

Empiricism, Pluralism and Politics in Deleuze and Stirner

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The aim of the paper is to explore the logic of empiricist pluralism in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Max Stirner. Stirner and Deleuze are two thinkers rarely mentioned together. Stirner's thinking emerged, along with that of Marx, from amongst the shadows of Hegelianism. However, while Marx attempted an inversion of Hegel on socialist and collectivist lines, Stirner developed a critique of German Idealism that was supremely individualistic and opposed to conceptual unities. His philosophy of egoism was a defence of individual difference against the onslaught of essentialist ideas and abstractions - like socialism and humanism - the 'spectres' of idealism that have subsumed the individual under one form of generality or another. Deleuze, on the other hand, was seen along with Foucault and Derrida as one of the most influential contemporary 'poststructuralist' thinkers, while Stirner is not generally regarded as 'poststructuralist', and has received scant attention in the light of contemporary theory. [1] Deleuze is commonly regarded as a philosopher of difference. His critique of conceptual abstractions and his celebration of the multiple and the corporeal engages many diverse terrains, from politics and psychoanalysis, to literature and film theory. However, it is precisely in this valorisation of difference and corporeality, and rejection of idealist abstractions, that a crucial plane of convergence with Stirner appears. Deleuze's thinking may be seen as the logical extension of Stirner's attempt to exorcise the 'spectres' of idealism and essentialism from thought. Deleuze, in his work on Nietzsche, refers to Stirner as "the dialectician who reveals nihilism as the truth of the dialectic." [2] Stirner turns the dialectic on its head, revealing as its culmination and essence, not the spirit of Rationality, but the egoist, the corporeal, unique individual. The dialectic, for Stirner, produces not the birth of grand ideals, but their death. Rather than being the overcoming of difference and singularity, the dialectic is in fact their final triumph. Deleuze continues this overturning of idealism and conceptual abstraction. This paper will explore and develop this plane of convergence, to see where it might lead. I will do this in the following way: Firstly, I will expand the concept of empiricist pluralism through a discussion of the Stirner and Deleuze's critique of representation. Secondly, I will look at the political implications of this critique of idealism, through an exploration of the state power and its oppression and effacement of individual difference. Thirdly, I will try to develop, from Stirner and Deleuze's thinking, a politics and ethics of multiplicity and corporeality through the notion of singularity.

Critique of Representation

When Deleuze said, "I am an empiricist, that is, a pluralist", what did he mean? Empiricism is a valorisation of the corporeal, sensual and material over the abstract, ideal and supernatural. Pluralism emphasises plurality, multiplicity and difference over unity, sameness and centrality. Empiricist pluralism may be seen, then, as the philosophical assertion of the material 'principle' of difference and plurality. Deleuze and Stirner, in different ways, are exponents of this principle. However the term 'principle' is somewhat misleading if it suggests an abstract conceptualisation of difference. Stirner and Deleuze reject abstractions and conceptions precisely because they deny difference and plurality. They seek to theorise, in other words, a non-conceptual difference, a difference that exceeds conceptual limits. They refuse to 'sterilise the wound'¹ in thinking by imposing concepts and ideals, instead allowing the visceral intensity of the world to leak out, forming strange and unpredictable rivulets in the sensible. For them life assumes a greater inten-

¹I borrow this term from Sue Golding's *Eight Technologies of Otherness* (London: Routledge, 1997).

sity, a more real reality than the concepts and definitions that hopelessly seek to explain it. So, for Deleuze, there is a qualitative distinction between real difference and conceptual difference, between difference in itself and its inscription in a general concept. He asks: “what is the concept of difference – one which is not reducible to simple conceptual difference but demands its own Idea, its own singularity at the level of Ideas?”² I argue that this non-conceptual difference that demands its own singularity, may be theorised in terms of Stirner’s idea of ‘uniqueness’. Uniqueness, as we shall see, is a form of individuality that cannot be reduced to a general idea. Therefore, difference for both Stirner and Deleuze is non-conceptual and material. It is ‘real’ difference, as opposed to the conceptual abstraction of difference that denies corporeality. This crucial distinction emerges through the critique of representation.

In *Repetition and Difference* Deleuze engages in a critique of representative thinking. He argues that representation limits thought and denies difference. This is because in representative thought difference is always conceived of as difference from something, difference from the Same. Thus, difference is always a poor repetition of an original idea – it is never difference in itself. Deleuze starts by distinguishing repetition from generality. Generality subscribes to two main orders: the order of resemblances, and the order of equivalences.³ Generality means, in other words, that one term may be substituted for another. Repetition, on the other hand, refers to that which cannot be replaced or substituted. Repetition is a conduct in relation to the singular – something that has no equivalent and which cannot be exchanged for another. It exists in itself. Each term that is repeated is different in kind from the one before. Deleuze says then: “If exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition.”⁴ While generality is the dull imposition of the law – for instance the equivalence of subjects before the law – repetition questions this law of exchange by celebrating the singular, the exception to the rule.

Repetition and generality are also opposed, according to Deleuze, from the perspective of representation. Representation is the relation of a concept to its object. However this logic operates in a double sense: there is always one concept for each particular object; and on the other hand, there is only one object per concept. This double logic of representation constructs the idea of difference as conceptual difference. Paradoxically this conceptual difference, for Deleuze, facilitates resemblances and generalities, rather than difference itself. Generality is the assertion of the infinite power of concepts to express and represent objects, while repetition blocks and limits this infinite representation. From repetition having the ability to define itself, there emerges repetition as non-conceptual difference. Non-conceptual difference is difference that escapes the conceptual order. In Deleuze’s words: “It expresses a power peculiar to the existent, a stubbornness of the existent in intuition, which resists every specification by concepts no matter how far this can be taken.”⁵ Therefore repetition is difference without a concept to account for it – a form of difference in itself. It always exceeds the Idea, seeking its alterity, its outside. However it must be made clear that this form of difference is not a difference absolutely outside the Idea, because this only reaffirms the Idea in its exteriority of opposition. Rather, non-conceptual difference is internal to the Idea, yet nevertheless always goes beyond it. It is the movement of singularities which plays behind the mask of generality, always spilling out from behind its edges.

²Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994) 26.

³*Ibid.*, 1.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, 14.

One must be wary, then, of an absolute affirmation of difference over sameness. To affirm the subordinated side of the hierarchy often restores the hierarchy itself, in an inverted sense. To effect an absolute transgression is to reaffirm the very thing one is transgressing. Difference in this way would merely become another absolute identity – it would become, in other words, the Same. Deleuze says then: “A slave does not cease to become a slave by taking power...”⁶ For Nietzsche, being a slave is a quality of powerlessness, regardless of one’s place in the hierarchy. In the same way, if difference is simply affirmed over sameness without effecting a re-evaluation of itself, it becomes merely another identity of the Same. It remains a ‘slave’ to the hierarchy it has reinvented. Therefore difference must be qualitatively different. It must be rethought in ways that resist the re-absorption into the structure of identity. Difference must transform the terms of the hierarchy. So while Deleuze valorises difference above generality, he goes beyond the binary of difference/sameness. Todd May reinforces this point. He argues that Deleuze is not positing a world of absolute difference because this would make difference a metaphysical and abstract concept that stands above everything - something Deleuze would reject.⁷ So, rather than difference becoming an absolute concept and an essential identity, it must remain open to the Other – open even to the possibilities of the Same. In this way, difference becomes difference in itself, not difference in opposition to the Same. It would be a Nietzschean difference which, unlike representation, does not need an external identity to oppose it in order to affirm itself. In this way, Deleuze introduces a principle of difference that not only resists conceptual generalities, but also resists its own tendencies towards conceptual absolutism.

So through the distinction between repetition and generality, there has emerged the principle of non-conceptual difference, difference which cannot be inscribed within the structure of the general. It may be thought of as an excess which defies the limits of the concept. This suggests an attack on the logic of representation itself. Concepts can no longer adequately represent real differences. For Deleuze, difference is primary while representation is secondary: “difference is behind everything, but behind difference there is nothing.”⁸ Deleuze engages in a critique of Hegelianism, which privileges the Idea over empirical difference.⁹ Difference for Hegel is seen in terms of contradiction that is always resolved dialectically. Difference is thus effaced by being dialecticised back into an essential, universal identity whose logic is unfolding. Deleuze argues that to see difference in terms of contradiction is to deny difference. Difference cannot be subsumed within the representative structure of the dialectic – it is always difference in its own right. In a similar manner, Deleuze also rejects the Platonic philosophy of abstract forms. For Plato only abstract forms were absolutely real while material objects were mere copies of the form and thus degraded. Difference was even further denigrated, according to this model of representation, by being an imperfect copy of a copy. However Deleuze argues that the ordered world of forms is undermined by the Other – the simulacra, in which it is impossible to tell which is the original form and which is the imperfect copy, as the form appears as merely another difference, another copy.

So representation is based on the centrality and predominance of identity. However, as Deleuze shows, this predominance is breaking down. The essential identities that account for the world

⁶Ibid., 54.

⁷See Todd May, *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas, and Deleuze*, (University Park, Pa. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

⁸Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 57.

⁹See Bruce Baugh, “Transcendental Empiricism: Deleuze’s Response to Hegel,” *Man and World* 25 (1992): 133-148.

are coming to be questioned. We live in the world of the simulacra, where identities are only simulated – they are masks for the play of differences and singularities that constitute them. Repetition does not belong to the order of representation for this reason. Because there is no original model or identity to be repeated, there is an endless play of signs and symbols – strip away one mask and one finds underneath, not the original essence, but another mask. There is no possibility of getting to the original, primary essence or Being behind the repetitions, because this essence does not exist. It is itself another repetition or representation. The logic of representation is therefore subverted by infinitely extending it. Concepts and generalities that are supposed to represent the world are thus devalued. The world is made up entirely of differences, differences that do not need a governing concept to represent them. These differences are unequal, not in the sense of being compared to a universal standard or norm, but in the sense of being different from one another in distribution and effect. This is what Deleuze calls nomadic distribution – distribution in an open space, without a central ordering concept.¹⁰ Everything in the world is already different from everything else – there is no need here for a conceptual of difference to account for this. Difference can be experienced and sensed directly. It refers to the corporeal, sensible world – an empirical reality that cannot be subsumed within abstract forms and representational structures. For Deleuze then:

Representation fails to capture the affirmed world of difference. Representation has only a single centre, a unique and receding perspective, and in consequence a false depth. It mediates everything, but mobilises and moves nothing. Movement, for its part, implies a plurality of centres, a superposition of perspectives, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which essentially distort representation.¹¹

A number of important points have emerged from Deleuze's critique of representation. Firstly, the notion of non-conceptual difference, or difference in itself is evident. This is a difference that, as we have seen, exceeds conceptual structures, having no need for these generalities. It challenges the rule of the concept over what it purports to represent. Secondly, there is a transformation of the principle of difference itself. Difference is no longer an identity of opposition to the dominant identity of the Same. This, as we have seen, only reaffirms the hierarchical structure of identity. Rather difference is transformed in a way that deconstructs binary oppositions. Thirdly, this principle of non-conceptual difference is the basis for an empirical pluralism. Conceptual identity, as we have seen, is composed of a plurality of real, concrete differences and singularities. Concepts and abstractions are only masks that hide a sensible, plural materiality – the world of real differences and intensities. There is, then, an immanent corporeality that defies all attempts at representation. The authority of the abstract concepts over empirical actuality is thereby subverted. Moreover, this empiricism is also transcendental. Patrick Hayden defines transcendental empiricism as an "ontology based on the primacy of difference."¹² Thus Deleuze's empiricist pluralism is transcendental because it presupposes an ontology of difference. Difference is, in other words, the primary principle upon which the pluralities of the empirical world are based.

¹⁰Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 36.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 55-56.

¹²Patrick Hayden, *Multiplicity and Becoming: The Pluralist Empiricism of Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998) 15.

Deleuze is interested in the real conditions of actual experience. He sees abstractions, concept and generalities as an attempt to deny these real conditions of experience by seeing them as reflections of a central essence or idea. So, for Idealists, empirical particularity is only an actualisation of the Idea. However for Deleuze, actuality is a real singularity, with its own terms and conditions of existence. The principle of multiplicity is used here to describe the condition of material existence. Multiplicity is governed by the logic of difference as a contingent relation between actualities. Empirical reality is constituted by multiplicities in this way – it is formed through a contingent arrangement of forces and intensities.

Representation is the mode of thinking that denies these immanent multiplicities and pluralities. It is based on an aborescent model or image that predetermines thought on a rational basis.¹³ Its structure is like a root and tree system: there is a central unity, truth or essence – like Rationality – which is the root, and which determines the growth of its ‘branches’. This model presupposes a central identity. It traps thinking in opposing binary identities such as black/white, male/female, hetero/homosexual. Thought must always unfold according to a dialectical logic and is thus trapped within binary divisions that deny difference and plurality. The aborescent model then is the basis for the abstractions and general concepts that dominate our thinking.

The Spectres of Idealism

Stirner engages in a similar critique of representation, claiming that abstractions and general concepts are fictions that deny the corporeal sensuality and difference of life. Stirner affirms difference and singularity, seeing them as primary elements of empirical reality. In this sense he may be seen to be subscribing to an empiricist pluralism akin to Deleuze’s. Abstractions like truth, rationality, morality and human essence are spooks which have no material reality, but which try to make individual difference conform to their principles. For Stirner the world is alive with these spooks, these ideal abstractions which deform sensual experience. We are haunted by these ghosts which are not of our own making, but which nevertheless dominate our thinking:

Look out near or far, a ghostly world surrounds you everywhere; you are always having “apparitions” or visions. Everything that appears to you is only the phantasm of an indwelling spirit, is a ghostly “apparition”; the world is to you only a “world of appearances”, behind which the spirit walks.¹⁴

In other words the conviction that there is an essence behind everything, a deeper truth to be discovered behind the surface, is an indication of the extent to which the spectres of Idealism have penetrated our thoughts. Stirner argues that to believe in Essence is to deny real, sensual experience. There is nothing beyond the surface apart from another surface, and to look for something beyond the surface is to deny life itself. Stirner’s critique of representation is evident here. If we see our corporeal world as merely a reflection or representation of an essential concept, we are denying this reality and seeking an apparition. Contrary to idealist philosophy, which considers the external world as merely an ‘apparition’ or a reflection of an essential truth or idea, Stirner wants to argue that it is this essential truth that is itself the apparition. Moreover it is an

¹³Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 25.

¹⁴Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed., David Leopold (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 35.

oppressive and destructive apparition because it alienates the individual from his sensual reality by making him seek after an essence which does not exist.

Stirner's critique of idealism and representative thinking develops from his critique of Feuerbachian humanism. In the *Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach applied the notion of alienation to religion. Religion is alienating, according to Feuerbach, because it requires that man abdicate his own qualities and powers by projecting them onto an abstract God, beyond the grasp of humanity. In doing so, man displaces his essential self, leaving him alienated and debased. Man's qualities become the qualities of God. Feuerbach argued that the predicates of God were really only the predicates of man as a species being, and that it was God that was a hypostatisation of man. While man should be the single criterion for truth, love and virtue, these characteristics are now the property of an abstract being who becomes the sole criterion for them. However Stirner argues that in claiming that the qualities which we have attributed to God or to the Absolute are really the qualities of man, Feuerbach has made man into an almighty being himself. Feuerbach embodies the Enlightenment humanist project of restoring Man to his rightful place at the centre of the universe. However, it is precisely this attempt to make man God, to make the finite infinite, that Stirner condemns. According to Stirner, Feuerbach, while claiming to have overthrown religion, merely reversed the order of subject and predicate, doing nothing to undermine the place of religious authority itself. The alienating category of God is retained and solidified by entrenching it in man. Man thereby usurps God, capturing for himself the category of the infinite. Man becomes the substitute for the Christian illusion. Stirner says,

The supreme being is indeed the essence of man, but, just because it is his essence and not he himself, it remains quite immaterial whether we see it outside him and view it as 'God', or find it in him and call it 'Essence of Man' or 'Man'. I am neither God nor Man, neither the supreme essence nor my essence, and therefore it is all one in the main whether I think of the essence as in me or outside me.¹⁵

So for Stirner, essence is something external to the concrete individual, and by seeking the sacred in 'human essence', by positing an essential man and attributing to him certain qualities that had hitherto been attributed to God, Feuerbach has merely reintroduced religious alienation. The concrete individual finds himself alienated once again to an abstraction outside him – this time human essence instead of divine essence. Stirner shows that by making certain characteristics and qualities essential to Man, Feuerbach has alienated those in whom these qualities are not found. And so man becomes like God, and just as man was debased under God, so the concrete individual is debased beneath this perfect being, Man. For Stirner, Man is just as oppressive, if not more so, than God. Man is the new idealist abstraction, which denies the sensible materiality of the individual in claiming to 'speak for' him, to represent him. It is a spook, or a fixed idea - something which desecrates the uniqueness of the individual by comparing him to an ideal which is not of his own creation.

This critique of representation extends to all abstractions, including rational truth and morality. Rational truths are always held above individual perspectives, and Stirner argues that this is a further denial of individual difference. Stirner is not necessarily opposed to truth itself, but rather the way it has become an abstract, sacred ideal, removed from the grasp of the individual and wielded tyrannically above the plurality of perspectives. Stirner says then: "As long as you

¹⁵Ibid., 33

believe in the truth, you do not believe in yourself, and you are a - servant, a - religious man.”¹⁶ By this he means that to believe absolutely in rational truth is to subject oneself to an abstraction which denies the corporeal world. Like Deleuze, Stirner believes that generalities like rational truth, which appear to be unified, are in fact made up of a plurality of differences. Stirner rejects fixed ideas such as rational truth and morality, from the perspective of individual difference, or ‘uniqueness’. Like Deleuze, Stirner sees individual difference as primary – the basis for the pluralities and multiplicities of the empirical world. Abstractions and fixed ideas are condemned because they subsume individual difference within their generalities, thus denying ‘uniqueness’. In this way, the generality of Man denies the concrete individual:

Man reaches beyond every individual man, and yet – though he be ‘his essence’ – is not in fact his essence (which would rather be as single as he the individual himself), but a general and ‘higher’, yes, for atheists, ‘the highest essence’.¹⁷

In other words, for Stirner the real essence of the individual is something as singular and unique as the individual himself. It is an ‘essence’ that paradoxically denies essence, because it does not refer to an abstract generality outside itself. Uniqueness may be seen as a form of non-conceptual difference, in a similar manner to Deleuze. It is difference defined through the real, empirical experience of difference, rather than through an abstract concept of difference. The basic unit of differentiation is, for Stirner, the ‘unique one’, or the ego. The ego is more than the concrete individual – it is a principle of difference in itself. Like Deleuze’s principle of non-conceptual difference, the ego goes beyond the limits of concepts, having no need for external generalities: “no concept expresses me, nothing that is designated my essence exhausts me...”.¹⁸ Stirner wants to go beyond essence, which is merely another mask, another repetition, till one finds the individuum, the foundation for the unique one. The individuum is not, however, an essence but rather a principle of pure difference that denies essence. To look for essence is to deny the concrete empirical reality of the world. Stirner says:

When one looks to the bottom of anything, searches out its essence, one often discovers something quite other than what it seems to be; honeyed speech and a lying heart, pompous words and beggarly thoughts, and so on. By bringing essence into prominence one degrades the hitherto misapprehend appearance to a mere semblance, a deception. The essence of the world, is for him who looks to the bottom of it – emptiness; emptiness is = world’s essence (world’s doings).¹⁹

In other words, there is no essence at the heart of existence – there is merely an emptiness. The real essence of the world, according to Stirner, is precisely the concrete experience – “world’s doings” - that is degraded into a deception through the search for an essence. This emptiness at the base of existence is a creative nothingness, a principle of difference through which new pluralities and multiplicities can be formed.

It may be argued then, that Stirner’s ego as a principle of difference, is the logical counterpart to Deleuze’s principle of non-conceptual difference. They both signify difference in itself – difference which defies the logic of representation. Moreover, both are actualisations of difference

¹⁶Ibid., 353

¹⁷Ibid., 38.

¹⁸Ibid., 366

¹⁹Ibid., 40.

which lead to the construction of new multiplicities and pluralities. They are the ordering principles that define the world of real, empirical experience. Therefore, Stirner and Deleuze, through a critique of representation, develop a logic of empiricist pluralism which undermines the abstractions and fixed ideas that dominate us. The discussion will now turn to the political implications of this critique of representation.

Critique of the State

I have argued that both Stirner and Deleuze engage in a critique of representation that seeks to liberate thought from the idealist image that denies empirical difference. The aborescent image of thought for Deleuze is an authoritarian conceptual plane upon which centralised and essentialist discourses such as rational knowledge are based. These discourses are inextricably tied to political power. For Stirner, too, essentialist discourses like truth and morality, are inevitably related to political power and to practices of self-repression.

The political expression of this conceptual authoritarianism is the state. For Stirner and Deleuze, the state is a monstrosity oppressively apparatus, and the enemy of corporeal, plural life. The state is the embodiment of conceptual unity, which denies life by subsuming it within its centralised and essentialist structures, and which provides the ground for a whole series of discourses and practices of domination. As an abstraction, the state transcends its different concrete manifestations, yet at the same time operates through them. The state is more than a particular institution existing in a particular historical stage. It is an abstract principle of power and authority that has always existed in different forms, yet is somehow more than these particular these actualisations. For instance, Stirner's rejection of the state goes beyond a critique of particular states - like the liberal state or the socialist state. Rather it constitutes an attack on the state itself - the very category of state power, not just the different forms it assumes. What must be overcome, according to Stirner, is the very idea of state power itself - the ruling principle.²⁰

Deleuze also stresses the conceptual autonomy of the state. He also sees the state as an abstract form of power not wholly identifiable with its particular concrete realisations. Deleuze refers to a state-form - an abstract model of power which "organises the dominant utterances and the established order of a society, the dominant languages and knowledge, conformist actions and feelings, the segments which prevail over others."²¹ For Deleuze the state is an abstract machine rather than a concrete institution, which essentially 'rules' through more minute institutions and practices of domination. The state overcodes and regulates these minor dominations, stamping them with its imprint. What is important about this abstract machine is not the form in which it appears, but rather its function, which is the constitution of a field of interiority in which political sovereignty can be exercised. The state may be seen, then, as a process of capture.²²

The state, for Deleuze, is immanent in thought, giving it ground, logos - providing it with a model that defines its "goal, paths, conduits, channels, organs..."²³ Moreover, while the state is the representative image of thought, it also functions as the representative image of the subject. It operates through a process of subjectification, in which the individual is made part of the state

²⁰Ibid., 226.

²¹Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 129.

²²Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1988) 434.

²³Ibid., 434.

image and thus made complicit in his own domination. The state does this by constructing an essential image of the human subject which one must conform to. For Stirner, the essential Man of humanist discourse also functions as a normalising image which dominates the individual and marginalises difference and uniqueness.²⁴ The concept of Man is constructed as a site of power, a political unit through which the state dominates the individual. The state demands that the individual conform to a certain essential identity so that he can be made part of state society and, thus, dominated: "So the State betrays its enmity to me by demanding that I be a Man ...it imposes being a Man upon me as a duty".²⁵ Stirner has broken with traditional humanist ontology in seeing the individual ego and human essence as separate and opposed entities. Humanity is not a transcendental essence. Rather, it is a fabrication of power or, at least, a discursive construct that can be made to serve the interests of power.

Deleuze, like Stirner, sees the human subject to be a representative norm and an effect of power, rather than an essential and autonomous identity. Subjectivity is constructed in such a way that its desire becomes the desire for the state. According to Deleuze, the state, where it once operated through a massive repressive apparatus, now no longer needs this - it functions through the self-domination of the subject. The subject becomes his own legislator: "...the more you obey the statements of dominant reality, the more you command as speaking subject within mental reality, for finally you only obey yourself... A new form of slavery has been invented, that of being a slave to oneself...".²⁶ For Deleuze, moreover, desire is channelled to the state through our willing submission to Oedipal representation. Oedipus is the state's defence against untrammelled desire.²⁷ Oedipal representation does not repress desire as such, but rather 'represents' it in such a way that it believes itself to be repressed. Oedipal repression is simply the representative image which masks the real domination of desire. Desire, for Deleuze, is not an essential humanist desire - which is merely the conceptual mask. Rather, it subscribes to an altogether different ontology - a transcendental empiricist one. Therefore the desire that is repressed in this way is real, material and constructivist - it forms assemblages with other desires, creating the multiplicities that make up the corporeal world. The repression of this desire is the most brutal and despotic manifestation of the domination of empirical plural life by abstract concepts and generalities. Desire is repressed because unfettered it is a threat to the state.²⁸ Oedipal representation individualises this desire by cutting it off from its possible connections and imprisoning it within the individual subject. This is much in the same way that, for Stirner, the essential human subject imprisons the ego, trying to capture its pluralities and fluxes within a single concept.

The question of desire, then, plays a crucial role in both Deleuze and Stirner's political thinking. For these thinkers we can desire our own domination, just as we can desire freedom.²⁹ Desire is not repressed or denied - rather it is channelled to the state. So for Stirner desire is constituted in such a way that it becomes desire for the state.³⁰ In this way state domination is made possible through our complicity - through our desire for authority. Like Deleuze, Stirner is not so much

²⁴ Stirner, *Ego*, 204.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 162.

²⁷ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, p. 88.

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia* (New York: Viking Press, 1977) 116.

²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari say: "To the question 'How can desire desire its own repression, how can it desire its slavery?' we reply that the powers which crush desire, or which subjugate it, themselves already form part of the assemblages of desire..." See *Dialogues*, 133.

³⁰ Stirner, *Ego*, 312.

interested in power itself, but in the reasons why we allow ourselves to be dominated by power. He wants to study the ways in which we participate in our own oppression, and to show that power is not only concerned with economic or political questions - it is also rooted in psychological needs. It has embedded itself deep within our conscience in the form of abstract ideas such as the state, human essence and morality. The dominance of the state, Stirner argues, depends on our willingness to let it dominate us.³¹ Because the state is a conceptual abstraction, and therefore a fiction, it only exists because we allow it to exist and because we abdicate to it our own authority, in the same way that we create God by abdicating our authority and placing it outside ourselves. The state's power is really based on our power. Political power cannot rest solely on coercion. It needs our willingness to obey. It is only because the individual has not recognised this power, because he humbles himself before authority, that the state continues to exist.

So for both Stirner and Deleuze the state must be overcome as an idea before it can be overcome in reality. The state is a conceptual abstraction that not only rules over ideas, discourses and thoughts, but also 'represents' the individual to himself in a way that channels his desire to the state. In this way the corporeal individual engages in his own repression, and perpetuates the conceptual structures which deny life.

The Politics of Singularity

The political question that must be addressed in this empiricist pluralist reading of Stirner and Deleuze is how do we resist domination? What political strategies, practices and concepts are available to us in this struggle for life? For Stirner and Deleuze, resistance to the state must take place at the level of our thoughts, ideas and most fundamentally our desires. We must learn to think beyond the paradigm of the state. The revolutionary politics of the past has failed because it has remained trapped within this conceptual generality. Politics is caught within essentialist concepts and Manichean structures which only end up reaffirming authority. Perhaps the idea of revolution should be abandoned altogether. Perhaps politics should be about escaping essentialist identities and generalities rather than reasserting them. Stirner argues, for instance, that resistance against the state should take the form, not of revolution, but insurrection. The insurrection starts with the individual refusing his essential identity, the 'I' through which power operates: it starts "from men's discontent with themselves."³² Moreover, the insurrection does not aim at overthrowing political institutions themselves. It is aimed at the individual overthrowing his own essential identity - the outcome of which is a change in political arrangements. This notion of rebellion involves a process of becoming - it is about continually reinventing one's own self, rather than limiting oneself to essentialist repressive identities.

Insurrection as a strategy of resisting essentialist identities and abstract generalities has many parallels with Deleuze's political thinking. Deleuze, like Stirner, sees becoming - becoming other than Man - as a form of resistance. Becoming is a process of evolution of two or more separate entities - a process of assemblage and connection. This notion of becoming is similar to Stirner's idea of the ego as a flux, a continual process of change that denies essence. Becoming is a constant shifting of identities and assemblages with other identities, to the point where the concept of identity is no longer adequate to describe it. Becoming produces lines of flight that escape state

³¹Ibid., 195-196.

³²Ibid., 316.

coding and refer to an Outside of sheer difference. Therefore, if we are to resist subjectification, we must refuse who we are and become other. In a similar manner to the insurrection, resistance for Deleuze, must be a “long labour which is aimed not merely against the state and the powers that be, but directly at ourselves.”³³ An important aspect of this ‘labour’ of resistance is to engage in non-authoritarian forms of thought – thought which avoids conceptual abstractions and unities. We must remember that for Stirner and Deleuze, abstract, conceptual thinking facilitates political domination. Therefore Deleuze wants to engage in thought beyond generalities. To this end he employs a rhizomatic model to counter the dominant aborescent image of thought referred to above. Rhizomatic thought eschews abstractions, unities and general concepts, and seeks out multiplicities, pluralities and becomings. The rhizome is based on the metaphor of grass, which grows haphazardly and imperceptibly, as opposed to the orderly growth of the aborescent tree system. The purpose of the rhizome is to allow thought “to shake off its model, make its grass grow - even locally at the margins...”³⁴ The rhizome, in this sense, defies the very idea of a model: it is an endless, haphazard multiplicity of connections, which is not dominated by a single centre or place, but rather is decentralised and plural. It embraces four characteristics: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, and rupture. It rejects binary divisions and hierarchies, and is not governed by an unfolding, dialectical logic. It thus interrogates the abstractions that govern thought. Therefore, Deleuze is presenting a new model of thinking which is more suitable to real empirical conditions of the world. It is a model that takes account of the pluralities and singularities, and does not try to efface them within dialectical logics and binary, oppositional structures. Rhizomatic thinking emphasises the multiple, plural and contingent over the universal, abstract and essential. It is a model that defies conceptual abstractions and representational thinking, allowing instead the free play of difference and singularity that resonates in empirical reality. Rhizomatic thought is thought which defies Power, refusing to be limited by it. Rhizomatics “would not leave it to anyone, to any Power, to ‘pose’ questions or to ‘set’ problems”.³⁵

I would argue that Stirner’s attack on abstractions, essences and fixed ideas, is an example of rhizomatic thought in this way. Like Deleuze, Stirner looks for multiplicities and individual differences, rather than abstractions and unities. Abstractions like truth, rationality, human essence, are images which deny plurality and deform difference into sameness. Stirner here invents a new form of thought that emphasises multiplicity, plurality and individuality over universalism and transcendentalism. This anti-centralist thinking anticipates Deleuze’s approach.

This ‘rhizomatic’ style of thinking has radical implications for political theory. The political arena can no longer be drawn up according to the traditional battle lines of centralised political power and the autonomous subject who resists it. This is because any political action is capable of forming multiple, rhizomatic connections, including connections with the very power it is presumed to oppose: “These lines tie back to one another. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad”.³⁶ In this way the politics of empiricist pluralism goes beyond the oppositional structures that have hitherto limited radical politics. It transcends the ‘politics of identity’ in which political demands are based around a certain particularity or identity in opposition to other particularities – for instance, those based on questions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and so on. Identity politics is based on a binary logic of

³³Deleuze, “Many Politics,” *Dialogues*, 124-153, 138.

³⁴Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 24.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, 9.

opposition, which is one of the features of aborescent thinking which Stirner and Deleuze would reject. According to this logic identity is formed through opposition to another identity. However rhizomatic politics, as we have seen, reject these binary oppositions, emphasising instead the multiplicity of connections between identities. The field of politics is also a rhizomatic system in this way: multiple connections form between different identities – even if they are in opposition – thus opening up ever new and unpredictable possibilities. Therefore to posit a particular identity of opposition – to think solely in terms of the oppression of women by men, gays by straights, blacks by whites, etc - is to limit our political possibilities. Therefore the politics of empiricist pluralism may be seen as an attempt to go beyond existing political categories and to invent new ones - to expand the field of politics beyond its present limits by unmasking the connections that can be formed between resistance and the power being resisted. As Deleuze says: “You may make a rupture, draw a line of flight, yet there is still a danger that you will re-stratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier...”³⁷

So while it might appear that this assertion of a differential identity with particular rights would be the logical political expression of empiricist pluralism, Stirner and Deleuze would reject such a politics based on the essentialisation of difference. While they regard difference as the primary principle of the corporeal world, they also see essential identities as fundamentally restrictive of this very difference. Essential categories raise difference to the level of a generality, and this is precisely what they are against. Difference is for Deleuze and Stirner, non-conceptual, non-essentialist, and constitutively open to flux and becoming. It is more about multiplicity and contingency, rather than achieving a fixed identity. Once difference achieves a fixed identity – once it is raised to the level of the ‘sacred’, in Stirner’s words – then it becomes as oppressive and restrictive as the totalities it was opposed to. Difference must be left open – open to the Other, open even to the possibilities of the Same.

In this way, the politics of empiricist pluralism remains open to the Other. It is open to a universal dimension that transcends absolute particularities and differences. In its desire to resist the totalising possibilities of the universal, the politics of the particular affirms the totalising logic of the state and capitalism instead. One could argue that it is precisely because the politics of the particular eschews the dimension of the universal, that it ends up reaffirming domination. That is to say that because the politics of the particular rejects any notion of the universal it is a ‘non-politics’ – a politics that denies any meaning or significance to the political dimension.³⁸

The potential radicalism of identity politics – the real of antagonism that it seems to belie – is vitiated in its rejection of the universal. Because it rejects the universal, identity politics cannot present a challenge to general structures of power and domination. Empiricist pluralism, on the other hand, presupposes a political field of difference that nevertheless remains constitutively open to the possibilities of the universal, the vital political dimension denied by the politics of identity.

This openness of difference to the universal may best be theorised by the notion of singularity, rather than particularity. Particularity is a closing off of difference to the universal, whereas singularity suggests a certain undecidability between difference and the universal. We have seen the way in which the general or universal is questioned from the perspective of difference as that which exceeds it. The other side of this strategy of empiricist pluralism is that difference

³⁷Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 9

³⁸This is a point that has been made by Slavoj Žižek in reference to liberal multiculturalism. See *The Ticklish Subject*:

is now questioned from the perspective of the universal that exceeds it – it is opened to something beyond its own limits. For instance, Michel Foucault's writings on revolution attest a deep reverence for a space of the universal. He advocates an anti-strategic stance on the question of resistance: "to be respectful when something singular arises, to be intransigent when power offends against the universal".³⁹ This anti-strategic approach, I would argue, is a vigorous defence of the dimension of the universal in politics. For Foucault, this domain of universality is the wellspring of revolt - it is the empty horizon which any political action or struggle, no matter how particular, pays homage to. It is domain that is vital to politics, and it must be defended against the incursions of Power. When power "offends against the universal", when the state or the forces of domination try to shut this domain down, to fill its empty place, then we should risk our lives in defending it. Foucault also talks about a respect for "singularity". However, by singularity, Foucault does not mean particularity in the sense of a particular political identity. Rather, he means a kind of singular event whose emergence is unpredictable and to some extent inexplicable, which shatters our political reality and fundamentally dislocates the structure of power.

From this one can develop a politico-ethical stance of singularity – a politics that does not emphasise difference to the exclusion of universality, or universality to the exclusion of difference, but rather keeps alive a fundamental undecidability between them. Moreover, singularity implies an ethics and a politics of life - it refers to the struggle of empirical life, with its pluralities and unities, its collectivities and individualities, its differences and universalities, against that the idealist abstractions that deny it. Singularity is the political and ethical expression of life's corporeal richness and intensity. It may be seen, as I have argued, as the politico-ethical expression of Stirner and Deleuze's empiricist pluralism.

[1]There are some exceptions to this. See Andrew Koch, "Max Stirner: The Last Hegelian or the First Poststructuralist," *Anarchist Studies* 5 (1997): 95-107. Jacques Derrida also refers to Stirner in his work *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994.

[2]Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans., Hugh Tomlinson (London: The Athlone Press, 1992) 161.

The Absent Centre of Political Ontology (London: Verso, 2000) 209.

³⁹Michel Foucault, "Is It Useless to Revolt?" *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 8, 1 (1981): 1-9, 9.

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