

## **Deleuze and Sartre: From Praxis to Production**

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*This paper was presented at the First International Deleuze Studies Conference in Cardiff (UK) on 13 August 2008.*

In 1989 Deleuze organized his work under 11 temporal and thematic headings, starting with “From Hume to Bergson”. Around the same time he stipulated that no texts prior to 1953, so no texts from before the publication of *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, should be included in any collections of his essays. (Deleuze, 2004: 7 and 192n1) This wish has led to a negligence of the five texts Deleuze published before 1953, all of them in the short period between 1945 and 1947. Only recently have three of these texts been translated. The other two texts are still not widely available.<sup>1</sup>

Three of these early texts deal mainly with Sartre. The few commentators that have written on these texts have, consistent with the consensus in Deleuze criticism, by and large played down Sartre’s influence on Deleuze.<sup>2</sup> François Dosse, for instance, in his recent biography of Deleuze and Guattari, denounces the Sartrean inclination of these articles as a teenage infatuation. He comments that Deleuze disavowed Sartre shortly after he had written these texts, and sets off on a ‘completely different path’. (Dosse: 119-20)

I do not believe, however, that Deleuze set off on a completely different path and believe that the early articles on Sartre show that he

is an important precursor to Deleuze's philosophical project. Deleuze's own philosophical approach purports to lay bare to which problems the concepts of a philosopher respond. I will follow this method here, and will try to show in what way the problems Deleuze encountered in Sartre's though have shaped Deleuze's thought. This will, I believe, show that Deleuze's project is an attempt to create a pragmatics that tries to overcome the failure of Sartre to link his philosophy to his politics, in other words, his failure to connect his phenomenological ontology to praxis.

In spite of his denunciation of the early articles, Deleuze himself recurrently pays homage to Sartre. In 1964 he wrote a tribute called 'He Was my Teacher' in which he said: "In the disorder and hope of the Liberation, we discovered, we re-discovered everything: Kafka, the American novel, Husserl and Heidegger, incessant renegotiations with Marxism, enthusiasm for a *nouveau roman*... It was all channelled through Sartre." (Deleuze 2004: 77) In an interview shortly before his death he again eulogized Sartre, remembering the effect *Being and Nothingness*, published in 1943, had had on him: "It was like a bomb [...] it was dazzling. An enormous book full of new thought. [...] I remember, I was with Tournier, we went and bought it. We devoured it. [...] I was fascinated." (Eribon) Michel Tournier also remembers this event and recalls: "Gilles called me each night to tell me what he had read that day. He knew [the book] by heart. [...] That wartime winter, dark and cold, we spent, wrapped in blankets, [...] but the head on fire, reading aloud the 722 dense pages of our new bible." (quoted in Dosse: 118)

Deleuze was, of course, not alone in his enthusiasm for Sartre. Sartre's existentialist reformulation of phenomenology dominated French philosophy immediately following the war. This shows how Husserl, Heidegger and Hegel had suddenly eclipsed the pre-war homebred philosophical tradition that had been dominated by Bergson. Christian Kerslake suggests that perhaps the sudden demise of the influence Bergson was caused by his emphasis on the continual accumulation of the past in the present, which did not sit well with the bleak war experiences which everyone would rather forget than take with them into the future. (Kerslake: 6) Althusser simply denounced this what he called a 'pitiful' spiritualist tradition on the grounds that it purportedly was reactionary, narrow-mindedly religious, and conservative.

(Althusser: 25) Another explanation might be found in the fact that the metaphysically inclined philosophies of the Third Republic had little to say about the issues that humans faced on a day-to-day basis. (Gutting: 104) The aim of the young French philosophers that came to maturation during the 1930s could be summarized with the title of Jean Wahl's book from 1932 *Toward the Concrete*. Phenomenology was embraced by them because it promised philosophical access to concrete reality. This same prospect was offered by dialecticism.<sup>3</sup>

These new philosophers, which enabled philosophy to break free from the pre-war conventions, however, soon established a new orthodoxy themselves. In Deleuze's words at the liberation French philosophy was 'strangely stuck in the history of philosophy [we] plunged into Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger; we threw ourselves like puppies into a scholasticism worse than that of the Middle Ages. Fortunately there was Sartre. Sartre was our Outside.' (Deleuze and Parnet: 9)

Like so many people just after the war Deleuze was impressed by Sartre's style. He wrote that he did not only admire Sartre for his 'genius for totalization', but also because 'he knew how to invent something new.' With this Deleuze apparently means, that Sartre knew how to create events. He wrote: 'The first performances of *The Flies*, the publication of *Being and Nothingness* [...] the conference *Existentialism and Humanism*—these were events: they were how we learned, after long nights, the identity of thought and liberty." He praises Sartre for being, like Nietzsche, a 'private thinker', speaking in his "own name, without 'representing' anything." (Deleuze, 2004: 77-8) He seems to have been an example of how one can also be an intellectual, a sort of a hero to Deleuze, rather than a philosophical precursor. This is, at least, the generally accepted thesis amongst Deleuze scholars.

This conclusion is not surprising given the fact that Deleuze has always maintained that he felt no proximity to either phenomenology or existentialism. The only broadly acknowledged philosophical influence Sartre had on Deleuze lies in the notion of the 'pre-subjective transcendental field' that Deleuze discovers in *The Transcendence of the Ego*, and which leads him to adopt his ontology of immanence.<sup>4</sup> Even though this notion is a crucial one in Deleuze's thought, no detailed study of the relationship between the two thinkers

has been undertaken. This oversight might have several reasons, but prime among them is Deleuze's own attitude. As we have seen, there is the ban on his early Sartrean texts, but there is more evidence to support this thesis. There is a short essay by Deleuze on Sartre from the early 1980s which is even less known than the early Sartrean essays. He gave this page long text to his friend, the Sartre scholar Jeannette Colombel, shortly after Sartre's death. Despite her enthusiasm, Deleuze did not want to publish it because, as Colombel remarks in a recent book, "Gilles did not want to appear as a disciple, nor as a rebellious son, or worse a docile son." (Colombel: 39)

In this short essay Deleuze admiringly sketches the dynamic connections between concepts and situations, the latter of which Deleuze identifies as a key concept in Sartre's work:

The 'situation' is not a concept among others for Sartre, but the pragmatic element that transforms everything, and without which concepts have neither meaning nor structure. A concept has no structure or meaning as long as it is not situated. The situation, is the functioning of the concept itself. And the richness and novelty of Sartrean concepts derives from this point, they are the expressions of situations, at the same time as situations are assemblages of concepts. (Colombel: 39)

This is not simply an exposition of Sartre's work, but rather an example of Deleuze's typical method of highlighting exactly those themes in other philosopher's thought which are co-extensive with his own work.<sup>5</sup> He is not just studying the arrows of great thinkers, as he put it himself, but is selecting those arrows that with some trimming could be used for his own battles. Claire Parnet called this method a non-parallel evolution. Deleuze, in the aforementioned essay on Sartre, writes the following:

If there has been an evolution of Sartre, it was not because of external circumstances, not by simple confrontation with Marxism, but because the concept of situation increasingly revealed its collective and political content. (40)

This, I would suggest, is also true for Deleuze. If there has been an evolution in his thought, in other words, if it has become more

political, it was not because of external circumstances, in his case, not by simple confrontation with Guattari or with Bergson, Nietzsche or Spinoza for that matter, but because the ontology of immanence increasingly revealed its collective and political content.

Deleuze's thought, then, has always been political, right from the start. And at the very beginning of the formation of his ontology of immanence, lies, as we will see, Sartre's philosophy which has situations as its key concept, and consequently, the dynamic relation between concepts and situations at its centre. Concepts have no meaning without a situation, without what Deleuze calls 'pragmatic factors' in his comparison of the dynamism between situations and concepts to the field of linguistics:

Besides studying the structures of language, linguistics has had to address a whole semantic domain that does not result from these structures and keeps them open indefinitely. But increasingly, this affirms the importance of pragmatic factors, which are not outside the language, or secondary, but which are internal variables, agents of enunciation with which languages or change occur. [...] it traverses them [i.e. in linguistics: language structures, and in philosophy: concepts] through and through, it determines their new divisions and their original content. (40)

Deleuze's work increasingly reveals itself as a pragmatism, and the immanent pragmatic factors, the situation, determine the original content of his concepts. The ontological speculation built on the pre-individual transcendental field, produces concepts, but increasingly it becomes clear that these speculative concepts have no structure or meaning without a situation.

This effort to place the concepts derived from his ontology into practical, pragmatic contexts, in other words to create a resonance between philosophy and practice, is, I believe, the driving force of Deleuze's thought. At least, it was what started it. Deleuze's philosophical apprenticeship started, as we saw, with long, cold winter nights spent reading *Being and Nothingness*, only to be involuntarily hurled into writing philosophy as a result of the realization that Sartre's phenomenological ontology in the end failed to carry through

the full implications of the pre-individual transcendental field. This realisation led to his very first published text ‘Description of Woman: for a philosophy of the sexed other’ published in 1945. This is a peculiar and very rich text. François Dosse calls it a ‘pastiche’ (119) but, although it contains frivolous and satirical elements, its overall message is extremely serious. In fact it reads as a programmatic introduction to Deleuze’s oeuvre, with many of the themes that he will revisit already in place, albeit in a germinal form: pure immanence, the actual and the virtual, a hatred of interiority, multiplicity, desire without lack, becoming-woman, faciality (with its smooth surfaces and black holes), and so on. This alone shows, I would say, a sustained influence of Sartre on Deleuze’s work.

Deleuze opens his article with stating his ‘great principle’: “things do not have to wait for me in order to get their signification.” (DW: 17) Thus signification is inscribed objectively in the thing. “As for myself,” Deleuze continues, “I am here for nothing [...] I do not invent anything, I do not project anything, I do not make anything come into this world.” (DW, 17) In other words, consciousness is not the light cast upon things, making them visible. Instead, Deleuze suggests, things are luminous themselves. Thus Deleuze’s great principle is a plane of immanence that is, as he will later say, “entirely made of Light” (Deleuze, 2005: 62)

This is of course an inversion of Husserl’s phenomenological ideas (Cf. Spade: 53-63) and Deleuze finds his inspiration for this inversion, as I pointed out before, in Sartre’s *Transcendence of the Ego*. In a conversation in 1983 he attributes the idea of the luminosity of things in themselves to Bergson (Deleuze, 1995: 54). It is possible that Deleuze had by 1945 been reading Bergson, although François Dosse identifies 1947 as the year that Deleuze discovered Bergson (Dosse: 123). In ‘Description of Woman,’ this great principle is however clearly developed in relation to Sartre, who, as I said, does not fully realize his own critique of Husserl and puts forward a decentred and impersonal unified consciousness that forms the transcendental field.<sup>6</sup> This is not good enough for Deleuze for who consciousness is still bound to the individual and who maintains that what is logically prior to all individualized states of affairs should not be itself individuated. (Cf. Somers-Hall: 129)

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre concludes that the conception of the Ego that he puts forward at the end of *The Transcendence of the Ego* does not help one bit to solve the question of the existence of Others. (Sartre: 259), in other words, it does not, as he believed before, refute solipsism. Sartre observes that the Other is not externally related to the I that observes, but has internal relations to it.<sup>7</sup> Husserl, Hegel and Heidegger realized this as well, but none of them, according to Sartre, went to the root of the problem. (Spade: 206) Heidegger, says Sartre, gets it almost right. Sartre, however, feels that Heidegger turns his general principle (“*Dasein ist Mitsein*”) into a necessary fact. This does not sit well with Sartre’s insistence that the particular is not grounded in the general, but the other way around. (Spade: 210) The connection between general principles and the individual is often presented as necessary. Thus the individual or the event is grounded by a primary structure. Sartre does not see it this way. For him contingency must be located at the level of the *individual*, not the *general*. (Spade: 233) He presents this argument later in *Being and Nothingness*, when he talks about psychoanalysis, but his critique of Heidegger corresponds to this critique.

Deleuze acknowledges Sartre for seeing the insufficiency of Heidegger’s conceptualization of the Other<sup>8</sup> but says that the “progress” he makes “is only apparent” (DW, 17). Obviously Deleuze also has problems with a strictly necessary causality in which a primary structure grounds a series of concrete particulars. Sartre’s critique of this structure, however, brings us back to the individual. Sartre fully recognizes that the inter-subjective model that he develops brings back individuality in the transcendental field, and even personality, but he gave up on the field anyway, as we saw before, because it would not enable us to escape solipsism. Deleuze however feels that Sartre’s new solution surpasses concrete bodies and instead offers an abstract notion of the Other as another “I”. (Faulkner: 25).

For Sartre the Other is a phenomenon in the world that is interpreted by another subject who does not have access to this phenomenon. The ‘inner sense’ of the Other, his or her thoughts and feelings, are inaccessible. In contrast, for Deleuze the Other expresses a *possible world*. This possible world is not in the consciousness of the other, he or she *expresses* it. It is not an expression of the subjectivity of the Other. (Faulkner: 27-8) Again Bergson is mostly credited for this

denunciation of the inter-subjectivity proposed by phenomenology (Cf. Gioli: 197) However, again, it seems rather that it is Sartre who provides a way out of his own conclusions.

The idea of the Other as an ‘expression of a possible world,’ is attributed by Deleuze to an unpublished text by Tournier (DW: 24n3). We have no reason to doubt this, but whatever the case, Tournier then seems to have derived this idea from Sartre’s book *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* from 1939. In this book the Other is a ‘pure surging up’ in the world and not another “I”. (Faulkner: 27-8) To put it simply, in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre reduces the Other to the object of a gaze, or to another subject. In ‘Description of Woman’ Deleuze criticizes this as a falling back upon the old subject/object dialectic, and instead focuses on the other Other (he later calls this *autrement qu’Autre*). It goes too far to reproduce the argument of the article here [see for a very detailed exposition Faulkner] but it suffices to say the conclusions are more or less reproduced in *The Logic of Sense*. The difference is that in the earlier text Deleuze still distinguishes two forms of this a priori Other, the ‘woman’ and ‘male-Other’. He concludes that the male-Other points towards actualized forms of the world, while the woman expresses an internal world, which is virtual rather than actual, but all the same fully real. This is the pre-individual and non-objectival transcendental field, which is of another geography, but not of another world than the actual real. This way it avoids the duplication of the empirical inside the transcendental, predicated on the thinking of the transcendental in the image of what it is supposed to ground. (Boundas: 37-8). Instead of this empirical transcendentalism, Deleuze offers us the germinal form of what he later called transcendental empiricism.

I cannot here, today, give a full account of Sartre’s influence on Deleuze. However, I hope to have shown that the philosophical relation between the two has, to say the least, has not yet been explored to the full. Bringing these two thinkers together shows, I believe, that Deleuze’s philosophical project is founded on the mission to correct Sartre’s failure to produce an ontology that allows for any kind of justification for an ethical stance or political action. (cf. Bernstein: 152) It is a different conceptualization of the Other, what Constantin Boundas called a ‘foreclosure of the Other’, that enables him to escape Sartre’s nihilist conclusions. It is this criticism, already

voiced so eloquently in his very first article, that forms the basis for many, if not all, of Deleuze's concepts, immanence, the virtual and the actual, up to the insistence that philosophy is about the creation or production of concepts.

I could draw out some conclusions. We might say on the basis of the foregoing that Deleuze's philosophy is to its very core political and has been so from the outset. This would argue against those thinkers, like Žižek, who see a split between Deleuze's ontological philosophy and the overtly political works that he has produced with Guattari. More important, I hope to have shown that the influence of Sartre on Deleuze cannot be reduced to a teenage infatuation, but has severely influenced his thought from the outset and has had a sustained influence on Deleuze throughout his career. To substantiate the later, more work needs to be done, but let me here, to conclude my talk give another example of this sustained influence.

We could argue that the philosophy of Deleuze is in need of a theory of relations in order to relate the virtual to the actual so as to counter the critique of people like Badiou who sees the division between the actual and the virtual as a new categorical opposition. (Badiou: 78) The turn to Hume provides him with this theory. Deleuze has repeatedly insisted on the importance of relations in Hume's work. But, as we saw, the virtual/actual divide was founded well before the turn to Hume, and thus well before the connections between these realms were cast in terms of Humean empiricism. The short text written directly after Sartre's death indicates another concept in germinal form, that is a *relational* concept. Deleuze praises Sartre's dynamic connection between concepts and situations. "Sartrean concepts," and I've quoted this before, "are the expressions of situations, at the same time as situations are assemblages of concepts." Again we could see here a situation we have become used to by now. On the one hand he criticizes Sartre for duplicating the empirical inside the transcendental. But we could argue that the solution to this problem is also derived from Sartre. The dynamic relation between concepts and situations offers a way to relate the pre-individual transcendental field and the empirical field which should, says Deleuze, not only be of another matter, but also another geography, without being another world. (quoted in Somers-Hall: 129) It is this productive practice of relations, this emphasis on the middle, on relations between things, that shows

that concrete social fields cannot be explained by reference to individuals only, nor simply by reference to indifferent chaotic flows. (Cf. Hayden: 299) It is the focus on the dynamism of relations, which Deleuze first encounters in Sartre, that eventually enables Deleuze to bridge the gap between ontology and ethics and politics.

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<sup>1</sup> The five texts are 1) ‘Description de la femme: pour une philosophie d’autrui sexuée’, *Poésie* 45, no 28, oct-nov 1945, pp. 28-29. Translated by Keith W. Faulkner as ‘Description of Woman: For a Philosophy of the Sexed Other’, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 7:3 (2002), pp. 17-24. 2) ‘Du Christ à la bourgeoisie’, *Espace*, 1946, p. 93-106. 3) Introduction of Jean Maifatti de Monterreggio *Études sur la mathèse ou anarchie et hiérarchie de la science*, éditions Du Griffon d’Or, Paris, 1946. Translated by Robin MacKay with David Reggio as ‘Mathesis, Science and Philosophy’, *Collapse* 3, pp. 141-155. 4) ‘Dites et profils’, *Poésie* 47, no 36, 1947. Translated by Keith W. Faulkner as ‘Statements and Profils’, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 8:3 (2003), pp. 85-93. 5) Introduction to Denis Diderot *La Religieuse* (Paris: Éditions Marcel Daubin, 1947), pp. vii-xx.

<sup>2</sup> The exception being the translator of two of these two texts, Keith W. Faulkner (cf. Faulkner).

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty, for instance, comments that Hegel attempted to explore the irrational rationally, in other words to synthesize the two, or in Merleau-Ponty’s words: ‘to integrate it into an expanded reason.’ (Quoted in: Descombes: 11)

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the term ‘subjectless transcendental field’ has also been attributed to Jean Hyppolite, one of Deleuze favourite teachers, who ostensibly finds it in Fichte. (cf. Descombes: 77n1). Deleuze has written little on Fichte, but does acknowledge him in his very last essay *Immanence: A Life*.

<sup>5</sup> “On ne trouvera pas dans ce livre, un exposé ou une analyse de la philosophie de Sartre. Nous avons seulement voulu mettre en valeur ce rapport dynamique des concepts et des situations.” (Colombel : 40)

<sup>6</sup> The transcendental ego as the unifier of consciousness is not needed, says Sartre, as this unity can be provided by consciousness itself. “Consciousness unifies itself through escaping itself,” writes Sartre. Acts of consciousness ‘traverse one another in such a way as to provide a decentred unity.’ (Somers-Hall, p. 128)

<sup>7</sup> External relations, in the form that A is not B (I am not you) presupposes that one term is not constituted by another term; the constitution is done by a third term, i.e. the observer. When there is a subject involved, one thus needs another subject to constitute this subject, after which one needs yet another subject to constitute this subject etc. This leads to the fact that, when not accepting solipsism, realism becomes idealism and idealism realism, and thus to a vicious circle. (cf. Spade: 202-4.)

<sup>8</sup> Both his praise and subsequent criticism of Sartre focuses on the fact that Heidegger ostensibly has allowed human reality to be “asexualized”, but this is not central to my argument here.