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Deleuze, Active Nihilism & Revolt

Lucrezia

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Gilles Deleuze’s thought is explicitly affirmative; his philosophy is known for its articulation of life as vital force, difference, creativity and becoming. It would be a misreading of Deleuze however to understand the affirmative drive of his thought as implying that he thinks only in positivities, or that he is concerned with affirming the world as it exists. Deleuze’s philosophy of difference and becoming, contrary to many readings of his work (both critical and celebratory), is in fact shot through with themes of aggression, antagonism and destruction which make his thought, and the tactical pointers he proposes for struggles against the existent, anything but an escapist or naively positive philosophy. As he writes in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* to affirm is to “set free what lives” and “instead of the labor of opposition or the suffering of the negative we have the warlike play of difference, affirmation and the joy of destruction.”¹

¹ Deleuze, G. (2006 [1962]) *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, The Athlone Press: London, p.174 and180.

This text proposes a reading of Deleuze which foregrounds the influence of Nietzsche's philosophy of active nihilism on Deleuze's thought and on what he means by affirmation. Through the lens of active nihilism, "becoming" and "nomadism" can be understood as concepts for an ethics of creative destruction and as strategies to escape capture by the State and the identities and orders it seeks to impose.

To understand Deleuzian affirmation, it is important to note that, alongside new creation, there is a violence and destruction inherent in becoming: the violence of an outside which destroys the self as it was and spurs it into new directions. This is a form of creation which leaves a trail of destruction in its wake. Deleuze and Nietzsche make clear that the force of negation which accompanies affirmation does not persist as an independent power, but is transformed or "transmuted" into something light and joyful, into a new affirmation. As Deleuze tells us, we can imagine this force of negativity as being like "soluble fire which ignites and then disappears into affirmation."

Readings and uses of Deleuze which ignore this negative shadow to affirmation, and which celebrate Deleuze's vitalist optimism while neglecting his joyful pessimism, risk obfuscating the destructive and nihilist elements of his thought. And it is this negative shadow which, it is argued here, gives Deleuzian affirmation its aggressive and antagonistic character: which make concepts such as becoming, nomadism and imperceptibility into concepts and strategies for the refusal, sabotage and destruction of systems which attempt to organize and capture forms-of-life into distinct, hierarchically organized, and controllable categories and identities.

Furthermore, Deleuze's notion of negativity offers a way to conceptualize the affective mutations of contemporary existence, such as depression, cynicism, hopelessness and passive nihilism, not as dead-ends roads of resignation nor as states of angst and alienation to be fetishized, but as strategic resources:

fuel to the fires which burn through the existent and open up possibilities of other worlds.

In a thesis titled “Escape”, Andrew Culp writes:

Cynicism, depression, and hopelessness fill reservoirs unleashed against Empire in revenge for the wounds it causes. Dangerous emotions pose a threat, not just to those who bear them, but to their source, Empire – the political imperative is to channel them. This should not be understood as an uncritical celebration of alienation or a politics of resentment. But these dangerous emotions are not unhealthy reactions to a sound world; they should be everyone’s natural reaction to the terrible situation facing us all. To throw them away would only rob some subjects of the only thing Empire has ever given them. So instead of avoiding their terrifying energy, dangerous emotions can be made political by giving them an orientation. This politics can become reactionary, as when it is used to restore a lost time or attack abstraction with stubborn disbelief. But once politics is freed from the demands of preservation, reproducibility, and repetition, innovation, difference, and singularity begin to flourish.²

This is a counterforce whose strength lies in an “immense capacity for making new galaxies of joy”³ out of and against the misery of capitalism. Depression, cynicism and hopelessness are transformed from states of paralysis in which our capacity

² http://www.academia.edu/5516631/Escape_Dissertation_, p.136.

³ Nietzsche, F. (1974 [1844-1900]) *The Gay Science*, “Our Eruptions”, Random House: New York, p.86.

to act is reduced into the negative shadow of insurrectionary joy.

A lesson often repeated by Nietzsche is that it is through experiencing pain and suffering we may come to know a more profound joy. He writes:

In the end, lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe sickness, also from the sickness of severe suspicion, one returns a newborn, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more child-like and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before.⁴

He continues:

A loss is a loss barely for one hour; somehow it also brings us some gift from heaven—new strength, for example, or at least a new opportunity for strength.⁵

Transforming pain into joy, heaviness and *ressentiment* into laughter, lightness and dance is the primary ethical challenge Nietzsche presents us with. In an affirmation of life which envelops the tragedies of the human species, Nietzsche rips apart all doctrines and images of life as inherently full of suffering, misery and struggle. This lesson is carried into anti-capitalist struggle by Deleuze and Guattari. As Foucault writes, Deleuze and Guattari remind us not to “think that one has to be sad

⁴ Ibid. p.37.

⁵ Ibid. p.256.

ressentiment, hate and revenge.”²⁴ Similarly, we can draw a difference between a fatalist and total nihilism which arms itself solely with forces of negation, and an active nihilism which is capable of both affirmation and negation; which sets upon the negation of the existent through affirmative destruction.

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There is a violence and destruction inherent in becoming: the violence of an outside which destroys the self as it was and spurs it into new directions. This is a form of creation which leaves a trail of destruction in its wake.

²⁴ Deleuze, G., (2006 [1962]) *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, The Athlone Press: London, p. 169.

in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable.”⁶ Deleuze’s affirmative thought then, is philosophy for political nihilists and pessimists who are joyful, who are under no illusion that a communist utopia awaits us on the other side of capitalism, but rather than this perspective leading to miserable resignation it can instead liberate us into the terrains of reckless antagonism and joyful destruction in and against the present, as we fight for impossible and unimaginable futures.

From Passive to Active Nihilism

For Deleuze affirmation and negativity are closely related as different powers in the passage from passive to active nihilism. He explains how the negative always precedes and follows the affirmative: that is, affirmation cannot take place without a corresponding negation. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze begins his discussion of nihilism with a critique of passive nihilism. In nihilism, “it is always the element of depreciation that reigns, the negative as will to power, the will as a will to nothingness.”⁷ Nihilism is a negativity that is reactive and through which the will to power is lost to “the becoming-reactive of forces” and, for Deleuze and Nietzsche, this reactive negativity needs to be transmuted (or transformed) into an affirmative will if it is going to do anything, if it is to take us anywhere and create the conditions for new becomings and new life.

To the question of “how nihilism can be defeated?” Deleuze responds by reversing his critique of nihilism through the elaboration of a second form of nihilism. In his explanation of Ni-

⁶ Foucault, M. (1983 [1972]) “Introduction to non-fascist life” in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.

⁷ Deleuze, G. (2006 [1962]) *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, The Athlone Press: London, p.161.

etzsche, Deleuze suggests that a nihilism which is passive and reactive in its mode of negation can only be defeated by a “fully completed and finished form of nihilism”⁸ This may appear confusing at first blush, but it becomes clearer when understood as relating to Nietzsche’s two distinct concepts of passive and active nihilism. Deleuze is here referring to the latter as completed nihilism.

The process of transmutation brings about completed nihilism. Deleuze explains why: “it is only by changing the element of values that all those values dependent on the old element are destroyed.”⁹ The passive, incomplete form of nihilism characterized by negation, reactionary forces and a will to nothingness is thus overcome through an active nihilism which seeks out the destruction of all old values in order to make way for the affirmation of difference. In this way, trans-mutation, the transformation of negativity into affirmation and difference which Deleuze and Nietzsche are calling for, is conceived of as active nihilism.

Deleuze notes a connection between reactive nihilism and the development of active nihilism: it is the manifestation of the first kind of nihilism which forces us to know the will to power and to gain knowledge of it:

The will to power is spirit, but what would we know of spirit without the spirit of revenge which reveals strange powers to us? The will to power is body, but what would we know of the body without the sickness which makes it known to us?¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.162-163.

by Deleuze as a force of the will to power only when it is transmuted into affirmation. The purpose of Deleuze’s concept of negation is always and only in how it “opens the field of affirmation.”²²

As anarchists and negative spirits, we can make use of Deleuze’s particular conception of negativity, and its articulation of a force of destruction which is “active, aggression profoundly linked to affirmation,” and in which “critique is destruction as joy, the aggression of the creator.”²³ In this way, we can bring the philosophy of active nihilism, as an ethics and a weapon, to our terrains of disorderly and antagonistic composition.

This philosophy teaches us the crucial importance of not becoming reactive to forces of repression and offers an ethics to combat affects of defeat issuing from the inevitable losses of the struggles in which we are engaged. Deleuze’s active nihilism also offers a philosophical framework for thinking through and against the nihilism of late capitalism; to experience the current organization of social misery as that which we must come to know in order to destroy; to *destroy what destroys you*.

Of the demon who follows Zarathustra on his travels on earth, Deleuze writes that he represents the purely negative form of nihilism, “because he denies every-thing, despises everything, he also believes he is taking negation to its supreme degree”. In the character of this demon we are given a warning against “living off of negation as an independent power” as “having no other quality but the negative [...] a creature of

²² Hardt, M. (1993) *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*, UCL Press: London, p.116.

²³ Deleuze, G., (2006 [1962]) *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, The Athlone Press: London, p. 81.

that form alternative conceptions of negation and critique more adequate to his project.²⁰

Negativity then, clearly has a place in Deleuze's thought and within Deleuze's concept of affirmation, as is seen in his reading of Nietzsche's philosophy of active nihilism. Deleuze makes it clear that affirmation cannot take place without the negative, as that which both drives us to affirm and as a force of destruction which opens the way for creation. Affirmation can only occur through the transformative power of an active nihilism, a desire for "overcoming". In order to establish the will to power as a will to affirm, we must first pass through the passive negativity of *ressentiment*; to know what it is that makes us suffer in order to seek the destruction of these forces, but not destruction as an end in itself but rather as necessary for affirmation.

Negativity is however always secondary to affirmation for Deleuze; it is its "zealous servant", while "[o]nly affirmation subsists as in independent power". Negativity becomes "absorbed" into affirmation like "soluble fire" so that only affirmation persists as a power: "the whole of negation is converted in its sub-stance, transmuted in its quality, *nothing remains of its own power of autonomy*". As Deleuze writes: "we are concerned with negations, but with negations as *powers of affirming*." Negativity is therefore key to affirmation but ultimately it is always superseded by affirmation, remaining only as "*the mode of being* of affirmation."²¹ There is thus no purpose in sustaining negativity as an autonomous force and it is a mistake to consider it as such: negativity is understood

²⁰ Hardt, M. (1993) *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*, UCL Press: London, p.115.

²¹ Deleuze, G., (2006 [1962]) *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, The Athlone Press: London, p.166-169.

In other words, it is through the negative experience of resentment, sickness, and the reactive spirit of revenge that we are able to come to know the will to power as the will to affirmation, and to overcome passive nihilism. Nihilism, which was earlier presented by Deleuze as a negative force needing to be defeated makes its second appearance as an active force, and is presented as key to the will to power: "thus nihilism, the will to nothingness, is not only a will to power, a quality of the will to power, but the *ratio cognoscendi* [principle] of the will to power in general". This principle of nihilism is however not an end to itself, but is a necessary step towards affirmation. As Deleuze writes: "Nihilism expresses the quality of the negative as *ratio cognoscendi* of the will to power; but it cannot be brought to completion without transmuting itself into the opposite quality, into affirmation as *ratio essendi* [raison d'être] of the same will."¹¹ And elsewhere: "Destruction becomes active to the extent that the negative is transmuted and converted into affirmative power: the 'eternal joy of becoming' which is avowed in an instant, the 'joy of annihilation', the 'affirmation of annihilation and destruction.'¹² Here again we can see how negation and its appearance as nihilism are only complete when they are transformed into an affirmative force of joyful destruction and creation.

In the transmutation of negativity into affirmation there is a "change in quality"¹³, from a negative quality to an affirmative one. This qualitative change brings about a radical transformation: "in place of depreciated life we have a life which is affirmed – and the expression 'in place of' is still incorrect. It

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 164. and quotes from Nietzsche F. (1888) *Ecce Homo*.

¹³ Ibid. p. 165.

is the place itself which changes.”¹⁴ The negative is said to become a power of affirming when it is no longer at the service of reactive forces but instead “is subordinated to affirmation and passes into the service of an excess of life.”¹⁵ The negative here is neither denied nor suppressed but is rather put to use as the force which desires destruction and thus, through an active nihilism, leads to affirmation. This is how we can understand the function and the force of negation. “At the limit” of the destructive process of active nihilism, writes Michael Hardt, there is the moment of transmutation when, “at midnight, the focal point, there is a transformation, a conversion from knowledge to creation, from savage negation to absolute affirmation, from painful interiority to joyful exteriority.”¹⁶

The destruction which is implicit to negation leads to affirmation, as the source of creation. Referring to Zarathustra’s “supreme degree of negation”, Deleuze writes, “*destruction as the active destruction of all known values* is the trail of the creator.”¹⁷ In this way, affirmation leaves a trail of destruction in its wake, as that which always accompanies any affirmation but is never its primary object. Furthermore, Deleuze states that negation also always precedes affirmation as “[*d*]estruction as the active destruction of the man who wants to perish and to be overcome announces the creator.” In this way Nietzsche’s discovery is “the negativity of the positive”¹⁸ which is able to

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Hardt, M. (1993) *Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy*, UCL Press: London, p.51.

¹⁷ Deleuze, G., (2006 [1962]) *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, The Athlone Press: London, p.167.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 170.

break out of all forms of *ressentiment* and reactive thinking and living. As Nietzsche writes: “We negate and must negate because something in us wants to live and affirm – something that we perhaps do not know or see yet.”¹⁹

Michael Hardt suggests that Deleuze’s affirmationism has been misunderstood by the Hegelian tradition (which we can extend to Benjamin Noys’s recent critiques in *The Persistence of the Negative*). Hardt writes that “[t]he great thinkers of the Frankfurt School, for example, have conceived of affirmation as a passive acceptance of the contemporary state of affairs, as a naïve and irresponsible optimism”, a perspective which according to Hardt remains in contemporary Hegelians (as, for example, in the critique of Deleuze made by Judith Butler in *Subjects of De-sire* (1987)), when they claim that philosophies of affirmation “remain impotent because they have deprived themselves of the power of negation”. Hardt argues, however, as is also suggested here, that “[a]ffirmation [...] is not opposed to critique. On the contrary, it is based on a total, thoroughgoing critique that pushes the forces of negation to their limit. Affirmation is intimately tied to antagonism.” Furthermore, and crucially, this negative moment has an “absolute, non-dialectical character.” When the Hegelian critics conceive of affirmative thought as “uncritical” or “anti-critical” thinking, according to Hardt,

We are once again faced with a nuance or an alternative that is misunderstood as a polar opposition. In other words, Deleuzian affirmation does indeed contest the Hegelian form of negation and critique, but it does not reject negation and critique *tout court*; rather it highlights the nuances

¹⁹ Nietzsche, F. (1974 [1887]) *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, New York: Dover Publications, p. 246.