



Frankenstein is Dead

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I really admire Richard Day's work, which may seem a strange thing to say given my critique of parts of his work started all this. Let me explain. In my oral presentation (the one Day says he liked much more than my written paper), I drew on Nietzsche to argue that every person (and thus every political thinker) is multiple. That is, each of us is a tangled mass of many different wills and desires. And each of these wills is running in its own direction, some even directly conflicting with others. So in the oral presentation I offered a critique not of Day's work as a whole, which I mostly agree with, but only of one particular will or desire in Day's work, what I called his "will to supersede." It's a clunky term, but what I was getting at was that there is a distinct desire present in Day's book, *Gramsci is Dead*, to lump a whole multiplicity of different political ideas and practices into one homogenous mass² and declare that mass superseded, dead, or past its "sell-by date." As I say in the paper, the most spectacular example of this is Day's Frankenstein monster: "(neo)liberal and (post)Marxist theory and practice." In his response to my written paper we have a new amalgamated monster to run away from, "business as usual." This monster seems to include everything that does not conform to the sensibilities of the protagonists of the most 'vibrant' social movements as Day understands and articulates them.

My written paper offers a political concept, networks of equivalence, that tries not to be a uniform amalgam but a heterogeneous assemblage. It aims to draw together and hold in tension a range of different ideas from both sides of the purported divide between hegemonic and non-hegemonic politics. I expected it to be imperfect, even ragged. I guess I should have also suspected it would be



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² The lumping even takes on linguistic form, e.g. in Day's response here he crams two names, Laclau and Mouffe, into one: "Lacamouffian" (p.2). Yikes.

rejected by anyone who identifies entirely with one side of the divide or the other. Maybe that means I am doing something right, or maybe it doesn't. Maybe Laclau and/or Mouffe would have rejected it as well.

At any rate, Day's response doesn't shed much light. We don't really get any good reasons to reject networks of equivalence. Mostly he offers appeals to authority: Deleuze and Guattari would see the idea as a betrayal, or it won't tempt the protagonists of the vibrant social movements. For Day it's all fouled by the stink of rotting meat (i.e. hegemony), and so even something in my proposal that sounds good—like impermanent centers that “carry out an organizing function for a time, and then dissolve, thereby allowing other centers to form and coordinate in another part of the network”—is dismissed. Of course what I'm offering there is Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the body without organs (BwO), which they adapt from Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 153; Burroughs 1966). I think the BwO offers something very important. Deleuze and Guattari argue that these temporary centers are needed because the project is not to *destroy* the body, to deterritorialize it so far and so fast that it becomes an utterly random collection of elements. The project is instead to deterritorialize it thoughtfully and patiently so that it can retain some functionality, so that it can continue to *live* as a body but do so without fixed organs that permanently perform certain functions. It is this approach, what we might call a ‘considered revolution,’ that characterized their political vision.

But for Day this idea is tainted by its proximity to Gramsci's democratic centralism. My suggestion that we might rethink Gramsci's concept by using the body without organs essentially curdles the BwO for Day, and he adds it to the ever-growing compost pile of spoiled political thought. And then he turns around and claims that Deleuze and Guattari would see networks of equivalence as a tree rather than a rhizome,³ even though their own idea is woven prominently into its fabric. Here we see again Day's dark desire to clump ideas into homogenous masses and then offer us simple either/or choices. Deleuze and Guattari, the body without organs, *Naked Lunch*—all become “business as usual.” It's preposterous. All this lumping seems to be aiming at nothing other than an ever-shrinking circle of fresh produce, a very few vibrant protagonists who get it, who can see through Trojan-horse ploys like mine. I don't think I am projecting the paranoia here, I think it really is there. It's corrosive, and it is largely the result of the unhelpful marginalization narrative I write about in the paper.

So what I was pleading for in the oral presentation is for scholars and activists⁴ to see figures like Gramsci, or Deleuze and Guattari, or every protagonist in the most vibrant social movements, as a complicated assemblage of multiple

³ (which for them is a ringing condemnation)

⁴ In the original paper I used the pronoun “we” for this complex group because I consider myself one of their number.

wills. Doing that relieves us of the need to junk someone if we don't like a certain aspect of his or her work. For example, Gramsci gave a cringe-worthy speech in front of a Fascist-controlled Italian parliament where he claimed that the communist party was justified in speaking for the masses because it had their best interests at heart ([Gramsci 1925](#)). But he also always maintained a deep respect for the autonomous will of people, a respect borne partly of his close connection to the factory occupations during the *biennio rosso* (1919-1920).⁵ Two very different and yet very real sensibilities bound up together in the same person. Those occupations were nothing if not *vibrant*, and they were an important inspiration for the mobilizations in Argentina in the early 2000s (especially the *autogestión* elements), which in turn were crucial for the "Spanish revolution" of 2011, which led directly to Occupy Wall Street, and so on. The protagonists of these movements are certainly connecting to something vibrant, and that something *is very much present in Gramsci's work*, even if other things, less tempting things, are present as well. In short, Gramsci was multiple. He was not a discrete body but a loose assemblage of many wills. All of us are made up of these multiple threads; each thread is both distinct from and tangled up with the others. I submit that as scholars and activists we⁶ should treat the whole complex thing with care and respect, look patiently for the threads we want to cultivate, draw them out, and connect them up with other compatible threads. That is what I was trying to do in my paper, with imperfect results to be sure. But to respond to my attempt by painting the whole thing with the 'business-as-usual' brush reflects the worst in Day. It is the result of his desire to homogenize the threads, fuse them into one cloth, and then declare the whole thing no longer fashionable. It's a desire in Day, and in all of us, that should be left to wither.

References

- Burroughs, W. (1966) *Naked Lunch*. New York, Grove Press.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1987 [1980]) *A thousand plateaus*. Translated by B. Massumi. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1925) *Speech to the Italian parliament*. Translated by M. Carley. Available at marxists.org.

⁵ A feat carried off by workers' councils alone, without any significant leadership (or even help) from the party. I feel like I keep pulling this history off the scrap heap, and Day keeps tossing it back on as part of Gramsci's dead whole-body. I'm not giving up.

⁶ (see?)