



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## An American Body | Politic

Herzogenrath, Bernd

Published by Dartmouth College Press

Herzogenrath, Bernd.

An American Body | Politic: A Deleuzian Approach.

Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2010.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15061>

---

## CONCLUSION

AT THE END of the twentieth [and the beginning of the twenty-first] century, the [traditional metaphor of the] Body|Politic seems to have lost its currency—as the political theorist Carl Schmitt observed, the idea and the “epoch of the State is coming to its end” (19), and with it a whole system of concepts developed in four centuries of [state] political thought. In the times of the decline of ‘grand narratives’ and ideologies, the idea of a unity called Body|Politic does not hold anymore: “The State as the model of political unity, . . . this sparkling gem of European form and occidental rationalism, is being dethroned” (ibid.). The Body|Politic in its traditional sense has lost its appeal—it has become a dead metaphor. In his study of the Elizabethan Body|Politic, David Hale concludes that for the twentieth century, “the imagery of the body politic no longer delights and instructs, no longer holds up the mirror to nature. To lament this change is futile; to recognize it, imperative” (137). What has to be noted, however, is that what is at an end is the notion of the Body|Politic as a “mirror,” a representative figure—a figure of *representation* only, that is. The idea of the traditional Body|Politic—with its concept of hierarchical order, the regulation and control of the multitudinal mass [the body] by an ‘aloof’ sovereign, and the government as guide of the people or its consciousness [mind], with its corresponding philosophical conception of an inert material needing to be [in]formed—is no longer valid. In fact, as the various examples in my study have shown, the hegemonic position of such an idea has always been challenged by alternative constructions, by the ‘invention|vision’ of Bodies|Politic that do not so much debate the legal foundations of its hierarchical structure, that do not operate on the level of the justification of the Body|Politic as a discursive construction of laws and regulations, but that concentrate on the very materiality on|from which that Body|Politic is constructed, and on its capacity for self-organization.

One reason for the decline of the [traditional] idea of the Body|Politic might be found in its connection to totalitarian [or fascist] politics, the idea of a machine-like, uniform Body|Politic, with its ‘double’ identity of ‘one

people' and 'one leader.' As Claude Lefort observes, "at the foundation of totalitarianism lies the representation of the People-as-One" (*Political Forms* 297). The 'bodilessness' of democracy—the fact that in democracy the traditional idea of the Body|Politic, with the body of the multitude being represented in the figure of the sovereign—leads to the paradox that although the individual seems to count more in a modern democracy, "the identity of the body politic disappears. The modern democratic revolution is best recognized in this mutation: there is no power linked to a body" (303). As long as power, as the agency of identity and legitimacy, "appears detached from the prince, as long as it presents itself as the power of no one, as long as it seems to move towards a *latent* focus—namely, the people—it runs the risk of having its symbolic function cancelled out" (305). For Lefort, democracy carries the seeds of totalitarianism within its structure. The concept of 'equality' results in an erosion of all markers of difference, and at the same time it implies an internal division as a result of iterated individualism [the danger that Tocqueville observed with regard to American democracy], in such a way that democracy "inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will be said to be sovereign, of course, but whose identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will remain latent" (303–4). The simultaneous dissolution of an 'organic unity' of the Body|Politic, the increasing absence of markers of difference [which, at the same time, were "*markers of certainty*" (Lefort, *Democracy* 19)], and the increasing stress on individualism leads to the apocalyptic image of society as a 'gray soup,' a regression to a disembodied Many [Hobbes's *Behemoth*]*—*the traditional Body|Politic succumbs to its inherent entropy. Totalitarianism, according to Lefort, can be seen as an answer to the uncertainty of democracy, providing a solution to its problematics. In the totalitarian image of the Body|Politic, internal division is denied [although the 'new head' effectively sets itself off from the body], while at the same time this Body|Politic claims a new territory which operates along a clear-cut division of insideloutside, where "the enemy of the people is regarded as a parasite or waste product" (Lefort, *Political Forms* 298). Totalitarianism might after all be the unwanted effect of [too much] democracy, and the new Body|Politic that arises from that, Lefort argues, "is the image of the people, which . . . remains indeterminate, but which nevertheless is susceptible of being determined, of being actualized on the level of phantasy as an image of the People-as-One" (304), of an even more rigid reorganization of the Body|Politic than ever.

What Lefort is arguing, then, is that the totalitarian image of the Body|Politic is a return to the premodern image of the Body|Politic, a return that develops 'through' the cancellation of that concept in modern democracies

and is in fact an effect of it. In contrast, my study has argued that this image of the ‘organic unity’ of the Body|Politic has been always present in the idea of the *representational* Body|Politic, even in its democratic phase—the concept of the enemy of the Body|Politic as parasite [or virus] had been a prominent metaphor in the Antinomian controversy, and Cotton Mather’s reading of smallpox in contrast derives a concept of a self-organizing Body|Politic from the concept of the virus. What is at stake are not so much different qualitative stages in the development from premodern monarchies via democracies into totalitarian regimes, but rather a development in terms of quantitative notions of rigidity, different ‘phases’ of Bodies|Politic that exist simultaneously. It has to be noted that representative democracy as a state institution is by definition undemocratic. When James Madison stated that the voice of the people’s representatives [the parties and politicians] is “more consonant to the good of people than if pronounced by the people themselves” (47), he only testified to the undemocratic nature of representative democracy. The opinions and desires are passed “through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country” (46–47). Representation does not by any means equal ‘government by the people’—representative democracy is ultimately a deeply aristocratic concept. For that reason, Deleuze|Guattari’s minor politics is directed against the totalizing tendency of *representation*—against *speaking for*. Deleuze|Guattari’s minor Body|Politic is not so much concerned with culturallinguistic constructivism’s approach to deconstructing the juridical tradition [and, ultimately, the legislative justification] of politics, but with trying to think a materialist and nontranscendent ‘ontology’ of the Body|Politic, to think the material nature of political becoming. In Deleuze|Guattari’s approach, the Body|Politic’s ‘material’ is not inert, disorderly and passive—as in the traditional perspective on the Body|Politic in need of a controlling agency, a head [of state]—but a productive set of dynamic forces and connections, capable of self-organization. ‘Order’ and ‘agency’ are not external qualities that the Body|Politic is infused with ‘from the top,’ but intrinsic to the body|matter itself. Deleuze|Guattari’s minor Body|Politic amounts as much to a rethinking of the matter|form dichotomy as to the notion of the Body|Politic, or the concept of ‘politics’ on a more general level.

The difference between the two approaches to the Body|Politic—on the one hand, a Body|Politic that is regarded as a stable ‘represented’ unity that has to be controlled by its ‘representational head’ [“an omnipotent, omniscient power” (Lefort, *Political Forms* 299), king, party leader, *Egocrat* or *Führer*; on the other hand, a Body|Politic as a multiplicity of members|forces that organizes *itself*—can be best shown by contrasting Foucault’s notion of a “micro-physics of power” (*Discipline and Punish* 26) and Deleuze|Guattari’s

notion of minor politics. Foucault's discussion of these microphysics analyzes the development of a system of power directed atlagainst the body in order to produce self-imposed techniques of discipline and self-monitoring, a power that cannot be located in a particular state apparatus as such. These strategies of [self-]discipline and surveillance were employed not only by institutions such as the school and prison systems and military schools, but pervaded everyday life by setting up timetables, by breaking down operations and action sequences into minute segments for their most efficient reorganization and control. The microphysics of power, then, is a system of "the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power" (*Discipline and Punish* 198), the power to reach, sustain, and control even the farthest and smallest areas of the Body|Politic. For Foucault, the 'capillaries' are "the fine meshes of the web of power" ("Truth," *Power/Knowledge* 116) by which the state apparatus invades and overcodes the Body|Politic. While Foucault is concerned with "the systems of micro-power . . . that we call the disciplines" (*Discipline and Punish* 222), Deleuze|Guattari's concept of minor politics, I argue, works from the opposite direction. Rather than trying to work out the microphysics of power, the way that state power diffuses itself into a preexisting Body|Politic, the unity of which is 'preserved' by the very workings of that micropower, Deleuze|Guattari are concerned with a 'political physics' of force, of the self-organizing potential of the multitude rather than the organizing efficiency of the state apparatus—a microphysics of *potential* rather than one of *potestas*, a micropower of *emergence* rather than one of control, a bottom-up aggregate rather than a top-down organization. Deleuze|Guattari's minor politics aims to invent a 'people that is missing,' a Body|Politic in its revolutionary becoming, in its capacity for production|being produced, not a 'People-as-One'—a Body|Politic cutting off its relation to the outside forces, creating a fixed, stable, bounded territory and shape—but a Body|Politic as process, producing ever-shifting relations.

The fear of the dissolution of the stable territory of the Body|Politic [and the concomitant specter of a wish for a 'People-as-One'] figures prominently in *The Disuniting of America*, by Arthur Schlesinger, the American social critic and historian. In these "reflections on a multicultural society," Schlesinger—an opponent of multiculturalism—argues that the *e pluribus unum* has always been America's "brilliant solution for the inherent fragility . . . of a multiethnic society: the creation of a brand-new national identity by individuals who, in forsaking old loyalties and joining to make new lives, melted away ethnic differences" (17). What Schlesinger seems to forget is that this melting away of differences does not create a national identity that

changes with every new member, but that ultimately means the growing conformity with a major standard of Americanness—the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant heterosexual male. Far from a national identity as a collective assemblage that constantly transforms the nature of its members and of its ‘unity’ in feedback loops,<sup>1</sup> what Schlesinger refers to [and constructs] is an a priori identity that subjugates its members to the major|molar axiom|mold. According to Schlesinger, the “multiethnic dogma abandons historic purposes, replacing assimilation by fragmentation, integration by separatism” (21). Ultimately, “it belittles *unum* and glorifies *pluribus*” (21). *E pluribus unum* is a promise of a stable unity, and at the same time a threat to difference, multiplicity, becoming.

*E pluribus unum* has always been the paradigmatic motto for the American Body|Politic. How this ‘One’ should be envisioned has been ‘embodied’ by two different versions of the Body|Politic: one that starts from a One already given, as an a priori given that needs to be preserved by the [major] politics of *representation*; and one that starts from the Many, from the self-organizing forces inherent in the multitudemultiplicity, one that “no longer believe[s] in a primordial totality that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date” (Deleuze|Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 42). Such a Body|Politic does not mean anarchy—it is ‘structured’ according to its immanent logic. But it is not a ‘totality’—no ‘People-as-One’—either. The *pluribus* does not add up to an *unum*—“it is a whole of these particular parts but does not totalize them; it is a unity of all these particular parts but does not unify them” (42). Deleuze proposes another motto: *omnis in unum*, by which he means a ‘circular’ movement in such a way that the One, as “always a unity of the multiple, in the objective sense, . . . must also have a multiplicity ‘of’ one and a unity ‘of’ the multiple, but now in a subjective sense” (*The Fold* 126). Difference, according to Deleuze, has always been regarded in terms of a negativity, as the negative term within a binary opposition: “Consider the great negative notions such as the many in relation to the One, disorder in relation to order” (*Difference and Repetition* 202). For Deleuze, however, difference is positive, productive, and creative—it does not refer to an undifferentiated matter|multitude that is *then* differentiated and ordered by language|representation.

Matter|multitude consists of ‘real’ differences and becomings smaller [or greater] than the differences that language operates with. If Deleuze repeatedly claims that a minor politics has to invent ‘a people that is missing,’ it is not in the way that Derrida sees the people as missing in the Declaration of Independence—not existing *before* the signing of the declaration, which constitutes the ‘We’ in the act of representation and hence the retroactive logic of the signifier in which the signature invents the signer. A molar

*representative* Body|Politic, grounded in either individual or political identity|unity and following the binary logic of *either/or*, operates according to “a simple concept, under which are subsumed either all the infinite degrees of an identical representation or the infinite opposition of two contrary representations” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* 203). In contrast, it is the concept of a minor politics and its “notion of multiplicity which denounces simultaneously the One and the many, the limitation of the One by the many and the opposition of the many to the One” (ibid.). Political theory|practice [and the philosophy behind it] is split by a an imperative to speak for the Many and also to be defined by the orderly hierarchy of the One, and order usually gets the upper hand in this oppositional conflict, coming out on top [where it ‘rightfully’ belongs] to counter the anarchy that necessarily arises when the multitudematter is left to itself. Deleuze|Guattari’s Body|Politic, on the other hand, does not choose between those [false] alternatives; in Deleuze|Guattari’s concept of a minor Body|Politic, multitudematter and order do not contradict each other, with multitudematter capable of self-organization, of the production of an immanent order that can do without representation, laws, and regulations imposed from the outside to inform it. Real politics, ultimately, emerges in the force field constituted by the torsion between both major politics [state apparatus] and minor politics, the “*democratic politics of becoming* by which new events, identities, faiths, and conditions are ushered into being” (Connolly 173). Deleuze|Guattari are not interested in preserving the Body|Politic as a discrete entity|unity, but in the interplay of forces that produce such ‘entities’ as dynamic and fluctuating systems. Ultimately, “it is not enough to say, ‘Long live the multiple,’ . . . The multiple *must be made*, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety . . . always  $n-1$ ” (*Thousand Plateaus* 6). This is the only way the *unum* belongs to the *Pluribus*, “the only way the one belongs to the multiple: always subtracted” (ibid.). Thus, the minor Body|Politic of Deleuze|Guattari is precisely the [‘*People-as-One*’-1], the *people that is missing*.<sup>2</sup>

The minor politics of Deleuze|Guattari are of a different order than that of the major politics of representation. Thus, a minor politics does not operate as a counterforce [or resistance] *within* the realm of representation. Rather, by linking itself to the level of production and materiality, and to the forces of self-organization inherent there, Deleuze|Guattari’s minor politics is concerned with experimentation and the invention of new forms of political life, new forms of political subjectivity—the invention of a new Body|Politic.