

**the anomalist:** // . n (pl.-ies) Something that deviates from what is standard, normal, or expected: // [www.theanomalist.com](http://www.theanomalist.com) : // [info@theanomalist.com](mailto:info@theanomalist.com)

***Becoming Multitude***  
***Toward a Theory and Practice of Absolute Democracy***

**- Timothy S. Murphy -**

At the very beginning of their last joint work, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note that “What is philosophy?” is a question that can only be posed “late in life, with the arrival of old age and the time for speaking concretely.”<sup>1</sup> Their answer to that belated question is well known: “philosophy is the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts” (*WP* 2). Apparently the parallel question “What is democracy?” can only be posed belatedly as well, for despite decades of solo and collaborative work on politics, it is only in the chapter of that book entitled “Geophilosophy” that Deleuze and Guattari turn their attention to democracy as an extensive problem. Prior to this, democracy had been addressed either explicitly or implicitly as a subordinate or epiphenomenal issue, as an adjective that occasionally modified the noun that names the real focus of their political thought: the State, the despotic agency of overcoding and transcendence. A single example from *Anti-Oedipus* suffices to demonstrate this:

As for democracies, how could one fail to recognize in them the despot who has become colder and more hypocritical, more calculating, since he must himself count and code instead of overcoding the accounts? ...The differences [among historical variants of the State-form] could be determining only if the despotic State were one concrete formation among others, to be treated comparatively. But the despotic State is the abstraction to be realized...only as an abstraction. It assumes its

---

<sup>1</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, p.1. Further references to this book will be noted parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *WP*.

immanent concrete existence only in the subsequent forms that cause it to return under other guises and conditions.<sup>2</sup>

This includes the democratic guise, which does not constitute an escape from despotism but merely its most elaborate ruse.

This harsh judgment on democracy is only slightly tempered in *What is Philosophy?*, where they note that democratic, dictatorial and totalitarian States are all “isomorphous with regard to the world market insofar as the latter not only presupposes but produces inequalities of development.” As a result, “democratic States are so bound up with, and compromised by, dictatorial States, that the defense of human rights must necessarily take up the internal criticism of every democracy” (WP 106). Human rights themselves will be subject to critique below, but for the moment let us remain focused on democracy more generally. The trouble is that “Democracies are majorities,” thus molar and rigid, and they obstruct or repel “the becoming [which] is by its nature that which always eludes the majority” (WP 108). Becoming is singular and minoritarian, and as such it is the work of philosophy’s mode of deterritorialization which “takes the relative deterritorialization of capital to the absolute; it makes it pass over the plane of immanence as movement of the infinite and suppresses it as internal limit, *turns it back against itself so as to summon forth a new earth, a new people*” (WP 99). This summoning forth that arises from philosophy’s absolute deterritorialization is also called utopia and revolution (WP 100-101).

Of course Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that deterritorialization, both capitalist/relative and revolutionary/philosophical/absolute, must be reterritorialized: “The immense relative deterritorialization of world capitalism needs to be reterritorialized on the modern national State, which finds an outcome in democracy, the new society of ‘brothers’, the capitalist version of the society of friends” (WP 98). This accounts for the functional isomorphism of democratic and other State-forms within the

---

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia I* (New York: Viking, 1977), trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, p.220.

world market, which is “the only thing that is universal in capitalism”: different State-forms constitute distinct “models of realization” of the endlessly additive and blatantly incoherent axiomatic of capital (*WP* 106).

Like the relative deterritorialization of capital, the absolute deterritorialization of philosophy is

reterritorialized on the modern democratic State and human rights. But because there is no universal democratic State this movement implies the particularity of a State, of a right, or of the spirit of a people capable of expressing human rights in ‘its’ State and of outlining the modern society of brothers. In fact, it is not only the philosopher, as man, who has a nation; it is philosophy that is reterritorialized on the national State and the spirit of the people (*WP* 102).

Hence Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of geophilosophy—rooted in Greece, France, England and Germany, perhaps developing in America, but emphatically not in Italy.<sup>3</sup> We will return to this exclusion below. Nevertheless, human rights, like the national States that express them, are merely axioms that “can coexist on the market with many other axioms, notably those concerning the security of property, which are unaware of or suspend them even more than they contradict them” (*WP* 107). Human rights conceived within this framework do not give birth to a new people, the States that express them do not map a new earth, and consequently modern democracy does not constitute a philosophical concept, even if it does pose a problem. Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari insist that “this people and earth will not be found in our democracies,” but only in the thinking of the most aristocratic of philosophers like Nietzsche (*WP* 108).

Deleuze and Guattari’s argument here appears to beg some important questions: is a genuinely philosophical concept of democracy possible? What would it involve, and what would its new earth look like? What kind of rights would give birth to a new

---

<sup>3</sup> In Italy, they claim, the Catholic Church “diverted [philosophy] toward a rhetoric and prevented a full possession of the concept” (*conceitism*) (*WP* 102-103).

people? What or who is this “becoming-people” to which Deleuze and Guattari allude obliquely at the end of the “Geophilosophy” chapter, and again at the very end of the book? These “people to come”—“mass-people, world-people, brain-people, chaos-people” (WP 218)—have certain attributes in common with philosophy and art: “their resistance to death, to servitude, to the intolerable, to shame and to the present” (WP 110). These attributes give us a clue as to where to look for a philosophical concept of democracy, for they are also the defining characteristics of the philosophy of another aristocrat, Spinoza (the “prince” or even the “Christ” of philosophers [WP 48, 60]).

Oddly enough, however, and despite his sensitivity to the counter-system of the scholia in the *Ethics* and other alternative strategies for reading Spinoza, Deleuze does not pay much attention to the concept of democracy in either of the books he dedicates to Spinoza. The only reference to it that I have been able to find is contained in a footnote to chapter 16 of *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, “The Ethical Vision of the World,” in which Deleuze expresses his uncharacteristic agreement with liberal, contractarian interpretations of Spinoza’s political philosophy. That footnote concludes with the following parenthesis: “In [Spinoza’s] *Political Treatise* the State seems never to exist in its *absolute* form, *absolutum imperium*, but always to be represented by monarchical, aristocratic or democratic forms, the last being the regime that comes closest to an absolute State.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this brief aside is one of the ultimate sources of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion, quoted above, that “the despotic State is the abstraction to be realized...only as an abstraction,” in both democratic and totalitarian forms.

A powerful critical response to Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of democracy has emerged from that *terra incognita* of geo-philosophy which is Italy. Articulated by Antonio Negri and further developed in his collaborations with Michael Hardt, this response aspires to create or rather “conjecture” a genuinely philosophical concept of

---

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), trans. Martin Joughin, pp.390-391n29.

democracy on the basis of Spinoza's incomplete *Political Treatise*.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Deleuze, who tends to assimilate Spinoza's notion of consent/consensus to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century concept of the social contract,<sup>6</sup> Negri rigorously follows out the exclusion of contractarian theory from Spinoza's *Political Treatise*. Far from being equivalent to civil consensus as Deleuze suggests, the social contract for Negri is "an explicit sociological fiction that legitimizes the effectiveness of the transfer of Power [from civil society to the State] and thus founds the juridical concept of the State."<sup>7</sup> The fiction of the contract authorizes an irreversible alienation of natural right from social subjects to the State, and because right for Spinoza (and Deleuze and Negri) is not a juridical concept (as is "human rights" within the axiomatic of the global market and its component States) but rather a concept of power,<sup>8</sup> this alienation is also one in which powers—what singular minds and bodies can do—are regimented and normalized into the transcendent Power of the State.

According to Negri's reading, Spinoza's concept of democracy rules out such irreversible transfer in advance: "The natural right of individuals, a universal given [as singular power], thus constitutes itself into public law by traversing the social antagonism [between individuals], not by denying it in some transcendental manner, but rather by constructing collective displacements."<sup>9</sup> Subjects do not irreversibly confer their powers upon the sovereign State, but preserve them within a framework of consensus that unifies without representation: "Democracy...means, then, that there is no alienation of power—neither in relation to its exercise, nor in relation to its formation or the specificity of executive action."<sup>10</sup> This negative definition, in terms of non-alienation, can also be put

---

<sup>5</sup> Negri, "Reliqua desiderantur: A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza" in *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)Contemporary Variations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), trans. Timothy S. Murphy et al, pp.28-29.

<sup>6</sup> According to Deleuze, for Spinoza "The principle of consent (pact or contract) becomes the principle of political philosophy, and replaces the rule of authority" (*Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, p.260; see also p.390n29 on the "second contract").

<sup>7</sup> Negri, "Reliqua desiderantur" p.31.

<sup>8</sup> Spinoza often sums this conception up in the phrase "*Tantum juris quantum potentiae*," "as much right as there is power"; see Negri, "The *Political Treatise*, or, The Foundation of Modern Democracy" in *Subversive Spinoza*, p.18, and especially "Reliqua desiderantur" p.33: the contract is "an alienation that, although it constitutes sovereignty through the medium of transfer, restores to subjects a freedom and a series of rights that have been transformed (in the transfer and by sovereignty) from natural rights into juridical rights."

<sup>9</sup> Negri, "The *Political Treatise*," p.16.

<sup>10</sup> Negri, "Reliqua desiderantur," p.38.

positively as follows: it is “the liberation of all social energies in a general *conatus* [desire or striving to survive] of the organization of the freedom of all. Continual and permanent.”<sup>11</sup> From this point of view, “Legitimation is inalienably rooted in collectivity; only the collectively expressed *potentia*, only the creativity of the *multitudo* determines legitimacy.”<sup>12</sup> What this means is that even when a State or institution has been constituted, it is not inoculated against the constitutive process of the multitude that gave rise to it. It is constantly and at every point (and not just at a few points and at strictly defined intervals) under threat of the withdrawal of the civil consensus that constructed it.<sup>13</sup>

For Spinoza and Negri, this immanence and permanence of the collective constitutive process is what makes democracy the only genuinely absolute government. “Absolute” in this case does not refer to “absolutism,” which would be the figure of the fixed and unalterable transcendence of the despot and the State, but rather to the unlimitedness of a continuous and immanent process of re-creation or re-invention that is congruent with Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the absolute deterritorialization of philosophy itself:

democracy...determined *sub specie aeternitas*...[is] a metamorphosis that does not stop, that has no end—it increasingly affirms the power of the ‘*absolutum*’ collective body, at the very moment in which it denies the presence of fear, terror, death....Therefore the *imperium democraticum*, because it is *omnino absolutum*, because it lives on eternity, is not limited to any [positive political] Constitution...but rather constantly transcends them all dynamically since it is ever more capable of perfection.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Negri, “*Reliqua desiderantur*,” p.37.

<sup>12</sup> Negri, “*The Political Treatise*,” p.17.

<sup>13</sup> This practice of continual and explicit re-legitimation of all delegation of power has been central to many forms of anti-institutional left activism over the past century; cf. Anton Pannekoek and the workers’ council tradition (*Workers’ Councils* [Oakland: AK Press, 2003]), Guy Debord and the Situationists (*Society of the Spectacle* [New York: Zone, 1994], chapters 4 & 9), and Sergio Bologna and factory councils in Italy (“Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origin of the Workers Councils Movement” in *Telos* 13 [1972]).

<sup>14</sup> Negri, “Democracy and Eternity in Spinoza” in *Subversive Spinoza*, p.111.

If it is not limited to any specific form of constitution (which would in fact re-introduce a version of the irreversible contractarian transfer of right and power), then rather than being one particular form of government among others, in fact “the Spinozian definition of democracy is the definition of ‘non-government’....[It] is not a form of government but rather a social activity of transformation” (ibid). Spinozian absolute democracy is not any historically given actual form, but rather the asymptotic virtual limit of the constitutive process, and thus it “can in no way be defined as a constitutional democracy, that is, as a form of government based on the division and balance of Powers and on their reciprocal dialectic”<sup>15</sup> such as exists in contemporary democratic States. Democracy *sub specie aeternitas* is what Marx called permanent revolution.<sup>16</sup>

In order to grasp the novelty and power of this concept of democracy, we must grasp what Deleuze and Guattari would call its determining component: the multitude.<sup>17</sup> As Hardt and Negri note, the multitude is distinct from “*the modern conception of the people [which] is in fact a product of the nation-state*, and survives only within its specific ideological context.”<sup>18</sup> The people is the product of a double construction: the separation of a supposedly homogeneous (paradigmatically European) people from other, especially colonized native groups through racial classification, and a further erasure of the internal differentiations of this people (class, gender, age) behind a hegemonic figure of representational Power (*E* 103-4). As such the definition of the people is exclusive and membership in it is closed. The multitude, on the other hand, is “a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogeneous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it” (*E* 103).<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Negri, “*Reliqua desiderantur*,” p.36.

<sup>16</sup> See especially the “Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League” in Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848: Political Writings* Volume 1 (New York: Penguin, 1973), ed. David Fernbach, pp.323, 330.

<sup>17</sup> Deleuze only mentions the multitude once in his Spinoza books, on p.266 of *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*: “Spinoza describes the City as a collective person, with common body and soul, ‘a multitude which is guided, as it were, by one mind’.” The concept emerges as central in Negri’s work on Spinoza, both *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), trans. Michael Hardt, and *Subversive Spinoza*.

<sup>18</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p.102. Further references to this book will be noted parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation *E*.

<sup>19</sup> See also Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Semiotext(e), 2004).

We might say that for Hardt, Negri, and their allies, the multitude exists in itself (or rather, since it is simultaneously singular and plural, itself), as the ontological substance that makes up peoples and their others, but not yet for itself (itself), as a concerted project of becoming.<sup>20</sup> The dilemma facing political philosophy and activism today is the territorialization of the multitude within various isomorphous State figures of the people, and the challenge facing us is to deterritorialize these peoples into the multitude that would be the subject, or rather the mode of subjectivation, of absolute democracy. Contra Deleuze and Guattari, then, the project of philosophy and activism is not the “summoning of a new people” or a “becoming-people” in a situation where there are no people (*WP* 99, 109-10), but rather a “becoming-multitude” of peoples who have been rigidly territorialized for too long.<sup>21</sup>

What would this project of becoming-multitude entail, philosophically and practically? Negri offers us several theoretical clues. First, the multitude as a collectivity is inclusive and open to the addition of the new powers/rights of new singularities: “The *multitudo*...is the foundation of democracy insofar as it allows individuals to introduce into society as a whole their own values of freedom. Each singularity is a foundation.”<sup>22</sup> This introduction of values which is constantly but discontinuously taking place strengthens the multitude and its constitutive process: “[democracy as] absolute is constitution, a reality formed by a constitutive tension, a reality whose complexity and openness increase as the power that constitutes it increases.”<sup>23</sup> Such increase in complexity and power can only happen because of the non-alienated and non-representational consensus that constitutes the multitude; the representational alienation of the contract or fixed constitution can only become weaker and less complex (in the dimensions of its power, not its abstract quantity) by expanding to include other singularities, and thus it resists such expansion. One axis of absolute democratic practice

---

<sup>20</sup> See Hardt and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), pp.221-222.

<sup>21</sup> We must not forget the inescapable legacy of atrocities that the concept of the people carries with it, best exemplified in the Nazi deployment of it as *Volk*.

<sup>22</sup> Negri, “*Reliqua desiderantur*,” p.44; see also Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, pp.240-241.

<sup>23</sup> Negri, “*Reliqua desiderantur*,” p.34.



is oriented in this direction, toward an ever-greater inclusion of singularities, both within and beyond the borders of constituted States.

Second, the consensus of the multitude is not a static agreement or quantified majority but an energetic vector that results from the paradoxical co-existence of two linked but incommensurable movements: “one movement presses with great force toward absoluteness in the strict sense, toward the unity and indivisibility of government...But the other movement of power is plural; it is the reflection on (and the recovery of) the powers of the *multitudo*” in all the dimensions of its component singularities.<sup>24</sup> More precisely,

the *multitudo* is...a juridical subject, a necessary attribute of the social, a hypothesis of political unity and constructiveness...But at the same time the *multitudo* remains an elusive set of singularities[,] an infinity [whose] power is a continuous movement—an infinite movement that constitutes a totality but is identified in it only as the actuality of a passage; it is not closed but open; it produces and reproduces.<sup>25</sup>

The multitude is not an object of majoritarian State administration like the people but an open process of production and reproduction of its own elements, a continual, discontinuous and unending negotiation that generates always temporary and precarious constitutional frameworks and institutional instruments.<sup>26</sup> This unending process of minoritarian negotiation constitutes the “becoming-eternal” of absolute democracy.<sup>27</sup>

From the viewpoint of administrative or commercial stability, such an unending process appears as an abyss of anarchy that constantly threatens to open up beneath or around States and their unifying market, but Negri insists that philosophers and activists

---

<sup>24</sup> Negri, “*Reliqua desiderantur*,” p.38.

<sup>25</sup> Negri, “*Reliqua desiderantur*,” p.40.

<sup>26</sup> This precariousness of institutional embodiment is what prevents the multitude from seizing or re-inventing fixed State institutions; cf. Marx on seizing the state apparatus and Foucault on “popular justice” (“On Popular Justice” in *Power/Knowledge* [New York: Pantheon, 1980], ed. Colin Gordon, pp.1-36).

<sup>27</sup> Negri, “Democracy and Eternity,” p.111.

should instead “consider the non-conclusiveness of the relationship between [the multiple singularities of] social praxis and the [unified] juridical subject of Power as a metaphysical condition of absoluteness [and] the *absolutum* [as] the presence of the political process in its entirety”<sup>28</sup>—that is, consider absolute democracy as a challenge and an opportunity to undertake a delirious Jeffersonianism: no longer merely “Every generation its own constitution,” but a constantly mutating constitutive process something like Deleuze’s “ideal game” in which “there are no pre-existing rules” and “each move invents its own rules” (that game which is “the reality of thought itself”).<sup>29</sup>

Negri’s philosophical clues regarding absolute democracy have brought us this far, but ultimately we must find further clues that can lead to concrete practice, tools that might help to actualize this Spinozian concept by re-opening the closed democratic process of capitalist States to its becoming-eternal, by deterritorializing the State, its institutions and people. What also remains to be invented, beyond tactics, is a viable strategy, a plan or rather a counter-plan directed against the anti-democratic plan of globalization, to articulate individual elements within the collective process into a democratic unity of action without subordinating their singularities to a reductive static totality. This is the challenge that Negri has offered, in terms drawn from Spinoza’s concept of absolute democracy. Certainly many radical social movements, both past and present, have manifested an extraordinary range and intensity of counterpower and thus counter-right, as witness the lengths to which both past and present movements have driven the State to misrepresent, restrict and suppress them. But these movements have not managed to carry their processes of deterritorialization to the absolute level characteristic of genuine philosophical creation as Deleuze and Guattari define it; they have not succeeded in extending the constitutive process to the point of summoning forth a movement of absolute or “universal” democracy, a new earth, beyond the framework of national States. Thus Negri’s (and Spinoza’s) challenge remains, in the future perfect, and it remains for us to become the multitude to which the challenge is addressed.

---

<sup>28</sup> Negri, “*Reliqua desiderantur*,” p.50.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, pp.59-60.