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The Outside of the Political

Schmitt, Deleuze, Foucault, Descola
and the problem of travel

A thesis submitted to
The University of Kent at Canterbury
in the subject of Politics and Government
for the degree of doctor of philosophy

Benoît Dillet

-

December 2012

Abstract

Is everything political? Is ‘the political’ the ground on which we establish laws and policies? Ever since Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* (1922), these questions concerning ‘the political’ have dominated the debate in political philosophy. This dissertation begins with this debate by studying the totalising and unsustainable political metaphysics of Schmitt. By operating a displacement, the question of the possibility of an ‘outside’ in the political metaphysics of Carl Schmitt is transformed when reading the two French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault.

Deleuze and Foucault help us to move away from the political voluntarism found in Schmitt to what we call ‘involuntary politics’. In chapter 2, we revisit Heidegger’s question ‘what is called thinking?’ that was so essential to Deleuze but find that Deleuze and Heidegger answered the question differently. While Heidegger answered this political question by the statement ‘we are not yet thinking’ and that it is the duty of philosophers to ‘think’, for Deleuze, thinking can happen in many different spheres (in cinema for instance) as well as in politics. A politics of thinking is for Deleuze, for instance when he claims that the Left wants people to ‘think’, a way to be disposed to receive the event. This involuntary politics does not imply a resignation to the status quo: stupidity is both the absence of thought as well as the origin of all thought for Deleuze. In chapter 3, we demonstrate that Michel Foucault’s politics was already developing in his early writings on literature, and that we cannot ignore the literary debt that Foucault’s political theory owes to his conceptualisation of the role of literature in society. For Foucault, literature is capable of creating a space that reflects, diagnoses and subverts politics; therefore, while literature enjoys a position external to politics, it is however not *autonomous* from politics.

Finally, the thesis turns to the problem of travel; the hypothesis guiding this last part is that travel presents itself as an almost all-too-obvious example (or a paradigm) of the outside of the political. Yet travel meets anthropology, and the questions of

contemporary tourism that inhabit our modernity are also the subject of many anthropologists (Marc Augé, Jean-Didier Urbain, Rachid Amirou). But anthropologists also ask questions about nature and culture that find resonance in the project of travel, and one cannot fully understand the purpose of travel and tourism without taking seriously the idea that the anthropologist is a professional traveller. In chapter 4, we deconstruct the commonly accepted opposition between travel and tourism to find in contemporary critical anthropological thought, in chapter 5, the conditions of possibility of contemporary travel. The interesting element of travel is that it is symptomatic of our contemporary social world, to the extent that the following question haunts the thesis: is travel the outside of politics?

In chapter 5, Descola's controversial table of the four ontologies allow us to conclude this dissertation with both concrete (since it is based on ethnographic works) and speculative arguments about ontological breaks, both the difficulty and the richness of an individual voyage from one ontology to another as well as the transformation of a single ontology, since these ontologies are far from being stable, ahistorical and fixed. What are the political consequences of thinking the world as being composed of a multiplicity of worlds? This raises problems about cultural and ontological relativism that will be discussed in the conclusion of chapter 5.

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