

## **Deleuze among the Economists: A Short Commentary on Abderrazak Belabes' 'What can Economists Learn from Deleuze?'**

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In 'What Can Economists Learn from Deleuze?' Belabes makes the case for economists reading outside of their disciplinary orientation so as to broaden their intellectual horizons in ways that might be helpful in confronting key issues in both economic theory and economic practice, but also, as Belabes says at the very end of the article, in order to 'work together and meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in an increasingly interdependent world' (Belabes, p. 64). And further, that undertaking such a task will help economists think beyond and outside of their particular and entrenched schools of thinking allowing them to come together in recognition – presumably as a result of such outside reading/thinking – that 'no one school holds the truth' (ibid). In particular, Belabes argues here that economists should read Deleuze's philosophy in order to effect such a transformation. This injunction is, as Belabes states at the outset of the paper, because, Deleuze can help economists 'emancipate' themselves 'from economic concepts, the key words, and the resulting indicators, which constitute a smokescreen' that makes it difficult for economists to confront 'fundamental questions that face human societies in their daily lives' (p. 56). Belabes goes on to argue that part of what reading Deleuze specifically can do is help economists who are inclined against the dominance of neoclassical economic theory (and its methodological individualism) to begin to move beyond mere criticism of that view toward the construction of alternative conceptions and theories that, presumably, might offer competing positive accounts of how economies might be oriented so as to meet the challenges referred to above.

I can see the appeal of Deleuze here. Part of what Deleuze and his often co-author Felix Guattari offer (among other things), is precisely the kind of analysis Belabes is looking for: throughout their work together, they show the many ways in which our concepts, in their attempts at making sense of the world in particular ways, also confine our subjective awareness and orientation in ways that make it difficult to escape (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983; 1987). This is both true, according to Deleuze and Guattari, at the level of disciplinary orientations like that of economics – the concepts, ideas and importantly, practices of the academic and policy-orientation of economics are both constructed and confined by the ways in which those things function in a given time and place, and for wider existence – our conceptual awareness of ourselves and our world is the result of our entrance into, and reproduction of, pre-existing, historically situated concepts and practices through which we grasp the world. These concepts and practices, for Deleuze and Guattari, never fully capture the world in which we find ourselves, nor do they fully cover all possible modes of being even when they profess to do so (and Deleuzian/Guattarian philosophy can allow us to see that).

Importantly, for Deleuze and Guattari, such concepts and practices are (as noted above) social and historical – we are, and our awareness is, never solely individual. Rather, all of that is the result of an 'assemblage; of the particular ways in which the larger social structure comes to understand itself and its world through time, and in interaction with particular sets of phenomena that are conjoined in that moment – and so we as individuals are inserted into these structures and produced and conditioned by them all the way down to

the level of our affective life – our very desires are constructed and controlled by these particular ways of being and the practices, both conceptual and otherwise, in which they are captured and channelled by these larger social structures that pre-exist us as individuals (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983).

In relation to the discipline of economics then, like any other science according to Deleuze and Guattari, the economist's ways of making sense of the world, the solutions they propose to problems and issues (and the very seeing of those things as problems and issues to be commented on and solved) are the result of this socio-historico-conceptual and affective embeddedness (as are such ways of making sense of the world in any discipline – including standard academic philosophy). The importance of reading and thinking outside of a given discipline then, is to find ways of working one's concepts out of that embeddedness and into something new – this involves not just conceptual expansion, but also expansion at the level of the affects, desires and practice itself. This is also why, as Belabes points out Deleuze's own method is eclectic and he moves between areas such as philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cinema and film studies as he was constantly looking for new ways to understand his own world and affective life, but also looking for new ways to expand his conceptual toolbox for analyzing these (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 1987; Deleuze, 1989). Belabes gets at some of this in the article but it would be good to see he and others work to further develop of these points, adding detail as to how this might work in the discipline of economics – what kinds of examples and specifics could be drawn from a Deleuzian approach to economics and economic thinking? What specific ways could such an approach help economists move beyond mere criticism of the neoclassical conception of economics and build new conceptions that might be produced in relation to the production of concepts in a Deleuzian mode of doing philosophy? How could such a movement help economists think the world in their discipline differently? Belabes hints at this in the last lines of the article when discussing the challenges we currently face globally both in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and other pressing issues and what these might mean for economists.

Additionally, the section in the paper that discusses the idea that capitalism is a system that, above its unequal distribution of profit, is fundamentally a system that unevenly distributes power – is a good one and more could be said here in relation to Deleuze – for him, as mentioned above, the analysis of power in a Foucauldian sense gives way to analysis of how capitalism assembles our own subjective desires in particular ways. Some discussion of this difference might also help further the project launched by Belabes' article here. And this might also help the target audience – other economists – think the ways in which their own affective life is wrapped up in the subject that they think most about in the particular and prescribed ways of thinking about economics generated by the history of the discipline itself. Éric Alliez's great discussion of this difference (between Foucault and Deleuze) in his 2013 article where he describes the ways in which the assemblages of historically situated social practices and people (such as, for instance economic practices) come to be understood by Deleuze and Guattari as organizing not power, but subjective desire in particular ways. In all, Belabes' article is thought-provoking and offers a nice starting point for an encounter between Deleuze and contemporary economic theory and practice.

## References

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