
Affirmative Ethics and Generative Life

Rosi Braidotti Utrecht University

Abstract

Rosi Braidotti's contribution to the Deleuze Studies Conference 2016 held in Rome (University of Roma Tre, 11–13 July), later transcribed and then revised by the author, points firmly to the current need for an affirmative thinking approach, actively standing to the present, while assessing its becoming and imagining new configurations. Saying yes to the world, being worthy of it, does not entail passive acceptance but rather the activation of transformative and critical thinking. To this aim, Braidotti looks at Deleuze as well as at feminist theory. The ontology of immanence turns into a materialist, collective, vital, embodied and relational ethics.

Keywords: life, immanence, becoming, affirmative ethics, materialism, feminism

I am truly delighted to be speaking at this great event, and thank you for your generous introduction. I am, however, aware that, having been given the very honourable position of closing the conference, I am standing between you and the *aperitivo*, so I shall try to be concise.

But I have to start by saluting the diverse and varied Deleuze Studies communities that are gathered at this conference – almost like a family reunion, albeit a non-Oedipal one. If I look around the room, I am comforted by so many familiar faces – so many of my Italian friends of all generations. But my Dutch travelling companions are here as well, all the students from the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome; and my good friends Patricia Pisters, one of the pioneers of Deleuze scholarship, and Andrej Radman from Delft. I see and salute Ronald Bogue, one of the founders of Deleuze Studies. And then my Australian community is here,

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Felicity Colman, Ian Buchanan and so many others. It is very moving to see you all.

We need time to talk, so I will briefly try to make, again, as I have many times before, the case for affirmation. And, you know, I don't want to sound like Pope Francis, but what the world needs now is heavy doses of counter-negativity in the mode of affirmation. What the world needs *now*. So we have the question of the present, immediately, confronting us, staring us in the face. If you approach the question of the contemporary within the philosophies of immanence, with Deleuze and Foucault, and if you add the feminist philosophies of embodiment and experience, then you are thinking about the present as a process of becoming. Academic scholarship especially in the Humanities is not happy with thinking the present, because the present is slippery and unreliable. Supposing you can provide a mass of empirical data, with multiple statistical variables, then you may be able to address the present, but otherwise the present is something that we—in the Humanities—are not supposed to be able to account for. The past is our domain, and honouring the authority of the past the key to our methodologies and core values. Serious universities in the world still do not allow literature students to write a PhD on a living author. Being dead is a prerequisite for being written about, so that you cannot write another book that may contradict what the critic may have proposed as the leading interpretation, I suppose. If you are a sociologist or an anthropologist, maybe it's easier to speak of the present, but it is as though philosophies and critical theories are devoted to past centuries and have an issue with the present. If you are a geologist, on the other hand, your time span is millions of years back, and this deep time is coming to haunt us in the Anthropocene, but that is another story.

The point is, however, that we need to account for the present in order to critique and resist it. This is going to reveal my age, but having had the fortune of being able to follow the lectures of Foucault and Deleuze, I have been contaminated by *amor fati*, that is to say, I got the bug of actually wanting to be accountable for the present, to be worthy of it. I think that the humble acceptance of the conditions of our limited present—which Spinoza describes as the conditions of our bondage—is also the key to understanding the importance of the project of affirmation.

But before we go any further, just as a reminder, being worthy of the present is not intended in a passive and acquiescent manner, but rather in an active mode, as a way of coming to terms with the present, in order to intervene in it and transform it. Being of the here and

now is a prerequisite to account for the conditions of our existence, of our limitations, of our constraint. This is the kind of embedded and embodied materialism that I appreciate so much in Deleuze. Of course, the old materialism is there and Deleuze is aware that Marxism has been there before, so he carries through the legacy of historical materialism. It is indeed the case that philosophers have always interpreted the world, but the point, however, is to change it, now more than ever, by introducing transformative thinking into the relationship to the present. How to respond to the convulsive transformations of the present is the core concern of the post-structuralist generation.

For instance, in dealing with this challenge, Foucault develops a distinct meta-methodological approach: he introduces the idea of cartographies, as theoretically infused mappings of the discursive productions that are ongoing at a given historical moment. Discourse is both material and semiotic, so we need to account for both the monuments and the documents of knowledge, in order to explain the political economy of knowledge production and the power relations at work in the present. But the philosophers are not alone in pursuing this project. The political movement where I came of age, feminism, pioneered this cartographic method before. Starting from the notion that the personal is the political, through different elaborations of the politics of experience, standpoint epistemologies and situated knowledges, feminist theory has developed original tools to account for power relations where they are the most intimate but also the most public: in lived experience. So there is quite a critical tradition of thinking of ways to come to terms with the present, encouraging people of the Humanities to deal with the contemporary, the here and now.

Deleuze nailed it, as he often does in his incredible philosophical work, when he says that the problem about accessing and accounting for the present is that the present does not coincide flatly with a here and now, it is not synchronised with the here-and-now-ness of a stumbling block of evidence. No, the present is part of a time continuum, of ongoing flows. This is where Deleuze turns to Bergsonism. And what that means is that the present is simultaneously the record of what we are ceasing to be and the trace of what we are in the process of becoming. So, from the beginning Deleuze splits the present into the present as the actual, that is to say both what we are and what we are ceasing to be, and the virtual, that is to say, what we are capable of becoming. The present, the contemporary, is multi-layered and multi-directional. We are always dealing with the virtual past, what 'we will have been'. We are always projected/projective futures, always dealing in a time continuum. And

yet, we need enough meta-stability to hold the frame long enough to draw a cartography of the very conditions of the present that shape and escape us.

Let us apply this insight to the meta-methodological problem I just mentioned. If we are saying that we are accounting for the present, that means that we are simultaneously making a cartography of what we are ceasing to be and a projection of what we are in the process of becoming. This double structure is not dualistic and oppositional, but rather dynamically complex in a way that makes it possible to co-produce collectively cartographies of power, designed as ongoing processes of reconstitution of subject-formations. Cartographic accounts are ways of holding onto the present for a moment, so as to produce an affective-cognitive relational mapping of what we are ceasing to be. Through this account, however, we also become able to detect the traces of what we are in the process of becoming. In other words, one maps the negative the better to detect the generative forces of affirmative becoming.

And this is why the discussion of affirmation is deeply materialistic, that is to say embodied, embedded, relational and affective. Yes, we have to be accountable for the present, to be worthy of the present, but that is neither a passive acceptance of the status quo, nor a flattening out of our differential locations. It is rather a multiplication, a complexification of the work of critical thinking, so that on the basis of the cartographies—which are the accounts of what we are ceasing to be and of what we are going through in that process, we then can trace what we are in the process of becoming. Accounting for what is happening to us is a cartographic exercise of mapping the power relations. If you have read any of my work, you will know that I supplement Deleuze with heavy doses of feminist theory, in order to ground the very abstract systems that genial thinker proposes. Deleuze gives us all the methodological toolboxes and the key concepts, but he does not do all the work of critique and creation for us. It is up to us to apply these instruments and make something out of it: this is a practical philosophy that demands actualisation. Critics of Deleuze even hold this against him, saying, ‘Why doesn’t he have anything to say about the problem I am struggling with?’ Well, Deleuze, the least Oedipalising of philosophers, is saying that you actually should do a bit of work yourself. Get active! Get empowered to act!

The task of critique is to actually make something happen in the world, creating assemblages and planes of encounter with other transversal subjectivities, injecting counter-codes in a system that is

over-coded by the axioms of capitalism. Operating among flows and speeds of re-territorialisation is a way of operationalising the awareness that we are always ceasing to be and trying to become, in a process of vital materialist flows. This process includes both biopolitical and necropolitical elements – if you really want to use the old language of the Foucauldian socio-constructivist methods. But for Deleuze, the essence of all living matter is the ontological positivity of entities that long to persevere in their existence, as Spinoza taught us. The critique of the negative engenders affirmation. Being worthy of the present means actually detecting the possibility of enacting and expressing the yet untapped possibilities of the virtual, as well as contemplating the death of so many of our concepts, so many of our practices.

You may have noticed that I have deliberately stressed the question of the subject and of subject-formation, which may not seem very non-Deleuzian. But I have never claimed to be an orthodox reader of a philosopher like Deleuze, who in any case makes a point of actively fighting against all orthodoxies. Nor am I a dutiful daughter, but rather a critical thinker prone to disobedience. Feminist politics of location is the reason why I believe that subjectivity matters and that theories of subjectivity do matter. We cannot do without political subjectivities, not even if so many of us today function under the cowardly cover of anonymity, writing vitriolic online blogs – or rather *because* so many people act in such an unethical manner. In order to have productive political practice, we need to have agreements on what counts as political subjectivity. And I am at my most Deleuzian when I call for transversal, complex, non-unitary subject assemblages of human and non-human agents, activated towards the production of possible futures.

Here I concur with Federica Giardini: feminist philosophy is the theory of radical immanence as embodied and embedded experience, which has brought to this abstract philosophy of immanence a concreteness, a materiality, a rage and an inspiration that all philosophers have profited from. This is the great contribution of the radical feminist tradition of thought that runs so strongly through Continental philosophy. But of course there is more to contemporary feminism than the radical wing. I don't want to sound cynical, but have we noticed, as Jacqueline Rose pointed out in *The Guardian* recently, that in the present chaos caused by Brexit, to take just an example, we witness now generations of women coming in to clean up the mess in politics? This not only confirms traditional gendered division of labour, but points also to another danger, namely that, if we don't watch it, we will be overrun by powerful conservative but equality-minded women,

right across the board. Contemporary feminism is active through neo-liberal feminists, some of them Christian Democrats, as the boys having made the mess decline to take responsibility for it. Others are downright illiberal and conflate feminism with egotistical self-empowerment—see Ivanka Trump.

Now, I don't want to be essentialistic but the genderisation of the division of labour in the political sphere, compounded by the polarisation of political realities and social inequalities at the moment, makes for a heady mix. Sometimes the contradictions of the present here in Europe are so acute that it feels like it is 1948, and we have to re-construct all over again, on the ruins of fascism. Except that—right here and now—fascism, carried by a variety of populist movements, seems peculiarly alive and well, whereas the anti-fascist left is tired out and confused. But that's precisely the point of the cartographies as records of *both* what we are ceasing to be and of what we are becoming. They are all about repetitions—without difference, and hence farcical on the nihilistic or negative side—and differential and hence generative on the affirmative front. Critical theory is about knowing the difference—an ethical difference about forces and values—between negativity and affirmation.

One step forward and two steps back? More like a thousand zigzagging detours that bring repetitions to bear on our ethical orientations at any point in time. Often I hear—loud and clear—the words of Olympe de Gouges, who wrote a universal declaration of women's rights in 1792, in the spirit of the Revolution, and was sent to the guillotine for it. But that message sounds just as loud and clear today: 'women's rights are human rights', proclaimed presidential candidate Hillary Clinton during her unfortunate campaign. In one of her video clips, you see Hillary Clinton in profile, telling a history of American feminist theory. Which means that she doesn't start with Olympe de Gouges but with Seneca Falls and traces the record of what we are in the process of becoming from there.

So what year is this, exactly, and what are we at? If you are trying to do a cartography in the sense of a record of what we are ceasing to be, of the eternal feminine under the aegis of patriarchy—what year are we in? None and all—a thousand years of oppression and struggle for liberation, a thousand plateaus of movements and counter-movements. This is emancipation as the actualisation of the virtual past, an idea that never quite made it but never quite died, either. Completely present, completely antiquated, completely part of a present that is trying to become actual—a sort of never-dead, always about to burst into life.

So, this is the starting point for an ontology of affirmation that overcomes the negative. In a sense we could stop here, because the questions have been building up—both conceptual and practical questions that we need to come to terms with. I do want to build the case for affirmation on the basis of this knot of contradictions, flying in the face of all the critics who say, ‘You’ve got to be somewhat demented to talk about affirmation in the present context.’ Apart from the fact that I have a great deal of sympathy for the demented, the problem is a no-brainer, given that the present is both actual and present. The question then becomes what it is about the present that makes it so difficult to act affirmatively in and on it. And here we can start the self-pitying lament that has become the favourite genre of the critical Left: we could start making the list of miseries, of atrocities, of frustrations and thereby revel in the negativity of the present, saying, ‘Is there anything good?’ Well, let me think ... #MeToo and Black Lives Matter are up and running. That’s something! It could be worse. We could become like Žižek and celebrate Trump as a champion of freedom ... but for whom, exactly, I wonder? Shame on these boys, really!

The serious conceptual point is: it’s easy enough to make a list of all the negatives and feel that that is enough to fulfil the critical function. If we return to the sources of Deleuze’s affirmationism, as Benjamin Noys calls it, Spinoza himself is the teacher. Spinoza lived through terrible times. Spinoza lived through the end of the Dutch Republic, which means that he watched the biggest democratic experiment in early European history collapse. He watched political assassinations, like the lynching of the brothers de Witt, immortalised in a painting by Rembrandt. Because of his fearless resistance to power, Spinoza also watched his own career go up in smoke, as he got thrown out of university, synagogues and cities. He was earning his living as an artisan making lenses, as a manual labourer in order to survive in a world that was disintegrating around him. This is the radical Enlightenment of the seventeenth century that Isaiah Berlin and others describe as ‘the other Enlightenment’, the Dutch (not French) Enlightenment: the enlightenment of the darkness and complexity, which could see the contours of the eighteenth century coming on the horizon, but know the pain of not being quite there, not yet ... not this ... The *Ethics* of Spinoza ([1677] 1996) was written in the middle of such shifting conditions of disaster and longing.

We could play games and compare whether our contemporary disasters are bigger than the disasters of Spinoza’s time, but I am not sure that would be, scientifically and politically, the most useful exercise.

I would advise us to follow instead the lead of today's Spinozists like Deleuze, when he argues that Spinoza is always ahead of us, and never behind. Why? Because the source of the *Ethics* is the necessity and the desire to extract knowledge from pain, to process the catastrophes of the present in order to make the actualisation of the virtual into a concrete possibility. To come to terms with failure, in order to reconstruct, again and again. This is why Deleuze reads Spinoza so carefully, so lovingly, and so pragmatically, without any romanticism about what is entailed in the process of affirmation. This is a practical philosophy that aims at transforming the debris and the ruins into workable possible systems, despair into praxis. Given that the present is not just the record of what we are ceasing to be, but also the trace of what we are in the process of becoming, nothing is ever completely lost. What is defeated or excluded is not dialectically cut off from the processes of becoming by being confined into the limbo of nothingness. The dialectics gets it wrong, by over-emphasising the negative. What is not actualised is just that: a non-potentiated option, that falls asleep, in an ontological slumber that Leibniz describes so well, as different degrees of being – vegetating, hibernating, going virtual. Till it is called out again by a collective assemblage that demands and desires its actualisation.

The whole point of affirmation consists in inserting the practice of philosophy in such a praxis, so that we can extract from the ruins something that would – will have – triggered the inspiration to go on. The Spinozist exercise is a confrontation with and a transformation of negativity. I really want to start with this idea, because all the critiques of affirmationism are reducing the Deleuzian enterprise to a sort of delusional kind of goody-goody, naïve belief that all that lives is holy. Apart from the fact that we could really discuss what's wrong with that, this is absolutely not what Spinoza or what Deleuze is doing. Some Spinozists do that; there are traces of this optimism in Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, for instance. But Deleuze is subtler. The point is that there is a clear analytic function of negativity in Deleuze's work, but not a substantive or ontological one. We are ontologically oriented towards the affirmation of our innermost freedom – the freedom to become all we are capable of, all our bodies can take.

What that means is that we need to say 'no' to the horrors of the time, but that function is not locating negativity at the core of the exercise: it is just an analytic function that leads on to the real job, which is identifying the areas out of which we can generate vital forces to create possible futures. Confrontation with negativity and processing the pain are the means by which we achieve adequate knowledge about the

condition we wish to overturn or modify. Critique is also clinical, it is about detoxifying us from the effects of the negative. That is important. Entire chapters of Spinoza's *Ethics* are about poison, about sickness and death, about feeling diminished by the times that you're living in. That is such an effective definition of negativity: a decrease of our ability to act and to take in and on the world. Micro-fascism, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is such a decrease of our desire for freedom – an opaque sadness and impotence that settles into our souls and saps our life energies away. We are all going through this in the present context.

After the Brexit I got one of the most significant SMSs from a British friend. She said, 'I feel disoriented and diminished.' And I thought, 'What a great definition of negativity.' Disoriented and diminished. And how many times, on how many occasions, do we have that sense of a negative affect, that you're diminished in your power of relating to the very conditions that engender your existence, a deficit in relationality, because your relation to power has been squashed, squeezed, chopped up by the nastiness, the violence, the vulgarity of the times. We could make an endless list of this. So, this is where it begins.

The ethics of affirmation is not the denial of all of this. It's a way of processing this material in the direction of affirmation. This is why, when Deleuze does his work on vital materialist philosophy, he talks about a form of thinking that is, yes, critical, but – as I said before – also clinical. It is a way of curing us from the overdoses of negativity of the system that we are working in. Affirmative ethics as critical and clinical is a practical exercise in going beyond that disempowering feeling of being disoriented and diminished, which is the way in which your vital forces are being chopped up, being stopped, poisoned, and denigrated by a multiplicity of negative factors that we cannot keep at bay, because this happens to be the present that we are working in. Is it any wonder that so many people prefer not to think and they retreat into the sort of protocol of commonsensical reasoning, the unfolding of established rules of thought? It looks like you're thinking, but you're only repeating.

I can understand that, because processing the negativity of the time is really hard work. It means accepting a certain amount of poisoning. Think about it for a moment: poison, immunity, autoimmunity. It is one of the great watershed concepts: at this point you can step out and go to the *pharmakon* of Derrida, which works just fine, we can still have a conversation. You can step out in a different direction and go to the autoimmunity discourse of Esposito, in the great Italian tradition of

biopolitics, to which Agamben also belongs, but to a lesser degree. These are all viable interactions and conversations.

But to pursue the ethics of affirmation means stressing that the real challenge in such a context is how to be confronted by the whole, by the poisoned and acidified seas, by the Fukushima tsunami of negativity, while trying stubbornly, and in some way inexhaustibly, to posit the force of the virtual, that is to say, 'Yes, but we are in the process of becoming something else.' That 'yes' is not a demented beatific acceptance of what it is, but rather the stubborn counterpoint: 'I would prefer not to. Thank you very much.' I'm always polite with the present, especially when I kick it in the face.

Interrupting the flow of negativity, disengaging from it by stating a positive passion—'I would prefer not to'—is a way of constructing critique as affirmation. It's a way of saying 'no', actually. But it is not a dialectical 'no' that blocks, cuts the relation and seeks antagonistic confrontation as the motor of change. It is a 'no' that relates. 'Real negativity,' says Deleuze in the wonderful pages of *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1988) (that's the text to take to the desert island) 'real negativity is the regime of judgment', that is to say, the regime of tyrants, of the herd, the regime of the priests and the judges that diminish us and disorient us. Sad passions are very well shared, because many people profit from them. For instance, Deleuze argues, philosophers profit from negativity and trade in it—by indulging in the self-pitying lament of everything that is wrong with the world, thus making us even more depressed. Is it any wonder that so few undergraduates take philosophy in their first year?

There are wonderful passages in Spinoza, read with Deleuze, when he says that there are different ways of handling the negative or sad passions: there are those who turn them into an instrument of moral flagellation of humanity, but then there are also people who feel sorry for the sadness of humanity ... I am thinking of a lot of younger scholars, who belong to the yoga and meditation people: they may be in the category of melancholy neo-humanists. So there are different affective levels in the sadness of these passions. But what Deleuze specifically takes issue with is the philosophers who are 'feeding off the corpses', as he so vividly put it. People who profit from the sad passions are scavengers feeding on the dead. There is a legacy of Nietzsche here as well. In his famous letter *Against the New Philosophers*, for instance, Deleuze describes them as necrophilic thinkers, who revel in the disasters of the world, because it gives them a job—that of lamenting and pointing fingers. They are conceptual hyenas, not creative, generous

minds—they feed on and thus require negativity to justify their critical exercises.

Try to analyse this position within the complex time-continuum structure I mentioned before. The prophets of doom who call themselves philosophers reduce the present to the record of what we are ceasing to be, thereby reducing its rich complexity and increasing the sense of disempowerment. A doubly negative effect. If we, however, work from within and respect its complexity, we can flip the sense of impotence around and focus on the actualisation of the virtual.

This operation begins with the composition of ‘we’—the missing people, who embrace the common cause of resistance by co-constructing affirmative modes of relation and values. This is a collective praxis, not an individual psychological disposition. This is how the discussion about actualising the virtual-affirmation enters the picture. We need another subject—‘the missing people’, on a plane of immanence that is sustained by the ethics of affirmation. To reach this point, we need to de-psychologise this conversation, de-psychologise joy and sadness and their concomitant affects. In fact, we need to de-psychologise the subject altogether, turning it into a collective assemblage.

As we all know, Deleuze encourages us to abandon Majority-bound identity altogether, in favour of multiple pre/post/beyond-identitarian formations, that is to say assemblages. That is hard work in cognitive capitalism, as it demands a number of serious conceptual shifts. If you’re Facebook generation or if you teach Facebook generation (thumb up and thumb down), identity is the bloated signifier of compulsive consumerism and possessive individualism, staring you in the face. Ego-indexed principles are the single largest obstacle to understanding the geometry of relations and affects that Spinoza has conceptualised. Affects and affectations are not emotions. Affects are collective, shared, transversal blocks of relation and becoming: ceasing to be, emerging as becoming, negotiating the boundaries in constant flows. And these blocks are transversal and collective and aim at co-constructions of transversal subjectivities. Contemporary sciences support this vision of subjectivity: we know from genetics and neurosciences that we are extended minds and distributed consciousnesses. So, if our sciences know it, why can’t we philosophers accept it too? What’s wrong with us? Why do we stay attached, as a class of thinker and an institutional corporation, to the unitary self, the individual as point of reference? This implicit humanism and uncritical anthropocentrism, by the way, are part of the reason why the human sciences have lost credibility in the Anthropocene world of today. These intrinsic

assumptions need to be questioned and discussed – and this is the task of posthuman scholarship, which builds on neo-Spinozist premises in order to renew the Humanities. The whole system indexed on anthropocentric individuals is inadequate, and we need to move beyond that framework. Let us start by de-psychologising the discussion about affirmation and negativity. We are in a universe, with Spinoza and with Deleuze, where we're not looking at liberal individual entities, we're looking at affective, relational and cognitive capacities. Ultimately, they are ontological capacities to open up to the world – or not – to take in the present as the record of what we're ceasing to be, to take on the present as the traces of what we're in the process of becoming. These gestures are collective praxis and together we are capable of reactivating the negative, reworking it, transforming it, reformatting it. It's a constant process and in this process the individual self is an obstacle, not at all an asset. So, the affirmation side is a collective stance – it unites and connects.

What is affirmative about affirmation is that it increases our ability to relate and take in the world. It doesn't diminish you. It enhances you. We have to look critically at enhancement, because capitalism has already embraced this notion and practice, funding projects of human enhancement in line with Silicon Valley ideologies of computer-based expansion of human consciousness. Indeed, enhancement is at the core of a movement called the transhumanists, who believe that enhancement of human intelligence is the future. The problem with our brains is that they are too slow in relation to the informational computational networks we have created. The solution to this neural deficiency is to enhance our cognitive ability. The project is called super-intelligence, the institute – for those of you who are looking for post-human jobs – is the 'Institute for the Future of Humanity', the university is Oxford, UK and the director Nick Bostrom.

This is not what I have in mind at all: the enhancement I am promoting is ethical and it has to do with cultivating what increases your capacity to relate, knowing that negativity is what diminishes you, what belittles you, what makes you feel unable to enter processes of becoming. Deleuze is very strict on the negative powers of our education, is critical of philosophy as the discipline that always makes you feel inadequate, ignorant, stupid, and, if you're a girl, also of the LGBTQ kind, badly dressed. Philosophy as a gigantic intimidation machine, that makes you feel never up to date, never good enough to express an insight of your own. Negativity is the standard practice in our own profession, and it is supported by institutional practices that reward negative affects such as envy, competition and distrust. In the way we teach our students

how to think critically we are strongly encouraged to support the cult of negativity at the heart of the Humanities.

So we have our job cut out for ourselves. Inserting in our institutional practice a culture of joy as a collective social action, not only as a psychological state: cultivate joy as a sort of exercise in increasing our ontological capacities. Ethics as an ethology of forces that puts the social construction of affirmative values at its core is the collective pursuit of ways of actualising the virtual by processing negativity.

Obviously, in this exercise the traps and the challenges are enormous. The most common objection made to this discussion comes exactly from the suspicion that enhancement is a contaminated term, as I mentioned above. The structure of advanced capitalism according to Deleuze and Guattari is such that the system has understood perfectly well that life is the capital that it needs. I think that where Deleuze and Guattari strike a very important political note is in giving us a political philosophy that reads advanced capitalism as a system that has understood that the only capital that matters is the genetic and the informational codes of all that lives. Think of the first sections of the 1972 seminal text that is *Anti-Oedipus*, where Deleuze and Guattari offer the first analysis of the financialisation of the economy, how capitalism will destroy its industrial base and replace it with a new commodity, called credit, which will produce massive indebtedness. Nowadays critics like Lazzarato have developed a fully-fledged political theory around the reality of the debt. But Deleuze and Guattari have the intuition early on, just after May '68—that capitalism does not break, but bends and adapts. The end of manufacturing inaugurates the neo-liberal age of credit, that is to say, debt. Advanced capitalism is not advanced at all; it is a rather brutal system that eats its own resources—both human and non-human—without any thought for tomorrow. A system where financialisation and capitalisation of all that live are working hand in hand goes beyond the bio-political management envisaged by Foucault, to develop a full-scale politics of life itself, as Nick Rose aptly put it. Or rather, life as surplus, to quote Melinda Cooper.

Unsurprisingly, enhancement is a major term of reference and economic practice in cognitive advanced capitalism. There is no major university today—I'm sure Roma 3 is no exception—that is not investing massively in the powers of life, the autopoietic powers of the living, as the capital that we need to get hold of. If we control the genetic codes of all that lives, well, we can remake it to supply demands, markets, spare parts or whatever is in demand. Now, as a scholar and a woman of science, I am full of admiration for the advances of our technologies:

biogenetics, nanotechnologies, stem cell research, neural sciences are the core of university research today.

They produce the capital that we need, but to do what? What is the aim of the capitalisation of life, including human neural enhancement under advanced capitalism? Between the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Extinction, where are these practices of capitalisation of life leading us?

Cognitive capitalism is the context within which we need to transfer our conversation about affirmation and our collective practices aiming at creating affirmative values. This adds another layer of complexity to the philosophy of Deleuze, a technological layer that is introduced by Guattari, who in the 1970s is ‘the free radio stations’ man. He is the technology guy in the duet Guattari–Deleuze. He is the one who brings in mediation, and a general ecology that encompasses the media. Of course today we need to update it, but the foundation is there; we need to transpose the concept at the core of our complex social systems. Here we can rely on great pioneering works by generations of Deleuzian film theorists, bringing the field of cinema studies in contact with the neurosciences and the biogenetic sciences, all within cognitive capitalism, who wants human enhancement in order to accelerate our productive and consuming power. The planetary environment is dying, but we have synthetic biology, which has just mastered, for instance, the production of synthetic meat—the first artificial hamburger was produced two years ago. We humans are not even looting nature any more: we are remaking it.

In other words, there is a generative process at work within cognitive capitalism, which aims at sheer profit. And our universities are at the heart of it. The same universities that are undergoing neo-liberal reorganisation and telling us that we don’t need philosophy. We don’t need critical theory. Why? Allegedly because these old disciplines have an idea of Man that is so antiquated that it can’t possibly keep up with the great scientific discoveries of our time. As a colleague said to me—and I’ve written this in *The Posthuman*: ‘You guys simply have an antiquated notion of what counts as the human. You still believe in anthropocentrism. What is wrong with you?’ Man is outdated, so the human sciences indexed on Man are over as well.

This is the context in which we need to transpose our discussion on the affirmative: mediation, double mediation, biogenetic and informational, and the attack on the very critical theory tradition that we’re trying to defend. What this simplistic criticism misses is the fact that the critical Humanities have been thinking about the death of Man and the crisis

of the human at least ever since Nietzsche. Foucault writes explicitly about the death of Man in *The Order of Things* (1970), arguing that philosophy needs to grow out of Humanism and develop analyses of knowledge and power. Unfortunately, Foucault died too young, so his work remains unfinished. Deleuze and Guattari, however, nail it and accomplish a masterful oeuvre.

After May '68 philosophers like Deleuze did see the mutation of capitalism coming. He and Guattari wrote a double masterpiece, the title of which is *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). Here we have the knowledge of life, the codes of life as the capital. This system will stop at nothing. They will make future bonds on everything. I think the Bundesbank has just today issued bonds on the failure of Brexit. Ten-year bonds have been issued with a negative outcome on Brexit. The betting on the betting on the betting . . . This extraordinary system will stop at nothing. So Deleuze and Guattari look the monster in the eyes and say. 'I know what you are up to. I know that you are after this, this Life which transversally connects us all.'

Vital neo-materialism acknowledges that life is an autopoietic system, by re-reading Spinoza; and it does extend the autopoietic from the organic to the technological—with reference to Maturana and Varela—but it does so for the sake of resistance and creating alternatives. The adequate, lucid and pitiless analysis Deleuze and Guattari produce of capitalism through their life-philosophy of immanence is not at all a form of acquiescence, as the critics argue—but the exact opposite. If we accept their cartography of advanced capitalism and the politics of life, we need to develop a counter-practice that, starting from the same premises, takes them in different aims and directions.

This is where the crucial programme emerges of creating an ethics of affirmation and a politics of affirmative transversal assemblages. What would that look like? What do we need to do to extract margins of possible action that would enable us to trace what we are in the process of becoming within such a system and construct patterns of alternative becoming? We can take several roads to look at this. A couple of examples from our own practices: any commons, follow the commons wherever they go! Communalism of Hardt and Negri, digital commons, city-based commons, multiplication of commons, digital and real. Another area where assemblages are happening: post-colonial meets Environmental Humanities meets Digital Humanities meets indigenous epistemologies. Post-colonial digital humanities, de-colonial indigenous land rights, totally mediated, but talking about land rights, talking about clean water with assemblages that have the activists, the media people,

the philosophers, etc., etc. I've been involved in a couple of examples in British Columbia: extraordinary assemblages, people that you would never meet, at the heart of it systems of knowledge coming from civil society, including the corporate sector, engineering, indigenous populations with very different world-views, and our universities doing their bit.

There are multiple other examples of what you would call prototypes of collective assemblages, moving in the direction of the actualisation of the virtual. There are some well-established assemblages, and my favourite, because it is my political culture, is the alliance of the marginals. These are the queer, post-human missing people that my heart goes out to: women, feminists, LGBTQ+, animals, illegal unregistered migrants, disabled people, but also the non-human agents, like dust, plastic, dying insects and the Earth-others—they constitute a transversal assemblage, united against the powers of destruction of 'Man'. But please do not panic. Deleuze's philosophy of becoming offers emancipatory options also to the majoritarian subject—Man—that subject which is One, white, male, heterosexual, urban, speaking a standard language, owning the women and the children—as Deleuze and Guattari so eloquently describe him. He can become otherwise—become woman/animal/child etc. You can get out of the dialectics of pejorative difference, provided you are prepared to shift locations and do the hard work of consciousness-raising. The praxis consists in developing adequate understandings of conditions of privilege, or lack thereof, the better to transform them. Feminist, post-colonial and race theories are powerful antidotes against unearned privileges.

Now, the queer assemblage is an old one, it has a long history in my political culture. It goes back to feminist science fiction, and to Afro-futurism, where the transversal assemblage mentioned above includes the extra-terrestrials and alien others. This alliance is gathering momentum in these apocalyptic times we are living through, as the desire to exit, to get out altogether, grows exponentially. This is akin to the anthropological exodus that Hardt and Negri describe in *Empire*, when they say that people have had it, they want out of capital-ridden systems. Lovely Francesca Ferrando in her work on extraterrestrial, dystopian post-humanism also reiterates this point about cosmic exits. Fine, but I'm a terrestrial. I'm of this world.

My radical immanence brings me back to where this talk started, with the here and now, the politics of location, of being responsible for the specific slice of territory that I happen to inhabit. I would love to think

the process of becoming as an exodus that comes back in, reinvesting the present as the trace of what we are in the process of becoming, maybe creating a little bit of distance from the present as the record of what we are ceasing to be. A space of non-belonging, a little kind of non-human zone would allow us to transform the weight of the negative into a collective affirmation of the possibilities of alternatives. We need to reinvest what we have got and not only want to exit all the categories, partly because capitalism doesn't mind exiting everything and disembodimenting us. Maybe there is something to be gained by reclaiming the particular sort of life, the particular slice of living that happens to be where we feel at home, where we have built a threshold of sustainability out of many nomadic paths of crossing. We are forever negotiating with multiple cracks and missing links—but some of us more than others.

Deleuze says wonderful things about the flesh and the frame of a house, and how the flesh is vulnerable, he doesn't say the word, but 'the flesh is tender' and needs protection. I think Deleuze says that it needs framing, it needs the containment of a frame. I would like to think of critical theory, of critical philosophy, of Deleuze Studies, as the framework where this type of thinking is possible, where we can create a space of stillness—meta-stability—at the heart of the deterritorialising speed of cognitive capitalism. A slowing-down that allows us to make that crucial distinction: what are we ceasing to be and what are we in the process of becoming? What does it take to make the collective leap towards affirmation? It takes giving what we may think that we are short of, that we haven't got, namely the affirmation of the generative power of the present. Giving what you don't even have is the classical definition of love, and I would push this in the direction of a collective falling in love with affirmative values. We need to borrow the energy from the future, if the present conditions do not allow us to act affirmatively. That is the affect that we need to cultivate: it is the ethics of becoming that will give us, that gives us the politics. What else do we need to have a politics? What else other than this: the sharing of an adequate understanding of our locations, in a collective recognition that triggers processes of becoming. The patterns of becoming 'otherwise other' are not identical, but zigzagging, diverse. They converge in affirming the possibility of a here and now that would be liveable, that would be sustainable, and affirming, yes, that famous love for the world that one feels so embarrassed in even stating. Since when are affirmative values an embarrassment? What is happening to us?

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