.

This relation to the body as a *vector*, that is, to the body as a site of 'magnitude and direction', is posed here as the forgotten element, that which must be brought into play in combination with any 'revolutionary consciousness' worth its name. Crucially, however, this idea that '*revolutionary consciousness is a mystification if it is not situated with a revolutionary body*' curls back round to the question of how revolutionary desire can be so easily recuperated and reduced to 'organizational microfascism'. It is, in this situation, a particular form of revolutionary consciousness that blocks revolutionary desire. What are the features of the form of revolutionary consciousness that might be said to 'block' revolutionary desire? Here I want to pick on just a couple of factors to mention, there are no doubt many others.

The problem of a particular conception of time

The rehearsal of familiar moments within Guattarian and Deleuzian thought that has just been offered gives a means for responding to the problem of 'semiotics' found in the role of signs and codings and can show why machinic materialism is not reducible to behaviourism. Non intentional and objective codings, in constituting a landscape, in turn produce a series of counter-effects. An example of this can be found in the concept of chreodes, the 'necessary paths' of Waddington's 'epigenetic landscape' that constitute the channelling of genetic developments, such that there is a continual pressure on the genetic code and the environmental factors to conform to already existing epigenetic pathways⁸. The example Waddington used was often of a ball rolling down a hill and coming to rest at the lowest point. The interesting point, however, is that in Waddington's model there is an intense relation between the micro and the macro levels of evolution⁹. It is this combinatory relation between levels that constitutes the evolutionary mechanism for Waddington and that perhaps offers a way to understand the machinic materialism of Guattari. At best behaviourism is incapable of operating beyond the level of the 'macro' and whilst techniques

⁸ Some discussion of chreodes in Dennis Atkinson, [Art, equality and learning: pedagogies against the state](#), Springer 2011, p149

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=oh5VrjVLldMC&lpg=PA149&ots=YMkHIT_LxY&dq=waddington%20deleuze%20guattari&pg=PA149#v=onepage&q=waddington%20deleuze%20guattari&f=false

⁹ It is the interest in and functional role of macro moments that puts Waddington at odds with any 'atomistic' form of Darwinianism and which also underlies the accusation that Waddington is more Lamarckian than Darwinian.

such as Skinner's 'operant conditioning' might edge towards an acknowledgement of a micro level in relation to a macro level, the micro is still treated as little more than a black box into which stimuli or conditions are fed and from which outputs result.

The question, for Guattarian machinic materialism, perhaps most acute in terms of politics, is whether this 'black box' procedure is an actual blockage in practice. Why, we might ask, is operant conditioning not enough for a machinic materialism? Is it just because of a metaphysical hang-up with regard some 'essence of freedom' or the reification of particular forms of activity that we call 'consciousness'? The most important factor in rejecting black box behaviourism is that the black box is effectively passive, little more than a product of stimuli, even if it develops into a product which offers counter-effects of its own as it sediments its stimuli into layers of functional operation, layers that might be manipulated by operant conditioning for example. Such a passivity in the object lends itself to a politics of manipulation and management by some special types of creatures who are capable of being more than a mere black box, be they defined as the educated, the cultured or simply the rational. The behaviourist black box always exists in the observed, not in the observer, who somehow privileges their position of analysis. It is little use, however, responding to this division into active and passive, into subjects and objects of analysis, by positing some 'special essence', some dogma of equality or sameness or subjectivity, unless we are content to revert to what is little more than a supernatural conception of some special property. The real conceptual distinction between machinic materialism and black box behaviourism lies in the fact that there is no fixed temporal boundary to the objects that arise from machinic processes. The subjects of behaviourism have linearity inbuilt into them, they move from time t_1 through t_2 , t_3 to t_n . Stimuli and response are determined, in fact, precisely in terms of such linear temporality. Machinic materialism cannot operate, at any level, in terms of a linear, constituted temporality, such that any process is inherently bound to a 'before/after' procedure. Such dynamics no doubt exist but are only one, perhaps quite small, element within a wider set of dynamics of threshold, density and displacement that are dominated not by linear time but by *events of activation or pacification*. Machinic materialism is, like the Freudian concept of the unconscious, in a curious relation to time, although one of temporal multiplicity, a 'timefulness' of desiring-machines rather than a 'timelessness' of the unconscious.

In terms of a 'micro-politics', moving from temporal linearity to temporal multiplicity should offer a route to develop practices that emphasise the engineering of events of activation / pacification as the core revolutionary moments. To change the vectors of a body, to speed it up or slow it down, to reanimate or to entomb, such moments might be found in attempts to enable or disable. It is easy to find the language of 'enabling' in forces that cleave to the idea of a revolutionary desire, but there is often little attempt to disable - to disable networks, policies, practices, bodies that are oppressive or blocking revolutionary desire, including within our 'own' bodies. Occasionally practices of disabling flows of counter-revolutionary desire might be seen, perhaps in moments of NVDA, or occupation, or hacking, and perhaps paradigmatically in the practice of the strike. Yet the validity of disabling practices is a key target for the forces of counter-revolutionary desire, who understand that if politics is reduced to representation, to protest, then it is but more one step to advocate the strike that disables nothing because, after all, it's just a protest, a voice being heard.

If the political is taken as a constellation of desire instantiated in a set of flows, networks and dynamics that is at any moment a particular mixture of enabled and disabled connections, then revolutionary desire need not organise *towards* a future moment of supposed universal activation but must instead operate *immanent to* the set of activations / pacifications of desire that constitute the vectors of the bodies of subjectivity. Channelling revolutionary desire towards a future, in this situation, actually constitutes a particular form of operation immanent to the constellations of desire which is inherently limited because it attempts to determine the present in terms of the future. In doing so it imposes an ideal onto the material and the primary result is a pacification reminiscent of the Christian concept of 'an afterlife in which justice is served' - one only has to have faith. This is one of the concrete means by which a revolutionary desire of a particular form can, despite its intention, pacify the desire for revolution. It can be seen in the all too familiar trope of a professed belief in a revolution *'that I believe in but which I doubt I will live to see'*. In contrast the kind of *already existing movement of revolutionary desire* is forgotten, allowed to decay and become pacified. Instead a move towards an understanding of revolutionary desire as immanent to the actual constellations of desire that exist needs to look towards nurturing and strengthening connections and dynamics of activation that already exist in combination with a process of blocking and disabling dynamics of pacification.

The supposed subject

Here a second problem arises, which is the role of the person, individual or subject. It is not uncommon to read that the molecular is a means of understanding the role of individual subjectivity within a wider molar frame. The devil is in the detail, however, and problems arise when the macro is effectively discarded in favour of the micro, in what is in effect a reductionist move¹⁰.

If the molecular revolution is posed as a need to 'situate revolutionary consciousness within a revolutionary body' then, firstly, it is crucial avoid any sense that this is a call to focus exclusively on the molecular, the micro- or the intimate, to the exclusion of the macro but also, secondly, the emphasis on the molecular is needed precisely in order to re-establish the relation between 'levels' as the most fundamental aspect of a politics capable of promoting revolutionary desire, not as a means or call to reduce one level to another. It is vital to be cautious about what we call 'levels' since the hierarchical mode of understanding this concept is deeply problematic and productive of error. An initial counter to the hierarchical understanding of levels is in the sense of the *levels of magnification*. It is not difficult to grasp the difference between a 10x and a 400x level of magnification, a difference in observational power or resolution. It is this difference of resolution that is encountered in

¹⁰ See, for example, the discussion of molecular and molar in Paul Elliot, *Guattari reframed*, I.B.Tauris 2012: p46-50. Elliotts discussion accurately portrays the movement from micro to macro that is central to Guattari but seems to take the 'micro' to indicate the level of the subject, to such an extent that he comes up with the slogan 'Forget the macropolitical - the micropolitical is where it's at', a slogan that reveals quite precisely the error of the subjectivist reading of the micropolitical which *reduces* the macro to the micro.

the micro/macro interaction and yet it is at this point that we encounter another blockage to revolutionary desire.

Whilst it is possible to switch the magnificatory resolution of our concepts, the switch will only reveal, at any particular point of analysis, two ends of a relation that cannot be found at any level of conceptual resolution but which must be deduced, through reason or abstraction. The forms of reason, however, need to rest upon non-subjective, non-anthropomorphic conceptions of systems since they cannot suppose the subject as the level of the micro. It is precisely such non-subjective, non-anthropomorphic conceptions that can be found in data analysis and which dynamic modelling has developed to high degrees. Desire, as the instantiation of a particular set of relations between various levels, can only be observed in the flows produced dynamically and quasi-holistically but to do so such flows need to be modelled and models need data-sets and pattern-finding algorithms. The understanding of different levels must not be reductive but equally it must go beyond a set of static snapshots and treat time itself as a second axis of levels of understanding, one that is not linear but which is *multi-layered*, hence the sense of a 'timefulness'.

The dynamic modelling of mass data over time is increasingly central as a tool of analysis in various scientific disciplines, including within some political theory. It seems somehow alien to those interested in the freeing of revolutionary desire, an absence that is perhaps a cultural hangover (a cultural chreode) from an earlier moment that is no longer sustainable or justifiable. In part the lack of integration of data analysis in projects for the liberation of revolutionary desire reflects the enormous control of such techniques by limited functionaries of projects that are, at best, mere conduits through which control flows and which are, at worst, direct means by which control connects to the actual. The crux of this cultural chreode, however, is the concept of the subject and the idea that the 'activation' that is most important is the activation of the a 'free subject'. This is a second moment by which a particular form of revolutionary desire pacifies revolutionary desire. In taking the object of political activity to be the subject, rather than the constellations of desire *within which the vectors of subjectivity are constituted*, the investment in the ideal of subjectivity acts as a pacification tool. This plays out in a two-fold error - first, a reduction of the molar to the micro and, secondly, an identification of the micro with the already constituted subject. What results is not only a reductionism but a *bad or false reductionism*.

For the forces of counter-revolution the subject has long been little more than a shell within which the flows of desire matter more than the name-tag temporarily attached to the body. The conversion of needs into desires, the transformation of the subject into a happiness engine, is a process that has been self-consciously explicit as to its goal for nearly a century, one which has faced little opposition from any revolutionary desire framed in terms of either futures-to-come or subjects-to-free. In opposition to the counter-revolutionary production of happiness-engines, premised on a displacement of needs into desires, revolutionary desire must return direct fulfilment of needs to the central place of activity in an attempt to produce 'freedom machines'. Such freedom machines need not worry about a future satisfaction of their desire for freedom but must act on the needs in the present as the nodes of desire that should be activated or pacified. The slogan 'bread and land' was not 'inadequate', is never 'inadequate' - it is, precisely, one of the key ways in which actual freedom-machines attempt

to organise freedom in the face of need. Freedom is not 'to-come' - it is already here, simply in chains. The actuality of freedom is premised on the satisfaction of need and extends only so far as the network of needs enables. Desire only ever flows as far as needs allow.

To take account of desire in the machinic materialism of the molecular revolution it is crucial to go beyond the moment of theorisation and enter a realm of observational testing, removing desire from the realm of the 'supposed subject' and placing it back into the realm of the a-semiotic encodings Guattari attempted to open up. It is the structure of necessary connections, of which a 'need' is a crucial form, that is constituted by the a-semiotic encodings. Here a 'need' is not some intention to be interpreted but is the observational reality of a connection. What is important to note, however, is that each structure of necessary connections *also constitutes a space of possible or potential connections*. In a particular constellation of desires what is constellated are *both* nodes of necessity *and* spaces of possibility. The understanding of need-connections offered by big data and dynamic modelling enable the flows of desire, particularly the flows of desire within social production, to be grasped in a multi-levelled functional analysis that has no requirement of intentions as an explanatory tool but which can rest on the idea of necessary connections of needs and fulfillments. To transform data modelling techniques from pacification models of management and manipulation into means for freeing revolutionary desire it is crucial to add to such techniques the idea that particular possibility spaces can be found through such analyses. It is possible to see both *how connections are being made* and *how connections can be made*. It is in the realm of this second moment - of potential connections - that revolutionary desire can begin to operate at a multitude of levels, in an immanent temporality and outside of the constrictions of representational idealisms.