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Materialist Politics

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Abstract: This essay discusses the problem of materialism and its relation to politics through readings of Deleuze's ontology. It recounts the "hidden tradition" of materialism in an Althusserian sense and brings about the idea of materialist politics by investigating the relationship between Alexius Meinong and Gilles Deleuze.

Key words: Deleuze, Meinong, Althusser

The "Sokal scandal" or "Sokal affair," which attacked Gilles Deleuze by propping him up as a postmodernist, well exemplifies the tension between science and philosophy. Alan Sokal's hoax had its validity in criticizing French and American academic leftists and in grounding leftist theories on scientific foundations. The Sokal hoax emphasized the ways in which Deleuze and Guattari utilize mathematics and physics to explain philosophical problems. Following the prank, scandalous controversies revolving around "continental philosophy" arose and were used to denounce contemporary philosophy in general as unscientific. Repercussions of the hoax stirred an anti-intellectual ambiance and highlighted a profound gulf between two cultures (i.e., natural sciences and the humanities), as articulated by Charles Percy Snow.

As Simon Duffy proves, Deleuze's orientation to mathematics is firmly grounded in the theory of finitism. According to Duffy, "Deleuze eschews characterizing his redeployment of mathematical problems and problematics as simply analogical or metaphorical" (2013: 2). Deleuze clearly recognizes the distinction between "those mathematical notions that are quantitative and exact in nature . . . and those mathematical problems that are 'essentially inexact yet completely rigorous' and which have led to substantial developments not only in mathematics and science in general, but also in other non-scientific areas such as philosophy and arts" (ibid.: 2).

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In contrast to the thinking of Alain Badiou, Deleuze's philosophy does not take mathematics as a philosophical foundation and, indeed, uncovers a genealogy of mathematics that is not concerned with mathematical grounds. Sokal ignores Deleuze's argument regarding the problem of mathematics and easily defines Deleuze's philosophy as nonsense. Considering Sokal's argument, I do not intend to justify Deleuze's use of mathematics and physics against Sokal's case, but rather to analyze the scandal as a symptom of postwar academic culture and to further investigate Sokal's attempt to appeal to populism. I claim that the "Sokal scandal" betrays the dilemma of postwar radical philosophy, including Deleuze's, and brings forth the problems of "theories," which Fredric Jameson has broadly discussed as the "reification" of philosophy (2004: 404).

In collaboration with Jean Bricmont, Sokal claims that their intention is "to make a limited but original contribution toward the critique of the admittedly nebulous Zeitgeist that we have called 'postmodernism'" (1999: 4). He continues, however, that their aim is not an interrogation of postmodernism in general, but rather "to draw attention to a relatively little-known aspect, namely the repeated abuse of concepts and terminology coming from mathematics and physics" (ibid.: 4). In their sense, the word "abuse" means:

> 1) Holding forth at length on scientific theories about which one has, at best, an exceedingly hazy idea. . . . 2) Importing concepts from the natural sciences into the humanities or social sciences without giving the slightest conceptual or empirical justification. . . . 3) Displaying a superficial erudition by shamelessly throwing around technical terms in a context where they are completely irrelevant. . . . 4) Manipulating phrases and sentences that are, in fact, meaningless. (Sokal 1999: 4–5)

Their statement ends up revealing their goal: "We are not attacking philosophy, the humanities or the social sciences *in general*; . . . we want to warn those who work in them (especially students) against some manifest cases of charlatanism" (Sokal 1999: 5). That is to say, this hoax intends to enlighten people who would seem to be drawn to "postmodern fraud." From this perspective, they criticize Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Latour, Baudrillard, and Virilio, as well as Deleuze and Guattari. I do not here examine all the criticisms they put forward, but rather focus on their interpretation of Deleuze's approach to mathematics and physics.

Following a long quotation from *Difference and Repetition* (Deleuze 1994), Sokal and Bricmont argue that "with a bit of work, one can detect in this paragraph a few meaningful phrases, but the discourse in which they are immersed is utterly meaningless" (1999: 158). In the footnote to the discussion, they say that "in order to understand it correctly, one must already have a good knowledge of relativity theory" (ibid.: 158). They do not take issue with Deleuze's use of physics terminology (e.g., "the speed of light, absolute zero, the quantum of action, the Big Bang, the absolute zero of temperature is minus 273.15 degrees Centigrade,

the speed of light, 299,796 kilometers per second, where lengths contract to zero and clocks stop" [Deleuze 1994: 120]). They say only that Deleuze's statement "may lead to confusion" (Sokal and Bricmont 1999: 158). However, the following argument seems to illustrate their point:

> After the birth of this branch of mathematics in the seventeenth-century through the work of Newton and Leibniz, cogent objections were raised against the use of 'infinitesimal' quantities such as *dx* and *dy*. These problems were solved by the work of d'Alembert around 1760 and Cauchy around 1820, who introduced the rigorous notion of limit—a concept that has been taught in all calculus textbooks since the middle of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Deleuze launches into a long and confused meditation on these problems. (Sokal and Bricmont 1999: 160–61)

Sokal and Bricmont assert that Deleuze's attempt to use mathematics to construct his philosophy is nonsense. What they argue here is quite simple: "what is the point of all these mystifications about mathematical objects that have been well understood for over 150 years?" (Sokal and Bricmont 1999: 165). Of course, their question does not appear to consider the role of mathematics in Deleuze's philosophy. Moreover, the question shares preconceptions that Jean-François Lyotard draws upon in defending so-called "postmodern science" in terms of a metaphorical play with mathematical jargon (1984: 10). Contrary to Lyotard, the response of Jacques Derrida to Sokal and Bricmont should be taken more seriously. Derrida argues:

> As for the "relativism" they are supposed to be worried about—well, even if this word has a rigorous philosophical meaning, there's not a trace of it in my writing. Nor of a critique of Reason and the Enlightenment. Quite the contrary. But what I do take more seriously is the wider context—the American context and the political context—that we can't begin to approach here, given the limits of space: and also the theoretical issues that have been so badly dealt with. (Derrida 2005: 71)

Derrida seems to understand correctly the hidden impetus behind the assault of Sokal and Bricmont on postmodernism. They urge the slander of French philosophy as relativism and irrationalism. I do not think, however, that their affront to philosophy adequately meets their own standards of critical thinking. Rather, the fecklessness of their arguments is in line with their critique of postmodernism, and their logic falls easily into baseless conjecture, crippled with narrow preconceptions. Sokal and Bricmont deliberately crop the critical points of the philosophical arguments they oppose, selecting only what they want to read in them to exaggerate their points.

Nevertheless, I think that the "Sokal affair" illuminates a meaningful fault line in philosophy as such. In a sense, the hoax illustrates the schizo-body of philosophy,

which, as Deleuze and Guattari argue in *A Thousand Plateaus*, is a "scandalously inefficient body" (1987: 150). The reason why Sokal and Bricmont deconstruct philosophy is its "inefficiency." Philosophy as such is schizophrenic, not captured by scientific rationalism, whereas postmodernism is irrational.

As McKenzie Wark argues, "Sokal had succeeded in exposing postmodern theory as making false claims about science" (2016: 183). Wark continues, however, that "the means by which Sokal made his point were by claiming to have proven a truth claim" (ibid.: 183). In this sense, it is problematic that Sokal attempted to publish his fake essay in a journal that was not peer-reviewed. He did not testify with a controlled experiment in human sciences and could therefore not prove anything in terms of the scientific data with which he would have stabilized his arguments. He was confident in his conclusion without any proper methodology to justify his conjecture about humanities, and arguably, he knew what would happen upon publication of the fake essay. His approach to the matter was not truly scientific, but instead, was badly in need of further probing to solidify his point.

Thus, we can conclude that Sokal and Bricmont's strategies to attack philosophy are typically populist. While they argue that "people" would naturally understand their discourse about philosophy, they simultaneously presuppose that "people" would not understand the background of scientific knowledge. This is a paradox, yet telltale in its whispers about the truth of philosophy.

Like Badiou, Deleuze was one of the rarest philosophers in his fidelity to the power of philosophy in the 1960s, while most Western philosophers of the time were inclined to anti-philosophy or further non-philosophy. Indeed, philosophy turned out to be a problem in the postwar world system. The globalization of philosophy had given rise to new issues regarding the deconstruction of canonical philosophy. The linguistic turn had removed the privilege of philosophy from the production and reproduction of knowledge. Empirical intervention precipitated by geographical and scientific discoveries into given metaphysical edifices had transformed the whole scope of philosophy. Philosophy no longer enjoyed the safe life within the realm of white male European ideology. This situation enabled an avalanche of anti-philosophy and, to some extent, justified anti-intellectual tendencies toward philosophical thinking.

In this way, philosophy had come to be scandalous—and a scandal in and of itself. Philosophy always stands against the normative form of morality, in that it aims at providing "people" with meta-ethical perspectives. Philosophy shows people who or what they are, how they are constructed, and why they believe in who they are. After the Second World War, French philosophy marked the moment at which philosophical thinking could be connected to political utopianism, wherein it stood to intervene in situations with philosophical conceptions. The disruptive sociopolitical events of May 1968 precipitated the ways in which French philosophy pushed the possibilities of politics to the limit and demanded initiatives

against conformism. Therefore, the discipline of philosophy came to represent thinking the impossible, thereby giving rise to a series of scandals.

If philosophy is a scandal, then it has to be an immoral event in which the truth of life comes to exist. When Sokal and Bricmont rail against Deleuze and Guattari, they presuppose their philosophy is scandalous. However, philosophy as such is a real scandal. Deleuze and Guattari endeavor to transform philosophy into a scandalous body, a schizophrenic desiring machine. They want to re-establish philosophy against anti-philosophy—namely, liberalism, ego psychology, and empirical anti-intellectualism in particular. Deleuze attempts to parse some mathematical formulation that cannot be adequately considered by "normal science" (that is, by the ways in which mathematics is philosophized). Herein are the rhizomatic roots of philosophical concepts. In this way, the role of mathematics in Deleuze's philosophy is not marginal, but rather the core of his thought. It is firmly related to the image of thought, the ontological limit of life. For this reason, Deleuze's interest in Alexius Meinong, a forgotten mathematician, should be reconsidered. Philosophy as a scandal means the reformulation of ordinary beings—in other words, the conceptualization of "virtual materialism."

Of course, Deleuze develops his ontology by considering many mathematical problems spanning different historical periods. Leibniz and Bergson are the primary resources for Deleuze's formulation of multiplicity. Nevertheless, Meinong's mathematical problematics are significant in Deleuze's ontological postulation, particularly in *The Logic of Sense* (1990). In this work, Deleuze is interested in Meinong's "Theory of Objects," focusing on his concept of a *Sein* (being), which is the existential status of an object, and a *Sosein* (being-so), referring to the characteristics of the object. The *Sosein* are the abstract features of a *Sein*, or the intellectually recognized being as such of a concrete thing. The *Sosein* are not visible in reality but appear within the intellectual comprehension of a specific being. As for the relationship between a Sein and a *Sosein*, Meinong claims:

> Now it would accord very well with the aforementioned prejudice in favor of existence to hold that we may speak of a sosein only if a Sein is presupposed. . . . However the very science from which we were able to obtain the largest number of instances counter to this prejudice shows clearly that any such principle is untenable. As we know, the figures with which geometry is concerned do not exist. Nevertheless, their properties, and hence their Sosein, can be established. (1968: 122)

A *Sosein* is independent of a *Sein*; *Sosein* exists alone without a *Sein*. This principle of independence is the very foundation upon which Deleuze develops his ontology. The autonomy of a *Sosein* means that there exist impossible objects, such as "square circles, matter without extension" (Deleuze 1990: 35). Deleuze understood this absurdity of "impossible objects" as Meinong's Paradox. The reason why Deleuze incorporates Meinong's ontology into his philosophy is that

Deleuze endeavors to develop the non-Hegelian philosophy of sense. Deleuze, like his contemporaries, strives to overcome Hegelianism. He pushes Hyppolite's reading of Hegel, bringing together all interpretations in his philosophy of sense.

The point that Deleuze intends to make is that the realization of philosophy cannot be equated with language. After Hegel's *Science of Logic*, all Western philosophers came to identify the hallmarks of being as thinking and language. In this way, the terminal goal of philosophy as a linguistic composition results in discursive logic. For instance, Heidegger's consideration of poetry as philosophical truth and Russell's logical atomism show the faith of these thinkers in the equivalence between language and reality.

Deleuze's understanding of sense stands firmly against these trends of philosophy. For Deleuze, those who claim to be in opposition to Hegel do not do enough in rejecting Hegel's presupposition to identify thinking with Being or Spirit. When Hegel says that Being can speak for itself, he assumes the ways in which philosophy becomes a reality at its logical end. On the contrary, Deleuze, with his concept of sense, suggests the virtuality of Being. The sense is the ontological locus but does not speak for itself. Sense has an infinite regress from reality. Nobody (no individual) can state the sense of what he or she is saying at the moment. This is the endless regress of sense. Deleuze argues:

> This regress testifies both to the great impotence of the speaker and to the highest power of language: my impotence to state the sense of what I say, to say at the same time something and its meaning; but also the infinite power of language to speak about words. (1990: 28–29)

Deleuze regards language as logic without objects. By default, language is dominant because it is impossible to be fixed on Being. Sense works as duality—a series produces the state of affairs as sense exists, and similarly, presupposition makes up facts as sense subsists. The two dimensions are independent of each other—nothing is associated. Where Deleuze's philosophy reveals, its "scandalous" body is in its assertion of logic without Being, in direct opposition to Hegelianism.

Deleuze regards logic neither as metaphysical deceit nor as the superior form of philosophy, but merely emphasizes how logic comes to work. At some point, Deleuze's idea of logic reminds us of Freud's approach to a dream. Logic in Deleuze's ontology is compatible with "dream-work" in Freud's psychoanalysis. The world is brought in as logical. Deleuze's ontology is nothing less than a theoretical approach to the logic of the world. In other words, it is a way to understand how a logical world is engendered. Deleuze extends the ambitious thought project to the entirety of postwar French philosophy in a radical way. According to Deleuze's radicalism, Meinong's logic is the alternative to Hegel's logic. Thus endorsing Meinong, Deleuze paves the way toward the ontology of mathematics. Worlds may be comprehensible through discursive logic, but the discrete characteristics

of multiple worlds are seen only with mathematics. This is where Deleuze meets Badiou insofar as both philosophers see mathematics as the ontological presentation of infinitesimal counting.

From this perspective, Deleuze embraces a dynamic ontology—the ontology of a being that is not stuck on inert materiality but rather exists as an infinite state of flux. The logic of sense is nothing less than a new ontology, which separates discursive logic from its object. This attempt results in alternative materialism to realism, which up to this point was based on a philosophical belief that language is the reflection of reality. Therefore, Deleuze's philosophy challenges the classical dichotomy of the relationship between theory and practice: a theory must be realized in practice. The theory has no end in practice, but rather is its own creative logic.

From this ontology, Deleuze does right by a new materialism, which reformulates metaphysical problems from the paradoxical aspect of objects. What is this "new materialism"? It is not the representation of materiality, but instead is the multiple forms of singular materials. It is like Freud's concept of *Es*, the singularities of which cannot be reduced to *Ich*. In this way, a concept is not just the abstractive form of materiality, but rather is the material as such. The concept creates new materiality. Its creation is not theological, however, but the transformation of multiplicity. In my opinion, the essence of Deleuze's politics lies in the way in which the multiple forms of materials are put in a concept—that is, geophilosophy.

In *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) argue that philosophy is the creation of concepts. A concept is the intensity of multiplicity, inscribed on the plane of immanence. In other words, a concept is comparable to "conceptual personae," which serves as the mode of thinking about territory and earth. In short, the task of philosophy (i.e., the creation of concepts) is the way in which "new conceptual personae" come to exist.

Interestingly, "new conceptual personae" is not a subject, but in fact, is geophilosophical thinking. Thinking takes place in the territory and changes it. Deleuze and Guattari claim:

> When relative deterritorialization is itself horizontal, or immanent, it combines with the absolute deterritorialization of the plane of immanence that carries the movements of relative deterritorialization to infinity, pushes them to the absolute, by transforming them (milieu, friend, opinion). Immanence is redoubled. This is where one thinks no longer with figures but with concepts. It is the concept that comes to populate the plane of immanence. There is no longer projection in a figure but the connection in the concept. This is why the concept itself abandons all reference to retain only the conjugations and connections that constitute its consistency. The concept's only rule is an internal or external neighborhood. Its internal neighborhood or consistency is secured by the connection of its components in zones of indiscernibility; its external neighborhood or exoconsistency is secured by the bridges thrown from

> one concept to another when the components of one of them are saturated. And this is really what the creation of concepts means: to connect internal, inseparable components to the point of closure or saturation so that we can no longer add or withdraw a component without changing the nature of the concept; to connect the concept with another in such a way that the nature of other connections will change. (1994: 90)

Concepts stand by themselves: "they are flat surfaces without levels, orderings without hierarchy" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 90). Therefore, what matters in philosophy are questions as to "what to put in a concept?" and "what to put with it?" In this way, philosophy as the creation of concepts becomes the experiment of the future. Philosophy brings forth thinking (i.e., experimentation), which is indeterminate and unconditioned without history. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "philosophy is reterritorialized three times" (1994: 110). It was reterritorialized on Greeks in the past, on the democratic state in the present, and a new people and new Earth in the future. What are these new people and Earth? I would say that the term describes another system of politics, which reinforces an experimental challenge to the possibility of representative democracy. It is "scandalous" thinking indeed to deconstruct the given material dimensions and discover micro-multiplicity interwoven with macro-multiplicity.

This idea of geophilosophy reveals how Deleuze, along with Guattari, assumes materialist politics rather than political materialism. The crucial point of his dynamic ontology is that the creation of materiality has its cause from within. Its reason might be "pure difference" or some similar intrinsic genesis but is never what is missing from the outset. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze discusses the problem of dynamic genesis:

> It is no longer a question of a static genesis which would lead from the presupposed event to its actualization in states of affairs and to its expression in propositions. It is a question of a dynamic genesis which leads directly from states of affairs to events, from mixtures to pure lines, from depth to the production of surfaces, which must not implicate at all the other genesis. (1990: 186)

Static genesis is the actualization of presupposed events, the symbolic expression of affairs. Meanwhile, a dynamic genesis gives rise to events, pure lines, and surfaces from states of affairs. However, the first stage of a dynamic genesis lies firmly in the clamorous depth—the schizoid system (Deleuze 1990: 191). This statement seems to resonate with the idea that Deleuze asserts in *Difference and Repetition*, "a single voice raises the clamour of Being" (1994: 35), which is successfully polemicized by Badiou. Here I withhold my discussion of Badiou's points against Deleuze to focus on Deleuze' materialism.

Whatever Deleuze presupposes in the idea above, the critical issue is that he regards the depth as vociferous. The "clamour" is the way in which a being comes to exist, even though a being has nothing to do with its depth once it is established. This idea is nothing less than the Deleuzian interpretation of the Nietzschean imperative that only difference returns as difference. Deleuze argues that "at the point at which the extremity of difference is reached," it is no longer a return to the One, but an openness to multiplicity (1994: 304).

According to Deleuze, a being in itself has no logic, and each being stands alone. As for the state of objects, there is no declaration, but "everything is equal." Materiality is the bundle of singularities, not any representation or symbolization of objects. A concept as such is a material, which is independent of its cause. This is the condition on which "everything returns as difference."

To understand Deleuze's position, it is necessary to consider Louis Althusser's conceptualization of new materialism in his later work. Althusser refers to "unknown materialism" in his attempt to set up new materialism, which aims at the revision of Marxism. Althusser's argument regarding new materialism in a certain way resonates with Deleuze's materialism. For Althusser, new materialism means "a 'materialism of the encounter' thought by way of politics" (2006: 172). What is the encounter? It takes place in the "political void." Following this argument, Althusser says further that "this political void is first a philosophical void," stating:

> No Cause that precedes its effects is to be found in it, no Principle of morality or theology (as in the whole Aristotelian political tradition: the good and bad forms of government, the degeneration of the good into the bad). One reason is here not in terms of the Necessity of the accomplished fact, but in terms of the contingency of the fact to be accomplished. (2006: 172)

When Althusser renders the idea of "new materialism," he puts forth the image of an Epicurean world. In the world, all the elements are flowing. Only by way of encounter does an element exist, demonstrating, in a way, the crystallization of the flux. For Althusser, politics contain the void and produce the encounter. What about Deleuze? Is there any possible political moment in his reformation of materialism?

In her polemical essay on Deleuze and politics, Isabelle Garo argues that "the current interest in the actuality of, or potential for, a Deleuzian politics might seem surprising" (2008: 54). According to Garo, Deleuzian politics, if they exist, are rooted in the radical years following the events of May 1968, and at best, implement "the displacement and redeployment of what had gone before" (ibid.). This is where the paradoxical character of Deleuzism comes to exist: that his viewpoint of politics presupposes the exceptional circumstances of May 1968 should prove that the political agenda of his philosophy remains valid today.

Garo regards this aspect of Deleuzian politics as an ambiguity, because Deleuze's reflections on politics do not present a clear alternative to current systems, but rather track down lines of flight that stand to occur in the future. According to Garo, Deleuze replaces "singular contradictions" with "lines of flight which are parallel and quasi-homologous" (2008: 60). Garo points out that there is not a class or class conflict in Deleuze's schema, and thus, "neither socialism nor communism is compatible with Deleuze's politics" (ibid.: 61). Nevertheless, the ambiguous nature of politics in Deleuzian thought does not mean that his philosophy has no intrinsic political moment but instead implies that the very equivocality of his politics affords capacity for reconsideration as the potential lacunae of his materialism.

Garo's critique of Deleuze seems parallel to Sokal's argument. Both Garo and Sokal insist that Deleuze's philosophy fails to actualize metaphysical ideas in reality. Against Garo as well as Sokal, I would say, Deleuze's political enigma is related to the unrepresentable thinking of materialist politics—the future line of flight—which should be produced by an event to come. In this respect, what is now in question is not how Deleuze's project can be recognized as a general model of politics, but how his idea of politics is inscribed in his materialism, thus describing the presence of Deleuzian materialist politics.

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