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BECOMING MINOR, SPACE, POLITICS AND EMANCIPATION

Becoming-Minoritarian as the universal figure of consciousness is called autonomy. It is certainly not by using a minor language as a dialect, by regionalizing or ghettoising, that one becomes revolutionary; rather, by using a number of minority elements, by connecting, conjugating them, one invents a specific, unforeseen, autonomous becoming.¹

Minor languages do not exist in themselves: they exist only in relation to a major language and are also investments of that language for the purpose of making it minor.²

There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. (...) A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence.³

Deleuze e Guattari, *Mille Plateaus*

When Deleuze and Guattari refer in *Mille Plateaus* to the project of “becoming-minor” (*devenir mineure*) in terms of a revolutionary practice with the potential to resist the axiomatics of capitalism, the concept is invested with a political dimension that merits exploration. With this in mind, this paper will explore the relations between space, politics and social emancipation drawing on the notions of “becoming minor” and “minority”. Two ideas are key: I demonstrate, first, how the concept of becoming minor exposes the epistemological criteria defining majorities and minorities, second, how it relates to a *practice* that operates a minorization of the major to make it minor, discarding the simple minor/major opposition. The concept expresses a concern with the creation of conditions of possibility for other forms of thinking and living that reflect the multiple experience of the world⁴.

It is important to consider, however, as Maurizio Lazzarato⁵ pointed out, that the notion of becoming minor is born in a specific period of struggles of the 60's, and reflects a context in which minoritarian formations seemed to offer lines of escape to the political rigidity of major social, institutional and partidarian formations. Nowadays, however, the situation is a different one. Because the neo-liberal model operates on a double register - at a micro-

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux*. Paris: Minuit, 1980. *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi. London: Continuum, 1987, p. 118.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

4. For an extended discussion of these issues, see my recently edited Dossier for journal *Lugar Comum*, n.41, 2014, in Brasil, entitled “Becoming Minor, Space, Politics and Emancipation. Perspectives from Iberoamerica”, with contributions from several authors analysing the territorial dynamics of power, and the relations between spatial practices and social emancipation across Ibero-America. An on-line version can be found here: <http://uninomade.net/lugarcomum/41/>

5. Non-published interview, May 2013, London.

political level, through the capture of the production of subjectivity, and at a macro-political level, through the mobilization of state institutions - the traditional opposition between minor social movements, institutions and parties needs to be re-evaluated and up-dated. For this reason, it is crucial to clearly distinguish the “becoming minor project” from praise for the marginal, the small, or the non-institutional. Therefore, I will emphasize the notion that politics is always both a micro and a macro-politics. It seems to me that if the concept still has something to offer today it is because it summons the need to seek ways of articulation and formalization between these two dimensions.

I

Developed in regards to the political nature of Kafka's work⁶, the concept of becoming minor refers to the process by which, in a context dominated by a hegemonic language, passages and spaces are generated for the variation and multiplicity that goes unreflected in the dominant forms of representation. In keeping with the idea that "the unity of language hides a political manoeuvre" and that hegemonic languages reinforce homogenization, identity and "constants of expression or content", becoming minor is a treatment of the standard language whose purpose is to extract language from the power relations otherwise imprisoning it and thus re-connecting it with the variation and heterogeneity that characterize the experience of the world. In this respect, neither the minor nor the major concern two different languages but rather different treatments or usages of language. The crucial definition involves how the major determines the pattern or rule in relation to which all other usages are qualified and subject: representations of power and knowledge, norms and laws, immanent to both content and form, which regulate not only discursive practices but also behaviours, ways of speaking, doing and thinking. Given such standardization, a minor treatment of language (*langue*) finds its justification in the premise that the multiplicity of the world should be returned to language to safeguard the feasible scope for enunciation as the capacity inherent to formulating new problems and introducing new objects of struggle into the political space.

According to Deleuze and Guattari's definition, a minor literature is characterised by affecting the major language with a strong degree of deterritorialisation and subjecting it to a series of displacements and renegotiations that push the major language to its own limits. In Kafka's case, this is particularly achieved via the contextual displacements (for instance in *The Metamorphosis*) that produce problems whose nature always requires a renegotiation of familial, economic, bureaucratic and juridical structures. This becomes clear when adopting the view put forward in *Mille Plateaus*

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*. Paris: Minuit, 1975.

that the politics of language is pragmatics: thus, that language does not in itself exist but instead depends on external and internal factors that determine its effectuation and the usage of linguistic elements in a certain social field and at a particular moment in time. Therefore, confronting language with its limits aims to precisely show this pragmatic dimension and reveal the network of elements on which language production depends. In this sense, language is best grasped if perceived as a dynamic system with breaks and transitions at the frontiers of micro and macro struggles reflecting both the power modulations existing at any given point in time by which the expression gets distributed. Should we continue to extrapolate the political meaning of framing language in terms of this dynamic, then we would understand how, just as the enclosure of language upon itself freezes its revolutionary political potential (through overshadowing its collective and social aspect), similarly, the enclosure of the writer upon him/herself suspends the revolutionary political potential of literary creation. Thus, in terms of the minor, and in contrast to a phenomenological or psychoanalytic conception of literary production, Deleuze and Guattari contend that the true writer is one who induces a force of de-subjectivation upon experience or an elevation of experience to the impersonal as the condition necessary to engaging with the collective (and singular) experience of the world, and thereby connecting the individual to the collective. On this basis, the notion of the 'collective assemblage of enunciation', also introduced in the *Kafka* book, is central to understanding what minor literature means: writing implies an act of writing *with* rather than a writing *of* things. This, in fact, describes the political condition of literature. In this manner, the making of a language is no individual affair but is above all a people's concern and in this respect a process of constituting a collective. This is why Deleuze and Guattari suggest that a minor literature creates the conditions of possibility of "a people still to come", a people that is missing⁷. However, discerning that "people" in this manner does not refer to any particular or ideal group proves vital since instead it calls into being the political question of the *yet-to-come*, of other ways of life, of other values and modes of thinking for which conditions of possibility have yet to be established. Indeed, it is this movement of "becoming", forcing the minor upon the major, that should be strategized.

II

Moving on from these considerations while bearing in mind the contemporary commodification of city and territory as a dominant trend, I now describe how the idea of 'becoming minor' informs a counter-hegemonic thinking and practice of space. However, I should first clarify that when

7. This articulation between a minor treatment and the notion of "a people to come" is best articulated in *Cinéma 2: L'Image-temps* (1985), *Critique et Clinique* (1993) and *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (1991) in relation the concept of fabulation.

speaking of a dominant, hegemonic language in the domain of the problematic of space and territory, we refer to the global process by which urbanization today promotes the expansion of capital, structuring both city and territory in ways that not only generate social exclusion and discrimination but also inevitably result in the affirmation of certain modes of spatial relation that require the asphyxiation of many others.

The aspects I noted earlier – namely, the deterritorialisation of the major language, the elevation to the impersonal, the connection between the individual and the collective, and the collective assemblage of enunciation – reveal important dimensions to take into consideration when analysing engaged spatial and social practices. Two aspects resulting from the previous examination should be added; firstly, the political investment of life and everyday existence – following due recognition that power operates across different levels, from the production of subjectivity to the modes of social organization – and, secondly, the importance of creating modes of articulation between the subjective dimension, social movements, forms of representation and institutions. Clearly, politics cannot be reduced to the larger dimension of representations or institutions, as it also underpins the production of subjectivity and forms of life, as much as the 'way we speak' or 'what can be said'. Indeed *politics is made and practiced*, traversing the fabric of existence both at the individual level as much as at the social level. If it is crucial to convey the need to conceive of existence and daily life from a critical perspective, it is precisely because if life has been constituted an object of power, it can also represent a strategic force of resistance. Power in this sense, as Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari contended, is better defined neither as a structure nor as an institution nor even as a property one gets endowed with, but instead as a set of relations of forces that traverse the social and the individual accounting for particular institutional or social crystallizations.

It is clear that material and spatial domains are traversed by power relations both in an explicit and implicit manner and transmitting regulations upon modes of social relations, forms of life and values. As such, space is not a simple neutral container of social and cultural relations and should be understood instead as something that plays an active role at a molecular level in the singularization and renovation of cultural and social modes of relation. As Guattari reminded us, the production of subjectivity depends on a series of polyphonic factors, spatial and material, discursive and non-discursive, signifying and assignifying. Thus, if we consider that practices of emancipation are space contingent (and space forming) inasmuch as social and spatial relations are interrelated, we should be able to carry out analysis of the institutions or places we inhabit not only to identify modes of rigid and hegemonic organization but also to reform them. We would thus approximate the process of institutional analysis or critique developed by Guattari and

Jean Oury in the *La Borde* clinic⁸, where we could say that the strategy was to *minorize* the institutional space as a means of singularization and autonomisation of subjectivity, therefore extending beyond the deadlock of a pure horizontality against a pure verticality of power.

In this manner, considering emancipation in relation to spatial practices, the key guiding question would become: in what way can we establish the scope for the emergence of more democratic forms of living and of relationships with space in conjunction with the communities at stake and exponentially amplifying their processes of civic autonomy and social emancipation? We would therefore have to consider an economy of space and territory oriented towards the emergence of other conceptions of freedom, of liberty and of justice, hand in hand with the respective communities and in critical opposition to major epistemological criteria.

Whilst it is certainly possible to identify minorities according to a numeral criterion⁹, it would be a mistake to confuse the minor with small or independent spaces disconnected from society or tentatively separated from reality, in rupture with the institutions and the existent power structures. On the contrary, as Guattari claims, the minor should above all *mobilize* a practice of articulation:

"the conclusion of these types of transformations will depend essentially on the capacity of the assemblages created to articulate these social and political disputes. If this articulation is not produced: no desired mutation, no struggle for spaces of liberty can ever hope to trigger large scale social and economic transformations."¹⁰

This thus raises the question of identifying ways of articulating the minor with the major beyond the simplistic (unproductive) opposition between 'small' or 'big', 'marginal' or 'institutional', 'formal' or 'informal'. As such, spatial practices, concerned with labour relations, with the collective as a form of production, with protocols of occupying space as much as the politics of territory and their legal determinations, become particularly relevant to thinking on the nature of a spatial practice able to intervene in the relations of different power spheres. It is correspondingly crucial to pay attention to participatory models that promote other forms of social relationships and that potentiate these articulations. And, just as it proves necessary not to confuse participatory methodologies with a lack of architecture, I also deem essential bearing in mind that which architect Teddy Cruz suggests when defending how "a community will not be free until it is able to creatively resolve its own housing needs, its own modes of socio-economic sustainability, its own conceptions of public space and infrastructure: its own civic culture"¹¹.

8. I have first attempted to analyse the spatial-political underpinnings of the work developed in institutional analysis through the study of the La Borde Clinic case in "Félix Guattari and the Collective in La Borde. Notes for a conception of subjectivity beyond the human", in *(dis)locations*, ed. Gabriela Vaz Pinheiro and FBAUP, 2011, 80-88pp.

9. As Deleuze and Guattari explain: "When we say majority, we are not referring to a greater relative quantity but to the determination of a state or standard in relation to which larger quantities, as well as the smallest, can be said to be minoritarian." *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 321.

The opposition between minority and majority is not simply quantitative. Majority implies a constant, of expression or content, serving as a standard measure by which to evaluate it. (...) Majority assumes a state of power and domination, not the other way around. (...) Minorities, of course, are objectively definable states of language, ethnicity, or sex with their own ghetto territorialities, but they must also be thought of as seeds, crystals of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movements and the deterritorialisation of the mean or majority." *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 116 – 117.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

11. Cf: the excellent online discussion and, in particular, the Teddy Cruz comments in "Re: [-empyre-] Resilient Latin America: Reconnecting Urban Policy and the Collective's Imagination, <http://www.mail-archive.com/empyre@lists.cofa.unsw.edu.au/msg04008.html> (Accessed in July 2012).

III

"Becoming minoritarian is a political affair and necessitates a labour of power (puissance), an active micropolitics. This is the opposite of macropolitics, and even of History, in which it is a question of knowing how to win or obtain a majority. As Faulkner said, to avoid ending a fascist there was no other choice but to become-black. Unlike history, becoming cannot be conceptualized in terms of past and future. Becoming-revolutionary remains indifferent to questions of a future and a past of the revolution; it passes between the two. Every becoming is a bloc of coexistence"¹².

A practice of the minor begins by recognizing that the thinking of space and territory represents an issue of concern to everyone. Just as the invention of a language concerns a collective, and not just an individual or a regime of representation imposed from above, space also concerns a community within the framework of constructing its civic autonomy. Only by adopting a perspective in which territorial struggles are perceived as struggles for life, as symptoms of these collective assemblages, can we make politics traverse space, hence, by conceiving it as a territory of existence. In this way, the politicization of space does not end in space, but continues pointing in an outwards direction, always indicating its position in a transversal chain of power relations, which prefigures its capacity for intervention and affection at different levels. Undoubtedly, the measure of mutual affection is the political measure of space.

Lastly, to recognize that politics is made and practiced in the struggle for the spaces of everyday existence as the struggle for life implies acknowledging and defending that the right to space is also the right to inventing the world.

12. *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 322.