

Original Article

# EXPERIMENTING WITH REFRAINS: SUBJECTIVITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF ESCAPING MODERN DUALISM

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## Abstract

*The attempt is made to address the question of the "production of subjectivity" in relation to those who refer to such productions – that is, the imagined reader of this journal. The envisaged challenge is that of escaping the web of conflicting definitions, which Latour has connected with the "invincibility of the moderns", of fabricating a "line of flight", which does not denounce, but rather reveals, makes perceptible, the special power of the modern territory. An important step, introduced by William James, is to abandon epistemological questions in favour of the care and concern demanded by that which is "coming into existence", and by its milieu, which may nurture or poison it. Poisoning is easy but nurturing is a craft, the neglect of which may be understood in relation to our vulnerability to capitalism. The concept of taking seriously the need to reclaim this craft is developed with the help of neo-pagan witch Starhawk.*

## Keywords

reclaiming; capitalism; practices; witchcraft; territory; trust

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## Introduction

It is quite clear that *Subjectivity*, the name chosen for this new journal, does not refer to a modern, dualist frame, in opposition to objectivity. It probably rather refers to what could be generically called events of “productions of subjectivity”, when what has been silenced or derided finds its own voice, produces its own standpoint, its own means of resisting a moral consensus, or a settled definition of what must be taken into account, or for granted. The importance of such events is hard to overvalue. My own intellectual and political life has been marked by what I learned from the appearance of drugs users’ groups claiming that they were “citizens like everyone else”, and fighting against laws that were officially meant to “protect” them. The efficacy of this new collective voice, relegating to the past what had been the authorized, consensual expertise legitimating the “war on drugs”, convinced me that such events were “political events” par excellence, producing – as, I discovered afterwards, Dewey had already emphasized (Dewey, 1927) – both new political struggle and new important knowledge. I even proposed that what we call democracy could be evaluated by its relation to those disrupting collective productions (Stengers and Ralet, 1991). A “true” democracy would demand the acceptance of the ongoing challenge of such disruptions – would not only accept them but also acknowledge those events as something it depended upon.

My concern in this paper, however, is to try to slow down – that is, to actively resist the temptation to state that with such definitions of subjectivity we have safely escaped what could be called the “modern territory”, ruled by the critical opposition between objectivity and subjectivity. This point does not concern those who enact the events, but “we”, who relate such events and others in terms of the “production of subjectivity”. My aim will not be to indict persons or intentions, but to characterize the modern territory as able to thrive on an ever-going process of capture. Following Bruno Latour, I will propose that this ability depends on modernity having not one definition, but rather referring to a web of conflicting definitions, each one able to capture the outside and mobilize it in the denunciation of others. How then to avoid being part of this process? Together with Deleuze and Guattari, I will envisage the “fabrication of a line of flight”, which does not denounce, but rather betrays, makes perceptible, the special power of the territory. The “fabrication” I will propose may be characterized as experimenting with refrains (*ritournelles*), both modern and familiar ones, in order to make perceptible not only the way territorial forces act but also what it may take to escape capture. To betray is never “in general”, is always a matter of encounter and connection. I will follow William James, arguing that connection is a matter of “coming into existence”, which demands both trust and an art of immanent discrimination, rather than the Dostoevskian refrain that we need some criterion of judgement, “or else,

anything would be allowed". Using the example of the way I tried to connect with practices that seem to enact the ideal of "objectivity" – that is experimental scientific practices – I will introduce the question of the "milieu" that favoured the transformation of the experimental achievement, the coming into existence of very unusual "facts", into a general propaganda enterprise. And in order to empower this question, I will experiment with a refrain crafted by the contemporary neo-pagan witch Starhawk, a refrain that challenges us to connect with the burning times, when witches were burnt in Europe. What may become perceptible, then, is the way our milieu is infected by the "adult" refrain, "we no longer can", which situates us as inheritors of this eradication. The example of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead will help me dissociate the answer to this challenge from a call to conversion – to "believe in witchcraft" – and connect it instead with the (pragmatic) art, or craft of forging efficacious propositions, resisting the lure of serving truth against illusion. At the end of my paper, a last double connection is proposed, first between Starhawk's refrain and the question of the vulnerability to capitalism as a capture apparatus, then between the need to think and care about our own subjective stance and the empirical and pragmatic adventure of reclaiming which engages neo-pagan witches and other anti-capitalist activists.

### Escaping the modern territory?

The need to slow down enacts the question of what Bruno Latour has characterized as "the invincibility of the moderns". Moderns, for Latour, are those who, one way or another, define themselves through a "great divide" separating them both from their own past and from "non modern cultures". For instance, Kant produced such a divide when he announced, in *Was ist Aufklärung?* (Kant, 1784), that "Man" was growing out of childhood, was now able to escape the authority of whatever presents itself as a transcending truth, and to make a free use of his capacity to think. My first concern is thus how, and at what price, can we escape such an inspiring characterization? And my second concern stems from the insistence of Latour that we should not understand "moderns" as defined by a particular definition of the divide. On the contrary, those who would criticize Kant, and put into question our capacity to make free use of our capacity to think, belong to the same territory as Kant. Latourian moderns easily include those who call themselves "post-moderns", and more generally all the "post-x", which have flourished in the academy, each producing a new version of the "great divide", making it even stronger, eventually thriving, even, on criticisms of it. In other words, the modern territory is defined for Latour by a web of conflicting inter-definitions, and it is this web he associates with the invincibility of the forked-tongues

moderns: their capacity to capture the outside in the clutches of their own polemics:

You think that the spirits of the ancestors hold you forever hostage to their laws? The modern critique will show you that you are hostage to yourselves and that the spiritual world is your own human – too human – construction. You then think that you can do everything and develop your societies as you see fit? The modern critique will show you that the iron laws of society and economics are much more inflexible than those of your ancestors. (Latour, 1993, p. 38)

...and so on, in a devilish round that is able to turn crazy any outsider who would sincerely try to understand what it is to be “a modern”.

Now those concerns are not addressed to those who participate in such events as “drug users getting their own voice”. But they are addressed to the probable readers of this new journal. Indeed the very event of the emergence of a new subjectivity is not, as such, part of the endless polemical bickering that makes up the positional stance of modern categories, but a new field for bickering may well be what will be produced as a result of such events.

Not always. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2004) account relates that US feminists had to learn from their Afro-American sisters how dangerously partial was their conception of “women”. The production of an Afro-American diverging subjective stance shattered the possibility of a simple “we”, and the practical consequences of this event are still in a process of difficult, hesitant and demanding unfolding – see also the French feminists’ dilemma when facing the production of subjectivity demonstrated by the new (new in terms of their youth and their politics) Muslim veiled women. This unfolding is indeed hesitant and demanding, because its goal is to keep learning from the consequences of any definition. In contrast, the theoretical affirmation of the constructed character of any answer to the question “what is a woman?”, against the essentialist belief in a “woman identity”, has nothing hesitant about it. What follows is rather an “essentialist hunting”, that is an inexhaustible source for academic publications and the production of ever more critical stances (is not “feminism” itself essentialist? and so on). Worse, it entails a “tolerant” attitude when third-world ecofeminist fighters, such as Vandana Shiva, appear not to possess the code – we (who know and could criticize her as an essentialist) have to be indulgent. Here we are in modern territory, with the territorial “great divide” refrain – they believe, we know – a territory that only extended with what has named itself “post-modernity” but should rather be called “hyper-modernity”, since the post-moderns know that the moderns believed.

To me, a relevant question would rather be: can we separate Vandana’s force – which produces her ability to struggle – from those seemingly “essentialist” grounds? And the challenge would be learning to disconnect this question from a stance of tolerance and to give it the power to make “us” hesitate about our

own conditions of thought. I want to investigate the possibilities of engaging with this challenge by starting with Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, with particular reference to the need for a "line of flight" to escape the modern territory.

### **Fabricating a line of flight**

The "us" I am addressing does not correspond to a well-defined identity. It is an empirical "us" that includes me, for one, and may include those who have tasted the rather intoxicating power of the critical stance. Modern critiques will not feature in my text as "enemies", however. They correspond to an abstract psychosocial type, the embodiments of which "we" meet everywhere, both in our (often academic) worlds and in our heads – in my head at least. And I will not cut my head off in the name of a "pure" outside that would demand disavowal and recantation. I will not attempt some kind of artificial reterritorialization that would hopefully "save" me from what is part of my own (constructed) identity.

This is why it is crucial to note that a "line of flight", in Deleuze and Guattari's definition of the term, does not entail denouncing the territory but "betraying" it: bringing into disclosure an ingredient that both belongs to the territory and connects with an outside against which this territory protects itself. Such an outside is not an "absolute" one that would transcend the territory and allow it to be defined by what it refuses or protects itself against. Furthermore, the outside of the territory and the definition of this outside as "dangerous" were produced together with the territorial refrain (*ritournelle*), shaping both the inside and what is kept outside. Correlatively, there is no "line of flight" that could act as a *voie royale*, there is no definitive flight, no model others would have to follow. What is needed is not a model but a refrain, like children in the dark, who hum under their breath in order to summon the courage to walk. And finally what you connect with is not that which had to be kept outside. The "empirical" event of connection comes first, not the terms that are connected. "One opens the circle not on the side where the old forces of chaos press against it but in another region, one created by the circle itself. As though the circle tended on its own to open onto a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 311).

I will thus try to expose, not denounce but try to make perceptible, the "working forces" the modern territory shelters. This is why I will proceed in such a way that I deliberately open myself to objections. Some of these objections will be quite justified, of course, but I would ask my readers to pay attention to eventual others, which may well make perceptible the betrayal of academic territorial rules. Those objections could well be "territorial cries", even if these cries present themselves as something that I should have to answer, or else...

“Or else” – this is not an empty threat, barring the way to freedom. Here caution – caution, not wisdom – is required (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 150), because the point is not to blindly escape and confront chaos but to fabricate and experiment. What Deleuze and Guattari call a force is not something we can define “as such”, but only through the modifications it produces when captured, when taken into an assemblage. Even the force defined by Newtonian physics needs the assemblage we take for granted when we speak of the motion of a “mass”. If I fell out of a high-level window (an experience physicists often propose to those who, they feel, do not sufficiently respect the objectivity of their laws: “admit that our laws about falling bodies are not constructions, or else try and jump...”), my motion would be a witness for the physicists’ force just as that of a stone, or a cat would be. But when I feel the force of the objection/threat “or else...”, what I am feeling is the power of a capture that would imply not only that it would be considered normal for me to defend myself against the objection but also that I do it by criticizing my critiques. In other words, what I feel is that I am indeed fabricated as belonging to the modern territory. To tell about a force, or to feel it, to be affected by it, always means that an assemblage has been produced, or fabricated – a matter of art, or artificiality, never a testimony of wild authenticity.

The very word I choose to use – fabrication – is part of the line of flight I attempt to fabricate and follow. Indeed, exposing the forces of the modern critiques – that is, both activating them (making them perceptible) and failing to satisfy them – is bound to result in the endpoint on which all critiques converge. If you are not interested in answering criticisms, then your position is arbitrary, it is a sheer (subjective?) fabrication. It is “your” fabrication, and not something that has the power to make us take it seriously. This convergence is characterized by Bruno Latour as “iconoclastic” – critique is the hammer that will legitimately destroy what cannot defend itself against the accusation of being “only a fabrication”. It can also be connected with the definition of truth as something that demands the overcoming of particular attachments: truth as something that hurts, its painful character being the very sign that identifies truth, and relates it to its demands, which we naturally resist.

Activating this convergence – a refrain for which could be “if our demands were to be bypassed, everything would be allowed”, a very Dostoevskian refrain indeed – makes it crucial to emphasize that the fabrication of a line of flight is demanding too, but in another way. It demands resistance against the mottos that present flight as an imperative or an aim in itself, and, more generally, it demands not to proceed in the name of anything that would transcend the actual process of fabrication, including the necessity or will to escape. Connection with outside “forces” has begun, must have begun, before one knows about it, in order for the production of this knowledge to belong to the very process. This, however, does not mean that a line of flight’s fabrication excludes demanding critical attention. It rather refers the demand to a process of

immanent critique, which I would call “discrimination” – what Deleuze celebrated when he compared Spinoza’s ethics to an ethology, a treatise about good and bad encounters: not about what would be good or bad *per se*, but about learning how what we encounter affects us, how it empowers, or separates us from, our capacity to act (that is also to think and feel). Forces then are a matter of “critical ethology”. No force is good or bad. It is the assemblage that comes into being when one encounters a force and is affected by it, which demands experimentation and discrimination, because capturing a force, being modified by a force, “forced” to think, and feel, and experience, is never without danger: “black holes, closures, paralysis of the finger and auditory hallucinations, Schumann’s madness, cosmic force gone *bad*, a note that pursues you, a sound that transfixes you” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 350).

### **Fabricating connections**

If subjectivity is to escape the critical clutches that signal the modern territory, immanent critique must present itself as an ingredient of the assemblage, not as critically examining/dismembering the assemblage itself. Referring for instance to William James’s remark, that in case of fright, it is hard to decide if it was caused by something frightening, or if that something was perceived as frightening because of our fright, the point is not to address this indecision, but to inhabit the undecided situation, and to learn what it may demand. Still following Deleuze (2003), we may speak here about a change bearing on “dramatization” (dramatization against the power of generality: Deleuze proposes that instead of trying to “define” – of answering the “What is?” question –, we address each situation as an event, which demands its own questions). What would come first then is the “fact”, for instance “this frightening situation”, and the question may indeed be, but needs not be, assigning responsibility for the fright. It may also be “what does this situation demand?”, “which kind of attention, concern and care<sup>1</sup> are required?” – relational, discriminating questions that imply being situated by the situation.

In one of his last texts, William James dramatized what I have described as “the encounter with a force” as a jump which demands trust but offers no warrant, a lack of warrant that may explain the intellectualist censorship insisting on the necessary disconnection between our “subjective” attachments and the question of what is entitled to play a legitimate role in our (modern) world.

We can and we may, as it were, jump with both feet off the ground into or towards a world of which we trust the other parts to meet our jump – and only so can the making of a perfected world of pluralistic pattern ever take place. Only through our precursive trust in it can it come into being. There is no inconstancy anywhere in this, and no “vicious circle” unless a circle of

poles holding themselves upright by leaning on one another, or a circle of dancers revolving by holding each other's hands, be "vicious". The faith circle is so congruous with human nature that the only explanation of the veto that intellectualists pass upon it must be sought in the offensive character to them of the faiths of certain concrete persons. (James, 1911, pp. 230–231)

Contravening the intellectualist veto does not mean denying what may motivate the fright or offence, deciding against those who are frightened or offended by what eventually comes into existence. William James was a pragmatist, and he knew that what is offensive may indicate something else than an offence against a moral or political silencing consensus: some encounters, some subjectivity-producing connections, may be "bad" or dangerous indeed. Examples of the kind of danger that may well be associated with "production of subjectivity" have accumulated since James. In the US, the case of Nazism served to tame pragmatism and to pragmatically justify the claim that we need to remain on the settled ground of consensual reason and factual arguments. However, other non-modern traditions may be understood as having inhabited the question of "good" and "bad" in another way, transforming the eventual danger into a pragmatic concern. They know that the encounter with what I have called "forces", what William James calls "other parts", needs care. They may be devouring ones indeed, or rather will be devouring ones if one does not know how to foster and nourish them, once they have been called up, once they have entered an assemblage. If we adopt their standpoint, then modern recklessness – their neglect of the art of assemblages that foster and nourish – and the urge for rightful vetoes may well appear as the two sides of the same coin.

How to foster and nourish are never general questions, but relational situated ones. This is what I wish to emphasize here, with the proposition of "discrimination", a capacity which is a matter of learning. When a critical "re-prioritization of subjectivity" is concerned, this discrimination may demand that we abstain from celebrating subjectivity-producing events as justified by their disruptive power, breaking consensual, repressive *status quo*. Learning means connection with such events. We learn when we indeed connect and are put to the test by the connection. What is this connection demanding from us? For instance, is it demanding betrayal, making perceptible the possibility of a jump we can and may make? Or is it demanding surrender – surrendering our own attachments in the name of a demand that would then transcend them?

The choice to speak about "discrimination" and not "reflexivity" is part of my argument. The capacity to discriminate is transversal – we attribute it without hesitation to animals, we know that it can be inborn as well as learned, and also that the differences discrimination makes have an indeterminate relation both with reasons, or motivations, and with causes. The point is not that they would be without reasons, or without causes, but that, as soon as we



deal with reasons and causes, we encounter knowledge questions, and the “fact” – the coming into existence of a situation that requires the learning of how to pay attention and produce discrimination – loses its importance. What becomes important instead is the more general question about such kinds of fact, what they allow us to claim, how they allow us to dispel illusion and assign responsibility. Reflexivity is vulnerable to such a capture, in terms of knowledge: it can easily mean paying attention to defects and biases to be avoided, and for instance to the way our own discrimination patterns and habits negatively affect the knowledge we produce. Such a concern may be quite important and relevant but it is not a line of escape from modern territory. The modern territory has rather for one of its refrains the generalization of this concern, then becoming a duty, the duty to overcome the “subjective” attachments that situate us.

It may well be that “reflexivity” is not only vulnerable to capture but results from the modern capture of the art of discrimination. William James emphasized the importance of trust, not blind trust, but “precurative”, which is also speculative, trust; trust in the possibility that something may come and make connection. This kind of trust demands that we accept “re-prioritizing” the question of the “coming into existence” against the settled ensemble of determinations that play against each other in the reflexive scene. This, at least, is the way I have tried (Stengers, 2000, 2006) to address the challenge of what may be the primordial situation heralding the triumph of objective, disinterested truth against subjective opinion, whereby experimental scientists conclude that “Nature has spoken!”, in order to “reclaim” it against such a play.

The claim that Nature would be able to speak, that is, entitle scientists to speak in Her name, has been the object of a lot of critical attention, from Kant up to the present-day debunking analysis. Some years ago a “war” was even waged, featuring two rival sets of determination, one organized around Nature as determining the difference between science and any other practice, the other organized around human practices as being the only effective determinant for what scientists attribute to Nature. Objectivity and reflexivity have been mobilized in a very Latourian exchange of mutual denunciations.

I would readily agree that so-called objective science lacks reflexivity, and endorse all critiques against the “detached”, neutral, “viewing from nowhere”, disembodied, knowing subjects featured in scientific propaganda. However, returning to the scene where experimenters rejoice that “Nature has spoken!”, I want to emphasize a Jamesian “coming into existence”, that cannot be reduced to general issues.

My rather simple starting point is that the notion of “human practice” is able to intervene only in a final disparaging conclusion: “you see, it is only the outcome of human activity”. The problem with this notion is that it cannot be separated from its claim to offer a polemical counter-proposition against the scientists’ usual one. In contrast, suppressing the adjective “human”, it becomes

possible to wonder about the specificity of experimental practices among other practices, which also cannot be characterized as “human only”. The question I ask, then, relates to practitioners: what situates them, what “forces” them to think and feel and hesitate in a way that marks them as belonging to *this* practice, experimental science?

What I have proposed (Stengers, 2000) is that the “Nature has spoken!” claim does not primordially herald a message of authority. It is rather a Jamesian cry, commenting on the achievement of the special kind of Jamesian jump which gives its meaning to the experimenters’ practice. Something has “met” the scientists’ “jump”, a connection has been produced, facts have been produced, which are gifted with the quite unusual power to reliably impose the way they should be interpreted. What forces experimenters to think and feel and hesitate would then be the result of a very strange achievement, which has nothing to do with objectivity as generally opposed to subjectivity. It is rather an event – the coming into existence of something that has got the power to produce agreement among competent colleagues, that is, among those who not only know how to pay the kind of attention, how to learn the necessary art of discrimination, which the experimental situation demands, but who also share the same passionate quest, assigning value only to whatever has the power to enforce their agreement.

So considered, the experimental practice of critique and discrimination between what would be “only an interpretation” and what would be characterized as “objective” has nothing general or “disembodied” about it. It is rather the enactment of a peculiar subjectivity produced through, and demanded by, becoming part of the very specific social fabric of experimental science, a fabric that presupposes and proclaims a specific version of the “precursive” Jamesian trust: it may happen that the demand is met for facts enforcing agreement.

My proposition is not meant to justify “Science”, but it may, I hope, open the possibility of connections with those scientists who struggle against the undue authority of the objectivity argument but would not wish to become hostage of a debunking, ironist view that would demand that they (reflexively) accept that any scientific achievement is only a “human construction” (see Rose, 1996). If this possibility of connection is trusted, new forms of resistance could come into existence in opposition to the typical arrogance and blindness of the “this is not scientific” claim we meet each time scientific experts judge a concrete situation as if their criteria and demands were generally applicable norms. The question of this arrogant subjectivity (the so-called “scientific ethos”) would become a bridging one, together with the question of those who accept and propagate the grand refrain demanding objectivity as if it was a general norm. But such a connection would necessitate a new demanding discrimination, which would have some bearing on the arguments that refute objectivity, or refuse it in the name of some other grand refrain (pick your choice). Whatever the grand refrain, it entails a frontal opposition that stabilizes the idea that there is indeed

a “grand” choice to be made, and the demand would be that the stage be actively deprived of any such “grandeur”.

This brings us to another question: since its very Galilean beginning, we cannot deal with scientific experimental achievements without also dealing with their “milieu”, a milieu which made it possible that this kind of achievement be turned into a general norm – objectivity – as related to a general theory of knowledge (Stengers, 2006). In other words, what we call a scientist cannot be disentangled from, or abstracted from, what we may term the “ecological” question, the question of the milieu that accepted and propagated such grandiose generalization.

### **A question of milieu**

Referring to an ecological question means referring to a question of encounters and connections, the connection between what has come into existence and the many differences it can make to the many other existences with which it is connected. A milieu has nothing to do with what would (objectively) determine the subject (in spite of “subjective” illusions of freedom). If productions of subjectivity cannot be disentangled from their milieu, ecology proposes that we do not think in terms of determination but in terms of entangling speculative questions. This at least is the way I have learned to address scientists, speculating about what they might become in a different milieu, with interlocutors other than the State and Industry, rather than reasoning in terms of deductive, knowledge claims (since... then...).

But the question of the milieu is also addressed to the “academic milieu”, that is also to the milieu I belong to, when writing this text. In order to try to make perceptible an aspect of this milieu, not as an explanation but as a (speculative) challenge, I will quote the cry of the neo-pagan witch Starhawk: “The smoke of the burned witches still hangs in our nostrils” (Starhawk, 1982, p. 219). Starhawk’s cry is a challenge for those living in a milieu where critical and reflexive social theory may easily lead to celebrate debunking or deconstructing as an achievement in itself. A milieu that might thus share the modern sense of pride in our ability to interpret witch hunting, as well as accusations of sorcery, as a matter of social, or linguistic, or cultural, or political, construction or beliefs. What this pride overlooks however is how this analysis will help us to address the burned witches themselves. Are they also to be reduced to a social construction? Would they not be destroyed a second time, this time by those who would describe them as victims, certainly, but also as the product of the same milieu that produced their hunters? Encountering Starhawk’s challenge makes me ask this question, and it is in order to continue and expand on this challenge that I quote her, a witch, as a co-thinker, as a now demanding part of my milieu.

The efficacy of Starhawk's cry resides in the small shock it may produce, which may be the verification of the challenge's relevance. What would happen, what would be the response of the academic milieu to those who dared to propose some continuity between the ultimate triumph of the witch hunters – the fact that we have lost the active memory of the eradication of European witches, that is the memory that something was indeed eradicated – and critical (de)constructionist theory? We have become used to Michel Foucault's "shocking" ways of questioning our modern pride in matters such as psychiatry or penal practices. But the shock now may well be addressed even to academic followers of Foucault, those who have turned his production of destabilizing, and even frightening, demands for lucidity into a "we know better" industry. What I am attempting however is not the "I know better" counter-move of assimilating social theory and witch hunting. I am attempting to slow down and question the way we are ourselves constructed, with the modern refrain "they believed/we know" – and the possibility of "putting at a distance", which this refrain entails.

If a milieu must be described in terms of encounters, nourishing ones, challenging ones, toxic ones, Starhawk's challenge may possibly cause some readers to speculatively activate their memory and imagination regarding encounters where they learnt the codes of our academic milieu: maybe a few derisive remarks, knowing smiles, offhand judgments, often made about somebody else, which have nevertheless got the subtle power to pervade and infect our thinking life, to shape the way we frame and address our questions. Those of you who just stopped to think have just felt the smoke, and have learned about the way it affects us.

To think of subjectivity "in terms of the milieu" is not a matter of theory. Indeed I could have chosen to deal theoretically with the Deleuze and Guattari concepts of assemblage, or of collective *vs* mass productions of subjectivity, but then I would have risked siding with "know better" theorists, producing messages that advertise my professional territory and protect me from little smiles, from judgments about my lack of what critical academics in US often call "sophistication". I prefer to continue and relay, together with, and with the help of, contemporary witches, the (unsophisticated) cry of those who ask "what *did* happen to us?", knowing that philosophical concepts may help us only as they empower what is first experienced as a stammer affecting the "adult know-better thinking", when we become as children in the dark who need a refrain in order to summon the courage to walk.

### **Resisting serious, adult thinking**

If, as a philosopher, I am differentiating heavily between theory and philosophical concepts, it is not because I want to defend the highbrow privileges of my field, but because I became a philosopher when I discovered

and experienced the power of philosophical concepts to “force” thinking and feeling, and then came to realize that this very power had been hunted down and eliminated, as some kind of witchery, in those countries like the UK, where philosophy has become a model for serious, adult, thinking. I became a philosopher through discovering not only Deleuze but also this forgotten English philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, who was a mathematician, but became, in just a few adventurous years, the most formidable producer of speculative concepts in the 20th century.

It may well be that the stammer-producing experience that turned Whitehead into a philosopher echoes in his recollection of how the industrialization of England proceeded: when “the workmen were conceived as mere hands, drawn from the pool of labour” and when, “to God’s question, men gave the answer of Cain – ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’” (Whitehead, 1925, p. 203). Even if, at his time, the evils of the early industrial system had become, as Whitehead wrote, a “common place of knowledge”, the point he himself wanted to insist upon was that those who gave Cain’s answer were not only greedy industrialists but also honourable, even kind-hearted men, devoted to progress – the best men of that time. They probably were those people Whitehead would meet in Cambridge as his colleagues. It may well be that it is at the high table of his college, that is, in the very sanctum of his academic milieu, that he experienced the kind of stammering perplexity we probably all experienced, the feeling that any “clever” discussion would only feed what one is dealing with. Whatever the experience, the refrain for Whitehead became: “What are our modes of abstraction doing to us? What are they blinding us against?”

For Whitehead, abstractions as such were never the enemy. We cannot think without abstractions: they cause us to think, they lure our feelings and affects. But our duty is to take care of our abstractions, never to bow down in front of what they are doing to us – especially when they demand that we heroically accept the sacrifices they entail, the insuperable dilemmas and contradictions in which they trap us.

What Whitehead confronted are the many conflicting versions of the modern refrain converging on the point that we have come to adulthood and have to know, and bear, the absence of what we needed as children – we are those who face the hard truth, whatever this truth may be. With this “great divide” refrain comes not only the duty to be tolerant towards those who still need protection against those hard truths, but also an incapacity to relate to them – they cannot challenge us, but they produce the guilty feeling that we have to become still more adult, still more detached from what we need, including maybe the need to interfere with their own process of getting out of childhood.

For Whitehead, modern categories were toxic, poisoning our thinking, producing the feeling that we deal with ultimate questions while those questions are our fabrication. He betrayed the modern territory not because he denounced those categories – a very easy, quite modern, feature – but because he dared to

propose that we were not prisoners of those categories. Whitehead's impressive conceptual apparatus has nothing theoretical about it, and is easy prey for academic derision and rejection – as indeed it was. It is a sheer fabrication, a deliberate construction, which cannot make sense without the coming into existence of the assemblage it calls for, when the reader enters an experimental and experienced discrimination process, reclaiming (a word I received as a gift from witches and other activists) what was sacrificed in the name of the modern, heroic, adult, “we no longer can”. Whitehead's experimentation with concepts thus entails the trust that this heroic modern refrain may indeed be betrayed (something I verified when teaching Whitehead) and that categorical abstractions are something we may fabricate in order for them to fabricate us (Latour's refrain about the functioning of fetishes). This is the same trust that I need in order to ask now what it would mean for critical theorists to actively remember that the manner in which something is theoretically characterized is part of the milieu of that something, and may empower or poison it.

Let us come back for instance to Starhawk and the neo-pagan witches, who experiment with empowerment rituals, calling for Goddesses and spirits and cultivating “magic”. Shall we be part of a milieu that “knows better”, or defines itself as those who “no longer can” connect with such practices – maybe appreciating the witches' role in the altermondialist movement but keeping at best silent about what they claim as a vital part of this role? Shall we be just “tolerant”, maybe theorizing the “return of spirituality” as a contemporary phenomenon? In both cases the choice is to be part of a milieu that refuses them the power to have us thinking and feeling, a milieu that claims it has no need or use for what they propose.

The alternative is not conversion. It might rather be to accept that they may make us think and feel and wonder about what sustains us, and maybe also about what leads us to think we do not need sustenance. The witches' challenge is not a matter of belief. What they challenge is the dangerous abstraction that can lead our questions about the production of subjectivity back to the modern territory: the abstraction that reduces this production to some kind of a “pure” event we can separate from what it requires and affirms.

To take another example, it is certainly easier to theorize the new veil in terms of colonization, resistance against an oppressive assimilation, racism and all that. But we maybe have to also listen to these girls who affirm that they want to please God. And we need to cultivate discrimination, paying attention to the way we are ourselves affected by this encounter with God intruding into our post-colonial, anti-imperialist analysis. As we also need discrimination with regard to the witches' Goddess. When Donna Haraway famously wrote that she would rather be a cyborg than a Goddess, she was probably a witness of “bad encounters”, and she was telling about the dangers of the assemblage. But she was certainly not cautious enough, or affected enough, as she did not take the time and the needed care to anticipate and thwart the enthusiastic adhesion

of her academic milieu, a milieu she authorized to snigger and promote a heroic adhesion to the cyborg as an (academic) weapon against those who still believe in... (pick your choice).

### **Efficacy and craft**

When “forced” to think and feel by witches, I felt bound to experiment with new words. One of them is “efficacy” – or rather the French “*efficace*”. In French this word avoids the tolerant conditioned reaction “if it helps them...”, because it is no longer used, and remains mainly associated with the theological mystery of the efficacy of sacraments. As we know, sacramental efficacy has been a dividing point in Protestant–Catholic debates. According to Protestants, Catholics believe that sacraments work “as if by magic”, while they themselves affirm that sacraments are unable to confer grace apart from the response that faith participants give to the sacramental words. But this very modern division concerning “what is responsible for what?”, is what we overcome without even thinking when we feel the force of words told to us, which produce an answer that is not “ours”, but that rather testifies for a transformation of who we are, a transformation that will maybe require caution and discrimination. Words and theories have efficacy.

Taking seriously (not thinking seriously, as an adult) the power of words, and gestures, and theories, may be related to the craft that witches call “magic”. And, as they say, to use the word “magic”, with the included testing shock this word produces, is part of the craft. They know very well that magic is not a matter of supernatural power, that the efficacy, or force, of words cannot be separated from the artificiality of assemblages, especially from the rituals whose empowering virtues they experience. But artificiality is not in opposition to anything else; it is the equipment needed for the Jamesian jump which they dare to take, a jump whose efficacy has been dismembered into natural and supernatural components. And this artificiality requires that the witches learn how to discriminate, to “taste” the effect (tasting a potion), and that they respect and honour the tools they fabricate in order for those tools to induce what will fabricate them.

In contrast with this pragmatic approach, the problem with theorists is that they very often refer to what they do as “constructions”, but lack the craft which a construction requires.

I will never forget reading an interview with a young neo-Nazi East German who explained his own trajectory in terms of the loss of social authority, the humiliation of a jobless father and other general psychosocial determinants. He produced himself as an illustration of psychosocial theories, thus claiming the kind of weakness, being acted by the situation and milieu, those theories suppose. Also, I will never forget a cartoon published in a French newspaper at

the time of the “révolte des banlieues”, in autumn 2005, showing a hooded youth wearing a T-shirt personalized with the sentence “Je suis un problème de société” and throwing a stone wrapped in a paper with the word “message”. The cartoon was right: Even anger today is interpreted as hiding a message asking for love, understanding, or recognition.

When dealing with the efficacy of some theories, as they pervade the milieu, would it not be interesting to speak about sorcery, or maleficent (not malevolent – the point is the effect, not the intention) magic? Are they not operating a capture at the service of truth of the ones they defend against unjust accusations, accusations that should in truth be turned against “society”?

Of course one could assert that theorists are right to emphasize the responsibility of the social order, and oppose those who criminalize youths! Even if a theory is right, though, its efficacy may be maleficent, especially if its producers utilize all their craft in their polemical critique against other positions, and forget that in so doing they take those whom this polemic is about as “hostages” in the conflict, a conflict that typically organizes around the question “what is responsible for what?”. If I love Whitehead, it is precisely because of the efficacy of his seemingly arcane concepts, as I experienced them, in breaking the powerful spell which this question of responsibility cast on modern categories, taking as hostage our very experience. The example of the conceptual propositions he crafted in order to lure us back to the wide variety of what we know, feel and experience may be of interest here because of their speculative character, adding dimensions to situations, not playing one determining dimension against another. This is not a ready-made answer but an example, dramatizing the question of the efficacy of theory. Theories are always efficacious, they always add to the situation, even when they only aim at diagnosing it. The problem with diagnosis is that it easily leads to forgetting about the unintended repercussions of one’s theory. Dramatizing the question of efficacy means that the theorizing craft needs creative (not reflexive) accountability, which dares to speculate about what may come into existence because of the theoretical intervention, and which eventually dares to create a lure for new possibilities that add to the interest of a situation and transform the way it is addressed.

More generally, I would claim that to diagnose alienation, or to identify actions as hidden resistance or subversive counter-power strategies, when the people concerned do not characterize their situation in these terms, is poor, and also dangerous crafts. They have for their first efficacy to designate the analyst as the spokesperson for people cast in roles that pre-exist them – a spokesperson who has not been produced and empowered by an effective, transformative connection,<sup>2</sup> but entitled by a theory – a spokesperson who eventually may be manipulated by those who understand the theory she obeys, and see the advantage of playing her game, but risk, so doing, becoming infected by their own role-playing....



We are dealing here with the politics of knowledge. Indeed, my question is intimately associated with the question of the differential productions of subjectivity – linking those who theorize, and those who are theorized. To dare to accept the characterization of our theories in terms of “efficacy” or “magic”, and not in terms of (valid) knowledge, would mean refusing any position that implies, one way or another, that the theorist knows better and, more concretely, abstaining from theorizing should an encounter not be produced, which connects the theorist with what empowers those about whom she theorizes; that is, an encounter which puts her in position to learn, and not to recognize. We may not pick and choose, select aspects that matter for us and neglect the remainder with a tolerant, softly contemptuous “if it may help them...” Even if implicit, this judgement may well have repercussions for which the theorist is accountable.

To give an example, it was a crucial turn in Bruno Latour’s thinking when he accepted that the scientists’ anger that exploded during the so-called science wars, although it could certainly be theoretically explained away, should rather be listened to. If they felt insulted by the relativist interpretation which deemed that sciences were (purely human) practices just like any other, the question could arise: are we not insulting all practitioners with the kind of questions which we address to them, and which imply the claim that we know how to define a practice? Were the practitioners who politely accepted our descriptions polite only because they felt incompetent, because they felt that we scientists knew better and were legitimately debunking their illusions? From that point onwards, Latour’s theorizing is no longer just diagnosing modernity, but actively, and always more daringly, betraying it (see for instance Latour, 2004).

To Latour’s question, I would now add Leigh Star’s so crucial question “cui bono?” – the question of a true cautious, discriminating witch (Leigh Star, 1991). Who in our modern milieu would profit from practitioners accepting an objective, demystifying interpretation of their practices? Who profits from the kind of vulnerability that defining such interpretations as normal and legitimate both exploits and induces?

## Vulnerability

In *La Vierge et le neutrino*, I proposed as a refrain which betrays modernity that all practices, including scientific ones, may be thought of as “surviving” (Stengers, 2006, p. 150). We would have to address those that exist now, not as having passed the test of modernity, the coming into adulthood, but as having got a reprieve, thus raising the question of the price that was paid for this reprieve.

This refrain has nothing to do with a historical description – there was never a negotiation about a “price” paid for survival. Its efficacy is meant to be speculative, retelling the refrain about a milieu pervaded with the smoke of the

destroyed witches, a milieu that could be compared to a “cemetery of destroyed practices”. What difference does it make to address contemporary practices knowing that if they still exist it may be because they were enrolled and mobilized by those who blessed so many destructions? And knowing that the way they claim legitimacy and eventually bless those destructions may well be related to getting the possibility of surviving? The point is not to excuse modern practitioners, but rather to wonder. What would be the consequences if those who, quite rightly, criticize such claims did not identify them as an expression of power but took them to be miserable lies that allowed modern practices’ survival and prosperity, but most probably also acted as a poison, transforming, as witches would say, “power within” into “power over”? Would it not empower new crafts, the efficacy of which would be not to denounce, but to “clinically” exhibit the action and effects of the intoxication? And would not new, interesting connections be possible with those, among modern practitioners, who struggle against the role assigned to their practice?

The question may, for instance, be asked today about the scientific experimental practices. Under the guise of the (capitalist) “knowledge economy”, what is happening is no longer only the intoxication but the destruction of the social fabric which empowers researchers to think and feel, imagine and object. Soon those practices will indeed confirm the critical diagnosis that there was never anything special about them, that they were reducible to power interests. How to connect with those scientists who complain about their increasing subjection?

We may well be tempted to snigger and remark that scientists well deserve their coming enslavement to the capitalist law of flexibility and separation from the product of their work. They may have believed that it was possible to side with powers that silence, blessing the silencing operations in the name of rationality and objectivity. Now they have to bow down and accept destruction as everyone else. They are not worth being defended, or even pitied. However, if we follow Deleuze and Guattari’s proposal to deal with capitalism as a capture apparatus, we may also slow down and hesitate. The question around an event of capture is always the question of what the capture process depended upon and exploited. Does not our “well deserved” reaction align us with those who finally actualize the ever-present possibility of those practices’ destruction? Are we not contributing to the vulnerability exploited by the capture process?

In *La Sorcellerie capitaliste*, Philippe Pignarre and I claimed that talking about capitalism as sorcery was not just a metaphor designating what Marx already described: capitalism as the master illusionist. We were also pointing to capitalism as able to profit from any opportunity, to turn any lack of imagination, care or attention into its advantage, in brief as a master in surprising its opponents, undermining their positions and producing their disarray and impotence. And the temptation to demand that something must be worth being defended has produced many such opportunities.

If capitalism needs, depends on, and propagates vulnerability to its “attacks”, it must welcome the famous Marxist thesis that it is paving the way towards socialism because of its very process of destruction of “traditional” forms of life (which are thus not worth defending). And it must also welcome the revolutionary version of the modern refrain of the “great divide”: one way or another, the struggle against capitalism would be considered as the final one – an apocalyptic battle between light and darkness – in a landscape brutally purified from the shackles of the past. Indeed it means that those who struggle have to keep their eyes fixed on the ultimate stake, that they close their ears against the cries and despair of those whose culture, practices and attachments were destroyed. And that they must give an unprecedented importance to “theory” as the necessary guide, the compass indispensable in the face of all temptations and deviations. From Marx’s definition of the proletariat as having nothing but its chains to lose, to Negri’s definition of the multitude, theory then appears as a “theatre of concepts”, identifying the pure conceptual instance that is entitled to raise a worthy standard in a confrontation that is also the begetting of a finally reconciled humanity. Such a theatre does not however offer what non-modern traditions, which know about sorcery, know how to cultivate: arts of protection against capture.

I would never pretend that what I would call the piety of modern critique – as it has time and again designated what was not worth defending, and constructed the concept of those (today it would be illegal immigrants) who may be considered as the spokespersons of humanity – is responsible for ongoing capitalist destruction. This would lead to a thesis about an intrinsic relationship between capitalism and modernity, while I follow Deleuze and Guattari defining capitalism as an abstract machine – as we know, what has happened in modern Europe is only a first, and other capitalistic models now proliferate in other regions of the world. But I would claim that such a piety has contributed to our own, specific kind of vulnerability, and contributed to what capitalism, devoid of any kind of piety, captured, exploited and still exploits.

## Reclaiming

In his *Three Ecologies*, Felix Guattari (2000) emphasized the connection between the three processes of devastation, which affect mental, collective and earth ecologies. What I have tried to make perceptible is a very limited point in this context: the simple fact that we are affected and that we need to distinguish in our own ecologies, both mental and collective, how we are affected. The point is not to feel guilty (another modern speciality), or to protest against unjustified suspicions – nobody would be more happy than I, if what I described was to be welcomed with a small, gentle, smile: “poor old French philosopher, she is trying to crash into doors we have already opened; we know all that, and the point of this new journal is precisely to learn together how to inhabit again

what has been devastated". But what I fear is that, if this is not the case, some readers may feel shocked by the fact that I speak about "us", as if we were important, at a time when so many urgent questions are demanding our attention and efforts.

I understand quite well that when they are called out to a fire, fire-fighters hurry without slowing down and wondering about their own role and subjective stance. But the point is that nobody really calls us out. We are rather, as readers of this journal, or writing in it, part of those few who inherit a tradition in which ideas and words do matter, which gives ideas and words some power to contribute towards changing, in one small way or another, situations. This is one of our common attachments, what is common between me and any reader who is still reading me at this stage of my text; and not to explicitly recognize and cultivate this subjective stance may well be compared with experimental scientists failing to explicitly present themselves in terms of the possibility of achievement that has them thinking and imagining together, using instead general, neutral themes like "objectivity". This is why I claim that we have to take care of our own mental and collective ecologies, not as an egotistic move (singing like Nero, while the world is burning) but because it is what we depend upon. And this means reclaiming an ecology that gives the situations we confront the power to have us thinking feeling, imagining, and not theorizing about them. In this I am a Marxist – the point is to "change the world, not to understand it", but I add that this implies giving to the world the power to change us, to "force" our thinking.

What I propose could be named "reclaiming" the tradition which forces us to think and write, and read, and reclaiming always begins with an empirical starting point, with a situation we have to claim, against all those generalities that demand that we eliminate it away as if it was only a contingent point – in this case, the empirical fact that we are readers of such journals as *Subjectivity*. Reclaiming, as the neo-pagan witches and other US activists forced me to feel, is a very concrete and political business. Starhawk tells about her own experience, when she was part of a group of activists who were mobilized to help Native Americans fighting for their rights. An old woman asked: "You are nice people, you who come and help us, but where are you coming from?" Which meant for Starhawk: "We can tell you who we are, and what we defend, but who are you, and how can we connect?" What Starhawk understood was that the answer could not be made in terms of generalities, presenting herself as an anonymous, self-sacrificing, righter of wrongs, but required being able to tell about her own attachments, in order to meet in dignity. She understood the political importance of "reclaiming" what made her able to fight, in order to share with others who also fight, for different reasons. And she understood that reasons that present themselves as anonymous may always be trapped in presenting themselves as universal, and then easily become murderous – we all know that.

Reclaiming is an adventure, both empirical and pragmatic, because it does not primarily mean taking back what was confiscated, but rather learning what it takes to inhabit again what was devastated. Reclaiming indeed associates irreducibly “to heal”, “to reappropriate”, “to learn/teach again”, “to struggle”, to “become able to restore life where it was poisoned”, and it demands that we learn how to do it for each zone of devastation, each zone of the earth, of our collective practices and of our experience. In order to reclaim, we, who are interested in “subjectivity”, may need to discriminate and empirically feel how the smoke of the burned witches still hangs in our own nostrils, and not in general, in order to create the possibility to resist the infection. And to resist not reflexively, but creatively, that is also technically – “it is, should be, a question of technique, exclusively a question of technique” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 342). Whitehead’s adventure was empowered by technical problems of conceptual articulation, and the witches’ rituals and crafts entail the “technical” problem of creating that which does not command the event of becoming able to reclaim, but does foster and sustain it.

The first step could well be to accept as a (quite non modern) refrain that we, who trust that ideas and words do matter, do trust in the magic of words and ideas. But then comes the hard technical question of learning how to fabricate and discriminate. We need techniques that do enable us to make the Jamesian jump towards forces we were separated from, and do also foster and sustain discrimination and care, because no such event, no such production of subjectivity, is good *per se*.

### About the author

Isabelle Stengers, born in 1949, teaches philosophy at the Université libre de Bruxelles. Her interests centred first around modern sciences and their toxic association with claims to rational authority. She is now working on the crucial challenge, both political and cultural, of an ecology that would embed our many diverging practices in a democratic and demanding environment. She has written numerous books, among which, in English, are *Order out of Chaos* (with I. Prigogine), *A History of Chemistry* (with B. Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent), *Power and Invention, Situating Science* and *The Invention of Modern Science*.

### Notes

- 1 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa activated my attention about the importance of creating a distinction between concern and care. To define a situation as a “matter of concern” is an important point of Bruno Latour’s thesis, and communicates with the political fight against those who judge a situation starting from settled “matters of fact”. As for the question of care, it stems from the feminist tradition and is related with the creation of sustainable relations with others and ourselves (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2008a). As this text will show, I have still a lot to learn about care, about how to relate with those who read me... But I wish to express all my gratitude to Maria Puig and Dimitris

Papadopoulos for their careful comments, which helped me to care just a bit more. They are not responsible however for the excesses and abuses, which my concern for the situation is not sufficient to excuse.

- 2 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has beautifully distinguished between standpoint theories as communicating with general epistemological claims and as connecting those who theorize with concrete struggles, the theorizer then presenting herself as indebted to the struggle that forced and enabled her to craft the words that tell about the new emerging standpoint (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2008b).

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