

Felix Guattari and the Psychosocial Imagination

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In November 1988 I attended an event in what was then a smoke-filled room at the ICA in London, to hear the radical psychoanalyst, Felix Guattari, present a talk called ‘The Three Ecologies’. In heavily accented French, he read what was to become the book of the same name. It was exciting, far more so than the rather pedestrian responses given by the British discussants. I do remember that, even with the text supplied, the talk was hard to follow. Having the book allows the reader to have more time to think and to gain a purchase on the conceptual apparatus that Guattari brought to his task².

To discuss Guattari on the occasion of the launch of the Association is important because Guattari allows us to bridge so many potential divides and concerns across psychosocial studies, between approaches to psychoanalysis and between psychoanalytic and other approaches to the study of the psychosocial. This short presentation seeks to introduce some aspects of Guattari’s work³.

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² The British Library holds a recording of this talk, which can be accessed via their website.

³ This talk formed an introduction to the much longer and more detailed paper, provisionally entitled ‘Rethinking Guattari’, which contains far more detailed analysis of Guattari’s conceptual apparatus.

The Psychosocial after Lacan

It is common to present the work of Guattari as the second part of a pair – Deleuze and Guattari – and to understand Guattari’s work through their joint work, often presenting it as a trenchant critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis. I suggest that Guattari’s work deserves understanding on its own terms and that the relationship to Lacan and to psychoanalysis is much more complex than has been generally understood. In his Three Ecologies talk, Guattari began with a reference to Gregory Bateson’s (1972) ‘Steps to an ecology of mind’. It is in this context that we might begin to think about Guattari and the psychosocial.

Bateson, who could arguably have thought about ‘three ecologies’, argued that all three systems of the individual, society and ecosystem were all together a part of one supreme cybernetic system that controls everything instead of just interacting systems. This supreme cybernetic system is beyond the self of the individual, which Bateson referred to as Mind. While Mind is a cybernetic system, it can only be distinguished as a whole and not parts. Bateson felt Mind was immanent in the messages and pathways of the supreme cybernetic system. According to Bateson, consciousness is the bridge between the cybernetic networks of individual, society and ecology and that the mismatch between the systems due to improper understanding will result in the degradation of the entire supreme cybernetic system or Mind. Thus, one could read Guattari’s three ecologies as a response to Bateson and an attempt to set out what this might look like. Thus, in this short presentation, I will dwell on Guattari’s development of schizoanalytic cartographies, as a way of developing a non-reductionist approach to the ecology of ‘mind’, an ecology that could explore possibilities for transformation and change.

Schizoanalytic cartographies

I want to turn to a series of seminars held in the 1980s which included Guattari, the sociologist Robert Castel and his psychiatrist wife, Francoise, the Italian psychiatrist Franco Battaglia, the physical chemist Ilya Prigogine and Isabel Stengers, who was then working with Prigogine in Belgium, as well as the psychiatrist and family therapist Mony Elkaim, who at that time was working in New York. Guattari developed a method which he called Schizoanalytic Cartography. According to Holmes (no date), this approach began out of this series of dialogues. According to Holmes, what emerged from the dialogue between Guattari and Elkaim was a series of diagrams relating to four domains of the unconscious, four inter-related varieties of experience, that overflow the ego to constitute an expanded field of trans-subjective interaction that he called a Schizoanalytic Cartography.

Each zone of a four-fold map is understood not as the definitive structural model of an unconscious process, able to render its truth or meaning, but rather as a meta-model, a way of perceiving and perhaps reorienting the singular factors at play. ‘What I am precisely concerned with’, Guattari wrote, ‘is a displacement of the analytic problematic, a drift from systems of statement (énoncé) and performed subjective structures toward assemblages of enunciation that can forge new coordinates of interpretation and “bring into existence” unheard of ideas and proposals’. (Holmes *opcit*, p9)

The four divisions of the diagram deal with existential territories, material and energetic flows, rhizomes of abstract ideas and aesthetic refrains. This translates as the ground beneath one’s feet, the turbulence of social experience, the blue skies of ideas and the rhythmic insistence of waking dreams. These kinds of experience are linked into a cycle of transformations, ‘whose consistency and dynamics make up an assemblage (individual, family, group, project, workshop, society etc.).

I want to introduce the concepts of Existential Territories and Incorporeal Universes. The Existential Territory is, says Holmes, the place in which language collapses and we are confronted by skin and sensation – the place of sensory experience, of affect, thought about specifically by object relations work on infancy (see Walkerdine, 2010). So we have to think of the way in which we inhabit a space and time, through our affective and sensory experience of it. This could be a neighbourhood, a home but it could also be the experience of a ‘bottomless black hole’ (Holmes op cit). According to Holmes, it is the experience of pacing, wandering, finding one’s territory. In this, he makes a reference to Situationism in which Guy Debord (1995) worked with the idea of the drift in which we might understand the psychic geography of a place through our actual wandering through it. Central to Guattari’s view is the way in which our territories attempt to mark out our own boundaries in an existential sense. It is this issue which is crucial because our existence as separate beings in object relations terms is understood by reference to an experience of primary process which allows us to feel held and as though we have a continuity of being (Bick, 1987; Walkerdine, 2010).

How do we mark out ourselves, our space, how do we come to affectively mark the boundaries of our affective bodies? This is the place, Guattari says, in which subjectivity emerges:

Territories of existencedrift in relation to each other like tectonic plates under continents. Rather than speak of the ‘subject’, we should perhaps speak of components of subjectification, each working more or less on its own. This would lead us, necessarily to re-examine the relation between concepts of the individual and subjectivity, and, above all, to make a clear distinction between the two. Vectors of subjectification do not necessarily pass through the individual, which in reality appears to be something like a ‘terminal’ for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data-processing machines etc. Therefore, interiority establishes itself at the crossroads of multiple components, each relatively autonomous in relation to the other, and, if needs be, in open conflict.”

(1989, p25)

So, vectors of subjectification are those forces which define and position subjects. For Guattari, the subject is a terminal for processes that involve human groups, socio-economic ensembles, data processing machines. So, what we see here is that these groups, ensembles and machines are what is primary and interiority is what establishes itself as at the crossroads of these, which may sit alongside each other or be in conflict with each other. Subjectivity is an effect of these processes and not its cause. Guattari invites us to think this assembled subjectivity via early processes connected to embodied infantile sensory experience.

Mony Elkaim, now a prominent family therapist working in Belgium, has written about his work with Guattari (Elkaim, 1997). What Elkaim stresses particularly is the role of Ilya Prigogine, the physical chemist, in providing a model which went beyond systems approaches currently in use in family therapy. What he stresses is the way in which Prigogine's chemistry showed how to think about change within systems, which went beyond what was, according to Elkaim, a rather closed and static view of systems to think about how change might be dynamically introduced. Prigogine worked on self-organising systems and argued that determinism was no longer a viable scientific approach. In deterministic physics, all processes are time-reversible, meaning that they can proceed backward as well as forward through time. For Prigogine, determinism is a denial of the effect of time. If time is introduced, certain actions are not reversible.

Elkaim argues that Prigogine's approach to unstable systems was a way of beginning to think about the possibility of change within a family (and of course wider social) system, so that through time the system becomes more open to the possibility of change. Elkaim's work focuses on how certain ways of relating brought into the system by its members from the past, when

taken together, can produce a certain stuckness and so an inability to move forward. We can see here that Elkaim credits Guattari with bringing in the importance of change and transformation within the future as opposed to understanding change as simply produced through a working through of past internal conflicts as would be classically psychoanalytic. Guattari at this time wanted to leave behind the strictly critical approach of *Anti Oedipus* in order to create or to account in a different way for practices of intervention, including politics and psychotherapy.

What kind of unconscious is Guattari invoking here? To understand this unconscious, we need to think about the relationship between infancy and psychosis –its relation to the embodied and the time before speech. Guattari’s unconscious has four dimensions, each of which relates to the body in a different way. The ground beneath one’s feet relates to holding and orientation (Meltzer, Tustin, Hanzel, Anzieu); the turbulence of social experience relates to modes of interacting or relationality; the blue skies of ideas could be related to the importance of thinking, as in Bion’s K and –K and the rhythmic insistence of waking dreams relates to the distinction between fantasy and reality⁴. So what we have here is an emotional or affective geography. What we need to understand is the way in which the adult’s affective geography is built upon the unspoken geography of infancy – that is the looks, the sounds, the feel of a mother’s body and so forth, are then built on and recalled in the geography of the adult, which itself relies on sensation, feeling, memory. It is to an ongoing tradition of infancy oriented research and psychoanalysis which we can draw on to understand where Guattari is coming from.

⁴ I am hugely indebted to the late Cathy Urwin for helping me to understand this.

However, Elkaim's work is from a different tradition, that of systemic family therapy. If Holmes credits Elkaim with the four-fold diagram it is also because family therapy as in the cook for the day example in Guattari's *Chaosmosis* (1992), which is recognizably like a family therapy task in which a part of the family might be given a task – say a father and son going on an outing together. The accomplishment of the task requires a great deal of work for it to happen and this work itself is understood as therapeutically effective by bringing change into the system.

Traditional systemic family therapy began in the 1970s and uses systems theory, notably the work of Von Bertalanffy (1968)⁵. What is important for us to understand in this approach is that the individual and environment form one system. Thus, when Guattari uses his four points, we can recognise that one of the salient aspects of the cartographies is the way in which they expand the field of the individual's psychic life to include a sense of a system in which the environment is a central part of the approach. What Elkaim and Guattari devised together and which came out of the seminars was an approach which took some basic principles from a systemic approach and developed them to utilise insights from psychoanalysis and semiotics. Indeed, as I have explained above, the cook for the day task in the La Borde kitchen is recognisable as the development of a family therapy task and indeed Elkaim (op cit) discussed how Guattari viewed the family therapy setting as a theatre for creativity. Central to family therapy is the understanding of a system in homeostasis. Patterns have developed and ways of being which prevent change but allow things to carry on as they are. By introducing paradoxes and tasks into the system, as with the father and son example mentioned above, the idea of working towards change is produced. Thus, the La Borde kitchen introduces a novel setting in which something new might be created, some change might happen but the outcome is unpredictable. The

⁵ Systemic Family Therapy, sometimes identified as the Milan Model, emphasizes a prescriptive and paradoxical approach based on systems theory.

Existential Territory is the place in which language collapses and we are confronted by skin and sensation – the place of sensory experience, of affect.

His concept of the Incorporeal Universe is a way of thinking about the possibility of moving from known territories into the creative but frightening space of the unknown, an unknown which is not yet embodied but can be created. It is how to manage that without succumbing to an annihilating anxiety, a need to re-territorialise, to effectively go back to the place that feels safe and known, which is the task he sets out to explore, both in therapeutic and political terms.

Using Daniel Stern and work on infancy and early childhood

Daniel Stern was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst whose work is taken up very enthusiastically by Guattari in *The Three ecologies*. In his book, 'The interpersonal World of The Infant' (1985), Stern attempted to provide a dialogue between emerging lab-based research on infancy in the 1970s and 80s and psychoanalysis. Stern was trained as an analyst in the ego psychology tradition in the USA and linked particularly with the Anna Freud tradition in Britain. In his work, he strongly opposed the work of Margaret Mahler and others who he thought put forward critical stage approaches to child development based entirely on clinical work and not informed by the developmental work of the time. The laboratory based work on infancy was enabled mostly because of development in video recording, which allowed minute analysis of interaction between caregivers (mostly mothers) and their infants in a lab. The work was strongly influenced by Stern's stay at the Child Care and Development Group run by Martin Richards in Cambridge.

Guattari arguably enthusiastically embraced Stern's work because of the way in which he presented development in terms of increasing relationally-produced sensory experience, which is

then taken by the child and mother to become the basis of repeated ritual exchanges, very much invoking the ritornellos. It is easy to understand why it appealed to Guattari, because it presents a widely cited (e.g. by Massumi (2003) and Hansen (2004) picture of an emergent self created out of affective and sensory relations between baby and caregiver⁶.

Stern integrates experimental evidence with the work of Sylvan Tomkins (1962, 1963), who posited that early affective experience was composed of patterns of neural firing which produced what Darwin called categorical affects (anger, joy, sadness etc), which Darwin posited had an innate discrete facial display and distinct quality of feeling and that these innate patterns evolved as social signals understood by all as means of survival. As Stern says, each category of affect is thought to be experienced along two commonly agreed dimensions, activation, which refers to the intensity or urgency of the feeling quality, and hedonic, which refers to the degree to which the feeling quality is pleasurable or unpleasurable. Stern coins the name ‘vitality affects’ for certain perceptual and sensory experiences which do not fit directly with a Darwinian approach. These feelings, which can accompany categorical affects, are experienced as a rush, a flooding, a wave of feeling, an acceleration of thoughts. What they share is a rush of neural firing though with different neurons firing in each case. But the point is the quality of the affect rather than its category. That is, the affective quality conveyed by a body which tells us about the vitality that body experiences – e.g. drooping, listless, slumped, jaunty, forceful etc. Stern argues that these are experienced as dynamic shifts or patterned changes within ourselves. He gives the example of a mother who soothes a baby by stroking its body in a particular way while saying ‘there, there, there’ with a certain modulation. He argues that this becomes patterned so that the words

⁶ But see the acrimonious debate between Stern and Andre Green (see Sandler and Sandler 2000).

can evoke the same pattern of vitality affect as the touch. He argues that this produces an emerging sense of self or a sense of an emerging self. In other words, patterns of experience and sensation relating to body parts are experienced as sensori-motor schemata (e.g. mouth to nipple or thumb to mouth), and accompanied by vitality affects is what produces the beginnings of a sense of self out of sensory and relational regularities and patterns. In particular, it is the ability of the infant to begin to organise invariant aspects of experience, such as indeed the nipple in the mouth, the stroking of the body, the sound of 'there, there'. It is these, says Stern, which form the basis of perceived forms, identifiable acts and verbalised feelings, which form the basis of subjectivity and of emergent relatedness in which all learning and creative acts begin. Stern goes on to describe how these are gradually consolidated at different ages, which I will not go into here, but Stern is concerned with the way in which a sense of self is gradually formed from this sensory and affective experience and its organisation. It is not difficult to see why this so excited Guattari. Stern presents us with a relational approach to early sensory experience and its changes over time, including the ways in which schemas do attach to territories and make an experience of an embodied and bounded self possible.

The experimental developmental psychological accounts discussed by Stern relate to what analysts call primary process and the role of part objects. Although Guattari references Lacan's work on '**object petit a**', actually most work on part objects (e.g. the breast, the nipple) comes from the object relations tradition and what Stern describes in terms of vitality affects seems to relate to the experience of primary process, as in 'The Existential Territory is the place in which language collapses and we are confronted by skin and sensation' (Holmes, op cit). The refrains which make up existence are the 'there, there, there' of the mother that we saw in Stern, just as

they are the steps from cot to mother's arms or the walk from sitting room to bed or the walk to school. These are the existential refrains, the repeated patterns, which Stern so strongly presents to us as making up the possibility of subjectivity. If Guattari came at this through psychosis, it is out of a recognition that he was dealing with experiences that could not be contained within the logic of the linguistic and the oedipal but also because he wanted to expand the remit of how he thought about subjectivity as an effect rather than a cause and the possibility of creative change.

The unconscious, he says, remains bound to archaic fixations only so long as there is nothing which engages it and can form an investment in a future. Thus, if we understand the existential territory as the embodied affective place or in fact places in which a sense of existing is produced. Tomkins, we have the idea of a schizoanalytic cartography, the idea of tracing the possibility of becoming Other, of moving forward, of being different.

Autonomy and Imagination

For Guattari, only a move through the imagination to a site of incorporeal universes can exceed a current subjectivity and can curtail the likelihood of a reterritorialisation in a place that looks like the place from which one has come. In moving from an anxious split off fantasy to an act of imagination, Guattari seeks to produce possibilities that stop 'the entropic rise of a dominant subjectivity' (Guattari 1989, p 45).

A collective and individual subjectivity that completely exceeds the limits of individualization, stagnation, identificatory closure, and will instead open itself up on all sides to the socius, but also to the machinic Phylum [*by this I think he means other possibilities of connection as in the on/off of machine codes in a computer*], to techno-

scientific Universes of reference, to aesthetic worlds, as well as to a new 'pre-personal' understanding of time, of the body, of sexuality. (1989, p 44-45)

Guattari's was a radical vision that incorporated elements from a variety of approaches to psychoanalysis as well as non-psychoanalytic work and ecological thinking. Guattari's approach to the psychosocial imagination clearly deserves our greater engagement and understanding. It is hoped that this very small introduction may serve to increase interest in this important body of work.

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