

IAN BUCHANAN, DELEUZE AND GUATTARI'S ANTI-OEDIPUS

Reviewed by Edward Willatt

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This guide to Anti-Oedipus comes at a time when this text is increasingly under attack by a number of formidable critics. It urgently needs the kind of critical analysis and defence that Ian Buchanan provides here. Criticisms of Anti-Oedipus have been prompted by the urgent priorities and concerns of contemporary thought and the contemporary world. Deleuze and Guattari are charged with being unable to account adequately for political situations, agency and action. Buchanan meets these challenges by effectively defending the value and relevance of Anti-Oedipus through his notion of 'practical Deleuzism.' This achievement is furthered by his ability to explain and analyse this complex text in ways that make this a highly readable and engaging guide.

The book begins by spending a chapter putting Anti-Oedipus "in context" (1). We find valuable biographical information here. This includes an account of the relationship between Deleuze and Guattari. Such insight is scarce in other books in English. Yet this context-setting does greatly determine how the reader is introduced to Anti-Oedipus by this guide. Most striking is Buchanan's claim in the first chapter that "If it is legitimate to say Anti-Oedipus is a May '68 book however, then it is because it was in a spirit of mutual ambivalence and uncertainty about May '68 that the two thinkers first came together in 1969" (8). This contrasts sharply with how Anti-Oedipus itself begins. Deleuze and Guattari seek to establish the horizon of thought which must be the horizon of desiring-production itself. I would argue that they begin their book by raising philosophical questions about how desire works and what it can do. This seems clear from the opening sentence of Anti-Oedipus: "It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts" (1)¹ To argue that context is inescapable, if this is Buchanan's contention, is a philosophical thesis that needs to be argued for. Deleuze and Guattari seem to want to throw open the horizon of thought so that it is able to encounter desire as being *at work everywhere*. They do not want to situate thought and I would argue that neither do they think thought can be situated or accounted for in terms of a historical and cultural context. For them context is not inescapable and thought is revolutionary insofar as it escapes its context and given meaning. In defence of his thesis Buchanan points to the fact that May '68 involved uprisings in Vietnam and Algeria as well as Paris. Anti-Oedipus can therefore be called a May '68 book without it being attached to a "a purely local affair" (12). He argues that "It is legitimate to treat Anti-Oedipus as a May '68 book to the extent that May '68 itself is treated as a complex, multiply determined event whose place in history is far from settled" (12). However, I would argue that Anti-Oedipus is as much a 1789 book or an 1848 book. If desire is always at work and this is the horizon of thought we must turn to the temporal syntheses that are the workings of desire. The conception of time at work in synthesis is non-linear and non-sequential. It is in this sense that any organisation of society, no matter how local or familial, can be said to have "opened onto all the names of history" (Anti-Oedipus, 168). This is the horizon of desiring-production and must include the production of Anti-Oedipus itself. It follows from this philosophical stance that we cannot

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 1984).

introduce the book by accounting for it in terms of a particular event and particular historical persons. Buchanan's argument is that Deleuze and Guattari are driven to account for May '68 by staging "a complete rethinking of political concepts like power, power relations, groups, group identity, the event, and so on, and insofar as it takes up this challenge, Anti-Oedipus is appropriately described as a May '68 book" (19). Yet from the perspective of desiring-production, which must be the horizon of thought, the most recent revolution does not take priority over any other. The conception of time that desire introduces is the non-linear time of desiring-production, the temporal syntheses through which disparate and fragmented partial objects are connected, recorded and consumed. Thus whilst Buchanan provides a valuable and much needed defence of the political relevance of Anti-Oedipus this needs to be strengthened by grasping desire as political on its own terms. It cannot rely upon the most recent of its moments or events to produce something new and revolutionary in a situation.

Such criticisms should not, however, overshadow Ian Buchanan's achievement in explaining and analysing the immanence of desire to the social. Anti-Oedipus is shown not simply to celebrate the ability of desire to flow but to situate such flows and explore what they can do in a situation. Buchanan shows how Deleuze and Guattari are concerned with strategic questions such as: "'Where will the revolution come from?' and 'How will it be betrayed?'" (12). The second chapter is an "Overview of Themes" (20) and engages more closely with how desire is *at work everywhere*. Buchanan emphasises the distinction between interest and desire to great effect. This helps to highlight the political relevance of Anti-Oedipus in its critique of the interests that are assigned to people and that mark out political and everyday situations. It enables the reader to grasp the difference between interests, which are so pervasive and seemingly commonsensical, and desire as an unsettling and revolutionary force. There is also an effective presentation of Freud's thought that takes us beyond Deleuze and Guattari's criticisms to show his major contribution to their thought (27f). Buchanan then sums up their disagreement with psychoanalysis as "The difference between these two ways of approaching the unconscious (as reservoir of repressed thought and fantasies or as a productive process which gives rise to machines)" (34). In this way the nature of desire as production itself and as immanent to the social is belatedly brought to the forefront. Yet one further move is missing at this stage. This is the question of the matter or materials of desire. These are partial objects and because these are not introduced yet we do not feel the full force of desiring-production. We need to be brought to see that desiring-production is not about the transcendence of material situations by flows. Buchanan emphasises "the political and historical content" (35) of desiring-production but is this material or ideal? I would argue that Deleuze and Guattari first of all present the immanence of desire and matter. They re-think these two notions through each other. There is a danger of missing the full effect of this move, which will bring thought "as close as possible to matter" (Anti-Oedipus, 19).

Chapter three is the longest and deals with "Reading the Text" (38). However, it starts by adding further context:

we could say that Deleuze and Guattari were both of the view that a mode of analysis that insists on filtering everything through the triangulating lens of daddy-mommy-me could not hope to explain either why or how May '68 happened, nor indeed why it went the way it did. (39)

This is a valid claim but could it not be equally said of other revolutions? We need to ask

why May '68 is more significant than other moments for Anti-Oedipus and what Buchanan's thesis adds to our understanding of the text. I would argue that it narrows the scope that Anti-Oedipus does have if we approach it from the start in terms of desiring-production. As I've already argued, for Deleuze and Guattari we must not seek to limit thought to a historical and cultural context if we want to grasp how it is produced or how it occurs. However, when Buchanan analyses the text his concern with context is left behind and the workings of desire are developed very effectively indeed. Here we do get to see how desiring-production is the horizon of Anti-Oedipus. The analysis of Marx's role is extremely effective at bringing out the universality and abstract nature of capitalism for Deleuze and Guattari. This is achieved by using examples such as the growth of Microsoft. Such examples develop Buchanan's notion of a 'practical Deleuzism.' They are thought-provoking because they show the relevance of Anti-Oedipus to contemporary political concerns. They are also evidence of a talent, rare among commentators, of being able to use examples without reducing the universal philosophical account in question to the particularities of the example. The growth of Microsoft, with which the reader will be somewhat familiar, is exceeded and put in context by "the perspective of the software industry as a whole" (56). Desire is shown to be at work marking out situations in which we find ourselves and making escape possible by always exceeding them. Buchanan explains that Microsoft is dominant in our lives but is itself exceeded by the universal workings of desire. This adds a great deal to Deleuze and Guattari's concern with the question 'how does desire work?' Also of note is Buchanan's analysis of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of group fantasy. He shows how Anti-Oedipus is able to challenge the contemporary concern with identity by relating it to apparently obsolete colonial fantasies invested in the idea of an immortal empire (88). Buchanan also shows that for Deleuze and Guattari we cannot take the notion of a group for granted. This is both because it can become reactionary and repressive, and because the very notion is problematic in a productive sense. He insightfully sums up this practical and political problem: "True social formations are more enduring than crowds and it is precisely the problem of how they endure, or rather how they are made to be more enduring than spontaneous irruptions like crowds, that is central to this [third] chapter of Anti-Oedipus" (91). Buchanan thus reveals how, as Deleuze and Claire Parnet put it in Dialogues II, "... *desire only exists when assembled or machined*" (96).²

We find that Kant's influence on Anti-Oedipus is downplayed. Buchanan points out that Deleuze and Guattari reject Kant's notion that desire is hallucinatory and delusional (48). Kant is further distanced from them by Buchanan's argument that: "Passive synthesis, then, is not just a capacity to receive sensation, as Kant might have it, but implies a synthetic ability to constitute the sensate organism as well" (52). I want to argue that this fails to grasp the nature of Kantian synthesis. Buchanan's position follows from his reading of the three synthesis of desiring-production in Anti-Oedipus. He argues that they need to be analysed in terms of the three syntheses of Difference and Repetition (50-51). Such a reading contrasts strongly with Deleuze and Guattari's "Preface for the Italian Edition of A Thousand Plateaus."³ They write that

The ambition of Anti-Oedipus was Kantian in spirit. We attempted a kind of Critique of Pure Reason for the unconscious: hence the determination of those

² Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Dialogues II, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Continuum, 1987).

³ Gilles Deleuze, Two Regimes of Madness trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 308-311.

syntheses proper to the unconscious; the unfolding of history as the functioning of these syntheses; and the denunciation of Oedipus as the 'inevitable illusion' falsifying all historical production. (309)

This conflicts with Buchanan's view that "the concept of passive synthesis and with it the schizophrenic apparatus as a whole rests on the philosophical foundation Deleuze puts in place in Difference and Repetition, particularly his magnificent conceptualization of the three syntheses of time: habit, memory and death" (50-51). This excludes Kant's role insofar as the three syntheses of Difference and Repetition are explicitly associated with Hume, Bergson and Nietzsche. In defence of Kant's role in Anti-Oedipus I would argue that his notion of synthesis is not simply receptive. It is constitutive because no 'thing in itself' is given in advance. Rather than seeking dogmatically to grasp a 'thing in itself,' synthesis seeks to constitute objects using the materials provided by sensible intuition and the necessary a priori forms that are intuitive (space and time), imaginary (the schematism) and conceptual (the categories). For Kant in the Critique of Pure Reason the being of an object depends upon its inclusion in the unity of possible experience. There is then much to be explored about Kant's role in Anti-Oedipus. For Kant we get characters like the dogmatist and the sceptic as products of the inevitable illusion of 'things in themselves,' echoing Deleuze and Guattari's critique of "Oedipus as dogma" (Anti-Oedipus, 51). In Kant's Critique of Pure Reason the inevitable outcome of dogmatism, which projects the 'thing in itself' as the horizon of thought and activity, is "the weariness and utter indifferentism" (7)⁴ of the sceptic. This is echoed when Deleuze and Guattari provide an analysis of Freud's scepticism in one of his late texts.⁵ They write of how

A great beauty animates this text of Freud: an undefined something is hopeless, disenchanted, tired, and at the same time a serenity, a certitude in the finished work. It is Freud's testament. He is going to die, and knows it.

The cure tends to be more and more interminable! (Anti-Oedipus, 65)

This connection is strengthened when we consider Deleuze's "On Four Poetic Formulas That Might Summarise the Kantian Philosophy".⁶ Here Hamlet's formula "The time is out of joint" shows that he is "the first hero who truly needed time in order to act" (28). This is in contrast to Oedipus who "is still urged on by his wandering as a derived movement" (28). For Deleuze this formulates a key part of Kant's philosophy and shows the contribution his thought can make to overcoming Oedipus. It is temporal synthesis that produces action rather than the blueprint for action being provided by a mythical space of Oedipal characters that assigns our roles and functions in advance. Such examples suggest that any guide to Anti-Oedipus must at least leave open the question of Kant's role.

The final chapter deals with "Reception and Influence" (133). It is a very useful and enlightening survey of the state of Deleuze studies worldwide for those of us who are only able to read English. It also gives a welcome and vigorous defence of Anti-Oedipus against those critics who engage little with the text itself. It gives examples of readings that are

⁴ Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996). Page Ax in the standard pagination.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey (New York: Macmillan, 1974) vol. 23. This essay was first published in 1937.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso), 27-35.

superficial and makes clear the great challenge that the text presents to the reader. There is very strong criticism of Slavoj Žižek in a footnote where Buchanan writes that “It is almost impossible to say enough bad things about Žižek's book [Organs without Bodies]⁷” (149). He makes the criticism that both Žižek and Alain Badiou borrow from Deleuze “while setting aside those aspects which would challenge their positions without actually having to negate them in a theoretical sense” (136). This will I think have the effect of encouraging readers to engage as fully as possible with the text. Buchanan argues persuasively that Anti-Oedipus suffers from a lack of engagement and makes the case for its re-evaluation even more compelling.

In concluding this review I would say that my major critical concern is that this guide does not question its own basic assumptions. These are that the historical and cultural context should determine how we approach a philosophical text. Deleuze and Guattari wrote that reading “is a productive use of the literary machine, a montage of desiring-machines, a schizoid exercise that extracts from the text its revolutionary force” (Anti-Oedipus, 106). They might also have taken issue with Buchanan's attempts to situate them as authors as a way of introducing Anti-Oedipus. In their final collaboration, What is Philosophy?,⁸ they argue that

The conceptual persona is not the philosopher's representative but, rather, the reverse: the philosopher is only the envelope of his principal conceptual persona and of all the other personae who are the intercessors

[*intercesseurs*], the real subjects of his philosophy. (What is Philosophy?, 64)

For them this is very important for how we approach a text because “conceptual personae carry out the movements that describe the author's plane of immanence, and they play a part in the very creation of the author's concepts” (What is Philosophy?, 63). However, Buchanan's ‘practical Deleuzism’ and the explanations of key notions and mechanisms in Anti-Oedipus that he provides do make this a valuable guide. It does manage to both challenge formidable academic critics and to engage and guide those who are coming to this text for the first time. This is a considerable achievement.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, Organs without Bodies (London: Routledge, 2004).

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, What is Philosophy?, trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London and New York: Verso, 1994).