Plateaus – New Directions in Deleuze Studies

‘It’s not a matter of bringing all sorts of things together under a single concept but rather of relating each concept to variables that explain its mutations.’

Gilles Deleuze, Negotiations

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THE PRINCIPLES OF DELEUZIAN PHILOSOPHY

Koichiro Kokubun

Translated by Wren Nishina

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List of Abbreviations

Gilles Deleuze


LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS


Félix Guattari


List of Abbreviations

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari


N.B. citations will give first the page number of the English translation followed by the page number of the text in the original French, e.g. (DR, 26/35).
Translator’s Preface

Translator’s prefaces, as we all know, are written to be ignored – a sad but inevitable fate. All the more so for a preface to a text such as the present volume, whose exposition, structure and argument are veritable models of clarity and distinction, those twin standards of philosophy that Descartes famously upheld as the golden metric for philosophic concepts. Elsewhere Professor Kokubun has mused that he feels more like a Cartesian than a Spinozist in disposition (scandalous for a Deleuzian!); it is for you, the reader, to judge the accuracy of this self-assessment.

This, however, puts the translator in an awkward position. For any lack of clarity and distinction that has dared to creep into the ensuing pages will necessarily be of my own doing (rather like the housekeeper who will with every justification be held responsible for a theft while he or she is cleaning the house). In particular I must insert a short obituary for my favourite word in the English language, ‘verily’, which appeared approximately 500 times in the first draft of the translation. These were erased (to my utmost chagrin) in toto after both our long-suffering editors and two anonymous reviewers raised more eyebrows than I can count. In retrospect, for the best: Kokubun’s emphases are always merited and immaculately lime-lighted, and the locusts of ‘verily’ (swarming straight out of the Old Testament) would only have occluded it.

Now it is one thing to be in possession of great philosophic acuity and originality, quite another to have a sense for philosophical pedagogy (one might be forgiven for assuming these were in inverse proportion, if not for occasional exceptions like Kokubun). The latter, at the very least, requires a very precise identification of what is difficult to latch onto in one’s own thinking, a skill precious as diamond. This must be one reason why Kokubun’s explication of Deleuzian practical philosophy as pedagogy and apprenticeship (in Chapter 3 of the present volume) is, as you will soon see, so successful.
Translator’s Preface

We learn nothing from those who say: ‘Do as I do.’ Our only teachers are those who tell us to ‘do with me’, and are able to emit signs to be developed in heterogeneity rather than propose gestures for us to reproduce. (DR, 26/35)

As he quotes Deleuze. It is perhaps debatable how successfully Deleuze put into practice what he preached, his remarkable lectures (many of which are unfortunately still pending in English translation) notwithstanding; Kokubun, for his part, has clearly taken these words to heart.

This pedagogic fervour comes to the fore in the ‘Research Notes’ interluding each chapter, which is a surprising stylistic innovation of this work (although there is a clear forerunner in Giorgio Agamben’s scholia). In these we are privy to Kokubun’s thoughts in the very process of their crystallising. The tone of the research notes is somewhere in between the intensely private scribbles one carves into the margins of books, and the philosophical lecture, assertorical but at the same time spontaneous. In other words, they are embodiments of Kokubun’s great generosity: what another philosopher might hide under lock and key Kokubun offers ungrudgingly to the world. And this so that we can, quite literally, ‘do with him’, apprentice ourselves to the way he reads, thinks, writes. Behind each note we can almost hear the man whispering in our ear: ‘do as I do’.

A final word on the text. It would perhaps be more accurate to call what you have before you an English edition rather than an English translation. Working closely with Kokubun and always with his seal of approval, I have expanded certain passages while cutting some others, mostly endnotes which would serve no interest for the English reader. In other news, the ‘Addendum on Kant’ in Chapter 2 was written from scratch following the suggestion of our anonymous readers, as a brief intervention into one of the more expressly philosophic of the Anglo-American debates on Deleuze.

* * *

Translation, as I now know, is arduous business, and in truth there were many around me who propped me up during the process, without whom I may never have finished what I started (happens a lot to me). Acknowledgement is due to my family, who tolerated the pile of Deleuze’s books which had taken up permanent residence on the dining room table; Nii-san, who knew how to distract me just before I descended into insanity (next time, please a little earlier each time . . .); my dear friends, who promised to buy a copy of the book
once it was out, thereby forcing me to keep typing (I’m following you guys up on that!); Mr. Misao Murase, without whose help I would still be camping out in libraries hunting for citations; and last but not least Professor Kokubun himself, who not only decided to entrust his work into the hands of a veritable nobody, but has since shared with me the great fount of his erudition and experience, philosophical and beyond. Indeed he has become something of a mentor to me, for which no amount of gratitude could possibly be adequate.

I dedicate this translation to my grandmother, who is partially to blame for what I have become. For what I will become, I have only myself to blame.

W. N.
Gilles Deleuze, one of the twentieth century’s greatest philosophers, was born in the 17th arrondissement of the French capital in 1925. Little Gilles was your average Parisian child, with a fondness for collecting stamps in his spare time, as Deleuze was to recall later in life. The Second World War began when he was fifteen; evacuated to Normandy, it was there that lessons on French literature given by a young professor awakened his intellectual curiosity. The encounter with philosophy was to take place not long after, in his final year of lycée. Recognising in his very first philosophy class his calling for the discipline, he took up a life of research as a matter of course. His thesis at the Sorbonne on the British Empiricist David Hume became his first publication. Following a decade of intermittent ‘silence’, in the 1960s he produced study after study in close succession, radically reconstituting every field he deigned to intervene in. But it was his 1972 Anti-Oedipus, co-authored with psychoanalyst-turned-political-activist Félix Guattari, that secured him lasting fame. Embraced as one of the prime representatives of what came to be known in Anglo-American circles as the postmodernist/poststructuralist movement, his reputation spread far and wide. And yet through all this bustle he himself was largely to stay put in his 17th arrondissement flat. Disliking travel, he spent little time on the likes of lecture tours, concentrating instead on his university teaching and his publications. Indeed, his life remained remarkably constant throughout. Plagued for decades by a respiratory condition, in the last years of his life he was forced to use an oxygen inhalator. This physiological burden may well have proven too much, and on 4 November 1995 he threw himself out of a window at his home. It is a curious irony of history that his death coincided with the assassination of the then Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, who had ratified the Oslo Accords and reconciled with Yasser Arafat; Deleuze had previously (in 1982) published a text entitled ‘The Importance of Being of Yasser Arafat’.

Deleuze’s readership continues to grow all over the world, and research on his work is prolific. There exists a dedicated journal,
there are international conferences on his work, and every year a vast number of research papers are churned out. Yet none of this proves in any way that Deleuze’s works are today being read; if anything, we have reason to believe the very opposite. One of the lasting contributions made by twentieth-century philosophy is the recognition of the profound complexity of the act of reading. Nonetheless, this lesson is most prone to be forgotten precisely for those authors who are discussed most frequently. Thus, the present study aims to do just one thing: to read the works of Gilles Deleuze. In this way we seek to prepare the minimum conditions which will enable one to read Deleuze. The admittedly grandiose title of this volume is intended to give expression to this undertaking. By ‘principles’ we mean the fundamental structures at the basis of things; ‘The Principles of Deleuzian Philosophy’ therefore signifies the fundamental structures at the basis of Deleuze’s philosophic thought. We believe that a proper understanding of these will pave the way towards a proper understanding of the concepts and theses which arise from them. If on the other hand the principles are not made sufficiently clear, those concepts and theses will be condemned to fragmentation, becoming nothing more than receptacles for the wishful thinking of each individual practitioner.

Where then should an investigation into the principles of Deleuzian philosophy begin? We will select as our point of departure that aspect of his thought which is at present most enthusiastically contested. For it is where debate is most clamorous that the act of reading is maximally problematised.

* * *

The assessment of Deleuze’s thinking seems to be polarised around the issue of politics. Those who see the germs of a new politics in Deleuze are pitted against those who maintain that politics is absent in the works of this thinker. The question we must ask is therefore the following: why do different commentators see two incompatible figures of Deleuze, the political and the apolitical? And which is the ‘correct’ figure of Deleuze?

The popularity of Deleuze’s thought has grown explosively in recent years, in particular within Anglo-American academia, but it is noteworthy that much of what has been written in this vein has concerned itself with a ‘political Deleuze’. Even restricting ourselves to scholars who deal explicitly with political themes, we can cite Nicholas Thoburn (2003), who emphasises the importance of
Deleuzian micropolitics; Ian Buchanan (2000), who has continued to publish widely on the relation of Deleuze to politics; Jason Read (2003), who reads Deleuze’s work as a renewal of Marxism; several collections of essays, such as Deleuze and Politics (Buchanan and Thoburn (eds) 2008) and Deleuze and Marx (Jain (ed.) 2009) . . . and this list does not even feign to be exhaustive. There was once a time, back in the late 1990s, when theorists were concerned that Deleuze’s thought was read one-dimensionally as a glorified Bergsonian vitalism, or else as an ontology of virtuality,1 but since 2000 it is undeniably the ‘political Deleuze’ that has taken centre-stage in the research.

Some may dispute this, but the most substantial effort in this direction has probably been Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s Empire, published in 2000. It is well-known that the new political subject they christened the ‘multitude’ owes a great deal to Spinoza, but it was during the course of his study of Deleuze that Hardt had caught the shadows of such a vision in the first place. Hardt claims in his Gilles Deleuze: An Apprenticeship in Philosophy that the early Deleuze moved back in time from Bergson to Nietzsche and finally to Spinoza, in whom he discovered ‘an avenue to enter the field of practice’ (Hardt 1993: 117). Based on this framework, he links such Deleuzian concepts as ‘multiplicity’ and ‘assemblage’ to a vision of radical democratic society, and develops a political utopia of his own in the process by which the ‘multitude’ is reformed and renewed. At the basis of Empire’s detailed analyses of the international political/economic situation lies a total fidelity to this framework. As for Negri, the importance of Deleuze (especially the commentaries on Spinoza) for his work goes without saying. Negri’s Savage Anomaly, completed behind bars and published in 1981, has Deleuze’s Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza (1968) as its central point of reference (incidentally, Deleuze himself provided the foreword to the French translation of The Savage Anomaly, released in 1982). It requires no leap of the imagination to see that the great international popularity of Empire contributed in no small part to the present dominance of the image of the ‘political Deleuze’. In any case, the fact is that many seek in Deleuze the vision of a new politics, or claim to have in fact discovered such a politics, and their writings are in turn read by others, establishing an influential paradigm.

At the other extreme, however, are certain theorists who consider the attempt to locate a politics in Deleuze to be severely misguided, instead proposing forcefully the image of the ‘apolitical Deleuze’. At the forefront is Slavoj Žižek, who asserts: ‘[i]t is crucial to note that
not a single one of Deleuze’s own texts is in any way directly political; Deleuze “in himself” is a highly elitist author, indifferent toward politics’ (Žižek 2004: 20; original emphasis). One can detect here a sarcasm directed at the facile crossing of Deleuze with the political, which according to Žižek is characteristic of the current, principally Anglo-American reception of Deleuze’s work. No mercy is shown towards those theorists whom he thinks are content just to project their own political aspirations onto Deleuze.

Despite this, Žižek’s underlying motivation is if anything to sketch out the possibility of a genuine ‘political Deleuze’. By unleashing a deliberate provocation, he hopes to incite vocal, ‘political’ opposition. By contrast, there are certain theorists for whom it goes without saying that Deleuze’s thought has no relation to politics, that Deleuze himself had no interest in politics. Alain Badiou is a prominent example: according to him, Deleuze subsumed every event of those ‘a-changin’ times’ – the last years of the colonial wars, Gaullism, May ’68, the red years, the revival of Mitterandism, the collapse of socialism . . . – under the monologic ready-made interpretative framework of the ‘Virtual’ (Badiou 2000). Deleuzian thought, it is argued, can explain away all and any political event using the all-powerful concept of the ‘Virtual’; and that which explains everything ultimately explains nothing at all. It is clear that for Badiou there is quite simply no politics in Deleuze. Likewise, René Schérer (1998) relates that in a private conversation Jacques Rancière responded negatively to the question of whether a Deleuzian politics is possible. For Rancière, the question does not even merit a proper academic discussion.

It is worth noting at this point that the ‘apolitical Deleuze’ is not merely a trope rehearsed by theorists hostile to Deleuze. Peter Hallward, in the conclusion of his study of Deleuze centred around the notion of ‘creation’, flatly asserts: ‘[a]lthough no small number of enthusiasts continue to devote much energy and ingenuity to the task, the truth is that Deleuze’s work is essentially indifferent to the politics of this world’ (Hallward 2006: 162). Hallward’s diagnosis is not an arbitrary interjection, as we can sense from his accurate assessment of the situation that ‘no small number of enthusiasts’ have taken it upon themselves as a ‘task’ to apply Deleuze’s thought to the political. He problematises the hegemonic reception of Deleuze’s thought precisely because he too is under its spell. It is too early to tell if Hallward’s claim is justified; his unease, however, is justified.

Superficially, Deleuze’s writings are decorated by such concepts as ‘becoming’ and ‘becoming-revolutionary’, concepts which seem
to lead straight to a transformation of the world. However, as we will see in greater detail, Deleuze is also a philosopher who ascribes great importance to passivity, and is consistently suspicious of such notions as the will, or activity. Far from these two tendencies coming into conflict, they entwine to constitute the unified body of his philosophy. To put it schematically, one undergoes becoming when one is affected by forces and powers. We can formulate this in another way: Deleuze thought endlessly about what it means for ‘something to change’ (intransitively), but he spent precious little time on what it means ‘to change something’ (transitively). The philosophy we can extract from this might well be a Heraclitean one of never-ending flux, but it is not the philosophy of revolutionary intervention hoped for by much of Deleuze’s current readership. It must be admitted therefore that the figure of the ‘apolitical Deleuze’ put forward by Žižek and others has conclusive grounds. It is entirely unclear how Deleuze can answer the suspicion that his philosophy amounts to this: all things which happen, happen thus because they were meant to happen thus. It goes without saying that we are here at a maximal distance from the political, howsoever conceived.

Now Žižek provides an important point of reference in taking this question further. According to him, Deleuze’s own philosophical method must be sought in the early monographs (Difference and Repetition, The Logic of Sense, etc.) and the shorter introductory volumes (Proust and Signs, Coldness and Cruelty, etc.), which must be distinguished from the books Deleuze co-authored with Félix Guattari. The stakes here are sky high, for if Žižek is right then the currently ascendant ‘Anglo-American’ ‘political Deleuze’ is none other than a ‘Guattarised’ Deleuze. Dismissing Anti-Oedipus as Deleuze’s ‘worst book’, Žižek takes every possible measure to dissolve this ‘Guattarised’ image of Deleuze.

If at times Žižek dabbles in provocation for its own sake, this should not detract from the immense importance of what he has drawn our attention to. And this can only be grasped once we are equipped with a better understanding of the position occupied by Guattari in the present reception of Deleuze. Having graced the world with his successive magna opera Difference and Repetition (1968) and The Logic of Sense (1969), an encounter with political activist Guattari, at the time working in psychiatric therapy, led to the publication of Anti-Oedipus in 1972 under both their names, following a two-and-a-half year period of intense collaboration. The two continued their joint intellectual labour beyond this initial success, giving birth to such
works as *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). It is crucial to bear in mind that these books do not follow the usual format assumed by co-authorship. Typically, such works begin by individual authors first writing up their respective sections separately, which are then amassed together; in Deleuze and Guattari’s case, however, such division is wholly absent. All we have is the single volume, with both of their signatures appended. If such a format was not the first of its kind, as a work of philosophy it is radical. We set aside for the moment the various difficulties which arise from this practice of ‘dual writing (écritre à deux)’. What must rather be highlighted at the outset is the following: because of this unprecedented format, the fact that the collaborative works such as *Anti-Oedipus* are written by both Deleuze and Guattari (henceforth we employ the label ‘Deleuze-Guattari’ to refer to this unique authorship) is all too often ignored, or at least passed over. As Stéphane Nadaud, editor of the vast reams of text Guattari wrote for *Anti-Oedipus*, has noted, the works of Deleuze-Guattari are referenced by countless academics as if they were the works of Deleuze tout court.\(^3\)

We are now in a position to understand more fully the importance of Žižek’s assessment that it was Guattari who introduced into Deleuze’s apolitical philosophy its allegedly political elements. Hence those theorists who desperately want to politicise Deleuze are offered an attractive possibility: cover over the elitist, apolitical side of Deleuze by treating the works of Deleuze-Guattari as if they were Deleuze’s own, so as to exaggerate the political weighting. When something unfavourable crops up in Deleuze, simply pick and choose by masquerading the works of Deleuze-Guattari as the works of Deleuze himself. In other words (though Žižek does not go quite so far), the confusion of Deleuze and Deleuze-Guattari is no more than the base expression of the desire of those theorists who want to re-engineer Deleuze into the political thinker he never in fact was.

Indeed we must press our suspicions one step further: was not the figure of the ‘political Deleuze’ we have been chasing just the mirage of Guattari? Were the aforementioned ‘no small number of enthusiasts’ not expending an inordinate amount of energy and ingenuity in interpreting the thought of Guattari instead? As a matter of fact, the *Anti-Oedipus Papers* have revealed that the multifarious concepts which appear in the work of Deleuze-Guattari – (de-/re-)territorialisation, (de-)codification, desiring-machines, connection/conjunction/disjunction, collective enunciation, the love between the orchid and the wasp . . . – all hail from Guattari.\(^4\) In other words: if we wish
Prologue

to problematise the parallel existence of the political and apolitical figures of Deleuze in the literature, we must begin by determining with precision the relation between Deleuze and Deleuze-Guattari.

If now we decide to distinguish the two authorships of Deleuze and Deleuze-Guattari, we face yet another difficulty. This is, so to speak, the ambiguity inherent in the object of study. With Deleuze-Guattari, we have before us a uniquely original way of developing a philosophical, historical and social theory, based on unprecedented concepts which can only be categorised as ‘their thought’. To that extent, any prospective student of Deleuze-Guattari’s thought is presented with a clear researchable object. Compare Deleuze himself, and the situation is radically different, for the majority of his works are monographs interpreting other philosophers and authors. In these works, Deleuze undertakes detailed studies of the respective philosophers’ concepts, or the authors’ themes; in other words, what populates Deleuze’s books is the thought of the philosopher or author he is writing about, and not the thought of Deleuze himself. Descartes put forward a philosophy of the Cogito, Kant developed the transcendental method, Hegel embroiled all things in the dialectic, and Bergson strained to see reality differently with duration. Deleuze’s works, however, are not written in this way. Deleuze always begins from some determinate object, and relentlessly interprets it; in spite of this, such works are unproblematically read as expressions of ‘Deleuze’s philosophy’. There can be nothing more obvious than this fact, and yet it is just as much of a fact that far too many scholars of Deleuze are oblivious to it, or else wilfully neglect it. If a piece of research has failed to discharge the prejudices held by the writer, that is, if it includes not purely information gained from the object of research but theories held by the writer prior to his/her study of the object, then such research should be cast aside as imprecise. This principle applies to all and any writer who undertakes scholarly research. Deleuze himself cannot be an exception: if, for example, Deleuze’s studies on Spinoza are not liberated from his own prejudices, that is, if they contain theories held by Deleuze prior to his study of Spinoza, then we must simply discard this work as inaccurate. However, the present situation is very different. Take for instance the following remark by Hardt, made in the context of explaining his own approach to reading Deleuze: ‘[i]f a philosopher presents arguments with which Deleuze might find fault, he does not critique them but simply leaves them out of his discussion’ (Hardt 1993: xix). If what Hardt says is true, all Deleuze is doing is arbitrarily stitching a patchwork from
the relevant texts, based ultimately on his own prejudices. If such an imprecise and unfaithful procedure is indeed at work in Deleuze, why does Hardt not attack it? What gives us the right to accord Deleuze’s essays this special status of immunity? A scholar who reads philosophy like this is not a scholar but a charlatan. This then is the pressing issue which we must confront in the following pages: is Hardt’s account of Deleuze’s method really valid? Does Deleuze really mix and match texts at will, to make a philosopher say what he wants them to say?

Unless and until we overcome these difficulties, the process of theorising Gilles Deleuze will remain unanchored. How can one expect to be able to study Deleuze’s thought, his philosophy, when one does not even know where to look? We would be no better than those hapless explorers who fantasise about the lost treasures of the ancient world. There is a very real possibility that much of what circulates under the banner of Deleuze is in fact nothing more than such idle daydreaming; all this hype surrounding him was nothing more than transcribed personal prejudice megaphoned under Deleuze’s name. Therefore, we must begin from a deceptively basic question: where is it that we must look to find ‘Deleuzian thought’?

Notes

1. See for example Akira Asada’s remarks in Uno and Asada 1997.
2. Hallward provides a useful overview of the debate surrounding the figure of the ‘Anglo-American’, ‘apolitical Deleuze’ in the section referred to here.
3. ‘We refrain from listing those studies concerning Anti-Oedipus which cite only the name of Gilles Deleuze. How can one not be moved to sorrow at such a treatment, if one cares to understand how the two friends had worked together?’ (AOP, 11; this passage has been omitted wholesale from the English edition, hence the translation is our own).
4. We must accord due consideration to Badiou’s approach to reading Deleuze. In his Deleuze: The Clamor of Being cited earlier, Badiou (2000) restricts his attention to the works Deleuze wrote on his own. Guattari’s name is not even mentioned, nor is there any programmatic prohibition against confusing Deleuze and Deleuze-Guattari. Badiou would no doubt say that this is blindingly obvious, since his is a study on Deleuze; in fact, we can go so far as to say that such an attitude is more faithful to Deleuze than are those theorists (partial to Deleuze) who have no qualms in equivocating between the two authorships.