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Applied Guattari: from toxic theory to loopy thinking

(Pre-print Version: May 2015)

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Abstract: The commentary unpacks the claim that Human Geographers have been zealous consumers of an ever-expanding array of French thinkers (Louis Althusser, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, & Co.), and that they have been far too hasty in seeking to apply the resulting morass of ‘French Theory’ to the pressing concerns of Human Geography. It also considers the claim that the work of one notable French poststructuralist thinker — Félix Guattari — is unamenable to such immoderate consumption, hurried digestion, and swift application: not only because the delirious Guattarian ‘Jargon Machine’ spews up a vast amount of always already obsolescent non-sense in the very place that is ordinarily reserved for an accumulation of sense (good, bad, and obviously all-too-common), but also because this ‘Jargon Machine’ is basically inexplicable and essentially inapplicable. Having grasped the virtue of theoretical indigestion, thoughtful impracticality, and resolute inapplicability, the commentary makes a final splurge of ‘Applied Guattari’ by way of ‘Applied Derrida.’

Keywords: Félix Guattari. Gilles Deleuze. Schizoanalysis. Transversality. Poststructuralism. French Theory.

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“You have to coin a new concept of application which is in agreement with dissemination: a concept of application which disseminates, which proliferates, which produces without producing, because it is not a production; rather, it would be a concept of application which generates something unpredictable in a totally different context, in contexts which no one can master in advance.”

Jacques Derrida, *As if I were dead* (1996, page 219)

“Intellectuals should no longer be asked to erect themselves as master thinkers or providers of moral lessons, but to work, even in the most extreme solitude, at putting into circulation tools for transversality.”

Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis* (1995, page 150)

“Fast, very fast, much faster than we can imagine, things will go in the direction of revolutionary deterritorialization.”

Félix Guattari, *The Anti-Œdipus Papers* (2006, page 249)

“In the midst of a certain zeal,” write Joe Gerlach and Thomas Jellis at the start of their thought-provoking paper. *In the midst of a certain zeal*. I read this phrasing several times over: *In the midst of a certain zeal*. *In the midst of a certain zeal*. *In the midst of a certain zeal*. (And on reflection, I wonder whether I was the only reader to linger over these words: *midst*, *certain*, and *zeal* – especially *zeal*, not least because of my predilection for *z*'s.) The paper opens with these wonderful words, and eases itself into what Gerlach and Jellis introduce as *French thought* – although the Abstract substitutes French *Theory* for French *thought*, with a capital T (so I'm presuming that French Theory is what French thought is called, although I doubt very much whether French thinkers – or Thinkers – would respond obediently to the call of their name; much like those who are branded Structuralists, Poststructuralists, Postmodernists, and even Brand ANT and Brand NRT invariably refuse to play ball when name-called), but not only with a capital T, but also with scare quotes –

'French Theory' –, suggesting, perhaps, that we will be handling and ingesting some toxic material. Gulp! *In the midst of a certain zeal for 'French Theory,' then.* Indeed, when zealousness recurs thereafter, it recurs in the guise of zealousness for 'French Theory.' (In parenthesis, the Oxford English Dictionary has this to say of *zeal*: 1. denoting ardent feeling or fervour (taking the form of love, wrath, 'jealousy,' or righteous indignation), with contextual tendency to unfavourable implications (emulation, rivalry, partisanship); 2. ardent love or affection; fervent devotion or attachment; 3. ardent, earnest, or eager desire; longing; 4. intense ardour in the pursuit of some end; passionate eagerness in favour of a person or cause; enthusiasm as displayed in action; all of which casts a great deal of heterogeneity and ambivalence into the midst of the theoretical mix that can be largely summed up in a single word: *lovesick*.)

In the midst of a certain zeal. In the midst of a certain zeal for 'French Theory.' *In the midst of a certain lovesickness for 'French Theory.'* Memories of Derrida and Lyotard: "all I have done is dominated by the thought of a virus" (Derrida, 1981, page 95); "a process of cancerization of theoretical discourses" (Lyotard, 1993, page 96). We are up to our necks in hazardous material, and we are called upon to take the plunge: *Read 'French Theory' Now! Gulp it down! As fast as you can!* Confessions of a Theory addict's zealotry: I'm permanently sozzled, morbidly obese, and as high-as-a-proverbial-kite on French Theory. I read like a zealous immortal, but worry that under duress Gerlach and Jellis are about to cajole me into reading like a zealous mortal: *slow down, read in moderation, think well, and avoid saturated books, fatty texts, and oh-so-sweet ideas.* (Has anyone ever complained about reading something *too soon*? Ponder and discuss.) Yet despite some crass *chiding for being 'too theoretical' and 'too abstract'* from their colleagues, and thereby being *branded as Impractical Geographers*, zeal-quenching is thankfully not what they do. The feast of 'French Theory' will continue unabated under Gerlach and Jellis's watch: Alain Badiou, Catherine Malabou, François Laruelle, Quentin Meillassoux, etc. Tasty treats indeed! But for some reason (that Gerlach and Jellis will be *at pains* to explain), there is at least one morsel that doesn't seem to be going down very well, even amongst the French Theory Zealists: Félix Guattari. They suggest that this has something to do with his nauseating and indigestible '*jargon machine*,' and his resolutely '*impractical*' sensibility and style, so that any attempt to sweep him up into our whirligig of hyper-

faddishness and lovesickness will leave everyone's head spinning and stomach churning: "Chaosmosis functions here like the pickup head of a Turing machine. The chaotic nothing spins and unwinds complexity, puts it in relation with itself and with what is other to it, with what alters it" (Guattari, 1995, page 114).

So, back to square one, where we find the paper starting *in the midst of a certain zeal* – a zeal that is *not going to abate*. This *opening up* reminds me of what Deleuze (1993, page 6) once said about materialism: "The model for the sciences of matter is the 'origami,' as the Japanese philosopher might say, or the art of folding." Hold onto this thought, this thought of *folding*, in the midst of this *opening up* to a certain zeal, while you ponder the ominous *weight* of launching into a zeal: a great, fervent, ardent energy that rises up and threatens to boil over. This *perilous launching* reminds me of what Deleuze (1992, page 281) once said about movement:

We got by for a long time with an energetic conception of movement, which presumes a point of contact or that we are the source of movement. Running, throwing a javelin and so on: effort, resistance, with a starting point, a lever. But nowadays we see movement defined less and less in relation to a point of leverage. Many of the new sports – surfing, windsurfing, hang gliding – take the form of entry into an existing wave. There's no longer an origin as starting point, but a sort of putting-into-orbit. The basic thing is how to get taken up in the movement of a big wave, a column of rising air, to 'come between' rather than to be the origin of an effort.

With the phrase *In the midst of a certain zeal* the paper launches into a column of rising air – French thought, French poststructuralist thought, French Theory (which you can brand however you like: Derridean, Deleuzean, Lacanian, etc.) – but then immediately falls *back*, falls back and *down*, falls back and down to Earth with a *bump* (the sound of which will catch up with you below). The paper opens *In the midst of a certain zeal*, but no sooner has it launched itself into this column of rising air than it falls back on a fear of flying (as if the lovesickness had turned into travel-sickness). *There has been something of a rush*, they say; *Human Geography has been rather quick*, they add. Not *too quick*, say our intrepid aeronauts – we will insist on this in a moment –, just *rather quick*. At this precise moment in the text there is a

strange exchange as our sickly aeronauts shuffle and squirm for fear of getting sucked into a cycle of faddishness: *the apparent ease of engaging with theory*, they say; *the rush, the haste, manifested as a 'quickenings' in the straightforward applicability of concepts*, they add. Our ardent aeronauts try to resist this comforting seduction through an anti-cyclonic gesture: *not as a slowing down ... but as a speeding up; as an acceleration of theorizing. Rather quick is not too quick to the extent that it is not quick enough*. This is reminiscent of a Baudrillardian fatal strategy, which employs escalation rather than opposition. The most effective way to abolish a cycle is not through inversion or reversion, which change nothing except the direction of spin, but through acceleration and intensification, which prove to be exhausting. Such is the passage from the complacency of what is merely 'rather quick' to the ecstasy of what is 'quicker than quick.' "Ecstasy is the quality proper to any body that spins until all sense is lost, and then shines forth in its pure and empty form" (Baudrillard, 1990, page 9). Just as fashion is the ecstasy of the beautiful, and simulation is the ecstasy of the real, for our discombobulated aeronauts the impractical is the ecstasy of the instrumental, operational, and applicable. *In the midst of a certain zeal ... Human Geography has been rather quick ... and in something of a rush ... to engage easily with theory ... in a cycle of faddishness ... the quickening of which turns itself over into a fatal and ecstatic form*. I underscore the phrase 'turns itself over' to draw attention to the fact that this loathsome scene of bourgeois ease and comfort disturbs, exhausts, and obliterates itself. Which reminds me of something Derrida (1988, page 119) once said: "If things were simple, word would have gotten around." (In a moment we shall see how the supposedly *straight* secretly harbours the truly *crooked* – bend and twist; fold and loop.)

The 'impractical,' then, is what *remains*, perhaps, once *the zeal, the quickening, the rush, the easy engagement, and the faddish cycle* have been turned over (or have turned themselves over) to the senseless spinning of a pure and empty form. The 'impractical' is what *precipitates* out of the ecstasy of the practical (and let us not forget the supplementary precipitation of the 'impracticable' out of the ecstasy of the practicable). The 'impractical,' then, is a remainder, a residue, and a precipitate, the solidity and weight of which leads it to *fall out* of the column of rising air with which we began. The 'impractical' not only falls out but falls down; plunging back to Earth with a bang. And of all of our beloved 'French Thinkers,' Guattari (who

has hitherto received only *muted* attention from geographers *in the midst of an otherwise palpable rush* to 'French Theory,' mainly because of an *occlusion*) may offer us the biggest bang, since his *impractical jargon machine* necessarily jams up and gums up the workings of our well-oiled disciplinary machinery: our conceptual machinery, our methodological machinery, and our operational machinery. Like a vehicle with a manual gearbox, we have the impression that the engine – *the zeal* – will be over-revved as the clutch – *the midst* – is released too rapidly; with the inevitable result that the vehicle will jolt violently and stall amid a ferocious gnashing of gears. Like the out-of-control juggernaut of Modernity that has left a delirious trail of 'creative destruction' in its wake, I can imagine Gerlach and Jellis jamming all manner of spanners into our demented disciplinary machinery; spanners like 'existential Territories,' 'meta-models,' and 'schizo-cartographies.' Or better still, I can imagine our brave aeronauts in their fast-deflating, hot-air balloon casting overboard a barrage of gizmo-concepts from the F.G. Jargon Machine (patent pending), which from a long way off appears to merge seamlessly with the more general bombardment of Human Geography by the arsenal of F.T. Inc. And all the while, the sounds of *sledgehammer theorizing and blunt application* continue to rise from the humdrum World below. It is within this cacophonous soundscape that the Zealists *amplify resonances* in the hope of leaving the Anti-Zealists *dumbfounded – shocked and awed*. This nomadic war-machine may seem like a far cry from the seemingly more modest and sedate appeal to an *apprehensiveness* and a *tentativeness*, to a *reluctance to operationalize, instrumentalize, and standardize*, and to a refusal to embark on a *whatever-application* of the F.G. Jargon Machine – *bluntly, it is perhaps just too convenient, or, just too stubbornly practical*; but this is to overlook the fact that the war-machine proceeds crack by crack, bend by bend, fold by fold. Every supposedly *straightforward application* is bent, twisted, and warped through and through, not least because every *application* (from Latin *applicare*) harbours a folding, an unfolding, and an enfolding.

In the midst of a certain zeal, then ... a column of rising air, within which we are always already adrift; a cacophonous soundscape of war-machines, jargon machines, and ecstatic machines pitted against well-oiled machines, disciplinary sledgehammers, and blunt instruments; a bent and twisted application that is less *inapplicable* than *inexplicable* – the applications spin around, like a vortex, picking up speed in the

middle, and plunging into an ecstatic form. All of which brings me to one of the most enigmatic phrases in Gerlach and Jellis's paper – the *generative vector* of the 'impractical.' As we have seen, this vector is bent and twisted three times over (at least): first *up*, then *out*, and finally *down*. The Zealists rise up in affirmation of the F.G. Jargon Machine, then fall out in an ecstasy of speed freakery, and finally rain down on the Anti-Zealists in an avalanche of inexplicability. And then? Perhaps a sweeping *in*, followed by a sweeping *up*, thereby completing the circuit and enabling our aeronauts to loop-the-loop, again and again, which would be helpful since the Human Geography jargon machines keep spewing up down below. There is no better way to *open things up* to the 'schizzed worlds' of 'transversalist consistency' – or 'schizoanalytic transistency' – than through a machinic encounter with *loopy thinking* (Guattari, 2011, 2013; Lazzarato, 2014; Raunig, 2010). Which brings me back to where I started, with Derrida's comments on 'Applied Derrida' in the midst of the *Applied Derrida* conference:

I was struck by the grammar of a sentence which I think has not been pronounced up till now, despite the number of variations on 'applied,' 'application,' 'applying,' 'applying Derrida' and so on and so forth. If I were to tell you (and this is the sentence) 'I am Applied Derrida,' think of the number of grammatical possibilities involved in this sentence. ... 'I am Applied Derrida.' ... 'Derrida is applied to me,' 'I am *applied* Derrida,' 'I am given Derrida.' ... If you had entitled the conference 'Deconstruction Applied,' it would have been very different, and I would have said predictable things such as: 'deconstruction cannot be applied.' Why? Because deconstruction is not a doctrine; it's not a method, nor is it a set of rules or tools; it cannot be separated from performatives, from signatures, from a given language. ... You have to perform something new, in your own language, in your own singular situation, with your own signature, to invent the impossible and to break with the application, in the technical, neutral sense of the word. So, on the one hand, there is no 'applied' deconstruction. But on the other hand, there is nothing else, since deconstruction doesn't consist in a set of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques, methods. (Derrida, 1996, pages 213–218)

So, perhaps we should loop-the-loop thrice more (at least), adding ‘applied meta-modelling,’ ‘applied schizo-cartography,’ and ‘applied existential territorialization’ into the midst of our twisted and inexplicable explication of ‘applied Guattari.’

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