

Deleuze and Guattari: Creative versus Utopian Thinking

1. Introduction: subjective redeployment on a collective level

In their essay entitled "May '68 Did Not Take Place", Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write:

"The American *New Deal* and the Japanese boom correspond to two very different examples of subjective redeployment, with all sorts of ambiguities and even reactionary structures, but also *with enough initiative and creativity* to provide a new social state capable of responding to the demands of the event. Following '68 in France, on the contrary, the authorities did not stop living with the idea that '*things will settle down.*' And indeed, things did settle down, but under *catastrophic conditions*. May '68 was not the result of a crisis, nor was it a reaction to a crisis. It is rather the opposite. It is the current crisis, the impasses of the current crisis in France that stem directly from the inability of French society to assimilate May '68."¹

In what follows I want to explain why it is that Deleuze and Guattari believe that the New Deal in the USA was an example of a successful subjective redeployment. We will see that it is such because *it was a reaction to a crisis* and because *it proceeded with enough initiative and creativity*. However, we will also see that the New Deal had a number of failings which May '68 sought to address; if the French government had reacted to the crisis of May '68 creatively, then they would have been able to solve problems that the New Deal was unable to solve that still face humanity—and not just the USA and France— today. I will therefore be attempting to show, using Deleuze and Guattari, in what way there is a continuity

¹ my italics

between the New Deal and May '68, and how this continuity consists in a certain playing out of the logic of "resistance to the present"² and a resistance to moralism and utopianism.

2. The rhetoric of the New Deal

a. Initiative and creativity in response to crisis

The New Deal was a reaction to an economic crisis that in some respects went against tradition and in other respects was very conservative. Roosevelt said "Let it be from now on the task of our Party to break foolish traditions"³; however, as Henry Steele Commager and Richard Brandon Morris wrote:

"It is the *conservative* character of the New Deal and of its leader that is most impressive. The 'Roosevelt Revolution' was in fact the culmination of half a century of historical development. It was deeply rooted in American experience; it relied on familiar instruments of politics and law; even its style was characteristically American."⁴

In Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* I believe we find a way to justify this seemingly paradoxical description of the New Deal as both conservative and breaking with tradition. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between "geography" and "history", where geography describes what is contingent about a time and a place, while history describes what seems to be necessary. They write:

"Geography is not confined to providing historical form with a substance and variable places... Geography wrests history from the cult of necessity in order to stress the irreducibility of contingency. It wrests it from the cult of origins... Finally, it wrests history

² *What is Philosophy?* p.108

³ Leuchtenburg p.8

⁴ Leuchtenburg p.x (Editors' introduction) (my italics)

from itself in order to discover becomings that do not belong to history even if they fall back into it... 'Becoming' does not belong to history. History today still designates only the set of conditions, however recent they may be, from which one turns away in order to become, that is to say, in order to create something new."⁵

So we create something new (for example, a new political and economic system) by turning away from history, for Deleuze and Guattari. But we do not do this in a vacuum, so to speak: history is there as something that we turn away from, and what we are "wresting" from history is not something non-historical but history itself. That is to say, Deleuze and Guattari are not claiming that we can turn away from history and do anything we choose; rather, our choices are conditioned even as we turn away from these conditions.

So when Roosevelt said "the country needs and... the country demands bold, persistent experimentation"⁶ he was talking of such a need to break the flow of historical tradition while putting something of this tradition to use in response to the contingencies of the day; he demanded experiments with new methods while also acknowledging that this experimentation and turning away from tradition was demanded by the times themselves and so had to engage with that tradition.

If this seems paradoxical, perhaps this passage from William E. Leuchtenburg's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* will serve as a good illustration of what "turning away from history" and wresting "history from itself" might mean:

"The New Deal was pragmatic mainly in its scepticism about utopias and final solutions, its openness to experimentation, and its suspicion of the dogmas of the Establishment. Since

⁵ *What is Philosophy?* p.96

⁶ Leuchtenburg p.5 (quotation from one of Roosevelt's addresses)

the advice of economists had so often been wrong, the New Dealers distrusted the claims of orthodox theory... and they felt free to try new approaches. Roosevelt refused to be awed by the warnings of economists and financial experts that government interference with the 'laws' of the economy was blasphemous. 'We must lay hold of the fact that economic laws are not made by nature,' the President stated. 'They are made by human beings.'"⁷

By emphasising the fact that economic laws are made by human beings, Roosevelt was of course not implying that we could simply wish new economic laws into being on the spot. What he was saying was that individuals of the time would clearly see for themselves that something was wrong with the economic system as it stood, that therefore traditional ways of thinking about economic problems would have to be *changed*, and that the newly-elected government indeed *would be able* to change these ways of thinking for the better.

Thus *the response of the individual to her times* (to history, to traditions) became important in the 1930s. The individual was not merely a product of history but stood just outside it (was "in it" but not "of it", we might say, following Deleuze and Guattari⁸) and so could comment upon it and *change* it. History was flowing in one direction, and this was causing more and more ills for the poor, but the reaction of the individual to injustice⁹ could be a factor in bringing about a redirection of the flow of history. Thus (Leuchtenburg writes):

⁷ Leuchtenburg p.344

⁸ see conclusion below; see also how Miller uses this phrase in his interview with Ben Grauer <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7DozLOLYow&feature=relmfu>

⁹ See Leuchtenburg: Roosevelt as a president of the people, who took correspondence seriously; people felt that they were involved in federal government

"The persistence of the depression raised questions... about capitalism itself. When so many knew want amidst so much plenty, something seemed to be fundamentally wrong with the way the system distributed goods."¹⁰

The starkness of the injustices of the system showed people that *something was wrong*, and yet such a thought would be impossible for one who believed that things followed inevitably from the conditions of history. People in the 1930s gradually learned to trust their individual perceptions of what was wrong with the world and to believe that they could do something about it (for evidence of this, we can look at Leuchtenburg's account of how the number of letters written to the White House increased during Roosevelt's time in office, as people saw him as one who would listen to their ideas for political changes¹¹).¹² Not that this perception of the ills of society by individuals would *inevitably* lead to change. Leuchtenburg writes that, in the early 1930s,

"Elmer Davis observed that people were asking 'Do you think we are going to have a revolution?'—but asking it 'apathetically, as if nothing they might do could either help or hinder it.'"¹³

So although people plainly saw before them the problems of the system, this often led them to a sort of despair, rather than to a revolutionary fervour. Radical change, whether revolutionary or based on reform of the existing system, was not driven by the people; revolution did not arise according to a (certain sort of) Marxist model, brought about inevitably by the injustices of the system. The people had become listless and apathetic, and while this perhaps made them open to new ideas, it took decisive and creative action

¹⁰ Leuchtenburg pp.22-3

¹¹ Leuchtenburg

¹² Cf. Hegel: only great men can change the course of history (and even then they serve history)

¹³ Leuchtenburg pp.26-7

from the New Dealers to bring about change, both in the economic system and in people's perspectives on their own power as citizens of the USA. With the New Deal, the government responded to the mood of the people, but it was not *driven* by the people; the New Deal was rather *facilitated* by the people. People just wanted to work, to earn a decent living, and the government *gave* this to them (or many of them) through novel reforms.

Leuchtenburg writes of Roosevelt that "in his campaign for the presidential nomination... he pleaded the cause of 'the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid'".¹⁴ When he talked of the "forgotten man", Roosevelt was talking about the way in which the economic system had forgotten the very poorest in society by failing to provide opportunities for them. According to the ideology of the New Deal, everyone deserved to have an opportunity to earn a living and escape from poverty. "Reform in the 1930's", writes Leuchtenburg, "meant *economic* reform; it departed from the Methodist-parsonage morality of many of the earlier Progressives".¹⁵ And so (Leuchtenburg says):

"The reformers of the thirties abandoned—or claimed they had abandoned—the old Emersonian hope of reforming man and sought only to change institutions. This meant they did not seek to 'uplift' the people they were helping but only to improve their economic prospects."¹⁶

As we saw above, people had gradually learned to believe that they had real power to change society. In a sense they did, because Roosevelt was indeed greatly interested in unorthodox ideas, and so as never before there was a chance for outsiders to influence

¹⁴ Leuchtenburg p.4

¹⁵ Leuchtenburg p.339

¹⁶ Leuchtenburg pp.338-9

government policy. And yet this chance of influence was still minimal. The democratic nature of the New Deal was illusory, and because it was merely illusory it was not equipped to solve many problems faced by American society at the time. "The New Deal left many problems unsolved", writes Leuchtenburg. For example. "It enhanced the power of interest groups who claimed to speak for millions, but sometimes represented only a small minority. It did not evolve a way to protect people who had no such spokesman, nor an acceptable method for disciplining the interest groups... The New Deal achieved a more just society by recognising groups which had been largely unrepresented... but left many Americans... outside of the new equilibrium."¹⁷

All this talk of the New Deal lacking real democracy may sound very un-Deleuzian; after all, don't Deleuze and Guattari repudiate democracy in *What is Philosophy?* when they write that

"This people and earth will not be found in our democracies. Democracies are majorities, but a becoming is by its nature that which always eludes the majority."¹⁸

However, I think we can see from this quotation that Deleuze and Guattari are attacking the sort of illusory democracy produced by the New Deal: for all their praise of the New Deal, the spirit of the New Deal does not go far enough for the new subjectivity *that we face in our time*, the subjectivity that demands democracy, because the democracy that exists today is the democracy of the majority, a democracy that leaves minorities without a voice, just as the USA of the 1930s did.

¹⁷ Leuchtenburg pp.346-7

¹⁸ *What is Philosophy?* p.108

3. May '68

The spirit of May '68 was a spirit that arose out of this need for real democracy felt by individuals left without a voice in modern so-called "democratic" societies. The spirit of May '68 was a mutation of the spirit of the New Deal, I would suggest, because the new traditions of the New Deal created individuals who would turn away from those traditions, just as the New Dealers had turned away from many of the economic traditions of the early 1930s. I want now to look briefly at this new mutation of Roosevelt's "forgotten man" that emerged in May '68: this is the man (or woman) who has been forgotten by society even as he or she is cared for by the economic system. As Deleuze and Guattari write in their essay "May '68 Did Not Take Place":

"The children of May '68, you can run into them all over the place, even if they are not aware of who they are, and each country produces them in its own way... They are strangely indifferent... they know perfectly well that there is nothing today that corresponds to their subjectivity, to their potential of energy. They even know that all current reforms are rather directed against them...

"... What we institutionalise in unemployment, in retirement, or in school, are controlled 'situations of abandonment', for which the disabled are the model."

The problem with these situations of abandonment is not just that they often do not provide the means for people to live, but also that they neglect the need that people have to *thrive*. Deleuze and Guattari drew a great deal upon Henry Miller in their work, and I believe that Henry Miller illustrates well the sort of thing that (much later) the May 68ers

were up against when he writes of the company he worked at in his late twenties. He writes:

"The whole system was so rotten, so inhuman, so lousy, so hopelessly corrupt and complicated, that it would have taken a genius to put any sense or order to it, to say nothing of human kindness or consideration. *I was up against the whole rotten system of American labour, which is rotten at both ends...* From my little perch at "Sunset Place" I had a bird's eye view of the whole American society. It was like a page out of the telephone book. *Alphabetically, numerically, statistically, it made sense.* But when you looked at it up close, when you examined the pages separately, or the parts separately, *when you examined one lone individual* and what constituted him, examined the air he breathed, the life he led, the chances he risked, *you saw something so foul and degrading, so low, so miserable, so utterly hopeless and senseless,* that it was worse than looking into a volcano."¹⁹

The problem here was not that people did not have work (though we see from Miller's account in *Tropic of Capricorn* that there were in fact many desperate people who could not find work in that time), but that the work itself was degrading: it made people mean and miserable. For Miller, people deserve more than just being hard-working "folks", as he says in one interview²⁰:

"This is something I'm always against... to regard people as 'just folks'. It's nice and folksy to talk that way... it means let's be warm and let's be sympathetic and all that. True enough, but... sometimes, and I think even very saintly men have the desire and they act on it too, they goad people, they have to give them a nudge, they have to give them a poke, they have

¹⁹ *Tropic of Capricorn* pp.18-19 (my italics)

²⁰ Interview with Ben Grauer: "Henry Miller Recalls and Reflects"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7Yx8Jz7ics&feature=relmfu>

to jab them to awaken them... They do that out of kindness and they do that to make them aware of themselves, of their potentialities... to make everyone realise what he is potentially capable of. Most of us are living far below our potential... and when we say 'just folks' we mean that, I think: all those people who are living below the horizon-line, you might say, who haven't come up; they're there like a soft cushion on which we're all comfortably floating... It's true [that] 'folks'—the people—are what supports us... the people who do the dirty work... who are... without name, without honour... it's they who are doing the work of the world, but even they could do other work, could do bigger work... I don't think what is called the work of the world, this everyday work... that gets glorified, I don't think it's really so important; I think it would be much, much better if people were told to be lazy, to shirk the job, to be idlers, to enjoy, to relax... not care, not worry; I think we'd get all that work done in some other way."

This self-discovery prompted by the goading of oneself by others (and by oneself) is the true meaning of life, for Miller. The lazy and the idle should not be written off by society just because they do not want to work; we should see that their idleness stems from a search for a deeper meaning. Thus he says a little later in the same interview:

"Jesus said... look at the lilies in the field they neither toil nor spin. And the thought behind it is that we are creating this work not because it has to be done but because we are busybodies and do not know how to swim on the river of life and we prefer a sort of senseless insect activity to a genuine activity which may often be no activity, inaction... I don't say to be quiet, to do nothing, I don't say that at all, but I say it should have sense, it should have meaning, what we do... And the greater part of what we do every day has damn little meaning."

It is this need for meaning that becomes all important for Miller. However, Miller is not suggesting that contemplation is an end in itself; he is saying that we should invest an active life with meaning. If we could do this then we could learn to help those in society who are currently forgotten by the system. Thus in *Tropic of Capricorn* he writes:

"I felt sorry for the human race, for the stupidity of man and his lack of imagination. Missing a meal wasn't so terrible – it was the ghastly emptiness of the street that disturbed me profoundly. All those bloody houses, one like another, and all so empty and cheerless-looking. Fine paving stones under foot and asphalt in the middle of the street and beautifully-hideously-elegant brown-stone stoops to walk up, and yet a guy could walk about all day and all night on this expensive material and be looking for a crust of bread. That's what got me. The incongruousness of it. If one could only dash out with a dinner bell and yell 'Listen, listen, people, I'm a guy what's hungry. Who wants shoes shined? Who wants the garbage brought out? Who wants the drainpipes cleaned out?' If you could only go out in the street and put it to them clear like that. But no, you don't dare to open your trap. If you tell a guy in the street you're hungry you scare the shit out of him, he runs like hell. That's something I never understood. I don't understand it yet. The whole thing is so simple - you just say Yes when some one comes up to you. And if you can't say Yes you can take him by the arm and ask some other bird to help you out. Why you have to don a uniform and kill men you don't know, just to get that crust of bread, is a mystery to me. That's what I think about, more than about whose trap it's going down or how much it costs. Why should I give a fuck about what anything costs? I'm here to live, not to calculate."²¹

²¹ *Tropic of Capricorn* pp.255-6

So, for Miller, *life* becomes the important thing, more important than economics. Of course, economists hope to use their science to make our lives better, but again what we are seeing here is Miller's logic at work: if you put life first, if you *live*, and live *meaningfully*, then everything else will follow.

Conclusion: creativity versus utopia

If this sounds a little far-fetched then we should remember that the spirit of May '68 does not denote a utopian programme. What I have tried to do in this essay is offer a Deleuzian analysis of the subjective redeployment that occurred during the 20th century and is still occurring today. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari tell us that

"utopia is not a good concept because even when opposed to History it is still subject to it and lodged within it as an ideal or motivation. But becoming is the concept itself. It is born in History and falls back into it, but is not of it... Such are revolutions and societies of friends, societies of resistance, because to create is to resist: pure becomings, pure events on a plane of immanence."²²

To be utopian about the ideas expressed by Miller would mean, in fact, to talk about them in the way Miller himself often seems to, if we take him literally²³: as real possibilities (if only we could go out into the street and ask for a meal, if only we could learn to praise idleness, then good things would inevitably follow from this). Instead, and I believe I am being Deleuzian when I say this, I am suggesting that the subjective redeployment expressed in the spirit of May '68 (and in the work of Henry Miller) is something real that we can respond creatively to in many different ways, just as the New Dealers found creative ways

²² *What is Philosophy?* p.110

²³ See Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of Miller in *Anti-Oedipus* for why we should not take him literally (see footnote below).

to respond to the problems that individuals faced in the 1930s. The important thing is to *acknowledge* our varied perspectives on things, the fact that we do not as individuals all subscribe to the ideal of the "hard-working" citizen, and then come up with ways to resist the aspects of society that flow from this ideal so that our own real individual needs are met: in this way we will be able to bring our own specific ways of becoming to bear on political problems, that is, to oppose our specific ways of becoming to the flow of historical tradition.²⁴ This is what it means to turn away from history in order to resist it.

Works cited

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²⁴ One way to do this is of course to do what Henry Miller did, which is to offer resistance by offering outrageous suggestions for the way that total individualism might flourish in society. But we only need to look at *Anti-Oedipus* p.144 to see that this isn't enough: Deleuze and Guattari tell us that Henry Miller, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and others like them are writers who each "fail to complete the process".