The suicidal state and the state of debate

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**Recommended Citation**

Buchanan, Ian M. and Ely, Michael, "The suicidal state and the state of debate" (2013). *Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers*. 794.

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Abstract
Dr. Ian Buchanan is one of the world's leading scholars of Deleuze and Guattari. He is a contributing editor to the “Deleuze Connections” series as well as editor of “Drain” magazine and a faculty member at the University of Wollongong in the Institution of Social Transformation Research. It is a true honor to receive his insight on the works of Deleuze and Guattari.

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Keywords
debate, suicidal, state

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/794
The Suicidal State and the State of Debate

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

ME: Dr. Buchanan, first, I want to thank you for speaking to me. Your contribution to our journal is one of the most exciting yet.

I wanted to start with a basic question before we get into your work specifically. In “A Thousand Plateaus”, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the implications of internalized fascism as the desiring of one’s own oppression. They go on to state that this culminates in a suicidal state machine in which “the dangers of all other lines pale by comparison”. In today’s modern age, where we face nuclear threats as well as great power wars, it is difficult for students like myself to explain the significance of this writing. What does it mean to create a suicidal state and how does that compare to the modern dangers that we face?

IB: Deleuze and Guattari define the fascist state as a suicide state because it would rather pursue its own ideals than take account of the reality of its situation. In the case of Nazi Germany, this was quite clear: Hitler famously declared that if the German people weren’t willing to fight on then they deserved everything they got. He had no qualms at all about maintaining his agenda even if it meant the literal annihilation of his own people. This is not something that is often said about Nazi Germany, no doubt because their determined annihilation of other peoples, particularly, but only the Jewish peoples, but what is the most horrifying to me is the willingness of the state to exterminate not just other people, but its own people. This is the pure form of the suicidal state. If this no longer seems relevant or easy to grasp then that is perhaps because in an age of neo-liberalism we have ceased to expect that the state should care about its own people. If we harbored any lingering optimism that the state did have our interests at heart this was extinguished by its response to the global financial meltdown in 2008, the effects of which we continue to feel in 2012. Right from the start the state – and it didn’t matter which country you were talking about – prioritized the banks and financial institutions, bailing them out even as it allowed the bank’s victims to go to the wall. To me, that is the latest permutation of the suicide state. And we may yet see states like Italy, Spain and Greece go to the wall precisely because they choose to continue to pursue the neo-liberal ideals that brought them into grief in the first place rather than put the welfare of their people first. As is well known, the only people who benefit from the austerity measures being imposed around the world today are the ‘bankers’, that is, the very group of people whose reckless culpability got us into this mess.

ME: With that question in mind, you wrote an essay in Drain Magazine, of which you are an editor, entitled “Space in the Age of the Non-Place”. In it, you say that we as subjects have forgotten our place in history. You go on to suggest that the schizo, as Deleuze and Guattari describe, lives history. I am curious as to how students, not only of history, but in any setting might use this theory to challenge arborescent structures within the modern world which you say “we have been evicted from”.

IB: I think the paradoxical point of that essay was not that we need to challenge arborescent structures so much as we perhaps need to figure out how we might create some new arborescent structures of our own. The binary of arborescent on the one hand and rhizomatic on the other is not Deleuze and Guattari’s shorthand for bad and good, however you might want to define or characterize bad and good. Rather, these are the two basic tendencies of the unconscious, that is, our unconscious has a tendency to either develop linear connections between thoughts, ideas, memories, affects and so forth, or develop rhizomatic connections between these things. Sometimes our memories do unfold in a Proustian manner, beginning with our earliest childhood and then unfolding like a marvelous continuous tapestry. But, then again, sometimes our memories stitch together in a seemingly random pattern, one image connecting with another according to a set of principles that cannot always be deciphered. If we compare Freud and Deleuze and Guattari, the basic difference is this: for Freud, all memories trace back to a real or imagined primal scene and all memories are bound together by virtue of its attractive force. Therefore, all images the unconscious throws up can be interpreted as derivations of this one primal image. Deleuze and Guattari set this whole way of thinking aside and in doing so force us to think more creatively about the ways and means by which memories (or ideas, thoughts, affects) form associations, which they call assemblages. It also needs to be borne in mind that for Deleuze and Guattari the purely rhizomatic mode would be akin to psychosis. That is why I suggested above that what we need today is new arborescent structures. It might be, though, that we need the disruptive force of the rhizomatic to create a space for these new structures to take hold. I think we are witnessing something along these lines with the global occupy movement – the movement itself came together and continues to grow rhizomatically, but the idea it is entrenching is fully arborescent: it wants a new way of thinking about how the state should function. It wants to reverse the polarity so that the 1% of the superrich are no longer the only recipients of state welfare.

ME: In line with that question, in the same essay, you say that the thing we take for granted is globalization. It seems that political pundits constantly triumph the actions of globalization, particularly with things like trade tariffs or political assistance, both of which
you cite as axiomatic in “Deleuze and the Contemporary World”. How might we recognize what we take for granted within the
globalized world?

IB: This is quite an old question. It received its most poignant formulation in Brecht’s work: Brecht argued that art needs to estrange
the everyday so that what seems natural is made to appear historical. In effect, he argued that what’s needed is pedagogic art that can
retrain the minds of people to see their world differently. It is hard to argue with this, but one also has to agree with Deleuze who said
in his cinema books that if it was easy to make people think then it would already have happened. It is clearly the job of educators at all
levels from kindergarten all the way to postgraduate level to instill the idea that the world we live in didn’t just take the form it did by
accident, that it is rather the product of deliberate decisions, even if those were decisions whose consequences could not be foreseen.
This in turn will require new forms of representation capable of rendering the complexity of the globalized world we live in.
ME: Along with this idea, in “Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘Anti-Oedipus: A Reader’s Guide’” you write a section entitled “Theory and Praxis”. In it, you point to the reversible nature of the globalized world whereby corporations are able to co-opt any style that exists, including those which parody it, particularly by using the wealthiest population’s love of inner city markets and the inner city market’s love of wealth. One does not need to look too far to see that this is clearly true; you cite Calvin Klein as evidence of this. How can we, in acknowledging this globalized facet of capitalism and power, subvert it without ensuring that we will be overtaken by the same structures of power we are fighting against? Is it still hopeful, or is there a sense of hopelessness, within our modern era, as it appears you are stating in your essay “The Utility of Empire”? Can there be an organized struggle against those structures without that organization becoming part and parcel of the capitalist system?

IB: I’ve always been suspicious of the word ‘hope’. I remember thinking in 2008 when Obama campaigned with the slogan ‘change you can believe in’ and bandied around the word hope like it was something worth having for itself that it was all just a con – we were being offered the hope for change in place of actual change. We were asked to believe in him and take hope from him as though this would be enough to make the world a better place. After the terrible Bush years I can understand why people took sustenance from this slogan, but it seemed to me then and I think history has shown that hope isn’t enough. Yes, it is better to live in a world in which hope survives, to frame things like life is a Hollywood film, but surely politics should aim to do better than merely offer the minimum conditions of hopefulness. Indeed, I would say the higher aim of politics should be to take hope right out of the equation. If the state governed with the welfare of all people in mind we wouldn’t have to hope that it would cease spending money on pork-barrel projects such as needless weapons programs and instead spend it on things we really need such as better schools, cheaper healthcare, and so on. By privileging the idea of hope we give the state license to treat the situation as hopeless, as though to say they must be forgiven in advance for failing to make any real difference to the way things are. So I think we need more anger not more hope.

ME: Continuing with your work, in the introduction to “Deleuze and the Contemporary World”, you argue that the problem with neo-liberalism is not that it denies rights, but rather that it creates a basis of realization depending on profitability and efficiency. You go on to state that with that in mind, and in the light of the Zapatista’s movements, we must start “with the government itself”. What does it mean to start with the government itself particularly when we advocate for “highly localized struggles”?

IB: I mean we have to start by asking ourselves what we want from our government. More concretely we have to ask ourselves what we think constitutes good government. In practical terms this means putting pressure on individual politicians not merely to make better decisions on ad hoc basis, ie to favour this piece of legislation and not some other piece, but to uphold a more progressive set of ideals. We used to call this ideology, but if neoliberalism has been successful in one respect it is that it has eradicated the very notion of ideology from contemporary discussion. It has made the word ideology into an obscenity, something that can no longer be uttered by any self-respecting pundit. But here I’m reminded of Nietzsche’s warning about nihilists, better the man who believes in God than the man who believes in nothing. For that is precisely what we have ended up with: a political landscape from which belief in anything but God has been eradicated. Consequently all political debates takes place in terms of inhuman or even antihuman concepts like ‘profitability’, ‘cost’, ‘accountability’, ‘productivity’, ‘feasibility’, and so on, instead of human concepts like ‘welfare’, ‘well-being’, ‘joy’ and so on. As several architecture critics have pointed out, one has only to look at the trashy new harbor developments that have spread like virus elsewhere, the state has allowed private capital to destroy potentially interesting sites for decades to come.

ME: Finally, and on a more personal note, I came upon Deleuze and Guattari’s theories in American collegiate policy debate. Lately, with the advent of this journal, my peers and I have received criticisms from the community for using interviews we conducted ourselves as “evidence”. The way that we have viewed this process is as a sort of “doing philosophy” akin to Deleuze’s work which you cite in your essay “The Problem of the Body in Deleuze and Guattari, Or, What Can a Body Do?” How, in your opinion, do we as students go about doing philosophy as a way to create and navigate concepts while simultaneously upholding the academic rigor of a particular discursive regime (to use Foucault’s helpful idea): you need to respect those rules in order to be taken seriously by others. Can you offer any thoughts on the issue of primary research and more specifically, can you, as a professor, offer an insight on the types of primary research that we as students can and should engage in?

IB: Now that is a tough question! I suppose I’d start by recognizing that as theorists we speak to multiple publics, and not all those publics think the same way as each other or indeed the same way as us. To which I’d add, if you are trying to do something new, then you have to expect criticism, indeed you should welcome it because it means you are provoking people and making them think. So criticism per se shouldn’t be a reason to change what you are doing. Along the same lines, the question of rigour really only matters in terms of the rules of a particular discursive regime (to use Foucault’s helpful idea): you need to respect those rules in order to be taken seriously by interlocutors who operate within those rules themselves. But if your goal is something larger, such as changing the world, then those rules are merely an impediment and should be disregarded the minute they cease to serve your purpose. If the community demands rigour you should respond by asking them why they want it, what purpose does it serve and more especially whose interests does it uphold. As for what kind of research students should do, that I cannot answer except by saying that what interests me is the question of why people believe what they believe. Why do people believe in neo-liberalism, even when on a daily basis they must see countless demonstrations of the fact that it does not have their interest at heart? It is questions like this that I think we need to ask and try to answer and in my view Deleuze and Guattari offer several excellent tools for this task.