

G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, “Introduction: Rhizome”

Summary: My aim in this presentation is to situate a conversation around *materialism* in D/G’s philosophy, and how it draws on & departs from Marx’s foundational idea of historical materialism. Rhizomatic structures (always in the middle) oppose a teleological or hierarchical understanding of Marxist concepts like capital/production and base/superstructure. However, while the structures of historical (or even just plain *conceptual*) understanding differ between the two, engagement with physical material—although the net in D/G is perhaps cast much more widely than in Marx—provide common ground through which to consider both theories in conversation and with a shared goal: the surpassing of capitalism and transformation of the world itself.

→ Biographical Notes

(Drawn from our good friends Vincent Leitch et al., Brian Massumi’s translator’s foreword to *ATP*, and the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).)

Gilles Deleuze

- Born Jan. 18th, 1925 in Paris to “conservative, middle class parents” (SEP); lived more or less in Paris his entire life. Studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, writing his thesis on Hume (British philosopher of empiricism), and spent the early part of his career bouncing around Parisian teaching positions.
- In 1962, published *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, the first of a number of provocative monographs in the 1962–69 period reinterpreting seminal Western philosophers.
- In 1969, after the events of Mai ’68, took a permanent position at the University of Paris VIII in Vincennes and met Félix Guattari.

Félix Guattari

- Born April 30th, 1930 in Colombe (Paris suburb), “had received an erratic education” (Leitch et al., 1447).
- The more politically radical of the two; trained as a psychoanalyst (although w/o formal credentials) and a political activist.
- One of Lacan’s original students, but moved by the mid-50’s to La Borde, a “psychiatric hospital outside Paris known for innovative practices in group therapy” (Leitch et al., 1447).

Collaboration

- In 1972, published *Anti-Oedipus*, first vol. of *Capitalism & Schizophrenia*. Known for its shocking coarseness, humor, and disregard for philosophical norms and traditions, it laid conceptual groundwork for *ATP* through terms like “body without organs” and “desiring-production,” the latter a synthesis & challenging of Marx and Freud: denying a subjecthood behind production and proposing instead a universal flow of affective intensities that cohere/disband into productive forces. Other collaborations include *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975) and *What is Philosophy?* (1991).

→ Key Terms

- Assemblage: organizational mode of multiplicity, nonhierarchy, a material capacity that contains implicit movement, comprising “lines of flight” (1455).
- Rhizome: all points connected to all other points, “acentrated, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying” systems without “organizing memory” (1459). Constant flux.
- Body without Organs (BwO): a sum greater than (distinct from) its parts; the collection of affective potentials emerging from and exceeding the limitations of individual parts (term from Artaud).
- Plateau: organizing unit of a rhizomatic structure, “any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome” (1459). Always a middle, w/o distinct end; “self-vibrating intensity” (1459).
- Nomadology: “the opposite of a history” (1460): D/G’s philosophical project, the ahistorical/antiphilosophical project of articulating rhizomatic movement.

→ My Stab at a Thesis

Insofar as “Introduction: Rhizome,” might be said to have an argument, it might be this: logos (logic, law, order) is an illusion of the State apparatus, an illusion that restricts the full positive, productive, affective potential of vital (more inclusive than “living” or “human”) energies.

→ Marx and Materialism

Teleology / Nonlinear History

- D/G’s concepts are deeply ahistorical, not in the sense that they deny the existence of temporality (but maybe they do?) but rather that they do not think Marxian historical teleology can understand the full breadth of existence, including and beyond political economy. Compare Marx’s historical progression of the bourgeois in *The Communist Manifesto*, predicated on the idea of interlocking steps, w/ D/G’s rhizome w/o “organizing memory,” which is to say no sense of historical situatedness.
- The rhizome’s affective flows trouble forces of production as either invested in capital or labor; all forces (energies) can flow across all points—the BwO furthermore introduces the idea that affective potential exceeds individual “organs,” parts. While D/G’s philosophy is deeply ecological, geological, material, it will not organize these forces into coherent strata from which order can emerge. Building a superstructure on a coherent base can no longer hold as a model. Indeed such a model would not only be false in D/G, it wouldn’t be “pragmatic” for total revolution: “[American authors] know how to move between things, establish the logic of AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings. They know how to practice pragmatics” (1462).

Rhizome, Base, Superstructure, Energies in Lines of Flight

- D/G then replace the Marxian understanding of the base and superstructure (fundamentally defined as *material* conceits and concerns) with the assemblage and the rhizome. On the level of organizational structure, these are widely divergent models. But a common ground may be in D/G’s foregrounding of ecological, geological, and technological metaphors as ways of coming to understand the energy flows in and between things—the “lines of flight” that constitute the assemblage. Just as for Marx the material is the first order of business in determining an individual’s and society’s needs, wants, and desires, so too in D/G are similar base concerns located in (natural) material.
- This joining of the material with desire (already present in *Anti-Oedipus*’ “desiring-production”) represents an attempt to mediate Marx and Freud, external material and psychic interiority. D/G aren’t interested in meeting both thinkers in the middle, however, but rather reveals that both philosophies, in a model of rhizome/assemblage, were articulating different things about the fundamentally same territory.
- The rhizome is then more than a metaphor: it is an *accurate* description of a material system that organizes both knowing and being (both collapsed into the same energy) as much for humans as for fungi as for rats as for geologies. Intermeshed sympathies.

→ Discussion Questions

1. D/G offer a small argument at the end of this chapter for how literature can model and perform rhizomatic movement, and their entire project in *ATP* is to effect a rhizome in their writing. What are some (theoretical or literary) strategies through which they attempt to create a rhizome here? How effective do you find these strategies? In light of conversation around material, what are the stakes of using *writing* as the medium of choice here?
2. Is materialism compatible with psychoanalysis? How might an analysis of D/G’s eco/geo/natural metaphors shift in a more overtly psychoanalytical (rather than Marxian) analysis? How effectively (if indeed at all!) does *ATP* mediate these approaches?