

Paul Patton

Deleuzian Concepts: Philosophy, Colonization, Politics.

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In one of Deleuze's most provocative statements (in a career full of provocative statements), he describes how he came

to see the history of philosophy as a sort of buggery [*enculage*] or (it comes to the same thing) immaculate conception. I saw myself as taking an author from behind, and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous. It was really important for it to be his own child, because the author had to actually say all I had him saying. But the child was bound to be monstrous too because it resulted from all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions that I really enjoyed. (*Negotiations* p. 6)

This describes the methodology of Deleuze's monographs on various thinkers in the history of philosophy. In these texts, he would push philosophers as far they would go, exposing hidden fault lines and unexpected assumptions. His works produced novel interpretations, drawing out the concept of 'expression' in the works of Spinoza, for example, or developing the philosophy of 'the fold' in Leibniz.

Implicit in the language of 'monstrosity' is the idea that such an interpretative practice would be a radicalizing one, challenging mainstream accounts of the history of philosophy. And yet, what happens when we apply this interpretative methodology to a radical philosopher? What, for example, would happen if we were to turn it against Deleuze himself? This is exactly what Paul Patton's *Deleuzian Concepts* seeks to do. And here, the attempt to engage with Deleuze via his own methodology serves not a radicalizing project, but perhaps a domesticating one, as Patton seeks to (in the words of fellow Deleuzian traveler Alex Lefebvre) promote 'a sober, more mundane use of Deleuze' (3).

Of course, to pose this opposition between a 'radical' Deleuze, and more mundane mainstream philosophers is to produce straw men on both sides of the equation. On the one hand, the very point of Deleuze's philosophy is to show exactly how 'radical' even keystone figures in the history of philosophy are (see, for example, his recontextualizations of Kant). On the other hand, Deleuze himself could be a sobering influence. His book *Nietzsche and Philosophy* provides a rigorous and systematic account of that notoriously aphoristic philosopher. It is this systematic Deleuze that Patton seeks to draw out.

It helps that Patton remains a masterful exegete of Deleuze. As the translator of *Difference and Repetition*, and the author of *Deleuze and the Political*, Patton has an insight into Deleuze's texts which makes his commentary invaluable. (What is more, this mastery includes both Deleuze's solo writings, as well as his collaborations with Guattari, a distinct advantage in a field of Deleuzian commentators who tend to be comfortable primarily with one or the other.)

Patton's insight is a deep boon for our understanding of Deleuze. There is the frequent tendency to read Deleuze as a poet or a mystic. Patton counters this by providing an image of the serious and, yes, sober scholar underneath. What is more, Patton is able to do this without sacrificing the novelty and radical nature of Deleuze's philosophy. Indeed, even as he provides a straightforward reading of Deleuze, Patton makes clear the importance of not doing so at the expense of the dynamism and mobility of his thought. As he states early on,

[Deleuze's] way of doing philosophy does not lend itself to the kinds of summary formula that pronounce him to be a philosopher of immanence, of creativity, of the extra-worldly... His commitment to movement in thought raises a question mark over all claims to have discovered the essence of his philosophy. (15)

This project is pursued in the book's first (and perhaps most useful) section, 'Philosophy, Concepts, and Language'. The first chapter, 'Mobile Concepts, Metaphor and the Problem of Referentiality', seeks to provide an understanding of Deleuze and Guattari's 'metaphysics of process' (19). This discussion draws heavily on *What is Philosophy?* with its argument that philosophy is primarily the practice of inventing concepts. This focus on the creation of concepts also brings to the fore the way in which Deleuzian concepts must be understood as 'mobile'. Philosophy constantly reterritorializes and reinvents concepts in different contexts, and for different purposes. Deleuze's concepts then are 'not built in orderly fashion on secure foundations but constructed, as it were, on the run, in the course of an open-ended series of encounters with diverse empirical contents' (19).

Treating philosophical concepts as mobile also requires rejecting reading them representationally and thus taking 'at face value Deleuze and Guattari's claim to write literally rather than metaphorically' (20). By advancing an understanding of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts simultaneously as mobile and non-metaphorical, Patton wards off 'poetic' or 'mystical' readings, while at the same time eschewing an overly systematized reading which would ignore the rhizomatic and nomadic character of their writing (not to mention readings which somehow manage to do both, such as, for example, Peter Hallward's *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*, which Patton has several choice words for).

This methodological investigation is then pursued in two following chapters that put Deleuze in conversation with Derrida and Rorty, respectively. In addition to showing unexplored affinities among these three thinkers, these chapters also begin laying the

groundwork for Patton's reading of Deleuze as a normative political philosopher, a project that comes to fruition in the third section.

The book's second section, 'Colonization and Decolonization in History and Literature', furthers this discussion by showing how the philosophical creation of concepts can be applied to the issue of colonialism. In principle, this interplay is a productive one, deepening Patton's account of Deleuzian philosophical methodology, while also providing a new way to think of the 'event' of colonization. In practice, however, this section feels the thinnest, if for no other reason than that Patton has discussed this intersection to more sustained—and better—effect elsewhere (in the aforementioned *Deleuze and the Political*, as well as his edited volume *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*). Chapter 6, 'Becoming-Animal and Pure Life in Coetzee's *Disgrace*', provides the most interesting application of this theme, providing a Deleuzian reading of the South African writer's notoriously difficult novel.

It is the third section, 'Normative Political Philosophy', which is the most controversial, seeking to provide a more 'sober' Deleuze, not just methodologically, but politically. Chapters 7 and 8 make the case for reading Deleuze and Guattari as normative political philosophers, ones interested in pursuing a broadly democratic politics, through their concept of 'becoming-democratic'. Though Deleuze and Guattari only briefly invoke 'becoming-democratic' at the end of *What is Philosophy?* Patton makes a convincing case that it is central to their political philosophy (this contra Nicholas Thoburn, for example, or Philip Mengue, who claims that 'there is a fundamental antipathy towards democracy in Deleuze's political thought' [162]). Though certainly political, the more difficult question is whether this constitutes a properly 'normative' philosophy, something Deleuze would have had a much harder time with. However, this claim is softened somewhat by Patton's earlier comments on the mobility of Deleuzian concepts.

Less convincing—or perhaps simply more radical—is the final chapter in which Patton puts Deleuze in conversation with Rawls. While Patton does not elide the methodological, ontological and political differences between the two, he does argue that 'we should not overestimate the difference between Rawlsian and Deleuzian utopianism. The distance between them is narrower than we might imagine at first glance' (188). Patton doesn't exactly wish to argue that Deleuze is a crypto-liberal, so much as to argue there is no necessary opposition between a Deleuzian political philosophy and a liberal political philosophy (and perhaps even some subterranean affinities).

To do this, Patton has to explain (or explain away) Deleuze's frequent critiques of liberal states, liberal capitalism and even basic liberal concepts such as human rights. Patton's response is to argue that in the case of rights, 'his opposition is only to certain ways of understanding...rights' and should not imply a 'rejection of rights, the rule of law or democratic government as such' (172). Patton uses a similar defense of democratic states, arguing that Deleuze has been involved in critiquing only specific historical instantiations of liberal democratic states, and not the concept as such. This argument is convincing as far as it goes. However, arguing that there is no necessary conflict between

Deleuzian philosophy and liberalism isn't quite the same thing as arguing that a Deleuzian politics leads one towards liberalism or, for that matter, the liberal state. Indeed, conspicuously absent in Patton's account is any in-depth discussion of capitalism or the state-form as such, two major concerns for Deleuzo-Guattarian political philosophy, and two major stumbling blocks to forming a more sober, more mundane, more liberal Deleuze.

More convincing is Patton's account of the way in which Deleuze can provide a useful supplement to liberal philosophy, and challenge its fundamental assumptions and weaknesses. In the end, one is left with the sense that Rawls needs Deleuze far more than Deleuze needs Rawls. Which is a useful insight, but perhaps not as radical a one as Patton wanted to make.

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