



## Shit and Signifiers

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**review of:**

Guattari, Félix (2006) *The Anti-Œdipus Papers*. New York: Semiotext(e). (PB: pp. 439, \$17.95, ISBN: 1-58435-031-8)

Got to pee, monsieur de Deleuze. I always have to pee. I've heard you never have to! (p. 365)

To readers already familiar with the writings of Félix Guattari, straightforward and un-cut comments, like this one on pee made to Deleuze, should come as no surprise. Even on peeing habits, Guattari never was a big fan of 'mediation'. Indeed, in the collected writings now named *The Anti-Œdipus Papers*, Guattari's language is at times straightforward and un-cut like a glossy Hollywood magazine targeting Neo-Marxist intellectuals. To readers less familiar with the writings of Guattari: *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* is a large collection of working letters that Guattari wrote to his friend and colleague Gilles Deleuze during their writing *Anti-Œdipus* together. Publishing *Anti-Œdipus* in 1972, and with their subsequent writings, Guattari and Deleuze undertook arguably the most daring intellectual quest of our time, rewriting Marxism, psychoanalysis, capitalism and philosophy through several series of very radical conceptual innovations. In addition to the working letters Guattari sent Deleuze in that regard *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* contains Guattari's private journals revealing a somewhat turbulent private life – including a troubled professional relationship with friend and teacher, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

What I feel like is just fucking around. Publish this diary for example. Say stupid shit. Barf out the fucking-around-o-maniacal schizo flow. Barter whatever for whoever wants to read it. Now that I'm turning into a saleable name I can find an editor for sure. (p. 400)

Familiarity aside though, ironically Félix Guattari himself was also rather un-cut about the idea of selling his letters and journals to capitalize on his saleable name. Therefore, some level of initial scepticism, regarding why we are now able to buy and read this stupid shit in English, seems advisable. Reading his letters and journals, one cannot help but to be a bit curious about what Guattari's reaction would have been, had he read the present and somewhat controversial Semiotext(e) edition. (I'll be returning to the controversial aspects later). Positive or negative, from the experience of reading *The Anti-Œdipus Papers*, surely Guattari's reaction, had he felt fit to continue the extreme writing style of his letters, would be one of sudden outcries (!); unfinished or

undeveloped lines of thought; beautiful spontaneous accelerations of sense; and extremely abstract thinking covered in implicit and esoteric academic references, leaving any actual *Bedeutung* sitting in a ‘fucking-around-o-maniacal schizo flow’ for poor readers to unravel themselves. If experience counts, Guattari would definitely also leave sentences half finished, perhaps even add a weird dream reading here and there, before finally glossing up everything with a touch of semi-inappropriate confessional exhibitionism disguised as self-analysis. If not a lesson on pee, *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* is quintessentially stupid shit in a ‘fucking-around-o-maniacal schizo flow’ format. So why would you ever want to buy and read this shit?

Obviously, to scholars enjoying hermeneutic fetishes, *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* will serve as an important historical source in creating the necessary contextual narrations to legitimize interpretations of Deleuze/Guattari’s *Anti-Œdipus*. While difficult, the letters are very rich in personal and academic detail, which can definitely be turned into a testimony to the specifics of the already famous collaboration between Deleuze and Guattari. If hermeneutic interpretations are your poison, you will also be happy to find that Deleuze’s annotations to the original letters are noted in the Semiotext(e) edition. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, Guattari’s letters are sufficiently detailed to support interpretive studies of the chronological *conceptual* development of the fore mentioned *Anti-Œdipus* collaboration. Some very interesting and complex conceptual work is to be found in *The Anti-Œdipus Papers*. This includes elaborate discussions on the need for, and problems regarding, the incorporation of elements of Hjelmslevian semantics in the base of Deleuze/Guattari’s joined schizo-thinking. Basically, what Guattari is trying to work out in the letters is how to *keep* the Marxist conception of capitalism as ‘value being constituted in general forms’ (through means of production), while *changing* the immanent semantic engine of Marxist political economy from Hegelian dialectics to a differential machinic ontology. While contemplating this change, Guattari debates, at great length and complexity, different conceptions of form and meaning. He is trying to dismiss the Hegelian dialectical formation for being the imperialism of an ‘impotent signifier’ (which Guattari’s favorite way of saying “meaning produced through a principle of transcendent formal unity coding onto substance”), and re-injecting a new and more powerful conception of formation, now driven by differential machinic power. Inspired by Hjelmslevian semantics, machinic power works as a figural split *between* content and expression (each of which is now given its own form and own substance), thereby ‘double articulating’ meaningful reality. In the realm of this split reality, Guattari argues, capitalistic machines work by introducing, or signifying, sovereignty of a decoded flow standard, thereby enabling physical exchange AND cognitive recognition.

So while creating a new conceptual foundation to analytics of capitalism, Guattari essentially seeks to also destroy the ‘impotency’ of classical bourgeois capitalism by letting machinic power penetrate concepts of bourgeois capitalism from within; it works as if you violently forced open a pair of scissors from inside a cheap plastic ring.

From this point on, *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* serves many an interpretive dish with meat on the bone. It does so because it is clear from the subsequent journals that Guattari’s fight against the ‘impotencies of signifiers’, while significant to the development of the analytics of capitalism, is equally important to him personally. Basically, it becomes

clear that the fight against the 'impotencies of signifiers' exists in almost all other areas of his personal life as well: his political fight against government power, his professional and personal fight against Lacanian influence, his private love life, indeed even in his relationship with Deleuze is at times described in the journals as mediated through impotence. So hermeneutic fetishists building contextual narrations, or drawing lines of conceptual development, should have a field day. *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* is definitely a useful, and pleasurable, read.

As Guattari also spends a great deal of time and energy debating Lacan's theoretical framework in general, and '*petit a*' in particular, reading *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* will definitely serve as a very interesting – and probably very provoking! – experience to people working with Lacanian analytics. In his letters, Guattari intensely criticizes Lacanian analytics for being the very epiphany of impotent capitalistic mediation, rather than a framework enabling critique of capitalistic production processes and social liberation. The letters, therefore, serve as a great study in Guattari's intense attempts to eradicate the capitalistic notions inherent in Lacanian analytics and discontinue this influence through conceptual innovation.

To Guattari, the question of capitalism and psychoanalysis becomes a problem of ontology. Rather than accepting the separation of 'the Real' from any analytical entity, such as the Symbolic or the Imaginary, he insists on the notion that nothing is separated from 'the Real'. *Everything* is Real in *The Anti Œdipus Papers* and, even though 'the Real' may exist *virtually*, *nothing lacks* in the Lacanian sense of 'lack'. Instead, Guattari understands formation of 'the Real' ontologically through two stoic conceptions of time 'modulation': *Chronos* and *Aion*. Lacanian notions, Guattari argues insistently, are insufficient because they are traversed, or mediated, by *Chronos* (the time of logic) thereby representing *Aion* (the eventual time of revolution) in a bad way. It serves as a bad representation of being because, by making too much fuzz of *Chronos*, we tend to neglect *Aion* in existence. Specifically, *Chronos* is a kind of temporal organizing that enables an internal economy (like a Lacanian structure) to exist ontologically. The establishment of a chronologic economy results in the possibility for powerful dynamics (like real thought or desire) to be codified and moved sequentially, like on a line, through different points of time and space. Thereby existence is given conceptual conditions that are fixed, and controlled, through the repetition of specific points in time and space, and semantic production is allowed to exist *only* as exchange between these repeated conceptual positions. Another way of saying this is that the result of *Chronos* is an overarching causal logic and production of bourgeois sense; everything is in order. Generally, the problem is related to the way, the mode, in which existence is articulated and signified. To Guattari the specific point of irritation seems to be that conceptual innovations (like *petit a*) supposedly existing 'outside' or 'free' of the fixed positions defined by this causal logic, indeed concepts that shall serve as means of critique or possibility of change of this very system, works through *negation* of this system. The concepts therefore exist only in negative relation to the *prerequisite* of chronological economy. Basically, every time Lacan points to '*petit a*' as representation of desire, he is pointing to a negative 'remainder' of a chrono-economic systematic, the existence of which did NOT change. Rather it just got repeated in the critical process. (In *The Anti Œdipus Papers*, now would be the time when Guattari would be serving readers the analogy of Saturn eating his children to

sustain his own existence.) This means that to Guattari, in essence, Lacanian analytics is only a con game on the primacy of logical time. With Lacanian thinking nothing *really* changes. Consequently, a substantial proportion of Guattari's letters are devoted to his trying very hard to overcome this intellectual inertia by making *Aion* (the eventual time of revolution) the prime temporality of reality.

In the future, perhaps Lacanians, provoked from reading *The Anti-Œdipus Papers*, will be analyzing Guattari's letters meticulously to unravel whether or not the concept of *Aion*, then, is itself precisely that: a negative remainder mediated by some inherent chrono-economic system...

However, and we are now closing in on the controversy I mentioned initially, the editor of the present Semiotext(e) edition has made some rather spectacular decisions, making life much harder on readers who wish to enact the fore mentioned academic exercises. Indeed, it must surely be leaving hard core Deleuze/Guattari fans and scholars alike thinking: 'what the *hell?!* This is destruction by the signifier!' The controversy stems from the fact that, rather than keeping the chronological order of Guattari's letters and journals, the editor has chosen to organize (Mr. Nadaud makes an attempt at calling it 'assembling') the writings under a series of six signifying conceptual frameworks. They are:

Texts for Anti-Œdipus

Psychoanalysis and Schizo-Analysis

Militant Incidences

Pragmatic Linguistics

Planes of Consistency

Corrections Made to Anti-Œdipus

Obviously this choice poses problems to readers seeking exactitude, for instance in the chronological conceptual development of the Deleuze/Guattari collaboration. Researching *The Anti-Œdipus Papers*, these readers will have some serious cutting and gluing to do. However, considering the importance of the problem of the impotence of signifiers inherent in Guattari's work, using these six conceptual frameworks to organize *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* turn out to be an immense strengthening of the papers. Not because the frameworks are good, though. Rather because the frameworks are bad. Really bad... Extremely insufficient actually, not at all capturing any meaningful level of the complexity or significance of Guattari's 'fucking-around-o-maniacal schizo flow'. The reason is that, in their signifying relation to the schizo flow, the six conceptual frameworks become caricatures. The frameworks are basically too easy, too obvious a choice, clearly making a privilege of biographical and conceptually monumental elements of the Guattarian legacy, rather than capturing the real intellectual fighting within letters and journals themselves. Ironically, it is in this sense of non-performing insufficiency that the organization becomes a stroke of genius, because the frameworks of *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* organize the writings in a composition that is characterized by exactly the kind of shit Guattari was fighting to

destroy: signifying shit. Impotence. By daring this controversial choice, the editor (perhaps inadvertently, but who cares?), has created a plane of composition that is very different from what would probably have been the case, had he succumbed to the apparent ease of chronology.

The impotence of the composition entails several interesting consequences. First, it changes the literary status of the letters and journals from 'communication' to 'oeuvre', which is important because this, in return, changes the degree of freedom that readers are 'allowed' to enjoy in reading and using the writings. Second, it destroys the privileged positions of the usual primary signifiers of the letters (the original *Anti-Œdipus* publication, and the Deleuze/Guattarian collaboration), thereby allowing new *Bedeutung*, different code surplus value, to be drawn from the schizo-flow. Third, because the six conceptual frameworks are very weak in their signifying relation to the power of Guattari's writing, readers are brought in a position to understand the many problems, inherently unfolding in the letters and journals, *in their own right*, rather than as preliminary writings the significance of which is to be understood only in relation to transcendent circumstances. To the future value of Guattari's letters and journals, these changes are probably very important.

In other words, the positive effect of the impotence and insufficiencies of the six signifiers chosen by the editor is that it creates a quite beautiful consistency in their affiliation to the schizo-flow. It becomes a dramatization of what is arguably the most significant problem Guattari was facing at the time of his writing the letters and journals: Oedipal disempowerment. Readers of *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* will find that desire (of) overcoming (his) disempowerment is precisely what organizes virtually all of the significant conceptual oppositions developed in Guattari's journals and letters to Deleuze: Molar organization vs. Molecular formatism – Despotic signifiers vs. Machinic figurism – Writing machine vs. Machinic writing – Lacanian *petit a* vs. Power sign – Anti-production vs. Real production – *Urstaat* BwO vs. Socius BwO – Impotence vs. Desire, etc. In *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* all of these concepts, created through desire to penetrate and explode disempowerment from the inside, are still under construction. They are unfinished intellectual innovations unfolding through a Guattarian 'fucking-around-o-maniacal schizo flow' tied to a capitalist code surplus value problematic, which literally makes them quasi-nonsensical shit!

But, regardless of whether readers read *The Anti Œdipus Papers* in order to understand *Anti-Œdipus* better or differently; read to psychoanalyze Guattari or the Deleuze/Guattarian cooperation; read to gain critical perspective on Lacanian analysis; or read to continue the Deleuze/Guattarian method of conceptual creations, reading this 'shit' is *really* quite a ride.

#### the author

Thomas Hedebye is a wonderfully talented Master student at Copenhagen Business School and Cornell University, Johnson School of Management, who is currently working to employ himself in the Ph.D. arena combining international finance, organizational studies and philosophy. In addition to his very promising academic skills, Mr. Hedebye is widely recognized for his social skills, which would serve as a joyful addition to the social climate of any department – although people with decisive powers of such entities are beginning to suspect that his sophisticated ass kissing *may be* the product of irony. For comments or inquiries about the product, please email: crackwhore\_dk@yahoo.com