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What is poststructuralism?

“Theoretical practice” is not a magical formula that would guarantee that the identity of theory and practice could be given and sustained initially: rather, it indicates a process in which operations are produced, inside which theory and practice take shape concurrently, against each other, in the sense that they are reciprocally put to work, in a movement in which it appears that there is never pure theory, whose meaning would be limited to its stated results, nor any pure practice, innocent because it would elude the confrontations of its intentions with its effects. (Macherey, 1998, p. 35)

The birth of poststructuralism

Poststructuralism as such does not exist. No group of philosophers or scholars ever formed a group called ‘poststructuralism’, but what exists is ‘poststructuralism’ as a retrospective epistemological construction that gives a point of meaning in the vast landscape of ‘French’ philosophy. Although they have certainly not invented the term, Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jonathan Culler amongst other North American scholars were probably at the origin of this retrospective construction in the late 1970s and earlier 1980s. Poststructuralism is here, and its effects on research in social sciences and humanities have been tremendous. In fact, the reception of poststructuralism in political studies has been conditioned by the ways key poststructuralist authors (Hélène Cixous, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Félix Guattari, Luce Irigaray, Jean-François Lyotard) were read and classified or compartmentalised. In this article, I want to argue that the extraordinary reception that poststructuralism has enjoyed over the last thirty years does not mean that we can either (1) seal off this movement of thought as another school of thought or approach; (2) that there is nothing left to interpret in poststructuralism, or that since it has largely been adopted as part of the academic *doxa*, we can move on to other critical enquiries without taking into account this tradition. My interest here lies in assessing what is dead and what is alive in poststructuralism today. What can we do with such a rich heritage that has become outdated? My overall argument is that poststructuralism should not be reduced to or contained by the study of discursive strategies but be instead a theoretical practice that reworks the relation between theory and practice and that gives priority to problems and events over solutions and historical continuities.

Like all labels, for instance existentialism, hermeneutics, or even Marxism, the use and the relevance of the term ‘poststructuralism’ can be questioned, since it often leads to more confusion than clarity, either as a watchword, an interpellation (in Althusser’s sense) or a straw man. Yet, I want to argue that we ought to use the term as a way to historicise political thought, which is much needed in times of crisis and endless productions of ‘turns’ in the academic publishing industry. Historicising ‘poststructuralism’ does not seem very ‘poststructuralist’ as an approach, given that poststructuralists are supposed to argue for relativism and becoming, as against history, reason, representation, the subject, etc. But these are reified understandings of poststructuralism that fail to engage with the political, social, cultural and technological contexts

specific to the emergence of these theories, or to individuate poststructural enquiries.¹ Poststructuralists were responding to specific social and material contexts: the withering of modernist values, the death of God, the atrocities of the Second World War, processes of decolonisation, the decline of the belief in progress, the democratisation of university education and the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Derrida's long-term project of the deconstruction of metaphysics has probably left the most significant traces in the disciplines of social sciences and humanities, and best encapsulated the spirit of poststructuralism. In political theory, the works of Roberto Esposito for instance, but also Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe were the most decisive in taking the deconstructive project to the domain of the political: they attempted to uncover the aporetic structure that underlies conceptions of the political.

The question 'how does one recognise poststructuralism?' presupposes claims about epistemology ('what can I know?') which poststructuralists have questioned. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro argues, poststructuralists have displaced the modernist-positivist conceptions of epistemology that claim that a value-free actor (a subject) can know something by adopting a position of exteriority and therefore objectifying 'bits' (in Bateson's sense) of reality. For poststructuralists on the contrary, to know reality means to 'subjectivise' knowledge rather than objectify it (Viveiros de Castro, 2015, p. 218; Viveiros de Castro and Goldman, 2012, p. 425), or to put it differently, to know reality is to participate in it. There can be no gap between science and reality but a continuum of engagement with it, this is what poststructuralists had inherited from Gaston Bachelard and the tradition of historical epistemology (Rheinberger 2010).² In the same way, the task of defining poststructuralism today does not mean uncovering its essence or its truths, but participating in this retrospective invention. Claiming that poststructuralists have challenged the objectivity of knowledge for subjectivity of knowledge is politically suspicious if not dangerous, but this is why when these philosophers are read, they need to be re-contextualised in the institutions they contributed to (what they were writing for or against at that time). Reading poststructuralists is to read them by asking oneself what they could have taken for granted when they were writing.

With the advent of Trump in the White House and the rise of 'post-truth' politics, poststructural political thought has recently come back to the centre of political debate. Some commentators (usually on the Left but not only) have claimed that the so-called 'postmodern Left' was partly responsible for the hegemony of Trump's rhetoric and his subsequent rise to power. In their opinion, by attacking traditional and universal categories such as Truth, Morality and Subjectivity to show other philosophical and historical accounts found underneath, Foucault and the Foucauldians had permitted the use of 'alternative facts', the denigration of experts and the birth of a post-factual or post-truth world 30 or 40 years later.³ Kenan Malik for instance is careful enough to claim that it is not poststructuralists as such that led to the production of lies or 'alternative facts', fake news has existed for a long time. But what has changed, he argues, are the 'purveyors' of fake news: in the age of social media, it is no longer institutions and

¹ Although our perspectives are divergent, one can refer to Johannes Angermüller's (2015) sociological and historical study of this event in 'French' thought that applies Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic production and notion of field.

² Adrian Little (2015) has recently taken up this theme in an important contribution to political epistemology, beyond what he usefully called 'fact-derived realism'. His conclusions are quite close to those of Gaston Bachelard's own non-Cartesian epistemology, originally published in 1934 (1985, pp. 135-177).

³ See for instance Andrew Calcutt (2016) and Kenan Malik (2017).

newspapers that manipulate the news but any private individual with a Facebook or Twitter account. A blind faith in truth has led to the worst episodes in human history, and poststructuralists were far from being the first ones to write about this: the precursors were Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber's critique of rationalisation but also the Frankfurt school that critiqued the Enlightenment as early as 1944. In fact, Lyotard's misinterpreted book *The Postmodern Condition* precisely asks the question in 1979 about the conditions of knowledge with the domination of information technologies and the commodification of knowledge.⁴

Thus, the question 'what is poststructuralism?' continues to be relevant and contested – it appears as the unthought of this particular debate on 'post-truth' and poststructuralism (sometimes confused with postmodernism). By displacing François Châtelet's definition of Marxism to poststructuralism, I want to argue that poststructuralism is 'neither a worldview, nor an ontology, nor a speculative philosophy, but another way to conceive the order of thought, founded on a new evaluation of the relations between theory and practice' (Châtelet, 1977, p. 18). By opening up ontological questions (especially in the domain of the political), reified understandings of poststructuralism have led to the belief that there was such a thing as a poststructuralist ontology. In the same way that Châtelet argued against the ontologisation of Marxism in the 1960s and 1970s, I want to argue here that there is no poststructuralist ontology, since for Marx but also for poststructuralists there can be no ground but the endless practice of grounding.⁵ Ontology does not come before politics, but as Johanna Oksala has put it, 'ontology is politics that has forgotten itself' (Oksala, 2012, p. 10).

Another way to approach poststructuralism was taken by Alan D. Schrift (1995), who examined poststructuralists as implementing different ways of reading Nietzsche. Setting a very different tone from Schrift, for Patrice Maniglier and the new generation of philosophers in France, examining (post)structuralism and what happened in the 1960s in French philosophy is a matter of 'urgency':

This question is not for us a historical question: it is not a simple curiosity for a previous period in the intellectual life of the Hexagon; it is a question that involves our most immediate situation, it is a concern for us, today — it concerns what "us" means and what "today" means (Maniglier, 2011, p. 7).

Thinking today means dialoguing with this previous generation of philosophers who have developed new ways of questioning the present condition, raised common problems that were shared amongst these figures. Some of the key problematics found in their work have opened new fields of study: for instance, surveillance studies, governmentality and biopolitics studies were created after Foucault, the influence of Deleuze in Film Studies is manifest (MacKenzie and Porter, 2017), and Lyotard's theses on the avant-garde and the sublime have become central to art theory and art history. Yet, in political studies and other disciplines, poststructuralism seems to belong to the past (and a nihilist past). This argument is symptomatic of our

⁴ Ashley Woodward (2016) has recently published a book that challenges the dominant and hasty (mis)interpretations of Lyotard's work by painstakingly demonstrating the actuality of his philosophical ideas on knowledge, technology and humanism.

⁵ For Marx, there can be no ontology of the individual since the individual is composed by social relations. The first lines of the sixth thesis on Feuerbach written in 1845 read: 'Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx 2002).

accelerationist times that generate endless new ‘turns’ and new ‘fields’, a kind of concerted planned obsolescence of theory.⁶ Far from expressing a disillusion with the present, I think this also reflects on our situation of ‘today’, that is when much critical thought has been not only discredited and mocked, but celebrated for its meaninglessness and systematically undermined by ideology. There is a practice of archaisation in political theory, that intends to undermine large interesting planes of theory to reinstate the endless return to normative thought, redistributive justice, and democracy in whatever its new forms may be: deliberative, communicative, digital or participatory. The dogmatic image of political theory is the one caught in the ideal theories about the Good, Beauty, Justice and Truth but also Democracy, Human Rights, maneuvering between concepts that have been discussed, refuted, reinstated obsessively. I agree with Fredric Jameson’s point made about postmodernity in a recent work of self-criticism that for our purpose can be extended to poststructuralism,

the terms postmodernism and postmodernity have been abundantly criticized over the years, and have perhaps, in the rapid obsolescence of intellectual culture today, come to seem old-fashioned and out-of-date, [...] [but] I still feel they are indispensable (Jameson, 2015, p. 103).

Poststructuralists have been received with great skepticism and were very quickly labelled as ‘nihilists’ or ‘neo-conservatives’ when in fact they were arguing against nihilism and general equivalence of thought. Their experimentations responded to specific individual, social and technical problems that were lost in translation, especially for studies using an ahistorical approach. Their work provides an extremely rich resource to think the history of the present and new forms of critique. Yet, the 1960s-70s are no longer present, and reading them today means not to repeat faithfully their arguments, but to betray them and take them elsewhere.

In short, there are new ways of approaching poststructuralism today. The first one is to revisit the texts from the period by reactivating their concepts in our problems today and ‘inspire those concepts that need to be created’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1995, p. 28). The second approach is to produce unexpected dialogues between different theoretical traditions, to rethink some of their preoccupations and their dreams for the present. In writing about the Marxist heritage, Macherey notes,

To rethink all this in the present is not to entertain a nostalgia for a tradition by making oneself the conservator of its relics, but to try to pursue the same experience of thought [*expérience de pensée*], the same ‘theoretical practice’ in reviving it in new paths that are to be invented again entirely (Macherey, 1999, p. 138).

Each concept is shaped in a specific context and for a specific purpose, in recovering these necessities (context and purpose), we can follow the theoretical practice that Macherey refers to here but also be conscious of the limitations of the concepts themselves. A superficial reading of poststructuralists stops short of confronting the concepts with the problems, and can only lead to extreme reactions: either being mesmerised positively or negatively.

Maniglier reminds us that in spite of the 50 years that separate us from this period, we should not attempt to recognise the merit of one protagonist over the other, but ‘understand what organises their common space of possibility’ (2011, p. 7). For him, but also for Étienne Balibar, there was

⁶ Wendy Brown calls this phenomenon, the ‘balkanization of theory’ (Brown, 2005, p. 71).

no radical break between structuralism and poststructuralism, but a continuing transformation of structuralism throughout the years of the 1960s (and Maniglier includes Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and Althusser in his collection, but excludes Cixous and Irigaray from this picture). Iain MacKenzie, Robert Porter and I argued a few years ago that, on the contrary, we cannot understand what really happened in France if we do not study poststructuralism transductively with its US reception-invention (Dillet, MacKenzie and Porter, 2013).

Theory as form

Having outlined several approaches to poststructuralism, and having provided provisional definitions of poststructuralism, I want to propose different ways of furthering the poststructuralist experience of thought by inventing new paths, as Macherey recommended. By developing the two approaches to poststructuralism introduced earlier, I can think of two kinds of studies that can be carried out using the poststructuralist heritage. In both cases, as we will see, the general guiding line is to look for external relations and concomitance, what constantly escapes poststructuralism, and therefore what can continue to revive it. The first one is to examine the archaeology of the common space of possibility that Maniglier referred to. The word ‘archaeology’ is of course Foucauldian in spirit, but it also denotes the historical nature of this first kind. The second type of research would be to invent new paths and new concepts that are inspired by the theoretical practice of poststructuralists but that fundamentally depart from them. It requires us to accept to betray these philosophies, to produce not an orthodoxy but a heterodoxy, ‘a kind of unfaithful faith’ (Macherey, 1999, p. 138). Amongst recent successful studies, I can refer to two very different books that participate in the poststructural theoretical practice but by inventing new concepts that correspond to different problems: Viveiros de Castro’s speculative anthropological study of the Amerindian ontology (2015), and Gregoire Chamayou’s philosophy of drones (2015).

Using poststructuralism in political theory today therefore does not mean looking for ruptures in the history of ‘French’ philosophy but studying its influences and lineages (past and future) and using their experience of thought for our problems in the 21st century. Reading poststructuralist texts leads us to witness how their ideas were also informed and composed by other traditions.⁷ These ideas were not absolutely original or new, but they expressed in a powerful way arguments already put forward by Nietzsche, Bergson, the existentialists as well as the Surrealists and other avant-garde artists. We cannot therefore isolate poststructuralists from these influences, and must recognise that the ways in which they had systematised and intensified the modernist inventions in literature and arts as well as in philosophy and politics. They accounted theoretically for the consequences of at least 50 years of modernism in art and wanted to bring into view the new problems that arts and science faced. In the same way that, for instance, Kandinsky said that he had responded to Einstein’s theory of relativity in physics, or that the Surrealists had attempted to create new techniques in art inspired by psychoanalysis, philosophy too had to go through a transformation in order to be ‘contemporary’, to become ‘theory’. In arguing for such a transformation, in early 1968, Gilles Deleuze writes:

⁷ This point is overlooked by Tony Burns (2011) in comparing the two approaches to the history of political thought of poststructuralism and Quentin Skinner. It is surprising that Burns does not refer to the influence sensibility and arts had on poststructural thought.

Philosophy has not at all undergone similar revolutions or experiments as those produced in science, painting, sculpture, music, or literature (Deleuze, 2004, p. 140).

It is not that philosophy should write about artistic or scientific subjects but that the transformations that happened between 1900-1960 in those fields have been more noticeable in form and in content than in philosophy, but also in other disciplines, such as literary studies, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics. When Deleuze wrote this, he had just finished his doctoral dissertation, *Difference and Repetition*, which attempted to integrate themes discussed at that time in all those fields, especially under the influence of structuralism. Key figures had modernised and reshaped entirely their discipline (hence the term ‘revolution’); for instance, Lacan in psychoanalysis, Blanchot and Barthes in literary criticism, Lévi-Strauss in anthropology and ethnology, second-wave feminism, and perhaps Sartre in philosophy in making philosophy accessible to the masses. Hence by emphasising a transformation in form, Deleuze (1994, p. xxi) imagined a way of presenting the history of philosophy as a kind of *collage*.

There is another sense why poststructuralism should be understood as inventing theory as form. By producing theory as a form, it also allowed artists to find resonances in the variety of concepts created by poststructuralists and other protagonists from the same generation. With the withering away of classifications, the decline in influence of academies of art, and the hybridisation of art (combining music, video, photography and performance), artists have increasingly relied on theory to find inspiration and meaning. Boris Groys goes so far to argue that contemporary art performs theory:

Indeed, the main goal of art is to show, expose, and exhibit modes of life. Accordingly, art has often played the role of performing knowledge, of showing what it means to live with and through a certain knowledge (Groys, 2012, p. 6).

For Groys, what distinguishes theory from philosophy is the relation to action and *praxis*, he opposes philosophy, which remains too close to contemplation and idealism, to a practical production and operation of theory. Although this distinction is unsustainable and too clear-cut, it also functions at the level of the relations between theory and practice, already introduced earlier with Macherey, as well as the transformation of the role of theory in a post-Fordist economy, in which universities, schools, pensions, health care and other public institutions are privatised. Thus, Groys’ more polemical point is that theory conforms to today’s ideology organised by the media to take action and to continually change everything (abandon these skills for new ones, change career, adapt to new technologies and so on).

The relationship between theory and art is therefore more immediate due to the increasing aestheticisation of life and society, the emphasis on self-design and self-fashioning. But this also means that via aestheticisation, theory becomes more accessible and can be used to counter both the constant urgency that we are subjected to and the lack of time that dominates the everyday in post-Fordist capitalist societies.

Art, science and philosophy seemed to us to be caught up in mobile relations in which each is obliged to respond to the other, but by its own means (Deleuze, 1994, p. xvi).

Theory as form means that more have had access to theoretical knowledge (both in terms of production and consumption), but this also means that theory can be worn like clothes, and names of theorists exhibited like brands. Theory is pharmacological, in the sense Bernard Stiegler (2013) gave to this word after Derrida’s reading of Plato; it constitutes both a cure that

emancipates from resignation, resentment and cynicism, but it can also be a poison that leads to the brandishing of names as signifiers of intellectual heroic figures. To aestheticise oneself is what everyone does on social media in post-2008 neoliberal societies: through Academia.edu to network, through Facebook or Instagram self-fashion, and through LinkedIn to find jobs. Aesthetics has become entirely integrated with capitalism, but this does not mean that art no longer has a role to play:

Today we are living not in a society of similarity, but rather in a society of difference [...] not a *politeia* but a market society. [...] Now, theory and art that performs theory, produce similarity beyond the differences that are induced by the market economy (Groys, 2012, p. 11).

For Groys, artists create social commonalities and values that contemporary societies lack by diagnosing our modes of aesthetic (and therefore economic) production. In this sense, artists are co-producers of theory. I want to now turn to political economy since we often accuse poststructuralism of avoiding these problems, and therefore of being complicit in the status quo. In the next section, I want to briefly outline some of the main problems a poststructural critique of political economy needs to discuss.

For a poststructural critique of political economy

As I have argued so far, it seems paradoxical to seek political applications of a thought that refused all blueprints and pre-packaged formats (*prêt-à-penser*). Although it seems important to delineate the group of thinkers and the key ideas that define poststructuralism, these should not be presented in a reified or inert way, as too many textbooks especially in sociology have done in the 1990s and early 2000s (by simply focusing on ‘power relations’ or ‘discursive strategies’). If there is one thing all poststructuralists agree on it is invention and creativity, that theory should be an experience in thought and practice beyond the confinement of readymade categories. When we write on poststructuralism today in 2017, we need to account for the fact that the dominant ideas of these French thinkers in the 1970s were subsumed by capitalism, with our entry into a post-Fordist era: with the financialisation of the economy, creativity, initiative-taking and autonomy have become institutionalised, making them a motor of the economic production following a double movement. These elements do not entirely replace the previous economic system, but add more axioms to make capitalism more flexible and adaptable to the demands for more autonomy, more creativity, more mobility and more flexibility. They are not superposed to the existing axioms of capitalism, they are part of the same material institution (*stratum*).

When Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), but also Vandenberghe (2008) and Žižek (2012, pp. xxi–xxii), claim that capitalism has become Deleuzian, or that Deleuze is the ideologue of capitalism, they fail to account for two points. First, from *Anti-Oedipus* onwards, Deleuze and Guattari collapse the Marxist distinction between infrastructure (the economic and material production) and superstructure (ideas, culture, beliefs) and present an immanent and dynamic critique of capitalism referring to the role of desire in the economy. In late capitalist society, desire is produced transindividually and immanently to the social and economic production. In the libidinal political economy, desire is abstracted, just as political economists (starting with Ricardo) emphasised the importance of abstracting labour in order to create a system of equivalence and exchange, to know how much a quantity of labour is worth (the relation between labour and capital is conditioned by the theory of abstract labour). Deleuze and Guattari analyse

the mechanisms of capitalism from a clinical point of view and diagnose its pathologies and irrationality. The title *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* was used to signal the similarities between these two pathologies, and not an opposition between them, as it is often believed. Crucially in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1983) note that capitalism and schizophrenia are two different kinds of limits: the first one is *relative*, since capitalism is based on crises and things constantly break down and transform in a capitalist political economy (simplified in the common language as ‘boom and bust’ cycles). The second is *absolute*, capitalist society cannot function with schizophrenic processes even though its internal contradictions are based on a controlled chaotic order (metastability). Schizophrenia is the absolute limit to any society since everything collapses with schizophrenia, even Adam Smith’s (1999, p. 9) belief about the supposedly natural propensity of humans ‘to truck, barter and exchange’ becomes impossible, let alone today’s complex forms of exchange increasingly reliant on digital technologies. In every society, there is a repressive dimension since ‘no society could bear a “pure” desiring production’ (Sibertin-Blanc, 2010, p. 43). In short, Deleuze and Guattari are therefore aware that capitalism is not only incredibly flexible and adaptable, but that sooner or later the neoliberal ontology would have to resemble that of the Situationist ethos or the Deleuzoguattarian radical chic.⁸

Second, Deleuze and Guattari’s analyses of late capitalism cannot be entirely relevant today given the changes in the modes of production and consumption, the circuits of exchange that capital has found through a hyperderegulation of the financial services, the collapse of trade unions, the rise of mass unemployment and ‘precarity’. Some of the contemporary problems are closely linked to the realisation of Marx’s hypothetical reflections on the ‘surplus population’ and ‘industrial reserve army’ due to the lowering of the costs of production and marketing with the increasing use of digital technologies. The other major social problems are linked to austerity politics and economic responses to the 2008 financial crises that only intensified the obsolescence and the redundancy of large segments of the population. Some of these responses created a new public deficit (through what is called monetary or quantitative easing) to support financial capital and the private consumption of global elites, instead of renewing infrastructures and public services. Robert Kurz called these responses ‘casino Keynesianism’. The financial crisis led over the last few years in Europe to the creation of the ad hoc undemocratic institution, the ‘Eurogroup’, to discipline Greece, culminating in 2015 with the capitulation of the radical left party Syriza. Everywhere there are talks about building walls, closing borders, defending one’s own economic territory, and expanding counter-terrorism measures. It is only from this inhospitable soil that theory today can nurture, from the ruins of the European project and the misery produced by neoliberal economies over the last 40 years.

Continuing the theoretical practice of poststructuralism today means confronting the metamorphoses of the economic reality. Work has been entirely redefined today, announcing, with the automatised society, a post-wage society based on self-employment and freelance work (alternating between periods of hyperactivity and employment). Marketing has also become central to economic production, convincing individuals to buy things they do not need.

⁸ I refer to Situationism here since a parallel (amongst others) can be made with this Parisian movement: ‘On [Guy] Debord’s account at least, the organization was dissolved precisely because of its recuperation was by 1972 already complete. By then the Situationist International had become custodian not of its own past activity but merely of its image. It had become merely a collective celebrity, part of the spectacular consumption of “radical chic”.... Having invaded the spectacle, the spectacle invaded it in return.... Its theory became ideology’ (Wark, 2008, p. 10).

However marketing does not only function through the usual channel of the ‘adscape’ on the internet, radio and television, and billboards in the streets and the metro, but also through the so-called ‘innovation’ of the tech industries that are promoted through technology reviews in mainstream newspapers and through the intensification of brand presence in television serials and films. Finally, commodities are no longer central to the processes of economic production and capital accumulation, rather they are central to identities, lifestyles and experiences.

Another shift, discussed in Foucault’s now famous 1979 lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008), lies in the renewed significance of ‘human capital’ and the ‘production of the self’ for companies. Companies hire workers for their attitude and their ability to develop themselves (entrepreneur of the self) rather than simply for their skills or degrees. They move away from the classical understanding of labour power to a conception of ‘capital-ability’ since the worker is now understood as an enterprise (Foucault, 2008, p. 225). For managers, given the extremely competitive environment, hiring workers is a real cost and investment, therefore strict procedures are in place (sometimes outsourced to other professionals) to diagnose the capacities of the human capital in potential candidates: ‘his conditions of life are the income of a capital’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 233). It is no longer who they are or what they can deliver that matters, but who they will become and how they will develop (all the courses offered to them about ‘personal development’ are a key mechanism). Foucault referred to this as an ‘economic conduct’ implemented by the worker herself (Foucault, 2008, p. 223), the differences are situated at the qualitative level in a post-Fordist political economy, rather than expressed in quantitative terms. An individual is not ‘hired’ for her practical or analytical skills but as an economic subject endowed with sharper faculties of understanding and imagination (creativity) than the surplus population. The worker is no longer a split subject who can sell her labour for 8 or 10 hours a day and enjoy the *otium* of the evenings and the week-ends, but in the post-Fordist economy, it is the entire subjectivity that is produced for capital, even outside employment and wage life, leading to new pathologies such as job burnout. Every activity should focus on investing into oneself as if one were a business, but also inventing oneself in order to produce a different identity and brand. This is why the emphasis on ‘becoming’ as a poststructural ethics in some studies can sometimes feel either idealist since it does not take into account (or only implicitly) the economic-material structure, or it can easily be co-opted by capital as part of the ‘creative industries’. Geoffrey Gilbert (2010, p. 133) is right to point to the ‘disciplinary effects’ of the non-representative impulse, the forgetting of Africa and Algeria in some poststructural texts, and the tendency to essentialise the poststructuralist gesture in the 1980s and 1990s. Deleuze however warned readers about these interpretations in his preface to *Difference and Repetition*:

The greatest danger is that of lapsing into the representations of a beautiful soul: there are only reconcilable and federative differences, far removed from bloody struggles. The beautiful soul says: we are different, but not opposed. (Deleuze, 1994, p. xx)

It is therefore in relation to the bloody struggles and in the processes of proletarianisation that difference and the flight from representation can take place, both in 1968 and today.⁹ But perhaps the first one to argue that neoliberal capitalism is Deleuzian was Foucault himself, when he considered the metamorphoses of labour in the neoliberal discourses. Foucault (2008, p. 224)

⁹ Another passage emphasises this further: ‘Clearly at this point the philosophy must be wary of turning into the discourse of beautiful souls: differences, nothing but differences, in a peaceful coexistence in the Idea of social places and functions... but the name of Marx is sufficient to save it from this danger’ (Deleuze, 1994, p. 207).

refers to the worker as a ‘machine’, in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari gave to this term in *Anti-Oedipus* (as noted by the editor of the lectures in an endnote [Foucault, 2008, p. 236]): a machine for them is not simply a mechanised object or an instrument, but as conglomerate of flows and stocks composing this metastable unit that both produces desires and that also is also subjected to a large libidinal flows in return. Foucault (2008, p. 224) writes: ‘the worker is a machine, but in a positive sense, since it is a machine that produces an earnings stream [...] not an income’. All this makes up a ‘machine-stream ensemble’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 225).

To conclude, in this article I attempted to show the potentials and the limits that can be found in the poststructural archive, and I also presented some of the avenues that can be taken to further its theoretical practice. I argued that, instead of establishing an essence or an ontology of poststructuralism, it is by searching for external relations and concomitance that the poststructuralist experience of thought can continue to breathe. Following Boris Groys, I suggested that by producing theory as form, artists had a more immediate recourse to theoretical practice, by using all sorts of media to perform knowledge. Finally, I presented some elements for a poststructural critique of political economy, not by forcing the application of poststructural theories or concepts onto a supposedly external reality, but by immanently integrating more and more social and political problems into the schemes of thought. A poststructural theoretical practice means integrating into thought problems and events, in order to compose with them, and not simply study discursive strategies.

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