Alain Badiou

The Fascism of the Potato[1]

Today we can draw up the most general – ontological – balance sheet of the 1960s and 1970s.At the heart of the matter,there is the idea that the *mass* uprising of May '68 – as unprecedented popular revolt – in the eyes of its intellectual protagonists would not have had a tangible *class* background and that,for this reason,it would be conceivable as an insurrection of the multiple.Students,workers,employees seemed to have risen up in parallel fashion,in a kind of horizontal storm,or a cumulative dispersion,in which on top of everything the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia could vindicate the role of tactical vanguard.

The immediate attack against the pseudo-centres of the unions,and even more so against their bourgeois political guarantor (the PCF) in its objective form,was an essential component of the storm.The entire external unity of the bourgeois type was violently rejected.But this revolt against the pseudo-centres was far from giving way on the spot to the new Maoist thought,which is that of a centre of a new type (of the party of a new type),new not only in its being,but also in its process.

Contrary to numerous revolutionary workers for whom this was the dominant question,the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia resisted en masse letting itself be traversed by the Maoist question,because the latter concentrated anew the proletarian class point of view,the absence of which at bottom pleased these intellectuals.In order to protect that which had catapulted it onto front stage (the dialectic of an extended mass revolt and a defeated proletarian leadership; of a vigorous ideology and an inexistent politics),the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia forged in haste the concepts with which the organic weaknesses of the situation could be changed into so many apparent strenghts.It unleashed into the clouds of pure thought the storm of the Multiple against the pretensions of the One.Down with the centres,whatever they are! Long live dispersion as such!Ontology returned to the Megarian school:only the multiple is affirmative,whereas the One is its oprpressive spectre,puffed up with resentment.

Let us admit that the transitory force of this frenzied polycentrism was nourished by the realities of the tempest.To attack on all fronts the 'unities' of the bourgeois type (labor unions,national unity,the union of the 'Left') gave the movement its vitality.Better the multiple storms of revolt than the unifying tutelage of a bourgeois politics.That is certainly true.

But at the same time,under the anti-organizational pretexts,it is not too difficult to see the rejection of the point of view of class.Its theme was the

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[1] Review of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,*Rhizome* (Paris: Minuit,1976).English translation is Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,'Introduction:Rhizome',*A Thousand Plateaus*,trans.Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1987).Page numbers in the body of the text refer to this translation.

need to add up the revolts (immigrants,women,ecologists,soldiers,prisoners,students,homosexuals,etc.), to enumerate the punctual social forces to infinity,but obstinately to combat anything resembling the political unification of the people's camp,seized in its antagonistic inflection,in its living class being.Organization and its alleged 'castrating hierarchy' make for broad targets:the One of the multiple in revolt is a question of content,of the politics of the people.Some hid behind the blunders of the form,here and there,in order to deny the content. Badly camouflaged behind the hatred of militancy was the hatred of the class struggle.

On this shaky ground,one soon would see the One takes its revenge in the depressing guise of the return of the bourgeois politicians from the Union of the Left.At the far end of the Multiple,there is the revisionist Despo;at the far end of Deleuze's literary pleasures,the ministerial smile of Marchais,or the fascist despot,the Medusa-like face of those verbose generals of which our history seems to know the secret.In effect,if the people do not have their own politics,they will enact the politics of their enemies:political abhors the void.

The ideological leaders of the petty bourgeoisie always commercialize this void,which they praise in the figures of nihilism and the aesthetics of despair,concerned as they are above all with not having to choose and with benefiting from the – considerable – advantages conceded by bourgeois politics,particularly 'democratic' parliamentarianism,all the while bedecking themselves in the spoils of the revolt.What these people abominate and seek to drown out – depending on the case,in the absoluteness of the One or in the pulverization of the Multiple – is the division into two,that is,the dialectic.

In this regard it is interesting to note that,in *Rhizome,*the cunning monkeys of multiplicities,the head of the anti-Marxist troupe,Deleuze and Guattari,openly strike out at the central dialectical principle:One divides into two.Let us look at the passage:

> One becomes two:whenever we encounter this formula,even stated strategically by Mao or understood in the most 'dialectical' way possible,what we have before us is the most classical and well reflected,oldest,and weariest kind of thought …the book as a spiritual reality,the Tree or Root as an image,endlessly develops the law of the One that becomes two,then of the two that become four …Binary logic is the spiritual reality of the root-tree …This is as much as to say that this system of thought has never reached an understanding of multiplicity:in order to arrive at two following a spiritual method it must assume a strong principal unity.(p.5)[2]

[2] The rhizome is the 'subterranean stem of living plants that pushes adventitious roots to its inferior side'.For Deleuze and Guattari,this botanical being that proliferates at the crossover between the floral and roots is the model of a multiplicity without unitary principle of generation.The rhizome is opposed to the pivoting root,or to the Cartesian tree layering its branches based on the solidity of the trunk.It is the potato against the dandelion or against the fir tree.

We will not take Deleuze and Guattari to be illiterate.We will thus take them to be crooks.Before giving their readers the shattering directive:'Be the Pink Panther and your loves will be like the wasp and the orchid,the cat and the baboon'(p.25),they should warn them that before all these metamorphoses they take their readers to be morons.Only a moron can confuse the Marxist dialectical principle 'One divides into two' with the genealogy for family trees concealed in 'One becomes two'.For what the dialectic says is the exact opposite of the 'strong principal unity' imputed to it;it is *the divided essence of the movement as One,*that is,a principle of *the double precariousness of the One:*

a)The One has no existence as entity,there is unity only from movement,all is process

b)The process itself has its internal being in scission

For a Marxist,to think the One is to think the unity of opposites,that is,the movement as scission.Dialectical thinking is the only thinking of revolt in that,precisely,it shakes to its roots the omnipotence of the One.For dialectical thinking,the essence of the One is the labour of antagonism that constitutes it,which is the Two.

Deleuze-Guattari's 'dialectical' arboriculture,all absorbed as they are to oppose the 'multiple' philosophy of the potato to the vertical despotism of the tree,is only a painful falsification.Lenin already remarked that the essence of the dialectic is never the strong and presupposed unity,but unity of *opposites,*which at once relativizes the concept of the One beyond return:'The unity (coincidence,identity,equal action) of opposites is conditional,temporary,transitory,relative.The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute,just as development and motion are absolute.'[3]

The problem of the dialectic is certainly not that of an excessive force of the One but rather that of its weakness.Nonetheless to think unity,albeit as tearing apart and as labour of division,this is what philosophy needs to apply itself to,against the leftist Manichaeism,which loses the thread of the unity of opposites and sees salvation only in the redoubling of the One,which flips into its opposite,for in the dialectic two times One does not equal Two but once again One – the only Two worthy of the name being the essence in becoming of the One.

'One divides into two' always means:'One is equal to the self-dividing-into-two',and never:'One becomes two'.This is true for the amoeba – as living unity that reproduces itself – as much as for capitalist society – as unity of a struggle to the death between two antagonistic politics.

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[3] *Translator's Note*:See V.I.Lenin,'On the Question of Dialectics'(1915),in *Collected Works:Philosophical Notebooks (*Moscow:Foreign Languages Press,1961),vol.38,p.360

What good comes from these small mistakes for Deleuze and Guattari?

The thing is that they have recognized in the dialectic their true adversary.

Deleuze's transitory historical strength has come to him from being the bard of the multiple in revolt against the bourgeois One (which,in turn,is only the One of the two that constitutes it as rivalry: two superpowers,two bourgeoisies,classical and state-bureaucratic).As long as the bourgeois One is the antagonistic target of Deleuze,at the time of the uprising against the pseudo-centres,there will be a clientele for the scattered revolts.What is to be done against the One of the proletariat,which qua scission is precisely that mobile and precarious One in which the revolt,through the elemtn of antagonism that traverses it,finds not only its place but also its affirmative dimension?Deleuze and Guattari have discovered only this poor trick:forcefully to reduce the dialectic to the One of reactionary metaphysics.Thus they imagine that they can keep the monopoly of the ontology of the revolts.

Unfortunately,the ruse will not do,given that the ontology in question,by circumventing the dialectic,is built against any thought of antagonism.And so we can see how today it validates with total equanimity any figure of speech or action whatever.This is only logical:you cannot think and exalt the pure multiple (the rhizome) without throwing yourself into the flattest of conservatisms,the surest ratification of everything that exists.You will obtain not only the Pink Panther,the baboon and the orchid,but also the white bear – which owes its elongated figure,as we all know,to its exclusive,fish-eating regime – the mangy jackal of the lasto oasis,the moth,and the whole panoply of pungent herbs that you find on the picket fences of the never-ending construction sites.

The great principles of the ontology of the multiple are by themselves the illustration of this conservatism,of this aesthete's acquiescence to the proliferating splendour of all rubbish.

Let us note that of all the possible multiplicities,Deleuze and Guattari hate only a single one:the Two,that detestable figure of choice (and of class choice),and the support of what they condemn the most in the world:morality,which implies options,but also politics (since there are only two of them,proletarian and bourgeois).'That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy,even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad'(p.9).

All scission having been eluded,all choice circumvented,the rhizome follow its course towards the unbridled apology of the anything whatsoever.This is the first principle:'Any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other,and must be'(p.18).

This 'must be' is famous.Let us understand:

- In a first sense,there exist only individuals,to whom it matters that they can touch each other without having any law,or any demand of class,*separate* them from the enjoyment of unlimited contacts-theory of 'social' relationships as immediacy of the body.

- In a second sense,the federalist political ideology,as the only outcome of a politics of the multiple,of an anti-dialectical politics:May all 'struggles' be in contact,and from this connected egalitarian magma,may the 'converge',as they say,But what will come out of this rhizomatic parliamentary potato?With a cold face,our innocent friends answer:the festival!History speaks another language.One know since at least the Commune that these 'convergences' of dismembered struggles are the prequel to the failure,the massacre,and the restoration of the One in its most repugnant forms.Sectarians of the rhizome,remember Chile!

- In a third sense,everything communicates with everything else,there is no irreducible antagonism.There is not the bourgeoisie on one side,the proletariat and the revolutionary people on the other.That is the reason why everything is a formless tubercle,pseudopods of the multiple.

As such,the One takes its revenge in the realm of the universal interconnection.

In truth,it is the Maoist dialectic that thinks the antagonistic weakness of the one,because it apprehends that there is something non-connectable – that in the unity of their conflictive movement,each term of the contradiction never ceases to *sever* that which connects it to the other term.Such is for example the process of the class party:to concentrate,through the practice of antagonism,the means radically to *separate* the people's revolutionary politics from *all* forms of bourgeois politics.Deleuze and Guattari only catapult in the realm of ontology the status that is their own:to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

This is what allows the 'pure' concept of multiplicity to take off.
Let us study how:

Principle of multiplicity:it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive,'multiplicity',that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object,natural or spiritual reality,image and world.Multiplicities are rhizomatic,and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are.There is not unity to serve as a pivot in the object,or to divide in the subject.There is no even the unity to abort in the object or 'return' in the subject.A multiplicity has neither subject nor object,only determinations,magnitudes,and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature.(p.8)

The only passage in these confused assertions that makes any sense lives as a parasite on the dialectic.In these 'dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature',one will recognize a bizarre version of the law of conversion of quantity into quality.The rest is on the order of the incantation:the Multiple indeed is a thinkable category only in its contradictory relation to the One.All thinking of the pure multiple carries like its shadow a thinking of the pure One.Besides,one sees this spectre haunt Deleuze and Guattari's discourse all the way to the use of the large capital,as that against which it feigns to build itself up but which it comforts with the unilateral and exalted deviation of its opposite.

This is particularly clear in the recapitulating definition in which Deleuze and Guattari,sensing that they ensnared in the Greek traps of the One and the Multiple,imagine that they have changed terrains:

> The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple.It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three,four,five,etc.It is not a multiple derived from the One,or to which One is added (n+1).It is composed not of units but of dimensions,or rather directions in motion.It has neither beginning nor end,but always a middle *(milieu)* from which it grows and which it overspills.It constitutes linear multiplicites with *n* dimensions having neither subject nor object,which can be laid out on a plane of consistency,and from which the One is always subtracted (n-1).(p.21)

Complete failure!The subtraction of the One merely metaphorizes the need for both the One and the Multiple,both 'n' and '1',in Deleuze and Guattari's construction of 'multiplicities'.The transparency of the political outcome is a schoolbook exercise,being a matter of the subtractive model 'n-1'.

The point is to call for the mass revolts,*minus* the antagonistic factor of unity – that is,minus their traversing by the point of view of class.

The point is to call for the ideas of the revolt,*minus* the proletarian party.

But these multiplicities,which are pure only thanks to this 'minus',validate that latter *outside* of themselves as that which endures intact in the One that is so irreducibly hostile to them.

We have seen this in May '68:If you have the mass revolt,but not the proletarian antagonism,you obtain the victory of the bourgeois antagonism (of bourgeois politics).If you have ideas that are just,but not Marxism,you obtain the return to power of the bourgeois reformists of the Parti Socialiste.If you have the objective forces,but neither the programme nor the party,you obtain the revenge of Pompidou's parliamentarianism,[4]
You obtain the return to the scene of the PCF and the unions.

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[4] *Translator's Note*:Georges Pompidou famously was France's Prime Minister under President Charles de Gaulle during and right after the events of May 1968,before succeeding de Gaulle as President in 1969.

The Deleuzian multiplicities are a zero-sum combination of weakness and impotence,of the multiple in revolt and the bourgeois One.

To think the multiple outside the two,outside scission,amounts to practicing in exteriority the dictatorship of the One.

To say that the grandeur and virtue of things lies in their being the 'minus' of (that is,in their external coexistence with) that which is antagonistic to them:that is ultimately all there is to it.There were the point is to accomplish a rupture,by forging the internal unity of that which,within the multiple,divides itself antagonistically from its adversary,Deleuze and Guattari propose a subtraction,a flat indifference.The multiplicities,subtracting themselves from each other as One,peacefully coexist.To play in one's own corner:such is the maxim of rhizomatic multiplicities.

And be sure to note that Deleuze and Guattari have made,in passing,a virtual discovery.What else do they tell us if not that the division of the people is not inherent to the people but is organized by the bourgeois State;that the character of the separated unity of this State is the point where all the great differences,all the stratifications,all the hierarchies,are operative so that it is indeed because it is non-popular,subtracted from the people,that the State as One maintains the people as multiple,as partially raised up against itself?The Maoists immediately see in this aspect of things the *class* dimension of the State,at work in what is the real historical body and defines the permanent stakes:the organization of *all the people* in bourgeois dictatorship.The conclusion leaves no doubt:there can be no regained unity of the people except in the antagonistic affirmation of the other point of view of class,the proletarian one,and in the destruction by the masses of the bourgeois unity,which has the State as its centre.

For Deleuze and Guattari,the situation is completely different.From the fact that the bourgeois One causes the division of the people,they infer the excellence of the division conceived of as indifference to the One,as non-antagonism.The State is the One of our multiple weakness?Let us be even more divided,let us subtractively affirm our division,and we ourselves will be plentiful.Which *we?* In truth,the *we* prescribed by the One.We should say: *In actual fact* Rhizome *draws the conclusion of the excellence of the bourgeois One.*

Can one dream up such disarmament,such complacency towards the worst?Whoever renounces antagonism and thinks in the element of indifferent affirmative multiplicity has the *need* sooner or later to kneel down,under the cover of the cult of the Slef,before the real political powers,before the separate unity of the State.This is why Deleuze and Guattari are pre-fascist ideologues.Negation of morality,cult of natural affirmation,repudiation of antagonism,aestheticism of the multiple,which outside of itself,as its subtractive plitical condition and its indelible fascination,leaves in abeyance the One of the tyrant:one prepares for the kowtow,one is already bowing down.

To cleanse themselves of the accusation of fascism,it will not be enough for Deleuze and Guattari to argue – in a familiar pirouette – that they are even more so than people think.[5]

A Note on the Text:'The Fascism of the Potato' first appeared in French as 'Le fascisme de la pomme de terre',in *La Situation actuelle sur le front de la philosophie (*Paris:Francois Maspero,1977),pp.42-52.Badiou signed this text under the pseudonym Georges Peyrol,which he frequently used for publications of the UCFML,not so much to hide his identity as to disguise the fact that these publication were often the work of just two or three authors.
From 'The Adventure of French Philosophy' (p. 191-201)
Edited and Translated by Bruno Bosteels

[5] 'We have been treated as fascists;we will never be so enough,so much are we aware,we at least,that fascism is not only that of others.Groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize.'

[*Translator's Note*:Here,as in the rest of his review,Badiou quotes from the separate publivcation of *Rhizome* as a small separate volme in French (Paris:Minuit,1976),p.28.In the English translation of 'Introduction:Rhizome',as part of *A Thousand Plateaus*,the corresponding fragment no longer entails such a clear pre-emptive move against possible objection:'You may make a rupture,draw a line of flight,yet there is still a danger that you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything,formations that restore power to a signifier,attributions that reconstitute a subject – anything you like,from Oedipal resurgences to fascist concretion.Groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize'(pp.9-10).]