Laughter as a Critical Tool for Liberation

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The question of what society is and how it operates is one that has been analyzed extensively in continental philosophy. In these analyses, the actions of the individual are taken as products of the society. This frames the question of the quality of life of the individual in a specific social context that restricts the possibility of critiques of the individual and their *ideological* values within a broader critique of society. In other words, these thinkers endeavor to improve the society by means of criticizing the practices of the social body instead of the *ideology* of the individual. Gilles Deleuze, Simone Weil, and Herbert Marcuse together provide us the tools to conduct an analysis of society in which the society and individual are viewed as within a symbiotic relationship. In *Pure Immanence*, Deleuze details an interpretation of Nietzsche's will to power and criticizes how it had previously only been interpreted as domineering rather than life-affirming. It is through this critique that Deleuze allows for the possibility of a structural political analysis of social power as life-affirming rather than life-denying. To approach an analysis of this critique, we must try to integrate a new understanding of force and power that Deleuze offers with prior social structural criticisms while including its individual component. This is why Simone Weil's analysis of force in *The Iliad or the Poem of Force* is a very fruitful addition to the literature on power and force. Because of her emphasis on what the individual can do in the face of overwhelming force as she describes it, she also chooses to discuss it in a context in which a systemic analysis of force is still possible. These particular characteristics of Weil's analysis of force allows us to use her work as an intermediary between Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche's power and Marcuse's work in *The One-Dimensional*

Man. Marcuse characterizes society as one which is subtly totalitarian through its illusion of free choice in the capitalist framework of western society. He views this system as one which reduces human life down to one dimension in both how we operate within our society and in how we value things. This idea of one-dimensionality fits very well with Weil's concept of force and seems like the inevitable product of a society that has a life denying understanding of power. This returns us to the question: Is a society with a positive relationship between power and life possible? John Lippett's work on laughter combined with this life-affirming understanding of Force indicates to us that a life-affirming society is only possible through a return to a critical mode of laughter.

Due to Deleuze's masterful writing and his own unique philosophical perspective, it is difficult to differentiate his explanations of the thinkers he is writing about versus his own thoughts. In fact, in several instances he does both simultaneously. Despite the fact that the work that is being referenced is an explanation of Nietzsche's ideas, I am going to refer to the ideas from the section about Nietzsche from *Pure Immanence* as if they come solely from Deleuze unless differentiation seems appropriate in specific instances.

For Deleuze, to be life-affirming is fundamentally oriented around unity between life and thought. "Life activates thought, and in turn thought affirms life" (Pure Immanence, 66). Thought and philosophy must be responsive to and affirmative of life. The creation of metaphysics birthed a disjunction in this unity by forcing thought to deny life by judging it against 'higher values'. This leads to philosophy and thought being reactive rather than active which is the context that allows us to make sense of the will to power as domination. It is through this reaction that the interpretation of phenomena and the creation of meaning lead to a reactive relationship of forces. This places coercion as the primary force in the relationship of forces that composes the will while adaptation and regulation become secondary forces. This is

how the understanding of the will to power as domination came about that places reaction over action. It is what we now intuitively conceive of when thinking of force or power. Deleuze wants a return to this presocratic life-affirming way of thinking to change how we think of the will to power which should be oriented around creation of values through the action-thought unity.

It is with this life-affirming understanding of force in mind that we must now turn to Weil's work on Force and attempt to adapt it to fit this creative mode of being. She characterizes Force very generally as "that x that turns anybody subjected to it into a thing…[which] turns man into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of him." (Weil, 163). The example of Force in action she chooses is the epic poem *The Iliad* by Homer, because it is incredibly honest in its characterization of Force in that it never shies away from showing the reader Force in its incredible brutality. One particular moment that Weil draws our attention to shows that Force, as she describes at its most extreme, lethal force, is in fact not its most insidious form. Rather, Force as the potential of enacting death is far more damaging to an individual because it turns the body into a thing and entombs the mind/soul/spirit in the thingified body. Weil posits that the mere threat of Force is sufficient to turn man into a thing, "[a] man stands disarmed and naked with a weapon pointing at him; this person becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him" (Weil, 165). This is the way that we see force at its smallest level which is life-denying, in how it literally is tied to lethality. In addition to this it subjugates thought into a reactive role by coercing all those participating in it to reject thought that has the possibility to affirm their life. This is why Weil is so insistent that the solution to Force is short pauses of reflection; just small moments in which thought can affirm life. However, because these pauses can only occur momentarily, the reflection they enable one to have is consumed with the weight of the experience of violent actions rather than true life-affirming thought in the Deleuzian sense.

Beyond this smallest level of Force on an individual, there is also significance to the central conflict of *The Illiad* being a war, which is a manmade product of the structures and institutions of society. This shows how Force is not just a natural phenomenon, but rather is something that is produced and perpetuated by specific structural interactions. In her review of James Holoka's new edition of *The Illiad or The Poem of Force*, Sheila Murnaghan mentions the context in which it was written, "*The Iliad, or The Poem of Force* was written in the summer and fall of 1940, after the fall of France. It may thus be read as an indirect commentary on that tragic event, which signalized the triumph of the most extreme modern expression of force." (Murnaghan, 1). This context only adds to how we can understand Force through its extreme expression in the military expansion of Nazi Germany. The Nazis in particular were influenced by an incomplete interpretation of Nietzsche's will to power as one of domination. This life-denying will to power of domination is the quintessence of Weil's force which is not just a phenomenon but a specific political and structural context that perpetuates itself through individual actors. This is why reflective pauses can only ever be discrete moments in the face of all-powerful systems.

At this point, Marcuse's work in *The One-Dimensional Man* fits nicely with this connection between life-denying thought and Force on both individual and systemic levels. Marcuse describes how the process of alienation and capitalist ideology has advanced so much as to now fully encompass the individual even to the point of removing the inner freedom that one experiences as a psychological subject though the psychoanalytic process of introjection. This appears to be another version of the phenomenon Weil described in slaves, that the threat of death reduces the scope of what the slave can experience down to the forced affection a slave must exhibit for their master. "To lose more than the slave does is impossible, for he loses his whole inner life. A fragment of it he may get back if he sees the hope of the possibility of

changing his fate, but this is his only hope." (Weil, 170) The quote above shows the diminishment of the inner life and freedom of the slave. In addition, Marcuse would say that a part of this introjection is the capitalist ideology and the immediate identification of the self with the industrialized civilization of our society. This identification removes opposition to the norms and practices of society which leads to,

> ...The loss of this [inner] dimension, in which the power of negative thinking... is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition. (Marcuse, 11).

This death of the power of negative thinking is the most absolute version of the dominance of life-denying thought. For, it is in this death that the ability to critique present values is lost and thus the ability to create new values is as well. Deleuze mentions the three metamorphoses from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: the Camel, Lion, and Child. The Camel represents the mode of life in which we merely bear the values of our present society. The Lion represents the stage when we begin to critique and destroy the values imposed on us. And, the Child is the stage in which the life-affirming practice of creating our own values takes place. Marcuse describes perfectly how the present ideological values of our society are no longer able to be critiqued which prevents the possibility of life activating thought and thought, in turn, affirming life. It is due to the limitation of Force that we are not able to transition from the Camel to the Lion. This is the final stage of Force: it has not just turned our bodies into things, but our souls as well. There is no longer even the possibility of a life-affirming philosophy in our society anymore.

It is at this point that we must again consider how we might escape this predicament. It is such a totalizing problem that we are unable to grasp a full picture of what it might tangibly mean to live in a life-affirming society. This imaginative difficulty forces us to look to different types of solutions within our social framework. It is here that we must turn to John Lippitt's work on laughter in a Nietzschean context. He says:

> Zarathustra's praise of laughter in his speech to the higher men is ecstatic. He urges them to 'learn to laugh at yourselves as a man ought to laugh!'24 Contrasting himself with Jesus, who in Luke 6:25 wishes 'woe to you who laugh now'. ("Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the Status of Laughter", 43)

Lippitt goes on to say,

> Laughing lions, then, are what the higher men have to become in order to embrace the eternal recurrence and laugh the laughter of the height. It is only when they do this, which they indeed eventually do in an affirmation almost as ecstatic as Zarathustra's own, that they realize their freedom… ("Nietzsche, Zarathustra and the Status of Laughter", 43).

Lippitt here connects the idea behind Nietzsche's character of Zarathustra, that of the Lion and Child, with a very tangible practice of rejection of the life-denying attitude of Jesus from the book of Luke. This second section from Lippitt almost comes out of Deleuze himself here: "Eternal Return is not only selective thinking but also selective Being. Only affirmation comes back, only what can be affirmed comes back, only joy returns." (Deleuze, 88). Laughter itself is the mechanism to return to a life-affirming philosophy and thus a life-affirming society. It is through Laughter that we as people locked in the stage of the Camel can begin to shift to the Lion which reintroduces the critical power of negative thinking that Marcuse thought was lost. Laughter has been thought of for centuries as a force itself because it has been able to subvert the dominating power structures of societies. It gives power to those who have none through its critical faculty. It is itself a mode of freedom and becoming through these affirmative critical qualities. In another work, Lippitt pointed out the almost religious role of Laughter for this same reason, "It is the redemptive potential of laughter as an attitude towards ourselves and our world that leads Nietzsche to condemn those who forbid us to laugh at ourselves, them, and human existence. Note, therefore, that laughter is assigned a quasi-religious role" ("Existential Laughter", 2). Thus, it forges a way towards a new kind of society which is almost inconceivable to us. In truth, it is difficult to even use the word "society" for what would require such a radical

shift. Because our modern notion of society requires such social limitation, it even tries to

exercise force over the conditions of Laughter. Laughter has been commodified primarily

through the comic industry, which perverts its critical power into a passive experience. Thus in a

similar way that Weil and the critical theorists propose their modest solutions to cope with the

overwhelming force of their problems, I propose that we must take laughter seriously as a critical

mode of being and as a mode of political expression.

This raises the question: if Laughter can be commodified and integrated within this

oppressive system of force, then how can it be liberatory? The answer requires us to first define

what we mean by Laughter. Laughter as a phenomenon, is necessarily tied to what gave rise to it.

It is a responsive action. We have already seen previously that the phenomenon of laughter can

be commodified so, naturally, we are not talking about the phenomenon of laughter alone. What

we are discussing is the character and interpretation of the action that gives rise to laughter or put

simply: a joke or comedic situation. However, the purpose here is to use laughter as a critical

activity, thus we cannot just simply say a 'joke' because that would invoke the social values that

form the concept of 'joke' which we are attempting to criticize. In order to critically use laughter,

we must take as its object the values that society is attempting to impose upon us. This new

critical type of Laughter takes on an almost obscene character from the perspective of the values

it criticizes because these introjected social values effect our judgements of it. Thus, we, as

influenced subjects, are tasked with the creation of a product that we have to learn to appreciate.

It is very important to note that in this critical Laughter is the rejection of particular types of

values, life-denying values. Thus, laughter must reject any 'guidance' or direction from these

life-denying values of our society in order for it to be possible to critique them. In other words,

Laughter cannot only be obscene, it must also be totally holistic. It is here that a reference to

Camus appears appropriate to mention as this holistic critical Laughter appears much like his

description of the rebellion against the Absurd. Both are a rejection of systems of meaning or value placed upon us by others. Laughter becomes a method to reject the values of society that have been impressed upon us as well as a method to embrace the arbitrary existential situation we find ourselves within. Thus, while Laughter in this sense fits within the Camusian framework. Its goal is to advance beyond rebellion against the Absurd into a more Nietzschean/Deleuzian sense of life-affirmation.

Weil and Marcuse when read together are almost obviously in agreement and few would take issue with their pairing. However, the introduction of Deleuze to the pair totally shifts the emphasis of the critique and truly propels the force and severity of their arguments. Orienting ourselves towards the goal of a life-affirming philosophy raises the stakes of the discussion because the mechanisms that trap us in the immanence of a life-denying mode of thought operate on a far deeper and more insidious level than the structural mechanisms of a capitalist society. In this analysis, however, we see clearly that there is a path to unity between action and thought through the practice of serious critical Laughter. This Laughter is a method by which we can reintroduce critical capacities that these aforementioned structural mechanisms have removed from us. This then allows us to question the life-denying values impressed upon us by our society. It is through this critical mode of Laughter that we can begin to create our own life-affirming values and restore the unity between life and thought.

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