

Discussion: Mari Ruti's The Disenchanted: Queer Theory between Negativity and Flourishing

Adrienne Harris

One of the most useful aspects of this brave and contentious and challenging paper is that it has the capacity to unsettle. I, and I suspect some of you listening, have a complex reaction – conscious and unconscious – to terms like ‘paranoia’, ‘abjection’, ‘failure’ - when these terms are being proposed as projects for development, transformation, political, and social action.

In a way that I hope is useful (I do believe it is useful), taking up these terms and this complex questioning of strategies for political and personal life, can be transformative. I used to think of this as one of the good outcomes or advantages of interdisciplinary work, but recently I have been drawn to another concept, a term developed by DeLeuze – nomadic theory, nomadic objects. So in this discussion I want to migrate between queer theory, ideology critique, and particular the critique of neoliberalism, and back and forth with psychoanalysis

These terms have a history in feminism: Kristeva, Braidotti. In philosophy, it is Deleuze who inaugurates this idea wanting to stress that texts and ideas not be seen as codification or as property to which the user had to pay taxes or mortgages, but mobile sites of energy. Nomadic

theory is a critique of the center as the defining force of concept and meaning. It seeks to destabilize the margins and the center. I would say this follows Mari Ruti's agenda and of many of the writers she is drawing on.

Ruti situates her analysis of the promotion of failure, of pessimism, and of abjection in the context of life and socialization in the neoliberal state, where the freedoms that are so often celebrated involve acquisition, economic power and the relentless stockpiling of resources with no respect for the natural or the social world. My guide to this critique of neo liberalism is Wendy Brown.

Brown, in *Undoing the Demos*, defines neoliberalism as a mode of reasoning, a production of subjects, a scheme of valuation, in which economic power dominates and where the coordinates of social and political are economic not political. Phenomena like education and citizenship are increasingly disqualified as meaningful. Brown unpacks the term democracy. Who and what is the demos? The poor, the uncounted, or the propertied. Historically she argues democracy has spoken for, and protected the disenfranchised. The texts Ruti is working with from queer theory interestingly go back and forth in their attunement both to dispossession and to new forms of prosperity and legitimacy.

This massive and ongoing disenfranchisement that constitutes the neoliberal experience, begins historically in Europe in the 20s. Then and now, we must notice, these trends have turned people to the right not the left. Thomas Piketty and others argue that the massive increase in wealth inequality constitutes a break in culture. These forces, I think, make the concept of 'failure' as a goal, extremely complex.

One thing that I miss in most work on critiques of neoliberalism and even in this material Maru Ruti is discussing is the notion of the subject as containing unconscious process, as well as intention and rational choice. If the psychoanalytic subject has too often been erased of a politics, a history and a penetration by the state into the psyche, political and radical political discourse makes a subject often too rational and intentional, even if at the mercy of the state and its interpellating forces. Rozmarin and Guralnik, Dimen, Gentile, Corbett and others (I include my own work and interests and many in this audience) have been hard at work to shift this . Clearly in both the field of politics, gender and identity politics we need both dimensions in their particular and shifting tensions.

Perhaps also we need to sharpen our understanding of the effect of interpellation. The Althusserian moment seems to be organized around guilt, the guilty startle as the police arrive and speak. But I think a very

powerful aspect of interpellation is shame, our most ghastly and disorganizing affect, particularly I would say in matters of gender and sexual identity.

Trying to hold both the intrapsychic and the intersubjective, I would start by noticing that binaries are among the important and primary tools of interpellation, of control. And, on the ground, far from wherever we think the State is located, we, through much unconscious intersubjective transactions continue to do the policing.

I will use Erving Goffman and Frantz Fanon to develop this argument.

Goffman: *Stigma* opened up a close and deep examination of the way individuals track the elements of self and other that carry such powerful forces of otherness/danger/excitement while remaining very resolutely under the radar of consciousness. Written much before the Kahneman and Twersky work on fast and slow thinking, Goffman's work examined the complexity of social transactions in everyday life. His model, symbolic interactionism, influenced a generation of social scientists interested in how groups often carrying lethal sites of difference (race, gender and sexual identity) code and judge and manage social and interpersonal life.. Kim Leary has called some of the aspects of this process ' micro

aggressions, tracking the subtle way that racist or sexist or many other forms of phobic anxiety is conveyed interpersonally.

We might think of this as an example of what Laplanche has theorized for intimate interactions as enigmatic transmission. Here, we expand this process to include desire that is dangerous by virtue of the forbidden-ness of excitement and other forms of more explicit hatred and disavowal. Enigmatic messages will also contain the myriad experiences Goffman was attuned to in which the shaming information as to how badly and impossibly one has failed at some form of required identification. Jacqueline Rose wrote about this recently, noting the number of feminist, queer and trans memoirs which describe the agony and failure of failing at gender and other forms of normativity. One understands the absolute determination to take failure on and shift its valences.

Fanon: In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. It is a third person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty....

Assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled. Its place taken by a racial epidermal schema.”

Images, practices, excitements, potentials for violence and lawlessness, are both the outcome of interpellation and a kind of resistance to it. I want to illustrate this with an experience documented in film and book – by a Texan psychoanalyst and ethnographer, Riccardo Ainslie. Ainslie arrived in Jasper Texas scant hours after the news of a terrible murder had been broadcast. In 1999, three young men tied a middle aged black man to the back of a pickup truck and dragged him to his death along a deserted logging road in this Texas town. Among the many insights Ainslie had, as he and his students worked in the very overwhelmed and devastated Texan communities was how immediate collective and individual memory, across racial identities, of racial violence was. The site was a deserted logging road, the site of a lynching from the 1920s, immediately brought back to awareness throughout the communities. How intimately people hold violent histories, the ‘we’ that provided it and the ‘we’ that experienced it. A lynching in the 1920s seemed almost a template for the events of 1999, an event well before the birth of the accused. Intergenerational transmission, conscious and unconscious, laid the tracks of those 1999 events.

Gender, race, sexuality, generation. There are a number of binaries which saddle/logjam our theories, our practices, and certainly our perceptions and judgments, occurring at high speed and outside awareness. Drawing on the work of Kahneman and Twersky, () we understand that much judgment and decision and ascription of meaning and value is conducted at very high speeds and much below the level of conscious awareness. It is the heart of Laplanche's () insight into the transmissions around identity and sexuality from the 'other'. Whatever elements in the messages are conscious or deliberate and explicit, crucially much that is conveyed is at an unconscious perhaps figurative, perhaps liminal, perhaps fully unconscious level.

Laplanche build a theory that with sensitivity and tact he both embedded in Freudian theory as he critiqued Freud's one person approach. I think what Laplanche proposes takes us to a new and somewhat different model of the unconscious, more akin to the work of Matte Blanco on what he called 'bi-valent logic.' Laplanche's and Matte Blanco's theoretical model make sound contact with the contemporary interest in non-represented experience, primitive mental states and layers of unconsciousness (Levine, Reed and Scarfone, Stern, Ogden,) I think this powerful model is closely kin to the Italian Bionians Ferro and

Civitarese as they are conceptualizing reverie and its interweave of dream, emotion, thought.

Matte-Blanco saw unconscious process as layered with increasing domination of a logic of symmetry, in which timelessness, an absence of negation, and of the notion of non-contradiction prevailed. Psychic experience could be the product of both logics, the conscious logic of what Matte Blanco termed asymmetry, where difference and variation and logical argument prevailed, as well as the logic of asymmetry in which as experience became more dominated by unconscious zones. In the unconscious differentiation increasingly vanished. Limitless infinity, as Lombardi describes this experience, the terror of profoundly unconscious forms or zones. As Laplanche does, Matte Blanco stresses the work of translation, in which the differing forms of logic (symmetrical and assymetrical) interact and co-construct.

In this way we can imagine that amidst the enigmatic message of desire is the message as to its moral, perhaps even legal character. Laplanche himself engages a discussion of the function of taboo in translation, but perhaps misses an opportunity to notice how much the impossibility or pathologizing of desires and identifications may be embedded in the transmission and thus eligible in unimaginably complex

ways for translation. Following on some interesting ideas Laplanche puts forward on the complex interpenetration of messages, from the other, and by the receiving individual, he invokes Freud on *Totem and Taboo*. What renovations or reworking of binaries in identity formation might be visible if we understand that the excessive, the beyond easy registration of unconscious transmission whereby binaries are projected and introjected, includes both the phenomena of desire implanted from the other to the emerging self, along with the instructions about what is enjoined and what is forbidden, what is sick and what is healthy. The enigmatic message will likely come with instructions regarding what we now call heteronormativity, and like all enigmatic messages, these instructions may be replete with conflict and contradiction.

Perhaps we might see that psychoanalysis, as one of the interpellating police forces, may through the discourse around perversion, have added a disruptive and shaming aspect to certain 'enigmatic' messages. Unconscious transmission must include the social field's input as well as the intrapsychic projects and forms of relatedness in the adult 'other.' Dimen and Corbett made these ideas at the cornerstone of their understanding of gender experience as productive of and responsive to regulatory anxiety. More recently, Guralnik and Rozmarin analyze the

potent force of social rules and organization at the deepest layers of intrapsychic life.

Failure and Abjection

First, Privilege to espouse failure. Social and econpower to write a book on this matter, What does it mean to make failure Performative.

How is that and is that Degrading to those whose failure is endless tragedy. Trump's base, lost past los present lost future. These are the men in Jasper, Texas

Secondly, odd to propose that we cultivate failure as though it were not already arriving to cultivate us.

Remind you of Thomas Priketty's comment on economic change changing statidtic since the depression/

We – educated middle class professionals – are falling.

Failure turns one to the right not the left. 20s Marcuse's hopes dashed.

Abjection. I found more to work with in thinking about abjection.

Levinasian. Responsible to the other for the other.

Many of these forms of citizenship and subjectivity feel to me useful for thinking about the prospects and failures of political action in relation to climate change.

Our terror(unconscious)

Abjection as limit, as moderation,

Searles 1972 paper. He spoke of apathy and terror.

Prescient predicting famines - now see the underpinnings of climate change I the crises of refugees from beleaguered and damaged lands in the Middle East.

Searles thought of our unconscious anxieties, our denials, our oedipal guilt – of having damaged the mother) as a brake on our activism. The role of envy and guilt that the fact of environmental pollution stirs in us; the depression and terror that the collapse or vengeance of mother earth.

In our thinking – social ind level about climate change we toggle between envious attacks and terrible demobilizing guilt. We have killed the mother.

She will now kill us. Searles saw our paralysis re politicas as a sign of the collapse of kinship and blocked mourning. Searles, always one to confess while he taught, saw in himself the pathological omnipotent reactions to loss as the deterrent to confrontation and work to effect change.

We could think of one of neoliberalisms unconscious agendas is to block mourning for the loss of the environment. IS it delusional to imagine there is still time to repair? Searles saw the romance with technology (in 1972!!!) as a defence against the loss of the natural ecology.

Abjection – as a value, as a tool for organizing. As a way for practicing social, personal and political life.

Conclusion: Circling back to Wendy Brown's grim conclusions with regard to neoliberalism, she finds Foucault writing about transformations in subjectivity at this point perhaps anachronistic. Perhaps we don't need to curate subjectivity, we need to be concerned about its survival in any forms. Subjectivity itself, she argues, is at risk. The subject is anachronism. We do not need to curate subjectivity we need to wonder if it (and certainly psychoanalysis and higher education) can survive.

Capital she argues, is used for stockpiling resources, not deploying them into communities to which labor then responds. The disappearance of labor (think of Yuval Harari's predictions for the future) alters the whole conception of a polis, a demos. Who? Where? What is the function?

Dinosaurs like me are always balefully predicting the end of everything. And it is important to note that the writers and theorists Ruti is considering want the game to go on, are working hard on how to think and live in some honorable authentic relation to self and other.

Appendix

Although Erica Chenoweth is substantially junior to those eminent gray-haired fellows, however, she stole the show with her talk on civil resistance. Chenoweth presented not only an argument about why nonviolent revolutionary movements

are more likely to succeed as violent revolutions, but also an impressive body of evidence to back up her claims. And she laid out several additional findings to elucidate why nonviolence trumps nonviolence as a tactic.

Chenoweth and her colleague Maria Stephan painstakingly collected data on 323 violent and nonviolent political campaigns since 1900. To qualify for the analysis, the movement had to be substantial in size, involving at least 1000 people active in the movement. They counted a campaign as successful if the goal had been achieved within one year of the peak of the event (as when Corazon Aquino and the People Power Revolution peacefully ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos from the Philippines in 1986).

When Chenoweth started out, she was fairly certain that the violent political campaigns would be more likely to accomplish their goals. But she was wrong.

The startling results are depicted in the attached Figure. As you can see, nonviolent campaigns have a 53% success rate and only about a 20% rate of complete failure. Things are reversed for violent campaigns, which were only successful 23% of the time, and complete failures about 60% of the time. Violent campaigns succeeded partially in about 10% of cases, again comparing unfavorably to nonviolent campaigns, which resulted in partial successes over 20% of the time.

FIGURE 1: Relative effectiveness of violent and nonviolent campaigns

Source: original from Erica Chenoweth

Why the difference? As Chenoweth and Stephan lay out in their book [Why Civil Resistance Works](#), there are several interlinked answers. First, nonviolent campaigns typically attract more participants, including women, elderly folks, and others who do not want to take on the risks or the moral burdens of running around with guns and explosives, but are willing to pass on information about government atrocities, and to engage in boycotts, strikes, or nonviolent protests. Second, when a tyrannical government acts to suppress a nonviolent movement, it is more likely to backfire. Government security forces don't want to fire on unarmed civilians, especially when the crowd might include their mothers, daughters, friends, and neighbors. And if unarmed civilians are attacked, other citizens are likely to mobilize, and the government loses support from the international community and from the other pillars of its own society, such as the local media and the financial sector.

Source:

And Chenoweth had more good news: When a government is overthrown nonviolently, the new government is more likely to be democratic, and less likely to itself be overthrown, as compared to those that won using guns and bombs.

All of this raises questions about the wisdom of government policies that involve sending arms to revolutionaries, who often replace the current violent and tyrannical government with another one (eliciting longstanding hatred for the governments that helped the current dictators take hold).

Douglas Kenrick is author of *The rational animal: How evolution made us smarter than we think*. (with Vlad Griskevicius), and of *Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life: A psychologist investigates how evolution, cognition, and complexity are revolutionizing our view of human nature*.

References

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