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A CONVERSATION WITH CATHERINE MALABOU

The questions of the following interview are aimed at introducing Catherine Malabou's work and philosophical perspective to an audience who may have never heard of her, or who knows only that she was a student of Derrida. What I hope that this interview reveals, however, is that Malabou "follows" deconstruction in a timely, and also useful way. For one of the common charges levied against deconstruction, at least by American critics, is that by opening texts to infinite interpretations, deconstruction unfortunately does away with more than the master narratives; it mires political agency in identity politics and offers no way out the socio-historical and political constructs of textuality other than the hope anchored in faith at best, but otherwise simply in the will to believe that the stance of openness to the other will let the other become part of the major discourses without thereby marginalizing or homogenizing them.

How does Malabou "follow" deconstruction? Indeed, she does not disavow her affiliation with Derrida; she, too, readily acknowledges that there is nothing outside the text. But, by the same token, she also affirms Hegel's deep influence on her philosophy. From Hegel, she borrows the central concept of her philosophy, namely, the concept of plasticity; the subject is plastic—not elastic, it never springs back into its original form—it is malleable, but it can explode and create itself anew. In this way, there is nothing outside the text, but the text is no less natural than it is cultural, it is no less biological than it is spiritual (or mental), it is no less material than it is historical. That is, the subject is not merely and ineluctably the social-historical-economic construct of an age (at the peak of modernity, a rational autonomous subject; in a post-industrial and global world, a highly adaptable, flexible, and disciplined subject). Instead, the subject can resist hopeless determinism by virtue of a dialectic inscribed at the heart of her own origination. So Malabou is a "follower" of deconstruction in that she affirms *inventionalism*, and in so doing, she is able to transcend the limit of deconstruction—*-différance*—with "plasticity."

But even this oxymoronic characterization of Malabou as a "follower" of Derrida and Hegel is improper; to be fair, one could add that she is also a "follower" of neurobiology and neuroscience. She will claim that the subject is a neuronal subject, and, in agreement with recent neuroscientific research, that such a subject is plastic; she will claim that capitalistic society mirrors the neuronal organization of the brain, and that the brain mirrors capitalistic society in that both are de-centralized and highly adaptable and flexible; she will anchor the

origin of the self in a biologically determined brain. At the same time, however, she will also be aware of the reductionistic tendencies of scientific discourse to deny its own ideological paradigm and to bracket out the genius of plasticity: the neuronal subject is docile, pliable, and adaptable, but, she emphasizes, it is also capable of resistance and rebellion. And so the program of Malabou's philosophy, unlike that of much of typical philosophy of mind and neuroscience, is not about promoting a capitalistic ideological paradigm by seeking ways to enhance the docile and disciplined neuronal subject; instead, it is about inciting us to take charge of our own brain, of our own subjectivity, and thereby, of our society. We can do this, not by denying that there is continuity between our brain and our thoughts, between the neuronal and the mental, between the natural and the cultural, but by recognizing that this continuity is not without contradiction, by recognizing that the passage from the neuronal to the mental is the site of contestation whereby freedom is established precisely because the brain is naturally plastic.

The interview was conducted at Professor Malabou's apartment in Paris in July 2007. I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Malabou for her hospitality and to Carissa Devine for her assistance with the transcription.

Noëlle Vahanian: *You are a philosopher, professor of philosophy, author of the Future of Hegel, Counterpath, Le Change Heidegger, Que faire de notre cerveau?.* You were a close student of the late Jacques Derrida. But you're not a follower of deconstruction; for that, of course, would go against deconstruction itself. How did you come to be a philosopher, and how did you come to work with Derrida?

Catherine Malabou: I think the way I became a philosopher and the way I happened to work with Derrida are about the same thing. I would say that I wasn't a philosopher before I met him. I used to be just a student in philosophy, and things really started when I met him. At the same time, you're right, I wouldn't define myself as a follower of deconstruction; unless we define the word to follow, what "to follow" means. The issue of "following" constitutes one of the leading threads of Derrida's book *The Post Card*.¹ In this book, Derrida undermines the classical order of filiation: first comes the father, then the son or the daughter. He undermines this order and shows that "to follow" may sometimes (or perhaps always) mean "to precede." Let us think of this extraordinary postcard showing Socrates writing under Plato's dictation: "I have not yet recovered from this revelatory catastrophe: Plato behind Socrates. Me, I always knew it, and they did too, those two I mean. What a couple. *Socrates* turns his back to *Plato*, who has made him write whatever he wanted while pretending to receive it from him" (12).

Then if to follow does not always mean to come after, or to imitate or to copy, if following implies a certain dimension of anticipation, then in this case, I would accept to define myself as a follower of deconstruction.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, tr. Alan Bass, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

NV: *Derrida once said in a film interview something to the effect that no philosopher could be his mother. I am paraphrasing here. He hoped that deconstruction would change or disrupt the patriarchal alignment of philosophy, reason, and thought. And this being the case, a philosopher could, if I am remembering correctly, perhaps be his daughter. So what would the philosopher look like, think like, write like who could be your mother as opposed to you father?*

CM: A mother-like philosopher would of course be a figure of exclusion. As you know, I've always worked on major philosophers, who occupy a central position in history of metaphysics (as well as in its deconstruction). A mother philosopher would on the contrary come from a secluded site, a repressed locus. Such a maternity, if there is one, implies that exists a mode of transmission, of inheritance, of genealogy which exceeds the traditional definitions of these terms within the history of philosophy. Which exceeds also, by the same token, the traditional understanding of the mother. The woman philosopher who says the most accurate things on this point is no doubt Luce Irigaray when she shows that the mother is traditionally seen as "matter" or "materiality" as opposed to "form".

She in fact thinks the feminine as what is excluded by this binary opposition itself, as what also exceeds such an opposition. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler writes: "Irigaray's task is to reconcile neither the form/matter distinction nor the distinctions between bodies and souls (...). Rather, her effort is to show that these binary oppositions are formulated through the exclusion of a field of disruptive possibilities. (...) Irigaray's intervention in the history of the form/matter distinction underscores 'matter' as the site at which the feminine is excluded from philosophical binaries" (35).²

My mother philosopher would then certainly belong to this "constitutive outside" or to this excessive materiality.

NV: *With that in mind, does your philosophy envision a kind of subjectivity that allows a legitimate philosophical voice to a woman?*

CM: The problem is that there is no "essence" of femininity. This statement is something on which most women philosophers or writers agree (Beauvoir, Kristeva, Wittig, Butler...). The excessive materiality I just mentioned cannot be said to *be* something, otherwise it wouldn't be able to transgress the limits of ontology. It is then somehow impossible to create or imagine what a "feminine-philosophical" subjectivity might be...

NV: *Why not?*

² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter, On the Discursive Limites of "Sex"*, New York: Routledge, 1993.

CM: Again, an ontology of the feminine would no doubt bear all the symptoms of the traditional ontology – that is, an exclusion of the feminine itself. As we know, the discourse of and on property, propriety or subjectivity is precisely the discourse which has excluded women from the domain of Being (and perhaps even of beings). I will refer to Irigaray again on this point : "Woman neither is nor has an essence."

At the same time, Heidegger's definition of the subject as *Da-sein*, that is, an instance which is neither man nor woman, but *Da-sein*, or *Es*, as in the German neutral gender, is not quite satisfactory either. It would still be too ontologically rigid to characterize the feminine. Woman has no essence, but that doesn't mean that woman is neutral either. I refer to Derrida's decisive analysis concerning the motif of gender in Heidegger (*Geschlecht*, in *Psyche*).³

NV : *When you write philosophically though, especially about what it means to be a subject or an individual, do you think that this is representative of what you understand is a feminine voice, or a feminine philosophical voice? Or is it representative of what some men might say is a feminine philosophical voice?*

CM: I wish to say a word about my own conception of the matter/form problem in relation to the feminine. If we consider, as I do too, that the feminine is a kind of materiality which is produced as the outside of the matter/form opposition, then a feminine philosophical voice may be heard either from within this opposition (as what has always been repressed in it), or from a total exteriority. As we know, Irigaray made up her mind to *mime* the philosophical tone as well as the philosophical rationality in her writings. This mimicry was supposed to be a way of subverting the metaphysical discourse. I myself chose to settle my thinking at the very heart of this discourse, to dwell within it. This a very classical way of doing, and there is nothing original in this gesture.

That said, I am investing the concept of plasticity which, in Hegel, means less the interplay between matter and form than the interplay between form and itself, that is, the relationship between form and form. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel show that the subject is plastic in the sense that she or he is able to receive form (passivity) and to give form (activity). I certainly do not intend to show that these modes of being of the subject represent the masculine/feminine relationship. I am interested in showing that this relationship between form and itself is not founded on a *difference*. The two modes of being of the subject are not different from one another, but each of them transforms itself into the other. With plasticity, we are not facing a pre-given difference, but a process of metamorphosis. In other words, the Hegelian subjects *trans-subjects* itself constantly. Its form is its matter.

³ See Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference," trans. Ruben Berezdivin, *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 13, 1983, pp.65-83.

We know that Deleuze's very strong critique of Hegel lays a foundation on the fact that dialectics is a logic which supersedes difference. According to Deleuze, the sublation of difference by contradiction amounts to an erasure of non-dialectical differential relationships. Working on plasticity allows me to present an other version of the superseding of difference. To give up difference may mean that "difference" is not the right word to characterize the relationship between the two modes of being of the subject.

If we relate this inadequacy of difference to the gender binary problem, then we may state that the concept of "sexual difference" is not accurate. I would like to turn towards Foucault on this point. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*,⁴ he insists upon what he calls the process of *transsubjectivation* (214), which consists in a trajectory *within* the self. This transsubjectivation doesn't mean that you become *different* from what you used to be, nor that you are able to absorb the other's *difference*, but that you open a space *within* yourself between two forms of yourself. That you *oppose* two forms of yourself *within* yourself.

Foucault writes: "Clear a space around the self and do not let yourself be carried away and distracted by all the sounds, faces, and people around you. (...) All your attention should be concentrated on this trajectory from self to self. Presence of self to self, precisely on account of the distance still remaining between self and self (...)" (222-223). This transsubjectivation, conceived as a journey within oneself, is the product of a transformation. Foucault underscores the Greek word *ethopoiein*: "*Ethopoiein* means making *ethos*, producing *ethos*, changing, transforming *ethos*, the individual's way of being, his mode of existence" (237).

There would then be a kind of transformation which would sublate the difference between the self and itself, which would create, produce a new self as a result of the opposition between two forms at work in the self.

Plasticity might be the name of this transsubjectivation. We would find in Hegel the possibility of understanding dialectics as a process of "*ethopoiein*." A plastic subject would be able to transform its way of being. This plastic ontology implies of course a plasticity of gender itself.

Such is my interpretation of the relationship matter/form in Hegel.

NV: *Did you ever run into prejudice?*

CM: Yes. It started very early when I was a student in what we call in France "les classes préparatoires," and I was preparing for the Ecole Normale Supérieure. My teacher said, you will never succeed because you're a woman. I have been told that philosophy was a masculine domain or field. And, ever since, I am always introduced in reference to deconstruction, even today, even if it is at a distance with deconstruction or by the question of my being a student of

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, New York: Picador, 2004.

Derrida. People associate my name to a man's name all the time, I am thought of as a specialist of Hegel or as a specialist of Derrida; I'm never myself.

I would like to add that I suffer greatly from social exclusion. I am still a Maître de conférences in Paris (and not a full professor even if I have written much more than all my colleagues). I do not find any support in the United States either and I discovered that the so called "feminine" or "feminist community" was a myth.

NV: *Let's move on to that concept of plasticity, if you will, because it does have a prominent place in your work. Can you explain what it entails, what is its origin?*

CM: I found it for the first time in Hegel. He uses it when he defines subjectivity in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The subject is not supple and soft, and it is not rigid either; it is something in between. The subject is "plastic." Plastic, if you look in the dictionary, means the quality of a matter, which is at the same time fluid but also resisting. Once formed, it cannot go back to its previous state. For example, when the sculptor is working on the marble, the marble, once sculpted, cannot be brought back to its original state. So, plasticity is a very interesting concept because it means, at once, both openness to all kinds of influences, and resistance.

NV: *The notion of plasticity has its origin in Hegel, but it is also a corruption of Hegel. And you achieve this corruption through the incorporation of neurobiology into your philosophy. Could you tell me why this interest in neurobiology, what does it offer?*

CM: "Plasticity" is not a corruption of Hegel. It may be the locus for a thought of transsubjectivation, as I said previously, but it is not a corruption. Neurobiology and Hegelian philosophy may seem very remote at first sight. In fact, the concept of "plasticity," which plays a major role within both of them, has the same meaning: it characterizes a certain kind of organization, the system's one. Between the system of absolute knowledge or of absolute subjectivity in Hegel and the nervous system in neurobiology, the difference is not so dramatic. It is the same mode of being, the same functioning, the same economy. I allow myself to refer on that point to my book *What Should We Do With Our Brains?* (translation of *Que faire de notre cerveau?* (Paris: Bayard, 2004), by Sebastian Rand - Forthcoming from Fordham). In this book, I am insisting upon the community between different kinds of systematic plastic organizations.

It is also clear that neurobiology today offers a new perspective on subjectivity. Continental philosophers have always despised this field. They say: "No. It doesn't concern us. It's for analytical philosophers. It's for Anglo-American philosophers." Even Derrida has very harsh words against it. He says that the concept of "promise" is alien to neurobiology, which can only be concerned by the notion of "program." This opposition between promise and program has to be deconstructed, because it marks the limits of deconstruction itself.

NV: *So you think that deconstruction would be resistant or closed to neurobiology or neuroscience?*

CM: There was a time when continental philosophers or psychoanalysts were right to fight against a hard reductionist tendency which at work in neurosciences in general. Neurobiology was a field that was completely unto itself and refractory to continental theory, structuralism, and post-structuralism. But about fifty years ago, things totally changed. I would like to refer here to scientists like Mark Solms, Oliver Sacks, Antonio Damasio, Eric Kandel... In his preface to Mark Solms' and Oliver Turnbull's *The Brain and the Inner World, An Introduction to the Neuroscience of Subjective Experience*, Oliver Sacks reminds us that according to Solms, psychoanalysis would have been for Freud a "moment of transition" (Solms's first book, coedited with Michael Saling, was entitled *A Moment of Transition*): "The reason for this was the very inadequate state of neurological (and physiological) at the time, not any turning against neurological explanation in principle. Freud knew that any attempt to bring together psychoanalysis and neurology would be premature (...). Neurology itself had to evolve, from a mechanical science that thought in terms of fixed 'functions' and centers, a sort of successor of phrenology, through much more sophisticated clinical approaches and deeper understandings, to a more dynamic analysis of neurological difficulties in terms of functional systems, often distributed widely through the brain and in constant interaction with each other." (viii). Further, Neurology has now "entered the age of subtlety." Sacks adds that "Solm's approach, then, is a double one: to make the most detailed neuropsychological examination of patients with brain damage and then to submit them to a model psychoanalysis, and, in so doing, hopefully, (...) to bring the mechanisms of the brain and the inner world of the patient together" (ix).

It is then very difficult to criticize such an open definition of neurology. Besides, many of the advocates of the "neuro-psychoanalytical" trend acknowledge a philosophical tradition in order to do what they're doing. For example, Damasio's famous books like *Descartes' Error* or *Looking For Spinoza* very explicitly claim to belong somehow to the continental philosophical tradition. I think that Derrida didn't have time to become really conscious of that.

Once again, the difference Derrida used to make between the program and the promise is a distinction in which we can't believe anymore. A machine—and I think that Pascal was the first to say this—can also promise. You remember this passage in Pascal's *Pensées* when somebody says, "Yes, but what if I don't believe in God?" And Pascal answers "You just have to kneel down and mechanically repeat your prayer, and God will come:" that's the promise inside the machine. You can't really draw a line between the mechanical and the messianic. This is also what is very interesting in the brain, and in the computer: somebody like Daniel Dennett now shows that a computer may be said to be plastic.

NV: *For the sake of those who are not familiar with your recent work on the brain, when you distinguish the blind brain from the Freudian unconscious, why is this important? Doesn't the notion of a biologically determined unconscious—the blind brain—as opposed to a Freudian, imaginary unconscious, threaten the subject's freedom by foreshadowing a certain natural determinism?*

CM: This was a very important discovery that the brain wasn't entirely determined. Some anatomic structures of the brain are, of course, genetically programmed, but a significant part of the neural organization is open to outside influences and develop itself consequently to these influences or interactions. It means an important part in the structure of your brain depends on the way you're living and on your experience. History is inscribed within the biological. That is what "plastic" means when applied to the brain.

NV: *Please describe your latest work on Freud?*

CM: The French title of my latest work is *Les nouveaux blessés*. I think it would need a little bit of translation. Perhaps "the new injuries," or "new wounds" (rather than "the new wounded" or the Newly Wounded?). So let's call it *The New Wounds*. It's about the kind of injuries or wounds or brain damage that psychoanalysis never took into account. It's a reflection on brain lesion or pathology (Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease) but also on trauma in general (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, all kinds of what I call "social-political" traumas). To what extent neurology today helps us to enlarge the Freudian conception of the trauma and of the psychic suffering: such is the issue. It seems that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud fails to define what might exceed the pleasure principle, what this "beyond" may exactly mean. Neurological traumas go beyond this principle, and discover something that has nothing to do with pleasure, but with every kind of serious trauma. This book is a reflection on those wounds that love and hatred or internal conflict simply cannot explain.

NV: *So, the wounds of trauma are material wounds rather than merely psychic?*

CM: If we are able to admit that the difference between "material" and "psychic" is very thin and even perhaps non-existing, if we agree on the absurdity of regarding the brain and the psyche as too separate and distinct instances, then we will have moved forward a great deal...

We know today that every kind of serious shock--it may be a wound on the battlefield, a shell shock, but it also can be domestic trauma or moral abuse without any physical injury--we know that every kind of serious trauma causes destruction in what is now called the 'emotional brain,' which is located in the frontal cortex. This material destruction obviously and undoubtedly implies psychic alterations or modifications. It's the end of the frontier, the borderline between psychic diseases as such and neurological diseases.

NV: *Fascinating.*

CM: Fascinating, true. I've read many interesting books on military psychiatry. It's very interesting that what happens with Vietnam vets or people who go in Iraq today, or what happens on the battlefield, but also, when you're a hostage, or you're caught in a bomb attack, or when you're quietly at home and suddenly there is a gas explosion, for example, that what happens in all kinds of

apparently different situations has a common point, which is the shock as such, and the way it alters your psyche.

NV: *Perhaps going back or linking this to the concept of plasticity again, or even going back to what you said about finding hope or promise in the program; how does neuroscience or this concept of plasticity, how do they help you to rethink the dynamics of subjectivity such that the singular individual isn't always already under erasure, but is produced and affirmed instead; is made public without contradiction, without alienation, without being lost to the public realm. Or are this loss and conflict inevitable?*

CM: Reading neurological or neurobiological books helped me to become aware of a certain change in the philosophical thought of death. A transformation of the Heideggerian notion of "being-toward-death" in particular. Heidegger says that death is at every moment possible. Neurobiologists make us conscious of the fact that my own metamorphosis after brain damage is at every moment possible; there is something like a break of the subject which is not death, which is another kind of *possibility*. To be destroyed as a subject when you suffer from a concussion, for example, means that you become someone else. The possibility of becoming someone else at every moment and for everybody equally--for even if we know that certain people are more likely to be the victims of such damage, we also know that everybody may undergo this kind of destruction at any moment--this possibility alters how we conceive of the subject. The fact of being mortal is one thing, and the fact of being plastic means being able to be totally transformed and become somebody else. For example, Damasio will say of one of his patients: "Elliot was no longer Elliot." So, subjectivity must be confronted to the risk of the loss of itself at every moment, and this loss is not death; it is something different.

NV: *Frightening.*

CM: It is very frightening, yes. But at the same time, because we don't want to get prepared for it, we're always disarmed when someone we know suffers from Alzheimer's or any kind of disease. We don't know what to do, yet this is a constant existential possibility: Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, it's something like that when you become, when you wake up as somebody different. This, then, is according to me the great metaphysical teaching of neurobiology today: not to consider brain damage as an isolated possibility, rare things that happen in hospitals, but to consider them as a constant possibility.

NV: *Since you broached the subject of this constant existential possibility, let me ask what is the self?*

CM: The self? This is a very interesting question because there is a total redefinition of the self. Damasio, for example, says that the self is at the same time everything and nothing. It is the elementary process of self-dialogue: "How are you doing?" "I'm alright." "How are you doing?" "I'm alright"--like the beating of the heart. It is the self-information of the vital processes, life itself, the very elementary dialogue between the body and the soul. And this very fragile

instance may at every moment be modified or wounded. And while this is a self-dialogue, at the same time, as I said to start with, this self-dialogue doesn't reflect itself. It is not a speculative instance, because there is no mirroring of it. You can't see it really. It cannot see itself.

NV: *And what do you make of this reading of the self offered by Damasio--is this a good thing?*

CM: Well, it's deconstruction inscribed within us. It is the biological deconstruction of subjectivity. In this sense, it is what you call "a good thing".

NV: *Say it again in other words maybe. What then constitutes the self? Is there a true singular identity or subjectivity? Or, is the self always a public phenomenon?*

CM: Of course the general process of self-information is common to everybody, so in this sense it is a universal structure. But, if we take for granted that at the same time the way your brain builds itself it departs from this structure, on the ground of this structure, then auto-affection, the way we keep ourselves informed about ourselves, is always individual. It's impossible to draw a line between universal and singular here, you know. There is a common structure, but at the same time the way it takes place in you and the way it takes place in me is not the same. The self is clearly not a substance.

NV: *Can you say something about the relationship of the individual to the public realm?*

CM: The most recent and current research in neurobiology reveals a new kind of brain organization that may work as a model to understand all kinds of organization today: society, for example. On this point, I'm very close to what Žizek tries to think when he says that he's looking for a new materialism, which implies this concept of society as a whole, as a closed totality without any kind of transcendence. That is also something he develops in *The Parallax View* in particular.

I don't believe in transcendence at all. I don't believe in something like the absolute Other, or in any kind of transcendence or openness to the other. So in this sense, as a Hegelian, I am quite convinced with Žizek that we're living in some kind of closed organizational structure, and that society is the main closed structure. But at the same time, this structure is plastic. So it means that inside of it, we have all kinds of possibilities to wiggle and escape from the rigidity of the structure. What happens in the brain is the paradigm to figure out what happens in society as such. We are living in a neuronic social organization. And I'm not the only one to say it. The neuronic has become the paradigm to think what the social is, to think society and social relationships. So it is clearly a closed organization; if by closed we understand without transcendence, without any exit to the absolute Other. But, at the same time, this closed structure is not contrary to freedom or any kind of personal achievements or resistance. So I think that in such a structure, all individuals have their part to play.

NV: *You speak of this neuronal structure; what if I said there is no hors-texte?*

CM: Yes and no. In Derrida, there is no *hors-texte*, and at the same time, there is something, in this very thought, like an outside. A totally open space. That of the "utterly other", or of the "*arrivant absolu*".

NV: *With this in mind, both this notion for you of neuronal structure and there is no hors-texte, how would you respond to those critics who see in deconstruction the end of political agency? Some people might ask how this sort of totality does not lead to quietism or relativism? Or what would you say to those for whom this closed structure must be opened up by way of a soteriological gesture of love and desire for a radical, unforeseeable other? Or, how would you address those who might view this closed, albeit plastic, structure as a new kind of fundamentalism?*

CM: Well, we have to admit that there is no alternative to capitalism; this is something that is, I think, inescapable today. So we clearly live in the absence of an alternative if we compare our situation with the one of our fathers fifty or sixty years ago. It's very different because we can't work out a different social or economical model. So it's very likely that we have to stay inside capitalism. Does it imply fundamentalism? I don't think so because although the general structure is given and unchangeable as such in that it cannot be transformed into another model, although we take for granted that the form is given, that the structure is given, once and for all--which seems to be true with capitalism--at the same time, all moves within this form are allowed. For example, if you consider today, capitalism in the USA and in Europe, and capitalism in the Far East, like in China, if you take into account that the most achieved form of capitalism occurs in a Marxist country, then you discover that capitalism is multiple. And I think that when people say that they're afraid of China, what they're afraid of is to see that a Marxist country is able to demonstrate what capitalism is to us. But this may help us to think how a single form is able to differentiate itself almost infinitely. I think that we can use the little gaps within the form--the way in which the same form is not always the same--to build resistance. I am very influenced by structuralism, here. What I mean is akin to what Lévi-Strauss says with respect to the various ways in which gods are represented; from country to country, you always find the same pattern, but inside of this general frame, you also find many little differences which forbid us to consider the structure as the same. So the sameness is the difference. I know this is very abstract, but from this general pattern we can evolve toward much more concrete social determinations.

NV: *Can we establish a hierarchy of values? What does this do for ethics?*

CM: Well, it's true that it clearly opposes Lévinas' vision of ethics as defined by some radical other. It seems that a genuine ethical vision of the social implies a kind of openness to change, and if we understand by change the way in which the other is susceptible to come at any moment. On the contrary, my definition of structure might seem very violent. And it's true that it is very close to the Hegelian one, and we know that it implies fight and struggle and everything.

But, at the same time, it also implies that in this kind of structure, everybody is equal to everybody; and to be responsible for the other allows you to do something for him. If you read Lévinas closely, sometimes he seems to say, and Derrida says the same thing, that the other is so remote that it is impossible to act in his or her place. You can't decide for him or her. For example if you have a child, or it is his or her decision, there's nothing I can do for him and for her. This is the way in which this ethical vision is not so pure. The other is so remote that it creates a sort of loneliness of the other as such. My vision of things is much more based on reciprocal and mutual relationships. I think that you can do something for the other, and sometimes I'm not bothered to know that I can act in your place if you're not able to do so yourself. You know, I don't feel guilty because sometimes I'll say my son will do this. So the difference between the two conceptions relies on a sort of horizontal schema. Lévinas was very much against the Heideggerian notion of *Mitsein*, the fact of being with the other. He says that's not ethical. I'm not so sure. I like this idea of being with the other.

NV: *There's a notion of reciprocity there.*

CM: Yes, and also of course the old problem of recognition and of reciprocity in recognition. And I think that if there should be an ethical value, the notion of recognition would be the one for me, and, of course, this notion implies fight and struggle.

NV: *Very good. So no radical Other?*

CM: No, unless you admit that you can be readily other to yourself. As when I was talking about brain damage.

NV: *So this is frightening.*

CM: This is monstrous.

NV: *This is monstrous, yes. Well, incidentally, in the United States, there are some theological moves toward claiming a radical other who's not omnipotent but weak. I am thinking of Gianni Vattimo, John Caputo, Catherine Keller. This notion of the weakening of being or something like that could be frightening as well. Weak because the claim to power leads to visions of this world that are apocalyptic, for instance, or violent visions. Weak because, people say, this is the only world, and so, if this is the kingdom, we have here a realization of God, of the weakness of God. So, I think that in that notion you have an attempt to say that this is it; this world is it. It's a notion that does away with transcendence. This is it. And yet that notion for some might hold a kind of promise, however impossible or unforeseeable.*

CM: And here we have messianism?

NV: *Yes, well something like that. So you're more of a pragmatist.*

CM: I think so, yes.

NV: *Which brings us back to the earlier discussion about determinism and materialism.*

CM: I believe in determinism to a certain extent because I believe that the structure is given once and for all. And when you read Marx you know that determinism is inescapable. But, I believe in dialectics, and it's true to me that Hegel was right to say that freedom was always a struggle between determinism and its opposite. There's no pure freedom and no pure determinism; they're always sort of a negative transformation of both of their mutual relations. And that's what plasticity's about.

NV: *To conclude our discussion then, tell me a bit about what you anticipate for the future.*

CM: I'm very curious to know what will happen in China. I'm very fascinated by this conjunction of Marxism and capitalism. So I'm sure that one day or the other we'll know more about the kind of achievement of social freedom-- well, so called social freedom and individual achievement--in liberalism. This is the first organization in my vision of the future. What will happen? Second, I am very curious about what will happen in the neurological field. I'm sure that there will be many more discoveries that will change the vision we have of ourselves. And third, I think that philosophy will be totally transformed by these two: economical and political promise on the one hand, and on the other, this new way of defining subjectivity. So I'm not really optimistic, but at the same time I'm very excited by what happens today.

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