

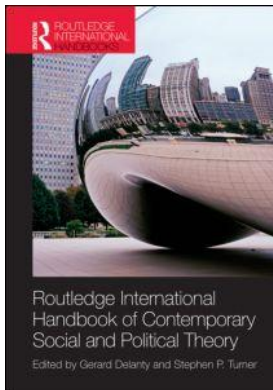
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Thomas Docherty

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Accidental Conditions

The Social Consequences of Poststructuralist Philosophy

Thomas Docherty

Much of the most invigorating social theory in recent times has its origins in the ostensibly unpromising field of literary criticism. The advent of structuralist and then poststructuralist work in literary theory provoked what became known as the ‘theory wars’ in university literature departments. Among literary theorists, one of the most abiding arguments in recent decades was that described by Paul de Man in his ‘The Resistance to Theory’ paper, originally written in 1982. Surprisingly, that paper argues that the greatest resistance to theory comes not from the avowed opponents of theoretical criticism (usually caricatured as ‘common-sense empiricists’), but rather from within theory itself. Key to the logic of the piece is a consideration of the vexing question of linguistic reference: that is, the question of how it is that linguistic *signs* map on to the non-linguistic *material* of history and reality. That question, at first glance one that is of purely literary interest, actually contains a major theoretical problem for social and political theory. Here is what de Man writes:

It would be unfortunate, for example, to confuse the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies. This may seem obvious enough on the level of light and sound, but it is less so with regard to the general phenomenality of space, time or especially the self; no one in his right mind will try to grow grapes by the luminosity of the word ‘day,’ but it is very difficult not to conceive the pattern of one’s past and future existence as in accordance with temporal and spatial schemes that belong to fictional narratives and not to the world. This does not mean that fictional narratives are not part of the world and of reality; their impact upon the world may be all too strong for comfort. What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenality.

(de Man 1986: 11)

This – a problem of linguistic reference that becomes the problem of ideology – is a major issue for poststructuralist philosophy. In what follows, I shall show how it also informs social theory.

For many on the political left, poststructuralism has little to offer social theory, and it has much less to yield that will be of use for socio-cultural practice. In one fairly prevalent view, poststructuralist thought, specifically in the form of its deconstructive turn, leads to a crippling

political indecisiveness and consequent quietist inaction. The logic here is straightforward, if based on a slight caricature of Derrida's practices of deconstruction. At the core of deconstruction is a realization that all our thinking is organized around conceptual oppositions: to make meaning at all, we need a structural opposition between (for examples) up and down, left and right, inside and outside, male and female, work and leisure, and so on. The logic of deconstruction is that the hierarchy that governs the opposition (and that would propose one polarity of the opposition as normative, against a deviant or abnormal secondary term) becomes, in Derrida's preferred term, 'undecidable'. This may be best explained by an example, one that is by now well-rehearsed in the literature.

Consider how we make sense of our society in terms of gender. For the most part, we operate as we do and live as we do thanks to (among many other structural and conceptual oppositions) a meaningful opposition between male and female. There is nothing 'essential' about this opposition: rather, it is simply one way that we have of making sense of our world as we do. It is useful in that it helps us to organize whatever socio-sexual arrangements we find congenial, for example; and, in this way, sexual activity can become meaningfully regulated for us. Now, for whatever reason (and, as far as deconstruction is concerned, the reason need not be clarified), the society that we currently live in and through proposes a hierarchical organization of that opposition, such that the male pole is often or usually proposed as normative, and the female is seen as derivative or secondary, as if 'female' meant 'not quite fully male'. We usually call this organization either 'sexism' or 'masculinism'. Deconstruction argues that the opposition, its intrinsic alleged hierarchy, and (perhaps most significantly) its consequential value-system (in this case, a system based on masculinism) is not stable, but rather 'undecidable'.

In the sexist logic and value-system described above, we ask how we would define 'male'; and, typically, the answer comes back along the lines of 'in possession of a phallus'. In this, 'female' is defined by absence or lack, specifically the lack of a phallus 'possessed' by the male. Deconstruction argues, however, that, in order to define the male in the first place, we have clearly had to have recourse, for comparison and contrast, to some entity that *lacks* the phallus: the *presence* of the phallus in the male is only meaningful – indeed only conceptually perceptible – once we are aware of its *absence* elsewhere. If no creature was marked by the absence of the phallus, then we could not use the phallus as a marker of gender, and we would thus still not be able to identify one entity as 'male'. Thus, says deconstruction, it turns out that if woman is defined by her *lack* (the alleged absence of the phallus), then man, paradoxically, is defined by *lack to the second degree*, because in order to define itself, the male turns out to be lacking its opposite (woman), which is itself defined by lack (the absence of the phallus). Far from the female being an incomplete male, the male, it turns out, is but a special case of the female – provided we are defining these in terms of lack, in terms of the presence or absence of the phallus.

The alleged hierarchy, therefore, in which male is a central norm and woman but a special case of maleness (the male who supposedly lacks the phallus), is reversed. We might be inclined to call this answer to sexism something like 'feminism'. *However* – and here is the problem with deconstruction and, indeed, all poststructuralist thought, for those on the political left – we still have a structural opposition (this time between, say, 'new man' and 'emancipated woman' or some such); and that opposition, as an opposition that governs our concept of gender, is available for further deconstruction and indeed *must* in turn be deconstructed. In this sense, with an analysis that is potentially interminable, we reach a position where the hierarchical organization between male and female remains, in the end, *radically undecidable*. This is not much use for those who would wish to change actual gender relations, say, or the property relations on which capitalism is built (worker against owner of the means of production, say); nor does it

help those who would wish to legitimize the revolutionary potential of the claim that the proletariat should overthrow the ruling class.

It is unsurprising, then, that many on the political left have construed poststructuralism as being, at best, a mode of thought that is in conformity with liberal bourgeois idealism or, at worst, a practice that is complicit with, even encouraging of, a quietist nihilism that has given the field of practice over to dangerous right-wing tendencies. The argument would be that poststructuralist logic takes us ever further away from material reality or history and into the realm of signs; and, indeed, this was explicitly Edward Said's argument when he favoured the work of Foucault over that of Derrida, seeing deconstruction as something that took us deep into the text, certainly, but preferring Foucauldian analysis as something that took us deep into textuality but also brought us back to the realm of reference again (Said 1984: 183). In what follows here, I shall attempt to nuance this concern about poststructuralism's legacy for social theory more fully, and to re-assert the power of poststructuralist thinking for a progressive and emancipatory social theory.

First, I shall explore the issue of the relation between, on one hand, linguistic and conceptual *form* (the ways in which we literally formulate thought), and, on the other hand, the brutal historical realities of *force* (as something that is not amenable to straightforward formalization). Second, I shall consider the relations of force to matters of desire, including the desire for social change; and here, the work of Deleuze will be of importance. Finally, I will examine how a very specific *play of forces* can shape history. The play of forces I have in mind here is that which we usually associate with love, itself an abiding issue in social theory and philosophy at least since Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*, and one that has been revived as a major concern in the thought of Badiou.

The Origins of the Problem: Force

In what we should regard as a key founding document of poststructuralism, the review essay 'Force and Signification', Derrida realizes that the great strength – and also the great limitation – of the prevailing structuralist thought that emerged in the late 1950s is its ability to deal with matters of *form*. Structuralism, with its ability to consider all things under the terms of *sign* and *signification*, is able to give a full understanding of what de Man, in the passage I quoted at the start of this piece, would come to call 'linguistic reality'. Yet, Derrida already finds, in this 1963 piece, that structuralism *as such* is complicit with ideology; and this is all the more true precisely at those moments when it believes it is actually unmasking ideology in the name of critique, because it confounds the understanding of form or of linguistic reality with the understanding of phenomena themselves. As he puts it in his review-essay, '*Form* fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create. This is why literary criticism is structuralist in every age, in its essence and destiny' (Derrida 1978: 4–5). In short, structuralism triumphs when one cannot deal with *force*, or when one reduces force to signification. 'Force' here is, as it were, Derrida's term for phenomenalism or for the material reality of history; and the key theoretical issue that is relevant to our present concern is the issue of *representation*.

The problem with structuralism, in these terms, is that it reduces the fact of history to the merest 'signs of history', shifting attention from ontology to epistemology as it were (McHale 1987: 10–11); and thereby, it evacuates history of its material content. The argument becomes focused on re-presentations of history, and not on the factual presence of historical events in their specificity. This, with its attention to the relation between presence and representation, is akin to the kind of argument advanced much earlier in the last century by Walter Benjamin in his much-cited 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' essay. There, Benjamin

indicates that, prior to the age of mechanical reproduction, the work of art is characterized by an aura, the ‘unique phenomenon of a distance’ (Benjamin 1973: 224) given to it by its absolute singularity (its absolute ‘otherness’ from us), its location at the nexus of a specific play of forces that made the production of the artifact not only possible but also somehow necessary. When we consider such a work of art, what we become aware of is the struggle – the tensed play of forces, if you will – that inhabits and informs or shapes the work, the play of tensions that concretize or realize themselves in the work. The work of art is, as it were, the momentary arrest of those forces, their arrangement into a form, or their illusory ‘freezing’ into a material reality a ‘now-time’ or *Jetztzeit*, as Benjamin has it (Benjamin 1973: 263, 265; Agamben 2005: 2 and *passim*).

By contrast, in the age of mechanical reproduction, where we have multiple copies of the work, we lose the specificity of that uniqueness, the specificity occasioned by our realization of the work’s absolute alterity or the fact that it does not care about our conscious perception of it; and instead we have what can be described as the purely *aesthetic* form of the work, a *form* devoid of the *content* that is historical struggle, or force. When the work is not designed primarily to be *available* to our consciousness, then, paradoxically, its value becomes *determined* by our consciousness; and we call this ‘aesthetics’. Attention is diverted away from the forces that shape material history, and instead directed inwards to the ‘linguistic’ or signifying shaping of the work ‘in itself’, as it were. For Benjamin – as later for Derrida – the real task of the critic is to find a way to re-awaken the force of that singularity in all its telling force, to ‘understand force from within itself’.

This, though it may sound abstruse, has a profound contemporary relevance. Recent years have witnessed the rise of a managerialist class in most of the advanced economies, which now organize themselves according to the logic of what Adorno and Horkheimer called a culture ‘brought within the sphere of administration’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1974: 131), or, as it is more commonly known, the ‘administered society’. Less philosophically, it is now a commonplace that the political class no longer *represent* people, but rather *manage* them; and, as for politics, so also for all aspects of social life. We are all managers now, either managing other people or managing ourselves according to bureaucratically established norms and expectations, sometimes called ‘projects’, ‘targets’, ‘personal goals’, or ‘outcomes’. For the ascendant managerialist class, historical specifics matter little: instead of an attention to the specific details or content of any problem or issue, they inspect instead the form of dealing with it, or matters of process. In project management, it matters little what the project actually is (‘running the economy’, as a project, becomes functionally equivalent to ‘organizing the school-run’): all that matters is the process by which we arrive at the conclusion whereby we show that we have, in the cliché, planned the work and worked the plan (we have ‘run the economy’, say – well or badly, it matters not).

In this state of affairs, we essentially establish two orders of being. The first of these is that which we might call material historical reality (running the economy well or badly), while the second is the level at which we *represent* that reality (the bald fact of running the economy, tables and spreadsheet figures to hand). Increasingly, the representation has supplanted the original, such that material historical realities now lead a rather clandestine existence, sometimes even becoming invisible, as if wished or magicked away. This is easily exemplified by the recent world financial crisis, in which the representation of wealth and profit in spreadsheets supplanted the actual debt and poverty that the representation had occluded. Or, in an equally chilling example, we can have inquiry after inquiry into the Iraq War, all of which turn out to be inquiries into the procedures that are followed to arrive at and manage decisions – and thus we evacuate our inquiry of any matters pertaining to the actual *content* of those decisions, instead merely confirming

that the *forms* by which decisions were made were adhered to. This is what we can call fantasy politics: the politics of ‘I wish it so, therefore it is so.’ In crude terms, it is what journalists refer to as the triumph of spin over substance; but, as fantasy politics, it is much more dangerous than just ‘spinning’ the news, for, as in other fantasies, real hurts – real forces – can be ignored.

It is worth remembering what is at stake in this: for Benjamin, such a thinking is complicit with an ideology of fascism. As he put it, ‘The masses have a right to change property relations’, but ‘Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves’ (Benjamin 1973: 243). For Benjamin, writing in the shadow of the 1929 Crash and the rise of a European right-wing scenting power, this aestheticisation of the political leads inexorably to war and to fascism; and his response is that we must politicize aesthetics. For poststructuralist thinking, the tendency is much the same: the ignoring of content under the signs of form leads to a situation where we have two separate realms, the world of material force, where people suffer pain; and the world of the forms of these things – which we usually call ‘government’.

Of Desire, Accident, and Death

Seeing representation as an issue, some philosophers and commentators look for a way of addressing, as directly as possible and without the fall into mere signification, something that is profoundly historical; and they find it in death. For Baudrillard, for example, death was a kind of liminal point that calls into question the very possibility of ‘symbolic exchange’ (Baudrillard 1976: *passim*). For many, it is in a profound sense ‘unthinkable’ in that it is structurally impossible to re-present one’s own death, if we construe representation as something that is dependent upon the priority of something really occurring, something ‘present’: one would need to survive one’s own death in order to represent it, and, by definition, that is impossible. There are large consequences of this fact.

The first of these is that death becomes linked to a kind of radical and absolute ‘singularity’, to something that is unamenable to representation and that therefore falls outwith the structural impasse given to us by the ‘ideological’ thinking that I outlined above. As Derrida has it:

Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, “given,” one can say, by death ... It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible.

(Derrida 1995: 41)

Death, thus, becomes a theoretical test-case for our attempt to come to grips with the absolute singularity of the historical event. If history can be defined as that which eschews repetition (Blumenberg 1983: 596), then death becomes its central element. Yet, as Derrida has indicated, with this singularity comes the call for an ethical responsibility. Thus, in the first place, death as that which is inevitable becomes aligned with a force of history that can be described, as in ancient classical tragedy, as conditioned by *Ananke*, necessity. Yet also, in the second place, death calls us forth to answer the fundamental question governing all social theory and social practice, ‘What shall I do?’ or ‘How shall I live?’ The logic of poststructuralism, remember, has made this a major problem, given that it has rendered us into the realm of the undecidable.

In the face of this, Deleuze offer us a series of major possible moves. The subscription to history-as-necessity is complicit with the prioritization of the formal structures of history over the specifics of the material content: events. For Deleuze, the event is absolutely central. In

brief, the major turn that he gives to poststructuralist thinking is one that re-establishes the centrality of the event, in all its evanescence, to any radical thinking. Yet this is not the material event as we usually think it; that is, it is not a definite something that is occasioned or brought about in a world of supposed 'exteriority' by an 'interiority' of consciousness that allegedly determines material conditions in the world. The world 'as such' does not exist, in fact: rather, there are only *arrangements of forces* that are episodic, radically singular, and productive of desire.

History as it is lived does not feel like the living out of a formal story, the fulfilling of a pattern. For Deleuze, this fact is important: although he is very aware of Derrida and other philosophers who find their sources in Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, Deleuze works instead through an ontology derived largely from Bergson and Spinoza. From Bergson, what he takes as central to his thought is the importance of *time* and of *movement*. Considering Bergson's notion of duration, however, he already gives it his own inflection, arguing that duration 'is a becoming that endures, a change that is substance itself' (Deleuze 1988a: 37). In Spinoza, he finds a very specific sense of *difference* and of *singularity*. In this, Deleuze indicates the 'scandal' of Spinoza as the scandal that essentially dismisses any notion of a world of duality: 'According to the *Ethics* ... what is an action in the mind is necessarily an action in the body as well, and what is a passion in the body is necessarily a passion in the mind. There is no primacy of one series over the other' (Deleuze 1988b: 18). Deleuze's ontology is not a philosophy of being but rather a philosophy of becoming and, indeed, a philosophy of *accidental becoming*. This, and specifically the role of the accidental, is of lasting importance in social theory.

There are overlaps with deconstruction. Deconstruction and associated forms of poststructuralist thought base themselves on a notion of *difference*, deriving largely from the linguistics of Saussure. Saussure famously argued that language is a system of differences without positive terms: meaning is produced through differential structures. Thus, we see a structuralist world based on binary oppositions; and, in Derrida, we move from the restricted economy of this simple opposition to a generalized economy of difference as such. However, in all these cases, there remains a notion of difference *as opposed to* identity: in short, within difference, there lurks a remnant of *substantive identity* as such. Deleuze takes this in another and contrary direction.

In Spinoza, he finds a notion of what we might call absolute or primary difference: not difference that defines itself in opposition to something else, something 'self-same' or self-identical; but difference, rather, as an absolute condition of the very possibility of identity, so to speak. Spinoza begins his *Ethics* with a meditation on the substantiality of God; and his case is that God is at once infinite (and thus containing an infinity of possible attributes) while at the same time unique (and thus not amenable to re-presentation): 'God is both unique and absolute' (Hardt 1993: 61). For Deleuze, this offers a consistency with his reading of time and movement in Bergson, for it offers a version of substance that is *intrinsically different*: not 'different from' something else, for there is no something else (God is infinite), and not differing from itself in time (God is one thing). Rather, this is pure difference as constitutive of the substance of being.

The result, for Deleuze, once the theological issue is removed from the equation, is that one is never in a state of being (a being that would allow me to give an account of 'my identity'), but only becoming (in which 'I' never quite coincide with myself, since my temporal condition precludes any such possibility, and since the 'I' is a product of the movement or arrangement of forces). Being would equate with death, and is negative; becoming is equivalent to living and is affirmative, joyful.

This means, though, that all things are necessarily always in flux. In fact, it is even more radical than that: anything that we might want to identify as a specific 'somewhat' (or some 'thing') is nothing more than a pure instantiation of a play of forces that makes the somewhat as it 'is', an interruption in the otherwise continuous flow of becomings; yet more, the perceiver of this

‘somewhat’ is herself or himself but an accident of the play of forces that phenomenologically brings the perceiver into line, however momentarily, with the perceived. To perceive is momentarily to arrest the flow of becomings, the play of forces that constitutes history, as it were. Within this, therefore, any ‘event’ – such as the event of perception – is itself an ‘accidental condition’ of history.

There is, thus, no ‘I’ other than the play of forces that allows me, at whatever moment, to pretend to arrest the flow of becoming. This has a massive effect on the notion of agency, and beyond that, of freedom. This is a way of describing how Deleuze thinks of ‘events’. At one level, events are what constitute history; but, according to Deleuze, we must be careful to distinguish events from spectacle. The event takes place in what he thinks of as ‘*le temps mort*’:

... the event is inseparable from dead time. It’s not even that there is dead time before and after the event, rather that dead time is in the event, for example the instant of the most brutal accident confounds itself with the immensity of empty time in which you see it arriving, as a spectator of that which has not yet happened, in a long suspense. ... Groethuysen said that every event was, as it were, in the time when nothing happens.

(Deleuze 1990: 218; my translation)

Now, the event, therefore, is not something that is determined or even predetermined by a consciousness; rather, the emergence of the consciousness is that which comes about precisely as a result of the encounter that *is* the event itself, the play of forces that constitutes this ‘dead time’, a time that is taken out of formal narrative but that allows for the constitution of a subject.

In many other philosophies or social theories, especially those based either upon forms of psychoanalysis or upon forms of ‘identity-politics’, the subject is often typically characterized and described by her or his desire. For Deleuze, such desire is not a matter of exerting a will upon exteriority, much less a matter of ‘choice’, either consumerist or existentialist – in short, the desire does not ‘bring something about’. Again, the desire is that which is produced through the encounter that, in the first place, is constitutive of both subject and object, and constitutive of them *as* subject and object. What Deleuze is trying to do is to find a way of addressing movement as the fundamental form of ontology, but ontology considered as the conditions of our becoming rather than as being.

The result is the production of what we can call the accidental conditions of consciousness or of desire. It is important to note that we are not here talking of desire as a set of ‘wants’ or ‘choices’ based on lack or need or wish. Rather, this desire is a way of describing the product of force. The play of forces or the arrangement of forces that constitutes becomings-in-time is something that is itself in constant flux; and it thus produces desire simply as the condition of producing yet more arrangements, more becoming. In this way, desire can be thought of as a pure ‘affirmation’, the affirming of positive becoming; and the significance of this is that it flies directly in the face of most radical ‘critical’ thinking that derives from Hegel or from any notion of criticism as negation. Desire, here, is what philosophy – and, by extension, radical social theory – should be about: it is about the production of more becoming, more *concepts*. This – the ‘production of concepts’ – is indeed, Deleuze’s answer to the great question, ‘What is philosophy?’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1991: 8)

It will be seen, though, that the affirmation that is desire nonetheless leaves us with some practical difficulties. If there is no I determining of exteriority, then it follows that we have a difficulty with the very idea of conventional historical agency. Further, if we have such a difficulty, then we have a corollary problem concerning freedom. Deleuze and Badiou (most especially this latter) have some ways of considering this that are helpful; and, interestingly, some of these answers return us to some foundations of poststructuralist philosophy.

Accident and the Encounter that is Love

The question of agency, and with it the attendant issue of human freedom, is an abiding concern for all social theory. If we put together poststructuralism's legacy, in which we can think of ideology as a problem concerning the confounding of linguistic with phenomenal orders of being (what I called 'fantasy politics' above) with the emergence of a desire that is not based in the negating power of an individuated human consciousness (Deleuze's implicit critique of individualism), then we reach, in a very different inflection, a concern expressed by Marx. In his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Marx famously argued that 'Until now, the philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it' (Marx 1976: 65). Yet he also knew that such change was not a matter easily brought about, for in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, just five years later, he points out:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past. The tradition of all the generations of the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

(Marx 1978: 9)

In this, he is actually rather close to Deleuze, except that Marx, working still within Hegelian dialectic and valuing therein the power of critical negation, believes that change can be 'chosen', as it were. For Deleuze, taking seriously the realization that history, material history, is 'event', we cannot stand aside from the flow of history and make such choices: 'we' – the very idea that there is a communal 'we' in the first place – is but an accident of flows and arrangements of forces.

History becomes what it really is: encounter, encounters that produce subjects, however fleeting, and that enable further encounters through the fact of desire, now better construed simply as ongoing Bergsonian motion. In this final section, we should consider what is at stake in the issue of the encounter, and try to discover what remains of agency or freedom after these recent philosophical turns.

In recent times, Badiou has placed considerable emphasis on the question of the encounter. Indeed, he places the *amorous* encounter, along with a philosophy of number, at the centre of his philosophy. Deriving from set theory, Badiou's mathematics argues that there is no grounding or foundational 'one' from which we can establish ordinal or cardinal amplitude or difference; rather, difference is again basic, for set theory shows that 'There is no "one"'; rather, there are multiples 'and every multiple is itself a "multiple of multiples"' (Badiou 1988: 37). In Badiou, any 'singularity' approximates to Deleuzian 'substance', and specifically the substance of an encounter. Where, for Derrida, the question of singularity emerges with a contemplation of death, for Badiou (and for Deleuze) singularity emerges from the encounter we call love.

To explore this, let us return to the problem given to us by poststructuralism: the problem of reference. This is also a problem regarding truth, it should now be clear. In many cases, we test the truth-claim of a linguistic proposition by measuring it against some non-linguistic reality: if I say 'it is raining', then I can test the truth of my statement by feeling the rain on my skin when I step outdoors. What happens if you do not believe me? In this case, truth is conditioned by an ethical demand: while avoiding coercion and while remaining purely disinterested (i.e. wanting only to test the claim), I must try to persuade you. In most existing philosophies or social practices, what this amounts to is the erection of a philosophy of identity, of identity-politics: 'you' must be 'I', in that you must see things as I see them. You must identify your own statement with mine (we call it agreement); and thus you and I are the same, identical, equal.

Behind this, there lurks a fallacious notion of an intrinsic or possible ‘equality’ among the participants in a dialogue. It is fallacious because it presupposes the division of the world into interiority (my feeling or opinion) and exteriority (the rain). It is misleading also because it is based upon the idea that difference can be resolved into sameness or identity, that difference is not ‘really’ difference but simply two variant representations of an underlying sameness. It is false because it believes that two different views can be one; false in terms of equality because it believes that it can occlude differences of power in the arrangement of forces between you and me through something called agreement or consensus.

Against this, let us simply consider the encounter in a more neutral fashion. Let us tie it certainly to truth; but, now, following Deleuze, we can have truth not as something epistemological to be tested by what will turn out inevitably to be an ideological claim for verification by assenting to an alleged real. Rather, let us present truth as the eruption of an event. Further, let us consider the event that is the encounter; and let us characterize that encounter with desire’s ethical variant, love.

Badiou rejects the notion that love is a fusion of different entities. Against the kind of claim that suggests that love is a coupling (a two-becomes-one) that can form the basis of the social, Badiou writes instead that ‘Love is not that which, from a Two supposedly given structurally, makes the One of an ecstasy ... Love is not the deposition of the Same on the altar of the Other ... love is not even the experience of the other’ (Badiou 1992: 255–6; my translation). Instead, Badiou sees love as an experiencing of the world, by the world: it is not simply the experiencing by a pre-existing ‘One’, distinguished from other ‘one’s, of some equally pre-existing ‘Other’. Love, in this encounter, becomes the production of truth; but truth as an event, as a something-that-happens, and thus as historical fact.

For Badiou, truth is intimately tied to events. A truth is not a validated knowledge-claim, as it were, for ‘knowledge-claims’ presuppose the divisibility of events into consciousness and exteriority. A truth, for Badiou, is something that happens, an irruption into the existing order of things. In Marxist terms, Badiou’s truth is a changing of the world instead of a mere knowing or interpreting it.

He turns to the amorous encounter, that shocking changing of the world that we can experience and that shocks us into truth. The argument goes as follows:

1. Assume two positions of experience (Badiou calls them ‘male’ and ‘female’, but stresses that this has no biological or essentialist overtones);
2. Recognize that these two positions, insofar as they cannot be identical with each other, are in fact radically disjunctive with respect to each other (they are what Lyotard might have called incommensurables);
3. Now realize that this disjunction cannot be the object of a knowledge for either of the two positions, for, to assume such a knowledge is to assume a third position outside of the encounter itself. It is also to assume an identity between that third position and either the male or the female and, by definition, that would be a modification of the male or female position in the first place. In any case, finally
4. There is no third position in the encounter. This final point is crucial for Badiou’s purpose, for, given the lack of such a ‘transcendent’ or third position, it is impossible to *know* that there are two positions in the first place; rather, the encounter in question is not at all the object of a *knowledge* at all. Instead, it is an *event*. We move from love as epistemology (and all that it entails: the whole idea of criticism as taste, or as preference for this over that), to criticism as ontology.

Now, Badiou also claims that truth must be ‘transpositional’; that is, not simply dependent upon point-of-view. How can truth – the truth of this love, say – be transpositional, given the

absolute and radical disjunction of man/woman? The usual answer is to claim that there is a masculine science (or knowledge) and a feminine one; or, more fundamentally for social theory, that there is a bourgeois science and a revolutionary science. Such a view will always resolve itself into the dialectic whereby difference is reduced to identity, for we will have to adjudicate between competing truth-claims; and, in this, we will always have a situation whereby one consciousness (or individual) exerts its authority over another, claiming not only truth but also a greater legitimacy than the individual who 'loses the argument'. Instead of such a neo-Hegelian master/slave scenario, Badiou begins from his paradox: truth is transpositional, and yet there remains a radical disjunction between positions *within* this truth. Love, he claims, is the arrangement in which this paradox is treated: love does not rid us of the paradox, but gives it to us as an event that must be engaged with.

Conclusion

The legacy of poststructuralist thought, especially in the hands of late Derrida, Deleuze, and Badiou, is one where we must review our relation to knowledge, to ideology and, perhaps above all, to democracy. Democracy as we usually consider it is based on a struggle, between competing 'opinions'; but that struggle occludes the deeper struggle between an alleged world of exteriority and that of a supposed interiority. Any such arrangement is condemned to live in the fantasy of ideology. Against this, say these thinkers, we have a duty to explore multiplicity, radical becoming, and the accidental conditions or truths of love.

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