Intellectuals and Power

Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault

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Michel Foucault : A Maoist told me: "I can see why Sartre is on our side, for what and why he is involved in politics; and you, I can even see why you do it, since you've always considered imprisonment a problem. But Deleuze, really, I don't see it." His question took me totally by surprise, because it's crystal clear to me.

Gilles Deleuze : Maybe it's because for us the relationships between theory and praxis are being lived in a new way. On the one hand, praxis used to be conceived as an application of theory, as a consequence; on the other hand, and inversely, praxis was supposed to inspire theory, it was supposed to create a new form of theory. In any case, their relationship took the form of a process of totalization, in one shape or another. Maybe we're asking the question in a new way. For us the relationships between theory and praxis are much more fragmentary and partial. In the first place, a theory is always local, related to a limited domain, though it can be applied in another domain that is more or less distant. The rule of application is never one of resemblance. In the second place, as soon as a theory takes hold in its own domain, it encounters obstacles, walls, collisions, and these impediments create a need for the theory to be relayed by another kind of discourse (it is this other discourse which eventually causes the theory to migrate from one domain to another). Praxis is a network of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory relays one praxis to another. A theory cannot be developed without encountering a wall, and a praxis is needed to break through. Take yourself, for example, you begin by theoretically analyzing a milieu of imprisonment like the psychiatric asylum of nineteenth-century capitalist society. Then you discover how necessary it is precisely for those who are imprisoned to speak on their own behalf, for them to become a relay (or perhaps you were already a relay for them), but these people are prisoners, they're in prison. This was the logic behind your creating the GIP (Group for Information on Prisons): to promote the conditions in which the prisoners themselves could speak. It would be totally misguided to say, as the Maoist seemed to be saying, that you were making a move toward praxis by applying your theories. In your case we find neither an application, nor a reform program, nor an investigation in the traditional sense. It is something else entirely: a system of relays in an assemblage, in a multiplicity of bits and pieces both theoretical and practical. For us, the intellectual and theorist have ceased to be a subject, a consciousness, that represents or is representative. And those involved in political struggle have ceased to be represented,

whether by a party or a union that would in turn claim for itself the right to be their conscience. Who speaks and who acts? It's always a multiplicity, even in the person that speaks or acts. We are all groupuscles. There is no more representation. There is only action, the action of theory, the action of praxis, in the relations of relays and networks.

Michel Foucault : It seems to me that traditionally, an intellectual's political status resulted from two things: 1) the position as an intellectual in bourgeois society, in the system of capitalist production, in the ideology which that system produces or imposes (being exploited, reduced to poverty, being rejected or "cursed," being accused of subversion or immorality, etc.), and 2) intellectual discourse itself, in as much as it revealed a particular truth, uncovering political relationships where none were before perceived. These two forms of becoming politicized were not strangers to one another, but they didn't necessarily coincide either. You had the "cursed" intellectual, and you had the "socialist" intellectual. In certain moments of violent reaction, the powers that be willingly confused these two politicizations with one another – after 1848, after the Commune, after 1940: the intellectual was rejected, persecuted at the very moment when "things" began to appear in their naked "truth," when you were not supposed to discuss the king's new clothes. Since the latest resurgence, however, intellectuals realize that the masses can do without them and still be knowledgeable: the masses know perfectly well what's going on, it is perfectly clear to them, they even know better than the intellectuals do, and they say so convincingly enough. But a system of power exists to bar, prohibit, invalidate their discourse and their knowledge – a power located not only in the upper echelons of censorship, but which deeply and subtly permeates the whole network of society. The intellectuals are themselves part of this system of power, as is the idea that intellectuals are the agents of "consciousness" and discourse. The role of the intellectual is no longer to situate himself "slightly ahead" or "slightly to one side" so he may speak the silent truth of each and all; it is rather to struggle against those forms of power where he is both instrument and object: in the order of "knowledge," "truth," "consciousness," and "discourse." So it is that theory does not express, translate, or apply a praxis; it is a praxis – but local and regional, as you say: non-totalizing. A struggle against power, a struggle to bring power to light and open it up wherever it is most invisible and insidious. Not a struggle for some "insight" or "realization" (for a long time now consciousness as knowledge has been acquired by the masses, and consciousness as subjectivity has been taken, occupied by the bourgeoisie) – but a struggle to undermine and take power side by side with those who are fighting, and not off to the side trying to enlighten them. A "theory" is the regional system of this struggle.

Gilles Deleuze : Yes, that's what a theory is, exactly like a tool box. It has nothing to do with the signifier… A theory has to be used, it has to work. And not just for itself. If there is no one to use it, starting with the theorist himself who, as soon as he uses it ceases to be a theorist, then a theory is worthless, or its time has not yet arrived. You don't go back to a theory, you make new ones, you have others to make. It is strange that Proust, who passes for a pure intellectual, should articulate it so clearly: use my book, he says, like a pair of glasses to view the outside, and if it isn't to your liking, find another pair, or invent your own, and your device will necessarily be a device you can fight with. A theory won't be totalized, it multiplies. It's rather in the nature of power to totalize, and you say it exactly: theory is by nature opposed to power. As soon as a theory takes hold at this or that point, it runs up against the impossibility of having the least practical consequence without there being an explosion, at some distant point if necessary. That's why the idea of reform is so stupid and hypocritical. Either the

reform is undertaken by those who claim to be representatives, whose business it is to speak for others, in their name, and this is how power adjusts, distributing itself along reinforced lines of repression. Or else the reform is demanded by those who have a stake in it, and then it is no longer a reform but a revolution. A revolutionary action, by virtue of its partial character, is determined to call into question the totality of power and its hierarchy. This is nowhere clearer than in the prisons: the tiniest, meekest demand by the prisoners is enough to kill Pleven's pseudo reform bill. If little children managed to make their protests heard in nursery school, or even simply their questions, it would be enough to derail the whole educational system. In reality, the system in which we live cannot tolerate anything, whence you see its radical fragility at every point, and at the same time its global repression. In my opinion, you were the first to teach us a fundamental lesson, both in your books and in the practical domain: the indignity of speaking for others. What I mean is, we laughed at representation, saying it was over, but we didn't follow this "theoretical" conversion through – namely, theory demanded that those involved finally have their say from a practical standpoint.

Michel Foucault : And when the prisoners began to speak, they had their own theory of prison, punishment, and justice. What really matters is this kind of discourse against power, the counter-discourse expressed by prisoners or those we call criminals, and not a discourse on criminality. The problem of imprisonment is a local and marginal problem, because no more than 100,000 people go through prison in any year. But this marginal problem shakes people up. I was surprised to see how many who were not in prison interested in the problem, to see so many people respond who were in no way predisposed to hearing this discourse, and surprised to see how they took it. How do you explain it? Is it not simply that, generally speaking, the penal system is that form where power shows itself as power in the most transparent way? To put someone in prison, to keep him there, deprive him of food and heat, keep him from going out, from making love, etc., is that not the most delirious form of power imaginable? The other day I was talking with a woman who had been in prison, and she said: "To think that one day in prison they punished me, a forty year old woman, by forcing me to eat stale bread." What is striking in this story is not only the puerility of the exercise of power, but the cynicism with which it is exercised as power, in a form that is archaic and infantile. They teach us how to be reduced to bread and water when we're kids. Prison is the only place where power can be exercised in all its nakedness and in its most excessive dimensions, and still justify itself as moral. "I have every right to punish because you know very well how evil it is to steal, to kill…" This is what is so fascinating about prisons: for once power does not hide itself, does not mask itself, but reveals itself as tyranny down to the most insignificant detail, cynically applied; and yet it's pure, it's entirely "justified," because it can be entirely formulated in a morality that frames its exercise: its brute tyranny thus appears as the serene domination of Good over Evil, of order over disorder.

Gilles Deleuze : Now that I think about it, the inverse is equally true. It's not only prisoners who are treated like children, but children who are treated like prisoners. Children are subjected to an infantilization which is not their own. In this sense, schools are a little like prisons, and factories are very much like them. All you have to do is look at Renault's entrance. Or anywhere: you need three vouchers to go make pee-pee during the day. You uncovered a text by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth-century, a proposal for prison reform: it is in the name of this noble reform that Bentham establishes a circular system, where at one and the same time the renovated prison serves as a model, and where without noticing it, one moves from the

school to the factory, from the factory to the prison and vice versa. There you have the essence of reformism, of representation which has been reformed. However, when people begin to speak and act in their own name, they don't oppose one representation, even one which has been reformed, to another representation; they don't oppose another mode of representation to power's false mode of representation. For example, I recall when you said that there was no popular justice against justice, it happens at another level altogether.

Michel Foucault : In my view, what comes to light beneath the hatred which the people have for the judicial system, judges, tribunals, prisons, etc., is not only the idea of some other, better justice, but first and foremost the perception of a singular point where power is exercised to the detriment of the people. The anti-judicial struggle is a struggle against power, and in my opinion it's not a struggle against injustice, against the injustice of the judicial system, nor is it for a judicial institution that would work more efficiently. Still, isn't it striking that every time there are riots, revolts and seditions, the judicial apparatus has come under fire, in the same way and at the same time as the fiscal apparatus, the army, and the other forms of power? My hypothesis, but it's just a hypothesis, is that popular tribunals, for example, those during the Revolution, have been a way for the lower middle class, in alliance with the masses, to recuperate and harness the movement unleashed by the struggle against the judicial system. To harness it, they proposed this system of tribunals, which defers to a justice that could be just, to a judge that could pronounce a just sentence. The very form of the tribunal belongs to an ideology of justice which is a bourgeois ideology.

Gilles Deleuze : If we look at today's situation, power necessarily has a global or total vision. What I mean is that every form of repression today, and they are multiple, is easily totalized, systematized from the point of view of power: the racist repression against immigrants, the repression in factories, the repression in schools and teaching, and the repression of youth in general. We mustn't look for the unity of these forms of repression only in reaction to May '68, but more so in a concerted preparation and organization concerning our immediate future. Capitalism in France is dropping its liberal, paternalistic mask of full employment; it desperately needs a "reserve" of unemployed workers. It's from this vantage point that unity can be found in the forms of repression I already mentioned: the limitation of immigration, once it's understood that we're leaving the hardest and lowest paying jobs to them; the repression in factories, because now it's all about once again giving the French a taste for hard work; the struggle against youth and the repression in schools and teaching, because police repression must be all the more active now that there is less need for young people on the job market. Every category of professional is going to be urged to exercise police functions which are more and more precise: professors, psychiatrists, educators of all stripes, etc. Here we see something you predicted a long time ago, and which we didn't think possible: the global reinforcement of the structures of imprisonment. So, faced with such a global politics of power, our response is local: counter-attacks, defensive fire, an active and sometimes preventative defense. We mustn't totalize what is totalizable only by power, and which we could totalize only by restoring the representative forms of centralism and hierarchy. On the other hand, what we must do is find a way to create lateral connections, a system of networks, a grass roots base. And that is what is so difficult. In any case, reality for us does not pass through the usual political channels in the traditional sense, i.e. competition and the distribution of power, like the so-called representative authorities of the French Communist Party or the French Trade Union. Reality is what is actually going on in a factory, a school, a barracks, a prison, a police

station. Consequently, action there entails a type of information of another nature altogether than what passes for information in the papers (such as the type of information we get from Liberation Press Agents).

Michel Foucault : Doesn't this difficulty, the trouble we have finding adequate forms of struggle, derive in large measure from the fact that we still don't know what power is? After all, we had to wait till the nineteenth-century before we knew what exploitation was, and maybe we still don't really know what power is. Maybe both Marx and Freud are not enough to help us come to know this thing which is so enigmatic, at once visible and invisible, open and hidden, invested everywhere, this thing we call power. The theory of the State, the traditional analysis of State apparatuses certainly do not exhaust the field in which power functions and is exercised. This is today's great unknown: who exercises power? And where? Today, we know more or less who does the exploiting, where the profit goes, into whose hands, and where it gets reinvested, whereas power… We know very well that power is not in the hands of those who govern. But the notion of "ruling class" is neither clear nor well developed. There is a whole loosely knit group of notions that need analysis: "dominate," "manage," "govern," "state apparatus," "party," etc. Similarly, we need to learn just how far power extends, through which relays, down to the smallest instances of hierarchy, control, surveillance, prohibitions, constraints. Power is being exercised wherever we find it. No one person, properly speaking, holds it; and yet it is always exercised in one direction and not another, by this group in this case, by this other group in this other case. We don't really know who has power, but we do know who doesn't. If reading your books (starting with Nietzsche and in anticipation of Capitalism and Schizophrenia) has been so crucial for me, it's because they seem to go a long way toward setting up this problem: using old themes like meaning and sense, signifier and signified, etc., to pose the questions of power, the inequality of powers, and their struggle. Every struggle develops around a particular focal point of power (one of the innumerable focal points such as a boss, a security guard, a prison warden, a judge, a union representative, a newspaper's editor-in-chief). And if pointing out these focal points of power, denouncing them as such, talking about them in a public forum, constitutes a struggle, it's not because people were unaware of them, it's because speaking up on this topic, breaking into the network of institutional information, naming and saying who did what, is already turning the tables on power, it's a first step for other struggles against power. If making a speech is already a struggle, like those made by the medical doctors who work in prisons or by the inmates themselves, it's because such an action momentarily confiscates the prison's power to speak, which is in reality controlled exclusively by the administration and its accessories, the reformers. The discourse of struggle is not opposed to the unconscious, it's opposed to the secret. This seems a let down, but what if the secret were worth much more? A whole series of equivocations concerning what is "hidden," "repressed," "unspoken," enables a cheap "psychoanalysis" of what should be the object of political struggle. The secret is perhaps more difficult to bring to light than the unconscious. The two themes which only yesterday we came across once again, that "writing is the repressed" and that "writing is by rights subversive," in my opinion betray several operations which must be severely criticized.

Gilles Deleuze : About the problem you just raised: that we see who does the exploiting, who profits, who governs, but power is still something rather diffuse – I would offer the following hypothesis: even Marxism, especially Marxism, has posed the problem in terms of interest (it is a ruling class, defined by its interests, that holds the power). Suddenly, we run smack into

the question: how does it happen that those who have little stake in power follow, narrowly espouse, or grab for some piece of power? Perhaps it has to do with investments, as much economic as unconscious: there exist investments of desire which explain that one can if necessary desire not against one's interest, since interest always follows and appears wherever desire places it, but desire in a way that is deeper and more diffuse than one's interest. We must be willing to hear Reich's cry: "No, the masses were not fooled, they wanted fascism at a particular moment!" There are certain investments of desire that shape power, and diffuse it, such that power is located as much at the level of a cop as that of a prime minister: there is absolutely no difference in nature between the power wielded by a cop and that wielded by a politician. It is precisely the nature of the investments of desire that explains why parties or unions, which would or should have revolutionary investments in the name of class interest, all too often have investments which are reformist or totally reactionary at the level of desire.

Michel Foucault : As you point out, the relationships among desire, power, and interest are more complex than we ordinarily imagine, and it is not necessarily those who exercise power that have an interest in exercising it; those who have an interest in exercising it don't necessarily, and the desire of power plays a game between power and interest which is quite singular. When fascism comes into play, it happens that the masses want particular people to exercise power, but those particular people are not to be confused with the masses, since power will be exercised on the masses and at their expense, all the way to their death, sacrifice, and massacre, and yet the masses want it, they want this power to be exercised. The play of desire, power and interest is still relatively unknown. It took a long time to know what exploitation was. And desire, it has been and promises still to be a lengthy affair. It's possible that the struggles now under way, and the local, regional, discontinuous theories being elaborated in the course of these struggles, and which are absolutely of a piece with them, are just beginning to uncover the way in which power is exercised.

Gilles Deleuze : So I come back to the question: today's revolutionary movement has multiple focal points, and this isn't a weakness, it isn't a deficiency, since a particular totalization belongs rather to power and its reaction; Vietnam, for example, is a formidable local response. But how do you view the networks, the transversal connections between discontinuous active points from one country to another or within the same country?

Michel Foucault : This geographic discontinuity you've mentioned perhaps means that the moment we struggle against exploitation, the proletariat not only leads the struggle but defines the targets, methods, places and instruments of struggle; to make an alliance with the proletariat is to embrace its positions, its ideology; we effectively assume the motivations of its fight. We all melt together. But if we choose to struggle against power, then all those who suffer the abuses of power, all those who recognize power as intolerable, can engage in the struggle wherever they happen to be and according to their own activity or passivity. By engaging in this struggle which is their own (they are perfectly familiar with its targets, and they themselves determine the methods), these people enter the revolutionary process – as allies of the proletariat, of course, since power is exercised in the way that maintains capitalist exploitation. These people truly serve the cause of the proletariat revolution by fighting precisely at that point where they suffer oppression. Women, prisoners, conscripts, homosexuals, the sick in hospitals have, as we speak, each begun a specific struggle against the particular form of power, constraint, control being exercised over them. Such struggles belong to the revolutionary movement today, provided they are radical, without compromise or reformism,

provided they do not attempt to readjust the same power through, at most, a change of leadership. And these movements are connected to the revolutionary movement of the proletariat itself insofar as the proletariat must fight every control and constraint which are the conduits of power everywhere. In other words, the generality of the struggle most certainly does not occur in the form you mentioned before: theoretical totalization in the form of the "truth." What constitutes the generality of the struggle is the system of power itself, all the forms in which it is exercised and applied.

Gilles Deleuze : And one cannot make the slightest demand whatsoever on any point of application without being confronted by the diffuse whole, such that as soon as you do, you are necessarily led to a desire to explode it. Every partial revolutionary attack or defense in this way connects up with the struggle of the working class.

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