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# Cultural translation, politics of disempowerment and the reinvention of queer power and politics

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## Abstract

This article addresses the task of describing the flows and trends of cultural translation of queer between the USA and Europe, particularly France. Firstly, it demonstrates how queer groups located in France re-translated 'queer made in the USA', inspired by continental philosophy, back into a French idiom in the mid-1990s. It then seeks to explain their contemporary responses to new trends and agendas in queer studies and politics that sound more and more compliant with 'logics of disempowerment'. The re-sexualization and re-politicization of French post-structuralist philosophers and psychoanalysts such as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Lacan, made possible by American queer theory and cultural studies, have been succeeded by a phase in which American theorists seem to crave the traditionally European privilege of being lauded as public intellectuals. At the beginning of the new century, a violent recodification by straight scholars and institutions took place and is still taking place in France: queer and post-colonial studies are dismissed or banned as subjective, unscientific agit prop. Today's benevolent researchers reaffirm their power through powerlessness and 'identify' with the victims they defend. In this context, recent American queer theory and politics can give the impression of being driven by a logic of disempowerment. To illustrate this, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is compared with her *Undoing Gender*. Thus where *Gender Trouble* promoted strategies of resignification and resistance for both gender expression and hate speech, *Undoing Gender* displaces the strategy of resignification from hate speech to what could be called 'master words' such as 'the universal' and 'the human', and this 'neo-universalism' is linked to a politics of vulnerability. Moreover, whereas in *Gender Trouble*, textual or discursive performativity is impersonal and reversible, in *Undoing Gender*, the continental European figure of the philosopher is back. To counter this development, to pursue a strategy of dis-identification with the nation state and the United States, to quit the politics of

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vulnerability or desperation and to reverse the disempowering effects of the neo-assimilationist agenda, the article proposes a specifically French alternative. This consists of seeking to insert a queer version of what Félix Guattari calls 'micropolitics' into the macrocultural agenda of the LGBT right.

### Keywords

French queer theory, American queer theory, politics of disempowerment, cultural translation, Judith Butler, Félix Guattari

The intellectual traffic and irritated fascination that bind France and the USA proved crucial for the development of 'French queer' in the 1990s and continue to be so at the beginning of this new century. Of course it is no easy task to describe the contradictory currents of cultural translation. (Derrideans, indeed, might regard it as properly endless.) Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some of the effects that American queer theory of the first wave (Butler, 1990, 1991, 1993; de Lauretis, 1987, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990) has had on 'French queer', both before and after the relevant texts were translated (Butler, 2002, 2005, 2007; de Lauretis, 2007; Sedgwick, 2008), and to address some of the issues raised. In particular, it is worth looking back on such queer groups as Le Zoo that arose in the mid 1990s in France with the aim of queering not only individuals – we ain't born queer – but also the media, institutions of knowledge such as universities, disciplines such as the social sciences and much more (Figure 1; Zoo, 1998). In doing so, I speak as a queer activist and theorist living, working, and struggling in France and the French university system, while doing my best to disidentify with my assigned nationality and trying, for more than 10 years to 'queer France'.

Understanding how queer groups located in France retranslated the first wave of 'American queer' might also help to understand how they feel today about new trends or new agendas in contemporary queer studies and politics which sound more and more compliant with the 'logic of disempowerment'. Responses to the arrival of the second Butler on the French scene with the preface to the late translation of *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 2005) and *Undoing Gender* (Butler, 2006) support this view. In the French queer context and for reasons I will try to explain, it was difficult not to feel that *Undoing Gender* was undoing *Gender Trouble* (1990), which had enjoyed a politically efficacious oral circulation in France since 1996, notably by sidelining the resource that was queer performativity. This was a new development in the queer contraband between the USA and France: after the resexualization and repoliticization of French post-structuralist philosophers or psychoanalysts such as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Lacan, which allowed American queer theory and cultural studies as it were to 'drag up' French Theory, we were presented with the spectacle of American theorists craving for the privilege of being crowned as philosophers or public intellectuals in the old French style.

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avec le soutien du Centre Gai et lesbien  
**Le séminaire Q.ueer 98-99**  
**CHÉTÉROSEXUALITÉ,**  
**CE DOULOUREUX PROBLÈME**



**King Monika Treut**

L'objectif des séminaires queer du zoo est de faire circuler le plus largement possible un type de savoir et de références relatifs à la construction historique, sociale, politique et culturelle de l'homosexualité, de l'hétérosexualité et des genres. Il est d'autant plus urgent de créer de tels espaces de savoir que l'on se fait traiter de "radicaux du campus" par des sociologues éminemment straight dès que l'on essaye de tirer parti de l'originalité de la pensée queer ou de la spécificité des points de vues gais, lesbiens ou trans. Nous sommes fiers de notre "tradition" réflexive et fatigués, en outre aussi, de voir Pierre Bourdieu s'évertuer à dégayser, à déqueerer, à dépolitiser le savoir queer (Beaubourg, juin 97) et à ridiculiser la pensée féministe (Normale Sup, juin 98).

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**Figure 1.** Flyer handed out by The Zoo for the first queer seminars (1998–1999) in Paris at The Gay and Lesbian Centre and the University of Paris I.

## 'Queer made in France'

What is this thing called 'French queer' that evolved in the late 1990s and in what ways does it differ from Anglo-American queer theory? Although I discovered queer theory in London in a little bookshop called *Compendium* in Camden, and first saw queer images at the 1995 London Gay and Lesbian Film festival (not to mention the queer kiss-in organized by *Outrage* in Piccadilly Circus), I do not feel qualified to comment in detail on the English context. But I suspect that in England, where multiculturalism has left its mark (for good or ill), and where it is possible to use the terms 'identity politics' and 'community' without negative connotations, the fight against republicanism and universalism is not the priority that it is in France. At all events, in contrast to American high queer theory of the 1990s, which had as one of its major political objectives that of going 'beyond' American identity politics (see Fuss, 1991; Halperin, 1997; or see Butler, 1991), when it came to 'French queer theory', identity politics really mattered.

In the USA, the rhetoric of conflict, be it of war between identities, cultures and territories, or of frontier skirmishes (such as those concerning butch or ftm), is part of the self-understanding of communities, including sexual communities. The US-THEM binary operates not only in national and international affairs, but also within sexual and gender communities at the micro level. For a variety of reasons, though, there has been since the 1990s, especially in high theory, a decisive shift towards anti-identitarian positions, with the goal of 'Aufhebung' or going 'beyond' identity politics being presented as the way forward. The orthodox explanation at the time was theoretical and political: identity politics supposedly raised the spectres of essentialism and the renaturalization of identities, especially minoritarian ones. Today, we might regard this war against an essentialism, which did not actually apply very strongly to contemporary gays and lesbians, as a theoretical strategy bound up with economic and racial privilege. Demonizing identity politics was an unaffordable luxury for queers of colour, Chicana lesbians or non-white feminists. Except where they were merely 'strategic' in Spivak's sense, post-modern disquisitions against 'the essentialist menace' were more suited to academics teaching in Ivy League universities and flying first class. It may well have been simple shame, rather than a strictly intellectual concern with the lesbian as a semiotic entity or an undecipherable signifier, that led to a repudiation of the ethnic, sexual or gender identities ascribed by the straight white world and an adoption instead of postmodern conceptions of subjectivity. We could also point to the fact that in the black and white universe of American culture, the possibility of conceiving of identity as a work in progress can be deployed as a means of disrupting binary models and the fixity that goes with them.

Crucial to an understanding of the particularities of 'French' queer politics, by contrast, is the fact that 'French queer' took up the tool of identity politics in order to fight a form of republicanism and universalism which, while supposedly inclusive, egalitarian and neutral, effectively excludes minorities. In the 1990s, baby

queers in France had been fed (and got fed up with) so-called 'French Theory' (Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault and Lacan). For different reasons, mostly theoretical and personal rather than political, these theorists had been among the first to push for an interminable, provisional and contingent conception of identity, even when this did not match the required Lacanian understanding of Freud, as was the case for Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault. From a nascent French queer perspective, the 'American miracle' consisted precisely in the fact that these father figures got reconfigured by American queer theory. And in France this translated back into a rereading, a repoliticization, a resexualization of these authors by French queers. Given their restrictive structuralist backgrounds and the subsequent post-structuralist skills they developed, this was relatively easy to do. Thus it felt good, new and important for us to make the connection between Foucault's French epistemological and sexual closet, his absolute fear of 'confessing', his SM practices and his claim for the happy limbo of non-identity. And at the same time we relished rediscovering and enacting his critique of knowledge and power and answering his call for the insurrection of 'subjugated knowledges'.

### **Post-identarian identity politics**

Thus 'queer in France' developed a post-identarian identity politics. Universalism, republicanism and invisibility were the targets. 'In your face' and affirmative post-identarian queer identities began to burgeon: 'les trans, les pédés, les gouines'. Another specific and very important aspect proved to be the critique of the dominant epistemological regimes of knowledge and power in the (social) sciences, since French universities were still blissfully ignorant of either situated or subjugated forms of knowledge (to say nothing of feminism or cultural studies).

The tools were the deployment of sex, genders, hyper-reflexivity and hyper-constructivism as subcultural skills in identity making, minoritarian performances and performativity, and media visibility (Figure 2). And last but not least, a play with the untranslatable term 'queer' was used to circumvent the usual automatic exclusion and secure access to the public sphere, including knowledge production areas such as 'intellectual circles', universities, publishing houses, and the media.

Did it work? Little by little, there did emerge a cross-cultural Americano-French way of doing or performing queer genders and sexual identities: transgender versus transsexual for instance, or Lesbian SM, or the reclaiming of butch and fem roles (Lemoine and Renard, 2001). Non-normative identities and sexual practices proliferated a little. Subcultural production blossomed in the form of films, diy practices, performances and post-porn subcultures (Bourcier, 2001, 2005).


Perversely, though, this post-identarian identity politics failed to tally with post-modern prescriptions. On the contrary, queer turned out to be far from synonymous with Deleuzian becomings. Saying or believing that Lacanian psychoanalysis and its conceptions of subjectivation had always been queer before queers even existed or named themselves was a calculated misconception which did not work. Nor was queer concerned with the dandification of the self as practised by the late

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Figure 2. Flyer advertising an FtM night at The Zoo.

Foucault. Still less was it about the depoliticization and reprivatization of perversions or the celebration of individualism. And finally queer did not entail an openness synonymous with anti-ghetto, anti-communitarian or minoritarian logics ('gay ghettos' and the Arab 'repli communautaire' being jointly 'public enemy number one' in French culture).

## The new straight mind

At the beginning of the new century, the gap is widening between the homonormative and the homorepublican gay and lesbian agenda (civil unions, marriage, adoption, the fight against ‘coca cola homophobia’ worldwide) and queer agendas focused on epistemological concerns, gender fuck and gender rights. The latter seek precisely to deconstruct that universalism which sustains fights for rights, for inclusion and coalitional politics (with sex workers, say, or trans people, or people of colour), for acceptance by the general public and for access to the political arena.

Though perhaps not as obviously as in other European countries, queers in France nowadays are also opposed to assimilationist and reformist LGBT politics and agendas. They criticize the fact that fighting for gay rights has become synonymous with marriage, victimization and neo-colonial interventions based on a universalizing Eurocentric conception of ‘homosexuality’ – all of which rely on those state, juridical and medical discourses of power (psychology, etc.) which Foucault deconstructed so brilliantly. France may not have got involved in Iraq this time; but we do still have to confront assimilationist occidentalist sexual politics. We have not yet had a gay publication headlining with the words ‘ready for war’ as happened in England (Levitt, 2001), but France is no less engaged than the rest of European LGBT politics in constructing an indicatively homophobic Orient as opposed to the sexually liberated West. Moreover former sexual radicals such as Didier Lestrade from *Act Up Paris*, like his famous English colleague Peter Tatchell are doing very nicely thank you.

Regarding the politics of knowledge and the queering of academic and cultural spaces, a violent backlash by straight scholars and institutions has taken place and is still taking place in the French context. Fields such as cultural studies (to say nothing of queer and post-colonial studies) are dismissed or banned as subjective, unscientific, propagandistic, and incompatible with the ethos of the relevant disciplines, be it sociology, say, or history. It is said that they are not conducive to good manners in classes and symposia. Sadly, French gay and lesbian scholars who are either closeted and/or republican in their sympathies and/or blind to the exclusionary nature of their French academic habitus are helping to do the dirty work.

One could say that in the 1980s, Derrida went deep inside ‘écriture féminine’ and was the best guy to explore it. In the 2000s, by contrast, straight and white academics performing as public intellectuals (a peculiarly French phenomenon) have to some extent succeeded in regulating the production of queer and post-colonial knowledges and politics by using both negative and productive strategies and censorship. One of those strategies is to allow a non-specific form of visibility that effectively prevents any debate. As a result, subaltern minorities cannot really speak or achieve any form of social transformation in the French public space. This successful strategy is associated with a drastic change in the discourse of the power brokers. Instead of relying on explicit positions of power (the ‘mandarin’ model of the 1970s), today’s benevolent researchers, professors and masters keep reaffirming their power through powerlessness and isolation and by ‘identifying’ with the victims they claim to defend



(i.e. all minorities), while remembering always to indicate the social and professional cost such an heroic and solitary involvement implies... for them.

This straight positionality can be expressed in more arrogant way and is not confined to academia. For instance, a novel called *La meilleure part des hommes, les années sida* (2008), written by Tristan Garcia, a young straight graduate of one of the prestigious 'Écoles normales', appeared with the prestigious publisher Gallimard. The book has been extremely well received by the French Press, received a lot of attention during the autumn season in which it appeared and was even crowned with the 'Prix de Flore' in November 2008.

Why is this first novel so great? Here is what the author says on the cover: 'It is the story of an era I didn't go through, of a community and a generation destroyed by AIDS, taking place in areas I never lived in.' Which could be read as: I am straight, I am HIV negative, I know nothing about the gay community but I'm gonna tell you about the love, life, words and death of Guillaume Dustan, a French gay writer who died in 2005; about Didier Lestrade, the founder of Act Up Paris; and about how they hated each other. And I will be rewarded for not writing your usual self-centred novel (autofiction is out of fashion) but a novel depicting an era and a generation I am wholly ignorant of. Oh, and by the way, it is all just an 'exercice de style'. This is a good example of who in the French public, artistic and political sphere is doing the talking and who gets to be heard on the subject of minorities.

### **Undoing Gender Trouble: The 'second Butler' and the politics of disempowerment**

It is in this context that the recent American queer theory and politics can give the impression of being driven by a logic of disempowerment. Is this because of their contamination by assimilationist or integrationist strategies? Could such a thing as a cultural mainstreaming of queer theory and politics be taking place?

A good example of this mainstreaming might be found in the construction and evolution of the French reception of the works and politics of Judith Butler, especially the 'second Butler' of *Undoing Gender* (2004). It is hard to see in what sense if any this book troubles comfortable heterosexual assumptions. Rather, the 'second Butler' appears to be fuelling a logic of disempowerment that extends to the fight for gay and lesbian rights. So what is it about *Undoing Gender* that can be considered as undoing *Gender Trouble*?

There are three respects in which a comparison between *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender* helps to illuminate what Judith Butler's 'new' politics consist of: gender paradigms, strategies, and agency. *Gender Trouble* uses at least three different gender paradigms: the hermeneutic, the performative and the proliferative. According to the hermeneutic paradigm, genders are variously intelligible, so the drag queen, by disrupting the dominant binary sex-gender system, can critique compulsory heterosexuality. According to the performative paradigm, gender is a performance and performative: it can be resignified and misquoted, just as 'queer' can be resignified in an endless Derridean manner. According to the proliferative

paradigm, the drag queen's imitation of a femininity without an original is good news, because the 'natural' binary of sexual difference cannot prevent the proliferation of denaturalized new genders.

It is quite a different story in *Undoing Gender*. In that book, the question is not how to proliferate new genders but how to survive, because 'unintelligible genders' (Butler, 2004: 30)<sup>1</sup> are undesirable and lead to non-recognition. Gender norms are inescapable; worse: 'we desire norms' (Butler, 2004: 31)<sup>2</sup> – which kind of zombifies 'us' (Butler, 2004: 206).<sup>3</sup> We also have to take into account the fact that the interpellation process has changed: those times are gone when 'queer' could invite or resist resignification. Now we have to deal with being called either 'unreal' (Butler, 2004: 30),<sup>4</sup> or 'non human'.

In terms of strategy, *Gender Trouble* (together with *Bodies that Matter*, Butler, 1993) promoted strategies of resignification and resistance for both gender expression and hate speech (to be called 'queer' for instance). And given the renamings and the elaboration of new gender identities that have occurred since the 1990s, either as a precondition for, or as a result of, Butler's analysis, one could say that it worked. *Undoing Gender* displaces the strategy of resignification from hate speech on to what could be called 'master words': such as 'the universal' and 'the human'.

What is happening with agency, which was the major bone of contention in, and maybe one of the weak points of, *Gender Trouble*? Free will, the 'I' of Simone de Beauvoir was strictly forbidden in *Gender Trouble* and any 'we' had necessarily to be contested (as pointed out in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble* focusing on the 'abusive and exclusive feminist "we"'). Agency was dependent on the impersonality of performative repetition, which could not be controlled, still less predicted, by anybody. In *Undoing Gender*, there is a noticeable and radical change in the terms of enunciation. Especially for the French context, the 'I' of the philosopher Judith Butler herself comes across very strongly. And it looked pretty weird (and not at all queer) to see Judith Butler crossing out the word 'queer' at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in June 2005 in a panel dedicated to the French translation of *Gender Trouble*. Not only was any debate foreclosed, but dirty words such as 'queer' or 'performativity' were very unwelcome, to put it mildly. This provoked such fury and rage in the queer group *Panik Qulture*, that they addressed their reluctant queer queen with a flyer (see Figure 3).

Analysing all these moves beyond the frame of a Levinasian ethical turn, it is hard not to conclude that the aim is to redirect performative power in the direction of a neo-humanist and universalist politics addressed to nobody in particular. The performative potential of gender or hate speech has been magically transmogrified into norms and universality. It is to norms that resignification applies and 'ouverture' is the new watchword. How very unthreatening, how full of respectable intentions!

### **Six Feet Under: The politics of vulnerability and neo-universalism**

The difficulty with this new agenda is that it is based on a new presumption of vulnerability whereby in major respects: 'it is unclear that we're still living'

**ORTHODOXY IS NOT SEXY** **ORTHODOXY IS YOUR ENEMY**

## DE LA TRADUCTION CULTURELLE EN VEUX-TU, EN VOILA !

**LISTEN EVERYBODY !  
CECI EST UN INSTANT DE TRADUCTION CULTURELLE LIVE!**

Assurée par des féministes, des post-féministes, des queers, des anormaux de tout poil, des transpédégouines issus de la première vague de trad de Gender Trouble qui dure depuis déjà plus de 10 ans.

Pourquoi sont-ils/elles systématiquement écartés lors des visites de Judith à Paris? N'y a-t-il pas comme un trouble dans la traduction culturelle ?

Qui vous fera croire que la traduction imprimée est le seul moment de l'appropriation/torsion/négociation de Butler en France?

Pourquoi le tiers espace des féministes, des post-féministes, des queers, des anormaux de tout poil, des transpédégouines est-il systématiquement invisibilisé par des gate keepers qui expriment « le sentiment de Butler » à sa place et empêchent les débats ?

Comment de "grands intellectuels" français peuvent-ils passer leur temps à sonner les rédactions des journaux et des magazines pour invalider les lectures politiques des French Freaks et imposer une orthodoxie philo only du texte en expliquant que les autres lectures et appropriations sont l'oeuvre de décervelé(e)s ou n'ont pas l'heure de plaire à leur amie Judith?

**WHO'S TALKING ?**

Le dispositif de pénétration de Gender Trouble en France exclut trop d'acteurs politico-sexuels et vise à un nettoyage straightisant et dépolitisant des effets de la pensée et des politiques queer.

Même si c'est le rêve secret des queers de l'american theory, nous n'avons pas besoin de public intellectuals : ce sont eux qui confisquent le débat public en France.

**JUDITH DON'T GET HEGEMONIC  
ON OUR BACKS !  
STOP BETRAYING YOUR PEOPLE !**

**PANIK CULTURE**  
Contact presse: Marcella Moustache 06.83.24.92.68 – marcellamoustache@yahoo.fr

**WE'RE QUEER, WE'RE HERE,  
FUCKING AND READING  
TROUDUCS ET TRADUCTEURS  
FUCKING BRIGHT AND VERY ANGRY  
NO ERASURE!**



**Figure 3.** Flyer handed out by the queer group Panik Culture at the École Normale Supérieure on 26 May 2005.

(Butler, 2004: 206). We seem to have reached a point where everything can be resignified or culturally retranslated, even the state: 'I think that the state can also be worked and exploited' (Butler, 2004: 116).<sup>5</sup> With this we have reached the limits of that hypertextualism which was already a problem in *Gender Trouble* and which, in the 1980s and the 1990s, exasperated so many post-Derrideans and drove them to despair. One cannot but wonder whether the fact

that signification is always either provisional or performative can be used as a recipe to cook almost anything. As far as agency is concerned, at any rate, the consequences are crystal clear: in *Gender Trouble*, textual or discursive performativity is impersonal and reversible. In *Undoing Gender*, the continental European figure of the philosopher is back. Public intellectuals and philosophers will decide whether a resignification is possible and acceptable.

The shift apparent in the 'second' Butler raises a lot of issues that cannot be dealt with within the scope of this article. But it might be worth listing a few of them for the sake of further debate. For example: is universality open to resignification? Is there any difference between the repetition or performative recitation of such a master word and hate speech against a minority? Isn't this reaccumulation of utterances of universalism part of the biopolitical game we all know? Who is the political subject of the resignification of the universal? What are the consequences if previously impersonal agency or the naming of minoritarian hate speech are annexed by a neo-modernist philosopher author?

Gender used to be undone without an agent but through agency. Why does *Undoing Gender* allow such metaphysical or ontological formulations as 'What does gender want?' (Butler, 2004: 2)<sup>6</sup> or 'What desire wants' (Butler, 2004: 2).<sup>7</sup> Isn't the answer rather simple? Nothing! And as for the political goal of 'expanding the human', the question is the same as for the project of the resignification of universality: is not the category of 'the human' one of the most inflated and hegemonic of all modern concepts?

Queers in Europe are doing things differently. It is far from proven that embracing post 9/11 American queer theory and politics, obsessed as these are with a so-called 'spatial turn' that boils down to geographical global expansionism, is the right way to proceed. The fact that the national American queer bag is getting deflated by trans studies and that American queer stars are going global and craving the limelight as global intellectuals is their business. What we in Europe need as a matter of urgency is an alternative proliferation and re-empowerment which will enable us to pursue a strategy of disidentification with the nation state and enfranchisement from the USA by focusing instead on bi- or multilateral transnational organization.

### **Gloria Gaynor's microculture**

This work is still to be done. Could it work if we rely on old sites of enunciation and the neo-modernist and majoritarian regimes of knowledge and power that the second Butler is calling for? Gloria Gaynor still works, doesn't she? We have survived, haven't we? Haven't we come a long way? Maybe our microcultures are micropolitical enough already. Maybe queer microcultures already do feed into what, borrowing a term from Felix Guattari, I would call queer micropolitics.

In the era of The CMI (Capitalisme Mondial Intégré), or Global Integrated Capitalism, the best political tool is 'the production of subjectivities'. This is the first micro-level at which politics works. Here Guattari agrees with Foucault in

stressing the micro-level of power: power is everywhere and produces and regulates subjects (Guattari and Rolnik, 1986, 2007, 2008). The production of subjectivities is a huge industry. The good news is that this industry also produces dissident subjectivities – even if it is often very difficult to prevent these from being ‘hijacked’, that is, recuperated, integrated, assimilated, or neutralized. For instance, according to Guattari, psychoanalysis is a major eraser of subjective potentialities (Guattari, 1984). The crucial question, though, is who has the insight or the authority to distinguish between a ‘good’ subjectivity, which Guattari calls a molecular or processual subjectivity, and a ‘bad’ one (Guattari 1995, 2009). For although Guattari might be very hard on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysts, he puts himself in a difficult position too: that of having to decide what is molecular and resistant and what is not – as can be seen in his travel book *Micropolitics* (1986 and 2007). This consists of a diary record of Guattari’s trip to Brazil in 1982, at a time when Lula was running the PT (‘Partido dos Trabalhadores’ or ‘Workers’ Party’). And Guattari, unlike Deleuze who never travelled and didn’t want to get mixed up with actual grassroots politics, found himself in the position of having to answer many questions from Brazilian homosexual and lesbian feminist activists.

### Queering Guattari’s micropolitics

Of course Guattari is very clever and makes it very clear that he cannot say for certain whether a particular group or a movement is on the right path of ‘singularization’ or ‘molecularization’. As we know, at that time, dialectics was out in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s thinking, but nonetheless something that is not molecular can become molecular and vice versa. Guattari is always very tough on and very suspicious of minorities in general – even when travelling in a country like Brazil where, as many of his encounters remind him, it really does make sense to talk of cultural minorities. Lula and Solidarnosc in Poland are certainly happy examples of singularization, but when it comes to minorities such as the homosexual, the feminist and the Black, Guattari finds them very problematic. Beware of the reification of identities! Beware of activists who end up forming ‘splinter groups’! Beware of the homosexual and feminist movements which are always on the verge of forming ‘ghettos’!

The opposite of these unproductive or even dangerous singularization processes, is the now famous notion of ‘becomings’ (‘devenir’). One of the paradoxes is that Guattari already knows where to look for these. For instance, Black becoming can be found, strangely enough, in the French poet Rimbaud, (Guattari and Rolnik, 2007: 105).<sup>8</sup> Homosexual becoming cannot be found in the gay liberation front. In fact, minorities know nothing about their own becoming and Guattari is very keen on asking them to transversalize, to get as far as they can from their cultural identities and resources, in order not to become ‘reified’. How come minorities

are called upon to resist the danger of 'reification' much more strongly than majorities such as the heterosexual regime?

My hypothesis is that Guattari does not realize that his insistence on the importance of 'subjectivation', which at that time can be seen as an anti-Marxist stance and anti-materialistic strategy, entails attaching comparable importance to microcultures. He doesn't recognize that the feminist and gay movements of the 1970s and 1980s were already putting into practice his demand that 'the subjective economy' should be taken into account as part of the political economy. For instance, when Guattari considers the homosexual movement as a dead end, a fixed and reified cultural identity, or when he says that it is synonymous with non-becoming or turning back, he does so because he is 'queer blind', unable to know or to see how those microcultures are very much alive, polyvalent and engaged in micro-politics. And when we consider the speed at which microcultural proliferation, changes, turns and fights have succeeded each other since the 1970s, we might conclude that queer microcultures are a good starting point, and not a dead end, especially since they did not necessarily end up mired in dominant recoding or stratification. The tension between fixed gay identities and the LGBT agenda on the one hand and queer lives on the other is sufficient to prove the point, and to demonstrate that it is not necessary to sacrifice minoritarian agencies in order to resist, say, Global Integrated Capitalism, norms or oppressions. Actually it is fairly obvious that assimilationist LGBT politics go hand in hand with dominant recodings, and that it is a burgeoning queer materialism like the German one which might effect a critique of (gay and lesbian) capitalism.

No wonder Guattari could not understand the existence and the microcultural meaning of the 'macho man' in gay communities in the 1980s or of SM cultures generally.<sup>9</sup> He was not listening to the *Village People* and thought SM was completely disconnected from homosexual culture and politics although he was aware of the existence of feminist and homosexual movements in France. The fact that he became a gay-friendly icon with the publication of the famous issue of *Recherches* called *Trois Milliards de Pervers* (Hocquenghem and Schérer, 1973) which was banned in 1973, may be an example of misprision, given the information on the status of homosexuals in the journal provided by the unofficial biography of Deleuze and Guattari (Dosse, 2007).

In fact, materialist feminists (I am thinking especially of Wittig and her *Straight Mind*; Wittig, 1992) did demand that Marxism should take the production of subjectivities into account, as did other feminisms in the 1970s and the 1980s. The French FHAR (Homosexual Front of Revolutionary Action) also adopted this strategy, something the straight leftist activists of the 1970s and the 1980s and the so-called French Left have failed and are still reluctant to do (witness the composition of so-called left parties in France today). And so it is no accident that *Trois Milliards de Pervers* had been put together by the FHAR and not the CERFI (Guattari's own independent research centre) where it was jokingly referred to as 'le numéro des pédés'.

## Queer power: Is the invisibility of microcultures and macropolitics the future?

In order, among other things, to escape the politics of vulnerability or desperation, it is vital to try and find out why this thing called 'queer' proved to be a great 'subjective' resource but failed to align, to coalesce in a legible social and political movement at local or transnational level. How might we engineer a queer collective capable of confronting the works of Integrated Global Capitalism differently at a macro level now? How might we articulate a queer 'macro'-politics to fight the mostly gay and American assimilationist or integrationist agenda?

Guattari was very much against the whole concept of identity and cultural identity, which he found to be incompatible with the process of singularization and the production of differences.<sup>10</sup> And whatever the flaws in his understanding of 'culture' and 'identity', he was probably right in saying that it is very difficult to undo the knot between recognition politics, rights and fixed identity – as Judith Butler must surely be aware.

I hope I have made it clear that the Butlerian call for a return to universalism is reductionist. Between the abstract agency of *Gender Trouble*, the very modern 'I' of the philosopher of *Undoing Gender*, and the restricted and excluding 'we' of the so-called LGBT agenda of rights, there is room for queer macro cultural agencies and agendas. That agenda, indeed, must focus on expanding and proliferating agencies, creating collective possibilities for action in a post-universalist world in order to fuel logics of empowerment and come up with queer agendas in the public sphere, replacing the gay and lesbian one that gets endlessly replicated at the global level even when it is deeply inappropriate, not to say racist.

The queer politics of the 1990s need to be reworked. The situation we face is the reverse of that diagnosed by the materialist feminists of the 1980s and anti-Marxist, anti-dialectic, anti-psychoanalytic or schizoanalytic figures such as Guattari. Where they rightly criticized Marxists for ignoring subjectivities, we have opened up and continue to contribute to the subjective economy. We can swim and move in spaces they and we were calling for. So what is the next step, knowing that it must and can preserve and build on this subcultural subjective production and proliferation?

Not only is the LGBT assimilationist agenda disempowering, its political project of 'spreading everywhere' replicates a normative arrogance. Foucault famously insisted that 'power is everywhere' (Foucault, 1976). To which Guattari would probably have rejoined: 'Yes, but micropolitics are not everywhere'. What we need to do is find the right places in which to insert queer micropolitics so as to maximize their indivisible cultural empowering potential.

### Notes

1. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the law of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility) is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always *as if you were* human but with the

- sense that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favour. (Butler, 2004: 30)
2. The normative aspiration here at work has to do with the ability to live and breathe and move and would no doubt belong somewhere in what is called a philosophy of freedom. (Butler, 2004: 31)
  3. Although we need norms in order to live and to live well, and to know in what direction to transform our social world, we are also constrained by norms in ways that sometimes do violence to us and which, for reasons of social justice, we must oppose. On the other hand, normativity refers to the process of normalization, the way that certain norms, ideas and ideals hold sway over embodied life, provide coercive criteria for normal 'men' and 'women' And in this second sense, we see that norms are what governs 'intelligible' life, 'real' men and 'real' women. And that when we defy these norms, it is unclear *whether we are still living* or ought to be, whether our lives are valuable, or can be made to be, whether our genders are real, or even can be regarded as such. (Butler, 2004: 206)
  4. Indeed, the task of international lesbian and gay politics is no less than a remaking of reality, a reconstitution of the human and a brokering of the question, what is and what is not livable? So what is the injustice opposed by such work? I would put it in this way: to be called unreal and to have that call, as it were, institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against whom (or against which) the human is made. It is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality. To be called a copy, to be called unreal is one way in which one can be oppressed, but consider that it is more fundamental than that. To be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject, as a possible or potential subject but to be unreal is something else again. (Butler, 2004: 30)
  5. The state is not reducible to law, and power is not reducible to state power. It would be wrong to understand the state as operating with a single set of interests or to gauge its effects as if they are unilaterally successful. I think the state can also be worked and exploited. (Butler, 2004: 116)
  6. Although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way, there is nevertheless a desire that is constitutive of gender itself and, as a result, no quick or easy way to separate the life of gender from the life of desire. What does gender want? (Butler, 2004: 1–2)
  7. Certain humans are not recognized as human at all, and that leads to yet another order of unlivable life. If part of what desire wants is to gain recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will want recognition as well. (Butler, 2004: 2)
  8. Arthur Rimbaud, dans *Les Illuminations*, parle d'un devenir-noir. D'une certaine manière, ce devenir-noir concerne aussi les autres catégories ethnographiques. . . Des singularités féminines, poétiques, homosexuelles ou noires peuvent entrer en rupture avec les stratifications dominantes. Tel est le ressort principal des minorités: une problématique de la multiplicité et de la pluralité et non une question d'identité culturelle, de retour à l'identique, de retour à l'archaïque. (Guattari and Rolnik, 2007: 105)
  9. Je crois que c'est vous qui devriez m'expliquer cette histoire de macho men. Ce que je me demande par rapport à cette problématique, c'est si, indépendamment de ce caractère de modélisation et contre-modélisation, il n'y aurait pas également une conjugaison avec le sadomasochisme, comme Suely l'a signalé. Une chose qui m'a étonné (et c'est un peu par hasard que je m'en suis aperçu), c'est l'augmentation considérable dans les quartiers de



prostitution de Paris, de femmes équipées d'un matériel sadomasochiste: des fouets et des choses de ce genre. C'est selon moi un phénomène assez nouveau. J'ai l'impression de ne pas avoir vu cela avant, au moins pas si ouvertement dans les rues. Je crois qu'aux Etats-Unis, les groupes sadomasochistes étaient déjà très forts depuis quelques années et cela n'a pas changé, ni atteint les nouveaux homosexuels. (Guattari and Rolnik, 2007: 121)

10. cf. Chapter 1: 'Culture : un concept réactionnaire', passim.

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