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The Disparate: Ontology and Politics in Simondon*

0. Introduction

Within the ambit of contemporary continental philosophy, a veritable differend has opened up between two ways of articulating the political and the ontological, both emerging out of the post-68 mutations of Marxist theory and communist politics: on the one hand, we have a vitalist-Spinozist lineage centred on a concept of a self-valorising, powerful multiplicity, itself considered as expressive and constructive of being, on the other a Cartesian, or Sartrean, conception of political subjectivity that depends on the evacuation of any expressive substance from being and an emphasis on the discontinuous character of politicisation and the continued significance of decision and organisation for emancipatory politics. The latter position, to cite Merleau-Ponty's anti-Sartrean epithet, could be regarded as a kind of 'ultra-Bolshevism', while the first returns us to some of the Bergsonian tendencies that fascinated the syndicalist left at the beginning of the twentieth century. Or, to use terms from Badiou's *Logiques des mondes*, we could view the contemporary scene as split between a materialist dialectic of the void and the exception, and a democratic materialism concerned with corporeal and linguistic politics.

Without delving further into this position, which broadly pits Badiou against Negri, in this presentation I'd like to complicate this debate somewhat by introducing a third position, as it were, that of Gilbert Simondon, which is particularly relevant here, inasmuch as the theme of ontology and politics, as proposed by Andrew Benjamin, has been conceived in terms of the category of relation – one of Simondon's key concepts. What I hope very briefly to show is the manner in which Simondon tries to think together nature and excess, technology and revolution, in a manner that might at least dislocate some of the common-places of contemporary debate on ontology and politics. I aim to do this by focussing on three elements of what, rather improperly, could be referred to as Simondon's political thought: 1. the manner in which the concept of Nature or pre-individual displaces the debates on the relationship between political action, human nature and biological capacity; 2. the importance of the excess of the subject over the individual as the matrix of a politics of the transindividual; 3. the possibility of envisaging the concept of disparation as a non-dialectical but nevertheless political conceptualisation of conflict and transformation.

However, a political reading of Simondon's might at first appear as illegitimate or sterile. Though it recasts concepts such as society, community or culture, Simondon does not seem to grant any specificity to political activity as such. We could even say that his writings betray a strong anti-political tendency, if we define 'political' in terms of the sovereign and representative administration of public affairs, or as a constitutive activity of distribution of places and capacities, or as interruption and dissensus. Perhaps, in a time when, to quote Negri, "ontology has absorbed politics", it is only to politically eccentric metaphysicians that we may turn to forge the conceptual tools that will enable us to think the. Having said that, we cannot disregard how Simondon's philosophy of

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‘technical culture’ sought to neutralize the bond between antagonism and productivism which he regarded as the fatal platform for the politics of the Cold War. This effort was based on the diagnosis of the repression of invention by labour, and of the technical object by the wonderfully named “morality of output”. This led to an interpretation of Marxism as a worldview embedded in the hylemorphic domination of nature (as matter) by labour (as form-giving work), whose concepts of antagonism (class struggle) and of capacity (human nature) cannot do justice to the complexes of materials and forces, the lines of invention and the transindividual processes behind the ontogenesis of the social. Simondon’s investigations on the technical object must be read as an attempt to evade the discourse *of* capitalism and the critical discourse *on* capitalism, by means of a thinking which refuses the paradigm of labour in order to seek in the technical and scientific activity of invention the key to a new genesis of the collective life. “Work and capital”, he writes, “*arrive late on the scene* with regard to the technical individual”, which “is not *from the same epoch* as the labour that activates it and the capital which frames it”.

But can we absolve the relational and creative power of invention from any truck with the “molar” struggles of capital and labour? Would this not be a kind of “angelic” relation? In this respect, by isolating a new politics of machinic organisation and invention from the explanatory tools of the critique of political economy, Simondon appears to block access to an immanent comprehension of the capture of invention and the machine by the capital. To put it differently, and in terms dear to both Marx and Negri, by treating the subsumption of technology to capital as formal rather than real or ontological, Simondon loses the means of thinking the contemporary convergence of invention and work, an indiscernibility that still requires an understanding of the sociogenetic function of exploitation. In other words, the configuration of ontology and politics cannot evade the manner in which the ‘real abstractions’ of capitalism – money, value, abstract labour – mould the very being of machines, inventions and subjects.

1. The unequal

Leaving aside for the moment the questions of political economy, what are the effects of “forcing” the passage from the level of ontological speculation to that of political experimentation? Rather than turning to Simondon for a set of concepts with which to format the political, the most interesting “political” repercussions of his thought can be found in the way that it becomes a testing ground and point of divergence for different approaches to politics. In my eyes, at the core of any discussion of Simondon and politics lies the question of the status accorded to his concept of preindividual being. Here there are (at least) three possible readings.

The first interprets the preindividual as an unresolved charge, carried by the individual as a *potential*, linking this concept to those of human nature and living labour. The preindividual would thus name a non-reflexive, naturalisable capacity, namely the linguistic capacity to produce new statements. The circumstances of contemporary capitalism, and of the subjectivity that underlies it, would be such as to make this preindividual surface, and politics could thus be considered as the insurrection of this capacity against the measures of domination imposed by capital and its mechanisms of control. A position of this sort can be encountered in Paolo Virno’s very stimulating use of Simondon.

A second reading sees the preindividual as caught up in a twofold transindividual (or social) relation which concerns, on the one hand, an individual and what in it is more than itself, and, on the other, an individual and another by the means of their emotional, and preindividual unresolved charge. Muriel Combes gives an apt name to this relation: the intimacy of the common. These two orientations in the political reading of Simondon, which one could respectively call *naturalist* and *relational*, share a certain view of the latency of the political (or of politics), which contrasts interestingly with the Deleuzian reading of Simondon.

Deleuze turns to Simondon in one of the key moments of *Difference and Repetition*, at the beginning of chapter 5. This text of pure metaphysics is nevertheless rich with indications for a political ontology. It begins by distinguishing between difference and diversity. The diverse is what is given, the phenomenon, but every “phenomenon refers back to an inequality which conditions it”, “to a difference which is its sufficient reason”. This “irreducible inequality”, this transcendental injustice, is linked by Deleuze to the concept of a signal-sign system, in which the phenomenon is defined as a sign which “fulgurates” between disparate and incommensurable series, giving rise to an *event of communication* that both synthesises and veils the heterogeneity from whence it emerges. Deleuze concludes as follows: “The reason of the sensible, the condition of what appears, is not space and time, but the Unequal in itself, *disparation* such as it is comprehended and determined by difference in intensity, in intensity as difference”. A politics of difference that were not merely to be understood as the conjunction of different particularities, which is to say as a politics of the diverse, would need to begin from here. By tracing the boundary-line between potential and virtual, Deleuze casts the preindividual as a transcendental field populated by disparate singularities and series, rather than as reserve of creativity that could *express itself* in a given political occasion.

For Deleuze, the preindividual is identified neither with human nature (in its neotenic or innate versions), nor with a “common”. In both cases, that would involve a pre-emptive “equalization” of the Unequal, it would mean advocating a speculative optimism which would look at the preindividual as the *preindividual-of-humanity*, the latency of a collective life which is always already possible, and precisely not as something that leads us towards politics by its very “inhuman”, unconscious and properly unliveable aspect; what Deleuze refers to as that “which overflows any liveable or lived matter... a passage of Life that traverses the liveable or the lived”. It is here that the concept of metastability, introduced by Simondon, comes to the fore. This is what Deleuze says: “what primarily defines a metastable system, is the existence of a “disparation”, at least of two orders of magnitude, two disparate scales of reality, between which there is not yet any interactive communication”. Could one ever qualify this disparate metastability as “common”? Simondon and Deleuze offer a conception of politics as the invention of a communication between initially impossible series; as invention of a common that is not given in advance and which emerges on an ontological background of inequality.

2. Energetics or dialectics?, or, How to think revolution

Simondon develops a very original reflection on the social which is guided by the concept of an ontogenesis of relation. Are we then forced to identify politics and the transindividual (or collective) dimension? Political action with social relation? The

Negrian discourse on real subsumption and the primacy of ontology over the political could suggest such an identification, but it would better to attend to the possible disjunctions in Simondon's thought between the social and the political. Short of naming every constitutive process, every social genesis, as *ipso facto* political, one cannot jump from the thesis of a (biological or ontological) disposition to sociality straight to the assertion of a disposition to politics. Taking into consideration the rare "political" remarks in the work of Simondon points us to the place where the preindividual demonstrates its excess with regard to any disposition, capacity, or notion of the common.

In his intervention at the conference of the Society for French Philosophy in 1961, Simondon proposes, in a striking analogical short-circuit, and against the use of probabilistic theories in the social sciences, to "transduce" the energetic theory of the metastability to the social domain and to think the pre-revolutionary situation as a privileged object (or medium) for the political application of a thinking of individuation. This is a paradoxical provocation, but one well suited to a theory which "does not grant any privilege to stable configurations": revolution is for Simondon the only "laboratory" available for social thought *qua science*. Simondon displaces the false alternative between a causal density that would remove any singularity from revolution, on the one hand, and a mystifying decisionism, on the other, by seeking to think through the unforeseeable coupling between a pre-revolutionary disparation and political invention. The pre-revolutionary state is the "very type", according to Simondon, of the psychosocial state which a political science of metastability should concern itself with, "a state of supersaturation ... where an event is very ready to occur, where a structure is very ready to emerge". What makes this state otherwise potential and accounts for its asymmetry vis-à-vis its resolution is the need for a structuring germ, a revolutionary crystal. This need is determined by an excess (of magnitudes, of disparate series, of energies) and not by a lack.

We are not dealing with the *expression* of a potential but with the invention of a communication responding to the larval emergence of divergent energies in the social field. The element of politics as analysis and intervention is not the genesis and the concretization of social relations, but metastability (or disparation) "as such" and the event-invention which crystallizes it into a new configuration (carrying a further preindividual charge). Pre-revolutionary disparation is not held "in common". Though it must sooner or later elicit the affects of subjects, it is not there as a dark background structuring social relations – and this is for the simple reason that it is defined by its impossibility, by its basic "inequality". For this reason one must take seriously the characterization of this social science (a science of the revolution perhaps?) as "founded on a human energetics". This definition sets aside the idea of a political disposition, of an originary sharing out of politics, in favour of a study of the conditioned contingency of political invention.

But how can we think the theme of conflict within this framework? Prolonging the idea of a social science attentive to psychosocial instability, Simondon remarks that one should consider social groups according to their metastable aspects, i.e. according to those moments when "they cannot preserve their structure" and "become incompatible compared to themselves ... they dedifferentiate themselves and become supersaturated". To truly catalyse the unfolding of a pre-revolutionary state, groups must thus disadapt

themselves, deindividuate themselves. One could say that one of the conditions necessary for the invention of a revolutionary solution likely to amplify and integrate the new potentials brought by a metastable state is precisely that of demolishing old bonds, of affirming the difference in the midst of the social. If there is a “revolutionary” subjectivity, it is related to this discovery of metastability at the heart of the group. The choice of opposing a theory of *groups* inspired in particular by symbolic interactionist sociology to a thought of the class struggle is very important here. It manifests Simondon’s wish to avoid a dialectical or structural conception of antagonism, with the massive individuations (“pure social sets”) that it would involve. In other words, Simondon sees antagonism substantialised or identified into classes as a dissimulation of the new potentials elicited by disparations and internal resonances of a social system in becoming. By encasing social change in a preconceived antagonism, Marxist thought would miss the true stakes of a “human science”. Metastability may indeed determine antagonisms but the invention of a new social configuration is never transitive to, or latent in, the logic of a system. There is always a hazardous discontinuity between the Unequal and the Common. Disparation thus makes it possible to think a social conflictuality, but one that is always relative to metastable field. In short, energetics versus dialectics.

3. Towards a politics of invention

Invention, this “dark zone ... between labour and capital”, would allow us to pierce the substantialist veil which hides the processuality of the social, thereby contribute to the emergence of the transindividual. It would function as fulcrum of radiation in the formation of collectives that escape the normative rigidity of an *interindividual* communitarian life. But the presence of a collective dimension in the experience of invention does not eliminate the need for a rethinking of the humanity-technics relation. The micropolitics of invention on the level of the technical object must be accompanied by a true transformation at the level of the “technical ensemble”. It is here that Simondon introduces the motif of a technical finality, an “auto-valorization” born of invention and propagating itself through machines. One of Simondon’s first readers, Herbert Marcuse, gave a singular inflection to this question. In *One-Dimensional Man*, he quotes *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques* to define the totalitarian rationality at work in the technical ensemble of industrial capitalism (the “autocratic philosophy of techniques”). But Marcuse also discerns in Simondon’s book the thinking of a “new technology” that would also announce the advent of a new rationality, an exit out of every dialectic of *Aufklärung*. Simondon, the thinker of the “catastrophe of liberation”, would introduce the possibility of a true change of course in the relationship between technics, capacity and human becoming. On the basis of Simondon’s idea that the incompleteness of the technics requires us “to make finality”, Marcuse calls for a political inversion of technology, for a “becoming political” of science that would issue into a political control of the transformation of values into needs. One could then do without an additional ethics to technical rationality, in order “to translate the values into technical tasks - to materialize the values”. But Marcuse’s error dependence on a kind of negative dialectics prevents him from fully drawing the lessons of Simondon’s thought. He seems unaware that “nature” in Simondon has a very different relation to technical reality than Hegelian nature, that it displaces the entire problem of the politics-technology-nature relation, by

starting from what Muriel Combes has usefully referred to as an “inobjective” idea (Combes) of natural facts. Marcuse consequently misses the event-driven discontinuity which in Simondon marks invention and technical objects as ways of relating social and political collectivity to the becoming of nature. Simondonian finality is punctuated by these intercessors, mediators, converters, and differs thereby from a dialectic of control. The call is to free the machine inasmuch as it can function, paradoxically, as a contact with disparate nature, much more direct than any intuition, as an opening of disparate potentials for the formation of groups and the revolution of social relations, and no longer as “a servant who never protests”. This image of machinic liberation in turn leads to a novel definition of politics: “a coupling between the inventive and organizing capacities several subjects”.

4. Is there a theory of the subject in Simondon?

Unless we deem subjectivity as such to be political, we must acknowledge that an explicit thinking of the political subject is absent in Simondon. The subject, as an individual for whom the preindividual poses a problem (as Simondon puts it in some remarkable pages on Nietzsche’s Zarathustra), is haunted by the social, but it is not constituted in or for an experience that could be described as political. The “phase” of being that Simondon calls collective is better defined as social than political, and its immanence to subjects, although it integrates, at a “higher” level, the disparities from which they suffer, does not represent the situated emergence of a nucleus of action that could as such function as a source of innovation. We saw that the political metastability (“the pre-revolutionary state”) is conceived as an engine of dedifferentiation, determined by a disparation of magnitudes and the presence of new potentials that demand the insertion of a structuring germ endowed with a “capacity to cross, animate and to structure a varied domain, or rather ever more varied and heterogeneous domains”. Invention here is more the invention *of* a subject (as a sudden upsurge, an asymmetrical synthesis) than invention *by* a subject (its more or less intentional product). Conversely, one can regard the subject in Simondon as a necessary but not sufficient condition necessary for any political activity. The subject, which would never be “in itself” political, would thus provide us with the key to the political event or relation, itself prolonged by specific groups and transindividual dynamics. Simondon thus brings together three elements: a) the paradoxical opening of the subject onto “its” preindividual charge, b) the process of “collectivization” that makes the preindividual pass into the transindividual and governs the formation of groups, and c) the events and disparities which define political problems or situations. The experience of the subject opens onto politics to the extent that this subject carries and seeks to resolve its preindividual excess, but can only do so at a collective level, itself ‘mediated’ by technical objects. The disjunctive synthesis between individual and subject is thereby doubled by the asymmetrical synthesis of the subject and the transindividual collective. Let us take a paradigmatic “subject” for Simondon, the technician or the inventor as “pure individual”. The (pre-)political character of this subject is announced by its strong anti-communitarian impulse, by the transindividual sociality to which it gives rise by subtracting itself, with the assistance of the machine and technical networks, from the inert normalcy of the interindividual. The technician as “pure individual” constructs, through invention, a break with the communitarian bond, a creative destabilization which doubles and counter-effectuates metastability, thus

preparing the “revolutionary” event. He injects his excess into the social by the mediation of the technical object, preparing the collective by amplifying his own preindividual charge. For this reason “the community accepts the painter or the poet, but refuses the inventor”. To conclude, paraphrasing a remark made by Alain Badiou about Canguilhem, we could say of the subject in Simondon that it is a somewhat ‘unstable’ living being. It is in the risk of invention confronted with the hazards of disparation, and not in a sudden appearance of an anthropological, or even inhuman commonality, that one can draw “political” lessons from the thought of Simondon. Above all, perhaps, the following: “The human being is a rather dangerous automat, which is always likely to invent and to give itself new structures”.