



Too Poor for Debt: Deleuze's First-World Problems

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Deleuze launches his description/prediction of the emergence and imminent consolidation of the society of control as a postscript. The text thus announces itself as an afterthought, a supplement appended to some complete larger textual body, from which it is, however, unmoored as it is launched as an independent self-standing text that, moreover, does not indicate *to what* it is an addendum but instead, *on what* it speaks. By this token, the Postscript unhinges the conventional notion according to which a supplement signals “the addition of something to an already complete entity” (Attridge 1992: 77). By marking his text as the adjunct to an absent main body, Deleuze appears to concede and at the same time emphatically embrace the necessary incompleteness of this short précis on the post-disciplinary regime. My argument in the following will be that the supplementary status of the Postscript does not so much signal some subversive or dissident gesture in the name of the minor or the molecular (even though it does that, too); instead, it primarily serves to keep at bay and contain an exteriority that it aims to ‘confine by exclusion’¹; and that exteriority, I will argue, is the Third World.

In a short aside, as it were, the Postscript acknowledges that the itinerary from the societies of sovereignty to those of discipline and thence to those of control is in a global perspective the path of a minority. If the passage from discipline to control materializes in distinct modes of subject formation – ‘man enclosed’ replaced by ‘man in debt’ – then these subject positions remain unavailable to the majority of humanity, as Deleuze asserts in a formulation that reads like a concession: “*It is true* that capitalism has retained as a constant the extreme poverty of three quarters of humanity, too poor for debt, too numerous for confinement” (1992: 6; *emph. added*). I share my unease with this strained phrasing with Arvind Rajagopal, one of the very few postcolonial theorists to have directly engaged with the Postscript, who reads this assertion according to which 75% of people on the planet are obviously not articulated to the dynamics of either dis-

¹ Cf. Deleuze’s elegant summary of Foucault’s scenarios of the workings of the disciplinary assemblages: “It is by excluding or placing outside that the assemblages confine something” (1988: 43).



cipline or control as “a postscript to the Postscript” (2006: 280), a curiously incoherent insertion *and* exclusion of the Third World.²

A bit further down, this indecisiveness between inclusion and exclusion gives way to the insinuation of apparently separate spheres: in order to make sense of the passage from discipline to control, Deleuze suggests that, “in the present situation, capitalism is no longer involved in production, which it often relegates to the Third World, even for the complex forms of textiles, metallurgy, or oil production” (1992: 6). This reads as if the outsourcing of material production and processing from the metropolitan centres to the Global South were an exodus of capitalism into a zone where forces other than capitalism organize production so that capitalism appears to be no longer ‘involved in production’ but can now resort to the “higher-order production” (ibid.) that appears to correspond to the society of control. Material production in the Third World thus appears to take place without capitalism (read, capitalism proper?) being ‘involved’ there, insinuating the Third World as somehow outside the fold of capitalist subsumption. This of course must appear at odds with the assertion, cited above, that capitalism effects or rather retains ‘the extreme poverty of three quarters of humanity’. If “Deleuze is theorizing the form of power specific to ‘metaproduction’³ but curiously, regards this as separable from ‘production’” (Rajagopal 2006: 280), then what seems to emerge is a somewhat confused version of the ‘uneven development’ model: one in which capitalism proper apparently operates on and in a zone of ‘higher-order production’ suturing subjects into the grammar of the society of control through the rule of debt, while old-style material production has been displaced to the vast hinterlands and backwaters of capitalism, where subjects, due to their extreme impoverishment, remain exempt from the rule of debt – just as they have apparently remained exempt from confinement, too, due to their sheer numerousness. In what ways and by what regimes these subjects (after all, three quarters of humanity!) should have been subjectivized instead remains largely unclear from the supplementary Postscript; as a consequence, the notion suggests itself that the ‘too poor for debt’ majority is located somehow and somewhere not only outside the society of control but outside capitalism and modernity as such.

Such a scenario must render Deleuze’s account suspicious if not for Marxist, then certainly for postcolonial critics. To the former camp, the notion of some domain external to the capitalist world system and the circuits of the global market must be anathema; likewise, from a postcolonial perspective, the suggestion of the Third World as a separate sphere delinked from capitalist dynamics has been interrogated as “Deleuze’s dismissive and indeed incoherent account of the world’s three-fourths” (Rajagopal 2006:

² Significantly, the most influential expansion on Deleuze’s sketchy notion of debt – Maurizio Lazzarato’s works on the “debt economy” (2012: 105) and “the governmentality of debt” (2015: 168) – remains equally silent about the Global South and the specific differences between different *kinds* of debt.

³ ‘Metaproduction’ is Rajagopal’s own translation of Deleuze’s original *surproduction*, a term which the 1992 publication in English that I use in this paper renders as ‘higher-order production’.



280) reminiscent of all those degrading or fetishizing representations through which colonial discourses powerfully constructed non-European worlds as other, i.e. as located in some (atavistic or pristine) non-modernity.

How can one make sense of such a confused attempt at mapping capital, which for the past decades has regularly surfaced in critical theories of whatever denomination with the epithet 'global'? Where if not *in* capitalism should we locate the Global South/Third World? If Deleuze, obviously, does not specifically care, many Deleuzeans do. Thus, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explicate right at the outset of their most influential book, *Empire*, that "[t]wo interdisciplinary texts served as models for us throughout the writing of this book: Marx's *Capital* and Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*" (2000: 415n4). More specifically, the setting for the crucial drama at the heart of *Empire* – the combat between postmodern capitalism and the multitude – is that very society of control that Deleuze, in the Postscript, extracts from the implications of Foucault's genealogies of regimes of power/knowledge. Unlike Deleuze, however, Hardt and Negri go out of their way to emphasize that, like the entirely placeless postmodern capital itself, the society of control has no specific location whatsoever. Instead it constitutes "*a world that knows no outside. It knows only an inside, a vital and ineluctable participation in the set of social structures, with no possibility of transcending them*" (Hardt/Negri 2000: 413). In the unified but uneven planetary space of *Empire*, essentializing distinctions such as those of 'First' and 'Third' worlds become meaningless since "we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First" (xiii): "The world is not divided in two and segmented in opposing camps (center versus periphery, First versus Third World)" (144). In order to systematically grasp the uneven unification of planetary space, Hardt and Negri take recourse to the category of 'subsumption' that briefly pops up in Marx's distinction between absolute and relative surplus value in the first volume of *Capital*. While absolute surplus value is extracted by way of 'formal subsumption', i.e. by the prolongation of the working day (or comparable 'expansions' of capitalist exploitation into the worker's 'own' time), relative surplus value arises from processes of 'real subsumption' which does not operate on the principle of expansion but, instead, of intensification. It does not prolong the working day but "mould the nature of the labour process itself" (Postone 2004: 66) by way of technological enhancements and logistic or choreographic optimization so that an increased output can be produced without an extension of working hours. Importantly, for Marx, real subsumption can only occur on the condition of an already implemented formal subsumption, which it tends to supersede. It "emerges and develops itself spontaneously [*naturwüchsig*] on the foundation afforded by the formal subsumption of labour under capital. In the course of this development formal subsumption is replaced by real subsumption" (Marx 1962: 533; my trans.).



Hardt and Negri adopt this notion of a passage from ‘formal’ to ‘real’ subsumption and apply it to their own account of the financialization of the globe and the consolidation of the society of control, which appears as structurally isomorphic to the remoulding of the labor process in Marx’s notes on real subsumption: for while Marx envisages the ‘improvement’ of work organization instead of the temporal expansion of the working day, Hardt and Negri (illustrating Deleuze’s post-scriptural sketch) characterize the society of control as a variant of real subsumption, as

an intensification and generalization of the normalizing apparatuses of disciplinarity that internally animate our common and daily practices, but in contrast to discipline, this control extends well outside the structured sites of social institutions through flexible and fluctuating networks. (2000: 24)

Unlike Deleuze, they grasp the society of control as planetary, without an outside, a form of power from which nobody is exempt – least of all those ‘three quarters of humanity’ whom Deleuze imagines to be too poor for debt.

When read symptomatically, the incoherences of the Postscript go a long way to explain why there should have been (or still be) such a vexed relation between Deleuze and the postcolonial, Deleuze and the Global South. At a first glance, this might come as a surprise, given that many of Deleuze’s key tenets and concepts (such as, say, nomadism, the minor, etc.) appear specifically germane to postcolonial/decolonial projects of whichever variety. However, with the notable exception of Robert Young (who attempts to re-read the operations of colonialism as “a form of ambivalent desire” [Young 1995: 167], that is, as a variety of the desiring machines as discussed in *Anti-Oedipus*), in-depth postcolonial engagements with Deleuze have remained rare. Unlike Foucault, Derrida or Lacan, not to speak of Marx or Gramsci, Deleuze has hardly ever been adopted as a cornerstone on which to erect postcolonial theoretical models.⁴ What can, however, be noted is a dispersal of Deleuzian terminology and, to some extent, figures of thought that appear to have seeped into the postcolonial text in the fashion of what Bruce Janz has called an act of ‘forgetting’, which is not the same as ‘rejecting’ or ‘denying’ but also a far cry from dogmatic application. Instead, to ‘forget Deleuze’ implies that “the well-known concepts – bodies without organs, planes of immanence, the fold, and so many others – are not fetishes or idols, they are just concepts, made to be stretched, changed, re-appropriated. That is how they are honoured”: in fidelity to the spirit, not the letter of Deleuzian scripture (Janz 2014: 24). Of course, such an ingestive mode of ‘forgetful’ adoption is notoriously evasive for the critic bent on detecting influences and intellectu-

⁴ Claims to the contrary are hardly viable; thus Réda Bensmaïa’s apodictic assertion of some “Deleuzian postcolonial orthodoxy” rests on the confused equation of postcolonial theory with “French Theory” (2017: 12, 5), while Peter Hallward’s diagnosis of a damaging “inspiration of Deleuze and Guattari” that intoxicates “every postcolonial study worthy of the name” is premised on an extremely severe distinction between the (bad) singular and the (good) specific that lumps virtually *all* modes of thinking together as insufficiently “critical” (2001: 34, 48).



al debts, which will then, at best, become contentious or, at worst, mere speculation.⁵ For while obvious resonances with Deleuzian thought run deeply through Edouard Glissant's work (cf., among others, Brown 2019; Yountae 2013; Hallward 2001, esp. 100-32) without necessarily allowing for a re/construction of lineages of influence (cf. Allar 2019), in other postcolonial thinkers the Deleuzian resonances are far less constitutive. *Perhaps* therefore a 'forgetful' mode of adoption can be observed in theorists like Arjun Appadurai or Achille Mbembe who, though frequently cited as pro-Deleuze postcolonial thinkers, hardly ever claim in any explicit or programmatic way that they work with or through a Deleuzian lens. Thus, in a rare direct reference to the work of Deleuze, Appadurai concedes that his deployment of the "d' word – deterritorialization" mostly occurred in a "partly unconscious drawing on Deleuze" (Bell 1999: 33), and in fact the sparse and light-handed usages of that 'd' word (or any other Deleuzian concept for that matter) in *Modernity at Large, The Future as a Cultural Fact or Fear of Small Numbers* indicates that the dose of Deleuzian substance in Appadurai's work is rather homeopathic (which does not mean that it is absent or ineffective).⁶ Certainly, things stand differently with Mbembe, who frequently appears to "be on the cusp of embracing the rich inessential pluralism of Gilles Deleuze" (Weate 2003: 30) in a project that could perhaps be best described as the superimposition of a Deleuze-inspired hope for counter-actualization onto the dark ground of a scathing critique of the 'zombifying' violence that prevails in the fraught "conviviality" (Mbembe 2001: 104) of the postcolony.⁷ More specific to the focus of this paper it could be observed that Mbembe's rendition of "the baroque character of the postcolony" resonates with Deleuze's exclusion of the Global South from the ambits of the society of control: for where, pace Mbembe, postcolonial domination is primarily staged as an 'obscene' and 'macabre' spectacle, we appear to have not even entered disciplinary society but are obviously still (or back?) in the even older sovereign regime. And yet, the same writer quite nonchalantly speaks of the deeply disciplinary South African Apartheid regime as "a society of control" (Mbembe 2014), thereby perhaps signalling either simple indifference or a refreshing readiness to 'stretch', 'change' and 'honour' Deleuze in a happily forgetful (mis)appropriation.

⁵ This is all the more the case when the discourse of the putative influencer has become common coinage: not everyone who uses the term 'unconscious' is necessarily a Freudian, not all deployments of 'hegemony' are couched in serious readings of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, and certainly many 'rhizomes' spread their tentacles across academia without the authors having traversed a thousand plateaus.

⁶ This of course runs counter to, again, Hallward's estimation of Appadurai's (early) work as thoroughly Deleuzian – a notion that says less about Appadurai than about Hallward, who apparently detects Deleuze in every analysis that foregrounds, as Appadurai does, heterogeneities, mobility, fluidity, diaspora, fragmentation and, yes, deterritorialization (cf. Hallward 2001: 35). I see the same critical strategy of 'thinning out' Deleuze in order to find him everywhere in Lorna Burns and Birgit M. Kaiser, who read all postcolonial literature that is "invested in the elaboration of a transformative vision of a future that maintains the ability to *become* new in divergent and truly different ways" as "resonating with Deleuzian thought at a fundamental level" (2014: 13).

⁷ The postcolony as a site of necropolitical violence is in fact the arena of appearance for genuinely Deleuzian "polymorphous and diffuse [...] war machines" (Mbembe 2003: 30).



As is well known, a less ‘forgetful’ but also far less generous reading of Deleuze can be found in Gayatri Spivak’s seminal paper, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), which despite its excessive density has remained one of the most influential contributions to postcolonial theory. Here, Spivak takes Deleuze (and along with him, Foucault) to task for their complicity in the unquestioned perpetuation of the privilege of the dominant to represent the oppressed Other (the subaltern). Of course neither Foucault nor Deleuze and Guattari partake of chauvinistic discourses that frame the Other as inferior; to the contrary, Spivak highlights how these radical Parisian “prophets of Otherness” romanticize the subaltern as “masses” invested with a privileged sharp insight into the mechanisms of precisely those power relations by which they are being oppressed. This uncritical “valorization of the oppressed as subject” (Spivak 1988: 274) falls far back, for Spivak, behind the very critique of the unified sovereign subject whose deconstruction ranged as a primary self-set task among these poststructuralist philosophers.

More specifically, Spivak charges Deleuze with a myopic Eurocentric bias that “ignores the international division of labor” and renders him “incapable of dealing with global capitalism” (1988: 272) and of addressing his own historically specific insertion and entanglement within the unfolding dynamics of capital: instead of ‘mapping’ the implication, if not complicity, of the Western intellectual with the global dominant, Deleuze, according to Spivak, shies away from considering “the relations between desire, power and subjectivity” and is therefore “incapable of articulating a theory of interest” (273) – a theory that would necessarily have to zoom in on the crucial problematic of ideology. Instead, Spivak diagnoses in Deleuze a manifest disavowal of ideology as such and hence a foreclosure “of the difficult task of counterhegemonic ideological production” (275), all of which results in the irredeemable mess of the “unrecognized contradiction within a position that valorizes the concrete experience of the oppressed, while being so uncritical about the historical role of the intellectual” (275).

These are powerful charges: Deleuze as a Eurocentric master thinker who, in the guise of radicalism, reconfirms the tenets of the privileged white metropolitan subject. Of course, these accusations have not remained uncontested. Taking recourse to mere biography, Marcelo Svirsky and Ronnen Ben-Arie have attempted to demonstrate that Spivak’s argument “cannot stand” by signposting “Deleuze and Guattari’s own political activism in Indigenous struggles, particularly with specific Palestinian and Algerian anti-colonial campaigns” (2020: 291). In a far more substantial discussion, Andrew Robinson and Simon Tormey insist against Spivak that there *is*, in Deleuze’s work, a consistent ‘theory of interest’ which, however, “privileges desire over interest” (2010: 29) and probably for that reason alone must have remained unacceptable (or outright unintelligible) for Spivak. James Noyes has pushed this further by arguing that it is precisely the Deleuzian notion of desire that could fully politicize the postcolonial project in its mission “to disable the global economy’s easy displacement of socio-political and economic



disparities into the heart of the subject. This is the core idea behind Deleuze and Guattari's conception of desire" (2014: 43) – and, to some extent, behind Spivak's definition of interventionist pedagogy as the "noncoercive rearrangement of desire" (Spivak 2004: 102).

While Spivak has long ago withdrawn her dismissal of Foucault, she has to my knowledge only relativized the severity of her assault on Deleuze, even while occasionally drawing on Deleuzian concepts for the development of her own projects. In principle, however, she has stuck to her critique of Deleuze's "benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as Other" (Spivak 1999: 277) and his relegation of developing societies to some mystified outside. This critique has found strong support in the interventionist camp of postcolonial theorizing (cf. e.g. Wuthnow 2002) as well as in radically self-critical anthropology (cf. Miller 1993). In a similar vein, Karen Kaplan spots in Deleuze's thinking a veritable provincialism that treats "[t]he Third World [...] simply as a metaphorical margin for European oppositional strategies, an imaginary space, rather than a location of theoretical production itself" (1996: 88). It is against this backdrop that Simone Bignall and Paul Patton venture to redeem Deleuze's place in the postcolonial conversation, proceeding from the diagnosis of a "mutual disregard, which previous scholarship has highlighted as characteristic of the relationship between Deleuze and the postcolonial":

Deleuze does not directly 'speak with' the thinkers and writers of the postcolony, and postcolonial theory seldom engages with Deleuzian philosophy in a sustained or comprehensive way, despite the abundance of Deleuzian motifs in postcolonial discourse. When theorists have directly considered postcolonial influences of/upon Deleuzian philosophy, they have usually done so in a critical and dismissive fashion. (2010: 1)

This holds true in particular for those strands of postcolonial theory that directly address the modified continuation of colonial rule in the form of economic and financial dependency buttressed by "the great narrative of Development" (Spivak 1999: 371). Such critiques highlight, e.g., how 19th-century colonial ideologies with their postulation of European civilizational supremacy reverberate in current neoliberal orthodoxy where "free-market practices [...] become synonymous with a 'civilizing globalization'" (Medly/Carroll 2003: 147); or how "the entire world [has been] engulfed in capital's universalization" (Chibber 2013: 294) so that Deleuze's tacit (or putative) assumption of the Third World's status as somehow not inside the ambit of capitalism must appear meaningless. To the contrary, a postcolonial perspective would have to insist that if power in the society of control is articulated not by way of enclosure but debt, then the Global South does not get enlisted as a belated conscript but has instead been the first object of that 'new' regime. For in Europe's postcolonies all over the world, it is not only or even primarily individuals that have been seized as 'indebted men'; it is entire fragile national



economies (Deleuze's 'three quarters of humanity' allegedly 'too poor for debt') that for decades now have been held captive in the inescapable trap of Third World debt legitimized by the ideological framework of that empty formal equality which, precisely like the one between capitalist and worker, pertains between creditor and debtor (cf. Graeber 2011: 101 and *passim*).

After 2008, these dynamics of formally independent nation-states captured in transnational debt relations to the point where they have to cede sovereignty have 'come home' to Europe itself. The most dramatic instance in this context is arguably the unmasked 2015 Eurogroup coup that indicated how Greece had been reduced to a "debt colony" (Kotzias 2013). There is much to be learned from Deleuze in that context, as the writings of his disciple Lazzarato amply demonstrate. However, what requires to be added is the historical dimension of these processes, more precisely, the genealogy of the 'new' debt economy in coloniality. Seen through that lens, what manifests in the crushing of the Athens Spring and the concomitant austerity regime is first of all the application to Europe itself of techniques that had long been tested and refined in the (post)colonial South. Foucault, speaking of the emergence of the society of discipline, has dubbed this dynamics the "boomerang effect" of colonial practice in which a "whole series of colonial models was brought back to the West, and the result was that the West could practice something resembling colonization, or an internal colonization, on itself" (2003: 103). In this perspective, the colonized South served not only as a vast repository of raw materials and as a site of ruthlessly exploitative production, but also and not least as a laboratory, a testing ground for experimenting on disciplinary techniques – including that most 'successful' of all disciplining institutions, the panopticon, which clearly has its genealogy in the visual regimes of the Caribbean slave plantation (cf. Mirzoeff 2001: 48-76), and that was "built for the most part not in northern Europe, but in places like colonial India" (Mitchell 1991: 35; cf. also Barder 2015: 86). In this vein, Martha Kaplan elaborates how British rule in India hinged on the exercise of panoptic power fanning out from the centre of the Bombay Presidency into the vast hinterlands, rendering "the inhabitants of Maharashtra into objects of scrutiny, inmates of a prison" (1995: 68). A similar, if not more excessive colonial fantasy of panoptic power has been reconstructed for the racial surveillance complex in German South West Africa, where the colonial regime implemented a number of measures ranging from "the division of the protectorate into zones of governance to panoptic housing and labor architecture" (Madörin 2020: 76). Far from being 'too numerous for confinement', then, the colonized inhabitants of the South were often especially exposed to the enclosing dynamics of the disciplinary regime as they were recruited by European colonial power as objects of ongoing experiments in the improvement of techniques of monitoring, surveillance, classification, policing, etc. Likewise, present-day Global South poverty does not exempt from being governed by debt; to the contrary, it is precisely the structural entrapment of entire national economies in the "debt economy" (Balibar 2013) of the post-Bretton Wood



world order that makes 'private'/individual indebtedness in African, South Asian, Caribbean and/or Latin American societies doubly inescapable, leaving vast majorities of the population defencelessly exposed to the allegedly atavistic power dynamics of debt bondage, serfdom, forced labor and, increasingly, actual enslavement (cf. e.g. Purkayastha/Majumdar 2009; LeBaron 2014). In this light, Deleuze's insinuation that the Third World is somehow external to both discipline and control not only renders modern power a mere first world problem but effectively obscures the heightened vulnerability of Global South societies to the workings of precisely those forms of power from which Deleuze appears to deem them exempt.

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