

Stasis, flow, and the political production of mental disorders

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*Total liberation involves every facet of the personality.*

The “total liberation” that Fanon referred to is not just that of an individual: it is also that of a society. Fanon, of course, had firsthand experience of both as a psychiatrist in 1950s Algeria during the War of Independence: the colonial rule of France had left deep marks upon Algerian society and people which, on the one hand, contributed to violence within the Algerian population as a whole, and on the other, psychological disturbances which became all the more apparent during the war. Seeing the connection between political structures and mental health, Fanon concluded that genuine political freedom would not occur unless the psychological edifices of colonial power were also uprooted.

In this vein, using Freud, Deleuze and Guattari, Fanon, and Said, this paper argues that not only are mental disorders produced through an individual’s positionally-informed relationship with her social environment but also that the *mechanisms* of disorder production involve the pathological repetition of behaviour and psychic processes and, at a more fundamental level, stasis in the productive action of the unconscious. The Oedipus complex is instrumental in this as it suffuses interrelationships and psychological functions with deep power differentials. In discussing this, the paper progresses in three sections. The first section lays out the general groundwork for understanding the unconscious as theorized by Freud and Deleuze and Guattari and establishes that the idea of unconsciousness is itself very unstable especially when considered in relation to the conceptual binaries that support it as well as in how it exists in relation to social phenomena. The next section subsequently discusses the ramifications of such an understanding of the unconscious as mental disorders are

concerned, and contrasts the nuances of Freud's understanding with that of Deleuze and Guattari by focusing on the mechanisms that produce mental illness. This is identified as being both a temporal, behavioural, and relational stasis *as well as* being simultaneously a phenomenon characterized by repetition. The final section looks more closely at the social-political levers that drive or produce these mechanisms, locating them generally in the Oedipus complex and its various iterations such as in colonialism.

### **The unconscious and its (ontological) discontents**

*There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other ... the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.*

Deleuze and Guattari, 2

Given its importance to mental and psychic processes generally, discussing the unconscious must be an initial point of departure. However, defining it is itself a complex task which is not unproblematic. Freud was among the first to articulate the idea that there could be a part or region of the human being that existed outside or separate to conscious and aware knowing. In Freud's work, the unconscious is conceptualized as the repository of inaccessible (i.e., rationally un-known and un-recognized) material such as repressed memories (Freud 1981, 30) and, particularly, sexual drives (ibid, 46). Sexuality links behavior directly to biological functions and embodied experience via the action of instincts and drives; however, due to the effects of society, in Freud's schema, these drives become repressed, rendered inaccessible to conscious awareness.

Such a clear distinction between the poles of conscious/unconscious, human/nature, civilized/uncivilized, and even self/society is unstable, however, even in Freud's work. To discuss this as such, it is necessary to first briefly discuss the meta-ontology that

connects these concepts. To approach the matter from a different, but related direction, to Deleuze and Guattari, the divisions and distinctions maintained between production, consumption, and distribution are supported and maintained by the binaristic constructions of man/nature and civilization/nature (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 3). These are categories that draw their bases, ontologically speaking, from a deeper fissure: *bios/zoe*. This conceptual map, which is at its essence humanistic and Western, organizes phenomena according to divisions such as rational/non-rational, conscious/unconscious, active/passive, civilized/feral, human/non-human, and male/female; these poles intersect with other constructions such as self/Other (Braidotti 2010, 207) and, after Said, European/non-European. It is possible to see these binaries play out in a typical rendering of, for example, the production process, where human (typically male, white, Western) intelligence and technology acts upon the inert and passive substance of nature in order to produce something. Thus extracted from the Other, it is then possible for the product (or whatever) to be consumed and, thus internalized and assimilated into the self.

Following Freud and traditional psychoanalysis, the conscious/unconscious divide roughly follows the same terrain; at the same time, there is a deconstructive tension throughout Freud's work that directly challenges this. Central to *Civilization and its Discontents*—indeed, present in the very title of the work—is the idea that civilized society is of a separate order from other domains of life, which, in this case, is human instinctual urges: the natural, animalistic, and untamed. However, within Freud's work on this relationship is his deconstructive and quite radical argument against the received wisdom of his Victorian time that the uncivilized and unconscious was, categorically, the repository of the undesirable and useless. Freud vindicates the instinctual by claiming,

through the process of sublimation, that it is directly responsible for the creation of culture: “[the sublimation of instinct] is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life. ... it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct” (Freud 2002, 44). In such a way, that sense of radical alterity present in humans—unconscious instinctual drives, the “animalistic”—are rendered as active agents in the creation and sustaining of forms normatively associated with the human domain. In other words, in Freud’s understanding of the psyche, the unconscious retains a certain productive quality, an attribute that directly challenges the *bios/zoe* binary upon which normative understandings of being, non-being and creative activity are built.

However, as Freud and Deleuze and Guattari show, that these distinctions and their meta-category, *bios/zoe*, are troubled at best makes conceptual room for an unconscious that is active and agentic as well as being located both internally *and* externally. Hence their reflection that schizophrenia is “the essential reality of man and nature;” it has no boundaries, no distinctions between self/Other, production/consumption (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 5). While Freud’s work does problematize such sure distinctions between rational/irrational, civilization/nature, it stops short of giving desire the same treatment; Deleuze and Guattari pick this problem up and expand on it in the concept of the desiring-machine. In contrast with Freud and Lacan, desire is not the reaction to a sense of absence, but is the animating principle of production; it is production. Desire does not travel through a void to attain its completion and satisfaction, but, instead, is a productive agent in its own right. With the collapse of production/consumption, cause/effect is, also,

a temporal collapse evocative of the digital age: the human in the world becomes enmeshed in flows of simultaneity and the desiring-machine becomes linked to other machines as in a circuit. Again, what is of importance here is the idea that the unconscious is deterritorialized: it is not so much a personal quality as it is an interactive, intersubjective field. This resembles Bataille's concept of heterogeneity as well as Lacan's *objet a* insofar as they resemble fields of human (and, presumably, non-human) experience which exist outside of, yet defined in relation to, socio-linguistic structural relations of power and meaning. Unconsciousness, in this frame, is pure alterity, the big Other, constituting political relationships while also, at the same time, providing resistance against them. Put differently, un-consciousness is an important constitutive element of *zoe*, that domain of the non-human and inhuman that, while being fundamentally exterior to *bios*, also constitutes it.

### **Political constructions and mental disorders: mechanisms of illness**

In Deleuze and Guattari's framework, then, the unconscious continually produces and reproduces itself: it is properly understood as being like a factory. Desiring-production is also necessarily something that exists in co-relation with the environment; on a fundamental level, it is not possible to usefully separate one from the other. If the site of the unconscious is multiple (or diffuse or nomadic), then it follows that there are multiple nodes or domains via which mental disorders can become manifest (so, for example, the view that disorder is biochemical in etiology or otherwise biologically situated is not antagonistic to the standpoint that it originates through social determinants, but is instead a part of the same continuum). On this, Deleuze and Guattari's work is in

accordance with Freud's. Putting aside temporarily the involvement of political influences on producing mental disorders, however, the *reification* of disorder in each body of work presents as being different in emphasis. To Freud, mental illness is a product of repetition, although in common with Deleuze and Guattari, Freud also sees disorder to arise through what seems to be its opposite: fixity. Upon a closer analysis, it is apparent that the two perspectives are, in fact, quite complementary, although the ontological bases upon which Freud's and Deleuze and Guattari's analysis rest differ on a substantial point.

#### *A. Neurotic illness, fixity, and repetition*

Freud observed of his neurotic patients that the origin of their disorders was most frequently to be found in their (typically social) experiences. In his words, a symptom "was usually brought about by the convergence of several traumas, and often by the *repetition* of a great number of similar ones" (ibid. 1981, 14; emphasis added). What is interesting about this statement is that it sets up repetition located in the "external" as a precondition for disorder in the "internal." However, as Freud's work shows, what is regarded as the self is deeply shaped by social and biological factors—to the extent that such categories as internal and external are rendered problematic and destabilized. While it would not be accurate to suggest that remembered but consciously inaccessible social experiences are *equivalent* to the unconscious mind, there is a strong relationship between the two, which suggests the potential for mutual influence. As this bears great relevance to Deleuze and Guattari's work, as will be demonstrated later, this idea also surfaces in Fanon and Said in their discussions on colonialism.

Repetition is also central to the symptomology of neurosis. Throughout Freud's case studies in "Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis," his patients display behavioural "tics" such as the woman who developed an inability to drink from a glass of water (1981, 13) or the woman who make clacking sounds every time she became excited (1981, 15). Freud offers a physical explanation for these behavioural abnormalities: in the case of neurosis, the nervous system becomes quite unable to "discharge" excitation physically, which produces psychological and behavioural symptoms (1981, 19). The metaphor he uses to describe this, which he calls "hysterical conversion," is of a river current that becomes divided; if one of the channels becomes blocked, it will overflow into the other (1981, 18).

That Freud's "flow" of excitement can become stopped, thereby causing symptoms, presents an interesting tension relative to the role he outlines for repetition. Memory, unsurprisingly, plays a critical role, and the tendency towards fixation on particular memories and its relation to mental disorder likewise does not go unremarked upon. In fixation, a kind of temporal collapse occurs wherein an individual retains an emotional attachment to some traumatic past occurrence(s) to such a degree that phenomena in the present recede in importance to them; their life, or part of it, remains effectively in the past (1981, 17). Thus, in fixation, two apparently contradictory things are happening: the individual's desires *stop* interacting in a fluctuating, changing way with the environment and instead coalesce around the affective content of an event in the past; and this overinvestment with a past phenomenon leads to the *repetition* of desire complexes, and, hence, behaviour.

That fixity and repetition are so linked in the production of mental disorders is

something that is picked up also in Deleuze and Guattari, although the emphases are somewhat rather different. To them, reality is organized by way of flows and stoppages of flows; they define a *machine* as “a system of interruptions or breaks” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 36). This system of continuities extends through materiality as well as social and psychic reality, though of critical importance here is that machines do not *break* the continuity of the system, but rather “condition” it (ibid. 36). Machines redefine the context of flows in which they exist according to their own function, which is another way of saying that a machine is an inherently relational entity. In addition to qualifying flows, machines, in fact, are also the source of flows—or are one themselves (ibid. 36). The salient point here is that life—whether it is social, ecological, economic, or what have you—is productive, and it is built upon a series of interrelationships with other domains of life that are continually shifting and exchanging.

In this schema, a desiring-machine is somewhat of an analogue to the Freudian unconscious, though Deleuze and Guattari grant it much more productivity than even psychoanalysis does for the reason that the Oedipus complex has such a repressive effect on the productive nature of the unconscious (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 24) that Freud may not have been able to take fully into account the full productive capacities of the unconscious. What organisms share, they write, is a common productive ability that arises from the action of desiring-machines (ibid. 8); as for desiring-production, this is identical to social production (ibid. 30). Where mental disorder arises in this system is when the flow that issues from desiring-production becomes rigidified and stopped. Rather than conflicting with Freud’s observations on the repetitive nature of neurotic illness, however, this view corroborates with it in that behaviour becomes “stuck” in

relation to others, though for Deleuze and Guattari, the mechanism for this is explicitly found within the homogeneous (to borrow from Bataille) structures of power that organize society, which they call the *socius* and of which the Oedipus complex is a part.

### *B. Social power structures and mental disturbances*

The way that the *socius* interacts with desiring-production is much like the way in which civilization generally acts to repress instinctual drives in psychoanalysis: the main action of the *socius* is “to codify the flows of desire, to inscribe them, to record them, to see to it that no flow exists that is not properly dammed up, channeled, regulated” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 33). Depending on the time and place, there have been different ways in which the *socius* has accomplished this based on the political form that it has taken, and, most critically, depending on the form of the *socius*, different mental disorders have become most prevalent. For example, Deleuze and Guattari argue that due to the kinds of desire regulation and codification prevalent under the “territorial machine,” hysteria was most prevalent; likewise, the “despotic machine” tended to produce manic depression and paranoia (ibid. 33). Capitalism, however, is a structure of power relations—a “social machine”—of a very different sort in that its main action is to “decode” and “deterritorialize” the flows of desiring-production—thus rendering schizophrenia as the dominant psychic product of the current age (ibid. 34). In another paradox, though, the repressive ancillary structures that make the capitalist project possible—its bureaucracies, legal apparatuses, police forces, and so forth—both simultaneously inhibit and promote complete deterritorialization, and the complementary reterritorialization that occurs takes the form of the Oedipus complex, “the ultimate

territoriality” (ibid. 35).

All of this is to say: like Freud, Deleuze and Guattari see the critical importance of the social in the production of mental disorders. As with Freud, there occurs a behavioural alteration or, perhaps more accurately, adaptation, that is in response to social arrangements (although Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptual model suggests a high degree of co-interaction and co-creation between individual and environment). However: the emphasis here is much more on the interruption and rigidification of “flow” as the origin of disorder. In more concrete terms, this refers to not just the repression of desire: with desire being productive and instrumental in creating not only relations, but also reality itself, if its flows become impeded, the unconscious effectively ceases to be productive. Rather: instead of being like a “factory,” it becomes a “theater” that is given to merely reenacting mythical, symbolic representations of social reality, and what causes this to occur is precisely the involvement of the Oedipus complex (Deleuze and Guattari, 24). This, of course, is not far off at all from the Freudian model; as mentioned earlier, Freud believed that the repression of desire and the subsequent blocking of neuro-biological excitatory impulses was a chief factor in producing neurosis. However, while Freud saw the Oedipus complex as a more or less natural desire that nevertheless had to be repressed in whole or in part in order for the individual to function well in society, Deleuze and Guattari find it *responsible* for repression.

### **Power and Oedipus**

Nevertheless, the point that there is a high degree of desire repression in connection with the Oedipus complex is one upon which both Freud and Deleuze and Guattari are in

accordance. Of central importance to it is social power: Freud's depiction of the lust the infant has for its parents and its desire to kill the parent of the same sex is really on a fundamental level a narrative about a desire to ascend in social hierarchy and therefore power and importance. Freud's work takes this conflict as central and even natural to a human's psychological development; that there should be a *universal* human drive to hierarchically arrange social relations in such a violent way is assumed. Where repression comes into play is that the strength and nature of the desire is considered offensive to the internalized set of social mores as embodied in the superego, which, in Freud's schema, acts to keep the content unconscious by way of guilt and shame feelings. This action is what Freud claims to constitute the "'nuclear complex' of every neurosis" (ibid. 1981, 47).

As writers such as Fanon and Said have observed, to the extent that colonial power exists suggests that there also exists a social framework based on hierarchy and subjugation in Western(ized) societies. This is the essence of the Oedipus complex, but where Deleuze and Guattari depart from Freud is informed by their ontology and they accordingly see it as a non-essential—albeit important—component of society. Returning to their statements that humans are not meaningfully distinguishable from nature and that reality—physical, biological, social—is actively produced by way of flows of interrelations between machines, the ontological underpinning in their vision is one that is definitively *non-hierarchical*. What the statement "Oedipus presupposes a fantastic repression of desiring-machines" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 3) means here is that political power and hierarchy as *particularly* embodied in the patriarchal, heteronormative, and Eurocentric Oedipus complex is what is central to stultifying the

productive qualities of the unconscious/life itself—“the only real relationship” (ibid. 24)—that is otherwise embodied in humans. To Deleuze and Guattari, the Oedipus complex itself is the source of repression because of how it codes experience. *Representation*—rendering the productive “factory” of the unconscious as a “theater”—is, at its essence, a linguistic act.

This theatre of representations, built as it is upon language, becomes the territory upon which the narratives of power are inscribed and reified; as seen in the work of Fanon and Said, these narratives take the shape of relationships with the Other that are subjugating. To be clear, however, mental disorders are not produced in a unidirectional fashion by way of “external” social phenomena impacting the “internal” world of the individual; as Deleuze and Guattari and Said suggest, this inner/outer binary is problematized by the way that identity and, by extension, the concept of the self, is transcorporeally constituted from multiple overlapping and sometimes conflicting categorizations (Said 2003, 44). In practice, however—and this is a crucial point—the Oedipus complex nevertheless renders this complexity *as* a binary; as was discussed earlier, this takes the shape of *bios/zoe*, with the Oedipus complex residing in the *bios* pole. An unfortunate result of this is that the nonhierarchical and relational position humans would otherwise have to nature in the absence of the Oedipus complex becomes violently compressed in the *zoe* pole with the addition of Oedipalizing.

With this in mind, it is possible to see how flows of desiring-production, when rigidified as in via the Oedipus complex and subject to repetitive iterations, contribute to mental disorders and social oppression. The work of Frantz Fanon with psychiatric patients during the Algerian war of independence provides a good case study. What is

brilliant about his work was that he acknowledged how the Oedipal violence of colonialism, when internalized, produces mental disturbances. When taken to its extreme, as in colonialism, the Oedipus complex produces a kind of domination so complete that it obliterates the humanity of the colonized, rendering the native people as merely a feature of the landscape: the violent compression into *zoe*. He writes: “a colonized people is not just a dominated people. Under the German occupation the French remained human beings...In Algeria there is not simply domination but the decision, literally, to occupy nothing else but a territory” (Fanon 2004, 182). Colonized people do not get to exist within the *bios* pole of life, but are quite completely submerged within *zoe*: “a hostile, ungovernable, and fundamentally rebellious Nature is in fact synonymous in the colonies with the bush, the mosquitoes, the natives, and disease” (ibid. 182).

As Fanon’s work shows, the social violence that that produces and enforces the categories of colonizer and colonized, human and nature, is continuous with psychological and affective dislocations and ruptures: this continuity means that structural violence becomes reproduced, over and over, in not just structural, but also in interpersonal and internal, personal ways. Evocative of Freud’s research, not only were “psychosomatic” issues such as gastric ulcers and dysmenorrhea (Fanon 2004, 216) present along with psychological disturbances such as depression and panic attacks (ibid. 196), but also interpersonal violence among the colonized Algerians. This latter fact did not escape the attention of prominent Western scientists of the time, and Fanon relates some of the theories such people had to explain this: Dr. J. C. Carothers of the World Health Organization, for example, wrote that “the impulsiveness of the Algerian, the frequency and nature of his murders [and] his permanent criminal tendencies” were the

result of “primitivism” in the form of a reduced brain function “like the inferior vertebrates” (Fanon 2004, 226). This statement on the one hand lays quite bare the kind of institutionalized racism that was—and is—supported by overtures to a supposedly empirical impartiality, and on the other hand, displays the exact sort of dehumanizing violence that is so characteristic of a colonial mentality.

### **Concluding thoughts**

As is apparent in the previous discussion, colonialism is, fundamentally, a systematized form of violence that is mediated psychologically by the Oedipus complex, insofar as the Oedipus complex is an internalized, mythic, and linguistically-formed representation of hierarchy and power. Such violence, for colonized people like Algerians as well as every other group of people that have a relative lack of social power, is experienced repetitively in day to day life; for his part, Fanon was particularly witness to the physical, tangible result of this: colonial warfare. In accordance with Freud’s observations on the genesis of mental disorders, Fanon also saw that the repetition of stimuli in the social environment typically leads to psychological disturbance (Fanon 2004, 184; see also 194, 197).

Following Deleuze and Guattari, the Oedipus complex is also at the same time a repressive and rigidifying structure that at once organizes social relations around differentials of power and alters the function of the human unconscious where it becomes unable to interact with other beings and phenomena in an unstructured, non-hierarchical, and (linguistically) unmediated way. The idea that a “flow” is impeded in the production of mental disorders is present in both Freud’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s work, and this

paper's objective has been to track how both this stasis and repetition are essentially two sides of the same coin where the development and sustainment of mental disorders are concerned.

If the political is so tightly connected to, or indistinguishable from, the psychological, then it follows that political change must involve psychological change... or psychological resistance. Fanon's work clearly demonstrated the importance of the latter; in effect, native Algerians were engaged in resisting their own Oedipalization, though ultimately, this required that they take up arms against their would-be Oedipalizers. The fight must be both external and internal, and for good reason: although the Oedipus complex and the *bios/zoe* dichotomy that it supports structure experiences along lines of internal/external and self/Other, as Deleuze and Guattari's work also demonstrates, these distinctions are little more than fabrications that support very political objectives. It is in the interest of all to interrogate this deeply throughout every facet of experience.

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