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«With the normalization of individuals comes also the one of sexes, bodies or intimate relationships in general. Love itself does not escape the mechanisms of the ‹state apparatus›.»

LET YOUR LOVE BE LIKE THE WASP AND THE ORCHID ⁽¹⁾ Blerta Axhija, Nina Guyot

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According to Michel Foucault, our perception of power is often limited to macropolitical practices or the appearance of «institutions» which we tend to call the «State». However, he argues that those are mostly the product of interwoven micropolitical relationships and practices. In other words, the power of the «State» emanates from every form of relationship — even the most intimate ones — in a very decentralized way. The cumulative effects produced through these decentralized relationships of power can be more adequately named «state-machine», as the latter functions as an apparatus whose mechanisms can be found everywhere, rather than a centralized external entity.⁽²⁾

Those mechanisms can be described as the capturing of «flows of all kinds, populations, commodities or commerce, money or capital» or even eroticism, desire and emotions.⁽³⁾ Once captured, these flows go through the «State's» process of «overcoding», which imposes on others the real or true way of making sense of things, avoiding any questioning of how they are or should be, and regardless of those confronted by these questions on an everyday basis.⁽⁴⁾ Any story or knowledge that deviates from this created truth is considered dangerous and needs to be fixed. This process captures the endless creativity of life in strictly delimited categories.⁽⁵⁾

This process is one of fragmentation which consists in dividing and categorising every aspect of life such as knowledge, bodies, identities, desires, practices. It accentuates the dichotomy between what is considered normal or right and abnormal or wrong and creates the illusion that only the «State» can protect us from the latter.⁽⁶⁾ Paradoxically, this dividing process leads to the homogenisation of the society, by preventing other forms of knowledge or behaviours from emerging. Through this homogenisation, the diversity of individuals constituting a population becomes less complex to manage through the generation of normative behaviours. Those normative behaviours, and the illusion of a common identity they produce along with a form of social peace, participate in the reproduction of the status quo. Consequently, those with privileges tend to retain them and those excluded from them remain so.

As Foucault's conception of power says and in order to create this manageable society, the mechanisms of power must take place at the most micro scale. The fragmentation and homogenisation process are thus also applied to individuals, participating in turning human beings into «subjects». In fact, the characterization of one person in relation to another is supposed to be clearly defined, assuming that this person is a homogeneous and coherent entity, static over time. In Foucault's words, the «state-machine» «attaches [the individual] to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize, and which others have recognized in him».⁽⁷⁾ The resulting predictability of the human being satisfies the «State's» need for «infinitesimal surveillance by conquering the individual».⁽⁸⁾

With the normalization of individuals comes also the one of sexes, bodies or intimate relationships in general.⁽⁹⁾ Love itself does not escape the mechanisms of the «state apparatus». It is even a privileged terrain for the creation of

a homogeneous society, given its power to generate social bonds. This ability, however, gives it a double power. In fact, love possesses a subversive power by being able to generate new forms of social organisation, but it can also, in its most corrupted form, contribute to create the social relations feeding and fed by the «state-machine».

Today's usual conception of love can then be explored in the ways it participates in the creation of a normalized society. An understanding of its functioning and its limits in this task can finally lead to a broader comprehension of its subversive power in order to imagine how changes at a micro-scale — as in love relationships — can have a transformative effect over the whole social organisation.

The conception of love has evolved in parallel with the one of marriage, initially conceived as an economic issue. In the past, marriage actually embodied a transaction ensuring the transmission of a name, the constitution of heirs, fortunes or the formation of alliances. However, these economic-political imperatives changed when the wealth and status of the privileged classes tended to become independent of inter-family marriages, but rested on high-ranking affinities, business success or a military or civil career.

Less falling prey to various strategies, marriage became freer and, at the same time, the idea of «romantic love» became central.⁽¹⁰⁾ Romantic love, constantly portrayed in advertisements, movies or literature, is meant to be selfless, voluntary, free and pure.⁽¹¹⁾ Its representation promotes the idea of a unification of two halves, meant to form a perfect, monogamous, finite and stable entity. If this conception of love has become the norm, it is mainly because the unification, and thus homogenisation it suggests by encouraging the «fusion of lovers», is essential to our social organisation, as previously explained.

Also, the «state-machine» operates a fragmentation and homogenisation of love relationships by normalising a part of them and marginalising the rest. In fact, because it supports the idea of reuniting two different entities or two complementary halves, monogamy is defined as a dominant and hierarchically superior model among multiple and diverse relationships. With it, and for similar reasons, comes the preference of sexual relations within marriage, but also the favouring of heterosexual relationships.⁽¹²⁾ By repetition of this constructed norm, heterosexuality is thus considered a truth or natural archetype, without being one.⁽¹³⁾

In fact, heterosexuality is based on a binary vision of gender which is not the instinctive expression of the body, but an inscription of practices into the same body.⁽¹⁴⁾ These practices operate by fragmentation of the body to produce sexual differences through the idea of femininity and masculinity by isolating the reproductive organs as a gender marker. The latter, wrongly renamed from reproductive organs to sexual organs, freezes our conception of sexual intercourse by avoiding the sexualisation of the whole body and justifies the preferring of heterosexual relationships to others.⁽¹⁵⁾



King in his Carriage, 2014.
Image: Wikimedia Commons, Jean and Fred

Thus, our society follows a constructed and normalized form of love that seeks to unify the individuals as a homogeneous «people», bringing sameness through repetition of invariant behaviours. In «Commonwealth», Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri illustrate this condition through the interpretation of «The Fable of the Bees», written by Bernard Mandeville in the beginning of the 18th century. In fact, they understand this fable as the story of a perfect and complementary love between bees and flowers during the pollination period. Bees cover the needs of the flowers by moving their pollen from one plant to another and flowers provide bees with a substance they can use to make honey. Bees and flowers are thus two halves completing one another, creating a unity that repeats itself over and over in the same way. As such, it is, according to the authors, a representation of a corrupted form of love, in the sense that it reproduces itself without creating any difference or new assemblage. It is not conducive to the encounter of singularities, which nevertheless exist in an apparently homogeneous society.⁽¹⁶⁾

The system described above seems a priori imperturbable, coherent and fixed in view of its strongly established norms and the subjects it tends to create. However, it is daily challenged by the latter through behaviours and experiences that go beyond the rigid boundaries constructed through this normative system. Indeed, although the «state-machine» seeks to capture all flows so that they do not go beyond certain borders or identifying categories, certain things escape it.⁽¹⁷⁾ Love relationships are once again an accurate example of this situation.

For instance, everyday life gives one the opportunity to experience all sorts of love relationships that are far more complex than what the «state-machine» is able to embrace and only few beings can boast of having found absolute completeness in love.⁽¹⁸⁾ Even the idea of monogamy does not benefit from a single and clear reading, as it is noticeable that couples define the exclusivity of a relationship in a very personal way, negotiating on a case-by-case basis. More generally, one realises that the terms of love relationships, rather than normalised and homogeneous, are processes under construction, constantly negotiated, neither fixed, nor taken for granted.⁽¹⁹⁾

Also, the binary gender system and the heterosexual norms that flow from the «statist» conception of love relationships are also questioned daily. Indeed, the perfect binarity of the system of sexes, genders and sexual orientations is continuously transgressed. Some relationships fall outside the rigid framework of heteronormativity, some bodies do not conform to the falsely linear translation between the so-called biological sex and gender, and finally, gender identities formed over the past centuries are gradually dissolving.

These bodies, subjects or behaviours, perceived as deviant regarding the norms built by the «state-machine», show the transformative power lying in each individual. Indeed, by questioning the «statist» practices in our daily lives — such as the lovers' fusion of identity, the binary categorisation of bodies, or the dichotomic judgment of behaviours — we

may be capable of challenging the ideal normative subject by creating new identities, freed from moralizing normativity, rigid identity, as well as social and psychological determinations.⁽²⁰⁾ The subject as a unique, finished and static entity could become multiple, complex and changing, and this, whether in relation to itself, to others or to its environment. The limits defining an individual could be fluid, evolutive, or in constant «becoming».⁽²¹⁾

The notion of «becoming», as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, is not the unfolding of an essence or the passage from a synthesising identity to another. It is rather «the affirmation of the positivity of difference meant as a multiple and constant process of transformation».⁽²²⁾ It is the creative potential of life to exceed what currently is.

The question of becoming can once again be illustrated through the interpretation of another tale by Hardt and Negri: «The tale of the wasp and the orchid». This tale tells the story of a «copulation» between those two beings. Indeed, some orchids are shaped like the female wasp sex organs and produce the same odour than their sex pheromone. Male wasps thus «copulate» with the flowers and achieve their pollination by going from one to the other. However, wasps are not driven to any production but their own pleasure. «So wasps fuck flowers! [... They] do this work just like that, for nothing, just for fun!» exclaimed Félix Guattari in a letter to Gilles Deleuze.⁽²³⁾

From their differences and through their encounter, the wasp and the orchid form a new assemblage that exceeds them. They are beings in the process of becoming, the orchid being a becoming-wasp and the wasp being a becoming-orchid. Out of the restrained definition of a subject as a static and finished being, they are in prey to subjectivity, and represent a constant changing of the existing order through the production of new assemblages. They are not the love of the same but a love of the other, building their own definition of it, based on the encounter of alterity.

Individuals that adopt the idea of «becoming» would thus act like «nomads», according to the definition given by Deleuze and Guattari. They would move in a flexible way without encountering rigid or linear borders. Nevertheless, there will be boundaries, but, unlike the borders, they suggest softness, delicacy and offer security without control. Indeed, rather than separating the desirable from the undesirable, as a border set up by fragmentation would do, the latter respect the diversity of desires, but allow for their configuration to be continually and freely negotiated according to the emotional needs of oneself and others. Through their journey, the «nomads» deconstruct the status quo by questioning norms. Their path is free, although they do not have to go everywhere.⁽²⁴⁾

Such a change of paradigm would also generate at a macro level a different kind of society — a non-homogeneous or normative one — that corresponds to these new subjectivities.⁽²⁵⁾ Indeed, a shift in our conception of intimate relationships would for example question as much the concept of the subject, as the notion of the nuclear family or the idea

of a nation as a gathering of a certain number individuals under a singular and homogenous identity.⁽²⁶⁾ Through our actions, the «state-machine» would then be something that can be destroyed, not by a revolution but by the exercise of other forms of relationship to oneself and to other beings.⁽²⁷⁾

Given the differences that the production of new subjectivities enhances, it seems difficult to imagine that one group is more capable than another of addressing the need of a new kind of social organisation. In this sense, the work of Foucault, Guattari or Deleuze seems to point in the direction of a decentralised social action, where individuals in constant evolution form a «multitude» where each one is equal and constantly negotiating their relationship to others in a network-like system.⁽²⁸⁾ The «multitude» is «becoming» rather than being and accepts the richness and multivalence of possibilities which can maybe lead to more collective, social or political forms of organisations.⁽²⁹⁾

In this new kind of social organisation, love takes a completely different meaning to the unifying «romantic love» that we mainly consider today. In fact, rather than homogenisation, and according to Hardt and Negri, «what counts in love is the production of subjectivity and the encounter of singularities, which compose new assemblages and constitute new forms of the common».⁽³⁰⁾ Only those new assemblages and the evolutive «multitude» that results from them are capable of escaping the mechanisms of capture of the «state-machine» and operating as a revolutionary force.⁽³¹⁾

In this alternative vision of social organization, architecture can also take part in the mechanisms of resistance. Inasmuch as it is at present mostly subject to the mechanisms of the «state apparatus», it can also, like the «multitude», try to escape its capture. Indeed, the process of fragmentation and homogenisation previously developed is also applied to the built environment, which applies it in return to its users. For instance, architecture organises practices according to dichotomous logics such as public/private, institutional/domestic or social/intimate. This spatial fragmentation can also be found in programmatic terms, whether in housing with functionalist housing typologies, or in urban design which dissociates housing from work and leisure. This mode of design tends to homogenise the movements of individuals, making their daily life normalised and predictable.⁽³²⁾

A phenomenon of homogenisation also occurs in the production of urban buildings. Indeed, the liberal laissez-faire policy present in our societies is spatially reflected in the phenomenon of urbanisation which, coupled with unceasing infrastructural development, tends to turn cities into one undifferentiated space.⁽³³⁾ This form of homogenisation also finds place in the typological production of housing, where an ideal and generic form is favoured because of its ability to adapt supposedly different lifestyles, when it is in reality only capable of accommodating generic and predicted behaviours.

However, while considering the gradual dissolution of normative categories and limits, architecture also finds itself

capable of accommodating transformative and creative behaviours. For instance, fallow areas or voids in the urban grid offering nothingness, permit a new reality to establish outside the dominant societal norms. The user's appropriation makes it a place in constant evolution. By offering a space between construction and ruin, in the sense that its meaning remains to be imagined, the body can no longer respond to binary injunctions and the space offered becomes the terrain of a life detached from normalization.⁽³⁴⁾ Such architecture would allow for the constant re-appropriation of space as a tool of transformation and for the «becoming» of subjectivities it accommodates.

In such a space, «the nomad roams at will through the universe of possibilities», liberated from the normalizing «state-machine» and free to imagine relationships like the love between the wasp and the orchid.⁽³⁵⁾