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Janell Watson
Virginia Tech

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FRENCH THEORY IN SOUTH AMERICA

Janell Watson

Molecular Revolution in Brazil by Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik. Translated by Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes. New York: Semiotext(e), 2008. Pp. 495 \$17.95 paper.

Throughout his life as a psychotherapist, activist, and theorist, Félix Guattari sought ways to make political parties, militant groups, institutions, and analysis function more openly and less hierarchically. His aim was to foster subjectivities that would be freer, richer, and more singular than the standardized subjectivities made available by Integrated World Capitalism. Newly translated into English, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil* offers engaging and lively reflections on this problematic. This book is not, however, one of Guattari's major theoretical works and, despite thematic resonances, is not representative of his mature monographs.¹ It consists mainly of bits of lecture interspersed with conversations from a trip to Brazil. "This book is more a kind of travel journal than a work of philosophy, psychoanalysis or politics," wrote Guattari for the back cover of the first Brazilian edition. Having achieved a certain notoriety in France as coauthor (with Gilles Deleuze) of *Anti-Oedipus* (1983; *L'Anti-Oedipe*, 1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987; *Mille Plateaux*, 1980) as well as for his political militancy, in 1982 Guattari traveled throughout Brazil at the invitation of Brazilian psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik. Her original proposal for a series of university lectures was quickly modified by Guattari, who favored meetings, talks, and conversations in mostly nonacademic venues, hosted by a variety of groups, including the Workers'

Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*), lesbian feminists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, journalists, the staff of an alternative preschool, minority ethnic groups, and social workers. Rolnik gathered together these talks and conversations, along with related interviews, articles, and correspondence, and published them in Portuguese.² Although there have been seven editions of the book in Brazil, it did not appear in French until 2007.³ The new Semiotext(e) edition is a translation from the Portuguese.

The book's range of audiences and discussants is reflected in its mix of topics: democracy, militancy, minorities, autonomy, free radio, the legacies of May 1968, Catholicism, alternative pedagogy, psychiatry, history, class, and, of course, capitalism. There are many interesting comparisons between Brazil and France, and between Brazil and Italy (especially on the topic of autonomy). Rolnik also reproduces Guattari's interview with Lula, who had just helped found the Workers' Party and who would become Brazil's president twenty years later. During the interview, Guattari raises concerns arising out of his own experiences with the French Communist Party, as well as with smaller radical militant groups. The most original section of the book revolves around Guattari's contention that *culture* is a reactionary concept, expressing his concern that championing culture leads not to minority rights but to further ethnocentrism.

This topic is not discussed elsewhere in Guattari's work, and I find this thesis provocative, given that, more than a quarter century later, the notion of culture has become even more overused, to the point of losing its efficacy. Indeed, one of the salient features of Guattari's work in general is that he engages in a constant critique of culture and cultural productions, without ever relying on these vague, general terms. Instead he talks of groups, assemblages, rhizomes, existential territories, and social ecology, because these concepts highlight the singularities that, for him, the notion of culture elides.

As the title implies, the theme of *revolution* holds the book together, and for Guattari this is where politics and analysis meet. Readers familiar with the English essay collection *Molecular Revolution* will recognize his unique theoretical language in terms like micropolitics, desire, schizoanalysis, and machinic phylum.⁴ In both collections, the micropolitical level of desire is shown to be crucial in addressing practical political issues about organization, such as how to avoid bureaucratic sclerosis, and how small radical groups might fruitfully engage with large established parties. However, *Molecular Revolution in Brazil* differs not only by its Latin American context, but also by Guattari's increasing preoccupation with subjectivity. He explains that he replaces the notion of "ideology" with that of "production of subjectivity,"

explaining that subjectivity “is essentially assembled in terms of concatenations of social, economic, and machinic relations” (93). Subjectivity, for him, is transindividual, both intrapersonal and extrapersonal. In other words, it is a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, and thus includes prelinguistic and extralinguistic elements. In this view, subjectivity is not necessarily human, for Guattari presumes animals and even machines are endowed with at least a protosubjectivity that is essential to their functioning. Born out of his fascination with cybernetics and ethology, this posthuman conceptualization of subjectivity lends itself to current concerns in the fields of environmental and new media criticism.

While I am delighted to see more of Guattari's work appearing in English, the choices that have been made trouble me. Like the recently translated volume *The Anti-Oedipus Papers, Molecular Revolution in Brazil* may leave many Anglophone readers with the impression that Guattari was primarily a writer of fragments and provocative discussant.⁵ Unfortunately, his two major theoretical monographs, *L'Inconscient machinique* and *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, have yet to be translated into English. Semiotext(e) has recently acquired the English-language rights to *L'Inconscient machinique*, which I hope they will translate and publish soon, in order to give Guattari his due as a writer capable of sustained philosophical reflection.

Meanwhile, anyone interested in his views on oppositional politics, minority rights, and institutional analysis will find a great deal of new, thought-provoking material in *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*.

—Virginia Tech

NOTES

1. Félix Guattari, *L'Inconscient machinique: Essais de schizo-analyse* (Fontenay-sous-Bois, France: Recherches, 1979); Félix Guattari, *Cartographies schizoanalytiques* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1989); and Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
2. Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias do desejo* (Petrópolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1986).
3. Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolitiques*, trans. Renaud Barbaras (Paris: Seuil, 2007).
4. Félix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1984).
5. Félix Guattari, *The Anti-Oedipus Papers*, ed. Stéphane Nadaud, trans. Kéline Gotman (New York: Semiotext[e], 2006).