

Nomadism with a difference: Deleuze's legacy in a feminist perspective

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In the complex landscape of poststructuralist philosophies of difference, Deleuze's thought strikes a uniquely positive note. His theory of nomadic subjectivity stresses the affirmative structure of the subject and therefore distances Deleuze from the more nihilistic or relativistic edge of contemporary philosophy. Deleuze's thought offers more than a reflection on the contemporary configurations of power and on the forms of resistance available in the postindustrial regime of the global economy. Even more than his "*frère ennemi*" Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze re-inscribes the reflection on the politics of the subject within an aesthetic and ethical framework centred on affirmation, that is to say, on the affectivity and the positivity of the subject's desires. I find it important to stress this point now that the long and in some way impossible task of living with Deleuze's 'anti-Oedipal' legacy is upon us. I see a real danger that the complex and highly articulate structure of Deleuze's redefinition of subjectivity becomes split between, on the one hand, a more "socio-economic" angle, which inscribes the French master alongside other leading thinkers of the "post-industrial" or "post-fordist" economic system, and on the other, a more "aesthetic" aspect, which inscribes Deleuze in a continuum with the cultural and literary generation who invented "the linguistic turn". This would be in my eyes a reductive reception of Deleuze's work and one which would spectacularly miss the point of his complex re-articulation of subjectivity as an assembled singularity of forces.

As I have often pointed out,¹ Deleuze strikes a unique position also as a careful reader of the problem of the 'becoming-woman' of philosophy, a question which he inscribes at the heart of the philosophy of modernity. From Nietzsche to the contemporary variations on the theme of Woman as the philosophical Other, the "feminine" side of philosophy has emerged as the site of crucial questions which challenge the classical conceptions of subjectivity and threaten its humanistic foundations. Deleuze faces up to this challenge, without paying lip service to feminism or pretending to be a "feminist", let alone a "feminine" philosopher, but rather by raising the question of the becoming-woman at the heart of his conceptual structure. In

this respect, Deleuze shows more sensitivity to the woman's question than many of his followers so far and he is singularly attuned to the issues linked to the dissymmetrical power relations between the sexes.

Nonetheless, an unresolved knot marks Deleuze's (and Guattari's) thought on the feminine and on the becoming woman of philosophy, which I have summed up in a question: what is the role they attribute to sexual difference within their general philosophy of difference? Far from providing a single answer to this question, Deleuze has settled in a structural ambivalence on the issue of sexual difference, which in some respects constitutes the heart of his theoretical legacy on the matter. On the one hand, he comes close to feminist deconstructions of the metaphysical axis of difference, which assumes that sexual difference is the gateway – and the gate-keeper – of all other differences. On the other hand, he tends to include sexual difference alongside the other forms of “becoming”, including the becoming-animal, becoming-insect and becoming-minority. I regret to be unable to pursue this analysis further here,² let me just say that, instead of seeking for a hasty resolution to the structural ambivalence which marks Deleuze's thought on the feminine, it is of the utmost importance to linger on the conceptual tensions it creates and to explore them in all their complexity. I maintain that feminist theory is an indispensable tool to confront the complexity of Deleuze's analysis and that the intersection between Deleuze and feminist theory is mutually enriching and in some respects inevitable.

The starting point for Deleuze's thought on the matter is the redefinition of the concept of ‘immanence’ which refers to the singular yet de-essentialized material embodiment of the subject, which is also described in terms of becoming, complexity, dislocation and vital movement. Attached to the empirical tradition, Deleuze never ceases to attack the metaphysical core that structures Western philosophy and is perpetuated also and especially within the Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse. Of great relevance to Deleuze's quarrel with psychoanalysis is the extent to which it perpetuates the sacralization of the sexed body and consequently the illusion of an interiorized truth about the embodied self. Moreover, for the authors of the *Anti-Oedipus*, psychoanalysis ends up institutionalizing the polarity between the masculine and the feminine thereby defining sexual difference as the motor of the monologic economy of phallogentrism. Last but not least, psychoanalysis leaves unexplored and even undeclared its own hegelian legacy, which is expressed in the idea of desire as lack and negativity.

Against the monopoly of this sedentary discursive economy, which propels itself by binary opposites as mere specular reflections of each other, Deleuze proposes a de-essentialized brand of vitalism. The deleuzean body is a space of multiple becomings, potentially contradictory, impersonal and polymorphous.

This radical anti-humanism manifests itself in a philosophical style that makes few concessions to the illusion of metaphysical self-representation that is so central to the classic view of the subject. For Deleuze, the corporality of the subject is a dynamic web of potentialities and intensities in constant move and transformation. In this respect, Deleuze's thought both displaces and transforms the corporality of the subject.

Deleuze takes great distance from the emphasis on stable and foundational identities and he rejects the notion of roots – let alone of a matrix – for the self; he also corrodes the idea of 'experience' as a single monolithic notion. The philosopher of nomadology emphasizes instead the subject in terms of spaces of becoming, that is to say of constant mutation. For instance in Western philosophy, the masculine as term of reference of the dominant view of subjectivity coincides with the exercise of basic symbolic functions, such as reason, self-regulation, self-representation, transcendence and its corollary; the power to name and appoint positions of 'otherness' as a set of constitutive outsiders who design by negation the parameters of subjectivity. Deleuze argues that the masculine coincides with the fixity of the centre, which in western philosophy is represented through the notion of Being. As such, the masculine is opposed to the process of becoming, understood as the engendering of creative differences. Being allows for no mutation, no creative becoming, no process: it merely tends towards self-preservation and to the stubborn assertion of his own transcendental narcissism.

The consequence is obvious: it pertains to the feminine to become the vehicle of becoming and for the de-essentialized brand of vitalism so dear to Deleuze. This is why the "becoming woman" of philosophy plays such an important role in his work; in *Mille Plateaux* Deleuze states quite clearly the importance of the "becoming woman" as necessary, though insufficient, premise for his philosophical project.

It is worth stressing at this point that for Deleuze the term "woman" does not refer to the empirical reality of embodied females and of their experience; on the contrary, Deleuze corrodes the metaphysical certainty of the polarity between the sexes and aims at undoing the appeal of the authority of experience founded on the regime of fixed and steady identities. The theory of "becoming", and consequently also of the "becoming woman" mark a polymorphous set of transformations to which both sexes must gain access, including women. Woman remains for Deleuze the sign of fluid boundaries and consequently of potential unhinging of the institution of femininity which has historically functioned as the necessary and necessarily 'other' pole of phallogocentric culture.

On this point Deleuze joins forces with some feminists and takes a clear stand against the Oedipal vision of femininity which reduces woman to the

specular and complementary other of the masculine, to which it is tied in a dialectical knot of opposition. Deleuze conceptualizes woman instead as the constant process of becoming; and in so doing, celebrates the positivity of the non-Oedipal woman, who refuses to function in the procreative socio-symbolic contract of phallocentrism. The non-Oedipal woman remains stubbornly and proudly polymorphous and therefore opposed to sexual difference as a metaphysically constituted polarity. In so far as the “becoming woman” requires this rebellion against Oedipalized sexuality, Deleuze argues that women, too, must undergo the process of deterritorialization or of “becoming”. In this respect, Deleuze does grant a head start to the feminists, in so far as they are the women who have already taken their distance from the institution of traditional femininity and are dis-identified with its modes, codes, qualities and prerequisites. In so far as feminists deconstruct Woman, they are in a privileged position to undergo the process of “becoming” and to turn into subjects who undo the hold of phallocentrism. The “becoming woman” of the feminists, however, can only be accomplished if they disengage themselves from the humanistic legacy – which is present in equality thinking as well as in the feminism of sexual difference – and thus abandon the foundationalist modes of thought altogether.

The non-Oedipal woman is for Deleuze the prototype of the nomadic vision of subjectivity which marks his entire philosophy. Deleuze invents a unique philosophical style to convey this alternative view of subjectivity, which I read in terms of ‘figurations’ for alternative subjectivities. Firmly convinced that: “*c’est l’image de la pensée qui guide la création des concepts*”,³ Deleuze tracks down with rigour and originality the pre-philosophical passions or intensities which underlay philosophical concepts. In some respect, Deleuze re-designs the history of philosophy in terms of a typology of forces that carry and sustain certain philosophical statements. This is an affective or intensive style of philosophizing, which does not focus on the propositional content, but also takes into account the affective forces at work within philosophy.

In the pursuit of such radical decoding of the philosophical passions, Deleuze is motivated by the belief that our historicity makes it urgent for us to elaborate new schemes and modes of thinking. We need to learn how to think differently, especially about our own notion of the subject; this is one of the points where the deleuzian project intersects with feminist theory. Both mainstream and feminist philosophies of difference enact a programme of full-scale deconstruction of classical humanism, both as a vision of the subject, as a system of values, and as an ideal. One of the corollaries of this way of approaching theoretical practice is that the essence of philosophy occurs outside professional academic philosophical circles. Deleuze argues that philosophy is the *extramural* activity which consists in the creation of

new concepts and new images of thought. This project of re-imagining the activity of thinking likes at the heart of the stylistics invented by Deleuze. All of Deleuze's figurations – be it the rhizome, the body without organs, the nomad or the becoming – alternate a creative multiplicity with a singularity that is nonetheless deprived of stable roots and fixed foundations.

The consequences of Deleuze's thought for feminism are quite complex. On the one hand, it is undeniable that European feminism has humanistic roots: it emphasizes the positivity of lived female experience and it stresses both the dissymmetry and the asymmetry of the power relations between the sexes. Ever since the post-structuralist generation, however, it has moved further: feminist anti-humanism promotes the positivity of sexual difference as a way out of humanism. The starting point is the assumption that in the phallogocentric system, "difference" has been colonized by power relations that reduce it to gradations of inferiority. Further, it has resulted in passing differences off as "natural", thus essentializing them beyond the reaches of possible historical change.

The feminist philosophies of sexual difference thus expose difference as the site of the systematic dis-empowerment and humiliation of female subjects: it is another name for dis-qualification or symbolic absence. What feminist thought wants to do with difference is to overthrow the pejorative, oppressive connotations that are in-built into the notion and, in a transmutation of values, to re-assert the positivity of difference. This becomes a collective re-appraisal of the singularity of each (female subject). In other words, the subject of sexual difference is not Woman as the complementary of Man, but rather women as self-reflexive female feminist subjects that have taken their distance from Woman as constituted in the phallogocentric system: Women as other-than Man's Other.

Feminist philosophies of difference, however, are caught in their own internal contradictions and I want to argue that they can profit from a close dialogue with Deleuze's thought on the matter. For instance, Irigaray's emphasis on "mimesis" as the fundamental strategy of sexual difference thought has the short-term effect of re-emphasizing one of the poles of the very dichotomy which it aims to subvert. On the whole, feminist practice tends towards a foundationalist stance because it aims at empowering the presence, the symbolic authority and the intelligence of women. Feminism betrays this foundationalist basis even when it criticizes the limits of Enlightenment-based notions of equality, as is the case with sexual difference theories. When it adopts an extreme anti-foundationalist stance,⁴ feminism does so to the detriment of sexual difference understood as the affirmation of alternative becomings by women, or female feminists. The humanist base of feminist thought is made manifest in the lingering suspicion on the part of most feminists towards

technology and the technological social and symbolic system. Even a leading figure of cyber-feminism, like Donna Haraway, who emphasizes virtual corporality and the multiple intersections between the technological apparatus and the embodied self, does not fully disengage herself from the appeal to the notion of female experience, which I consider crucial for feminist practice. Although Haraway redefines the embodied self in terms of the interconnection of the human with the technological or the artificial, she shrinks from de-territorialized or nomadic subjectivities and continues to raise issues that are crucial to our understanding of identity. Namely, what does it mean to be human in a post-humanistic universe? How to rethink the unity of the subject without appealing to dualistic oppositions or to essentialistic notions of human nature? And how to reconnect this emphasis on fluid boundaries to the requirements of feminist political practice?

In such a framework, it is no wonder that the redefinition of the becoming woman by Deleuze has raised quite a few objections, especially from within feminism. Luce Irigaray in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, expresses strong reservations against the deleuzian project, arguing that fluidity, non-being, liminality and marginality, as well as a condition of symbolic exile are part and parcel of women's history of oppression. Irigaray argues that the process of de-essentialization of sexed identities fails to take into account the impact of the dissymmetrical relations between the sexes and as such it fails to destabilize the speaking position of the philosopher. However radical he may claim to be, Deleuze is holding onto the dominant position of the white male heterosexual thinker whose task it is to philosophize. Later I argued that it is precisely this failure to conceptualize his own speaking position that makes Deleuze contradict himself on the issue of "becoming woman". Only a subject who historically has profited from the entitlements of subjectivity and the rights of citizenship can afford to put his "solidity" into question. Marginal subjectivities, or social forces who historically have not yet been granted the entitlements of symbolic presence – and this includes women – cannot easily relinquish boundaries and rights which they have hardly gained as yet. More recently, American critics like Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal⁵ stress this point: the vitalistic dissolution of boundaries Deleuze proposes makes sense as a critical standpoint only if it is situated at the very heart of the Euro-phallogocentric empire. Gayatri Spivak also emphasizes this point: the philosophy of becoming minority is the last creative rebound of a decadent Eurocentric culture, of which Deleuze is both the heir and its utmost critic.

As feminism evolves away from its humanistic roots and the habit that consists in attaching subjectivity and agency to a strong, stable subject, the dialogue with Deleuze can only become more intense and complex. Contemporary feminism posits as its subject not the metaphysical entity known

as “woman”, but rather female diversity, i.e., women in their multiple differences. The axes that are mostly taken into account are: race, class, sexed identity, sexual preference and age: they constitute axes of subjectivation and also of diversification for each woman. Emphasis on the differences among women as well as on the differences internal to each woman allows for contemporary feminists to avoid the pitfall of essentialism but also the equally threatening option of a postmodern “diffuse” and fluid identity. This means that the question of “woman” is less central to feminist theory than the issues of what values and political programmes are female feminists capable of offering and to what an extent do these programmes respect diversity while empowering women. Having moved beyond the binary scheme that opposes the feminine to the masculine, contemporary feminism goes beyond metaphysics and the empire of the dichotomous same/other dyad.

Thus we get to a set of intersections between Deleuze and the post-humanistic brand of feminism. Deleuze remains caught in a structural ambivalence on the question of Woman; questioned on the matter, especially on his theory of the “becoming woman”, he will decline to answer, delegating to empirical females the task of solving the paradox of the feminine. This is peculiarly reminiscent of Freud in the false modesty with which he unloads unto the privileged “other” the task of undoing the knot of “otherness” on which the subject has founded his symbolic potency. In other words, Deleuze unwillingly repeats one of the habits of phallocentrism which the feminists have explicitly criticized: the inability to conceptualize his own speaking stance or situated position.

Because I firmly believe that a dialogue between Deleuze and feminism on this point is of crucial importance, I would like to suggest that this is not only the blind spot of the old dream of symmetry, to paraphrase Luce Irigaray, but that it also reveals a deeper conceptual point. Were Deleuze to accept that the dissymmetrical power relations between the sexes situate the feminine as the crucial gate-keeper of the process of becoming, and as the necessary threshold for the whole project to start, then he would run into major difficulties with his theory of the sexually undifferentiated multiple becoming. There would be an inner tension between a sexual-specific gateway to the process and the multiplication of sexes engendered by that same process. Moreover, considering the extent to which feminists have re-conceptualized the “becoming-diverse of women”, the deleuzean theory of the sexually undifferentiated becoming also would have to confront this other challenge. At the heart of the matter remains the structural tension between Deleuze’s vision of sexuality as “neutral” in its complexity, not for lack but rather for excess of intensity and flows of desire.

Needless to say, contemporary post-humanistic feminism plays fully the card of asymmetry, of non-equivalence, non-coincidence between feminine and masculine. “*Nous sommes unes*”, used to be the slogan in the early days of post-structural feminism; that is to say: women are not one subject, modelled on the Cartesian coincidence of the self with rational consciousness. They are neither one nor the other of the poles of comfortably established specular opposition between the two sexes, which turns the classical feminine into one of the metaphysical pillars of our world. Women are not pure fluid becoming either. We are emerging counter-subjectivities, subjects-in-becoming (“*nous sommes ailleurs*”). Being elsewhere is not the expression of a right to extra-territoriality, but rather the admission of a profound asymmetry in the repartition of the lines of subjectivation. Neither on the periphery (vis-à-vis the centre) nor at the heart of the phallogentric empire, feminist women are radically other, situated in other spaces and playing on different modes and scales of temporality.

Whereas Deleuze situates his project of becoming within philosophy – albeit against the grain of the dominant canon – feminists think about their becoming outside the beaten tracks of academic life, as a project that reunites life and thought into a far-reaching project of transformation. Feminism is a philosophy of change and of becoming: it functions through creative mimesis, that is to say by activating counter-memories. Memory thus activated is a time-bomb placed under the driver’s seat of phallogentrism; it will undo the main effects that this system has upon its minority subjects: wilfully instilled amnesia, symbolic misery, lack of self-representation. A counter-memory, the process of refusing to forget, or forgetting to forget, expresses feminist women’s desire to develop alternative forms of subjectivity. By comparison with the passion and the liveliness of feminist figurations that have emerged of late to express women’s passion for their own alternative becoming, Deleuze’s repertoire smacks of “*vieux jeu*”: figures like Alice in Wonderland, Nietzsche’s Ariadne, as the beloved fiancée strike too familiar a note and have already been worn out by years of use and abuse.

It is noteworthy however that, through these metaphorical renditions, it is this feminine principle that carries the positivity and the affirmative force in Deleuze’s philosophy. In other words, even unresolved, the question of the “becoming-woman” functions within his thought as an inexhaustible source of inspiration towards new modes of subjectivation. It is on the non-Oedipal woman’s body that Deleuze postulates the necessity and the potential of overcoming mere critique and gain access to a philosophy of affirmation.

What if the becoming-woman, activated by a feminist philosophy of “becoming-diverse of women” turned out quite differently from what Deleuze had in mind? What if the asymmetry between the sexes led to unpredictable

results which defy immediate counter-representation? This possibility is not at all foreign to Deleuze, who does not fail to raise it as a query marked by a touch of irony: “*qu’arrive-t-il si la femme elle-même devient philosophe?*” What would happen if the empirical subject – woman – came to coincide with the symbolic power attributed to its function – the feminine? And what if this coincidence between the empirical and the symbolic were consciously, i.e., wilfully claimed and brought into representation by female feminist subjects of the post-humanist era? What if the symbolic power of the feminine came to be the hunting grounds of tribes of female feminists in their immense diversity? What then?

Let me stress that this query lies at the heart of poststructuralist feminism and of the kind of politics of subjectivity it has been constructing. What is at stake in this question is how can we define the point of coincidence between the unrepresented (female subjectivity) and the representable (the symbolic power of the feminine) in such a way as to result in the subversion of established codes and modes of subjectivation. What happens if woman as sign of the becoming-minority gains access to symbolic presence and gives rise to her own representations of her becoming?

I am tempted to answer, with matching irony: what would happen is a gigantic short-circuit which will shake the symbolic system to its foundations, altering its oldest mental habits. It will be like a huge boom, which will throw the institution of femininity upon the garbage bins of history, alongside the leftover of the old masculinity. I cannot think of a scenario more fitting of Deleuze’s nomadic imaginary: we have already entered a “post woman” era in which all sorts of hybrids are engendered in a joyful play of creative mutations.

Social evidence of the decline of the femininity/masculinity divide and of the challenge posed to sexual dichotomies by fashion and popular culture abound: and yet, even with her head shaven, like Sigourney Weaver in *Alien 3*; even with the body pierced by all sorts of “queer” needles and rings; even though the “trans-gender” fashion has outnumbered the “trans-sexual empire”, the new social forms of experimentation with the “becoming-diverse of women” cannot be reduced to sexually undifferentiated multiplicities.

We may choose to call these new subjects: “subject-in-process situated in a genealogy politically motivated by feminist struggles”. Alternatively, we may call it: “vehicle of permanent deterritorialization of the phallogocentric empire, motivated by the passion for non-oedipalized sexual difference”. Let us call this new subjectivity: “line of evasion from the morbid mutual dependence of feminine and masculine”; or else: “software carrying virus that may prove lethal to the oedipal-military-industrial complex”. Personally I would like to

call her “nomadic subject of collectively negotiated trajectories”, and insist on taking Deleuze along as travel companion.

Notes

1. See especially my *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994).
2. The different forms of Deleuze’s becoming are analyzed in chapter 5 of my forthcoming book: *Organs without Bodies. A Study of Teratologies*, with reference to the history of science and also to literature and cinema.
3. Gilles Deleuze: “Signes et événements”, interview with Raymond Bellour and Francois Ewald, *Magazine Littéraire*, No. 257 (December 1989), p. 23.
4. See for instance Judith Butler: *Bodies that Matter* (New York, Routledge, 1994); see also Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti: “Feminism by any other name”, *Differences*, Vol.6, n 1–2, 1994, pp. 27–61.
5. Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, *Scattered Hegemonies* (Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1994).