
History through the Middle: Between Macro and Mesopolitics

Interview with Isabelle Stengers, 25 November 2008

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BM : Our research group works from Deleuze and Guattari's concept of micropolitics, in the framework of the ethico-aesthetic paradigm developed by Guattari. We try to imagine new forms of intervention in public spaces which straddle art and philosophy. We are organizing for an event that will take place in May 2009 which we call "Society of Molecules." Today we'd like to discuss the question of micropolitics in terms of the vocabulary you use in your last book with Philippe Pignarre, entitled *La sorcellerie capitaliste. Pratiques de désenvoûtement* (Capitalist Sorcery: Counter-Spells). We're interested in the fact that you developed this vocabulary of micropolitics in parallel with your work on the constructivist ontology of Alfred North Whitehead and Etienne Souriau. If there's time, we'd also like to get to the following question: How does the approach to the political that you develop relate to the academic milieu? Can we talk about constructivism as an intervention in the institution of philosophy?

IS: I will be publishing a book that is something of a sequel and a reworking of *La sorcellerie capitaliste*, but which sets up the question differently. *La sorcellerie* tried to deal with the question of our vulnerability to capitalism starting from the idea that what's at issue is the hold over us a type of sorcery has, and the fact that because we take pride in no longer "believing in sorcery" we have failed to produce the necessary protections. It's an issue of dramatizing, conveying how unprecedented are the questions raised by what we call global warming or climatic disorder, and by all of the "inconvenient truths" whose common characteristic is, precisely, to "inconvenience" the perspectives put in place by this same "we" who pride ourselves on no longer believing in sorcery. In both books, there is a non-academic commitment to use a "minimum of references." The project has to stand on its own, it has to activate knowledges that are

already there, transmitting a minimum of information, to the extent the term implies that the reader is lacking it. Instead, it has to produce new connections with what we know, or a change in the mode of connection. When I say “we” it’s about bringing into existence an open-ended “we” called forth by those connections, whereas the academic mode of reference implies an exclusive circle whose references establish that the author belongs, that he or she has read everything they should have. This produces an aftereffect of exclusion, often self-exclusion, of all those who will say, “because I haven’t read this or that, I can’t understand.”

EM: Perhaps we can begin, Isabelle, with your idea of “micropolitics,” starting from the distinction you make in your last book between first history and second history.

IS: I’d like to start with this issue of the molecular, which was so dear to Guattari. I originally trained as a chemist, and maybe that is why the terms “micro” and “macro” don’t work for me. I “understand,” but it doesn’t make me think. There are so many types of molecules. At one extreme, there is the hydrogen or water molecule, with either two or three atoms. At the other extreme, there are the biological macro-molecules. The point isn’t so much that they have more atoms. It’s that they pose entirely different problems, problems of knowledge, definite knowledge, and problems pertaining to the relation between the molecule and its milieu. A water molecule is complicated, but the molecule-milieu relation is not thematized as being decisive to its understanding. With biological macro-molecules, on the other hand, the molecule’s folding in space becomes important. This folding is not a theoretical question, because it occurs in an entirely specific milieu, following entirely specific temporal sequences, with multiple interactions. You can have the same sequence of amino acids as in a “biological” molecule that is active in metabolism, but the majority of foldings of which it is capable don’t produce a metabolic molecule. In short, the folding itself is something like a history. It’s a molecule-milieu history which obliges us to think through the “middle,” through the milieu (*par le milieu*), as Deleuze would say. I like to bring up the biological macro-molecule because I am afraid that if we content ourselves with the opposition between the molecular and the molar we are almost inexorably led to maniacal modes of differentiation where the issue is always designating paths of salvation or perdition. The question of how to go from the mode of description demanded by water molecules to the molar mode of description, where it’s a question of water that we can drink or swim in, is extremely complicated. It’s an open problem, not an opposition. I know that Deleuze and Guattari fought against anti-molar neo-moralism, especially in *A Thousand Plateaus* which, in contrast to *Anti-Oedipus*, insists on the need for caution, emphasizing experimentation over haste. There is a practical divergence at this point. In *La sorcellerie capitaliste* and *Au temps des catastrophes* (The Age of Catastrophes), I try to think “through” a particular

milieu that seems eager to leap with great appetite at any proposition allowing for a differentiation between the true and the illusory to be recreated. To paraphrase Deleuze paraphrasing Artaud, I try to think “before” the innumerable victims of this mania for oppositions, and to fabricate concepts that build in protections, ways of frustrating that which constantly rises up in defiance of all warnings. It seems to me that the macro-molecule is good protection in the sense that implies certain delocalized interactions which require resistance to the totality or the aggregate, but less in an oppositional way than in a way that makes perceptible the necessity of an etho-ecology, where the *ethos* of the molecule, that which it is capable of, cannot be dissociated from its *oikos*, from the milieu requiring this *ethos*. In this connection, I’m more comfortable with the idea of a mesopolitics than a micropolitics. The coefficient of “polemical truth” associated with the micropolitical worries me. The idea of the “meso” is quite new in physics. Microphysics is well known, it’s the stuff of physicists’ dreams. The macro in physics is also familiar, it’s crystals, liquids, and bodies that can be characterized by general, measurable properties. But the meso is neither of these. It concerns not matter, but material. Why does glue stick? Why do metals tend to stress and break? This is a science of the interstices and the cracks. It’s a science of defects. It is the kind of science where it is always a question of *this* material, rather than Matter, and which encounters “procedures,” like those of metallurgy. Why must the iron be beaten as long as it is hot? The macro is matter in general. Gas is marvellously “in general.” With the meso, on the other hand, it is necessary in each instance to redefine topically how the relations between the micro and the macro are assembled. In other words, it’s about everything that the macro does not allow to be said, and everything that the micro does not permit to be deduced. No, the questions that must be asked are utterly specific. Questions which bring characters into existence. What is a crack? How does this propagate? How is that encountered? What brings this to a threshold, where it breaks? These are questions which demand the invention of beings, such as the crack, that are called for with a manner of being all their own, and which enter more into narratives than into deductions. What also interests me is that this meso-knowledge reactivates the marvel of procedures of fabrication, as with metallurgy. Hammering, dunking the sword in cold water, all of the metallurgist’s tact, all that he “has an eye for,” has no micro or macro meaning. It is not for nothing that metallurgists have always had a special historical role in relation to powers, forming initiatory clans. For me, the meso deterritorializes physics much more effectively than quarks, the Higgs boson, or black holes, which continue to lend themselves to the old reality/appearance opposition, or politically speaking, to the “you believe, we know.” The meso is a site of invention where the pragmatics of the question is much more alive, more vivid, more difficult to forget than the micro or the macro, which traditionally play a game of truth. The meso must create itself. And each time, the meso affirms its co-presence with a milieu. This sticks -- that’s a relation to a milieu. This breaks, this bends, this is elastic -- that implies an action undergone. Every material is a

relation with a milieu.

EM: And the notion of the fold? It seems to me that for Deleuze, microperception folds into every macroperception. Isn't it the same for micropolitics?

IS: My problem is that, yes, we can say that these are folds and that macroperception is misleading, etc. In political terms, that enables an interesting critical relation toward the procedures of those who know nothing of Leibniz, or James, but who take charge of our perceptions. But there is a danger of getting blocked in the register of critical truth. There is a terrible discrepancy between the invention of procedures of capture on the one hand, and on the other the rare instances where procedures are invented that have to do with what American activists call "reclaiming" and what I call the meso. In politics, I think that the question is less microperceptions than procedures, practices that are apt to produce new perceptions carrying new consequences, to produce collective assemblages of enunciation experimenting with ways of combining creation with an active, experimental taking into account of their milieu – a milieu that is by definition unhealthy – experimenting with how to "think through the middle," through the milieu, in the way that collectives for direct nonviolent action have done, knowing that the cops will provoke in any case. The question of experimentation, or accountability as the Americans say, is situated at the level of the meso. I'm thinking of Haraway, and of course of Guattari's cartographic practices. I like Etienne Souriau's concept of "instauration" (establishment, institution) very much because, as regards to the artist at work, it deploys a quite fabulous assemblage denying any power to the old conflict between determination and freedom -- a conflict that Guattari still grappled with in his struggle against structure. If a work of art can fail, as a practical matter, then entirely other questions are raised. The question of failure and success is eminently political. It's a meso question, because it has nothing to do with success in the macro, sociological, sense. And it certainly requires the micro, but without thematizing it. The contrast success/failure raises different questions, pragmatic questions, in experimental relation with milieus. Tournier and Deleuze's Robinson, with his molecularization of perception, is certainly not insignificant from the political point of view.¹ But Robinson's relation to politics, his becoming, in which all of the categories of perception molecularize, that relation has to be made. The thing is, perhaps it's not the first that should be made. From my point of view, one of the first that should be made is precisely to respect this notion of the device (*dispositif*), that is, the notion of assemblages, assemblages that are worked on and through, and which imply artifice, and are a matter for experimentation. This of course excludes any reference to the masses, to the differentiation between those who know and those who must be impelled into movement. But it also allows a distinction that concerns the political. An assemblage is political to the extent that those who participate in it both experiment with and experience its fabrication, fine-tune it and feel its effects,

and to the extent that this participation in both these senses is indissociable from the induction of a capacity for resistance. An induction of it, not a displaying of it. This excludes devices which respond to the game of supply, including the offer of interactivity or relation, but also those which hypothetically display conditions of production for things which do not occur.

I feel that Hardt and Negri inherited molecular politics, in the sense that I fear it, with their concept of the multitude. It's a concept whose vocation is to announce the dissolution of differentiations, of attachments, of all that gives capitalism its grip. It's a concept that I feel is still constructed in the mode of what I call the Marxist conceptual theater, in which it is a question of identifying the antagonistic force worthy of its historical role. Deleuze and Guattari critiqued the theater of concepts and the theater of psychoanalytic roles. For my part, I critique the theater of Marxist concepts, whose crucial concern is: what is there that is not susceptible to being compromised by capitalism, to being captured by it? And as if by chance, what is implied always involves finishing capitalism's work: the destruction of attachments. The typical success of a meso device would be to confer upon a situation the power to make those who are attached to it, in an a priori conflictual manner, think together. Not overcome the conflict, but transversalize its terms. Careful – this is not an ideal. It's an event, in which one can recover the figure of the fold, and which cannot be discussed at the level of its general conditions. You don't mimic attachments, and you can't replace them with collaborationist good will. The question can't be simulated. What it has to do with, rather, is Guattari's axiological creationism. What that requires is a Jamesian confidence, not a detachment. My own confidence in the event by which a situation can make people think that which concerns them, by which a situation can escape the common destiny of being defined by preexisting terms, by which it can make a "fold," in other words acquire the power to situate those it rallies without converting to unanimous consensus -- this confidence is deeply rooted in my approach to the history of experimental inventions. The experimental situation has the power to rally, to transform the conflict of interpretations into a dynamic of controversy. The scientist as such is not terribly interesting. But I'm not sure that Guattari isn't throwing the baby out with the bathwater when he announces an ethico-aesthetic paradigm against the scientific paradigm. Objectivism is a poison that affects the sciences, just as the art market is a poison proper to artistic practices -- neither more nor less. But in a controversy in the strong sense, in the inventive sense, the term objectivity has no purchase. The sciences are not a model. They are a very particular example of an original production of subjectivity occurring when a situation makes a fold, in other words forces those it rallies to think, imagine, create. The sciences also provide an example of how this success gets captured. The important point for me is that there is no success that can offer the wished-for guarantee of being uncapturable. This means that any success will be condemned a priori by those given over to suspicion. Such is the fate of any

meso practice, and it is one of the reasons why the molecular is so seductive.

BM: Is second history the history of this passage through the middle, through the milieu?

IS: So, now we come to the two histories, which *Au temps des catastrophes* opens with, and where I write: "we are in suspense between two histories." The first history we're familiar with, it's the one that takes growth both for its slogan and as its operator, which is an operator of capture that at the same time makes things hold together and distributes the possible and the impossible. In our worlds, nothing is possible without growth. Today's economic and financial crisis belongs to this history, and as long as we talk about crisis we remain caught within its coordinates. Recovery is then the horizon of thought. This means, of course, that this is the history of worlds under the grip of capitalism. The other history is basically of an intrusion. We all know that something is in the process of intruding into our history that was neither anticipated nor prepared for, that was wished for by no one, including of course those who have been struggling against capitalism's hold. No one is ready for what's coming. It is beyond all of us, it's important to emphasize that. The chances are that this second history will be one that can be purely and simply associated with open barbarism, and those chances are all the greater to the extent that the first history makes out as if this were only a "crisis" to be surmounted. It is faced with this hypothesis of barbarism that I try to think and use the term intrusion, referring the new question of temporality which requires a break with the messianic-revolutionary tone. This is a break with the grand humanist perspective, in which time works for those who are on the side of truth. And incidentally, it is a break with those who function in the mode of "I know, but nevertheless ..." -- which is the degree-zero of idealism, in whose eyes any pragmatism is a synonym for betrayal. The intrusion of what I call Gaia is a radically materialist event.

EM: Could you talk about the question of Gaia?

IS: I wanted a name for who we may associate with the notion of intrusion. Now, it is obvious that the programmed future victims of climate warming taken as a whole, the polar bears, and so forth, is not what intrudes. I mean, they will pay dearly. The name I chose for what is intruding is Gaia, referring to James Lovelock, who proposed to address the living earth as a being. For his part, Lovelock used the word organism. But he was emphasizing precisely what is being called into question today, namely the feedback loops stabilizing a particular regime of existence. I abandon that, and the idea that this regime can be equated with health, which would make us its doctors. Gaia as I stage her is not sick. She manifests positive feedback loops that terrify those who study her. She's an assemblage of untameable processes whose power completely escapes us. The name Gaia is in resonance with the divinities prior to the

anthropomorphic Gods of the City, who were honored as fearsome and as indifferent to our maneuvers of seduction. Gaia is not nature in need of protection. She will survive the ravages. Living things may well count on Gaia, but what counts first and foremost are the bacteria, and they are something else that exceeds us: an uncontrollable power upon which we depend. The numberless people of the bacteria completely exceeds us, responding with extraordinary inventiveness to our antibiotics, not with the logic of lineages but rather one of the rhizome, a rhizome that traverses us. It is they, along with other microbes, that constitute the majority among the cells comprising this body we call our own. They are on Gaia's scale, and like her, they always act and enter into action as powerful vectors of scientific deterritorialization, undoing disciplinary closures and the tree of life that has become the coat of arms of darwinism. To name Gaia is to name something that does not demand a response from us, that is utterly deaf to our repentances. We are not responsible toward her. We are imprudent. We have been radically imprudent, which is a totally different idea than guilt. We can be guilty in relation to the polar bear, the Bengal tiger, and many other things besides. But in relation to Gaia the scene I'm trying to stage, the scene of intrusion, is a setting forth of a problem: there has been a grave imprudence, and we will not get ourselves out of it in crisis mode, like a bad moment we have to get through. What we need to do now is learn to compose with Gaia. Even if we succeed in avoiding barbarism, we won't be able to say that the issue is settled. Gaia will never return to being a neutral condition in our history. She will never again be something we count on, she will always remain something with which we will have to compose. Gaia cannot be domesticated. She is material in the sense of being untameable by human intentions -- a quite unprecedented figure of transcendence, implacable transcendence. We could say that our epoch is under the sign of a double transcendence, one implacable, the other irresponsible, one material, the other spiritual. Because capitalism is irresponsible, it is not equipped for this. It takes Gaia's intrusion as an occasion for new strategies, new captures. And we can indeed talk about "spiritual" captures, in the sense of a production of powerlessness and its hold over us, and in the sense that it is a question of destroying what counts, of bringing into equivalence what counts, in the sense that above all else we must not hesitate, in the sense that it is a question of seizing opportunities regardless of the consequences, etc. To speak of capitalism as materialist is the sad complaint of monotheistic transcendence. For me, to speak of the "spiritual" is to situate oneself in Guattari's ethico-aesthetic field, and I see the deliberate use of this denigrated word as a protection against bourgeois-scientific triumphalism. Capitalism is a logic, and a logic is spiritual in type. Its logic takes hold of us, it is not an object of knowledge. One can learn to simulate the processes which compose Gaia, but it makes no sense to simulate the capitalist logic, because all simulations feed right into it. We saw this with the financial markets: any simulation of functioning became an instrument for speculators, and immediately added itself to the functioning it described.

Here we have a functioning that goes so far as to make use of the productions that describe it -- even Marx's. Capitalism is not responsible, because it is not equipped for that. But it is apt to activate feelings of responsibility. Which is what I call stupidity. This sense of responsibility, this sad "that's the way it has to be," the triumph of that, is what I call stupidity, for example the dread that can overcome a modern man or woman at the mention of the word "spiritual." However it's actually an open door for spiritualisms, superstitions, and all sorts of regressions. Capitalism, for its part, is not stupid. Nor intelligent for that matter. That's what I meant in *La sorcellerie capitaliste* when I called it sorcery. It's a system of sorcery, not at all in an ethnographically correct sense, but in a pragmatic sense related to an issue: the issue of recognizing the sorcerer and protecting oneself. So these are the two pragmatic dimensions that stage the sorcery I am interested in: recognizing the efficacy proper to capitalism, all of its modes of capture, and experimenting with how to protect oneself from them. This is where there is a bizarre parallel, actually an anti-parallel, between Gaia's transcendence and the transcendence proper to capitalism. It is necessary to learn to compose with Gaia, but it is not possible to compose with capitalism. It is not constituted in such a way that the slightest composition, the slightest negotiation, is possible. What one can attempt to do is to demoralize those who serve it, meaning certain people who have been captured by it, not in the sense of converting them, but rather in the sense of creating the possibility for interstices that give a different texture to our world, that give us a chance to live out the challenge posed by the intrusion of Gaia in a mode that is not barbaric.

This other texture, with its capacity to slip through State apparatuses, to demoralize those who are responsible, to create and resist in the present and not in a messianic mode, this is what a "meso" pragmatic implies.

EM: How do you see Obama's electoral campaign of 2008? Did it have mesopolitical moments?

IS: Well, I try to follow the American news a bit, but as you know here in Belgium it's somewhat infected by the French point of view. Whereas in the US, Obama succeeded in getting across the point that it was not Blacks against Whites, in France they immediately asked where "their" Blacks were. There's no question that European politics suddenly felt old, after having so proudly resisted Bush's paranoia. What struck me with Obama was the part of his life in Chicago when he was a community worker. I know that in certain US cities at the community level there has been experimentation associated with the question of "empowerment." In France, this has been horribly translated as "responsibilization," and that translates into contracts those who are "irresponsible" and must be "civilized" are made to sign by those who are responsible. Seen from afar, it seems to me that these experimentations belong to the meso level by virtue of their definition of success, in that they are not

addressed to individuals but to the idea that a certain type of collective can render individuals capable of thinking and resisting, and in that they don't consider that problems "are" transversal, but see that connections are something that must be created and that their creation is the only antidote to the position of powerlessness, resentment, etc ... this is the only way of succeeding in creating problems rather than receiving them readymade.

This is something that has happened from time to time in France as well. There have been neighborhood associations around issues like drugs that have succeeded, through beautiful creations, in transforming the problem of their neighborhoods being affected by drug trafficking. They come to the realization that the people they ostensibly wanted to put away in prison were their own children, and their friends' children, so a collective decision was made to set up a relay mechanism whereby when a youth from the neighborhood was put in prison, he received a postcard every day. That is an example of a device that I would call a meso invention. It belongs to a collective, and it's something that must self-produce, it's not the application of a project. It seems to me that in certain cases American urban community initiatives have done this kind of thing, and more than that, that they have learned how to do it. If Obama really did learn that, it must be related to the type of campaign he succeeded in running, in which he succeeded in empowering support committees to which he gave the wherewithal to forge a role for themselves. I am not very optimistic about what he will be able to do now that he has radically changed his milieu, but it's very interesting that he succeeded in it during his campaign.

Of course, a success of this kind can be dismembered by those addicted to suspicion. That's part of the unhealthy character of the milieu into which the meso ventures. It's unhealthy as much by virtue of the interests it arouses as by the suspicions it arouses. It's this situation of an unhealthy milieu that must be thought politically. To celebrate the success of the campaign is not to celebrate Obama as a savior. It is to celebrate the learning processes this success required, and it is knowing that this is not something that is good in itself – even if it means pronouncing disappointment afterwards. The worst thing that could happen is if everyone who put their hope in Obama found themselves disappointed and went back into their holes saying, "Nothing is possible!" But it seems to me that they are resisting this, that they understand that Obama is super-exposed to an unhealthy milieu, but that everything does not depend on him, to the contrary, that everything he might be able to do depends in the end on them. He did not make the serious mistake of proclaiming: "You elected me. Now I will give you the world you dream of." Instead, there is the challenge to make the relay, from one situation to another. Meso practices must be maintained. They must always be remade, always reinvented. Failure is when the institution produces its own reasons for being.

BM: Obama is often presented as a character without qualities. Is this a seduction having to do with a process of remaking connection?

IS: The interesting thing is that people see different things in him, but they are not isolated from one another, projecting what they want on him. Instead, it puts them in proximity where before they weren't. I remember quite beautiful images from Chicago where you saw groups of people of European heritage congratulating groups of African heritage, sharing their joy, whereas normally, even when one is politically correct, one doesn't know how to share joy, one spreads guilt and feels sadness instead. Here, heterogeneous groups could each see something in Obama, and the different things they saw were factors that made something circulate between them. That was the success, because a chameleon in the usual sense cannot fabricate a circulation of affects, a circulation of joy, something that puts categorizations and distances into becoming without erasing them in a grand movement in which everyone becomes homogeneous under the aegis of a homogenizing "one." This was about something that puts distances into becoming, that rejigs distances, so that something else moves across. There was joy in Chicago. It's rare, but we can call it joy.

BM: So it was about joy as a political affect, and about mechanisms of connection, affective transmissions?

IS: Exactly. Joy can conjoin transitivity, contagion, and lucidity. When this happens, joy is an event. Someone I find who has spoken eloquently about joy is Starhawk, the neo-pagan witch, particularly in a text in which she explains "[How We Really Shut Down the WTO in Seattle](#)." That was the first text of antiglobalization history I received, because it was circulating on the Web. People passed it around among themselves, which attests to its having the power Starhawk associates with magic. I in fact felt a pressing need to translate it into French in order to relay it. I was not the only one. There are at least four French versions that have circulated on the Web. What she said in that essay was that this was only the beginning, it came with no guarantees, but that it was a beginning we should celebrate, because this kind of event is just too precious not to take sustenance in the fact that it occurred. The idea of making joy the marker of an ontological processuality is one of the meanings of the sorceresses' Goddess who, they say, is everywhere that joy, invention, and connection are. When new possibilities of thinking and acting appear, it is an ontological, or cosmological, event that we must learn to celebrate, even if it's precarious, or precisely because it's precarious. Joy is immanent to a situation, and guarantees nothing. It always surprises me that US and Canadian academic milieus don't accord more importance to neo-pagan thought. For me, it is important to relay with what is being produced by it, even if it's compromising, even if it exposes you to colleagues snickering, "so you believe in the Goddess?" That's not the

point. The point is daring to recognize that their practices have made “witches” capable of propositions that often seem to me to be more alive and more relevant than our own.

An example: There is a great danger that the barbarism will take the form of a governance by experts charged with managing scarcity in the name of emergency. No joy in this situation, where it will be decreed what one has the right to do, what one does not have the right to do, based on a rationality that is arithmetically incontestable, but lethal. It will be incontestable only in the sense that it is arithmetic. In this regard as well, Starhawk made me think more effectively than a thousand academic texts. I don't know if you've read her novel, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, published in 1993. It's a futuristic novel that takes place forty years from now ... things have indeed taken a turn for the worse, except in San Francisco (because there has to be a place where things happen differently, otherwise there'd be no novel), where there was a critical mass allowing for a reinvention of the city. But on the West Coast, it's barbarism, the reign of the water barons and their mercenaries, and the water barons are the direct descendents of the expert agencies that decided who would have the right to how much water, and that took into their own hands the life and death of others. Don't say witches are regressive, seeking to reanimate a spirituality condemned by history. I think that their practices make them capable of connecting with what is unique in our epoch, including the threat of new types of powers for which we lack a concept and have never experienced. Call into question, instead, the absence of relay among thinkers who just speculate on becomings and other existential catalyses. They are a far cry from William James, who knew how to compromise and expose himself.

EM: The connection you make in your work between philosophical writing – the creation of concepts – and political thinking addressed to a broader audience – could you comment on that? Is there a break between the two?

IS: There is no break. If the two weren't in play together, springboards for each other, I would never have become a philosopher. I didn't become a philosopher to comment on concepts, to cite authors, to theorize, or to rack up points against my colleagues, but because I discovered the effectiveness of concepts, of certain concepts – it started with Deleuze, Whitehead, and Leibniz – for dissipating the sad anaesthesia that makes people think in circles, for launching thought into adventure. In the US I would surely have become a feminist, perhaps a witch, probably not a philosopher. But to undertake a “becoming philosopher” with authors as minoritarian as those I cited (Leibniz might well have been a “great” philosopher, but he was still ridiculed for his “best of all possible worlds”) is also, and inseparably, to become sensitive to the ways that philosophical ways of thinking poison us, make us think in circles. One day Tobie Nathan pointed out to me the ease with which statements of “elevated”

imperative – he was thinking in particular of Lacan's – could be heard coming out of the mouth of a children's judge or a social worker justifying a child being torn from a family judged to be "unworthy." As a woman, I also refuse to forget the ease with which the philosophers have ratified the exclusion of women. In short, I did not "convert" to philosophy in general. I discovered in philosophy the possibility of transforming a "wrong" that I suffered into a creation. And it's not about theoretical creations, they only have value if they can relay away from what happened to me, if they can be relevant and can be taken up by others, in their own situations, and can help them stop suffering from what is poisoning them.

Deleuze said that his concepts were tools, but that doesn't prevent many of our colleagues from contenting themselves with paraphrase, with textual explanation. When I read this kind of text, such "sophisticated" texts, I feel the poison of feeling that I am not "up to level," and that feeling renews in me in the commitment never to write texts like that. It happens to me from time to time that I pick up a concept signed Deleuze as a tool. It's an event, it means that I am able – as you say, Brian, in your introduction to *Parables for the Virtual* – to extract it from its place of birth and transplant it. You have to do that. The transplant operation that I then become capable of is, as far I am concerned, addressed only very secondarily to philosophers. What it does is target poisons of philosophical origin that anaesthetize capacities to think through concrete situations. If when a transplantation has taken place I create my own concepts, they carry with them a vocation for intervention. The concept of "practice" for example is inseparable from this vocation. It's not a "pure concept," as are pre-individual singularities, or the crystal-image, or the pure form of time. No, it's always already engaged: always already taken up, as Guattari would say, in an assemblage of constellations of values, phylums, etc., that are always displaying their vocation to "think through the middle / through the milieu." Practice belongs to the meso, which means that it's not a question of "absolute deterritorialization," only of a relative deterritorialization capable of making practitioners think without sweeping them up into a witch's flight of thought. That might well happen, but it's not the problem that interests me. I want to create something that others can pick up on without becoming philosophers. And without being fascinated by philosophy. There is something formidable in concepts signed Deleuze, formidable in the sense of the *pharmakon*, which can be a remedy or a poison. It's that they can fabricate little judges, who operate in the name of absolute deterritorialization or the body without organs, in a way that revives that old refrain separating the elect from the contemptible.

BM: In *A Thousand Plateaus*, there is an insistence on the art of dosages and that absolute deterritorialization is unsustainable.

IS: Certainly, but I'm not sure that it's enough to insist – it's maybe a little late. In

any case, what I try to do is to create concepts that compromise the people who take them up, in the sense of preventing them from adopting the position of little judge, I try to create concepts that don't have fascination power. In short, concepts that display their relativity to the situation in which they could be effective. For example, I have to address the question of the State, or of capitalism, but I don't want to strike the pose of she who knows best, she who owns the concept capable of rivalling those already produced. It is for this reason that I speak of "characterizing," meaning an operation that is relative to a situation, in the pragmatic sense that one can ask what can be expected of the "character" in that situation. No end-all definition; instead, a great conceptual theater. No titanic struggle that takes the situation hostage, but rather the pragmatic of the writer who doesn't know how to define the character she herself created and must explore that character in a mode that is always situated: what can it become capable of in this situation?

I had this experience in a very intense fashion when I wrote a theater piece with Tobie Nathan and Lucien Hounkpatin, *La damnation de Freud*. It's 1919 and Freud finds himself hosting in his home a silent "Senegalese infantryman" traumatized by war, who will later reveal himself to be babalawo, or therapist, in training, for whom regathering his spirits at Freud's house is part of his trajectory. So the story is about an encounter between two therapists, but how could that come about? "Characterizing" Freud was not so much of a problem. But Lucien Hounkpatin, who himself comes from a family of initiates and was working with Tobie Nathan (at the Georges Devereux Centre for Ethnopsychiatry), kept saying: "No, no, he can't do that. He can't make Freud say that." And in fact, there wasn't much of anything he could do in the situation, as Lucien understood it. This wasn't a contemporary novel, it didn't revolve around an absence, it wasn't *Waiting for Godot*. What made writing it interesting was the fact of being obligated to an eminently recalcitrant character who refused to bend to our designs, and who because of that acquired the capacity of reorganize the whole plot.

BM: This relates to a certain concept of obligation – obligations inherent to a milieu.

IS: Being obligated by a situation, giving the situation the power to obligate you. And without guarantees. Never the slightest guarantee, neither the judgment of God, nor a conceptual guarantee. It's all about fighting against the demand for a guarantee, it's about compromising oneself. For instance, the characterization of capitalism as what has made our world a cemetery of enslaved or destroyed practices -- for example knowledge practices that were first enslaved and now are in the process of being destroyed -- has given rise to the idea that the destruction of those practices were a relief, a service capitalism was performing for the future. This creates what William James would call a "genuine option," a

vulnerable option. Either capitalism must be resisted with respect to this destruction, in which case the question arises of how to address the practitioners; or, they are judged to be unworthy of being defended, to be too compromised, vulnerable, corporatist. This is an option in James's sense because there is no position of neutrality. If we demand that a practice provide guarantees, of the kind Marx associated with the proletariat, it will prove incapable of giving it. But to ratify its destruction is to leave the field wide open for capitalism, and that is all it asks for. The concepts I attempt to fabricate in order to "speak well of practices" despite their vulnerability, are what I call "compromising concepts." In this sense, I'm a Jamesian. For me, when there is a fabrication of concepts, there are veritable options that are implied, so that to describe them is already a way of engaging. In this sense, even though it was Deleuze who made an apprentice philosopher of me, I am actually more Leibnizian. I refuse to honor any truth that finds its grandeur in a refusal to compromise itself with "established sentiments."

EM: For us, with the [SenseLab](#), the politico-aesthetic dimension expresses itself most often in the creation of certain techniques regrouping affects pertaining to events. Do you see your research group, [GEC](#)o (Groupe d'études constructivistes), as a mesopolitical assemblage?

IS: As Deleuze said to the cinema students at FEMIS (the French national image and sound school), "So things are going badly here? For us as well." Apparently, with you things are going better, and we would do well to learn more about your techniques, about your modes of assemblage, about what you have learned. As for GECo, I believe that it is at the moment below the mesopolitical threshold that would allow it to envision intervening. It is more that it exists in the interstices of an academic milieu undergoing a very brutal operation of redefinition. We're very late in this regard, but we're catching up with great speed, in terms of putting into place organizational forms corresponding to the injunction to position oneself in the academic market at large, with experts in evaluation at every level, and with an imperative of evaluability. And the resistance within the academic milieu is quasi nonexistent, even in France where, barring the unforeseen, the current movement of resistance lacks the transversal power to overcome Sarkozy's opposition. At least in Belgium we have one thing that gives us breathing room in comparison with France: no one asks us to adhere, we can grumble and scoff. But that doesn't prevent us from having to submit, it only avoids certain terror effects, such as the passion to eliminate what doesn't conform. That's what enables GECo to exist. In France, I think, we'd inspire hatred, because what we produce makes no sense, it's literally imperceptible, in relation to the evaluation tools. Our first success is also the sine qua non of our existence: those who GECo brings together succeed at working together in a mode that helps them avoid despair, avoid allowing themselves to be defined by the surrounding cynicism. That's already a lot. It also means experiencing and

experimenting with modes of working that make palpable what practices of collective thought might demand and produce – but that is on the order of the interstitial and virtuality.

EM: Could you say more about the “how” of this “virtuality”...

IS: I take the virtual in Etienne Souriau's sense, for whom it is not a chimera, not an empty dream or unrealizable utopia, but that which demands instauration. That is one of the meanings of the virtual in Deleuze. Deleuze's virtual has Bergsonian dimensions, but it also has Souriau dimensions, even though Deleuze never cited him except in *What is Philosophy?* This is the virtual as “the work to be done” (*l'oeuvre à faire*), as calling for realization. For example, it isn't the artist's idea. It's what the artist is not the author of, but which he or she puts to work. Whitehead also held the thesis that ideas do not belong to us. In *Adventures of Ideas* he writes that in *The Banquet* Plato invented “man” as “sensitive to the idea.” Man does not have ideas, he is sensitive to them. Whitehead added that Plato should have another dialogue after *The Banquet* called *The Furies*. *The Furies* is what results from an imperfect reception of the idea, what happens when the idea becomes proper to the human, when it becomes our property, or to put it another way, when we demand of it the power to impose itself. Souriau's thought, with his concept of instauration, also emphasizes the necessity of not taking possession, and above all of not psychologizing, of not talking about having a project, but of having a trajectory instead. A trajectory resulting from a three-way assemblage: the work in the making, the one who puts to work, and that which calls for its own existence, and in doing so keeps the one who puts to work guessing -- not in the sense of a secret to be discovered but in the sense of a tension between succeeding and failing, in the sense of a situation that is questioning. That is perhaps GECO's strength, that it exists only in this immanent tension between succeeding and failing, between succeeding, or working together in a mode that creates an experience that sustains us, and failing, which is to say dispersing.

translated by Brian Massumi

¹NOTES

This is a reference to Michel Tournier's novel *Friday* and Deleulze's analysis of it in an addendum to *Logic Sense* entitled "Michel Tournier and the World Without Others."