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Actualizing Poststructuralist Theory

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"What is essential to an invention is establishing the connection of forces that opposed one another before the invention. The invention is an association of forces that takes the place of an opposition or sterile contrast of forces."
Gabriel Tarde, L'opposition universelle

I.

Inventions: this was the title of a series of lectures we started at the Shedhalle in Zurich in March 2010, which now is followed by this edition of transversal. First of all, the title Inventions ties into the *Interventions*, the successful lecture and publication series, with which Jörg Huber and his colleagues have substantially influenced the discursive space of Zurich since the early 1990s. We thus consciously position ourselves in a genealogical line of the attempt to expand, irritate, recontextualize local theory competences with international inputs. We seek to newly institute, and institute in a

new way, what the Zurich Institute for Theory so successfully staged in the years between 1992 and 2005.

We see our organizational, conceptual and instituent practice in this genealogy of interventions, but we would still like to develop the terminological difference. From interventions to inventions, that seems to be a small step, a short path; and yet there is much to this small terminological difference: whereas an intervention represents an “incident” or “event” on familiar ground, invention emphasizes the potential of the new. Whereas the intervention seeks to incite a break, the invention adds the duration of inventiveness to this break. Whereas an intervention breaks into existing terrain, the invention founds a new terrain. Naturally this is not simply *creatio ex nihilo*: as the quotation from Gabriel Tarde emphasizes, placed as a motto here at the beginning, the invention is an “association of forces”, which probably developed earlier, but initially only as opposition, as a sterile confrontation. In this sense, the invention as a connection of forces is not unrelated to the intervention as coming-between, but the emphasis here is on the new beginning. What this involves is more than the break with the existent, it is, at the same time, the creation of a new constellation of forces, a new “connecting of forces”.

Nor are we wholly content with the presentation of a series of international interventions in the familiar terrain of the Zurich discourse; what interests us more is a sustainable de-localization of the discourses, specifically against various local backgrounds. We want to bring different interventions from all possible local contexts – in this edition from Paris, Venice, Berlin, Sydney, London, Frankfurt/M., Montreal, Vienna, Sofia, Manchester and New York – into an exchange with the intention of enabling a practice of polyvocality and translocality. It may be that our own position between instituting and institution is productive here. In

the sense of an ensemble of authors affiliated with us, we could say: we invented this series as a duo, developed the book as a trio, and this edition as several. Since each of us was multiple, the result was quite a number. In order to extend this plurality now into a veritable machine, it is not simply many local points that are required, which were set down in Zurich as Theory Drop Sculptures. What we want to achieve is a translocal discourse, a translocal practice, a translocal machine, in the becoming of which, the Zurich event series and the German-language book series each represent a specific intensity, a condensation.

At the same time, the concept of the translocal machine also names our highest goal: we want to contribute to a contagious stream of invention that does not start from a notion of being locally rooted as the source of discourse. The title *Inventions* thus also refers to a principle of invention as an association of forces, namely as an association of translocality and local condensations, as a co-emergence of singularities and their concatenations. And at the same time, the invention is also an implicit component of the theory assemblage that we want to newly ignite with our series.

II.

What is probably the most influential theory assemblage of the twentieth century has aged now: arising in the political context and social milieus of the 1960s and 1970s, it was not a school, and its protagonists did not necessarily work on the same theoretical questions. It was an intellectual boom, which produced profound changes in ways of living and forms of knowledge, new discursive orders and social practices. The conceptual term "poststructuralism" for this assemblage of knowledge production and sociality was always a too homogeneous and thus problematic

definition. But poststructuralism is not a homogeneous system of thinking. Indeed, it is not a system at all.

The term “poststructuralism” paradoxically first appeared in English-speaking countries, specifically as a word designating philosophical, literary, political and artistic theories, which emerged particularly in France in the 1960s and 1970s. The word is thus, first of all, an attribution from the outside; secondly, it is interesting to stress that no actors of this movement, and also none of those who were given the label “poststructuralist”, whether they wanted it or not, really knew exactly what it entailed.

Poststructuralism is thus anything but a school, and certainly not a national school; it can instead be described as an intellectual boom. What characterizes a boom, however, is that no causal determinism, no hierarchical order between the elements can be established. When we use the conceptual term “poststructuralism” today, however, we still know roughly which constellation of thinking we are referring to. Theorists like Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida, Spivak, Althusser, Lefort, Lyotard, Laclau, Mouffe, Barthes, Butler and many more are associated with poststructuralism. But what does such an amalgamation of theoretical positions mean? What defines the boundaries, outside of which an experience of thinking can no longer be called poststructuralist?

We want to come closer to answering these questions by first examining the relationship of the two components of the term: How do “structuralism” and its thereafter relate to one another? What does the prefix “post-” mean here exactly? First of all, it is simply a temporal thereafter that could mean a continuity, perhaps even an affirmation in relation to the theory currents of structuralism, to the extent that these can be fixed at least after the

fact to the name “structuralism”. Yet not even this “post-” can be so easily determined in “poststructuralism”. We should probably always be a bit distrustful about linear schemata of thinking, about a representation of the French philosophy that was supposed to be structuralist in the 1960s and then became “post-structuralist”; about a thinking that was first supposed to be Hegelian and then Freudo-Marxist and finally discovered Nietzsche.

Does this caution oblige us to propose only negative definitions of poststructuralism? Can we only say that it is *not* a school, *not* a national movement, *not* a new system of thinking? If the invention – and thus also this book – is an attempt to engender an association of forces, then the question necessarily ends up in the foreground, of whether it would be possible to find one or more points of convergence between these theoretical forces. Can we not presume that there are one or more *shared* questions among the people who could be called poststructuralists? Can we formulate what certain convergences consist of?

We affirm that. Several of these forces can be defined, to the extent that they introduced a new assemblage of thinking and perhaps engender new associations, new assemblages of thinking again and again. But we want to take a detour: perhaps the answer will end up being clearer, if we describe where the convergence point of structuralism was found. There is a point in common between those who were called “structuralists” in the 1960s, but who were – with the exception of Lévi-Strauss – nevertheless not structuralists, namely Althusser, Lacan and Foucault. The point in common was found in a certain insistence on posing the question of the subject in a new and different way, liberating themselves from the fundamental postulate that French philosophy – since Descartes and fortified by phenomenology – had never abandoned.

From the perspective of psychoanalysis, Lacan raised the problem that the theory of the unconscious is not compatible with the theory of the subject. Linguistics and Lévi-Strauss' studies provided this new problematic issue with new instruments. The literary works by Blanchot and Bataille formulated an invitation to question the category of the subject, its predominance, its founding function. And Althusser challenged the philosophy of the subject, because French Marxism was obscured by elements of phenomenology and humanism. Althusser's work consisted of taking up Marx' analyses again, but by calling into question the concepts of human nature, of the subject, of the alienated human being.

So we can say that the concept of "structuralism" was applied to individual theorists, who conducted completely different studies, but treated one element in common: they attempted to question philosophies, reflections and analyses, which were essentially arranged around the primacy of the subject. This applied to Marxism, which at that time was fixed on the term "alienation"; it applied to phenomenological existentialism, which focused on lived experience, and it applied to the currents of psychology that rejected the unconscious in favor of authentic human experience – an experience of the self, so to speak.

Yet there was still another background that went somewhat deeper. Structuralism is considered a French invention, a debate that evolved in France in the 1960s. Yet if we draft a genealogy of structuralism, we notice that structuralism was by no means a purely French invention. Its traces reach back to a whole series of investigations that were conducted in the 1920s in the Soviet Union and Central Europe. Even before and during the Russian Revolution of 1917, structuralism spread (then and there, however, under different names) into such diverse fields as linguistics,

mythology or folklore, which were first flattened under the large Stalinist steamroller. It was only then that it wandered into marginal underground networks in France. Structuralism was one of the major cultural victims of Stalin. At the same time, however, he also sounded the death knell for traditional Marxist theory. A new left, a new political constellation had to be born. However, that – as Foucault already noted – was not easy.

First, attempts were made to marry Marxism with phenomenology. Subsequently, and specifically in that a certain form of structural thinking, of structural method began to develop, it became evident how structuralism took the place of phenomenology, in order to form a couple with Marxism, from which a Freudo-Structuralo-Marxism resulted. That did not work very well.

Poststructuralism emerged in a climate of searching movements, which was marked by philosophical and political struggles and developments: by the debate on human sciences and structuralism, by the development of the *nouveau roman* and the filmic innovation of *nouvelle vague*, by the crisis of old ideologies and new political and existential experiments – and most of all: Would poststructuralism even have been possible without 1968 and the events that followed 1968? Or *were* these movements perhaps even poststructuralism?

In any case, there was an intellectual event in this boom that we want to emphasize. This was the French Nietzsche renaissance, which shook the order of thinking, the direction of political and social sciences and even the form of political activism. This Nietzsche renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s was a pivotal point in the emergence of the poststructuralist constellation. In the 1960s Nietzsche's philosophy was central for a movement turning away from the phenomenological experience. In the 1970s it was crucial

for a re-interpretation of the works of Karl Marx. It allowed the development of the micro-physics of power, which played a central role in the interpretation of resistance, antagonism, class struggle. Through this genealogy, the debates about the concepts of "class", "race", "gender" and/or "sexuality" could be newly determined.

Deleuze described the Nietzschean experience as a radical one, especially to the extent that it made it possible to find a way out of all the forms of bureaucratization and structuralization in the dominant currents of Marxism and Psychoanalysis. Nietzsche's philosophy was welcomed as a powerful machine of de-codifying, de-bureaucratizing and transversalizing. Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari and many others also used it to appropriate Marx' theories of alienation for investigations of the way in which we are enclosed in our history and where possible lines of flight develop. And naturally it was also the anti-academic function of Nietzsche's philosophy that was able to shake the elite academic system in France. The re-invention of the experience of Nietzsche's thinking allowed breaking out of the dominant academic culture in terms of content and style and with the intention of concatenating the concept machines with the social machines.

This also allows asserting the opposite of the successor thesis of structuralism and poststructuralism: "poststructuralism" sets itself fundamentally apart from structuralism, it posits a break, a boundary, could be called structuralism without structures. Here, "post-" assumes the character – if not already that of a negation – of a line of flight from certain definitions of structuralism. Just by itself, the central category of the structure and even more so its dichotomous relation to the subject are the fundamental anticipations that poststructuralist positions call into question, from which they separate themselves, which they elude.

Regardless of the position taken with respect to these interpretation attempts: the name "poststructuralism" has at least two major weaknesses in relation to that which it is supposed to designate. First of all, what is designated is by no means a coherent or even remotely homogeneous "school". Under the paradoxical label "poststructuralism", extremely different theories, which could not be equated, were subsumed into *one* concept. They are not only empirically, but also conceptually almost explosively diverse, manifold and contradictory. For this reason, with *Inventions* we do not seek in any way to establish a "truth" of poststructuralism. Our actualization of poststructuralism has little to do with the question of what poststructuralists have actually said. Instead, our question has more to do with the contextualization of poststructuralism, and with the battlefields, in which theories emerge here and now.

Secondly, however, and perhaps even more importantly: the prefix "post-" is rarely distinguished by a special significance, but in the case of poststructuralism it is positively misleading. The issue here is specifically the non-*follow*-up, the continual new creation, the *creatio continua* primarily of concepts and assemblages of concepts. The most obvious characteristic of the authors labeled as "poststructuralist" is the abundance of their innovations, their inventions; whether it is as the invention of terms, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the task of philosophy, whether it is the invention of a new style of a virtuoso way of dealing with the most different disciplines, as with Michel Foucault, whether it is as the development of a comprehensive method, as with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, whether it is as the theoretical assumption and simultaneous igniting of a social movement, as in the so different cases of the Italian Autonomia with Antonio Negri, the New Social Movements with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, or queer activism with Judith Butler.

III.

Some of the most important protagonists of poststructuralism are no longer alive today. This makes it even easier, at very different levels in various social fields, to appropriate, decontextualize, depoliticize their theory developments, pulverize them politically after decades of nurturing at the subcultural margins, or trivialize them into academic mainstream.

When we briefly outline four of these fields in the following, then we certainly cannot except ourselves from their problematic developments. There seems to be no outside in this complex process of appropriation and expropriation. Often enough, we stand before the broken pieces of our assemblage of concepts, often enough our central terminologies empty themselves before our eyes at the same moment that we take them on our tongue, even as we enunciate them. And yet there is something at stake in every new formulation, a struggle for the actualization, the new contextualization, the repoliticization of the concept machines – and the social machines that exchange with them. It makes a difference, whether we fight for the contexts of meaning of the concepts, or whether we surrender them without a battle, or whether we compliantly feed them into the apparatuses of appropriation.

1. In the fast-moving discourse terrain of the art field, it is a conventional phenomenon that each newest form of theory development is quickly appropriated, digested with as little residue and resistance as possible. In the case of poststructuralist currents, their attractiveness first arose from their marginal position at the peripheries of knowledge production. Most of all, however, in their

frequently non-academic ductus, in their often poetic language and experimental form, they promised the greatest gain of attention particularly in the art field for decades. Thus it came about that set pieces of theory and quotations from poststructuralist sources torn out of context formed an ever flowing river of points of reference, often based on a lack of understanding. Sometimes that was even productive.

2. In contrast to this, hegemonic academic philosophy still wants little to do with these “new” theoretical debates, even fifty years after their emergence, which operate too far away from academic domestication and too close to current social changes. The most important poststructuralist positions were and still are largely kept far away from the canons and milieus of academic philosophy. The European development even seems to be intensifying here. The dominant positions barricade themselves, fortify the walls of their disciplinary fortresses, and instrumentalize the neoliberal reforms of the university institutions for isolation.

3. Perhaps the ignorance of academic philosophy is one of the reasons why poststructuralist philosophy has tended to be taken up more in other academic disciplines, especially in the various cultural and art studies fields. In art history, literature studies or film theory, a considerable number of small university islands with a poststructuralist background have arisen. However, their applied detailed studies are often also examples of the more general problem of academic striating and decontextualizing: in the detailed transfer into the individual cultural studies disciplines, the

theorems frequently lose their transversal aspirations, their intensity and explosiveness.

4. Finally, the poststructuralist theories are also a contentious terrain, when it comes to the exchange with social movements and micro-political practices. Following and alongside a "generation" of globalization critique schooled in the popular-poststructuralist reading of *Empire* and *Multitude*, for some time now there seems to be a return of various identitarian positions at different levels taking place, both in research close to the movements and in the movements themselves.

Naturally the problem fields outlined here are by no means homogeneous, and there are numerous exceptions to the problems described. Nevertheless, all the effects of ignorance, appropriation and academicization are components of a more general discursive "repression of resistance", in which the excesses of a "dangerous theory class" are to be made as innocuous as possible.

The *Inventions* are intended to contribute to a new composition of this "dangerous theory class". Within this framework, a concrete presentation of current positions of poststructuralism is to take place, as well as altogether an attempt at a renewed composition, transversalization and queering of its discursive and activist currents; especially from and in specifically the fields in which they have been proliferating for decades: (queer-)feminist practice and theory, critical art and knowledge production, critical migration research, endeavors of decolonization and social movements. When it is nevertheless also a matter of philosophy here, then it is specifically not as a means of taming, determining and striating social antagonisms and the struggles associated with them, and certainly not of forming another network to be sent into the arena

of academic evaluation and devaluation. The invention as a cooperative form of the force of invention is instead intended to serve "establishing the connection of forces that opposed one another before the invention": a connection of forces, from which new currents develop, temporary overlaps of discursive and social machines.

A new composition of this kind will ultimately engender new terminologies. In this way, maybe the label "poststructuralism", which has never been much more than an impossible auxiliary construction tying together completely different theoretical currents, will finally become wholly obsolete after years of being increasingly hollowed out and emptied, and will be replaced by a new assemblage of concepts. The *Inventions* are intended to develop impulses for letting these concept machines and their associations with social machines become possible.