Against the Psychoanalytic Unconscious: Deleuze, Guattari, and Desire as a Heuristic for Self-Regulating Biopolitics

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1975 marked the release of Michel Foucault’s “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,” which his preceding lectures would later term ‘biopolitics’. Both “Discipline and Punish” and “The Birth of Biopolitics” represent some of the most important, impactful, and informative theories on the way in which surveillance functions; consequently, how its power works to materially produce the conditions for oppression.

In “Discipline and Punish,” Foucault utilizes genealogical analysis to trace the historical strands that come together in forming of disciplinary society; what Foucault articulates typifies the power formation and deployment of the contemporary sovereign. Foucault expands on this theory through the development of ‘biopolitics’. He defines this as the sovereign’s use of power through politics. This is done in order to manipulate and control the lives of the sovereign’s subjects. Thus, biopolitics provides the regulatory framework for which the execution of power (that Foucault describes in “Discipline and Punish”) not only arises, but also the reason for which it exists in the first place. Biopolitics works not only as a description of the apparatuses of power that the sovereign utilizes, but also the reason for which those apparatuses are used.

While Foucault’s analysis is thorough in the material examination of the existence and function of biopolitics, it lacks a desire-focused explanation for the reason in which biopolitics is so effective at not only sustaining power, but also in the regulation of populations. This lack of desire-centered analysis has led some to interpret and mobilize Foucauldian biopolitics in such a
way that reinforces the Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition; the process has forwarded an understanding of biopolitics that actually reinforces biopolitical control. As both a resistance to this fundamentally violent trend and application of Foucault’s analysis to the violence of the neoliberal world, I propose that the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (specifically their elaboration on desire and ‘desiring-machines,’) as the best heuristic for understanding the way in which biopower functions.

Deleuze and Guattari’s first written-assemblage “Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia Volume 1” addresses the way in which Lacanian psychoanalysis—and psychoanalysis writ large—engenders the conditions for the capitalist control and manipulation of bodies and subjectivities. Thus, before diving into Deleuze and Guattari’s (DnG) concept of desire and how it implicates biopolitics, it’s critical to understand the Lacanian psychoanalysis that provided the structure for which they were writing against. While both Lacan and DnG’s critical projects center the importance of desire—and desire’s interaction with subjects and society—radically differently. Forwarding and reframing (to his credit) Freud, Lacan centers desire around an individual’s unconscious and specifically the unconscious containment of unknowable ‘signifiers.’ Indeed, to Lacan, the unconscious governs the expression of a subjects desire and actions; dually, the unconscious is unable to be fully understood.

To clarify, what Lacan articulates is that there are latent, naturalistic ‘signifiers’. When interfaced with social realities (which correspond to said ‘signifiers’), it produces a specific kind of desiring-response. Lacan then uses Freud’s Oedipus Complex to re-conceptualize the want to kill the father as the fundamental ‘castration’ or ‘loss’ that is at the heart of every subject’s psychological development. This loss provides the framework for which unconscious signifiers interface with the world. Due to the strictly partial knowability of the unconscious, there will always be a

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'lack' in what is expressed and what is understood. This 'lack' comes to express the fundamental lynch pin of Lacanian desire: due to the inability of subjects to fully understand the other, desire can only be represented and understood through the individual's unconscious.

Despite the fact that Foucault would likely object to his work being explained through a frame of Lacanian psychoanalysis, he lacks an articulation of how biopolitics intersects with a conception of desire and subjectivity. Due to this, and the near omnipresence of Lacan in the western academy, Foucault's conception of biopolitics leaves itself very open to the possibility of being explained through Lacan. A conception of biopolitics understood through Lacanian psychoanalysis would ground the functioning of biopower in its appeal to individual unconscious signifiers; also, communicating that sovereign control stems from its ability to generate the possibility for individuals to shift their psychological anxiety (or lack thereof) onto the other.

The possibility for the aforementioned Lacanian interpretation of biopolitics seems to be most applicable in Foucault's usage of Bentham's 'Panopticon' as a heuristic for understanding one structuralized instance of biopolitics. One of Foucault's arguments as to why the panoptic society is so powerful in its regulation of populations is due to the fact that the panoptic is able to "spread throughout the social body" through its ability to get subjects to self-regulate themselves. The question of self-regulation opens the door for Lacanian psychoanalysis to describe the conditions for which that self-regulation occurs; generally, this is through some appeal to the voyeuristic unconscious. Since self-regulation centers on Foucault's discussion of power, this interpretation is able to circuit the entirety of biopolitics through Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Deleuze and Guattari focus on Lacanian psychoanalysis and its explanation of power as the oppositional form which they develop their concept of desire. Antithetical to Lacan's individualist concept of desire, Deleuze and Guattari articulate that desire is inherently a collective and horizontal function; hence, the connection of one subject to another creates a 'desiring-machine'. Additionally, the function produces desire both from that connection and the connections broader position in the structures of society.

To Deleuze and Guattari, desire is necessarily a collective production, in which the unconscious is a theater that produces and internalizes the desire that is produced by the relationships in which subjects engage – also, the structures of power that those subjects encounter. Desire implicates subjectivity; however, subjects are not static,
contained, individuals. Instead, subjects are constantly open and changing to the desire that is constantly produced in civil society; Deleuze and Guattari term this ‘becoming’. Therefore, desire is not a lack that can never be understood (terminalizing in only the individual); instead, desire is a flow that is constantly moving, connecting, and growing in intensity in such a way that produces subjects as ‘becoming’ instead of individual. ‘Becoming’ consequently produces subject-subject relationships and structural arrangements that are horizontal. These arrangements are based on affective connections and open to the flowing of desire in a necessarily anti-hierarchical way; these arrangements being called ‘assemblages’.

Deleuze and Guattari articulate that while the function of desire (aforementioned) being such, desire is not produced in a neutral way. Rather, the very nature (horizontal and collective) of desire means that desire is able to be controlled, or ‘circuited’ by structures of power. This operates through structures of power utilizing their material power to forward a dominant conception of desire; this elevates the only flow of desire that is considered legitimate to express. Structures of power thus utilize their hegemonic power to force ‘becoming’ into statized individuals. Inverting assemblages into hierarchical relations produce desire in such a way that only makes sense in so far as its relation to that structure of power. For example, white construction of people of color is characterized as inherently undesirable and fundamentally anti-human; this reveals the way in which structures of oppression hijack subjects desire to reinforce the conditions of their power. Also, how they frame desire which is recognized by said system as ‘deviant’. Thus, Deleuzoguattarian desire would conceptualize the self-regulation endemic to biopolitics as not a question of the voyeuristic unconscious; instead, it is the sovereign’s ability to circuit desire as only intelligible if it is fundamentally biopolitical. Subjects’ expression of self-regulating biopolitics is not a question of their unconscious signifiers. Hegemonic power’s ability to control the production of desire in such a way that subjects are forced to be biopolitical and desirous of biopolitics. This is compounded with the way in which neoliberalism allows for the production of limited ‘becoming’, particularly white ‘becoming’. This extends to capital investment and categorization of bodies, revealing how Deleuzoguattarian theory is important in understanding the meta level power of biopolitics. Also, the ways in which other structures of power, like neoliberalism, utilize biopolitics to cement and exercise their power.

Indeed, Deleuze, Guattari’s, and Lacan’s concepts of desire are radically different. Lacanian psychoanalysis is individualist, naturalistic, and

HEGEMONY:
leadership or dominance, especially by one country or social group over others

DELEUZOGUATTARIAN:
relating to, or characteristic of, the works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari
hierarchical, while Deleuzoguattarian desire is the exact opposite of that; Deleuze and Guattari also problematize Lacanian psychoanalysis as an explicit function of oppression. Deleuze and Guattari problematize the individualistic naturalism inherent in the Lacanian unconscious as a refusal to engage with the ways that structures of power infiltrate the subject’s unconscious. To demonstrate this fact, Deleuze excavates the traditional Freudian case of Schreber, in which during a session of psychoanalysis Schreber expresses explicitly racist discourse. However, the psychoanalyst ignores this and latches onto Schreber’s utterance of a specific name as an indication of their Oedipus. This, to Deleuze, highlights the individualist focus of Lacanian psychoanalysis, forcing the only concern onto ‘signifiers’. This leads to ignoring structures of power like anti-blackness and settler colonialism. In short, the process allows them to re-naturalize themselves.

Not only does the Lacanian unconscious tacitly reinforce structures of power through obscuration, but also directly in its construction of subjectivity as a strictly static and enclosed individual. Specifically, by framing desire and consequent subject as starting and ending with the biologic body, it characterizes the subject as hierarchical – collapsing the possibility for the flow of desire. This causes bodies to be defined strictly on the basis of their worth in relation to structures of power (for example, their productivity to the capitalist project; hence, specific bodies to be ‘pieced’ based on their defined worth to neoliberal markets).

In summary, Lacanian psychoanalysis is not only oppressive in and of itself, but also makes theorizing biopolitics under a Lacanian framework a near impossibility. This is because the systems (capitalism, neoliberalism, settler colonialism, anti-blackness, et cetera) that the Lacanian unconscious reinforces all utilize biopolitics as an exercise of their oppression and legitimacy.

Foucault theorized biopolitics as a tool to shed light on the material way in which the sovereign is able to utilize and manipulate its power to justify itself and create the conditions for oppression. It was done in the service of creating more effective, nuanced, and liberating resistance movements. This provides invaluable tools to the dismantling of the intertwined nature of contemporary surveillance. We lose that revolutionary power when we utilize a framework that replicates biopolitics and subsequently turns our coalitions of resistance into matrices of oppression.

Deleuzoguattarian desire is relevant through its ability to provide the most material explanation of biopolitics. Also, it has an ability to fundamentally resist one of the foundational ways that biopolitics expresses itself. In contrast, Lacanian psychoanalysis should be rejected on the grounds that its foundational replication of some of the central tenants of neoliberalism. Additionally, it becomes impossible to utilize the analysis of biopolitics to dismantle biopower when the
very framework you are utilizing replicates the conditions of biopower.

Undoubtedly, the process of living and dying within the assemblages of violence (which scar the contemporary world) mark the necessity for revolutionary action. The fact that this action needs to begin with a conception of desire does not re-justify (hence, re-deploy) those structures of oppression. Indeed, structures that revolution is necessarily antagonistic against. This is due to the fact that systems of power, like capitalism, utilize desire as one of the primary staging grounds for its deployment of violence. Indeed, to quote Guattari: “to reinforce its social terror...the capitalist army of occupation strives, through an ever more refined system of aggression, provocation, and blackmail, to repress, to exclude, and to neutralize all those practices of desire which do not reproduce the established form of domination”\(^{26}\). This statement exemplifies that to truly engage in revolutionary action – which dismantles systems of genocide and mass death – liberation must “move beyond the limits of our ‘person,’ that we overturn the notion of the ‘individual...’ in order to travel the boundaryless territory of the body, in order to live in the flux of desires”\(^{27}\). This necessity of revolutionary action is provided by Foucault’s biopolitics, but becomes impossible to utilize if circuited through the fundamentally violent frame of Lacanian psychoanalysis.
WORKS CITED


6. Ibid.


11. Ibid., 3.


17. Ibid.


21. Ibid., 58.


23. Ibid.


27. Ibid., 209-210.